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Meanings of Buildings

The future of buildings beyond symbols of success and metaphors of masculinity
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Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of the 'office building' as symbolic representation of the culture and values of the individual, organisation, and society. By reference to practitioner and academic literature on buildings and organisations, the writers assess whether the form of built environment that exists at the end of the 20th century is supportive, or constraining, of individuals. The writers propose that the symbolic nature of office buildings is fundamentally flawed, in relation to the individual working within them, in that the contemporary office building is more likely to be a representation of narrow male power than of egalitarian empowerment. It is presented as constraining, rather than enabling, despite the rhetoric of practice. It is argued that the 'new' office, in both social and physical terms, is a neo-modernist anachronism in a postmodern world.

Key words: culture, power, empowerment, gender, post-modern, postmodernism

Introduction

The office building is a product of the 20th century, derived from dramatic change to the nature of office-based organisations during the second half of the last century; from the era of Charles Dickens, in which a 'large' private, non-industrial organisation or government department would employ a handful of people (Drucker, 1989, p76), to the growth of commercial organisations and government departments whose employees were numbered in the hundreds and, latterly, thousands. The first examples of large office buildings were constructed in response to this organisational change during the late 19th century; with technological facilitation from the development of the lift/elevator, new forms of steel and concrete construction, and systems of mechanical ventilation and air-conditioning (Duffy, 1997, p19). These early office buildings were designed as physical representations of the wealth of the new and expanding organisations that occupied them, as containers for activities structured within a Taylorist discipline (Duffy, 1997, p22), with the office building becoming the new temple of the capitalist economy.

During its development in the 20th century, the office building has served as advertisement for the occupying organisation, as investment for capital in pursuit of growth and, in a few more recent examples, as environment for interaction of individuals within the organisation. At its extreme, the 20th century office building has metamorphosed into a physical manifestation of culture; whether of the developer who commissioned it, the organisation which inhabits it, the socio-political environment in which it is located, or of the profession - or individual professional - who designed it. The office building may often be viewed as a symbolic manifestation of the perceived success of the dominant culture, which may also be seen frequently to be a symbol of masculinity. At the extreme, the male symbolism of the office building may be seen in the egocentric realisations of Donald Trump in North America, and in the ambitions of Bruno Grollo for Melbourne in the new millennium. Such 'maleness' may also be seen to be demonstrated in the form of buildings that symbolise the self-perceived grandness of developers (Canary Wharf Tower, London), of cities (Messeturm, Frankfurt), of organisations (Bank of China, Hong Kong), and of whole countries (Petronis Towers, Kuala Lumpur).

The gender bias which is seen in the design of these office buildings is also present in the social organisations that have designed, constructed and sanctioned them over the past century, in that the hierarchies of power and control within professions, industries and political institutions have been predominantly male throughout the 20th century.

Gender Bias and Organisational Discourse

Organisational discourse as it occurs in Western Modern societies, which is produced in and about the organisational context, is heavily gendered. Organisational discourse is defined as

“...ways of thinking about organizing, taken-for-granted, more-or-less unconscious meta-understandings about the way things are achieved in society...The act and art of organizing is a central part of our thinking that colours how we view ourselves and the world.” (Mills, 1993, p134)

The taken-for-granted ways of thinking about organisation that have predominated throughout the 20th century are derived from male-centric conceptions of the world and human nature. For example, Weber's (1967) formative study of capital entrepreneurship owes much to Calvinistic religion, and reflects a discourse of rationality as calculability, and the absence of emotion and patriarchy (Martin, 1990). Male virtues are to the fore, whilst female virtues are missing.

Similarly, images of leadership value masculine characteristics. It has been argued (Kets de Vries, 1989) that organisational cultures establish approved leadership behaviours and attitudes, which males can copy, and through which they are regarded, as both successful and male. For women, however, cultures provide contradictions in identity formulation between achieving hierarchical, power-gaining success, and being a success as a woman (Kets de Vries, 1989). This is due in part at least to established societal cultural norms, which conceive woman as part of a dyad; either with a man, a child or oppositionally structured with society; whereas a man is conceived as a sole-operator in the organisational context. For the male, life outside the organisation serves a purpose, as something which has to be provided for but, for woman, the extra-organisational elements are taken as part of her identity definition (Hearn and Parkin, 1993).

These trends in organisational discourse are embedded in the broader culture of Western societies. This can be seen through an analysis of cultural narratives, myths and stories. Campbell's (1988) analysis, for example, identifies male roles of the 'hero', which can normally be played out in organisations, and will be seen as commensurate with career success. The woman's dyadic roles, by contrast, will be seen as representing weakness in leaders, and by employees. Needing direction and protection, having demands outside the organisation, and being identified with sexuality, are factors that are not associated with success *per se*. Where female roles do occur along with workplace success, they can be seen as examples of unfairness. For example, the 'temptress' is considered to achieve success without task-related merit. From this point of view, the taken-for-granted cultural roles of women are less compatible with organisational success than those of men.

Organisational discourse concentrates on the singular, rather than the communal, nature of power and authority. Taylorism's 'one best way' (Taylor, 1947), the machine metaphor (Morgan, 1986), and the universalising assumptions of systems theory (Brown, 1992) all lead to thinking about people in categories within the organisation. Power bases are principally those of legitimacy and coercion (French and Raven, 1959). The categories relate to access to power, but people outside the organisation, and outside power, are also categorised by the impact of organisational discourse on societal culture (Hearn and Parkin, 1993). It defines and de-politicises the unemployed, older people, disabled people and unpaid carers. Organisational discourse is taxonomic in Foucault's (1980) sense that it is concerned with categorising people, getting them to categorise themselves and each other (albeit unconsciously), and hence reproducing the dominant characteristics again and again.

Whilst practitioner understanding of cultures (Hawkins, 1997) and their development may take a 'knowledge-focused' approach, seeing that knowledge determines the bases of power, the writers will promote a post-Baconian view, that power is not seen to be derived from knowledge, but that "power *defines* (italics in original) what counts as knowledge and rationality, and ultimately,...what counts as reality" (Flyvbjerg, 1998, p27). From this approach, it will be argued that the manifestations discussed below are not symbolic of a developing knowledge base, but of outmoded power structures, with little relevance to the future of humanity.

The outcome of these cultural imperatives: in which roles and images, are recurring narrative themes; is that building design is dominated by male characteristics. This is not to say that only men are involved in design, but that the unconscious cultural assumptions which direct training, education, theory and practice implementation arise from, and reproduce, a limited variety of male-oriented outcomes.

Buildings as Symbols of Culture and Power

The gender bias that is seen in the organisational discourse is also to be seen in the realities of organisational practice. Whilst the practitioner literature may talk of new forms of organisation, in which there is "growing importance of women - and feminine values - in the workplace" (Raymond and Cunliffe, 1997, p12), the reality of practice is that "most organizations, particularly in the private sector, are dominated by men" (Martin et al, 1998, p431).

Beyond the physical manifestation of culture at a macro-level, buildings are intrinsically linked with the formation and ongoing evolution of the social culture of the occupying organisation in action. At the sub-cultural and professional level, they will, in conjunction with the management regime that facilitates or controls their operation, act as 'allies' to, or 'collaborators' with, the people. That is to say that they will become enablers of, or constraints upon, thought and action by the organisational members at the level of strategic thinking, policy design and operational delivery. There is a unitarist presumption in much of the practitioner literature that what is good for the performance of the organisation will be good for the individual (Cairns and Beech, 1999a). However, it can be argued that earlier architectural responses to Taylorist managerial discourse resulted in 'an unholy alliance', in that "pseudo-scientific analysis of management processes and the Modernist design ideology aided and abetted each other in their neglect of human factors, group psychology, and the need to build elaborate networks of social relationships within organizations in order for them to be successful" (Turner and Myerson, 1998, p21).

At the start of the 20th century, the Larkin brothers set up the world's first mail order business, housed within one of the most famous examples of early modernist office design. This new form of business required that the company "recruit a large, disciplined, and educated labour force of clerks - who turned out to be largely female - to handle the millions of pieces of paper that were being generated by many tiny transactions" (Duffy, 1997, p21). The organisation of the Larkin company, both in social and spatial terms, was one of explicit hierarchy and control. Both the work process and space planning layouts were based upon, and demonstrative of, the formal Taylorist approach.

At the end of the century, study of the gender structure of companies within the computing industry; in the field of software design; shows that, "women are increasingly concentrated in low status 'specialities'" (Beirne et al, 1998, p158). The modern equivalent of the Larkin organisation is not necessarily one in which the role and status of the female has dramatically improved. The work in technologically enabled settings, such as call-centres, has been referred to as 'Team Taylorism' (Baldry et al, 1998, p. 182):

"Just as our modern clerical worker's labour process is characterised by the low task discretion, specified performance targets, visual and electronic surveillance and low-trust relations associated with Taylorised work, so also has *she* (italics added) lost any ability to control her environment" (Baldry et al, 1998, p165)

Writers on contemporary office design, from the arena of design practice and implementation, make reference to the work of writers on organisations and management - Handy, Kotter and Lawler (Duffy, 1997, pp50-51), and Maslow (Raymond and Cunliffe, 1997, pp22-23); - in order to provide support for design concepts which promote more flexible, non-territorial space allocation in offices. It is argued that, as organisations have become more flexible, and subject to continual change, "office space will be used more intensively, with less emphasis on traditional long-term 'ownership' of individual work places and more emphasis on more flexible and shorter-term, ownership of office space by ever-changing groups" (Duffy, 1997, p50). A note of warning on the long-term validity of the organisational concepts is sounded by Turner and Myerson, who point out (1998, p25) that, "sometimes a casual and not even particularly original insight about the workings of organizations is developed into an organizational theory of

everything.....But these panaceas have often been over-sold when they are at best partial solutions to a complex problem." Writers on new concepts of spatial design may see their conceptual solutions for new forms of office as providing flexible space for flexible organisations, where "office environments must adapt to increasingly 'fluid' working practices (ie people whose working methods differ from 'traditional' practice, for example, operating to different hours and over a range of locations within the office building)" (Laing et al, 1998, p4). The reality for those working within the new 'flexible' organisation may, however, be that the culture is not that of real empowerment, but that of "hyper-modern authoritarianism which, potentially, is more insidious and sinister than its bureaucratic predecessor" (Wilmott, 1993, p541). The reality of the organisation may be that "influencing behaviour is almost all of what management is about, and buildings influence behaviour. Failure to wring every benefit out of the most expensive capital assets most companies ever have would not be countenanced in any other aspect of corporate life" (Seiler, 1984, p120), and that to seek out the underlying truth of new office concepts we must consider "what motivates managers to examine how people spend their time at the office and where else they could work? The most obvious reason is cost reduction" (Apgar, 1998, p121). The impacts of such pre-occupations are increases in stress and worker-anxiety (Daniels, 1998).

Whilst practitioner literature on new workplace concepts draws upon the work of writers on management in order to provide support for the models of human and spatial organisation, it draws from this work selectively. The quoted writers have written of new forms of organisation of the flexible, non-territorial type discussed (Handy, 1989; Drucker, 1989), but they also consider wider implications of the changing nature of work and employment, beyond those privileged to have control and self-determination in relation to the time and place of work. Handy (1991, pp139-141), Drucker (1989, pp181-185) and Toffler (1991) warn of the danger new forms of flexible empowerment for some being accompanied by parallel forms of inflexible de-powering for those without access to the new technologies and the new employment opportunities. As Handy states (1991, p141), "this divided society, this monotone world dedicated to efficiency, this world will happen only if we allow the organization to dominate our lives". The examples of studies from within new organisations, dealing with those who do not occupy the senior positions, in particular the mass of low-trust female workers, show that the reality of life for many is not one of self-determination in relation to work, or of user control over the working environment.

In seeking to overcome the predominantly male culture of the property and construction markets, it is relatively easy to give the illusion of placing the concept of femininity at the heart of organisational decision making on new forms of office, by reference to the project champion as "chief executive - who has the vision and the power.....*Her* seniority gives *her* real influence, and *her* passion the will to use it (italics added)" (Raymond and Cunliffe, 1998, p102). In reality, however, "the presence of significant numbers of women in relatively high-status positions would be necessary to overcome the usual conformity pressures placed on a few token, high-ranking women executives. In addition, the support of men who share aspects of feminist ideology would be important" (Martin et al, 1998, p432). Also, the mobilisation of women in organisational politics has been conceived as a fundamental requirement for change (McCalman, 1999). Even in best case scenarios, such as those studied by Martin (1998), long-term survival can be questioned. Martin's case-organisation has subsequently acquiesced to the pressure of the male-centric, antagonistic stock market, and has replaced its female leader with a male.

Conclusions

If male-dominated, hierarchical cultural norms are to be broken, considerable risks will have to be taken. These include some transfer of power to the de-powered, for example, by involving real, long-term, involved users of environments at all levels of society and its organisations. This remains a marginal, and marginalised approach (Robertson and Cairns, 1999). It is proposed that, for the next millennium, there is a need to engage critically with contemporary concepts of power and knowledge, and with the human communication systems which are used to implement them. There is a need to promote revolutionary intellectual discourse on the systems which will be relevant if we are to promote the development of organisational cultures which are represented by distributed, egalitarian power, which defines a new form of contextual, relevant knowledge, and if these are then to challenge the embedded form of physical embodiment of culture in buildings.

The revolutionary approach which we advocate will see the power of the 'expert' diminished, and the role of the manager becoming, not that of implementer of 'expert systems' (Cairns and Beech, 1999b), but that of facilitator of user-originated, humane environmental design and management solutions. In facilities terms, it will move the power over design of the workplace to the desktop of the long-term occupier. This position is opposed to modernistic views which seek rational linearity, efficiency, and which presume unitarism. The criticism may be applied to those who would propound technologically enabled remote working as a source of individual freedom and self-determination, because home-working and other forms of teleworking still fit the masculine paradigms of individuality, and of the absence of recognition of the need for collaboration and community in work. Similarly, the ever-increasing attempts to modernise the office, we would argue, do exactly that. They do not move towards a postmodern de-centering of the subject, rather they perpetuate freedom for those who fit with the discourse, those who can aspire to heroic roles, and constraint for those who have continuously been marginalised in the modernist discourse.

In a world in which the practitioner literature on new forms of office design aligns with the philosophy of Habermas (1987), in seeing consensus-seeking and freedom from domination as inherent forces in the developing communication and learning processes within societal structures and organisations, the reality of many office-based organisations is that of class and gender fragmentation. The progressive drive towards a knowledge-based, self-determining elite of workers may see a growing army of disenfranchised and dis-empowered members of society. In such circumstances, rather than being seen in terms of 'soft', organic metaphors like 'flower' or 'forest' (Raymond and Cunliffe, 1997, p23), the office building may in reality be seen as either 'castle' or 'fortress', repelling those from without, who lack access to the technology, jobs and rewards within. Similarly, the wired-up 'home office' may become a dispersed micro-patriarchy incompatible with concepts of organic development, and with female virtues of family and security subverted by the need for male-dominated physical protection and isolation.

Hence, the future may have some appearance of postmodernism, but may be neo-modernist embodiment of forces that are entirely pre-modern in their conception.

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