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Trendy ‘creative’ offices as a form of control

Introduction

Pressures to perform and excel are high throughout the society. High performance is encouraged and driven by various means, including HRM practices, performance measurement and organizational change initiatives. One aspect of organizing utilized increasingly in corporate world to increase performance and reduce fixed costs is the design of physical office space. Especially the design of ‘creative’ offices has become a trend though which organizations seek to encourage creativity and innovativeness and attract new high-profile employees. Fairly recently, a stream of critical research on creative spaces have started to emerge and scholars have concluded that the design of creative offices tends to rely on a stereotyped understanding of creativity, which sees creativity as a collective and planned process (De Paoli & Ropo, 2017; De Paoli, Sauer & Ropo 2017). Although the critical conversation of the stereotyped understanding of creativity enforced by the contemporary trend of designing ‘creative offices’ has begun, only a surface has been scratched so far. This study continues on the same line and problematizes the contemporary trend of designing creative offices, extending and complementing the current conversation. The analysis at the moment is on-going and the richness of the visual material allows several alternative paths for the analysis. Currently, the paper focuses on the question of *what kind values, ideas and beliefs are symbolically enforced by the spatial design?* Based on the analysis, it is, thus, possible to further explore and discuss *what kind of worker subjectivities are expected,*

assumed or imposed in consequence? Currently, the analysis focuses on two aspects of creative physical space in particular: the politics of transparency and visibility and the politics of non-spatiality. The method of this paper is a visual analysis, analysing a set of photographs of office spaces nominated as ‘creative’ on the Internet.

Theoretical background

The theoretical underpinnings of this research can be located in research on organizational aesthetics and organizational physical space, especially in critical research, which recognizes the various power effects that physical space and its aesthetic and symbolical features may have for the individuals working there (Gagliardi 1990; Dale & Burrell 2008; Wasserman 2012; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011). Although for a long time the physical organizational space has been treated as empty and fixed container (Taylor & Spicer 2007, 325), it is nowadays more and more understood that the physical space has an evident influence on organizational actions, for example through facilitating some action and constraining other (Elbach & Pratt 2007, 185). In addition, various physical environments awake different emotional or cognitive responses in individuals (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz 2004). For example, a physical space that fails to reflect individual personality and distinctiveness may evoke a sense of threat (Elsback 2003, 2004), thus making physical environment an important reflector of one’s identity and sense of self. Workspace aesthetics can be also looked at as intentional attempts to regulate employee thoughts and behaviour, and as a form of control or a site of politics (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte 2018; Baldry, Bain & Taylor 1998; Wasserman & Fenkel, 2011). As a form of control, a physical space can be seen to discipline the body and behaviour, enforce hierarchies and inequalities and subordinate individuals to an aesthetic and symbolic regime (Wasserman 2012; Wasserman & Frenkel 2015).

Empirical material and analysis

The empirical material of this study comprises of pictures of 16 companies’ offices found on the Internet. The number of pictures per office varies from 1 to 7, the most typical number of pictures per office being 4. In addition to the visual images, short descriptive texts of the purpose and highlights of the office design are included in the analysis. The pictures were found through search engine Google by using the phrase ‘creative office’. The pictures were

found on the websites that were the first on the list, so among the most popular examples of ‘creative offices’ online.

The analysis of this paper leans on a semiotic analysis of pre-existing photographs, which have been taken and put online for various purposes, of which the researcher is unaware. It is assumed that one purpose for taking the photographs is to display the new, ‘creative’ office design for image and reputation building and marketing purposes. Therefore, the actual look of the facilities after the employees have settled it may very well differ from the pictures found online. The pictures also include people in them, although it cannot be known whether they are actual employees or hired models. The people in the pictures are, however, likely there for a reason, as the general impression of the pictures is that they are staged, rather than taken in the middle of a regular working day. That, naturally, cannot either be known for sure.

First, the pictures of creative offices were skimmed through for overall impression of them. Next, a content analysis of the pictures was conducted and the visual elements and cues of the images were thematized and grouped. The first level of thematization is based on the visual cues of the images, in other words focuses on the denotative level (cf. Barthes 1972). The first level thematization includes: i) the symbolical or aesthetic features, themes and cues included in the image, such as colours, symbols or artefacts, ii) the spatial layout, views and architectonic solutions and iii) the visual references to various other places, symbols, or ideas. The next step of the analysis is the connotative level of analysis, that is, the meanings that the visual cues and images as a whole evoke that includes the linking of the themes and visual cues of the images to broader cultural values, beliefs or ideas (cf. Barthes 1972).

At the moment, the analysis is on-going and there are two broader level ideas that emerged based on the first level themes. They are openness/transparency and non-spatiality. However, the material is very rich and analysis preliminary, and therefore, it is possible that other broader level themes are identified.

Preliminary findings

Transparency

In the images there are various cues that all connect to the value of openness and transparency. Workings spaces comprise often of desks that are not even separated with partitions, but people are supposed to work side by side. Transparent walls, atrium type of spatial design and open spaces recur in the images. Even cubicles meant for private working or meetings are often either fully or partly transparent.

The physical space that is transparent and open to different floors resembles a Foucauldian idea of panopticon, where somebody might be watching and monitoring a person, but the person does not know if and when. While in an actual panopticon is designed so that the prisoner cannot find out whether s/he is monitored, the contemporary transparency panopticon does not prevent that; the person can always turn his or her head and look around. The consequence then is that the people working with the specific person also knows s/he is looking around to see if s/he is being watched, therefore enforcing the transparency yet again. The open design is known to result in a feeling of being under a constant gaze (Wasserman 2012), which makes employees feel constantly self-aware.

It is also worth noting that openness and transparency concern only the employees located inside the organization's physical walls, the external walls are often made of concrete, bricks or other opaque material with relatively small windows or not windows at all. It highlights the physical boundaries of the organizations and excludes the rest of the world from the organization. The idea of transparency and openness, therefore, only apply only to those working in the company, but not the company as a whole. While both the concepts of transparency and openness have a very positive connotation, they also include darker aspects. Here, transparency will be discussed as a form of control, as vulnerability and as a forced sociality.

Non-spatiality

The images analysed here often contain visual cues of specific places, such as a coffee shop or a bar, industrial plant, home and a classroom. Very often the pictures analysed included references to some combination of them. For instance in Dropbox office, the ceiling resembles industrial environment, while the colourful coffee pans, coffee makers and plants remind of a coffee shop, while the wooden dining table makes a reference to home. Behind a big glass window there is a more traditional meeting room with a large table, chairs and a tv.

What is interesting is that the offices rarely – if ever – include references to only one particular place in specific, but almost always they include a mixture of references to different places. They have visual cues pointing to a living room or kitchen of a private home, of industrial plants and factories, of coffee shops or bars, of regular offices, meeting rooms or classrooms and public spaces, such as parks or squares. Since one office only rarely reminds of one particular place, it is interesting to analyse the purpose of this spatial mixture, that eventually lead to the idea of non-spatiality. The consequence of the spatial mixture, in other words mixing visual cues from different places to the design of one specific office leads to the creation of a ‘non-space’ (cf. Augé 1995). Here, the concept of ‘non-space’ refers to spaces that symbolically lead one to think of a combination of variety of spaces, without being loyal to any one of them, while Augé (1995) defines them as places that are not related to, nor contain references to history, identities or relations. Although the non-spatial offices often contain visual cues that refer to identities and history, they refer to the organizational history and organizationally imposed identities. All references to personal identity or history are either hidden from the images or they do not exist. The idea of non-spatiality imposed on individuals has consequences that should be further discussed. Here, the theme of non-spatiality will be discussed as anonymisation of space and as an attempt to disguise the boundaries of work and non-work.

Potential contributions

The paper seeks to problematize the contemporary trend of designing ‘creative offices’ by exposing and discussing the value-laden nature of the trendy design principles. Recurrent features of the spaces in the photographs reveal what kind of office layout, workspace aesthetics and symbols are considered to make employees more ‘creative’ and thus eventually higher performing, and what kind of values, ideas and worker subjectivities are encouraged. By tracing the values, ideas and subjectivities that are encouraged, we can also get an idea of what is *not* encouraged or even tolerated, and often remains hidden.

By the visual analysis of the pre-existing photographs, the paper exposes darker sides of organizational efforts aimed at promoting creativity and high performance. Openness and transparency subject employees to an inescapable gaze, while the spatial solutions still seem to guard and protect the organizational boundaries. Non-spatiality disguises references to the workplace as *workplace*, filling it with various, often simultaneous references to cafes, nature,

kitchen, and other places usually visited during leisure time. On the other hand, there are also spatial references to classrooms or even factories with assembly lines, which have positive connotations such as learning and effectiveness, but also negative connotations, such as inferiority, subordination and standardization. By bringing up the value-laden ideas and assumptions enforced by the contemporary design of 'creative offices', the aim is to expose them to be critically and openly discussed and questioned.

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