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“The map and the territory. Sensemaking through the organisational structure and space.”

Abstract

“The map is not the territory” is a famous dictum by Alfred Korzybski that accurately describes the difficult ontological and epistemological relations between organisational structure and space. With the evolution of the contemporary approaches to organisational design both these issues have faced deep paradigmatic shift. The concept of organisational structure has advanced through functional, divisional, matrix, lean, agile, networked, virtual and fractal approaches, reflecting the reorganisation of entrepreneurial processes and sources of competitive advantage. Concurrently with that, the principles of organisational space arrangement evolved from Taylorist offices, through Bürolandschaft, Action Office, cube farms, to networking, virtual and casual working places, reflecting the changing corporate cultures and the essence of modern work. Although these changes are on-going and interrelated, they tend to be misaligned and socially underestimated. The deconstruction of value chains through the extensive use of outsourcing and global networking, where employees can hardly identify with the final product, resulted in the growing issue of identification with the organisational structures. Simultaneously, the existence of telecommuting, reinforced by ITC infrastructure, led to the deconstruction of office space. While agility of organisational design, accompanied by elasticity of working environment might seem very appealing in a modern economy, it often lacks the elements of identity building and sensemaking that are crucial for contemporary workforce.

These elements of work experience are especially relevant for knowledge workers. Being a major part of knowledge economy, independent and highly skilled professionals, often nomadic and nonconforming in nature, cannot be easily bound to a given place or position. This is a growing challenge for managers, especially in creative and hi-tech industries. Modern managers can no longer be only responsible for creating and maintaining effective and efficient structures. They also need to create meaningful and inspiring workplaces. However, while the sensemaking through organisational design seems to be well understood (the issues of organisational roles, processes, hierarchy and relationships, in both formal and informal perspective), the reflection on sensemaking through organisational space (buildings, offices and general spatial environment) tend to be less developed. Yet the modern examples of organisational architecture, like the offices in Silicon Valley or R&D centres in automotive industry show how the working space has changed. Open space offices, with

hammocks, pool tables, scribbles on the walls, personal pieces of furniture, coffee machines and game consoles are the examples of workspace designs that blend the idea of office, cafeteria, forum and playground. Introduced by creative industries and IT giants like Google, these approaches are now commonly copied by other aspiring companies. Again, while very appealing, these changes need to be carefully studied because modern knowledge work should not be treated as a casual game, but rather as a mindful journey in space and time. For example, depending on the stage of the project, employees need different spaces. Sometimes they need to have formal meetings, another time they should be offered a space to talk informally and finally all of them need a separate, personal space to focus on the job or simply relax.

There are many studies and examples showing that adaptive, engaging and personalised office design correlates positively with organisational efficiency and staff performance. However, there are other problems that need to be considered. While modern corporate architecture attempts to renounce the concepts of Bentham's Panoptikon or Mitchell's enframing, still many organisations are willing to create very attractive, yet vain workspaces, only to put employees in a golden cage of productivity and replace Foucault's self-surveillance with the illusion of self-indulgence. One should also be aware that even though it is possible to foster communication and innovative practices using proper space design, innovation is not about open spaces, but about open minded organisational culture. Finally, the replacement of infamous cubicles with slides, hammocks and game rooms may ultimately occur pathetic for ageing employees. All of that calls for a deeper understanding of organisational space, especially in the context of organisational aesthetics or even an/aesthetics (the term coined by Wolfgang Iser as a condition where the daily excess of aesthetic experience dulls our senses and results in anaesthesia, as we are overwhelmed by beautification of everything). This symbolic and sensory approach provides a new cognitive perspective and helps to understand changes in organisational behaviour as the effects of changes in the perception of reality. Aesthetics could also be used to conceptualise an organisation as a form of expression, prone to various aspects of human perception, interpretation, reception and reaction or even to distinguish between meaningless organisational veneer and meaningful organisational beauty.

Aesthetical approach to organisational studies calls for the development of specific research methodologies. The most adequate is visual organisational anthropology and the application of visual ethnography toolkit (photography, video, photo-voice, photo-elicitation or visual auto-ethnography) to organisational studies. These methods could be used to build a new theoretical background for better understanding of organisational architecture, both in its literal and metaphoric sense. The concept of Visual Grounded Theory (proposed by K. Konecki) seems to be especially relevant, however there are specific restrictions in its application to organisational studies. The paper includes the examples of initial visual ethnographies performed in the chosen organisations.