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A Startup's Emerging Identity Communicated by and with Space

There are many expressions of “symbols of culture” that Geertz has articulated (1974). In addition to language and speech, what can other mediums - physical representations - of communication tell us about a culture? The Western Apache communicate their value set and code of behavior through stories of places (Basso, 1996). Walibiri iconography situates a viewer in the cosmic order using sight and touch (Munn, 1967). Organizational ethnographers investigate the role of space and place-making in our own societies, investigating symbolic power, experiential form, power assertion and effects on organizational identity. Grafton-Small speaks to its symbolic nature, explaining, “Cultural determination of physical space makes meaning concrete” (1985). Gagliardi speaks to space’s role in habitus as it “provokes cognitive and sensuous responses” (Brown & Humphreys, 2006, Gagliardi, 1990). Bourdieu highlights how the “design of buildings sustains difference and hierarchy by excluding and segregating categories of people” (1990). Brown and Humphreys focus on how “understandings of place influenced the accounts [given] of their group and organizational identities” (2006).

This ethnography investigates the proactive role of space in forming the identity of a new organization. How does space communicate an organization’s nascent identity and act as a tangible tool for the organization’s members to make sense of their implicit culture (Bolman and Deal, 1984)? The subject of the study is a one-year old startup that defines itself as a “collective of independent artists and designers” and functions as both an art gallery and a design consultancy. As they hold meetings to negotiate a collective identity that bridges the hemispheres, the study observes the evolution and use of their gallery/studio hybrid space and questions how individuals make sense of both the physical and conceptual combination of art and design. As Gieryn states (in a more nuanced version of the famous Churchill quote), “places are made through human practices and institutions even as they help to make those practices and institutions” (2000). How might the startup’s space translate a nascent intention into a strategic articulation?

Three core research questions were explored: How do members describe their space? How do members make sense of the relationship between the gallery and the consultancy? How do members’ definition of “art” and “design” compare to their sense making of the gallery and consultancy? Findings result from a 3-month engagement with members, using space as a tool to explore culture. Research consisted of participant-observation of space usage, member-led guided tours of the space and in-depth interviews with members about their definitions of art and design and their understanding of the relationship between the gallery and the consultancy. The proposed presentation will review organizational ethnographies of space and introduce the unique conditions of startups, walk through patterns and insights that resulted from the research, and compare these outcomes to the company’s previously-established internal value identification. The talk will end with a discussion on spatial and artistic methods for understanding culture.

Keywords: placemaking, workplace, symbolic anthropology, story, organizational identity

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