

Preprint

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Beyond strategy and tactics: On the micropolitics of organisational aesthetics

David Adler

Abstract

The design of office spaces and office architecture has received increased attention over the last decades. However, studies on work organisations predominantly approach the design of work environments from an instrumentalist perspective in which spatial configurations are strategically deployed in order to optimise work performances and increase productivity. Going beyond this instrumentalist view, I develop a concept of the micropolitics of organisational aestheticisation. Drawing on empirical data from a research project on the performativity of contemporary office architecture, I show how the (re-)design of office spaces is a heterogeneous and contingent process. Turning to the micropolitics of office space makes apparent, that organisational spaces with their aesthetics cannot merely be seen as a predetermined technology, strategically instituted by management to subtly ‘govern’ work practices. Instead, institutional space is performed in the transgressive and dynamic interplay of material and discursive pre-figurations and the diverse and contingent practices, interpretations, and subjectifications that emanate from them. The turn to micropolitics and performativity subverts dichotomous distinctions between strategies and tactics from organisational sociology.

Keywords: office architecture, performativity, aestheticisation, micropolitics, work organisations, strategy, tactics

1. Introduction

Modern organisations have described themselves as spaces of efficiency and rationality. This self-conception has been supported and maintained largely by the exclusion of the supposedly non-rational: the private, the subjective, the emotional – and not the least: the aesthetic. From a rationalist perspective, aesthetic sensibilities merely constitute a disturbance for the smooth

running of the administrative ‘machine’. Office architecture and the design of office space has, in this perspective, long been seen as a more or less stable technology, which, drawing on scientific knowledge, must be planned to avoid any inefficiency (Galloway 1922). The rise of the creative industries, however, has brought with it an increased explicit attention to and affirmation of aesthetic qualities – be it of the organisation’s products, the appearance of the employees, or the aesthetic qualities of work environments. Andreas Reckwitz (2017) accordingly talks about a “dispositive of creativity” producing an aestheticisation of society. It is against this background that the role of office design is transformed in particular for administrative, knowledge, and creative labour. Today, the aesthetic qualities of office spaces gain explicit attention. Despite these changes, the discourse on office architecture largely conceives of institutional spaces and their appearance as technical artefacts, that can be strategically employed and that produce distinct and predictable effects on their own terms. Against such a conception, I argue that institutionality does not simply produce spatial effects behind users’ backs. Rather spaces become effective in a performative way: by the complex, contingent and ongoing interlacing of heterogeneous elements like knowledge, practices, subjectivities, and imaginaries.

2. Organising space: Between strategy and tactics

I want to situate the discussion about the organisational space and its aesthetics within more general debates within organisational sociology and the sociology of work. Roughly speaking, here a distinction between strategies and tactics can be made. Stemming from military practice, “strategy” and “tactics” are interdiscursive notions, which have been taken up in many different social fields, such as politics, sports, and not the least, business. In his posthumously published book *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), a Prussian major general and influential military theorist, first of all distinguished strategy and tactics according to *scale*: While strategy sets the general guidelines of action and defines an overreaching goal, tactics are limited to more specific circumstances. Tactics translate strategy into practical action and adapt it to the particular and dynamic situation (Clausewitz 1873, 116). Clausewitz focussed on the discrete dynamics of the differently scaled military practices, which are at the same time dependent on each other in order to facilitate military success.

However, the different scales of strategies and tactics have also been translated into contrarian elements: dominance and resistance. Strategic thinking has been mainly attributed to management, based on its asymmetric relationship to labour. In this vein, control is a seminal subject in the sociology of labour relations. With Max Weber this can be understood within a wider development of rationalisation (Thompson and McHugh 2009, 33–39). In this perspective organisational space is an object of the management’s (or owners’) efforts to technically optimise the organisational processes, while being itself subjected to ‘rational’ procedures of cost minimisation.

As Harry Braverman (1998) has pointed out in the Labour Process Debate, human labour is essentially an indeterminate potential. This potential cannot simply be realised by a formal act of acquiring labour time. Instead, the corporation has to find ways, to make the workers work efficiently according to its needs. Given the fact that in capitalist work organisations the worker is not the owner of their work product, the capitalist and – with its mandate – the manager are responsible for organising and planning the work process (Braverman 1998, 37–39). So, wage

labour has to be subjected to a management strategy (Thompson and McHugh 2009, 107–109). From this Marxist perspective power and dominance become central aspects of the labour process: what may seem like a neutral technological development towards greater efficiency turns out to be an instrument in the surveillance of labour and the repression of efforts of self-management and resistance.

Braverman's approach has been criticised both for overgeneralising the Taylorist mode of organising labour by identifying it with management strategy per se and for overemphasising the coherence of such management strategies (Thompson and McHugh 2009, 107–115). From a Foucauldian perspective, Clegg and Wilson (1990, 234) criticise Braverman's conception of control and technical development as a "conspiracy of control by the mythically unified subject of 'capital'". In it there is little leeway for tactical moves by the employees. Management strategy seems inescapable.

Foucauldian approaches to organisations have for their part not been free from such totalising tendencies. They conform with the Labour Process Debate insofar as they see power relations as a key part of the organisation's management of labour, instead of assuming a mere technical rationalisation. Basically, such approaches relate back to two major aspects of Foucault's thinking: his work on discipline and his later work on neoliberal governmentality. Discipline is usually related to a Taylorist mode of governing labour. It aims at the individual and seeks to adapt behaviour to a predetermined norm. Foucault gives it an explicit spatial form, when he describes the disciplinary logic referring to the "panopticon", an ideal prison which was developed by Jeremy Bentham in order to technically optimise control over individuals (Bentham 1995; Foucault 1995). In organisation theory the panopticon has become a widely used (some might say: overused) concept to describe an intensified "supervisory control" in the late 20th century (Dale and Burrell 2008, 61). The concept of governmentality is, in contrast, used more in order to describe contemporary forms of management, which do away with the traditional hierarchies and an individualistic control along the lines of pre-determined norms. In his lectures on governmentality, Foucault describes the emergence and development of a new mode of managing the "population". Rather than trying to discipline the individual, governmental "programmes" (Bröckling 2016, 12–14) seek to indirectly steer the outcome of group processes by manipulating the general conditions of human (social) behaviour (Foucault 2004a, 2004b).

Foucauldian approaches can at times have a tendency towards a dystopian projection of an ever more effective and inescapable drilling and use of the subjects, focussing on governmental programmes without systematically taking practices with their emerging and contingent dynamics into account (O'Malley et al. 1997). Seen from the perspective of the self-development of governing knowledge, governmentality risks to reduce resistance to nothing more than one further engine for the perfection of control (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995). Within this logic of omnipotent strategies, office architecture and organisational aesthetics must first and foremost be seen as a mere function or instrument, which acts on the (passive) employees according to the management's intentions or an objective economic rationality.

Micropolitical approaches can be seen as an explicit alternative to such a generalisation of overpowering strategies. They open up the perspective for organisational tactics which are not in compliance with the overall goals and interests of the organisation. In fact, the notion "political" was first used in a rather dismissive way, pointing to the efforts to advance egoistic

self-interest, that in the end can be to the detriment of the organisation as a whole (Burns 1961). In a similar vein, Henry Mintzberg contrasts political power in organisations with forms of power which draw on formal legitimacy or an underlying ideological consensus. So, *political* power not only aims at advancing particular interests, it is also “divisive and conflictive” in nature (Mintzberg 1983, 172). While political games can have a variety of functions within the organisation’s everyday life, they are of utmost importance for those who are less likely to justify their behaviour with a legitimate discourse and who don’t have access to the organisation’s ‘control room’. Accordingly, micro-politics are strongly linked to resistance and to the subversion of managerial strategies.

Micropolitical studies render visible the everyday practices, which cannot simply be subsumed under overreaching structures. Strategies from above are contrasted with tactics from below. Michel de Certeau, one of cultural studies’ major influences, explicitly delineated his concept of everyday practices against the assumptions of an inescapable dominance that he found in authors such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. For de Certeau *strategy* is able to delineate a territory over which it disposes and with which it is able to mould the conditions the participants are confronted with. It is rooted in a privileged standpoint which allows it to overview the events – “*une pratique panoptique*” as de Certeau (1990, 60) formulates it referring to Foucault – and for which the territory is made readable and devoid of its imponderables. *Tactics*, in contrast, operate in the space controlled by somebody else. They invade this heteronomous space, while staying fragmented, they “poache” in the territory defined and controlled by a superior authority (de Certeau 1990, XLVI, 61).

What does that mean for office architecture and the aesthetics of office space now? Office space and its specific design can be seen as strategic, as they are systematically planned to influence and shape the practices and subjectivities of the employees by setting a specific territory for their everyday activities. However, this should not be misunderstood as a kind of socio-technological determinism. Rather, office spaces are subjected not only to processes of interpretation and sense-making, but always also to (re-)negotiations and (re-)arrangements in which they become a matter of political concern *within* contemporary institutionality.

3. Performativity, discourse, and ethnography

My empirical analysis is situated in an approach, which I call “performativity analysis”. Performativity has been widely discussed in recent years (for a succinct introduction to some key positions see Gond et al. 2016). I take up motives from different contributions to this debate and translate them into an empirical research perspective which approaches its objects based on both the irreducibility of specific performances of social practices and the recognition of formative elements that permeate such practices.

Performativity analysis, against this background, brings together the two major impulses from the broad and diverse discussion on performativity (Austin 1975; Barad 2003; Butler 1993; Callon 2007; Derrida 1988; Law and Singleton 2000):

- The transgressive moment: Discourses are not only self-referential systems, but they ‘perform’ reality, as economic sociology points out.

- The moment of accomplishment: Structural phenomena and ‘natural’ preconditions are in fact not just givens in interaction but have to be locally and ongoingly brought about in everyday life.

Performativity analysis, as I understand it, is not one particular method of analysis, but a broader research programme which uses and extends methods from discourse analysis, ethnography and dispositive analysis. As such my analysis is situated in the lively debate on the interplay of discourses, materiality, and practices within qualitative methodology in recent years (van Dyk et al. 2014; Macgilchrist and Van Hout 2011; Porsché 2018; Scheffer 2007; Wrana 2012).

For this chapter my empirical material consists of (1) contemporary office discourses (i. e. textbooks, architecture and business magazines, monographs, contributions from management science), focussing on the German discourse between 1995 and 2015, (2) unstructured in-depth interviews with architects and other actors that help understand how these discourses are practically and institutionally embedded, and (3) three months of ethnographic fieldwork in a medium-sized public-relations company, where I was able to actively participate in everyday activities in the role of an intern. My status as a researcher, which was made known to the staff of the division in advance, allowed me to take extensive notes, observe and tape record a number of meetings and conduct supplementary and in-depth interviews with several employees. My ethnographic research aimed at making accessible the profane everyday usage of contemporary office spaces which is at times overlooked, based on the discursive celebration of spectacular new buildings. Because of the heterogeneous material, I draw on multiple methods for my analysis. Two procedures are of special interest for this chapter.

I drew conceptual maps for the individual texts, which helped me to identify typical concepts which structurally bind together different discursive articulations. Thus, these maps – which are both inspired by hegemony analysis and situation analysis (Clarke 2003; Nonhoff 2010) – can help to identify the inner-discursive structuration and the immanent logic of the discourse. But performativity analysis cannot suffice itself with such a quasi-structuralist perspective. It asks how the discourse is dynamically translated into materialities and practices and how discourse is itself practically constituted.

In order to bring together aspects from different materials I collected – like textbooks, processes of planning and implementing a building, and everyday usage of space – I coded the texts in a recursive process. In contrast to classical Grounded Theory, which is based on coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998), my aim was not to create a coherent coding system, which would represent a more or less closed meaningful cultural order behind the empirical material. Rather coding was used for de-constructive purposes, breaking up the text, making topics accessible and contrasting their discursive representation and, importantly, identifying ‘dense’ text segments for microanalysis.

4. Office space as strategy? The discourse on office architecture

When reading textbooks, descriptions, articles from journals and popular magazines on the design of office buildings, it seems at first glance quite evident that office architecture is first and foremost an *instrument* at the organisation management’s command. Be it the direct effect on the employees’ work performance or a contribution to the company’s image by a “corporate

architecture” (Messedat 2005), office architecture and the design of office spaces is expected to contribute to the organisation’s formal goals – especially profit and productivity. The organisation scholar Thomas J. Allen and the architect Gunther W. Henn put it quite bluntly: “Architects can play an essential role in arming managers with the *tool* of physical space to help them plan and direct a successful innovation process” (2007, 127 emphasis in original). The metaphor of a “tool” clearly points to the instrumental view on office space. As such, it serves the “managers” in implementing their intentions, which are identified with the formal organisational goal of a “successful innovation process”.

On the flip side, economic and technological developments are presented as objective foundations for the design process, a basis that precedes and determines a specific architecture. Some architects justify whole architectural styles by pointing to a broad mode of capitalist regulation that purportedly ground them:

The emergence of postmodern architecture and urbanism in the seventies, sweeping the market in the eighties, represents much more than a new aesthetic sensibility. [...] The force behind these developments, rather than emerging from within the architectural discipline itself, must be found in the socio-economic level. Postmodern cultural production coincides with the historical crisis in the regime of mechanical mass-production, first developed by Ford in Detroit. (Schumacher and Roger 2001, 48)

This derivation of architectural creation from socio-economic conditions, which echoes the Marxist distinction between economic “basis” and cultural “superstructure” (Hall 1977), is a recurrent theme in the work of Patrik Schumacher from Zaha Hadid Architects, who has an influential voice within the field of architecture.

Other authors take changing work practices and new ways of organizing work as their starting points and ask in how far those require new spatial programmes. According to these representations of economy within the architectural discourse, intensified transversal communication, flexible structures, and new possibilities and necessities of mobility are key developments (see Klug et al. 2005). From a discourse analytical perspective, it is striking to see *how* the economic and technological conditions are made relevant for the architectural solutions promoted in the discourse on office architecture. They are largely mobilised as an anonymous fate that inevitably entails specific spatial solutions. Instead of marking a discursive origin of demand, these are typically masked and naturalised in passive constructions. Typical phrases in this context are: “Multi-functional workspaces are required ...” (Messedat 2005, 15), “... flexible and innovative work sites are in demand” (Schittich et al. 2013)¹, “Ethnic and cultural adaption is required” (Gerhardt 2014, 8).

This evocation of spatial change as anonymous necessity vis-à-vis an a priori economic and technological change, is accompanied by a double textual strategy of *threat* and *promise*. Basically, this strategy provides the elements of the discourse on office architecture with an existential dimension. Do as I say, and you will prosper, ignore it and you will perish. To give just one example: “Corporate architecture has become a strategic management instrument and can make a significant contribution to economic success. Businesses that miss this

¹ Quotes from the German corpus and from the ethnography have been translated by the author.

development run the risk of losing their position to competitors on the global market place” (Messedat 2005, 15).

Aesthetic considerations certainly play an important role within the design process of contemporary office buildings. However, within the discourse on office architecture they are rarely seen as a value in themselves, but design decisions are explicitly justified based on their purported instrumental contribution to the organisation.

To sum this up: what are organisations promised to gain from office architecture? Office architecture is especially touted to contribute to a flow of communication, the facilitation of innovation, the stimulation of creativity as well as the boost of motivation. Most fundamentally this is pursued by three spatial means:

- *Transparency*: The office space is broken up visually. The extensive use of glass on the inside allows to permanently be aware of the others’ activities – and accordingly to be permanently visually exposed to the others.
- *Openness*: Separating walls are torn down. Closed spaces do still exist but are framed as exceptions for “concentrated work”. Openness is sought to create “chance encounters”, which intensify both the flow of information and innovation.
- *Atmosphere*: Office space are expected to contribute to the well-being and the creativity of the employees. The created atmosphere is intended to make the organisation attractive for desired “human resources”.

All of this is not only sought to increase the office work’s *efficiency*, as was the case in the typical modern office – it is expected to increase *productivity* of the creation of knowledge goods and cultural products (see Geberzahn and Redemann 1995, 9).

In the following, I will switch the perspective from the vantage point of the strategic creation of spaces to the tactics of everyday usage, which can be seen as both: performing office architecture and being performed by architecture.

5. Subverting the strategy: Office space as a terrain of tactics and resistance

Although the office building in which I have done my fieldwork is not an ‘avantgarde’ building frequently featured in mainstream news media – not an urban landmark of a star architect, neither a gaudy playground for creative workers, nor a fancy exhibition room for designer furniture – the key aspects mentioned above were at play in the construction and interior design of its spaces. Singular office rooms had glass doors and windows to the corridor. Additionally, each floor was equipped with open space areas, which were used as group offices as well as space for meetings and group activities.

I participated in the field in a double role: as an ethnographer and as an intern. Thus, participation did not only mean to be co-present in the field, but working alongside with the other participants, experiencing the office space based on a shared practice. At the same time, being known to the participants as a researcher yielded free space for the work of observation. Not only was I able to participate in meetings for projects I was not involved in in my capacity as an intern, I was able to openly take extensive notes, to record several work settings, to ask ‘naive’ questions, and to invite some of my co-workers to additional in-depth interviews.

During my stay I observed several practices that were immediate responses to core strategic elements of contemporary work environments (such as transparency, openness, and a productive atmosphere). One prominent practice was to undo the transparency of walls that is produced both by internal windows and glass doors. This tactic has mostly been employed at workstations, where the exposure to the colleague's gaze was especially high. The covering of an unused glass door, which connected a larger office to the reception area, with a large indoor plant went largely unnoticed. More attention was attracted by a collection of printed out memes mocking the project management software, which covered one office window, thereby blocking the view from the corridor. While this particular obscuring of transparency was, to my knowledge, not challenged but rather appreciated as a creative expression and ironic comment on the organisation's everyday life, a similar case on a different floor had created a little controversy, as I learned from one of the persons involved. Having to copy some documents, I noticed stripes of privacy film on the window leading from the alcove where the copying machine was placed to an office room; something that I never saw anywhere else. Additionally, a large calendar was stuck up the window. When I asked one of the receptionists about it, it turned out that this window had been the object of a longer tug of war. In a first step, the employee behind the window attached a calendar to it, in order to avoid being on direct display whenever someone used the copy machine. This, however, interfered with the aesthetic sensibilities of other employees, specifically the receptionists who felt responsible for the overall appearance, especially of 'their' floor. In the next step, stripes of privacy film were added to the window. This was a compromise, as the receptionist told me: It partly blocked the view on the workstation behind the window but avoided the tinkered feeling of the back of the calendar displayed towards the corridor. However, this apparently did not finitely settle the issue. As mentioned, I found the window covered both by privacy film *and* a calendar, possibly because the stripes of privacy film had just provided partial protection from being visible. The window I came across, bore the sedimented traces of a complex negotiation of the office space's (in-)transparency.

While in this case the spatial configuration of visibility was renegotiated, another aspect of practically dealing with the aesthetic order of the office concerned the acoustic accessibility. Generally, the employees appreciated the outline of the office, which included a number of open space group offices. However, employees would use small ruses to make their activity less easily accessible to others moving around within the open space. For instance, in the eight-person group office in which I worked, computer screens were slightly turned to the side walls, so that they were less easily visible from the entrance area.

While transparency is mainly understood visually, the open space of contemporary offices is also an acoustic space. The employees in smaller rooms of two to three persons could close their door in order to shut out the outside sounds and in order to signal that they did not wish disruption. For the inhabitants of the group offices this was not an option. They had to either move to an enclosable room (for instance, a small attic on the building's top floor, which I was recommended to use when I had to make a series of phone calls). Or they had to wear their walls on their body – performatively substituting the physical enclosure of the traditional office cell. For this both headphones and music as well as earmuffs were used. The use of such devices certainly impeded communication but at the same time it was a communicative act in itself – making it apparent to the others that one wanted to work in a focussed way and liberate oneself

from the duty to react to ‘interpellations’. The cutting off of the office’s public dynamics was quite real though. I observed several situations in the group office where colleagues in close proximity contacted each other via e-mail in order to open up a conversation (which was cut-off again, once the earmuffs were back on). Despite performatively undoing the (economically justified) openness of the office, this form of self-isolation is at least in part not so much subverting the ‘government’ of labour, but implicitly contributing to it: it more often than not aims at improving the work outcome.

In a way this materially supported technology of the self already exceeds a simple dichotomy of strategy and tactics. It liberates the working subject from the total communicative integration, which, within the discourse on office architecture, is presented as a strategic tool to increase productivity and innovation. However, it does not simply aim at avoiding or subverting this government of the employees’ bodies and subjectivity. At least in part, it regulates the aesthetic overflow produced by the unlimited open space in the service of work performance, thereby contributing to the company’s success by dint of an entrepreneurial self-government.

6. Aesthetisation as accomplishment: Reworking workspaces

So far, I have, on the one hand, pointed out major characteristics that are discursively expected from contemporary office spaces in order to render offices more efficient and productive. On the other hand, I have described local practices that subvert key elements of the discursive programme of the office space to make it more habitable for the office workers. I now want to turn to a case from my ethnography, where I could accompany an employee-initiated process to reshape one of the office spaces.

Shortly before I started my fieldwork in the company, five “competence centres” (CC) were created with the objective of offering opportunities for development for senior employees. The process of spatial transformation was initiated by the members of one of those CC, which aimed at increasing the “attractiveness” of the organisation both for clients and for (potential) employees.² One major undertaking was the revamping of the entrance areas adjacent to the staircase on the respective floors and the central conference room. The entrance areas were rather spacious, but they were used only very rarely, especially on the floor on which I worked. A group of chairs was almost exclusively used for dropping of clothes when going to the restrooms before lunch break. One employee used the high table, situated closely to the natural light coming in through the kitchen windows, for small informal meetings with one or two other persons (see Figure 1).

The rearrangement was initiated because several employees suggested that the office spaces did not adequately express the company’s, and notably their own, *creativity*. More than that, they perceived a deficiency of the office’s aesthetic appeal. During a meeting of the CC, in which I participated and recorded, the employees even expressed actual disgust for some of the facilities’ infrastructure. Such sensations are not a mere reflection of the ‘objective’ aesthetic status of the office space. Rather they are embedded in the dynamic process of remoulding the

² Details like names and specifics of the location have been changed to preserve anonymity. For a more detailed account of this case, see Adler (2017).

corporation's appearance and in the employee's aesthetic subjectification. Part of this goes beyond the scope of my ethnographic observations: The sensibilities that are at play in the employees' aesthetic judgements take shape within the biographic process of habitualisation (Bourdieu 1984). However, within the performativity approach these transgressive moments also depend on practical activation within the given setting. What is more, aesthetic sensibilities play a key part in the situated presentation of self as a 'creative' subject.

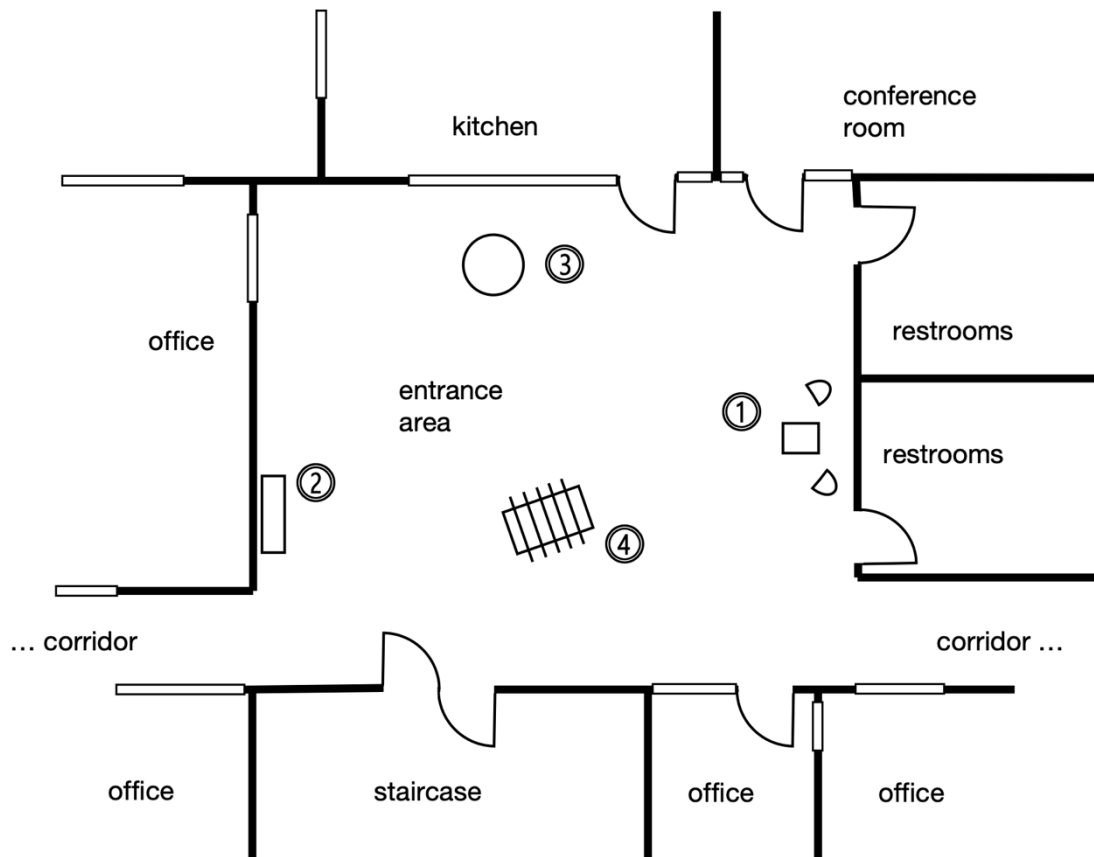


Figure 1: Layout of the entrance area before the reshaping of the place. (1) small sitting group, (2) cinema chairs, (3) high table, (4) table football.

The aesthetic sensibilities depend on the practical orientation and foci, which distinctively changed during the process of transforming the entrance hall. In the first phase of the CC's activities, during discussions and meetings ever more deficiencies of the office space were collected and piled up. The participants used rather drastic language to describe the given state of the building and its interior design, which framed the intended changes as a dramatic urgency. For instance, Sophia, one of the participants of the CC, while discussing creating a "comfortable atmosphere", pointed out:

That was the first thing, that also I saw here, when I came into the kitchen. I couldn't believe my eyes. Well, I haven't seen anything like this in even the ugliest of medical practices, such ugly cityscape pictures. (transcript CC meeting, May 2015: 17:20 min.)

Given that the CC's head repeatedly mentioned the problem that he does not even see some of the office's aesthetic shortcomings because of being so used to them, remembering *initial*

impressions of the office space can be seen as one of the practical methods employed by the participants to break free from the ‘oblivion of aesthetics’ in everyday work practices. ‘Oblivion of aesthetics’ is not to say that the material work environment and its sensuous qualities are strictly speaking unperceivable or irrelevant in everyday life. Rather they can become delegated to a background blur. In addition, in one of the CC’s meetings, where the members prepared for presenting the desired changes to the CEO, the PowerPoint presentation comprised a photograph of the first glance one gets, when entering the floor from the staircase. This picture was accompanied by a narration of an imaginary new “client” entering the building for the first time, climbing the steps, arriving at the reception, climbing another floor to reach the conference room etc. Based on this imaginary perspective of a client, seeing the company’s workspaces with fresh eyes and without the rusted in vision of the everyday usage, the CC’s members reflected on the signs given off by their work environment: the intuitive assumptions sparked by the appearance of the work environment not only about the innovativeness and productivity of the company, but about the creative capabilities and aesthetic sensibilities of the employees themselves.

Given this point, one should expect that a remodelling of parts of the office space quite literally ‘knocks on an open door’ on the ‘executive floor’. However, the process of implementing the changes was more difficult – a difficulty anticipated by the CC’s members when preparing their demands for the boss. Trying to gain a fresh perception of the office space, and collectively focussing on what ought to be changed, the CC’s members developed a temporary ‘hyper-sensitivity’ for the office’s aesthetic deficiencies and, accordingly, a sense of great urgency: as things were perceived to be dire (“ugly”, “disgusting”) and to give an inadequate representation of the companies and the employees creative potential they had to be changed as soon as possible. This sense of urgency was not necessarily shared by other members of the organisation, who were essential for forming a coalition in order to put through the desired changes. And the economic logic brought forward by the CC’s members, even if widely in compliance with the considerations of the discourse on office architecture, was not self-evident either. As one senior employee determines regarding the initial interior design and furniture:’

I think erm on the one hand that ((the boss)), well, does not have a particular high standard, concerning that. He does not, well, have an aesthetic standard or he has not such a standard that he wants to represent something, but what was important for him was ‘well I want that to work and if its affordable all the better’ (Interview with senior employee, September 2015: 10:27 min.).

Accordingly, in the negotiation between the CC and the CEO, we find two logics: on the one hand, an idea of functionality at minimised costs, on the other hand the idea of a productive increase of return, which, however, requires some expenses. Interestingly, the discourse on office architecture and office design is in itself marked by a similar conflict of economic logics, which subverts, in a way, all to simple concepts of homogeneous and strategic enforcement of “rationality” within the organisation. Institutional strategies are not only limited, countered or subverted by extrinsic tactics, but by the interferences of the multiplicity of the strategic itself.

7. Economic overdetermination: Beyond strategy and tactics

If I suggest a perspective on organisational space that rejects seeing it merely as a rationalised and ever more perfect instrument of productivity and/or control, it is not because there is an absence of economic logics. Quite the contrary, what is striking both on the level of architectural concepts and the sense-making of everyday users and inhabitants is that the discourse is economically ‘overdetermined’. There is more than one economic necessity defining the spatial order of organisations. Not the least because of this, a clear dichotomy of the managerial strategy on the one hand, and elusive and dispersed tactics from below on the other, fails to adequately capture the complexities of organisational aesthetics.

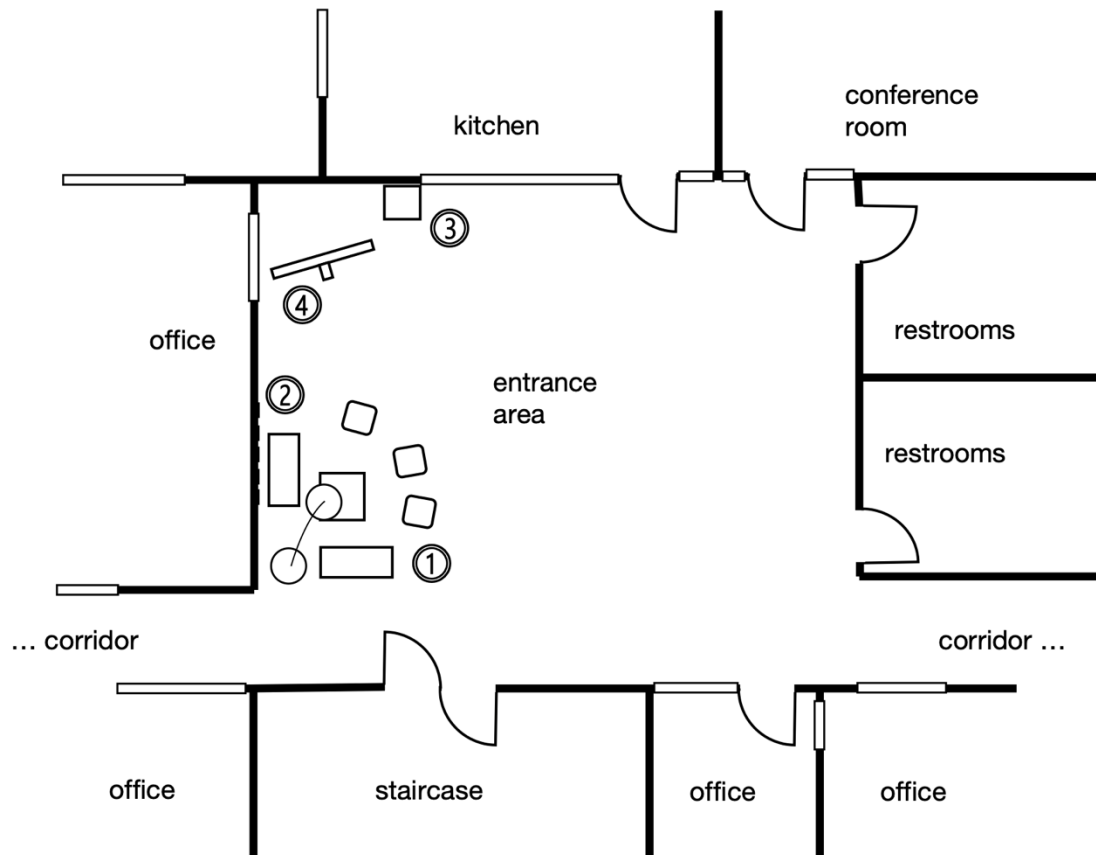


Figure 2: Layout of the entrance area after the revamp. (1) Sitting group with DIY furniture, sitting bags, and lounge lamp, (2) picture wall with company related photographs, (3) fridge with soft drinks and beer, (4) digital whiteboard.

The CC’s members argued from a productivism perspective: additional costs are rendered profitable because the updated aesthetics are believed to increase the organisation’s success by producing creativity, well-being and work motivation. On the other hand, the CEO saw costs with uncertain return. Also, he did not share the aesthetic sensibilities of some of his employees. It is important to note, that there is no levitating centre of calculation, which could neutrally decide this conflict on the basis of pure rationality. As one senior employee points out in an interview: “in the final instance decisions always include a gut feeling”. Getting things passed, accordingly, requires a good sense of timing and the ability to assess the decision makers’ moods. But the productivist position is itself also grounded in beliefs and intuition. I have already pointed to the aestheticisation, which was at play in the process of transforming

the office space, pursued by the members of the CC. More interestingly, something that can be called ‘oblivious tactics’ was at work here, where the difference between tactical pretext and true conviction is blurred. The employees both believed their economic rationale and employed the rationale tactically, in a micro-political move to enforce interests that lay beyond the official organisational plane of formal goals and legitimacy. This ambivalence became apparent in the interview with the senior employee, which I have already quoted above. Speaking about the remoulding of the entrance area initiated by the CC’s members, which had by then been completed (Figure 2), she stated:

Yes, so that is the goal [...]. That the folks like to come here and happily get up in the morning, because they feel good here. And the environment, and the interior plays its part in this. And, of course, you are more productive and yes, if you feel good, you can perform better. So, that is, that is a fact. For sure. (Interview with senior employee, September 2015: 40:36 min.)

However, when digging deeper and asking if the organisation had any means to really assess the effects of individual changes in the work environment, the employee shifted gears:

You are totally right. So, we cannot prove it. We can, we can simply try to sell it the best possible way to the management. (Interviews with senior employee, September 2015: 42:26 min.)

It would be wrong to see this as proof for a secret plot. The employee may well be convinced that the aesthetic changes made will advance the company’s economic goals. What is more relevant here, though, is the smooth transition from convictions about the economic benefit of certain aesthetic aspects of the organisation, to the tactical usage of arguments and the play on the organisation’s formal logic in the name of a higher economic rationale, that might, for instance, escape the short-term calculations of management control systems. More importantly this implies that organisational aesthetics are not – as the rationalist perspective on organisations would have it – founded on a solid bedrock of economic calculations, but rather in the micro-political entanglements, the performativity of heterogeneous aspects such as competing economic logics, aesthetic sensitivities and self-images, orders of aesthetic valuation, situationally defined urgencies and conflicting and in part ‘illegit’ interests.

At the outset of my argument, I assumed a dichotomy of strategies and tactics. The presence of economic arguments in the office discourse, make it easy to see an inescapable “neoliberalisation” of office space, an ongoing perfection of the control of human labour and stimulation of creativity, as one would assume in the tradition of governmentality studies. In this perspective office architecture and the design of workspaces seem, first of all, to be a tool which helps to put management strategies into practice. But this is, at best, only half the truth. Architects are confronted with a quite similar situation as the CC’s members, when trying to sell their projects to the clients. Across the interviews, architects detail how they try to convince entrepreneurs to consider new spatial programmes. In part, they try to anticipate and play the logics of the client organisations, taking a tactical stance vis-à-vis the economic promises so frequently made in the discourse on office architecture. As one architect put it in an interview:

Well, we sometimes argue for something, that we want for entirely different reasons. You can also put forward Trojan horses. If you think something to be more beautiful or more pleasantly designed, you must just sell it as less expensive. (Interview with Architects A & B, April 2015: 23:19 min.)

But, despite such ruses, architects are mostly convinced that their preferred ‘solutions’ really are more economically sound than the one’s preferred by their clients. This is for instance due to a conservatism from the clients’ side: clients want the buildings to be cost efficient but intuitively fall back on spatial programmes with which they are already familiar. Against this, architects push new concepts, that they consider to be more efficient or productive (Interview with architect C, November 2015). Or it is due to a calculative parochialism of the organisation’s institutionality: for instance, an architect complained, that the management control systems are based on medium-term cost amortisations, thereby structurally preferring architectural solutions that likely will be costly in the long run (Interview with architects A & B, April 2015).

Neither in discourse nor in the everyday practice of organisations there is an absolute position from which the “rationality” and “efficiency” of the organisation’s aesthetics could be neutrally and objectively measured. Both in discourse and in everyday practices the materiality of the office space is surrounded and supported by heterogeneous and reflexive practices, by concurring economic concepts, habits, self-images, and interests in which strategic and tactical moments are inextricably intertwined. This goes beyond the practical and tactical subversion of discursively elaborated materialisations of managerial strategies, which I have addressed in Section 5. What appears to be a strategy, may be tactically motivated, while tactical arguments can ‘forget’ their instrumental status and support a managerial strategy that initially was but a pretext for other goals.

8. Conclusion

Reading the contemporary discourse on office architecture we, at first glance, find some evidence for the prevalence of economic considerations being at the centre of aesthetic decision-making for contemporary workspaces. In fact, architects themselves devalue mere “aesthetic sensibilities” in favour of supposedly sound economic and technical tendencies. An attention to micropolitics can help to make visible the resistances and margins of such processes, which exist in the organisation’s everyday life, and which tend to be missed by more totalising approaches to work organisations. However, the juxtaposition of a discursively fixed spatial “programme” and local practices of resistance does not adequately grasp the deep interrelatedness of strategies and tactics. Organisational aesthetics are situated within an ambivalent negotiation both within its development and within its everyday usage. While workspaces certainly perform the practices that ‘take place’ within them, this does not imply a passivity from the side of the everyday users. Against the tendency of some micropolitical approaches to organisations that understand strategy and tactics as opposing forces, equated with legit and formal organisational goals on the one hand and the illegit and informal interests of the employees on the other, my discursive and ethnographic empirical materials point to the fact that both aspects, strategies and tactics, are profoundly intertwined. In the discursive and

practical context, it can turn out that strategic arguments are tactically motivated. At the same time, the instrumental usage of economic concepts relating to the design of office spaces, may as well solidify and legitimise a specific economic logic. In this regard, the micropolitics of organisational aesthetics do not only constitute an external limit to the realisation of self-sufficient organisational strategies, but it affects the inner core of such strategies. The political conflict then is not one between legitimate strategy and illegitimate deviance from it, but one between multiple strategies – in my case, multiple logics that promise economic success to the organisation.

Beyond the specific case of work organisations this points to the fact, that architecture is not only a corset that supports institutionality by setting its spatial conditions in a seemingly stable and sedimented way. As much as architecture provides a shell for institutional practices, it is always also a matter of concern and contestation within these practices. The space of institutions is performed in the transgressive and dynamic interplay of material and discursive pre-figurations and the diverse and contingent practices, interpretations, and subjectifications that emanate from them.

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