Theory of Space/s: Rereading Foucault's 'Heterotopias' and its Various Implications

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Abstract

The term 'heterotopia' was used by Foucault in one of his lectures given to a group of architectural students in 1967. This lecture was published in 1986 in an essay entitled 'Of Other Spaces'. Although this is a theory to be explored for exploring spatial relations in the field of architecture, its implications could be extended to various other fields. Foucault, in this lecture proposes ideas and new ways of thinking about 'space' or 'spaces' in a globalized world where heterotopias are like "counter-sites". A concept which has been considered ambiguous and incomplete in its attempts of definition by some has also remained a topic of much discussion and debate for many. It serves as a base for understanding complex urban spaces in a globalised society. These spaces form a part of our modern urbanized identities and cultures as well and according to Foucault, the concept of heterotopias is like a disruptive force, a way to think about things differently. Foucault's lecture historicizes the concept of spatial existence and probes into the problem of juxtaposing heterotopias with real spaces of our existence. He talks about tensions and contradictions in these sites of contradiction which has been existing since the conception of civilization. Foucault, while theorizing with the post -modern condition of existential reality in the modern European world, has also pointed out several real spaces that serve as examples for heterotopias. Foucault's theory about the formation of the ideal subject in 'different spaces' or 'other spaces' are dealt with in his later work *Discipline and Punish.* His own published lecture is however insufficient in this respect and there are a handful of scholars who have been working on elaborating and extending his theories in their research works.

This paper will discuss the concept of heterotopias as implied by Foucault and few other scholars working in the same field.

According to Heidi Sohn, Michel Foucault had borrowed the term 'heterotopia' from medical and biological contexts and had then used it in his own discourse (41). The word is a contraction of two words 'hetero' and 'topos' where 'hetero' means another or different and 'topos' means place (Sohn 41). Sohn also points out that the term had been increasingly appearing since the 1920s in medical literature to describe a particular phenomenon or to talk about the spatial displacement of any normal tissue, which however does not have any influence over the total functioning and development of the body to which the tissue belongs (41). In medical science it is believed that heterotopia usually occurs in organs adjacent to each other having a close 'spatial relationship' in their origin (Sohn 41). The word has been shown to have a diverse range of meanings. It however signifies a condition that generically suggests a kind of 'spatial and morphological anomaly' (Sohn 43).

'Heterotopia' as a term appeared for the first time in the preface of Foucault's *The Order of Things,* which was published in 1966 and Foucault had actually posited his concept of heterotopia as an opposition to utopia (Sohn 43). Both the terms are however conceptual and abstract in nature. The term 'heterotopia' was presented in a lecture as well by Foucault himself in France in 1967. This lecture took place in front of an audience of architects. Although in a much closed circle, the term gained wide popularity among the field of architects as it seemed to open a wide range of vistas in the field of urban planning for new architectural experiments. The concept of heterotopias/s originates the idea of 'different space' or that of the 'contesting spaces' (Boyer 54). The lecture on architectural heterotopias has however established a new science known as the science of heterotopias or the science of 'other spaces'. It got published in several languages and the published English version was named 'Of Other Spaces'. The English translation of the title was however a subject of disagreement among many and it was thought that an alternative translation would be 'different spaces' as the word 'heterotopia' contains the root 'hetero' which is a Greek word meaning 'different' rather than 'other' (Sohn 22). But the version entitled 'Of Other Spaces' received wide circulation.

Before moving any further into the concept of Heterotopia, it is perhaps more important to talk about the concept of space in itself. Drawing attention to Henri Lefebvre's idea it would be proper to think about the concept of space in its entirety on all levels: social, geographical and economical. While describing the concept, Lefebvre actually alludes to the history of the philosophy of space according to which, with the advent of the Cartesian logic, the concept of space had entered the realm of the absolute (*The Production of Space* 1). Philosophers like Descartes and Kant are important on this aspect for giving a definition of social space. Space however came to be considered as more of a 'mental thing' (Lefebvre, *Production of Space* 3). Space is talked in terms of an abstract sense and no clear account of it was given at any time. People talk about literary space, ideological space or rather spaces as well. Being a mental concept it is difficult for Foucault or others to explain or produce a very radical stance on this concept. He never explains what space it is that he is referring to so that the gap between the philosophical and real can be bridged.

Foucault claims that a proper and definitive definition of space might never be possible as our life is perhaps still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remains almost unbreakable ("Of Other Spaces" 16*)*. Certain oppositional institutions and practices are still considered as givens like the difference between public space and private space,

between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, leisure and work etc. (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 16). For Palladino and Miller the identity of these spaces is discursive in itself (1). Foucault considers that the chief anxiety of our era lies in the consideration of space as more important than that of time as part of our existence ("Of Other Spaces" 15). Drawing indirectly upon the Phenomenologist's Foucault claims that the space in which we live or the space in which our daily experiences occur is not at all a homogeneous one but a heterogeneous one ("Of Other Spaces" 16). Our daily experiences take their shape amidst a network of relations originating in separate yet interlinked spaces both in domestic and public sphere. These spaces are closed or semi-closed sites like the house, the bedroom, the bed, the pub, the garden etc. Foucault proposes his interest to be in those sites that have the 'curious property of being in relation with all other sites in such a way that those sites can mirror or reflect and contradict at the same time' ("Of Other Spaces" 17).

Coming back to the concept of heterotopia/s, it can be said that the idea of the other space or the different space can also however not be limited to Foucault himself. There have been scholars to extend on this subject and its implication. Edward Soja and Henri Lefebvre are some of the well-established scholars working on the theory of space from various disciplines. Foucault claims that there has been a history of space and it is also not possible to separate the concept of time and space. He mentions Galileo and his role in changing the concept of space in its totality ("Other Spaces" 15). Human idea of existence was challenged when the reality, that, the earth is moving around the sun was discovered. The idea of the possibility of the existence of an open and unending space beyond our comprehension was propagated. Post urbanization, the concept of space/s started receiving a different kind of attention in geographical and architectural fields. It was not the empty open space of the outer cosmic world but one that keeps on forming and reforming as the experiences of our lived space is inside that of a set of relations which determine all other experiences of living. In a globalized world, the space in which we live is thus given to us 'in the form of relations between emplacements' (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 15). Distinctions are drawn between Family Space and Social space, between Cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work etc. All these concepts of space/s are a result of a certain amount of unspoken 'sacralisation' or segregation of those particular spaces. Foucault has used the word 'emplacement' in several places. The word 'emplacement' implies that the relationship between locations in space is also the constitutive principle behind the perception of that space as well. He talks about the emplacement sites like passages, the streets, trains etc. and also sites of temporary halts like cafes, cinemas, beaches etc. which can be defined through that network of relations that interrelates them ("Other Spaces" 16). There is also the closed or semi closed emplacements of rest that goes behind the making of the house, the bedroom, the bed etc.

The concept of space is broadly divided by Foucault into two: utopias and heterotopias. Utopias do not exist in reality but have their origin lying in a vision of perfection ("Of Other Spaces" 17). He also adds that heterotopias are those places, which have evolved in the process of creating utopias. These spaces are like 'counter sites', kind of places that are outside all places and are also localizable. The mirror is shown as a very good example of a proper heterotopia. Foucault continues with the six principles of a space

termed as heterotopias/s, namely: the 'heterotopias of crisis' and 'heterotopias of deviation', the pre-existing heterotopias made to function in a very different manner, heterotopias juxtaposing several spaces in a single real space, heterotopias of time called as 'heterochronisms', isolated heterotopias with distinct system of opening and closing and spaces having relation to all other spaces and performing a function according to that (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 17) . He has provided examples for the above mentioned various kinds of heterotopias and sketched a detailed analysis of his thoughts about space. Foucault however talks of the mirror before beginning with his analysis on heterotopias and refers of it being a utopia as it is one kind of a 'placeless place' ("Other Spaces" 17) according to him. The mirror embodies a space which is unreal and virtual at the same time. The reflection of the subject in the mirror is also a projection of one's self in a place where he or she is actually not present. It is like a shadow that shows the presence of the body in a place where it is not. The mirror is said to function as a 'heterotopia' in this respect as its existence is different from that of all other spaces (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 17). The six principles through which Foucault has chosen to describe the phenomenon of heterotopias is termed as 'heterotopology' by him.

The first principle takes into account that all cultures in the world do have heterotopias. Their existence however might be embodied in various forms not visible in common eyes so easily. These heterotopias can obviously take various forms and there can be no universal form of heterotopia existing as such. Foucault begins by citing the reference of the 'crisis heterotopias' in primitive societies ("Of Other Spaces" 18). The word 'crisis' over here implies those places which are kind of privileged or sacred or forbidden and reserved for those individuals who are in relation to society always in a state of crisis and thus are seen occupying different space in themselves. Such spaces are one of those inhabited by people who are passing through any particular phase in their lives and their existence is not in particular terms with the existing dominant mode of life in the society. Although such a demarcation was better found to be existing in the primitive society, a few remnants can still be found in the modern world as well. The crisis heterotopias of the primitive world are said to be consisting of temporary phases in life like that of the growing up boy or the period known as adolescence, the elderly, the pregnant women etc (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 18*)*. The heterotopias of the modern world are different from that of the primitive world. The modern world heterotopias in our society are for example, the boarding schools in its nineteenth century form or military service for young men playing different roles and all other spaces such as the nowhere, the heterotopias without any proper geographical markers. Foucault however remarks that the heterotopias of crisis are rapidly disappearing in the modern age and these are getting replaced by spaces what can be termed as heterotopias of deviation. These places are like those 'other' spaces in which the behaviour of the inhabitants is 'deviant' (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 18) or different in relation to the required or established mode of behaviour. Examples provided in the essay are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, the prisons, the old age homes, the asylums etc. These are classified as the heterotopias holding deviant modes of behaviour in respect to that of the expected mode. The inhabitants existing in the above mentioned spaces are said to be existing somewhere in the borderline between the heterotopias of crisis and the heterotopias of deviation as these inhabitants are seen to be facing a period of crisis in their

lives and their behaviour is also not considered to be normal and thus deviant in one sense. Thus they can be said to be belonging somewhere in between that of the heterotopias of crisis and heterotopias of deviation or inhabiting both the above mentioned spaces (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 18).

The second principle for the description of heterotopias as given by Foucault assumes that one existing heterotopia can be made to function in various other ways ("Other spaces" 18). Although each heterotopia does have a specific function of its own within the society, it can also have a different function as well. He cites the example of the cemetery in this case. A cemetery in the European culture holds a very special space in the lives of all Europeans. Most of them have a connection with it due to their deceased relatives. So it is connected with all sites of the city, state, country, village and society. The architectural positioning of the cemeteries has however changed since the eighteenth century. Prior to the eighteenth century the cemeteries usually occupied a sacred position in the central part of the cities, churches, houses or communities. It was however from the beginning of the nineteenth century that the new cemeteries started to be located at the outside border of cities. A gradual change in human perception of the death happened from the course of the eighteenth century to the nineteenth. The pious believes of people regarding the dead was somewhat centred upon the idea of resurrection and the immortality of the soul and lesser attention was given to the physical body of the dead. A gradual doubt and uncertainty regarding the presence of souls and the concept of resurrection after death shifted the attention towards the physical bodies of the dead. Scientific developments in the beginning of the nineteenth century acquainted Europeans about the contagious aspect of various kinds of illness that could spread due to the dead being buried in and around the populated areas of the community in both cities and villages. This consciousness was perhaps, as Foucault explains the major reason for shifting the cemeteries from the 'sacred and immortal' heart of the city to that of the suburban separate space in the margins ("Of Other Spaces" 19). Thus the existing heterotypic space of the cemetery gets transformed from the central position to that of the margins across centuries.

Foucault cites the example of another and the third principle of classifying heterotopias. These heterotopias are capable of projecting several incompatible juxtaposing spaces in one single real space ("Of Other Spaces" 19). He cites the example of a theatre, a cinema, or a medieval garden in order to describe this principle, in case of a theatre, the spectators experience a whole set of places that are kind of alien to each other on the single stage. In case of a cinema, the audience are made to imagine or enjoy the projection of a three dimensional space on a two dimensional screen. The most interesting heterotopia falling under this principle is the garden in Orient culture. Foucault writes, "... the garden... had very deep and superimposed meanings" ("Of Other Spaces" 20). The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space structured into a rectangle representing four parts of the world. This sacred space or the garden consisted of a central piece of architecture like the fountain or the water basin in the middle of the rectangle. The entire mass of vegetation would grow around this central space and come together in this imaginary centre of perfection. The garden is thus like a microcosmic spatial representation of the entire world, and at the same time is a very small part occupying a different space in the geography of the entire world (Foucault, Of Other Spaces 19-20).

Foucault talks of the fourth principle in determining heterotopias. He terms them as 'heterochronies' or heterotopias of time ("Of Other Spaces" 20*)*. These spaces function when the inhabitants can reach at a sort of absolute break with the traditional time in those spaces. The cemetery can be used as an example in this respect as with the loss of life is associated the idea of eternity which is actually a kind of break in the traditional mode of time. The other instances of such heterotopias are the Museums and libraries as in these spaces time keeps on building up since ages. Libraries and Museums are places of "all times, all epochs'', and "all tastes" ("Of Other Spaces" 20). Museums and Libraries are heterotopias where accumulation of time takes place across history qualifying them in the category of heterotopias. The other kind of heterotopias of time is those that are linked to time in its transitory aspect and these spaces are absolutely temporal. Temporary fairgrounds, festival grounds, vacation villages etc. are live examples of such heterotopias (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 20). The fifth principle talks about the opening and closing of any heterotypic site which is not freely accessible to all. The entry in such a space is possible only after going through certain rules and permissions. These rituals associated with opening and closing rites not only isolates them but also makes them penetrable at the same time. Examples for such spaces would be places of particular kind which are although rare not completely absent from the world. People choosing to enter these heterotypic sites are under the illusion that they are entering one particular place where the fact of their entry is actually excluded. Here Foucault talks about the famous bedrooms existing on the great farms of Brazil and several other places in South America. People entering these rooms did not have any access to the family quarters as these people were uninvited guests in need of these spaces. Foucault uses the American motel rooms as examples for this principle ("Of Other Spaces" 21).

Foucault writes, "The last trait of heterotopias is that they have a function in relation to the rest of space a function...Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes all real space... Or else, on the contrary, creating another space... ("Of Other Spaces" 21)". So the sixth and last principle of heterotopias talks about spaces which are either an illusion exposing the reality of all other spaces and the 'other' kind of space, which tries to project itself as one that is perfect and mostly well arranged in comparison to other real spaces. The first kind is the 'heterotopias of illusion' and the second one is termed as the 'heterotopias of compensation' (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 21). The writer establishes the example of a brothel for the 'heterotopias of illusion' as the activities in a brothel actually exposes the hidden reality of societies in all cultures. He brings up the example of the establishment of colonies as an act creating the 'heterotopias of compensation'. The colonies established in the beginning of the seventeenth century by Puritan Societies in America were like perfect other spaces or heterotopias of compensation. The colonies were structured according to a perfect plan. There would be the village houses with the families living over there, practising religion on particular days, following a regular daily schedule, having its own cemetery, own church etc. Christianity was behind the making of the geographical space of the American colonies in the European world. These colonies had the regular life of their inhabitants regulated from morning till night as expected by the established period of time. Thus brothels and colonies are like two extreme types of heterotopias in the sixth or last principle (*Foucault,* "Of Other Spaces" 22*)*. Foucault ends

his lecture by giving the example of the boat or ship as a floating piece of space connecting all other places. This floating piece of architecture is one among the temporal heterotopias without any permanent geographical location, representing several spaces in a single real space and perhaps the 'perfect other' space of illusion, real and imaginary at the same time. He uses the phrase 'heterotopia par excellence', ("Of Other Spaces" 22) for describing the ship, which has remained one of the greatest modes of economic development in our civilization for centuries.

Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* talks about the idea of space from the spatial geographer's point of view. It is thought that Lefebvre's project concerning the idea of social space had Foucault's idea of space and the concept of the formation of subject at its centre. The concept of space was linked with the formation of human body as a subject existing in such heterotopias and the kind of relationship that was formed between these subjects and their living spaces through a network of power. In his *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault theorized a regime of modern power that he says has been working upon the creation of disciplined bodies or what he calls 'docile bodies' (135). These docile bodies are made to follow a particular disciplining routine for their daily existence in places like the prison, the correction homes etc. The prison may be imagined as an example of heterotopias which can be classified under the principle of 'heterotopias of deviation'. It is about how bodies confined in a particular space are actually captured in the web or network of power. Although the concept of heterotopias remains unresolved as to what should actually be included and excluded from this concept, Foucault was perhaps able to make the concept of 'space' or 'spaces' function in the epistemology of the postmodern discourse. Various scholars from various fields have opened a wide variety of studies on the topic of heterotopias which has come to be known as Heterotopian studies. Critical responses have also grown on this topic. The school of heterotopian studies has people like Edward Soja, Gennochio, Saunders etc. pointing out the various implications in this field. Genocchio has questioned whether Foucault's over elaborative examples of different or other spaces is at all plausible. He doubts whether all the associated sites are at all true heterotopias in the proper sense of the term ("Interpretations of Heterotopia" 1*)*. Soja's claim is that Foucault's accounts of heterotopias are 'incomplete and inconsistent' and they are only rough and sketchy works to some (Johnson 1). The problem of heterotopias and making it work in the practical field is that, there are no definite ways of locating these spaces. The concept of heterotopias is in itself considered to be of an imaginary nature in itself by some. Locating heterotopias in real world is not free from contradictions as particular criteria of locating a heterotopia are controversial as well. Genocchio, Soja and other similar critics have also speculated about the possibility of the heterotopian spaces to be serving as 'sites of resistance' as well (Allweil and Kallus 192).

The theory on heterotopias has been provoking multiple responses in the architectural field as the concept is considered to have become a dominant theme of discussion for architectures belonging to the 'postmodern urban space'. It would be important to draw a brief reference to Lefebvre's idea of space over here. As implied in his work on this topic, Lefebvre draws upon the theory of space from three different but interrelated structures of space and concludes that the production of space also produces different patterns of communication for each (Fuchs n.pag). For Lefebvre, there is a process of producing social

relations, social institutions etc. by human beings in society and he foregrounds the concept of the digital or virtual space in the postmodern urban reality. Talking about the concept of the boundary of social space, Lefebvre remarks that there can be three levels of social space distinctly categorized into 'perceived social practices, conceived representations of space and lived spaces of representation' (Lefebvre, *The Production of Space 39).* Being a Marxist he argues that one kind of "dialectical relationship exists within the triad of the perceived, the conceived, and that of the lived" spaces of existence. These social systems are dialectics of practices and have specific structures of their own. Lefebvre's chief contribution lies in the field of study that he proposes for the new kind of space in the modern world which is the digital space (Fuchs n.pag). Various post-modernist approaches have also made use of the theory of space/s to describe the productive features of a postmodern era driven by mass media and communicative technologies. In Johnson's 'Geography of Heterotopia', there are a total of 36 spaces (Palladino and Miller 1). Thus the concept of heterotopias is an all-encompassing debatable term producing comprehensive arguments and relating the concept to the birth of modernity. Kathryn Lafever has invited a range of questions about Foucault's explanation of social space and power (*Foucault's* "Heterotopia and Pedagogical Space" *n.pag).* Whether heterotopias have any existence outside the structures of social power or not is also a matter of interest for her. The essay in itself has also seen to acquire a different space in the entire school of criticism. Foucault's heterotopias are problematic yet it challenges, advances, enriches and complicates our understanding of the evolution and history of space and its various other implications.

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