Building blocks to an understanding of Deaf space

I use four building blocks, and examples.

The first thing to do though, is to temporarily park ideas of 'space' or 'Deaf' that we currently have – and just start with 'humans doing life'.

Building block 1:

The first building block, then, is to see 'spaces' not as things that are fixed, but as moments that emerge as people 'do' things.
… and because humans 'do' from within their bodies… how they 'do', is shaped *by* their bodies, and by how their bodies can sense and use the environment around them to do those things.

So, 'space' is essentially the 'production' of a context that enables someone to do the various activities that constitute life, as their body allows them to use the environment to do that.

An example will make this a bit easier to digest.

Example:

Imagine two people meeting and wanting to communicate… they use their bodies (whatever senses and body parts are available to them) to capture, and shape the environment around them to make that happen.

So, imagine two people who have common use of their hands, their arms, their mouths, their eyes… but not their ears. As those people meet, they use their bodies to shape the environment to produce signals in ways that can be captured by each other = light, through movement.

Imagine two people who are the same as those above, but also have their ears available for use. They could use the same visual communication…or evolve a use of sound, movement produced through the mouth and captured by the ears.

Imagine two people meet who have common use of only their hands, their arms, of touch… they produce signals through touch, and perception of movement.

Etc.

Note that to this point, I've not mentioned 'Deaf' (or hearing, or deaf-blind) at all… the field is open: all we have is individuals, producing different contexts (all valid, all equal) to allow their own, embodied expressions of communication as a part of human life.

… and I've not put any limits on how big, or small those spaces are… just think of them as attached to the people involved… somehow constituting a situation of potential between, and perhaps around them.

(this is so much easier to explain in sign!)

Building block 2:

The second building block is to see that, because spaces are there to enable people to 'do' things… they are not content to simply be 'moments' of possibility… they seem to have a natural tendency to grow - build themselves up internally to become more and more sturdy, more permanent, and externally expand to start to co-opt the environment in a more or less permanent sense.

This is kind of common sense if you think about it – if spaces are about allowing people to 'do' things, then the bigger and stronger and more established they are, the better they do their job.

Initially, this happens by the production of knowledges… so, as a communication space is produced again and again we find the emergence of language… and culture… which are authored, and re-authored each time that communication space is produced, and are remembered and rolled out again by those who produce it.

Over time, those practices start to get etched into the physical environment… we build buildings, and structures… which aren't really 'spaces' – more structures, but built in ways that facilitate the production of particular spaces, and mobilise established knowledges as taken for granted systems. We end up with buildings, and communication systems, and mass media and so on, that all build on, and work with the initial production of space.

And then, as space is produced within those structures, the structures themselves, and knowledges of them get woven back into the spaces, and the knowledges of space. They becoming 'places'.

We end up with a situation where we have a whole mixture of spontaneous, established, and physical spaces and places, constituting a landscape… lived 'in' by those who produce and inhabit its spaces... but also potentially visible to others outside if they are astute enough to recognise what they are seeing.

Example 2:

So – take our two people using visual communication… and allow them to live with others who also use visual communication. And then allow them to gradually develop language (natural sign), culture, buildings, transport, communication media etc…

Then do the same for the two using sound-based communication.

Then do the same for those using touch-based communication…

What emerges are radically different realities. Spaces, produced in structures that will differ... simply because each group's production of space differs.

The spaces within them are still produced on a human level – by human lives… all equal in validity – still emerging from bodies, simply 'living'.

Building block 3:

The third building block is to realise that because spaces are there to enable people to 'do' things… once they are there, we tend to assume that they are 'normal' – with potentially disastrous consequences for other spaces.

If you think about it, this is normal – when you're *in* an established space, you don't see it – It's doing its job, and you just 'live'.

It's only as you encounter another space that you start to become aware of your own space, and of its boundaries… and experience the need to explain your (and the other) space in some way. Your space becomes 'home', 'safe', 'us'. The other space becomes 'them', 'other', 'foreign'.

Often one meaning that arises is whether you think the other space is the equal of yours (recognition), or whether its better than yours (inferiority) or worse than yours (superiority).

And how you describe your space, and how you understand its relationship with other spaces will shape how you act towards them.

And this only gets worse as structures appear and start to prescribe which spaces they will facilitate.

Example 3:

Imagine our visual people - take them, and drop them into a context where the predominant space is one that uses sound-based communication.

Now you have two spaces, still both equally valid (just humans doing human things with human bodies)… encountering each other.

Now what happens is determined by how each space describes itself, and the other… and by how each allows the other to do what it's supposed to do… to allow those producing it to live.

So you might get a stand-off, where the two spaces stake out their territories and co-exist separately.

Or, you might get tolerance, where those in each space able to function in the other space do so, and there is flow between them, and the edges of them become messy and blurred.

Or, you might get intolerance, where one attempts to annihilate the other.

Or, you might get 'benevolence' (ref Lane) where one group assumes that the other is worse off, and attempts to provide them with the tools to enter the 'better' space.

In fact, you'll probably get all of the above, all mixed up because – remember – you're not dealing with space as 'fixed'… so as individuals and group produce spaces, and encounter others doing the same, they have individual freedom to produce spaces the way they want, and to do so differently in different situations, different encounters, different times.

You'll almost certainly get some kind of labelling - where one group distinguishes itself from the other, calling itself 'Deaf', and the other 'hearing'… or calling itself 'hearing' and the other 'deaf'.

Building block 4:

The final building block is an understanding that none of this is discrete, and that all of it is very messy – but that because its starting point is always that any space produced is valid (simply humanity 'doing life') and because it describes the in which that space grows, secretes structures, encounters other spaces, defines itself etc... spatial analysis remains a staunchly neutral, critical tool.

(So, when we talk about 'Deaf' space, we are - in fact - already jumping ahead to assume that it's space that has reached a point where it's become described as 'Deaf', which means that it's already in a context of encounter where it needs to define what 'Deaf' is, and what 'Deaf' isn't... and may be weaving those knowledges into the production of the space to some extent.)

That's not to say that spatial theory baulks at the idea of a 'Deaf space' - On the contrary – it can analyse it in ways that are very empowering.

Example 4:

Exploring Deafhood, it can unpack why Deafhood may be a natural tendency of becoming for those who find themselves visually-oriented in a hearing world (ie. a yearning for an experience of a space that is populated with richer and more complete knowledges, and accessible - ultimately, allowing the person to be more fully 'human') ... and how Deafhood emerges as time is spent within 'Deaf' space - and why that space has to be 'Deaf' (ie. not 'hearing') and why that distinction becomes a necessary defence when faced with an uncomprehending, hegemonic hearing space that refuses to acknowledge the validity of any other space than itself.

So it's politically powerful, and even more so in that it doesn't start from a position of antagonism, but rather unpacks antagonism by demonstrating why the antagonism has emerged.

And it's useful at more than just a social level:

Mary Beth Kitzel – at the workshop recently – outlined a taxonomy of spatial production which ran something like:

- Mind – the spaces that you produce within your mind to allow yourself to be… spaces of self, spaces of memory, spaces of identity

- ₋ Body – linguistic spaces, spaces of sense, of mobility,

- ₋ Interpersonal – spaces of communication, of language, of information

- ₋ Society – spaces of knowledge, of culture, of 'normal'

- ₋ National – spaces of nation, spaces of citizenship, of belonging, identity, spaces of politics

- ₋ Global – spaces of humanness, of wholeness, of well-being

  ... and if you start exploring Deaf spaces, hearing spaces... just 'spaces' at these levels - then you're into Deaf geographies.