

HOW DOES WORKPLACE DESIGN MEAN - CONTRASTING MANAGER-DESIGNER-USER PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Based on an extensive case study on the relationship between workplace design and organizational identity in a management consulting firm, this paper explores the meaning of workplace design from three different perspectives; management, designer and users. The analysis showed that these three perspectives differed significantly in terms of intentions and interpretations of the symbolic meaning of design features, but also more fundamentally in terms of the perceived role of the office as well as the process for construction of meaning relating to the office design. The study illustrates the profound influence a designer can have, whether intentionally or not, on employees' attitudes and behaviours in the workplace through the meaning its design evokes for the employees. It is argued that designing workplaces that truly support knowledge work requires an emphatic approach involving the user (employee) as an active partner in the design process. It also entails revisiting models, tools and processes used for analysing workplace design needs to be able to integrate organizational identity as well as emotional values and embodied experience into the resulting design. This conclusion uncovers a knowledge gap in today's workplace design literature as well as practice as it is not clear that neither designers, nor managers, currently have the skills, knowledge or education for conducting such an analysis.

Keywords: Workplace design, identity, meaning

1 INTRODUCTION

The recent rise in interest in the topic of workplace design reflects the changes in organizational life brought about by the increasing importance of knowledge work. New patterns of working are emerging as work is becoming more cognitively complex and knowledge workers are expected solve problems creatively based on their own understanding of the situation and in collaboration with others. In addition, IT has enabled knowledge workers to become more mobile and some knowledge workers perform much of their work outside the office. These developments call into question traditional bureaucratic organizational structures and management practices. Organizations are increasingly adopting flexible and decentralized work schemes and the topic of organizational identity (OI) has become one of the most important research topics in the study of knowledge work. OI is treated as "a system of shared meaning" in organization studies (Cornelissen et al. 2008) relating to that which is central distinct and enduring about an organization's character (Albert and Whetten 1985), or the employees' response to the question "who are we" (Corley et al. 2006). Much of the attractiveness of the concept of OI lies in the implied link to behaviour. A shared sense of the organization's identity among organizational members is normatively regulating, promoting coordinated, purposeful action and cooperative behaviours (Ashforth et al. 2008). Identity regulation can therefore be seen as a significant and increasingly important modality of organizational control (Alvesson and Wilmott 2002).

The office environment provides a physical context for the social interactions in which organizational identities are constructed, through facilitating or hindering people to meet and interact and through mediating symbolic content. As noted by Elsbach and Bechky (2007), while knowledge workers spend less time in the office each week, the meaning of that time may have changed in important ways. The office has become an important location for symbolic, learning and creative interactions. Consequently, the design of offices has taken on a renewed importance to corporate managers and is now perceived as one of the key factors that affect knowledge worker performance, albeit a highly complex one that isn't at all well understood (Davenport 2005). This paper aims to contribute to this understanding by specifically addressing the relationship between organizational identity construction and the design

of the physical setting (i.e. the office) based on a case study of a global management consulting firm, here called Professional Consulting (PC). 43 semi-structured interviews with employees, including two project managers for the office design and move as well as the architect, provided the bulk of the data. In addition, observations were made at various times and places in the office work space (landscape) during a period of three months, although visits to the office were made during a period of about a year. Next the meaning of the workplace design from three different perspectives will be explored; management intentions, the architect's understanding of the workplace concept and the resulting design, and the employees' experience and interpretation of the workplace design.

2 THE SETTING

PC thrives on an elitist identity deemed to be essential for successful recruitment of employees and customers, as well as for the day-to-day functioning of the organization. "Professional" was a key term when consultants described "who they are", along with hardworking, conscientious and smart. Another key feature was related to the social dimension, enjoying working with the colleagues. As one interviewee put it, "my colleagues, in addition to being very competent, are actually really nice. It is easy to have fun at work. I guess that is the greatest plus with PC, that I am happy with the people here."

PC had moved into the office, which housed several hundred consultants, that was the object of the analysis 5 years prior to the study, conducted in 2004. Leaving a "traditional" office where partners and the more senior consultants had their own rooms to what was set out to be an extremely "modern", completely open-space office implied significant changes. Located in a modern[ist] building the office has a non-territorial design, i.e. where employees do not have personal work spaces, but desks are assigned on an as-needed basis. Because consultants spend most of their time outside of the office, primarily at client site, there are only desks for part of the workforce to be in the office at any one time. The office workspace is open plan and workstations are of identical design. Desks with minimal partitions are located around a core in the middle of the building of which PC occupies several floors with more or less identical layout. Apart from a number of conference rooms and "phone booths" for individual phone conversations, there are no walls or other features that divide the space into separate areas. PC employs a clear desk policy and has minimal amounts of decoration; there are few textiles and employees are not allowed to put up personal decorations. Although some do break this rule, there is very little space for personalizing workspaces, so the few decorations there are do little for the overall experience of the space. While there are a few pieces of furniture that stand out in bright colours, the colour scheme is dominated by white, a greyish blue and green.

3 MANAGEMENT INTENTIONS - THE PROJECT MANAGERS' STORY

There were two project managers from PC involved in the reconstruction, design and move of the office, here called Lisa and Maria. Lisa, who was recruited for this role, was overall responsible and reported directly to the CFO and the CEO who set the objectives and key requirements for the new office. These emphasized security (as projects may involve sensitive material from/about the client), functionality (in the sense that it should focus on supporting consultants' work in the office, and be easy to maintain) and innovation (in the sense that it uses the latest technology and smart solutions, both to support functionality and display an image of PC being an innovative company). Lots of light and open spaces early became guiding principles for the design. There were also considerable global guidelines from the US head office related to issues of security, technology, desirable locations, and flexible open plan. However, design choices such as furniture, decorations and colour schemes were up to the individual PC offices.

Much effort was put into the planning, design and process for getting this office up and running smoothly. Surveys were conducted with employees to find out user needs and heads of departments were asked to sign off documents where they agreed to the plans to avoid conflicts at a later stage. Very early in the process a metaphor was developed for the new office based on the concept of an airport. The underlying thought was that the office was a place for landing and taking off for the consultants "always on the move" and "in transit" to use expressions that were often used in the planning process according to Maria. Everything should work as smoothly as possible for consultants passing by, all services needed should be easily available. Creating meeting places to maximise the possibility of serendipitous meetings was also

a central concern. Open stairwells were strategically placed in the middle of the building and cafés were open and located in connection to the stairwells where as many people as possible would pass by. Cafés “should also be an oasis in the office. The heart of the company” according to the document specifying the functions for these spaces. The main reason for adopting the airport metaphor was that, as Lisa put it, “it fits so well with how we work”.

Both Lisa and Maria were extremely happy with the way the project was carried out and the resulting design – very much in line with the original requirements from top management. As Maria said “it was supposed to be a functional office. And I think we succeeded damn well with that”.

4 DESIGNER INTERPRETATION - THE ARCHITECT'S STORY

The architect, Jenny, was on board very early on in the project by helping PC find the location and negotiating the deal with the real estate owners. She was also very satisfied with the process as well as the result and still used the PC office as show-case for new clients and prospects, 5 years after the project was concluded. Jenny also emphasized the importance of management being involved in the design process. This is a key to success in such projects generally, and the PC office was no exception. “It was great because they were so aware that how the premises [should be] designed has a lot to do with internal processes and how you work”. She explained that there are different levels of democracy in different companies. “[At PC] there was not so much democracy, and that is almost always good ... You cannot have hand-raising exercises about everything and let the personnel put in their veto about everything. You simply can't. Instead here it was management and the project team that simply decided, and I think that was really good”.

While the functional and technical requirements were worked through in great detail, Jenny cannot recall any particular guidelines when it comes to specific design features such as colour. It was her responsibility to come up with a design proposal that contained everything from carpets, curtains, furniture, textiles, colour schemes etc. In this case what became the guiding principle for the colour scheme was the period when the building was originally constructed. One of the first colours that she decided on, and which then set the tone for the rest of the colour scheme, was a greyish blue “which was incredibly typical for the 30's when the house was built” and she thought “it was really great to be able to bring that out”. Nor did she have any particular guidelines regarding PC's organizational identity when designing the office. Her interpretation was that they had a high profile as “top class consultants” but because of the transitory nature of the business (with an up-or-out structure, most people only stay a few years) her view was that they did not have as strong an identity as she has seen with other companies she had worked with. Communicative guidelines regarding messages were more related to how they work; “they wanted to be extremely professional. Everything should be superefficient” – and then of course the airport concept. “And it was the lounge feeling, airport, a really nice lounge, it should be comfortable, professional, you should be taken care of, you should be served ... and high technical standard”.

5 USER EXPERIENCE - THE EMPLOYEES' STORY

Most employees tended to describe the experience of the office in similar ways; Impersonal, sterile, cold, “not cosy” or “lack of homely feeling” were common words used. As one manager described the experience of the office: “It's large-scale production, impersonal, practical. There are no curtains like you can often see in other workplaces. Very little textiles in general. There's a cactus over there, but those other things that you have to create a bit of a homely feeling, a feeling of cosiness that you find in other workplaces, there's none of that here. It's a practical workplace. Rational. Not so many unnecessary things.” Nevertheless, in spite of the lack of explicit symbols in the office design, it was very common for consultants to read in “hidden messages” in the office design, assuming there were intentions behind certain design choices – whether by local management or global guidelines. A particularly clear case was employees' interpretation of the colours. People simply assumed that they were the “corporate colours”, directed by “global guidelines” or reflecting the logotype. Yet, as noted above, rather than being connected to global guidelines the colour scheme was a result of the architect's ambition to bring out the character of the building. She made a very clear point about avoiding logotype/corporate colours, as they tend to change more often than the office design.

In fact none of the interviewed consultants answered no to the question of whether the office design reflected the identity. Instead they tended to look for the connections. The most common words for describing the PC identity was “professional”, but also among the more common words for describing the office design. While the other words used to describe the identity (such as smart and nice) are more related to personality traits, being professional has behavioural implications (Gray 1998). A PC consultant is supposed to “act professionally” and the office design mediates what it means “to be professional” in PC. For example, as one consultant responded to the question of whether the identity is reflected in the office design: “Yes, I guess it does. It’s pretty cold. A consultant is supposed to be a little professional and a little cold. It’s not cosy and a consultant isn’t supposed to be cosy either. Should be relatively strict which it is here. Not a lot of unnecessary stuff lying around. Strict. Professional.” In a sense then, the design of the office helps consultants visualize, articulate/define what it means to be professional. Of course, professional is a common word in many different industries and types of firms and can mean very different things in different contexts. However, as the term is part of PCs identity discourse it has a particular meaning to PC consultants – and as such clarifies what behaviours are appropriate. There were certain attitudes and behaviours that seemed particularly predominant in this particular PC office that may be seen as a reflection of the interpretation of what it means to be professional. Most notably, interviewees noted that people do not greet in the hallway in this office, a custom that was perceived as rude and unpleasant. It is important to look busy as one consultant put it. While the office was designed to promote networking and provide as many meeting places as possible, it was very rare to see people sit down in the cafés to chat over a break. As one consultant described the office, “I would probably just say that it is bigger, barren, cold, and a lot of people. You can have a coffee break in several places, but nobody does because then you get a bad conscience, or somebody thinks you ought to [have a bad conscience]”.

The office design thus seems to reinforce certain dimensions of the identity (attitudes and behaviours). But this means it also suppresses others. The social side of the OI, appreciating and enjoying working with the colleagues, is not reflected in the interpretations of the office design – nor is it displayed in the behaviours in the office. The office is experienced as cold, impersonal and sterile. As such the role of the office in defining “who we are” emphasizes rationality and efficiency, underlining the individual as exchangeable resource. Furthermore, having minimized “unnecessary” artefacts, textiles etc. as well as not allowing personalization of workspaces, there is little that sets this firm apart from other firms. There are no (few) specific symbols in the office that reveals what is special about PC, something that shows what they do or what they stand for. And many people do miss this “other side” of identity. When asked what they miss or would like to change in the office design (apart from having it warmer, cosier) they had a hard time putting the finger on the specific design features, but might be summarized as a sense of belonging. One manager remarked that “there’s this conflict that if the office is something positive for us because it is a sort of homestead, then you get reminded of how fleeting everything is when you come in here”. Another critical point in this respect was the design of the social spaces. Given an identity where it is important to look busy an efficient, placing the cafés in the most exposed area may not be conducive to socializing. In response to the question of what the dream office would look like, one manager said: “We get back to this [issue] with the social spaces. If you take the café area, it is a completely crazy location by the stairwell, where people run through all the time, it’s completely crazy. It should be separate, [a place where] you go inside. None of our social spaces are separated that way, but people run past all the time... they have not been concerned with making it cosy, inviting to sit down... Now it’s like – PC what is it you do? We work with a lot of companies. It says nothing about what we produce.”

6 DISCUSSION

This case served to illustrate how the three perspectives differed in how they perceive the meaning of the office design in a knowledge-intensive firm with a mobile workforce. The designer and management perspectives are based on a process view and the office is seen as a “tool” for supporting the knowledge workers in achieving their tasks as efficiently as possible. This exemplifies the “functional design” view that dominates the current workplace literature, i.e. an approach that focuses primarily on designing work environments that allow *organizations* to change and adjust to their environments, but neglects to

address the emotional needs of *individuals* in their effective adaptation to the resultant changing work requirements (Lechner et al. 2008). Similarly, this approach reflects what Krippendorff (2006) calls the technology-centred view of design, a heritage from the industrial era focusing on the function of design. Technology-centred design improves the world in designers' and their clients' terms, often resulting in "a schism between what designers believed they did and what they did in fact" (p.5). In contrast he argues for a human-centred view of design, which departs from a community of users, their embodied interactions with designed artefacts and the meaning that these interactions elicit within their specific context. While the functional perspective ("the office as tool") was certainly recognized and appreciated by the employees, their reactions to the design were rooted in the embodied experience of the office and demonstrate the validity of the human-centred perspective. People respond holistically and emotionally to physical environments before starting to analyze their meaning (Rapoport 1990). As the accounts above illustrate, the overall experience of the office "spilled over" on the interpretation of OI in the sense that it helped employees interpret ambiguous identity words such as what it means to be and act professionally. At the same time the OI influenced the interpretation of the design, in terms of the general approach to office design (a PC consultant is supposed to be able to work from anywhere and therefore the physical setting is not supposed to matter) as well as the reading of "hidden messages" behind design choices (e.g. it is probably due to global guidelines). Users' meaning is created in the interplay between office design and OI; an illustration of Krippendorff's (2006:57) axiom for human-centred design: "humans do not see and act on the physical qualities of things, but on what they mean to them".

The analysis of user's meaning also prompts the question of whether we need to fundamentally reconsider the role of the workplace and workplace design for knowledge-based companies with mobile workforces. The metaphor of the office as an airport was not attractive to the employees (especially not as they tend to travel more in their job than they care for, thus airports rarely had positive connotations). While they accepted the metaphor as an accurate reflection of *how* they work, it did not represent an appropriate metaphor for what the office *means* to them, nor what they would want it to be. Rather, they preferred to view their office as something closer to a professional "home". Other words used to describe the role of the office was "docking station", "base station" and "hub", all denoting the sense of the office as home base – a central starting point to which you return and dock practical things, but also a sense of belonging, meeting your "family" (i.e. colleagues) and "recharging the batteries" after long periods at client site. While some consultants maintained that the office is less important in a company like PC because they are hardly ever there, others said this makes the office even more important, only its role changes. As one consultant explained, "some aspects become less important, like daily practical things. But on the other hand it is important to have an office and a [sense of] attachment ... it has to do with identity. Sense of belonging. Meeting place and belonging".

To conclude, this paper has highlighted the need for approaches to workplace design that take a broader view of the role of the workplace in supporting knowledge work. In addition to considering work process from an organizational perspective, the emotional needs of the user as well as the organizational identity should be considered to be able to design a truly supportive office. This is of course not an easy analysis to conduct. As such it is a task that often falls between the chairs of designers and management today, and there are few models and little research to support practitioners in taking on this complex exercise. This conclusion thus strongly supports Grech and Walter's (2008) call for multidisciplinary research and the completion of the feedback loop that is so important to the design professions if they are to serve their clients diligently. Perhaps we need to rethink not only "how the office shapes meaning", but also the "meaning of the office"?

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