Recovering the Narrative of a Failed Media Studio

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Abstract

A new lab at our university, designed to be the Composition New Media Studio, was seemingly abandoned rather than maintained after its design was complete. The authors share an account, or case study, of failed infrastructure, based in a series of campus "noticings" (Tsing) and interviews with composition teachers who taught in the space and were part of the design process. In examining this space more closely, we hope to encourage others to share stories of failure and take more notice of the objects, spaces, and local stories that lie in failure's wake.

Finding the ideal space and tools to write has become central to the study of meaning making. From locations that writers use to create and compose (Brodkey; Prior and Shipka; Reynolds; Rule) to the use of talismanic objects and tools like Moleskine notebooks, crafts, and geocaching materials (Alexis; Prins; Rivers), compositionists consider the nonhuman elements of our writing world to be just as agential as the human ones. Other scholarship has revealed more concrete challenges related primarily to acquisition of space (Camarillo; Davis; Walls, Schopieray, and DeVoss; Carpenter and Apostel). Yet, composition scholars typically place emphasis on the writing scene as it unfolds in situ, rather than digging into the past, which may lead to neglect of institutional artifacts that reveal hidden histories about spaces. More importantly, acknowledgment of failed writing spaces and studios from a physical or material perspective is almost nonexistent. Such omissions are problematic since Amanda Bemer, Ryan Moeller, and Cheryl Ball, like other scholars before them, have argued that "physical spaces . . . affect the relationships and work scenarios that take place within them" (140-41). Discussions of abandoned printers, water damage spots, and lost door entry codes may not be as seductive as accounts of favorite pens, touch screens, and ergonomic chairs. However, this article gives attention to the more damaged and forgotten spaces of our universities, the ones with hidden histories and unrealized goals. The narratives of unsuccessful studios or labs are just as important as a detailed account of those spaces that thrive under the right conditions.

During Shannon's first year in a tenure-track position, she stumbled upon such a space where she was assigned to teach composition: the remote and seemingly abandoned Room 307. After the first day of class, she emailed the department chair and the composition director because Room 307, with a sign that read "English Composition New Media Studio" above the door, was not fit for use. Although the room featured ergonomically designed chairs that rolled conveniently, new computers, and large widescreen televisions on opposite walls, debris littered the floor, and the walls revealed water stains from leaks.

> Hi, everyone,
>
> I am attaching photos from Room 307. From what we discussed today, it looks like it has not been cleaned for at least a year (as someone found it in this condition during her summer course in 2014).
>
> I have photographed a few things out of sheer curiosity—there is a dead clock stopped at 8:25am on a shelf. In that same area are two printers shoved in a closet and a very curious old binder of forms where you can hand in "complaints" to someone. The walls have expensive television screens with what looks like water damage just above them. I also snapped a few shots of overflowing trashcans down the hall.

As a new faculty member, Shannon did not speak her entire mind. This email masked several concerns: How was the program currently being perceived by those working in this part of campus? In what ways had the original designers of the studio lab conceived of this space, and why? Most importantly, how did the designers and staff not account for the room's maintenance and repair?

Shannon photographed the room that day from multiple angles to document the strange experience. After a bit of sleuthing, she began to have conversations with the people involved in the establishment of the studio. These discussions continued, off and on, during Shannon's early years as a professor. Her analysis did not result in a full institutional ethnography of Room 307 (see Miley). Instead, methodologically speaking, it became an informal series of "noticings" that built an incomplete but fascinating narrative of what happened in the past. Anthropologist Anna Tsing says that "[w]hat we're doing in fieldwork is noticing; we notice human relations with each other; we notice spirits; we notice all kinds of things." In this sense, noticing becomes a more informal and improvisational method for understanding how the university functions. Susan Leigh Star's call "to study boring things" also offers a guide to studying the indoor workings of our habitats on campus when reminding us that "it takes some digging to

unearth the drama inherent in system design creating, to restore narrative to what appears to be dead lists" (377). In this essay, we focus primarily on the physical objects and buildings surrounding computers rather than the computers themselves, which means attention goes toward the water stains and door codes rather than Windows operating systems and wireless networks. This focus is because forgotten objects and spaces surrounding computers reveal more concrete histories while machine hard drives are often wiped clean.[1] This essay follows the example of scholars like Charles Bergman, who reflects on the awe he experienced when visiting his University Center basement (65). The campus plumber had explained how the boilers worked to heat multiple structures at his college, and this information awakened Bergman to the "material reality" and "silent syllabus" at his institution (66). The act of walking across campus became, for Bergman, "a way of knowing the place in new ways" (68), which echoes Tsing's idea of engaging in specific "noticings."

As an outside observer to 307's story, Shannon had to recognize the limitations faculty and administrators face when confronted with directives to engage in so-called "innovating" and "cutting edge" projects. Labs and studios often serve, as Lori Emerson says, as "a response to pressures humanists are feeling to both legitimize and even 'pre-legitimize' what they do." Studio and lab spaces are, for better or worse, a "sea change in how the humanities are trying to move away from the 19th century model" of classrooms and the concept of the solitary scholar writing alone. Although the road to innovation is often paved with good intentions, the implementation of a plan can stall when material realities of a campus intervene. Andrea Davis, in her own account of proposing a new lab, brings infrastructural realities sharply into focus by stating that "the process of space requests in institutions is a slow process involving many layers and levels of stakeholders. . . . It can, and often does, take years to implement" (586).

There are success stories despite this arduous process. Morgan Gresham and Kathleen Yancey write about creating a studio for the Clemson University Communication across the Curriculum program. With a three-million-dollar donation from an alumnus, the professors and architects worked together to design a space where different disciplines of writing, communication, and visual arts could converge in new ways. Another notable building is Eastern Kentucky's Noel Studio for Academic Creativity, where Russel G. Carpenter and Shawn Apostel describe the creation of "a space that facilitates play" (410). A video embedded in this Studio's website shows ample white board space and touch screens to enhance tutoring efforts. This space even includes objects like Silly Putty and Legos (Carpenter and Apostel 395). Conversely, our writing program director was working with

a found classroom inside a multi-purpose student center in an area where foot traffic was limited. Those who create new studios are often dependent on university size. In the case just mentioned, Eastern Kentucky's student population would more than double our own institution's numbers, and Clemson triples them.

The student center (or the Center), which housed 307, was and still is incredibly labyrinthine in part due to its Brutalist design. Architecture of buildings like ones on this campus, established in 1969, often make wayfinding difficult. Laurie Olin explains how many campuses at the time appeared "defensive and fortress-like" (8) due to Brutalism, a "stark, concrete-centric" form of architecture, characterized the arrangement of the interior and the exterior of many institutional structures across the country (Mindel).

Figure 1: *A photo of Room 307. The windows look out from the second level of the Center building. From this angle, the bottom (first) floor appears hidden underground.*

As seen in the image above, the Center reflects that design. It includes entrances and exits on the front and back of the building, both on the bottom and second floors. The first floor is even hidden completely from the angle featured above, which creates what some might observe to a bunker effect. Although the main floor, or second floor, includes the cafeteria and the offices of student services, people rarely venture upstairs. This location would be a particular challenge for students who were new to campus in first-year writing classes.

As Bemer, Moeller, and Ball remind us, English departments "do not have control over the ultimate design of most spaces" (142); instead, they often settle for what they are given. The key factor in choosing such locations is money, since available university spaces, particularly offices and classrooms, are hard to find. Consequently, spaces like writing centers or our media lab have been compared to "moveable feasts at transient tables" that are "spaces inside other spaces" (Sunstein 7–9). Such spaces may resemble a "proofreading-shop-in-the-basement" (North 444), or even a *small storage closet* (emphasis ours) in which students can only "stop and go" (Nordstrom). Contingent faculty also dwell in such spaces. Susan Miller speaks of the "sad women in the basement," where overworked women teach and tutor in hidden areas (121). Nate, a former graduate student who helped the director create the lab,[2] was aware that the studio was "removed away from the normal classroom sphere" or, rather, "kinda out of the way" on the third floor. Room 307 at our institution was the inverse, or attic, to Miller's basement, but the message is the same: spaces for teaching and tutoring writing, even when given new equipment and a new title, are essentially invisible if no one can find them.

Interior Design

At the time of this article's composition and interviews with him, Nate, the former graduate assistant who worked with the WPA, was a full-time lecturer. While the composition director and Nate were both involved in the execution of the room's design in 2013, Nate was responsible for placing the orders with vendors and emailing the facilities manager with any problems they had. When recollecting his time working on the lab, Nate comments that he felt more like a "task rabbit" than someone who had agency in the process. When asked what the original budget was, he did not know. Andrea Davis, who proposed a new lab for her campus of 1,500 students, states that the budget for her project was close to $75,000 (562). Our school of 5,000 students may have had a similar budget. Of equal importance was the fact that the director of the program had received funds from the dean of her college to hire someone like Nate. In most cases, such positions would be funneled through the department, and the chair would have to sign off on most stages of the process. The hiring process for Nate did not include the department and chair's sign off, which meant that Nate was less likely to receive guidance from a department chair and, therefore, less likely to feel included in usual departmental activities and goals. This part of the history, although not revealed immediately, was essential to consider, since the process of creation was fraught with challenges from different levels of

university infrastructure. In their article on "Hacking Spaces," Douglas M. Walls, Scott Schopieray, and Danielle Nicole DeVoss report that the creation of a new lab or studio at their institution took "five separate offices on campus and multiple campus personnel" (284). From Nate's interview, Shannon thought it sounded like this redirection of power was the director's attempt to "hack" or circumvent traditional hierarchies.

When the project began, Nate stressed that the goal was to move away from desks organized by rows; Walls, Schopieray, and DeVoss echo this concern in their work on "hacking" (269). Nate mentions that the need "to move and be organic" was imperative to his director's vision of a new space: "The idea of 307 was that it would be sort of modular, that you could have rows, but you could also change it around." This flexibility is hardly surprising given how Silicon Valley is known for promoting face to face "collisions" and "chance encounters" among its workers (Waber, Magnolfi, and Lindsay), and colleges often seek inspiration from such models, attempting to create what Natalie Loveless refers to as the "gadget-gear-cool-factor badge of maker-lab circulation" (33). Large flat screens hung on opposite walls so that the projector's images could be visible from multiple vantage points. However, Nate said that "unless you were moving around constantly, there was no central focal point." The idea was to have "power strips coming down from the ceiling" that would move as groups of students gathered throughout different areas. Nate mentioned that this set up would also allow desks to move and be arranged while students would still be plugged in. This plan was abandoned because, in the end, the power structure would simply resemble a series of cords descending from above; it was "too ambitious," Nate said. The word ambition suggests that the director was hoping, perhaps, for a Noel Studio rather than an attic classroom, something that could serve as a "show pony" (Nate's words) to administrators and visitors.

Nate stressed what Shannon already observed when she was assigned to teach in 307: the room possessed no central podium for the teacher. He said, "If you stood at the front, you had to sit down at the computer." The space, being primarily designed for group work, was not as flexible as Nate and his director had hoped. "You had to ambulate the entire time," he explained. It placed pressure on instructors to be constantly moving, and such situations are grounded in ableism. Sometimes this layout, based in part on corporate trends to maximize productivity (Waber, Magnolfi, and Lindsay), does not deliver the way it claims. Bemer, Moeller, and Ball note that "the pod layout is not a utopian ideal. The computers, unless they are mounted low enough, . . . can create line-of-sight problems" (144).

Rearranging chairs in a form of organizational theater is a superficial move at best. By putting such emphasis on pods and collaboration, the lab prohibited students from engaging in authentic writing situations with any degree of flexibility. "It was just people in pods, and they were blocked from each other," Nate says, echoing Bemer, Moeller, and Ball. Full-time lecturer Liz makes another point, one that echoes Jody Shipka's thesis in *Toward a Composition Made Whole*. She observes that the digital reigned supreme in 307: "I don't like the set up. Not everybody likes to work digitally all the time. There's not a lot of space for using pen and paper or other materials." She goes on, "I am constantly reminding people that multimodal doesn't mean digital because I don't like making digital projects all the time. I encourage my students to play with materials and create things." Nate agreed and informed Shannon that his own most recent teaching tools from the 2022-23 school year include markers and a white board. Although he feels "like a Luddite," he has noticed that he builds stronger bonds with students when he keeps things simple.

Physical Structure

Furniture and a lack of focal points were not the only concerns. Water leaks in the ceiling were a continual issue in the third-floor space (see Fig 2). When those leaks occurred, the ceiling tiles crumbled, and pieces, along with water, would land on the newly purchased computers. Nate said, "I had to cancel class a couple of times because there was a puddle of water underneath one of the computers, and I didn't want anyone to get electrocuted." [3] Problems with roof leaks had not been an obstacle anyone had anticipated.

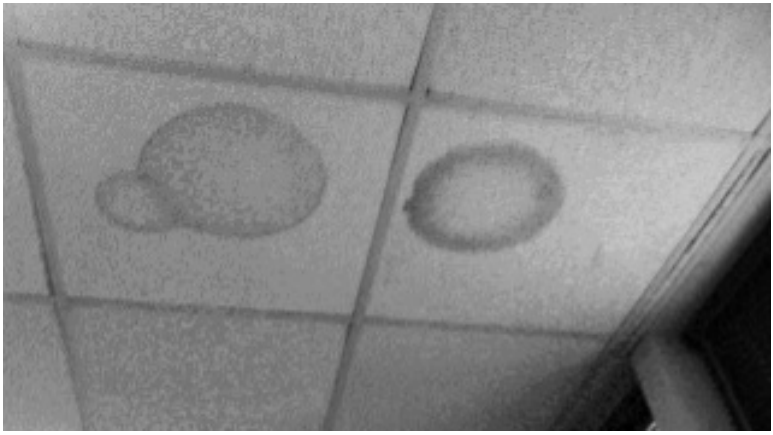

Figure 2: A photo of brown stains on ceiling tiles that reveal water damage that grew worse over time.

When the ceiling tiles fell, Nate mentioned that they were quickly replaced, but these replacements were a small band-aid on a much larger problem with the HVAC system. The facilities manager later explained that the key problem was always the roof. Regardless of cause, the costly new equipment was embedded in a space where walls and the ceiling carried older histories of flaws with them.

Likewise, Liz encountered a problem that Shannon, too, was confronting in her current teaching assignment in a neighboring building. "The first time I used the room I had to have campus police open the door," she explained, "because the code [to open the door] didn't work." Liz also explained that there was a door code and an alarm code for the room, and she had never been given the alarm code. Alarm codes are often given to very few individuals for obvious security reasons, but teachers find themselves confronting uniformed officers at their classroom door when such things go sideways. Gaining access to a location seems like something instructors take for granted, but Shannon learned quickly that this obstacle interferes with many who try to do their jobs.

Additionally, Liz found that this third-floor space was not maintained regularly, despite the presence of new technology and new furniture. In this sense, the space most resembled someone's attic, a place to accumulate dust and forgotten materials. "The first time I taught in that classroom it wasn't dirty," she said, but "it got progressively dirty" as the semester went on. "I started going to class early and hoping there either wasn't a class before me or that it would end early so that I could have more than ten minutes to clean up." Liz goes on,

> I remember talking to the director about it and she's like, "Well, ok, we'll put in a work order to make sure someone goes and cleans it," and then that never happened. And I didn't know until the end of the semester that there was some kind of ongoing discussion about who was responsible for cleaning and how they were gonna get into a locked room because apparently what I heard was facilities was saying they couldn't get into the room because they didn't have the code. . . .

When we asked if Liz used the printers in the nook, or closet space in 307, she mentioned that at first she did, but after time passed, she was uncertain who would restock the toner or paper. The machines then were ultimately left unused. This lack of maintenance is particularly disappointing given the artifact Shannon found upon visiting 307. She found a notebook in the 307 closet that day that was originally designed for teachers to make maintenance requests for the room.

The binder included official forms that teachers could fill out to file a maintenance request. The binder's cover mentions names of employees who no longer work at the university. This artifact, more than any other, suggests the importance of local history and how we may learn from it. Liz mentions that she does not remember a maintenance notebook, and neither does Nate. When Shannon opened the binder, no one had marked in it at all. Nate does remember constantly emailing facilities at the time and hypothesizes that the binder was a "band-aid" for the numerous problems that kept plaguing the room.

The Legacy of 307

The abandoned tools (the binder, the abandoned printer) in 307 may seem insignificant to a passerby. To Shannon they indicated the power of engaging in specific "noticings" and asking questions about local history. The need to create something eye-catching and innovative on college campuses is not new, but the pause necessary to contemplate the flawed processes by which these creations take place still warrants discussion. Unearthing local histories of infrastructure leads to more responsible planning and stewardship of space. Today Room 307, which, as Nate says, was intended "to be a sparkling example of how the university was being progressive with technology," hosts a student lounge for those in the University Honors Program. The signs associated with the English department were removed; even the number 307 has been taken down. Oddly enough, the Honors Program webpage suggests that 307 has been a lounge since 2010, so the history of the short-lived media lab has been erased, although the room is still labeled 307 on the Office of Public Safety's Emergency Plan. The third floor now hosts a variety of services, from counseling to the student food pantry. To the casual visitor, the third floor represents an amalgam of good intentions, all designed to improve the life of students, yet the arrangement of these services is a random one. This area of the Center then earns the reputation of housing the "leftover" needs of the campus.

Although we often cannot control the amount of space or money available, the conversations that arise as part of renovation require some updating, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic that challenged infrastructure and university resource pools in ways that most could not anticipate. However, many faculty are doing more than their share to help students and their institutions. Looking ahead, we might offer three suggestions for improving the ways faculty and WPAs address matters of studio making and infrastructure.

First, organizational and innovation theater are often neoliberal mirages rather than sound critical paths. They become even more so when used amongst Brutalist structures that were not originally designed to feature such studios. Organizational and innovation theater are terms used in business to describe the performance of changing a company's infrastructure without engaging in deeper changes regarding the purpose and mission of the organization (Blank). The idea of setting up a new lab may seduce some academics charged with overseeing the marketability of a certain major or line of study because labs could act as centerpieces to tours on campus for prospective students. Even as those labs become highlights of a campus tour, the belief that all who enter such labs—students and instructors alike—are literate in the advanced technologies is a tenuous claim. Consequently, these same rooms may remain unused or underused for periods of time. Not only do some faculty avoid such settings due to various reasons, but staff hired to clean the rooms are wary of maintaining the new equipment, particularly when these workers are outside hires or contractors rather than full-time employees. Lilah Burke observes that the pandemic only exacerbated such conditions when these same workers were laid off. In some cases, the more expensive the equipment bought to display, the more unlikely any staff member, especially one in a precarious position, will feel comfortable cleaning the various surfaces and furniture due to a fear of being blamed for breaking or altering the new tools. Additional security codes on doors are often needed in such cases, and such systems run the risk of impeding rather than aiding instructors in doing their jobs.

Secondly, the local and more general histories of architectural planning, design, and maintenance are necessary in considering changes to classrooms and potential lab spaces. The brief comments on Brutalism in this piece barely scratch the surface of understanding the history of campuses over time. Becoming familiar with new technology and software on computers is just the beginning of preparing to teach writing. New teachers and their mentors might also spend time learning how maintenance takes place in classrooms and how proper upkeep determines quality of learning. Most importantly, our ability to understand the spaces in which we work will better prepare us for students with a wide range of abilities and ways to move within a given institutional context.

Finally, composition leaders and administrators might consider new sources of institutional memory. Van der Ryn and Cowan have explained that "memories of those who inhabit a place provide a powerful map of its constraints and possibilities" (65). Nate, to this day, possesses over sixteen years of experience teaching and studying at our institution. He earned undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as a certificate at our university

and served as an adjunct writing instructor in the years that followed. Now he teaches composition full time on a renewable contract. Nate's perspective on this failed project now can be best summarized as one in which he recognizes that both he and the lab were resources to be used rather than cared for. As an eager graduate student, he mentions that his enthusiasm for new ideas and projects "was hijacked for someone else's purpose" ten years ago, but he now speaks fondly of his new department chair and the increased agency that results from being "left alone to teach." Those designing spaces in the future might benefit from consulting people with Nate's longevity because they have witnessed different administrators shape the campus's spaces over time. Additionally, those who employ future Nates (graduate student assistants) might benefit from articulating goals and clarifying the purpose of errands and tasks associated with this design.

Lecturers enter and inhabit more spaces on campus than any tenure-track professor due to course load. They are more than temporary resources; they are experts in how to navigate different rooms and tools. Nate witnessed how different leadership styles changed his experiences as a facilitator of these spaces. It was Nate who alerted Shannon to our institution's role as a satellite campus, one that for years was trying to establish its identity apart from the main campus, whose reputation was more established. This positionality led to what he described as the "over-eager use of resources and a lack of transparency." These noticings from Nate escaped Shannon's attention even though she has been at her place of work for nine years. Metaphorically speaking, Shannon was able to point out the trees, but Nate could see the entire forest, which is instrumental in observing our surroundings. This project was granted exempt status by Shannon's university's Institutional Review Board and Research Council[4] since both Nate and Liz are being used as experts on 307 rather than as subjects of the study. However, Nate's key role in navigating the lab's creation did warrant the use of a pseudonym, even though these events transpired almost a decade ago. His position is still precarious since he is not protected by tenure.

Under today's administrative leaders, the facilities director asserts, such problems as those once found in 307 are no longer an issue, and this development makes it easier for us to recount the mistakes of the past without encountering institutional blowback. The current facilities director explains that a new emphasis on avoiding deferred maintenance, the kind of maintenance that saves money and postpones serious repair, has become part of facilities ethos since new leadership arrived on campus. Although circumstances have improved with time, more testaments of failed or unsustainable projects like 307 would help new leaders and instructors avoid such pitfalls. Those testaments might also help create the "deep wonder" that

Bergman experienced at his institution. All campuses reveal hidden histories. We just need to know who to ask.

Notes

1. For a robust explanation of infrastructure related to digital design and hardware, see DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill.

2. Nate is a pseudonym. Likewise, all references to building and location have been anonymized.

3. Kaitlin Clinnin has stated that WPAs might do well to learn more about crisis management, which includes preparing for "hazardous material spills, medical emergencies, and even elevator malfunctions." Additionally, Genie N. Giaimo says that it is equally important that OSHA guidelines be followed and that employers "must take steps to mitigate or remove identified hazards" even during crises like the pandemic.

4. This project was granted "exempt" status: AUM IORG #: 0005227; AUM IRB #: IRB00006286; FWA#: 00012889

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