‘It’s Like Waking Up in the Library’

How an International Student Dorm in Copenhagen Became a Closed Circuit during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how lockdown measures have affected international students living in an international student dorm in Copenhagen. During the COVID-19 lockdown in Denmark from March to June, the dorm, which was previously considered a domestic space only, emerged as a closed circuit that collapsed into a single space living, work and leisure activities. The article shows that due to the lack of physical, mental and temporal demarcations between spaces of work and leisure, the dorm as a closed circuit has altered social and intimate relations. Drawing on concepts of non-places, home, and hyper-places, it argues that the life of international students was particularly disrupted by the COVID-19 lockdown.

KEYWORDS: Copenhagen, COVID-19, international students, lockdown, online teaching, place, space

On 11 March 2020, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced that Denmark would become the second country in Europe to enter lockdown. This article examines how this lockdown has affected international students living in an international student dorm in Copenhagen. Incorporating Marc Augé’s (1995) non-places, Nigel Rapport’s and Andrew Dawson’s (1998) insights on migrants’ constructions of home, and Manuela Ivone da Cunha’s (2008) hyper-total institutions, I explore ethnographically how the dorm, previously considered a domestic space only, has now emerged as a closed circuit that combines in a single space living, work and leisure activities. Due to the lack of physical, mental and temporal demarcations between spaces of work and leisure, the dorm as a closed circuit has altered social and intimate relations. In this contested environment, I explore how academic demands come out on top and create a sense of constant obligation to work.

Methods

Ongoing measures to control the spread of COVID-19 have dramatically altered the ways in which ethnographic fieldwork as understood in anthropology – that is, rooted in physical co-presence and intersubjectivity – can be carried out. In a recent article on this issue, Magdalena Góralska introduces the term “anthropology from home” to denote “research in the pandemic times – that is, geographically restricted but digitally enabled” (2020: 46), and which characterises much recent work in the field. My project thus operates within a unique niche in which thinking about geographic and interpersonal restrictions have instead made possible anthropology *at home*. My position as an international student living in an international student dorm has enabled me to investigate, using traditional anthropological tools, the challenges facing this particular group of people living in a particular place at a particular time.

Anthropology *at home* actualised for me two main challenges, both of which are evinced by Maruska Svašek in her description of the field as “an experiential setting with blurred spatial and temporal boundaries” (2010: 90). First, the project reconfigured my relationships with the people whom I lived with, as our relationships were redefined by the project as we assumed researcher and researched roles. At times, the unstructured, unplanned, informal conversations, interactions and observations that constitute a large chunk of anthropological data felt like a betrayal to my dorm-mates and friends, who have so generously indulged this project. Thus, the use of semi-structured interviews, photo diaries and other formal data collection methods provided a sense of professionalism and trust with my collaborators. Second, this project transformed my relationship with my home, turning it into a field site. While my bedroom may have offered some solace, it was interlaced with the fabric of the dorm, and I was often reminded by the sound of the ‘field’ as people walked passed my door, chatted in the living room or cooked in the kitchen.

Life at the Student Dorm

Nestled in one of Copenhagen’s most affluent suburbs, the international student dorm Klosteret, which translates to ‘The Convent’, is no stranger to transformations. Originating as a hospital ward, run by a medical order of nuns, the space has been repurposed in recent years to a student dorm, an innovative solution to provide 22 single-occupancy student rooms spread across two separate dorms to shore up Copenhagen’s ailing rental stock. The rooms still bear the trappings of their former medical purpose, as they are painted in a sterile white and fronted with wide doors to ease the transporting of patients. However, the hospital cots and medical machinery have been replaced by Ikea flatpacks and a practical assortment of inoffensive storage options.

Managed by the University of Copenhagen’s housing foundation, these dorms are reserved exclusively for an international market. This type of temporary accommodation undergirds global education, facilitating the mobilities of many international students. Typically, international students stay there for periods of three to twelve months as a conveyor belt of students pass through the dorm throughout the year. Such spaces are evidence of what Augé (1995) terms a ‘non-place’. Non-places are devoid of historic and

relational meaning and serve to enable the circulation and consumption of goods and services in a globalised world. For Augé, non-places are opposed with anthropological places, the former producing ‘solitary contractuality’ while the latter is the nexus of ‘the organically social’ (1995: 94).

However, analysing the dorm in terms of Augé’s dyad fails to account for the ways in which students at the dorm actively transformed it from a non-place to a meaningful home. In their volume investigating the plural ways in which home is constructed by migrants, Rapport and Dawson reconceptualise home away from a fixed place and instead locate it ‘in a routine of practices, in repetition of habitual social interactions, in the ritual of a regularly used personal name’ (1998: 27). Thus for Rapport and Dawson, home becomes a mobile notion as ‘a home . . . can be taken along whenever one decamps’ (1998: 27). They emphasise that this notion of home is always mediated by particular political and socio-cultural characteristics of an individual. This theoretical framework thus enables us to imagine how being ‘at home’ is made possible in transient spaces.

For the students at the dorm, home was constructed in myriad ways as they incorporated trans-local and local practices into their daily routines. Practices such as cooking favourite dishes created a feeling of being ‘at home’ as students combined and adjusted recipes with which they had grown up with ingredients that were available to them locally. Trans-local relations were maintained using digital telecommunication in which dorm-mates could integrate family and friends from their home countries into their new lives, while newly acquainted local friends were introduced to the home during house parties or potluck dinners. This was occasionally further enhanced by combining their trans-local and local lives by introducing housemates to their pre-existing networks while making video calls. Additionally, following Melanie Lovatt’s (2018) material culture study of how older adults feel ‘at home’ when moving to residential care, students at the dorm created a feeling of being ‘at home’ not only through bringing along physical souvenirs from their home countries, such as photographs of family and friends, but also through acquiring new objects, such as plants or a new mug, which engendered new forms of attachment to their new home and which also enhanced their feeling of being ‘at home’. Thus, while the dorm functions as a non-place, due to its temporary and transactional nature, through their daily practices and material objects students at the dorm succeeded in transforming it into a home.

Emergence of the Closed Circuit

Since the start of lockdown, residents of the student dorm struggled to adjust to the transition to online teaching and the logistical and organisational shifts it demanded. Agnes, a Master's student from Lithuania, explained:

For me, it's really hard to concentrate. Not being able to go to the library, to the university – it's the biggest downside. Now all I am doing is: I start reading an article in my room, then go do something else, like watch a tv show, and this goes on all day. Then I will be hungry and I will go to the kitchen and spend an hour cooking. And when I go back to my room, I still have to finish my work. There are so many more distractions than before.

This sentiment of feeling distracted was reflected across the dorm. Work seemed to drag on all day, as Giacomo, an Italian exchange student, summarised: 'Even when you're not working, you're thinking of doing work. Not even thinking about a problem or something you read, but thinking about thinking about a problem'. Thus, as a dorm, we attempted to overcome this common obstacle by reconfiguring our large living room into a study space. A routine was established in which we would all start working together from 9:00 am until 6:00 or 7:00 pm, Monday to Friday. It was successful for a few days, but soon the challenges of working in our impromptu library unfolded. For some, it was the difficulty in maintaining a standard sleeping schedule. The introduction of lockdown around the world had made available a vast range of friends and family members from their home countries with whom they could now communicate more often. This new situation increased trans-local obligations, which demanded temporal synchronicity across time zones. Typically, it was the international student who was expected to adjust to the time zone of their friends and family in order to join the now more widely available online sociality enabled by Zoom parties. In other cases, our 'library' was an inappropriate place to attend work meetings or online lectures. Like in a normal library, it was frowned upon to distract others by making a lot of noise, such as participating in a discussion, academic or otherwise. Thus, meetings and online lectures were reserved for bedrooms. Often after finishing such a meeting, people decided to continue working from the desks in their bedrooms instead of joining their dorm-mates in the living room. After a week, people stopped going to the living room on days when they had meetings or classes.

Juan, a Spanish Master's student, made the following remarks:

I feel that I should not be stressed. I have plenty of time to study and live a healthy life. Yet, the fact that you do not have anything that separates study time and leisure means that you can never really disconnect. There is nothing that breaks up your day, or your week. Every day, it's like I am waking up in the library.

What emerged from this initiative was an exacerbation of the struggles of the dorm's residents in relation to their work. As a collective, we decided to transform the living room from a social space into a working space. Consequently, people rarely spent time there in the evenings after having studied there throughout the day. Due to the unspoken rules of that space regarding respect for fellow dorm-mates, work also encroached into the students' bedrooms. Initially, it was only during meetings and lectures, but this increased to any day on which students had potentially disruptive online activities. This move also caused a third reconfiguration: intimacies between dorm-mates changed as dorm-mates were viewed not only as friends, but as colleagues too. At the same time, distance was created between dorm-mates whose sleeping schedule was not conducive to the standardised workweek intended by this study collective. Instead, these students would work in the dorm later in the evening, which also created a sense of obligation within other students who passed by that they too should be working.

These reconfigured intimacies of spaces, relations and time had the unintended consequence of expanding work into more aspects of people's lives, rather than demarcating it to a specific time and place as we had initially intended. Instead, time and space exerted their own agency, as students were unable to overcome the temporal and physical limitations that the lockdown occasioned. While this study initiative only lasted for a few weeks, it marked a turning point, as the blurring of pre-existing physical, relational and temporal boundaries between academic, social and personal spaces engendered by the lockdown now collapsed together.

In Da Cunha's research on prisons, she introduces the term 'hyper-total institution'. In expanding the limits of Erving Goffman's concept of total institutions, she agrees with Goffman that 'the barriers which separate different spheres of life in the outside world, corresponding to discrete domains of relationships and identity, collapse within total institu-

tions' (2008: 345). She contends, however, that this collapse does not represent a time apart from the former social worlds of those who are incarcerated inside. Instead, it represents a reconfiguration of intimacies as kin and friendship networks continue to develop both within and outside the prison as the institution 'incorporates the neighbourhood materially and symbolically, in the form of large sections of kin and neighbours' (2008: 345). While I do not suggest that life in the dorm mirrors life within a prison, this concept of the hyper-total institution is useful in thinking with when analysing the impact of the lockdown on the dorm.

As discussed above, residents of the dorm actively created a domestic space, inscribing it with material and relational significance. Thus, while it used to be considered solely as a domestic space, due to lockdown measures the dorm has now emerged as a closed circuit that combines, in a single space, living, work and leisure activities. What makes this case unique, however, is the way in which the 'neighbourhood' was incorporated into the dorm. Rather than incorporating local social networks, such as fellow students that are made unavailable through social-distancing policies, the neighbourhood is instead reproduced through reconfigured relationships with dorm-mates as colleagues rather than friends and through trans-local telecommunication with kin and friendship networks back home.

Conclusion

In June, as life in Copenhagen began to regain a sense of pre-lockdown normality, life at the student dorm had yet to find its previous rhythms. Most days, the living room remained empty as students mainly limited themselves to studying alone or chatting to friends online in their bedrooms. The continued closure of the university and its associated facilities caused the closed circuit of living, working and relaxing at the student dorm to perdure beyond the general lockdown. This brings into question the extent to which international students are connected to a city beyond the affordances provided by the university. This apparent disconnection between international students and the reopened city, I suggest, points towards broader systemic issues of migrant exclusion and integration in Denmark. As the threat of a second wave is still on the horizon and universities mull over plans on how to safely reopen in the near future, the reactivating of the closed circuit remains a distinct

possibility for international students. I therefore hope that these findings may give impetus to universities to take seriously the particular challenges that lockdowns produce for international students and to create specific contingencies to mitigate their particular vulnerabilities, for, as Juan remarked: 'You are always with the same few people; everyone is in the same situation and getting tired of it. You don't feel like doing much and people have started to keep to themselves'.

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