Spacing identity: Unfolding social and spatial-material entanglements of identity performance

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyze how architectural design, and the spatial and material changes this involves, contributes to the continuous shaping of identities in an organization. Based upon a case study of organizational and architectural change in a municipal administration at a time of major public sector reforms, we examine how design interventions were used to (re)form work and professional relationships. The paper examines how engagements with spatial arrangements and material artifacts affected people's sense of both occupational and organizational identity. Taking a relational approach to sociomateriality, the paper contributes to the further theorizing of space in organization studies by proposing the concept of *spacing identity* to capture the fluidity of identity performance.

1. Introduction

Winston Churchill's statement "we shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us" refers to the reconstruction of the old chamber in the House of Commons partially destroyed during the Second World War. He insisted the chamber's rectangular shape with benches on the sides and a divide in the middle of the room be maintained because this would uphold the two-party system (www.parliament.co.uk). What makes Churchill's statement intriguing is not only the observation that space and architecture can affect people inside a building, but also the importance of space and architecture in support of broader societal ideas. In this paper, we address both of these facets of "what buildings do" (Gieryn, 2002) in relation to identity performance in organizations. In keeping with recent research on space and identity as well as studies of the sociomateriality of identity, the paper examines how spatial-material arrangements of buildings contribute to the continuous shaping of identity. This is not cast as a matter of unidirectional influence, but as a result of co-constitutive spatial-material and social entanglements, not only produced through and affecting everyday work practices, but also serving as conduits for the unfolding of political agendas.

The backdrop for our study is the growing scholarly interest in the role of design and architecture in contemporary management (Boland & Collopy, 2004; Boland, Collopy, Lyytinen, & Yoo, 2008) and leadership theory (Ropo et al., 2015). Inspired by how expert designers work, Boland and Collopy (2004) argue that design should be considered a

process – as opposed to something stable – and that managers should (learn to) adopt a "design attitude" to management as this can bring "emotional energy back into the center of managing […] invoking the hopes and dreams of those involved" (Boland et al., 2008: 17). Ropo et al. (2015) offer another perspective. They draw attention to how leadership affects and is affected by changes in the material and spatial arrangements of organizations, and where the emphasis is given to the space, embodiment and materiality of leadership. Following these lines of inquiry, we aim to unfold the interplay between architectural design and the everyday work practices of an organization, i.e. the ways that peoples' sense of identity is challenged, enacted and accommodated through the spatial-material arrangements in which they work.

In exploring this issue, we build upon work on organizational space (Beyes & Steyaert, 2011), the sociomateriality of identity performance (Symon & Pritchard, 2015), and the notion of organizational dissonance (Stark, 2009). We also draw on insights from architectural geography (Gottschling, 2017; Kraftl & Adey, 2008; Sage, 2013) and Science and Technology Studies (Akrich, 1992; Latour, 2005; Farías, 2015), all of which offer performative and relational understandings of the role of space, architecture, technology and other artefacts in creating constraints and affordances that influence peoples' actions. In conceptualizing the interplay between the spatial-material arrangements of the workplace and peoples' sense of identity, we are particularly inspired by Beyes and Steyaert's notion of "spacing" (Beyes & Steyaert, 2011), which emphasizes the multiplicity and agency of space and its material, embodied, affective dimensions. We extend this notion in the

context of identity construction and suggest the concept of *spacing identity* to emphasize the processual aspects of how spatial-material arrangements of organizations are closely involved in the shaping of practices and professional relationships. The paper is based on a case study of a municipal administration that used design interventions as a means of promoting organizational change. Our analysis shows how changes in, and the use of, spatial-material arrangements affected the staff's sense of occupational identity as well as the organization's sense of 'who we are' – its organizational identity.

By empirically illustrating different ways in which the spatial and material dimensions of workspace matter for people's sense of work and organization, the paper makes several contributions. First, we introduce and theorize the notion of *spacing identity* to capture the ongoing performance of identities, which happens as an integral part of the spatial-material formatting of work and workspace. Spacing identity involves not only the entanglement of bodies, artefacts and physical space in organizations, but also affect and dissonance. Identity performance is, thus, a "relational contingency" (Law, 2002: 92). Second, we show that design interventions that engage staff in collective design processes can be productive means for enrolling staff. The use of visuals and material artifacts in these processes allow participants to re-view their current practices while also envisioning their future work and workspace. Although design interventions can be considered as scripts that seek to shape participants' engagement, they also allow for further reflections through this double movement of re-viewing and envisioning. Third, our study demonstrates how organizational politics is materially tied to and performed in the context of general political debates, in this way supporting recent work on the complex interplay of the spatial, material and discursive dimensions of identity construction (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). Further, we suggest that a better understanding of these sociomaterial entanglements can help both managers and employees in their efforts to develop productive conditions for new work practices and professional relationships.

The paper is organized as follows: We begin by expanding on the theoretical backdrop for our study, which is followed by the methodological approach. A description of our case organization provides the backdrop for two empirical vignettes, which illustrate how changes in an organization's spatial-material arrangements challenge and is challenged by the staffs' sense of identity. In the ensuing discussion, we unfold the notion of spacing identity and argue that our work contributes to the existing literature on organizational space and materiality by providing a more processual account of the mutual constitutive relationship between identity and spatial-material arrangements. We conclude with some implications for management.

2. Organizational space and the sociomateriality of identity performance

Architecture has, as Dale and Burrell note, a privileged position – it is "the place where space and organization meet face to face" (2008: 23–24). Moreover, organizational spaces are not empty. Apart from the people in them, they are full of material artefacts that are "mundanely obvious" features of organizational life (Whyte & Harty, 2012:196). These observations highlight the three interweaving topics dealt with in this paper – space, materiality, and identity – each of which have a long history in management and organization studies. As noted by Kornberger and Clegg (2004), *space* has been a managerial issue since the early days of scientific management. Dvora Yanow is, however, to our knowledge, one of the first to introduce the concept of "organizational space". By suggesting that built spaces are "at once storytellers and part of the story being told" (Yanow, 1998: 215), she underscores that space concurrently acts and is acted upon. Since then, and perhaps prompted by Kornberger and Clegg's call for "bringing space back in" to organization studies (2004:1095), there has been a substantial amount of publications attending to the role of the spatial in organizations, particularly to the issue of power and control (e.g. Clegg & Kornberger,

2006; Taylor & Spicer, 2007; Dale & Burrell, 2008). As for the *materiality* of organizations, this has largely entailed studies of technology use, and there have also been calls for "bringing materiality back in" to organization studies (Carlile et al., 2014:2). These calls emphasize moving beyond the traditional view that humans live in a world separate of things, considering the relationship between humans and things – the social and material – as inherently entangled (Barad, 2003; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). *Identity* is another long-standing topic of organizational research. Central to this research are questions of how identities are established, upheld, transformed, and regulated (Ybema et al., 2009; Brown, 2015). While scholars attending to occupational identity often focus on the overlap between "'who are we' as members of an occupation and 'what do we do'" in our work (Nelson & Irwin, 2014: 893; Ashcraft, 2013), research on organizational identity focuses on the understanding of an organization's characteristics and central values, and how these are shared amongst and challenged by members of an organization (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000) as well as by external stakeholders (Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

When it comes to studies of how space and materiality affect identity, space is considered as actively involved in controlling and regulating identity (Dale & Burrell, 2008), creating the model worker (Hancock & Spicer, 2011) and in doing gender (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015). Moreover, Dale (2005) demonstrates how work, social relations and the material structures of organizational spaces are understood as mutually enacting, thus, highlighting the importance of both organizational space and materiality. However, much of the research on material artifacts and identity emphasizes the strong symbolic effects of artifacts (Elsbach, 2004; Jones & Massa, 2013), how their removal can pose substantial identity threats to both individuals and/or groups (Elsbach, 2003), and on the instrumental and/or aesthetical effects of artifacts (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011). With a few notable exceptions (Dale, 2005; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011), these two strands of literature pay little attention to the mutually constitutive entanglements of spatial arrangements, material artefacts and peoples' everyday work encounters.

Recent work on organizational space (Beyes & Steyaert, 2011) and on the sociomateriality of identity (Symon & Pritchard, 2015) offers useful conceptual resources for addressing these issues. Drawing on insights from geography (notably Thrift (2007) and Massey (2005)); Beyes and Steyaert (2011):53 argue that "thinking of space towards the thresholds of the material, the embodied, the affective and the minor" politics of organizational life offers a new perspective on organizational space. They introduce the concept of "spacing organization" to capture "the provisional constellation of the material, embodied, affective, and multiple sides and sites of organizing" (Beyes & Steyaert, 2011). From this perspective, organizational space is not a static container but conceived of as active – generative for the organizational practices taking place within, enabled by, and constituted through the spatial arrangements. These spatial experiences are, however, imbued with affect and inherently political (Massey, 2005). In their paper on the sociomateriality of identity work, Symon and Pritchard (2015) appear to have a similar position. Following Orlikowski and Scott (2008): 456), they argue that the social and the material should not be considered as separate entities but as sociomaterial assemblages, in which neither the social nor the material are independent entities with distinct characteristics (Symon & Pritchard, 2015: 243). The sociomaterial assemblages are what "produce the capacity for action", and this "comes from the enmeshing of material affordances, human understanding, situated practices and cultural discourses" (Symon & Pritchard, 2015: 244). Both contributions provide a relational understanding of the social, spatial and material as inextricably entangled in constellations or assemblages. This being said, they each point to additional facets of organizational practice that are important for understanding what architecture does to peoples' sense of identity. Symon and Pritchard (2015): 244) emphasize the role of "cultural discourses", whereas Beyes and Steyaert (2011) direct