

# CULTURAL PHYSIOGNOMY



Visiting Alan Campbell, House of Commons, London.

Prime Minister's Question Time and a debate calling for a judicial inquiry into the Iraq war.

The look and feel of the corridors and chambers together with the look of the inmates (MPs, visitors and staff) are so familiar. Not because we have all seen it on TV (low resolution video), but because it is all so reminiscent of my old school (very traditional English grammar school) and college (old and at Cambridge) – rich sensory memories. The old oak paneling, framed prints and oils, the style and decor yes, but also its patina, and then the dress, gestures, bearing and comportment of the people.

This is the physiognomy of a building, an institution, a (sub)culture.

Physiognomy is to read character from surface features.

It is much discredited of course (bushy eyebrows too close together do not signify criminal disposition). But this early and dubious science is the ancestor of contemporary biometrics and anthropometrics.

The broad principle surely holds – that someone's life history leaves traces in their surface features – the look of someone has a particular genealogy. That the surface look of a building reveals much about its character and use. This is a kind of archaeological thinking.

So what is the physiognomy of a building and its occupants? – materialities revealing their genealogy, symptom like.



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