

DEAF SPACE

Introduction

The desire to take possession of space is deeply embedded in Deaf culture (Bauman & Joseph, 2014). Deaf people want a space where they can call 'home' (ibid, p375). Deaf Space is often seen as the Deaf club or the temporary Deaf spaces which form when signing Deaf people meet in the street or in a bar (Gulliver & Kitzel, 2016, p. 451 cited in O'Brien et al., 2019). There are very few 'spaces' Deaf people can call their own. The Deaf community has traditionally been based around a strong network of Deaf clubs and residential schools for the deaf which were incredibly important for the transmission of Deaf culture and values (Ladd, 2003); spaces where Deaf people could 'escape the oppressive oralism of hearing society' (Valentine & Skelton, 2008). However, recent times have seen the closure of many Deaf clubs and schools for the deaf (Ladd, 2003). Improvements in technology and the widespread use of the internet is now revolutionising communication for the Deaf community. Is it now time to talk about an on-line Deaf community space?



Deaf Club , 1918-1920– Image by Peter Jackson

In the past things were great! I'd regularly go to Bristol Deaf club which was a Deaf space with everyone using Sign Language. You'd see older Deaf people there too who would have a rich knowledge of Deaf history. This was in the 90s, the Deaf social scene there was strong and vibrant. I'd attend regularly on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. We'd play pool, darts, bowls and a wide variety of other games. There was also bingo for the older generations. I was always involved in football and would talk about this for hours there."

(David Ellington)

"The Deaf club was where I learnt most of my Sign Language as the signing there was different from school. School had a limited vocabulary, but the club had a much wider breadth of Sign Language being used there. I would watch the older Deaf generations signing and learn more language and comprehension. I wasn't taught formally at all; it all came naturally and developed within me as I learned."

(Chris Steel)

"I'd go to the Deaf club in Chester regularly, every Saturday and Sunday would be bowling, and Wednesday would be Deaf club."

(Maureen Jackson)

"I was also a member of the BDA, at the weekend there would be mime and drama workshops; the BDA is how I connected and met with other Deaf people. These weekends were so important for me. On Friday, Saturday, and Sunday everyone would be signing to one another; when the weekend was over, I'd go back to work on Monday feeling uplifted and reinvigorated because of the weekend. On the Monday I'd be back with hearing people, they would all be talking, and I wouldn't know what they were discussing, so I would get on with work. By Friday I'd feel deflated and flat but then I would see all my Deaf friends and feel great again. The Deaf community was so important and useful as you'd learn so much and broaden your horizons."

(Mark Heaton)

The Past

In the past, Deaf clubs were the epicentre of the Deaf community; spaces which provided the bond of belonging and collective identity. They were spaces for information exchange, co-operation and mutual support between Deaf people (Valentine & Skelton, 2008). Deaf clubs also provided a geographical base for shared leisure and sport activities; in short, a rewarding social life that was largely absent outside of the club.



A party at a Deaf Club, 1911 – Image by Melinda N. Napier