



Human Relations
[0018-7267(200207)55:7]
Volume 55(7): 799–820: 024541
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SAGE Publications
London, Thousand Oaks CA,
New Delhi

Aesthetics, morality and power: Design as espoused freedom and implicit control

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ABSTRACT

This article is intended to contribute to debate on the arguments that are propounded both in support and in condemnation of new forms of workplace aesthetic. I draw upon experience in organizational intervention and on literature from the arenas of physical and social workplace design to support a multi-contextual debate on the new workplace aesthetic and on interpretations that are placed upon it within different contexts of study. While an essential tension of freedom and control is identified in the literature, I offer no conclusion in support or in condemnation of any particular viewpoint. Rather, I argue for a multi-perspective analysis of workplace aesthetic in order to surface meaning for different groups of actors within their own context of thinking/acting. From this, general theories for analysis of other situations may be derived rather than particular models or recipes for application.

KEYWORDS

aesthetic ■ design ■ morality ■ postdichotomous ■ power ■ reality

Introduction

Each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pên, he chooses – simultaneously – all of them.

Jorge Luis Borges (1970: 51)

The call for papers for the International Workshop on Organizational Aesthetics, held in Siena in May 2000, espoused the notion that the human 'senses and the aesthetic judgement restore corporeality to the people in organizations'. This may be taken as supporting the concept of aesthetics – the experience and expression of environment through the human senses – as empowering actors within organizations; providing a framework both for expression and representation, and for interpretation of their roles, purposes, behaviours and actions at the individual level. In this article, I discuss alternative approaches to consideration of the aesthetic of the organizational environment, particularly on the nature and role of the physical setting of work. In the social science arena, Elton Mayo's ubiquitous Hawthorne experiments (Pennock, 1930) are seen by some (Baldry et al., 1998: 181) as 'marking the death knell of theoretical interest in the influence of the physical environment over worker behaviour'. Within the practitioner literature on the physical design of 'the new office' (Duffy, 1997), however, it is argued that, 'based on very new and very different assumptions about the use of time and space, new ways of working are emerging fast' (1997: 46). Here, the implication is that space is a key driver of new forms of organization design.

Across the literature, there is dichotomized consideration of the role of the physical environment, with the workspace seen as controlling (Baldry et al., 1998) and commodified and rationalized (Rosen et al., 1990), or as empowering (Turner & Myerson, 1998) and flexible and diverse (Duffy, 1997). This essential tension of control/freedom may be viewed as reinforcing 'traditional' dichotomies of management/workforce, with the workplace playing an instrumental role. However, at another level, I would say that this tension further dichotomizes time – to historical and contemporary orientations towards the space/organization relationship. Foucault argues (1994) that time and space are inter-linked (yet separate) and that before the 20th century humanity was concerned primarily with the time element, while 'the present age may be the age of space' (1994: 175). He further posits that contemporary space is formed by 'relations of emplacement' (1994: 176); of proximity, connection and perception; whereas historical space was formed by relations of hierarchy. I will argue that this emplacement/hierarchy dichotomy underpins differences in the approach to discussion of space across the design/practitioner and social science literature, with the first set placing space within the emplacement frame; supporting interpersonal relations (e.g. Raymond & Cunliffe, 1997); and the second set placing it in the hierarchy frame, reinforcing Taylorist work design (e.g. Baldry et al., 1998). Finally, I will argue that there is a lack of study in either arena of the relationship of people and organizations to space over time.

Bases of aesthetic interpretation

While this study springs from, and may appear to remain rooted in, early studies of organizational aesthetics (Strati, 1999) – I return frequently to discussion of the physical – its relevance is intended to transcend this frame of reference. This article draws upon literature on workplace design from both social science and practitioner/design fields, and upon illustrations of an organization based on personal experience of consultancy and research interventions in both fields. By reference to these and to areas of philosophy and psychology, I present arguments for the interpretation of the aesthetics of environment as representative both of emplacement and hierarchy – of freedom and control. In support of these arguments, . . .

. . . reference to literature and organizational illustration is used to argue that the individual freedom espoused by supporters of new forms of workplace aesthetic may be merely a superficial representation of underlying application of a form of ‘master and slave’ (Nietzsche, 1994) (im)moral authority by those with power over design and organizational decision making; those who are both creators of the new forms of work and workplace, and of the value system applied to consideration of it. *They* will judge what is ‘good’ and what is ‘empowerment’, without reference to those who are the subjects of their good and empowering actions

. . . reference to literature and organizational illustration is used to argue that the individual freedom espoused by supporters of new forms of workplace aesthetic may be derived from rationalization presented as rational analysis – a utilitarian approach based upon free agreement among actors (Rorty, 1999), seeking consensus and freedom from domination (Habermas, 1987). That is to say that, what is presented as rational analysis and design (e.g. Duffy, 1997: 224–8) may be based, rather, on (un)conscious acceptance that ‘maybe technology and centralized planning will not work. But they are all we have got’ (Rorty, 1999: 228).

I neither seek to resolve the differences between these views through reductionist argument, nor to promote synthesis in accordance with the Hegelian dialectic (Gadamer, 1976). Rather, I argue that the seemingly conflicting views of the origin and process of conceptualization, implementation and occupation of the workplace environment should be held as being simultaneously valid without contradiction. In so doing, I refer to the principles of Janusian and homospatial thinking (Rothenberg, 1979), seeking to

surface and engage with the different meanings that exist synchronously within and between different groups of actors within their own context of thinking/acting.

The approach used in this work might be considered trans-disciplinary (Argyris, 1996; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998) or pluri-disciplinary (Strati, 1998), in that I do not frame the subject within a particular body of theoretical or practical knowledge. Nor do I seek to integrate different approaches according to a multi-disciplinary model. Finally, my discussion of meaning is concerned with all levels of organizational hierarchy, drawing upon literature and intervention that involves internal and external actors, and members of organizations at senior and middle management, and at operational levels.

(Dis)unity and di/con-vergence in studies of organization

The last two decades have demonstrated a move away from the excessively rational and structural view of organizations prevalent up to the 1970s (Zey-Ferrel, 1981), with the development of theoretical approaches to organizational study that emphasize postmodern concepts of complexity and ambiguity (for example, Burrell, 1988; Cooper & Burrell, 1988; Cooper, 1989). Much of the literature from fields of management practice and research from this period, however, demonstrates a drive towards rejection of the logically inconsistent and a resultant focus on the search for organizational unity. This tendency can be observed in a range of literature on managerial approaches; for example, organizational cohesion (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991), shared vision (Wack, 1985; Collins & Porras, 1996; Cohen, 1997) and the exercise of leadership to seek to transform followers into a more unified and motivated body (Bass, 1985). Such approaches involve a drive for uniform meaning and interpretation (Hedberg, 1981; Weick, 1991; Kim, 1993) across all organizational actors. I would argue that such approaches often ignore the essential contribution to meaning and understanding of what is omitted from any situation, with sole concentration on what is present, or on what is *acknowledged* as present – relevant for inclusion according to the particular model of analysis.

Within the pluralist stream of organizational literature (e.g. Salaman, 1979; Fox, 1985), there is acknowledgement of diverse perspectives. However, these are commonly conceived in terms of dichotomous opposites – by reference to thesis and anti-thesis. Here, I argue for complex and ambiguous understanding of organizational context that transcends ‘simplistic and unhelpful false dichotomies’ (Feyerabend, 1999), and accepts that organizational actors may conceive their own situation, relative to others in terms of ‘multi-layered

reality', 'multiple realities' or 'no-such-thing-as-reality' (Beech & Cairns, 2001).

Within the emergent field of organizational aesthetics, there is early reference to complexity and ambiguity (Strati, 1992). However, there is also support for development of understanding of 'the physical and social *reality* of an organization' (Strati, 1998: 1386, emphasis added) in order that through symbols 'the fragmentary is made whole, *unitariness* is restored' (1998: 1387, emphasis added). In arguing that there is no single organizational reality – no unitariness that transcends difference – I argue that the search for the 'shared text' (Strati, 1999) must not focus upon areas of similarity and familiarity to the exclusion of the unshared texts. It is through their own text(s) that individual actors and groups of actors derive personal meaning in the context of their own being. Only by making explicit the differences, as well as the similarities between these texts, will the organization as a whole cope – in the positive sense of 'grappling with success' (Fowler & Fowler, 1964) – with the multiple realities that it contains.

Aesthetics of the physical – the wilderness of organizational studies

Study of the physical environment of organizations in the 20th century was to a large extent constrained by the ubiquitous Hawthorne experiments, conducted within the Western Electric Company in the 1920s. The primary conclusion from these studies was that social factors are far more important determinants of employee satisfaction and productivity than physical factors (Pennock, 1930). This key 'finding' came as a great surprise to the research team (Roethlisberger, 1941) but has become the 'central and distinctive finding from which the fame and influence of the Hawthorne studies derive' (Carey, 1967: 405). The separation of the physical and the social environments of work, with the social as primary area of study, has been the dominant model of social science research throughout the period; a split that was further reinforced by Herzberg's (1966) placing of the physical within the dichotomous framework of motivators/hygiene factors.

For those researchers, largely working in the practice arena, who have studied the physical environment, the Hawthorne studies have been subject to differing interpretations in relation to the contribution of the physical environment to organizational aesthetic and human behaviour. The 'Hawthorne effect' has been cited (Vischer, 1996: 189–90) as evidence of the *positive* influence of change to the physical environment on levels of employee satisfaction and performance, whereas the studies have also been

cited as evidence that consideration of physical environment is overlaid with human relational factors (Duffy, 1997: 221–2) that militate against its consideration. In line with Pennock's early report, others (Sundstrom, 1986; Baldry et al., 1998) see the contribution of the Hawthorne experiments as leading to a situation in which 'human relations . . . eclipsed the physical environment' (Sundstrom, 1986: 47).

Later studies have challenged the methods and validity of the Hawthorne experiments (Carey, 1967; Smith, 1998) and enabled challenge to Herzberg's (1966) view of the physical environment. While there has been development of a body of literature on the physical environment of the workplace over the past decade (for example, Becker, 1990; Duffy et al., 1993; Vischer, 1995, 1996; Duffy, 1997), study of the field as contributor to individual motivation and satisfaction has remained relatively undeveloped, and certainly detached from 'mainstream' management studies. However, as Bitner states (1992: 57), managers are regularly charged with planning, building and changing the physical environment of work, but 'frequently the impact of a specific change on ultimate users of the facility is not fully understood.' She highlights the field as 'rich' and 'inviting' for further research.

Organizational contexts of aesthetic – evangelism and the devil-incarnate

Before discussing the role of the aesthetic of the physical and its relationship with the aesthetic of the social, I wish to lay some demons to rest, and make explicit some personal beliefs. First, I would state that I perceive the physical environment as a mental construct of the actor/observer derived of their interaction with the elements that frame it, both tangible and intangible. That is to say that I consider that the physical environment does not exist as a 'thing in itself' (Nietzsche, 1990); it cannot be 'designated by "thinking" (that) has already been determined' (1990: 46) in accordance with some framework of 'total knowledge'. Also, I consider that the psychological perception of being, and construction of values cannot be appreciated or understood without reference to physiological experience (Nietzsche, 1994). These beliefs lead me to consider the psycho-physiology of the socio-physical environment – concepts of combination without synthesis. My earliest thinking on this was stimulated by a situation where . . .

. . . some years ago I was in the audience when architectural critic and commentator Cedric Price spoke to a group of architecture students in Glasgow. Within a wide-ranging presentation on appreciation of

architecture he spoke of the importance of the Taj Mahal as a building that was unchanging over centuries and that still demonstrated the same expressions of human emotion and characteristics of technological achievement as when it was built. I challenged this notion, stating that the 'building' did not exist other than as a function of the psychological perception of the actor/observer, whereas the unchanging physical entity was only an assemblage of stone, timber, etc. As such, the building could not be unchanging and would certainly not be perceived in the same way by a camera-clad 20th-century American tourist who arrived by jumbo jet and taxi as it was by an Indian farmer of the 18th century. My intervention was dismissed mockingly as 'ludicrous' and the presentation continued according to Price's 'grand plan'.

I consider that this concentration upon the physical as 'absolute and real' within the context of design is a major factor militating against the development of interpretation and understanding of the complex and ambiguous contexts of implementation and use. As a member of the architectural profession, and contributor to architectural education programmes, I support the view that 'the convictions held by architects concerning architectural style and its aesthetics are developed within their professional community' (Strati, 1992: 578), and consider that this leads them to become culturally myopic. As Brand states, 'schools of architecture . . . are wonderful and terrible. Wonderful because they foster the last great broad Renaissance-feeling profession, terrible because they do it so narrowly' (1994: 70). As he further highlights, the concentration upon the visual and the graphic leads to a situation in which 'sight substitutes for insight. The artistic emphasis discourages real intellectual inquiry, diverting instead into vapid stylistic analysis' (1994: 70).

If the history of the aesthetic of the physical is bounded by a frame that excludes consideration of the contribution of the non-physical, and the context of interpretation is that of the designer rather than that of the user, there can be little hope for development of real insight into the future contribution of the physical environment to organizational aesthetic. Particularly when, as Kierkegaard posits, 'life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards' (1996: 161).

I will now consider recent developments in the literature that discuss the physical environment from the perspective of the user of that environment, and attempt to relate them to the organizational context. Here, we find different views of the contribution of new workplace forms to space/organization relationships within the overall aesthetic of organization.

Freedom and empowerment in organizational aesthetic

Within the field of built environment studies, there is a body of literature that sees the new physical workplace aesthetic as empowering workers in the 'knowledge economy'. For them, the new workplace is seen as coming 'under increasing control of, and be(ing) more responsive to, ever-changing teams of intelligent and demanding end-users' (Duffy, 1997: 51). It is seen as providing employees with 'a symbol of what they belong to' (Raymond & Cunliffe, 1997: 22) and answering their questions, 'what does my workplace say to others about my company's values and attitudes: what does it say to me?' (1997: 22).

In this literature, studies of 'successful' workplaces are presented as exemplars of a new, post-Fordist (Duffy et al., 1993) era of workplace design. The rational, impersonal 'machine aesthetic' of the modernist design era (Guillen, 1997) is superseded by a postmodern approach of support for the individual within the organization – but not one that is based on altruism. Rather, the approach is one in which a pragmatic, Deweyan interpretation (Rorty, 1999: 119–20) may be seen to be promoted, in that the workplace is supportive of a move towards a unifying organizational

Control and exclusion in organizational aesthetic

Within fields of study related to the social environment of the new workplace, there is a body of literature that problematizes the relationships between organization and individual. The 'new' workplace is seen as a concept that 'does not seem "modern" at all but almost approximates to a Dickensian sweat shop' (Baldry et al., 1998: 182). Here, the aesthetic of the physical environment is not of material beauty, rather it is a representation of the social aesthetic of the ugly (Strati, 1999). 'Buildings are seen as structures of control: this is, after all, *why* lots of people are brought together under one roof' (Baldry et al., 1998: 181, emphasis in original).

As representation of the social aesthetic, the physical environment is not seen in itself as the means of control, rather that it provides 'an important *setting* for the social system of governance' (Goodsell, 1993: 271, emphasis in original), affecting rather than governing, or showing direct causal impact upon the actual forms of governance.

While the espoused theory of the design aesthetic has moved beyond the rational, impersonal 'machine aesthetic' of the modernist design era (Guillen, 1997) to one of support for the 'demanding

democracy for the benefit of all, both management and workers.

The pragmatism of the approach from the managerial perspective is demonstrated in that, in addition to benefiting the user through improved working conditions, 'the alternative workplace also can give companies an edge in vying for – and keeping – talented, highly motivated employees' (Apgar, 1998: 121).

As Apgar (1998) points out, however, the implementation of new models of workplace design must be undertaken with consideration of the difficulties in overcoming ingrained behaviours and practices, and of the challenge that is presented in managing complex change to the environment, culture and practices of the organization.

end-user' (Duffy, 1997), the nature of the theory in use remains one of control and hierarchy.

Rather than the aesthetic of the workplace of the new 'knowledge economy' being indicative of a Baconian construct of organization in which 'knowledge is power', there is demonstration of a post-Baconian construct, in that 'power *defines* what counts as rationality and knowledge and thereby what counts as reality' (Flyvbjerg, 1998: 227, emphasis in original).

Within this new workplace, the 'morality' of the organization is not that of egalitarianism, rather it is that of the 'will to power' (Nietzsche, 1994) and the maintenance of 'tradition' – i.e. hierarchy.

The conflicting views of the aesthetic of the new workplace that exist in the literature, and the position of the 'user' within these, may be analysed through consideration of the context of their origination. More detailed reading of the design practitioner literature indicates that reference to 'user' satisfaction with the design output may refer primarily to senior management perception (e.g. Duffy, 1997: 163–6), based upon their participation in the design process at a more strategic, decision-making level (Vischer, 1996: 191) than that of the employees. This exclusion of the end user at the operational level from any real and meaningful input to the physical design process is seen by some (Zeisel, 1984; Cairns, 1996) to be the norm in the design process. Such an approach may be considered as one of hierarchy and exclusion rather than of empowerment and inclusion – the exercise of individual 'will to power' (Nietzsche, 1968) whereby it is the powerful who categorize their abstract design principles, making them 'real' and turning them into laws. It may, however, be viewed as a pragmatic response to organizational problems and technological opportunities – seeking utility that is not represented as 'truth' and is not subject to binary consideration that posits

the 'good X' against the 'bad non-X' (Rorty, 1999). Finally, it may be viewed as a more naïve, paternalistic form of control, on the basis that 'you can never please everyone [and] if people here weren't happy, you'd soon hear about it' (Duffy, 1997: 165) – definition of 'satisfaction' through lack of expression of 'dissatisfaction'.

While the practice-oriented design literature on the new workplace aesthetic may be considered to be exclusive, the same might also be stated of – within – the social science literature. Here, there is certainly consideration of the operational user but, in seeking to 'provide a more accurate picture than that filtered through the "popular"' (Thompson & Warhurst, 1998: vi); an 'antidote to much that is misinformed or misunderstood' (1998: vii); this literature might be said to exclude – through dismissal – consideration of the context of origination and use of the popular – the practitioner literature.

I consider that these differing viewpoints cannot be resolved through any reductionist approach or through synthesis in accordance with the Hegelian dialectic (Gadamer, 1976), since they are not merely differences of opinion or interpretation. Rather, they are differences that are framed by different contexts of thought and action and that result in very different forms of socially constructed reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966) across which resolution by elimination is not possible. Such elimination will remove data, opinion and belief from our frame of thought – reducing the effectiveness of our analysis.

Aesthetic as ugliness – beauty as unaesthetic

In order to illustrate different perceived 'realities' of the social and physical environments of organization, this section recounts my experience in and reflection upon involvement with a single organization over an extended period of time. As such, it presents stories of the different organizational texts that were developed by the different actor groups, rather than case material supported by academic rigour in the collection and analysis of data. In particular, since my role varied across time from practitioner consultant to independent academic researcher, my 'data' are value-laden and my presence in the stories is essential to you, the reader's engagement with them. The organization is a governmental agency supporting public sector borrowing through private investment in savings and bonds.

In the 1970s the agency moved into a new office development that had been designed as an example of 'bürolandschaft in excelsis' (Duffy, 1992: xii), but within a governmental, bureaucratic context – large, free-form, open-plan office floors for the operational staff, and enclosed

offices for management (top management was situated within a tower that sat above the main buildings). Within a short time, the 'organic' design had been replaced by regimented rows of administrative staff desks, with supervisors sitting at the heads of the rows – supervision by watching every move. Departmental boundaries became delineated and defined by 'Berlin walls' of storage cabinets – almost as impenetrable and, in the event, more permanent. These changes were reputedly – by management at the time of my first intervention – brought about by the need to increase the numbers of desks that could be accommodated within the office, but not within the design concept. (There was apparently no attempt to initiate a new bürolandschaft layout with the original design team.) By the late 1980s the organization was under intense pressure to change. Reduced barriers to competition within the banking and building society sectors, along with the introduction of information technology (IT) and government drives to reduce the costs of doing business in the public sector all required action.

As a member of the external consultancy team on the redesign of the physical layout, with others I was charged with developing a strategy for improved flexibility of space utilization and for incorporation of 1:1 IT. The redesign of the environment brought about by our intervention was intended to break down the regimentation of the previous layouts, eliminate the inequalities of space provision that years of ad hoc 'planning' had led to and to eliminate the oppositional supervisor/supervised relationship. This was to be done in support of changes to the work processes and of a new management regime. Within a new management-led organizational culture of 'employee empowerment', groups were to become self-managing, collaborative units in which the 'supervisors' became facilitators of the group process, while senior management dealt with strategy development and managing people. Due to constraints of time and money, and the size of the organization – and in line with 'normal' practice – our consultations on space planning change were restricted to top and senior managers.

Following development and top management sign-off of the space planning strategy, new layouts were designed for one open-plan floor accommodating about 350 people. These layouts were implemented over one weekend, with staff coming in on Monday morning to find guides to show them to their new workspace where their personal belongings and work already awaited them. Several weeks after the staff had been relocated into their new workspace; with equality of space, break down of the 'Berlin walls', supervisors integrated into their teams and new planting to bring life and

colour to the space; a colleague and I visited the office in order to receive our well-deserved praise. The reaction of staff was not as anticipated. There was almost universal condemnation of the design as too cold/hot, open/claustrophobic, quiet/noisy – ‘condemnation’ as concept was the only consistency. After this visit I did not return to the organization for several years.

Senior management recognized that there were problems with both the business process and spatial change programmes and determined to take corrective action. In relation to business process change, they initiated a programme of small group working on ideas within departments. The ideas generated were analysed at the local level, further developed into integrated sets of change initiatives, then cascaded up to senior management as fully developed business cases. Following negotiation and agreement several teams implemented change programmes on a voluntary basis that included, among other factors, extension to the working day within the flexi-time programme, work sharing across members, and internally negotiated holiday arrangements.

Simultaneous to the process changes, all teams working on the floor where the space planning had been implemented according to my plan were allowed to redesign their workspace layouts. Management dictated that this had to be done within the minimum non-negotiable constraints of the strategy in order to maintain principles of equality, clarity and compliance with safety requirements.

I returned to visit the organization in my new academic role, interested to find out what had happened following the adverse reaction to the initial change programmes, and fearing that management might have retrenched and returned to the norm of bureaucratic, hierarchical management by direction. In the event what I found, and what had happened, was very different. With particular regard to the space planning, . . .

. . . upon my return I found that there had been some change to the layouts, in that many groups of desks were aligned differently in relation to the columns and circulation routes. It was evident, however, that the principles of the original strategy were being strictly observed.

. . . over the period since initial change, staff of the organization had found the layouts designed by the external consultant to be a retrograde step in relation to the ‘old’ layouts. Although there had previously been problems with overcrowding in some areas, and

The circulation routes had been maintained and had been reinforced by the insertion of different color of carpet. The groupings of desks and storage units still demonstrated equality of space allocation and a lack of 'defensible' departmental boundaries.

The use of plants and limited amounts of screening broke up the space, giving scale and color to it but without fragmenting it.

Whilst much had changed, I had a particular interest in one group whose workspace layout remained almost identical to my original space planning layout.

I asked my guide if I could speak with them.

some degree of discomfort, the new layouts aggravated the problems with no benefits.

Groups had been split up and moved. People had been relocated from comfortable areas in the building to areas that were too hot/cold. Storage had been redesigned and was now less accessible.

Thankfully, in conjunction with the new management approach to business, groups were allowed to redesign their space in order to suit their own needs. Over a period of time, one group in particular had changed the layout several times, moving ever further away from the consultant's layout.

One day, he reappeared and came to speak with them.

The encounter with this group at first confused me. They were insistent that the layout that they had designed was very different to that which they had found on the infamous Monday morning, that it had been derived from several iterations of incremental change over a period of about one year. Their insistence upon 'authorship' of the design was set within a text – rather, a set of parallel texts – in which . . .

. . . I saw the overall layout of the office as complying with my original design strategy and this particular group as remaining true to the detailed design.

. . . the senior manager who accompanied me felt discomfort that I was seeing my design scheme having been disrupted, but hopeful that I would not disapprove.

. . . the particular group saw themselves as designers of their own workspace, having had to overcome the ineffectual input of an irrelevant external party.

Only at a later date did it become apparent to me that there is a crucial interdependence/distinction between the different physical and psychological contexts of action that frame analysis and interpretation of solutions to the same/different problem(s) for different groups and individuals within what might be seen as a single 'reality'.

Discussion – on the multi-contexts of the particular

Consideration of the viewpoints arising from the literature and from the actors/groups within the above illustration may be undertaken using several different approaches. Feyerabend (1987) attacks the concept of a singular, knowable reality, and presents evidence of the multiplicity of realities within our single 'world'. Through discussion of the multiple contexts of knowledge and discourse in different cultures, he highlights that definition of reality is determined by differences of language, temporality and perception, in that 'the worlds in which cultures unfold not only contain different events, they also contain them in different ways' (1987: 105). With specific reference to one form of aesthetic analysis, in relation to archaic art, Feyerabend (1993: 169–86) further argues that much of what is represented as 'scientific truth' is merely presentation of one truth among many. Where the context of analysis is of a different world; whether temporally, culturally or geographically; from that of origination, the analysis holds true only in relation to the knowledge and belief system of the former, and will have little or no meaning to the latter.

The argument on the nature of 'reality' in organizations is further developed by Beech and Cairns (2001), with concepts of 'single reality', 'multi-layered reality', 'multiple realities' and 'no-such-thing-as-reality'. These are neither open to reduction or synthesis to unitariness, nor to comparative analysis by application of 'simplistic dichotomies' (Feyerabend, 1999). Here, I proceed to consider differences of reality(ies) of perception of workplace aesthetic.

Singularity and exclusion in aesthetic

As Nietzsche (1998: 52–3) posits, the concept of beauty – aesthetic – cannot be conceived, or perceived, without the human mind as context of its conception/perception, and human context is not singular and unitary, but is determined by hierarchy. The degree of freedom

Multiplicity and inclusion in aesthetic

Dealing with the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations that might be derived of a single aesthetic 'event' does not necessarily require the use of processes of reduction/rejection through application of logic. The environment itself 'can say many,

afforded the individual is related to effort expended in maintaining hierarchical status (Nietzsche, 1998: 64–5) by those who are powerful, in that ‘freedom is measured . . . by the resistance which must be overcome, the effort it costs to stay *on top*’ (1998: 65, emphasis in original).

Application of post-Nietzschean constructs to analysis of the cultural context of organization will lead us to consider that unity of perception can never exist, and that the application of positive terms of aesthetic approval to design may be seen as confirmation of (im)moral authority by those who hold senior positions within the design-decision framework.

The practitioner literature on what constitutes successful design may thus be viewed as adopting a particular moral stance, in which the excellence of the aesthetic is defined by self-reference to concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, derived from the actors’ positions within organizational hierarchies. Here, rather than power being derived from knowledge, according to the Baconian construct, prior access to power is the precursor to, and main determinant of, the development of ‘knowledge’, or ‘what counts as knowledge and rationality, and ultimately . . . what counts as reality’ (Flyvbjerg, 1998: 27).

The process of design and of its

even contradictory, things, simultaneously’ (Gagliardi, 1999: 323).

Through research using primary data and historical analysis, Rothenberg (1979) develops the concepts of ‘Janusian’ and ‘homospacial’ thinking. The former (1979: 55) requires that the individual conceives two opposite and contradictory propositions as being true *at the same time*. The process differs from the Hegelian dialectic in that there is no synthesis in order to resolve the paradox that ‘is *intrinsically* unresolvable’ (1979: 256, emphasis in original).

The concept of homospacial thinking goes further and consists of ‘*actively conceiving two or more discrete entities occupying the same space, a conception leading to the articulation of new identities*’ (1979: 69, emphasis in original).

Application of Rothenberg’s concepts takes us beyond the singularity of binary oppositions and dichotomous conflicts and enables us to posit new and innovative ways of appreciating the aesthetics of organizations according to the possible contexts of interpretation and action.

It might be argued that actors themselves – designers, managers and staff – may be capable of holding both Deweyan and

evaluation is one of exclusion rather than inclusion, with the value and knowledge systems applied being derived from, and reinforcing, existing structures of power and control within the organization.

Nietzschean constructs of interpretation as being simultaneously valid and without contradiction in their own minds (Rothenberg, 1979: 256–9); the will to managerial power existing in tandem with commitment to employee empowerment.

On the basis – bases – of the above, generation of meaning might be interpreted in a number of ways in relation to the rounds of change to the workplace aesthetic in the organization illustrated.

First, I argue again that to seek a reductionist and unitary interpretation among the different groups of actors is pointless, and would require acceptance of the ‘myth of a purified community’ (Sennett, 1970: 38) where the search for rationality and a single ‘truth’ is supported by the actors themselves, in that their self-projected image is ‘purified’ of ‘all that might convey a feeling of difference, let alone conflict, in who ‘we’ are’. Here,

people talk about their understanding of each other and of the common ties that bind them, but the images are not true to their actual relations . . . [in that] the lie they have formed as their common image is a usable falsehood – a myth – for the group. Its use is that it makes a coherent image of the community as a whole.

(1970: 38)

Consideration of diversity and ambiguity requires that we consider not only the different actors’ interpretations and meanings, but also the contexts in which they are seen to exist. Top management and the external consultants’ approaches might be interpreted as being grounded in a ‘new’ private sector mindset of providing a workplace that would be ‘more responsive to ever-changing teams of intelligent and demanding end-users’ (Duffy, 1997: 51) – a pragmatic drive towards an aesthetic of social democracy (Rorty, 1999) in support of a valued staff. However, it might also be seen as demonstration of the ‘will to power’ (Nietzsche, 1994) in action, and of exercise of the ‘hierarchical abuse of power’ (Vredenburg & Brender, 1998). Staff’s reaction to the change process may be interpreted as being derived of a mindset that remains fixed in a public sector mode, in that it accorded with the paradigm that the physical setting can be positively changed in the private sector but, that ‘such changes in the public sector can readily have negative

consequences' (Robertson & Seneviratne, 1995: 552). However, it might also be interpreted as being indicative of a purely negative reactive response to the fact that management's 'will to power has achieved mastery over something less powerful' (Nietzsche, 1994: 55). Or, the 'sign' may be that the staff's own 'will to power', later to be realized in the second iteration of change, is in emergent mode – a flexing of 'adolescent' muscles.

I could continue to develop arguments for and against some or all of these approaches: to seek convergence that would require reduction and elimination of some meanings, or to demonstrate divergence – to promote conflict. But, within the organizational situation, convergence was not evident, and neither was conflict – only difference. As Flyvbjerg (1998) posits, conflict is the *exception* in human relations, but not in a state of consensus, rather in a state of divergent equilibrium. Adopting an approach based upon Rothenberg's (1979) Janusian thinking model leads me to posit interpretation that does *not* contain an 'against' approach. First, in terms of external orientation of thought and action, it might be seen that top management were both concerned to bring empowerment and democracy to their staff, while simultaneously exercising their legitimate power (French & Raven, 1959) as managers, in line with the expectations of their own organizational and political masters. Similarly, staff's response might be considered both as 'controlled' response to management within the 'expected' public sector employee paradigm, and as exercise of new found power over management within an empowering management regime.

In considering the internal orientations of thought that align with these interpretations, for top management the holding of seemingly contradictory viewpoints is explicable in terms of them wishing to – needing to – respond effectively to the different demands and expectations of two disparate groups; their own masters and their own 'slaves'. The two groups' expectations and demands do not – will not – align yet must be dealt with in synchronicity. In the case of staff, response is directed only at one group – their 'masters' – but the response may be indicative of a lack of clarity about the dominant mindset of the top management team. Staff may have considered them either as genuinely 'reformed' supporters of staff empowerment, or as cynical implementers of 'fashionable' management models for personal advancement. Therefore, staff might be seen to hold two divergent views simultaneously and believe in both – to their own pragmatic ends.

With reference to the manifestation of the change, the plan, it may be asked 'what meaning and what value does it have for the subjects who have been and who will be involved?' (Strati, 1998: 1383). I would suggest that the answer is that it has multiple meanings and values for each different set of individuals/groups. The physical plan must be seen as representing

different psycho-physiological solutions to different physical/social problems simultaneously within the same assemblage of physical artefacts. It is both the problem and the solution to one particular group. It is seen both as setting for governance and as enabler of freedom, within a single manifestation. These paradoxical and conflicting meanings are not developed sequentially and exclusively, rather they are seen to be held simultaneously and in paradoxical dissonance but, as Schoenberg states (Rothenberg, 1979: 187) ‘dissonances [are] merely “more remote consonances”’.

Conclusion – against the *will to unity*

The differentiation of interpretations and justifications of management and employee participation in, and perception of development of, the new office aesthetic that is seen in the literature and in the organizational illustration may be used to support dichotomous considerations of control/freedom and managerial/workforce (em)power(ment). In seeking to move away from beyond such simplistic and reductionist arguments, however, I consider that the term ‘corporeality’ must be viewed in a different light. If we deconstruct the term, we may draw reference to the *corpo*-ris read as relating to the ‘body corporate’ – the organization as unity rather than as a collection of individuals. Following on from this, there remains the singular *reality*; the workplace as rational, unitary physical entity – perceived in the same way by all those who use it. Within this dialogue, the term ‘corporeality’ might be read as espousing the organizational aesthetic as manifestation, or enabler of organizational cohesion (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991), in which the whole is clearly identifiable with the sum of the parts and the parts are seen as sub-sets of the whole. It is to the philosophical basis of such a concept of cohesion that I promote challenge, which then risks presenting the options of fragmentation or alienation through design. I consider such fragmentation to be grounded in inappropriate dichotomization of the frames of the physical/social, rational/aesthetic and, in particular, emplacement/hierarchy (Foucault, 1994). Much of the social science literature (e.g. Rosen et al., 1990; Baldry et al., 1998) appears to place space within the hierarchical frame; reinforcing Taylorist organizational structures; while the design/practitioner literature (e.g. Duffy, 1997; Raymond & Cunliffe, 1997) places it in the emplacement frame; supporting de-layered and de-bureaucratized structures. By reference to current literature, it might be argued that the managerial rhetoric of freedom through physical workplace design is, in effect, a façade for insidious psychological control. However, the status of

literature and theory, and the lack of integrated and integrative research, do not support resolution of this argument.

All analysts and reporters – myself not excluded – run the grave risk of (re)constructing even contextual, actor-oriented interpretations around their own core values – the ‘will to power’ in action. In my best efforts to avoid this, I offer no *conclusions* on whether the new workplace aesthetic is representative of democracy or dictatorship, of employee empowerment or managerial control – or of all, at one and the same time. I would, however, suggest that the Flyvbjergian construct – ‘power is knowledge’ (Flyvbjerg, 1998) – and the Nietzschean ‘will to power’ (Nietzsche, 1990) are the dominant models for much academic and practitioner interpretation. The powerful actors in the particular context seek to define the dominant knowledge set that will inform development of the ‘tradition’ – the values and beliefs – of that context. By internal self-reference to this tradition, they then frame the morality that defines what is good (Nietzsche, 1994), and which governs decision making. Where this morality militates against consideration of the aesthetic – the non-rational and non-objective – the detached researcher must go in search of the subdominant, perhaps subversive, elements of power/knowledge/morality in order to surface alternative interpretations. This can only be done through critical engagement with *all actors* involved in any particular organizational situation within their own context of belief, thought, action and interpretation.

I have posited that, within the organization illustrated, different actors/groups *might* be considered to hold divergent and conflicting beliefs simultaneously and without contradiction. Whether this is the case or not, only by acceptance of such a possibility – probability – can the external observer/researcher hope to surface any interpretation of words and actions from the actors that will have meaning within the context of origin, rather than only in the context of interpretation. I have argued elsewhere (Beech & Cairns, 2001) that striving for an end goal of unity within the organizational context may be a driving force for sustained disunity, and that seeing disunity as a natural state should be a starting point for concerted, but not necessarily convergent, action by organizational actors. I hope that this article will contribute to debate on the nature of divergence and disunity – beyond the *will to unity*. Such study of complexity, ambiguity, humanity – aesthetic – in organizations cannot be conducted on the basis of rationality and objectivity. It must be conducted with emotion since . . . without emotion? ‘well? would that not mean to *castrate* the intellect? . . .’ (Nietzsche, 1994: 92, emphasis in original).

I argue for a research approach that is *value-laden* and *emotionally* driven – is itself aesthetically beautiful – but which applies the homospatial (Rothenberg, 1979) thought process in order to acknowledge that multiple

beliefs, values and interpretations can occupy the same intellectual 'space' simultaneously without contradiction and without need for reductionism.

Finally, I would argue that there has been a lack of study of the field of physical environment in the business and management arenas and, to date there has been little or no interest in the business schools. This lack of interest militates against full understanding of organizational thinking/acting, since the physical environment is not purely physical – it is contained within, influences the development of and is influenced by the nature of the social environment. The physical and social environments contain one another, frame one another and influence the development of one another – but they are *not* as one. On this basis alone, there is need for further study of the psychophysiology of workplace.

Acknowledgement

This article was first presented at the International Workshop on Organizing Aesthetics, Siena, Italy, May 2000.

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