

Parliamentary Design, Democracy and Partisanship

Contemporary democracies are widely diagnosed as being in crisis. Declining electoral participation, eroding public trust, the rise of populist movements, democratic backsliding and deepening polarisation have prompted scholars and practitioners alike to question whether the institutions of liberal democracy remain fit for purpose (Bennett and Livingston 2025; Mair 2013; Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017; The World Bank 2017). At the heart of this crisis lies a paradox: the formal architecture of democracy—its rules, its elections, its representative bodies—persists, yet its legitimacy is increasingly contested. Understanding this gap between institutional form and democratic practice requires attention to the institution that sits at the very core of governance: the parliament and, within it, political parties.

Representative democracy is not simply a procedural arrangement; it is a system premised on the capacity of citizens to be genuinely represented in collective decision-making. Parliaments, in tandem with political parties, are the pillars on which this system rests. Parties organise political competition, aggregate and articulate social interests, and sustain the connection between citizens and the state without which representation becomes hollow. Parliaments provide the arena in which competing interests are scrutinised, contested, and ultimately resolved into binding collective decisions. When either institution falters, the democratic chain connecting citizens to the government weakens.

Much scholarly attention has focused on the behavioural and systemic symptoms of parliamentary decline, including absenteeism, legislative gridlock, the growth of executive power, party fragmentation, and the retreat of deliberation in favour of partisan performance (Flinders and Kelso 2011; Best 2013; Cuddy 2018; Fazekas and Hansen 2022; Carroll and Bäck 2026). Yet a dimension of institutional life that remains curiously underexplored is the physical one. Parliaments are not only forums for processes and procedures; they are places. They occupy buildings, convene in chambers, and exist within broader urban and civic

precincts. How these spaces are designed, arranged, and experienced are rarely examined as aspects of democratic health, yet they may have significant implications for the functioning of a representative democracy.

This paper argues that the physical design of parliamentary spaces is not merely a backdrop to the analysis of democratic practice but a key element of it. At three distinct spatial scales—chamber, parliamentary building and surrounding precinct—design choices may shape the way in which parliaments, and political parties within them, perform their roles in liberal democracies. The analysis of parliamentary design is not an entirely new topic of research (e.g. Goodsell 1988; Psarra et al. 2023). Furthermore, there is a growing interest in how the built environment affects political behaviour and culture more broadly (e.g. Bell and Zacka 2020; Müller 2026; Nathan 2024; Parkinson 2012). Yet the existing literature in this field is fragmented, with architectural historians, political scientists, and democratic theorists working largely in isolation, deploying different concepts and methods. Individual insights about chamber acoustics, informal spaces, and the urban integration of parliamentary buildings, for example, rarely speak to one another, and the democratic significance of design features has often been grounded in disjointed normative foundations. And even works which aim to provide a comprehensive normative analysis of the importance of architecture for political life fail to systematically engage with parliamentary design. Consider, for example, Duncan Bell and Bernardo Zacka's (2020) edited volume *Politics and Architecture*, possibly the most comprehensive work in the field. Even in this large volume, parliamentary design is only mentioned a handful of times and is not subject to any systematic analysis.

This paper aims to address this significant gap in the literature by developing a single evaluative framework which, for the first time, connects specific spatial features of parliaments to the party behaviours on which democratic health depends. It should be noted that this is a normative theoretical paper rather than an empirical or comparative case study: our aim is to

develop and defend a conceptual argument about parliamentary design, not to test a hypothesis across cases or claim generalizable empirical findings. In this sense, the paper is an exercise in ‘applied democratic theory’ (Wolkenstein 2021: 314), i.e. it develops empirically-informed conjectures—combining normative insights from democratic theory with empirical evidence provided by the existing empirical literature—which can help generate testable hypotheses, guide comparative empirical research, and inform normative judgements about how parliamentary spaces ought to be designed.

Our analysis proceeds as follows. In the first section, we explain the function of parliaments—and by extension parties—in a liberal democracy. We do so by canvassing existing literature and crystalising the functions of parliaments, and linking them to two key functions that parties at their best promote in a liberal democratic polity: collegiality, i.e. parties and partisans’ capacity to cooperate across partisan boundaries; and linkage, i.e. parties’ ability to connect citizens with the state. In the second section, we employ these standards to evaluate the key features of the legislative chamber, i.e. shape and layout, size, and visibility. We then move on, in the third section, to assess the wider legislative building, focusing on its permeability, proximity, transparency, presence of informal spaces, and public accessibility. In the fourth section we consider the parliament’s location and immediate surroundings, particularly the degree of urban integration and the presence of protest spaces. We conclude by illustrating the broader implications of our analysis for democratic theory and practice.

Parliaments, Parties, and Democracy: Connecting Institutional Functions

The Functions of Parliaments

Any attempt to assess parliamentary architecture as a key element of democratic practice must first establish what parliaments are for. An overview of the literature in this field (Coghill et al. 2012; Hazell 2001; Louwerse 2026; Mezey 1979; Norton 1990; Rogers and Walters 2006;

Ruland et al. 2015) reveals that parliaments' functions can be organized across two broad categories

First, parliaments have a number of core functions. One of them is *representation*, which refers to the relationship between deputies and citizens: parliaments exist to give voice to public interests, to articulate citizens' grievances, and to ensure that the wider society is reflected in the institutions of government (Coghill et al. 2012: 62; von Beyme 2000: 73). Another core function is *legislation*, which involves the debate, amendment, and passage of laws (Ruland et al. 2015: 222). Furthermore, parliaments perform an important *oversight* role. As Hazell (2001: 23) explains, this scrutiny can be considered to be one of the 'classic functions of legislatures', and sees parliaments keeping governments accountable for their decisions, behaviours, and allocation of resources (see also Louwerse 2026: 1).

Beyond these three core functions, parliaments also perform a set of secondary functions. A prominent one is their *budgetary function* which, as Coghill et al. (2012: 57) point out, occupies a distinctive place in parliamentary work as it determines 'the allocation of the polity's resources and the direction of economic and other policies' (see also Ruland et al. 2015: 242). Additionally, parliaments are sites where *deliberation* takes place. Parliaments deliberate on matters of national importance—responses to crises, declarations of principle, the framing of social and political problems—without necessarily producing binding law (Rogers and Walters 2006: 2). Depending on the form of government, parliaments also perform additional functions, including *government formation* (von Beyme 2015: 513; Ruland et al. 2015: 223) and *judicial and constitutional functions* (Coghill et al. 2012: 58). Finally, many parliaments are increasingly involved in supplementary functions such as international diplomacy (see, for example, Almoatasm, 2024); ethics, integrity, and the regulation of political conduct (see UNCAC 2021); and learning and technological innovation (Nethery et al. 2022: 416).

Taken together, these functions reveal the breadth and complexity of what parliaments do. Yet parliaments are also deeply interconnected with political parties. Although parliaments are central to modern democracies, political parties remain the primary filter through which many people engage with and understand politics, and this holds particularly true in political systems where party structures are well-entrenched (see Bonotti and Weinstock 2021). Parliaments provide the institutional arena within which democratic life is conducted; parties provide the organised political actors who animate that arena (Kolln 2015). To make sense of this connection, in the following subsections we explore the normative theory of partisanship (NTP) and its applicability to the current study.

The Normative Theory of Partisanship (NTP)

In the past two decades, a growing body of normative scholarship has sought to recover and articulate the democratic value of parties and partisanship within liberal democratic systems (Bonotti 2017; Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014; White and Ypi 2016; Wolkenstein 2019). Notwithstanding its considerable internal variation, this literature—referred to as the NTP—converges on two fundamental dimensions through which parties can, under favourable conditions, serve to reinforce liberal democracy (Bonotti and Nwokora 2024; 2025).

The first of these dimensions is horizontal in character and concerns *collegiality*. It addresses the capacity of parties and their members to work across the boundaries of partisan competition in ways that sustain liberal democratic institutions and advance shared public goals. Parties and partisans demonstrate collegiality—and thereby prove their worth to liberal democracy—when they conduct themselves responsibly in relation to their political rivals. This encompasses a commitment to non-violence and, relatedly, to the principles of legitimate opposition and orderly competition (Rosenblum 2008). Collegial parties further honour the conventions of civil political conduct, for instance by offering concession speeches following

electoral defeat and adhering to the broader rituals that democratic culture requires (Bonotti and Zech 2023). In their public communications, collegial parties also practice a form of public justification that reaches beyond partisan self-interest, framing their positions in terms capable of commanding broader public appeal (White and Ypi 2016)—or, in Rawlsian language, grounding their advocacy in reasons accessible to all citizens rather than only to co-partisans (Bonotti 2017).

The second dimension of the NTP is vertical, and concerns the capacity of parties to provide a meaningful *linkage* between ordinary citizens and the institutions of the state (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020; Wolkenstein 2016), e.g. via candidate selection, the mobilisation of voters, and the translation of electoral commitments into policy (Dalton et al. 2011; Lawson 1988). At its core, the linkage function comprises two interlocking elements: voice and accountability (Bonotti and Nwokora 2024; 2025). Voice denotes the representational process through which parties convert the preferences and demands of citizens into coherent programmes and policy platforms. Accountability, by contrast, refers to the degree to which those demands are actually acted upon—whether through governing, implementing, or opposing policy depending on a party's position—and to the mechanisms of sanction that encourage and enforce responsiveness. Such sanctions may take formal shape, as when an electorate withdraws its support at the ballot box, or informal shape, as when representatives face public criticism and reputational damage for falling short of what citizens expect.

Although we acknowledge that there might be other ways of normatively evaluating parliamentary design, the NTP is the only existing comprehensive normative framework centred around parties in democratic theory and, therefore, an obvious starting point for our analysis.

The NTP and Parliaments' Functions

The taxonomy of parliamentary functions previously discussed—spanning representation, legislation, oversight, and a range of extended and emerging responsibilities—maps closely onto the two core dimensions through which the NTP holds that parties, at their best, strengthen liberal democracy: collegiality and linkage. Understanding these connections—especially when considering parliaments' core and extended functions—clarifies what both institutions must do if liberal democracy is to function well, and what is at stake when either falls short.

For example, parliaments' representative function (Coghill et al. 2012: 62; von Beyme 2000: 73)—giving voice to public interests, articulating grievances, and ensuring that the diversity of society is reflected in decision-making—maps onto the linkage function as defined in the NTP. By providing linkage between citizens and the state, parties are the primary mechanism through which parliamentary representation is operationalized. When linkage breaks down—whether through party elites ignoring voter preferences, weakening party organisation, or the collapse of programmatic competition—parliamentary representation is hollowed out even if the formal institutions remain intact.

Likewise, when it comes to collegiality, the correlation between parliamentary functions and the NTP is particularly evident in relation to oversight. More specifically, it manifests in the willingness of parties in opposition to scrutinize the executive rigorously, and on the willingness of parties in government to submit to that scrutiny without undermining the mechanisms that make it possible. But collegiality is important for the legislative function as well; effective law-making requires that competing parties engage with one another's arguments, accept the legitimacy of the amendment process, and submit their proposals to genuine scrutiny. Where collegiality collapses, deliberation fails: legislative processes become sites of obstruction, performative conflict, or rubber-stamping, rather than genuine collective reasoning about public policy.

As these examples show, parliaments and parties are deeply connected and they are both central to representative democracy. However, the NTP framework (which is grounded in parties) offers a more foundational analytical lens than the taxonomy of parliaments' functions for the evaluation of parliamentary design. This is because the NTP locates the conditions of democratic health at the level of political behaviour and institutional norms, rather than institutional outputs. Whether parliamentary functions are performed substantively depends on factors external to the institution itself. For example, representation is hollowed out when party linkage breaks down; oversight becomes performative and meaningless when collegial norms collapse; and legislation degenerates into obstruction or rubber-stamping in the absence of civility and mutual recognition. The NTP framework, by contrast, identifies the preconditions under which parliamentary functions acquire genuine democratic meaning. Linkage explains why representation reaches citizens rather than merely processing elite preferences. Collegiality explains why oversight and deliberation remain substantive rather than theatrical. Because these dimensions operate upstream of institutional outputs, they provide a more powerful analytical framework for diagnosing design failures and prescribing reforms.

The NTP framework assists us to maintain a normative anchor while we consider the matter of parliamentary design, understood here as not just parliament's formal structures, rules and procedures, but specifically its *physical* design. Designing parliaments without reference to the party behaviours that animate them risks producing formally sound institutions which, however, are democratically hollow. The NTP framework keeps those animating conditions analytically central, while we turn our attention to the question of how physical architecture may facilitate parliament's fulfilment of its democratic role.

In the following sections, we therefore use the NTP as an analytical lens to examine the complex ways in which parliamentary design at three key levels—i.e. the legislative chamber,

the wider legislative building, and the surrounding urban precinct—can affect parties’ ability to perform their collegiality and linkage functions.

The Legislative Chamber

The legislative chamber is the defining space of every parliament. It is where laws are debated and passed, where governments are held to account, and where the competing interests of citizens find formal political expression. The design of the chamber therefore carries particular democratic significance: its shape and layout, size, and visibility structure the interactions through which the fundamental functions of representative government are performed. In this section, we examine these three features of the legislative chamber and show how each of them can significantly affect collegiality and linkage, and therefore democratic practice.

Shape and Layout

The literature identifies several types of layouts for legislative chambers: opposing benches (e.g. UK), semi-circle (e.g. France), horseshoe (e.g. Ireland), circle (e.g. Slovenia), and classroom (e.g. Romania) (Gibson et al. 2023). The layout of the legislative chamber influences the collegiality dimension of the NTP framework—which concerns how parties conduct themselves toward their rivals, honouring norms of civil conduct, legitimate opposition, and public justification—much more so than the linkage dimension. Indeed, the effect of chamber shape and layout on political behaviour and culture maps closely onto questions of what conditions either promote or undermine collegial behaviour. Here we focus specifically on the two most common layouts: opposing-bench layouts, where government and opposition MPs face each other directly, and semi-circle chambers, where MPs generally all face the chair or speaker.

Opposing Benches

The opposing-bench layout, most associated with Westminster systems, advances adversarial politics. Korolija (2010: 371), for example, observes that the arrangement ‘spatially guides the members to speak and act in opposition to each other’, with no architectural curve to draw diverse voices toward consensus. Likewise, the division between ‘Aye’ and ‘No’ lobby seats in Westminster parliaments ‘encourage party discipline by their very location’ (Goodsell 1988: 298). At face value, opposing-bench layouts risk entrenching the kind of partisan confrontation that displaces civil conduct and public justification in favour of performative opposition. Additionally, these layouts may also present a gender bias, as they reinforce a masculine, oppositional style of debate—a dynamic that bears upon the inclusivity that genuine collegiality requires (Sawer 2000).

However, sometimes adversarial spatial arrangements may paradoxically promote non-violence by channelling conflict into theatrical, ritualised debate. Indeed, Parkinson (2012) observes that physical violence in parliamentary chambers occurs more frequently in some semi-circular legislatures than in oppositional ones—suggesting that the theatrical confrontation of opposing benches may function as a substitute for, rather than a precursor to, physical aggression. This is not a vindication of the opposing-bench model from the perspective of collegiality. Rather, it cautions us about simply equating architectural adversarialism with democratic dysfunction.

Semi-circular Layouts

Semi-circular layouts are generally associated with a different set of collegial dispositions. Sailer (2023), for example, contrasts the German Bundestag—semi-circular in form and associated with a more pragmatic, cooperative political culture—with the UK House of Commons. The European Parliament’s semi-circular design is similarly described as enabling

a sense of shared enterprise among parliamentarians from different member states (Sailer 2023: 385), though this effect is modulated by physical distance, which limits the opportunities for informal interaction among representatives seated far apart (a point to which we will return below).

The Dutch Parliament's transition from an opposing-bench format to a semi-circular one in the early 1990s offers an historically instructive case. Hoetink and Kaal (2018) correlate this architectural shift with a broader cultural movement toward rationality, compromise, and consensus—the kinds of dispositions that the NTP associates with effective collegial behaviour. The caveat they raise—i.e. that this cultural shift to some extent preceded the architectural change—once again reminds us that causation between parliamentary design and political practice can be ambiguous, and operate in parallel with a complex range of other variables.

Complicating the analysis further, not all semi-circular chambers produce the same effects on collegiality. Goodsell (1988: 299), for example, highlights that the multiple aisles dividing seating in such chambers may contribute to political fragmentation (as arguably seen in Italy and France), suggesting that the collegiality-promoting potential of the semi-circle shape is not unconditional. Physical subdivisions may reinforce factional clustering, and encourage MPs to only engage with those in their immediate vicinity rather than across the chamber as a whole. In this way, internal architectural features can partially reproduce the fragmenting effects that semi-circular design ostensibly exists to overcome.

Location of the Executive

The location of the executive within the chamber also carries its own implications, particularly for linkage (and, especially, accountability) more than for collegiality. In some parliamentary systems the executive, although derived from parliament, sits separately from backbench MPs.

In Austria and Greece, for example, the executive is positioned in front of or to the side of the presiding officer. In other countries, government members sit among MPs, either on one side of an opposing-bench chamber or in the inner arc of a semi-circle, as in Belgium and Spain (Gibson et al. 2023: 331). This particular architectural feature is understudied but we can speculate that blending the members of the executive into the broader parliamentary group might reduce accountability and scrutiny. Conversely, when the executive is seated separately, the spatial arrangement may reinforce an executive–legislative distinction that strengthens the dynamics of accountability. These are lines of inquiry which, as we suggest later in the paper, call for further research to establish behavioural links.

Size

Beyond the shape and layout of the parliamentary chamber, its size and the physical distance between its constituent features also have implications for both collegiality and linkage—though primarily for the former. As discussed below, size affects seating density, the proximity of MPs to one another and to the public galleries, and the acoustic conditions under which debate takes place, all of which has important implications for parties’ ability to fulfil their normative roles. A general view in the literature holds that smaller chambers foster more intense and engaged debate. Winston Churchill’s insistence on preserving the intimate scale of the House of Commons in its post-Blitz reconstruction, for example, is frequently cited in this context: a chamber that could not seat all MPs simultaneously, he argued, would generate a productive ‘sense of crowd and urgency’ that a larger, emptier space could not replicate (Churchill, in House of Commons debates 1943).

The relationship between size and collegiality is, however, not linear. Parkinson (2012), for example, observes that while smaller chambers may intensify debate, they may equally encourage a more conversational register—one that does not require the projected, declamatory

speech associated with adversarial performance. This ambiguity is significant from the perspective of the NTP: if collegiality involves both civil conduct and genuine public justification, the question of whether size promotes or undermines these dispositions may depend on how the acoustic and spatial intimacy of a smaller chamber interacts with the procedural culture of the legislature.

Acoustics represent a specific mechanism through which size and shape influence collegial and linkage functions. Foteinou et al. (2022), for instance, show that chamber acoustics affect the intelligibility of speech, which in turn shapes MPs' capacity to materially engage with one another's arguments—a precondition for the kind of public justification that is central to collegiality. There is also a linkage dimension: acoustic conditions affect whether speech in the chamber is audible to those in the public gallery, with implications for the accessibility of parliamentary proceedings to citizens (Foteinou et al. 2022). Insofar as the linkage function requires that parliamentary activity remains legible to the public, acoustic design is not merely a technical matter but a fundamental democratic one.

A gendered dimension intersects with both size and acoustics. Crawford and Keast (2014) argue that the adversarial orientation of the Australian horseshoe chamber reinforces traditional gender hierarchies, with acoustic properties that make women's voices sound comparatively shrill. Crewe (2015) similarly observes that many women feel uncomfortable and hesitant in the House of Commons chamber, where the norms of combative aggression favour a style of participation historically associated with masculine political culture. These observations connect to a broader body of literature suggesting that parliaments have structurally excluded women, reinforcing sexist cultures among MPs (Sawer and Maley 2024; Crawford and Pini 2011). This matters from the perspective of the NTP: collegiality requires not merely the absence of overt hostility but genuine mutual respect and recognition. Spatial and acoustic conditions that systematically disadvantage certain voices undermine the

inclusivity that robust collegiality demands. Conversely, design choices that explicitly accommodate the full range of parliamentary voices—including through technological adaptation, if necessary—may contribute to a more genuinely collegial culture.

Visibility

Visibility within the legislative chamber is another design feature that has attracted scholarly interest, and one whose implications can be usefully mapped onto both dimensions of the NTP framework. Some scholars have documented significant variation in visual interconnectivity across parliaments: in some chambers, such as the UK House of Commons, virtually every MP can see almost every other MP; in others, such as Belgium, those seated at the rear of the semi-circle fall largely outside the sightlines of most of their colleagues (Gibson et al. 2023). These differences are not merely aesthetic. The capacity of parliamentarians to see and be seen by one another shapes the social dynamics of the chamber in ways that can impact collegial behaviour.

In the UK case, for example, Psarra and Gil (2023: 185) observe that the visual dynamics of the Commons chamber encode a degree of spatial equality that partially offsets the otherwise unequal distribution of formal power between the government and the opposition, the executive and the backbench. This configuration may, in NTP terms, support the norms of mutual recognition and legitimate opposition that collegiality requires. Visibility, in this sense, functions as an informal enforcement mechanism for collegial norms: behaviour that might pass unnoticed in a more visually fragmented chamber becomes harder to sustain when it is witnessed by the full assembly. Conversely, chambers in which significant portions of the membership fall outside the common field of vision risk creating spatial hierarchies that reinforce existing inequalities of status and influence, potentially undermining the norm of treating all participants as legitimate contributors to collective deliberation.

The implications of our analysis extend to the design of public galleries in debating chambers. For instance, Parkinson (2012) argues that the act of making public claims in a space where the public is visibly present encourages legislators to frame arguments in terms that a broader audience can understand and accept. This reflects what the NTP recognises as the practice of public justification that distinguishes genuinely collegial political communication. A prominent and accessible public gallery thus contributes simultaneously to both linkage (by placing citizens in a position from which they can observe and evaluate their representatives) and collegiality (by disciplining the style of deliberation toward forms of justification accessible not only to co-partisans but also to opposing partisans and the broader public). The absence or marginalization of public galleries has the opposite effect: it removes the architectural prompt for public justification and reduces deliberation to an exchange between competing party professionals, insulated from broader accountability. In summary, representatives whose conduct is literally visible to observers may be more easily held to account than those who remain peripheral or invisible within the chamber, allowing for the operation of informal sanctions like public scrutiny and reputational damage. Architectural choices about sightlines and gallery placement, therefore, carry democratic consequences that extend well beyond the immediate dynamics of parliamentary debate.

That said, the practical significance of these effects may be limited by factors that architectural design alone cannot address. Attendance in public galleries is generally low (Parkinson 2012), and the increasing mediation of parliamentary proceedings through television and digital platforms means that the relevant audience for parliamentary conduct is largely remote and removed from physical presence. How chambers are designed for broadcast—the angles from which proceedings are filmed, the MPs who fall within or outside the standard frame, etc.—may in practice matter as much for linkage and accountability as the visual interconnectivity of the chamber itself.

The Wider Legislative Building

Besides the chamber itself, the corridors, lobbies, dining rooms, offices, and entrance halls that surround it are increasingly recognized as important sites of political behaviour, informal power, and democratic meaning. These spaces shape how legislators relate to one another, how citizens relate to their representatives, and how democratic institutions function—or fail to function—in practice. This section argues that the architectural features of the wider legislative building, like those of the chamber itself, can also be systematically understood through the NTP framework. The architectural features examined here—permeability, proximity, transparency, informality, and accessibility—shapes the conditions under which collegiality and linkage are exercised, facilitated, obstructed, or distorted. Understanding these connections enriches our understanding of how parliamentary design may impact democratic practice.

Permeability

Permeability can be understood as the degree to which spaces within a legislative building are integrated or segregated. For example, this might include the extent to which routes connect or divide different zones, and the ease with which legislators can move between them, as well as the degree to which users of the building are funnelled together or kept separate. Such features can influence the extent to which collegial behaviour is performed.

A comparative analysis of the Palace of Westminster and the Reichstag in Berlin offers the sharpest illustration of this connection. Westminster's labyrinthine and highly interconnected spatial structure facilitates informal interactions among legislators that would not occur in a more segregated environment (Psarra and Gil 2023). Of particular significance are the division lobbies in Westminster, whose connectivity allows members of parliament to exercise political influence informally as they pass through. These encounters are incidental to the formal act of voting but meaningful for the social and political relationships that sustain

legislative cooperation. The Reichstag, by contrast, is organised around a single distributional sequence that channels movement toward numerous dead-end spaces at the building's periphery. The result is little spatial culture of informal interaction: the architecture does not generate the conditions under which legislators from different parties are likely to encounter one another except in formally structured settings (Psarra and Gil 2023).

From the perspective of the NTP, this contrast maps closely onto the collegial dimension. Collegiality does not require agreement; it requires the kind of repeated, low-stakes interaction through which norms of mutual recognition, civility, and legitimate competition are maintained and renewed. Westminster's spatial integration sustains what has been described as 'a continuous generative process of socialisation and negotiation' (Psarra and Gil 2023: 192), which is precisely the kind of ongoing relational substrate from which collegial behaviour emerges. Where that substrate is absent, as in the more segregated Reichstag, a heavier burden is placed upon formal activity, rules and procedures to achieve what architecture might otherwise help generate informally.

A further dimension of permeability concerns the interaction between legislators and the executive within the parliamentary building. In an exploration of the Australian case, for example, Fewtrell (1985) analysed the move from Old to New Parliament House. He predicted that concentrating executive offices in a dedicated, exclusive zone of the new building would strengthen the executive's dominance and deepen its disjunction from the legislature. In the old building, ministerial offices were fragmented throughout the structure, generating regular informal contact between ministers, backbenchers, and opposition members. The new building's spatial separation of executive and legislative zones threatened to eliminate these incidental encounters. A later study by McIntosh (1989) found that, after a year of occupation, users of the New Parliament House were undecided on the overall effect on parliament-executive relations; however, a substantial majority of users reported that the separate

executive wing resulted in less contact between backbenchers and ministers. These studies suggest that permeability in parliaments may have implications not only for the horizontal dimension of collegiality—the relationship between government and opposition—but also for the integrity of parliamentary oversight, which is a key feature of linkage. Architecture that physically segregates the executive from the legislature may, over time, reinforce the executive’s tendency to treat parliamentary scrutiny as an intrusion rather than a constitutional obligation.

Proximity

If permeability concerns the connectivity of routes between spaces, proximity concerns distance and the positioning of certain spaces vis-a-vis other spaces. The most sustained body of evidence in this area relates, once again, to Australia’s transition from the old to the new parliament in the late 1980s. As Goodsell (2001) argues, moves from one building to another can be a form of quasi-experiment which can persuasively demonstrate the effect of architecture on legislators’ behaviour. Interviews with members at Australia’s New Parliament House found that the increased distances between offices, corridors, and meeting spaces were widely perceived to work against the collegiality needed to build effective coalitions (Crawford and Keast 2014). The compression of Old Parliament House had over time generated a density of informal encounters that the new building’s spaciousness dissolved. Indeed, as Parkinson (2012) also observes, proximity of offices between senior and junior colleagues, and between government and opposition members, helps to facilitate the frequency of deliberative exchanges that are conducive to collegiality. This also makes it more likely that perspectives that might otherwise remain marginalised will be heard.

These factors are important from an NTP perspective. For the collegial dimension, proximity matters because collegiality—as distinct from mere formal compliance with

democratic rules—is inherently relational. It is sustained through factors such as repeated encounters and shared spaces, which contribute to building mutual familiarity. Greater physical distance reduces the frequency of such encounters, placing the burden of relationship-maintenance more heavily on deliberate effort and formal scheduling, both of which are easier to avoid. For the linkage dimension, proximity—particularly between government and legislative backbenchers—matters for a different reason: it affects the degree to which the accountability dimension of linkage operates within as well as between parties. Where legislators and ministers share proximate informal spaces, the flow of information, pressure, and expectation that connects parliamentary representatives to one another, and ultimately to citizens, is more readily sustained.

Yet greater distance between different political actors does not always necessarily have negative implications for collegiality and linkage. In some cases, its effect may be neutral. In their study of office placement in the California Capitol building, for example, Sommer and Steiner (1988) did not find that proximity significantly affected collegiality between legislators, suggesting that architecture interacts with the manner and frequency with which such spaces are used. In other instances, distance may even have a positive effect. In the Australian case, for example, the increased distance characteristic of the new parliamentary building was not uniformly experienced as a negative outcome. For female MPs, and those representing minority communities, the greater space disrupted the ‘old boys’ networks that had flourished in the tight quarters of the old building, creating new opportunities for the development of collegial relationships outside established hierarchies (Crawford and Keast 2014).

These findings suggest that proximity is a feature of parliamentary design with mixed and variable effects on democratic practice. Those effects depend on whose relationships are being facilitated and whose are being disrupted. An architecture that tightens proximity may strengthen the informal networks of the already-powerful while leaving others more isolated.

The NTP framework, which insists on the democratic significance of reaching beyond narrow partisan self-interest toward public justification accessible to all, offers a normative basis for distinguishing between the kinds of collegiality that proximity fosters. Proximity that reinforces existing hierarchies and exclusions is not, in the full normative sense, collegial; it is merely convivial among the already-privileged.

Transparency

Transparency, in the architectural sense examined here, refers to the degree to which parliamentary spaces and processes are visually accessible—to the public, to the media, and to legislators themselves. As a design principle it has obvious symbolic resonance, but it is the relationship of transparency to the NTP's linkage dimension that is of particular interest for our analysis.

The Reichstag dome, which allows members of the public to look down through a glass ceiling into the plenary chamber below, is the most frequently cited example of architectural transparency in democratic design. Psarra and Gil (2023) characterise the building's overall message as one in which the political process is subject to visual scrutiny by a public that symbolically 'owns' the building. The Dutch Parliament's glass facade onto the streets of The Hague communicates a similar commitment (Hoetink and Kaal 2018). More concretely, Goodsell (2001, 162) speculates that the high visibility and 'wide-angle sightlines' in state capitol buildings in the United States provides platforms for 'visual self-presentation' to the public, media, and other politicians. These examples illuminate what might be called the accountability dimension of linkage in architectural form: the public can see their representatives at work—and representatives know they are being seen.

But as Chibois's (2023) analysis of the Palais Bourbon (the meeting place of the French National Assembly) in Paris makes clear, transparency and genuine accountability are not

always related. Erecting virtual glass walls around legislators so that the public can observe deliberations will not always, in itself, produce the responsiveness that the linkage function requires. Likewise, in his analysis of the Reichstag dome, Müller (2020; 2026) points out that where physical access remains tightly controlled, transparency may actually reinforce the divide between citizens and their representatives by making that divide visible while rendering it formally inviolable. Linkage, as the NTP framework insists, consists not merely in the expression of citizen preferences but in their actual uptake—and transparency, however symbolically powerful, does not guarantee that uptake.

Informal Spaces

Informal spaces also play a key role in parliament buildings and their presence—or lack thereof—can have implications for the democratic functions of parties, particularly for collegiality. In his analysis of the UK Parliament, for example, Norton (2019) explains that informal spaces include rooms like libraries, bars, lobbies, tea rooms, and dining rooms. These spaces, he argues, perform four key functions: socialization into institutional norms, information exchange, lobbying, and the mobilization of political support. The socialization function is most directly connected to the collegiality dimension of NTP since, as Norton (2019) argues, informal spaces can facilitate the kind of cross-party interaction that formal spaces either preclude or structure too tightly.

Similarly, in his comparative analysis of Westminster's division lobbies—where deals are struck as members mingle before and after votes—and the United States Capitol's more insular cloakrooms, Goodsell (1988) suggests that informal spaces not only permit but also actively generate departures from strict party discipline, enabling the kind of negotiated consensus that underpins collegial inter-party relations. Nielsen's (2018) observations about communal eating spaces as sites of cross-party mingling reinforce this picture. Where informal

spaces bring legislators from different parties together in settings unburdened by formal agendas or presiding officers, the relational preconditions for collegial behaviour—mutual recognition, accumulated familiarity, and the capacity to disagree within the boundaries of civility norms—are more readily cultivated.

Yet Norton (2019) is careful to note that informal spaces do not straightforwardly promote collegiality. As we already pointed out in our analysis of proximity, such spaces can also reinforce hierarchical and tribal norms, entrenching the gendered and factional dynamics that formal spaces might at least formally constrain. Women legislators, for example, may find that informal spaces, far from providing relief from the male-dominated behaviours and dynamics that characterize formal parliamentary culture, actually intensify it. Likewise, when specific rooms are assigned exclusively to particular parties, they may become, over time, shrines for party luminaries and traditions, thus deepening partisan factionalism rather than bridging partisan divides (Goodsell 1988).

From the NTP perspective, the ambivalence of informal spaces vis-à-vis collegiality is instructive. Informality is not intrinsically collegial; it is the content and character of informal interactions that matters. Informal spaces support the collegial dimension of democratic party behaviour when they bring legislators together across party lines, sustain ongoing relationships rather than reinforcing factionalism, and encourage legislators to engage with one another as participants in a shared democratic project rather than as opponents in a zero-sum competition. But when they deepen insularity, reinforce hierarchy, and further exclude already marginalized legislators, they undermine collegiality and are democratically counterproductive.

Accessibility

The last feature of the wider legislative building that we examine in this section is accessibility. This refers to the degree to which parliamentary buildings are physically open to citizens, the

conditions under which entry is granted, and the character of the spaces accessible once inside. Among the features of the wider legislative building, accessibility is perhaps the dimension most directly relevant to the linkage function of the NTP framework. Linkage, understood as the vertical relationship between citizens and the state, depends not only on what parties do but also on the degree to which parliaments—and the parties that inhabit them—are genuinely open to the people they claim to represent.

At its most basic, accessibility concerns who can enter a parliamentary building and on what terms. The contrast between political systems in which citizens may visit the parliament as a matter of right and those in which access is mediated through the personal invitation of an elected representative is, from an NTP perspective, significant. The latter scenario can transform a bottom-up democratic entitlement into a top-down favour, weakening the informal sanctions—e.g. reputational damage, public scrutiny, and the awareness of being watched—that the accountability dimension of linkage depends upon.

Westminster's Central Lobby offers a valuable example in respect of linkage. As the most spatially integrated point in the building—a convergence of routes bringing together MPs, peers, and members of the public (Puwar 2010)—the Lobby embodies democratic accountability in architectural form (Psarra and Gil 2023), at least in principle. Indeed the building's design brings different political actors and citizens into proximity, reflecting and reinforcing a conception of parliament as a genuinely public and accountable institution. Yet, the heavily controlled entry to Westminster suggests that architectural and practical accessibility can diverge substantially, thus simultaneously creating and withdrawing (or, at least, reducing) the preconditions for democratic accountability.

Beyond architectural design and entry conditions, the kinds of spaces, activities and interactions open to the public once inside also matter for democratic linkage. For example, guided tours, school visits, and open days can be meaningful opportunities for citizens to

observe parliamentary work and occasionally to interact with legislators (Prior and Sivashankar 2023). However, when the only accessible areas are touristic or heritage spaces, citizens may encounter the symbols of democratic power rather than its exercise (Parkinson 2012, 2013; see also Roberts 2009). In these cases, the building becomes a museum of democracy rather than a living site of it—architecturally open but democratically shallow. A parliament that welcomes citizens into its foyer while conducting its real business in spaces inaccessible to public scrutiny has satisfied the letter but not the spirit of the linkage function.

Media access deserves separate consideration as a mechanism of democratic linkage. In the French National Assembly, for example, a tiered pass system and the spatial segregation of journalists, facilitated by the segmented and fragmentary physical architecture of the building, have significant implications for democratic accountability (Chibois 2023). By limiting informal encounters between journalists, citizens, and parliamentarians, the building reinforces the elite status of elected representatives and reduces the conditions under which informal mechanisms of accountability—e.g. doorstep interviews, corridor exchanges, and casual encounters—can occur. Yet, rigorously managed access policies do not always foreclose media access. For example, in his analysis of Portcullis House—a building in Westminster that provides offices for over 200 members of the UK Parliament and their staff—Norton (2023) observes that journalists have learned to occupy the ground-floor atrium as an informal press zone, thus creating opportunities for democratic accountability.

The Surrounding Urban Precinct

As the previous sections illustrated, the study of parliamentary architecture has tended to concentrate on the legislative chamber and the wider legislative building. Yet the democratic practices and interactions that occur in the space which surrounds a legislature are no less important than those that unfold within it. Scholars of architecture consider that buildings are

defined (to a significant extent) by their relationship to the surrounding landscape and wider sense of place (e.g. Alexander 1977; Norberg-Schulz 1980). So, where does parliament sit? What kind of city, if any, does it inhabit? Can ordinary citizens approach it without forethought or effort? Is there space outside its walls for the expression of political demands? These are not merely logistical or aesthetic concerns; they are questions about the conditions under which parliaments and parties can perform their functions.

Urban Integration

Urban integration—i.e. whether a parliament is embedded in the daily life of citizens or secluded from it—is perhaps the most direct spatial expression of linkage. This requires that citizens experience parliament and the parties that inhabit it as institutions that belong to them—that their preferences flow upward toward them and that their capacity to hold them to account is not merely formal but concrete. The spatial relationship between a legislature and the public it represents therefore encodes a message about whether that relationship is one of proximity or distance, linkage or detachment. Our interest here is whether that message flows on to shape actual political behaviour.

Italy's Palazzo Montecitorio illustrates one end of the continuum. Situated in the heart of Rome, a few minutes from the Pantheon and surrounded by hotels, cafes, and commercial life, it allows citizens moving through the city centre to find themselves at the doors of the legislature without having set out to do so. Citizens might mingle with their parliamentarians in nearby establishments, although the building itself is generally not accessible to the public (Italian Republic n.d.). This spatial arrangement does not by itself guarantee that linkage functions well—parties may still fail to translate citizen demands into policy, and accountability mechanisms may still be weak. However, it may create the perceptual and

material conditions under which the legislature registers as part of civic life rather than apart from it.

The Australian Commonwealth Parliament, built on a broad hill in Canberra, represents the other end of the urban integration spectrum. Canberra is a purpose-built capital, several hours from the more populous centres of Melbourne and Sydney, and the parliamentary precinct is designed as a monument rather than as a neighbourhood. It is normally reached by car, not on foot; encountered by intention, not by accident (Dovey 2018; Macintyre 2008). As Dovey (2018) observes, whether a parliamentary building can be approached directly from the street or not is a meaningful indicator of the relationship it establishes between the institution and the public. Canberra's Parliament House cannot be so approached—or not in any way that resembles the incidental proximity of the Palazzo Montecitorio in Rome. The consequence, for linkage, is not that parliament is inaccessible in a legal or procedural sense, but that it is remote in a civic sense. When parliament is physically separated from the social world its members are supposed to represent, the vertical connection between citizens and state that linkage requires is stretched thin.

The Czech parliament provides another interesting example that can help sharpen this analysis. Tucked away in the streets below Prague Castle, largely unknown even to residents of the capital, the institution is closed to the public. According to Preuss (2024), this architectural invisibility has contributed to a broader erosion of public trust in Czech legislators—a parliament one cannot find, let alone enter, struggles to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of those it is meant to represent. This suggests that linkage can weaken even if formal institutions remain intact, and that its hollowing out can be partly spatial: the parliament building's location enacts a kind of democratic withdrawal, a message that governance occurs elsewhere, out of sight. Where there is no physical proximity, the representational connection must be sustained entirely through abstract mechanisms—party platforms, electoral cycles,

media coverage—without the grounding that urban integration and physical accessibility can provide.

Perimeter security intensifies these effects. Parkinson (2013), for example, notes that street closures, barriers, bollards, and fencing can transform the approach to a legislative building into an unpleasant and unwelcoming experience, communicating to ordinary citizens that the building must be protected from them rather than opened to them. The Romanian parliament serves as an example—although not far from the centre of Bucharest, and neighboured by an art gallery and cathedral, the building is still walled-away, fortress-like, from the city streets (Gruia Bădescu and Stătică 2023). A parliament surrounded by security architecture is one that has physically enacted a kind of distance, signalling that the vertical relationship between the represented and their representatives is mediated by suspicion rather than by invitation. These signals matter for linkage, because the exercise of voice and the practice of accountability both depend, at least partly, on citizens experiencing the institutions of government as responsive and approachable.

Protest Space

The provision of space for political protest also bears on linkage, especially the accountability dimension. Accountability refers not only to formal electoral sanction but also to the informal mechanisms through which citizens express demands, apply pressure, and signal dissatisfaction with those who govern. Protest is one of the most important of these informal mechanisms: it makes claims visible, concentrates demands at the site of power, and creates reputational costs for legislators who ignore what is being said outside their windows.

The physical public space adjacent to political buildings can be an important feature of democratic life (Dance 2014; Parkinson 2012). A protest at the gates of parliament carries a weight that the same protest, held elsewhere in the city, does not. The proximity to political

power sharpens the message, attracts media and public attention, and compels those inside to reckon with those outside. This is the kind of informal accountability mechanism that the NTP framework identifies as essential to democratic health: the sanction that is applied not by the ballot box but by the visible and reputational pressure of organized public demand. Where protest space is lacking, or where such space is too distant from the seat of power to carry symbolic force, this informal accountability mechanism is weakened—and with it, one of the key conditions under which parties may remain genuinely responsive to citizens.

The case of Australia's Parliament House in Canberra illustrates how spatial design can structurally constrain informal accountability. Protest within the parliamentary precinct is generally restricted to a designated area across the road from the main entrance, governed by guidelines issued by the Presiding Officers, with limits on duration and permanent structures (Iveson 2007: 56-82). The political geography of the capital therefore works—whether intentionally or not—to diminish the force of popular pressure on the legislature (see also Macintyre 2008). In NTP terms, the accountability dimension of linkage is spatially dampened: the informal sanction mechanism is available in principle but costly in practice.

Parliament Square in London offers a contrasting but instructive case. As Hicks (2015) observes, the progressive installation of memorials to figures such as Churchill, Gandhi, and Mandela has transformed the square into a site that already speaks of politics—and that therefore invites political expression. Yet the square's limited size and constrained accessibility mean that large demonstrations more often gather at Trafalgar Square, considerably further from Westminster (Nield 2012; Parkinson 2012). The symbolic proximity of Parliament Square is undermined by its physical limitations. The result is a partial accountability infrastructure: the square gestures toward the relationship between citizens and their legislature, but its spatial constraints ensure that the largest expressions of popular demand are displaced to a location that is less symbolically proximate to power. The informal accountability mechanism is either

reduced to a smaller scale or diluted—in either case, it is less likely to directly challenge those who govern.

These examples show how the presence of protest space outside parliament buildings can promote linkage and accountability, thus enhancing democratic representation. Yet, this dynamic can sometimes have a paradoxical effect: where protest space is plentiful and demonstrations easy to stage, protest may become routinized, its frequency blunting its effect (as suggested by Kriesi 2016; see also Parkinson 2012). This is problematic for accountability and linkage, since informal sanctions derive their force partly from their unusualness, and from the reputational and political cost they impose. When protest becomes normalized—a background feature of civic life rather than a sharp signal of popular dissatisfaction—its capacity to function as an accountability mechanism is diminished. There may therefore be a need for balance in designing the spatial conditions for protest: creating sufficient space, accessibility and frequency to make protest feasible and visible, but not so much as to transform it into mere performance.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the physical design of parliamentary spaces is a substantive dimension of democratic practice. Drawing on the NTP and its two core dimensions—collegiality and linkage—we have developed a systematic framework for evaluating how architectural features at three spatial scales shape the conditions under which parliaments—and political parties within them—perform their democratic functions. The paper’s key contribution is the development of a coherent and systematic analytical framework overcoming the fragmentation that characterizes the existing literature on parliamentary design. By synthesising the existing literature through the lens of the NTP, and anchoring the analysis in the two dimensions of collegiality and linkage, we have been able to bring disparate findings

into a single evaluative framework—one that connects specific spatial features to the party behaviours on which democratic health depends. The result is not merely a summary of what is known, but a coherent analytical framework capable of generating testable hypotheses, guiding comparative empirical research, and informing normative judgements about how parliamentary spaces ought to be designed.

It is important to stress that the relationship between parliamentary architecture and democratic practice cannot be captured by common sense intuitions alone. While many spatial features of legislatures appear intuitively important, their democratic significance becomes visible and clear only when they are situated within a normative framework—such as the NTP—that explains how physical design shapes the upstream conditions for collegiality and linkage. By making these connections explicit, the paper moves beyond descriptive plausibility and shows that architectural choices matter not simply because they correlate with familiar behavioural patterns, but because they structure the very normative capacities through which parties and parliaments sustain liberal democracy. This theoretical grounding, we suggest, is essential for transforming plausible conjectures into a systematic account of why parliamentary design should be understood as a core component of democratic health.

Several directions for future research deserve particular attention. Geographically, the field remains narrowly focused on Westminster and Western Europe; legislatures in Asian, African, Pacific, and South American countries are significantly understudied, as are state and sub-national legislatures, which offer important design variation and operate closer to citizens. Empirically, as well as aiming to establish causal connections between parliamentary design features and parties' democratic functions, future work should also investigate mixed and interactive effects—how features at one spatial scale reinforce or compensate for those at another. Finally, the framework here has implications for democratic reform: if spatial design shapes the conditions of parliamentary function, it represents an underutilised lever for

institutional renewal, one that deserves a place in debates about how to address the contemporary crisis of party democracy.

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