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Identity through the built environment

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Subject Area: Identity, Symbols, Spatial design and Managing Change

Abstract: As Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz (2004) have shown, there is a relationship between physical artefacts and emotion and this emotion arises from three conceptually distinct aspects of the physical artefacts; instrumentality, aesthetics and symbolism.

Within this paper, furthering this line of research, I describe how organizational actors within three educational institutes, undergoing change to their physical and managerial environment, interpreted that built environment and the physical artefacts within it. This description was used to create a model, developed from Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz (2004), and suggests that the emotion which is created as a result of interpreting physical artefacts is used to affirm/influence and/or create our workplace identities. Using Hatch, M.J. & Schultz, M., (2001) identity model as a base I examine how physical artefacts are using in the expressing, reflecting, mirroring and impressing processes, establishing whether or not each factor uses physical artefacts. I go on to suggest that our interpretation of physical artefacts, when meaning is constructed from physical symbolic artefacts, can be the basis of a language.

This work develops the constructs of workplace identity and image and uses them to link ideas for examining changing organizational relationships and the impact of the design of the organizational built environment on its occupants and stakeholders.

'If you are in a poorer position in relation to people who are the same grade as you then everyone thinks you have done something wrong. Why have you been given this workstation? We can't choose our own work area, sometimes there is a bit of negotiation but essentially it's allocated to us, so if we're allocated one for example with a position next to the printer then we are in a less favourable position, especially if someone who is essentially doing the same job has a better one. It also makes me wonder if I've done something wrong to be allocated a work station like this. Is something happening that I don't know about? Is something happening within my group?' (Faculty staff member, ABC, 2004).

Theoretical perspective

In this paper, I develop a framework for conceptualizing the process through which organizational actors adapt and change their workplace identities as a result of interpreting their built environment.

Conceptually and empirically, I took seriously Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz's (2004) assertion that there is a relationship between physical artefacts and emotion and this emotion arises from three conceptually distinct aspects; instrumentality, aesthetics and symbolism. My claims were built from a case study of organizational actors within three educational institutes located in the United Arab Emirates, and how they defined and responded to the issue of change in their physical and managerial environment. The case study was used to generate

a frame work to understand how the organizational actors interrelated with their built environment and the physical artefacts within it. I employed the idea that organizational actors have workplaces identities (Elsbach, 2004) and that these workplace identities, which include self, group and organizational identities, are altered/influenced over time. Adopting a social constructionist epistemology I support the concept that identities are in a constant flux and a permanent state of becoming rather than being (Thomas & Linstead 2002; Svengisson & Alvesson 2003). Therefore identity is "constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (Weedon, 1987). In our engagement with the 'other,' organizational actors construct or alter their identity (Thomas & Linstead 2002). This draws on an ontology which promotes the processual view of the world (Chia 1996) where 'how an actual entity becomes constitutes what the actual entity is... its 'being' is constituted by its 'becoming' (Whitehead, 1929: quoted in Chia, 1996). Meanings derived from this social constructivist perspective are then not fixed but are negotiated.

The focus in this paper is on issues arising from an organizational management of change involving both staff and facilities which were a starting point for interpretation of physical symbolic artefacts and identity forming processes. This is an emotional issue focus which underscores the importance of sensitivity to context and attention allocation. Within some organizations some issues are routine and can therefore be categorized easily. Having been categorized, the response used is already well learned (Weick, 1988). These patterns of routine behaviour are easily available and rewarded in an organization (Weick, 1979). Other issues, particularly sensitive issues that evoke fear and uncertainty and those that have not been previously encountered, do not fit into these categorization schemes. Some of these issues are emotional in nature and can affect individual and group processes and can stimulate different types of responses from those that are less emotionally charged.

Symbolic artefacts

The meanings of physical symbolic artefacts are socially constructed and the use of physical symbols is a routine activity that is taken for granted and conducted, consciously and unconsciously by organizational members (Pratt and Rafaeli, 2001). Physical symbols can represent multiple meanings, one symbol having

different meanings in different contexts. Symbols can be interpreted to give meaning not only about the physical object but about the relations of the people involved (O'Connor, 1994). For example, a large desk in an office will tell you the person behind it has status in the organization and a meta message is that this person can tell you what to do. The intent of an actor using a symbol may be misinterpreted so when, for example, management introduces open plan offices to promote communication these layouts can be interpreted by others in the environment as an infringement of privacy. When we are engaged in conceptualising a design concept it is highly relevant that we, as designers or managers have an understanding of the eventual interpretations of our work.

Workplace identity and how it is formed

Identity is the act of forming engaging and repairing our constructions to give a sense of coherence and distinctiveness (Alvesson, 2003). Identity involves asking, "Who am I?" or "Who are we?" (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Identity though, is not singular as we acknowledge the existence of multiple identities within the same individual (Burke, 1937; Feldman, 1979; James, 1890; Markus & Nurius, 1986; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Organization identity has been defined as comprising those characteristics that members perceive are fundamental to (central) and uniquely descriptive of (distinctive) the organization and that persist within the organization over time (enduring) (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). The aspect of 'enduring' has caused some discussion since it's introduction by Albert & Whetton as 'stable'. This paper examines the Pratt & Foreman (2000) definition and contrasts this with the following: *It is a process in which individuals create several more or less contradictory and often changing managerial identities (identity positions) rather than one stable, continuous manager identity (Alvesson & Svengingsson, 2003).*

Work has also been undertaken to understand our workplace identities (Elsbasch, 2004). This paper uses this definition of workplace identities which incorporate self, group and organizational identity.

Individuals can alter organizational identities and the relationship between individuals and organizations is reciprocal just as organizational identities can influence individual behaviour, individual behaviour can influence organizational

identities (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Hatch and Schultz (2002) model explained the identification process as follows:

Expression refers to how the organization expresses itself and this is done through symbols such as architecture, advertising and dress.

Mirroring is the reflection of an organization through the opinions and judgments of others and links image to identity and this part of the identity is constructed through social construction.

Reflecting is the process by which organization members understand themselves and the result of how organizational members perceive themselves and this manifests itself in the organizations history and makes an organizations values and assumptions explicit.

Impressing refers to the images of an organization that are projected to the environment and is done through various outreach and PR publications.

This model has suggested that the use of physical symbolic artefacts is restricted to the expression aspect of the identification process. This paper goes on to illustrate that the role of physical symbolic artefacts is more extensive than previously anticipated.

Process by which physical symbolic artefacts are interpreted

Boje (2001) proposed that we understand the social situation, in its complexity, through multiple lines of narrative through which the actors in the situation, and we as researchers, make sense of, and attribute meaning to, events, the self and others. It is proposed in this paper that physical artefacts are in fact an extension of language in that they fulfil the same documented roles in the organizational life. Language can be imprecise and it could be argued that the symbolic significance of artefacts is even more imprecise. However, viewing symbols as a language provides insight by reminding us that meaning could be found in individual physical symbols (words) and patterns of physical symbols (sentences). These patterns, or language, could be useful in realizing complex and subtle relationship issues, such as those involving ambivalence or plurality (e.g. Pratt & Barnett, 1997; Pratt & Dutton, 2000). Physical objects can be a communicative tool, being interpreted, manipulated and altered by actors in the

organizational built environment. They can be a call to action, mobilizing and directing (Straati, 1998) gaining commitment (Edelman, 1977) exerting control and power (Wilson, 1992; Czarniawska- Joerges and Joerges, 1990 and Bourdieu, 1991) communicating (Girin, 1987) and controlling perceptions and creating meaning (Pondy and Mitriff, 1979) and a political object and resource (Wilson, 1992).

Becker (1977) posited that a variety of components in the built environment can give information to users. This supports the view that employees may utilize external environmental cues either to categorize or make inferences about the organization. Other researchers have focused on the effects of specific stimuli upon behaviour such as colour (Bellizzi et al, 1983) or music (Bruner, 1990). Research into organizational dress has established that colour may carry symbolic information; blue for example, can convey dignity, red may convey affection. (Burgoon & Saine, 1978; Ketcham, 1958; Mehrabian, 1976) Dark colours convey power (Becker, Geer, Huhes & Strauss, 1961; Joseph, 1986; Lurie, 1981). Pratt & Rafaeli (1997) proposed that dress attributes act as a symbol of core organization values. Fussell (1983) proposed that the purity or naturalness of dress materials determines the attributions. Synthetic fibres (such as polyester) are proposed to convey lower class and status than pure fibres (such as silk) that purity of materials is an important symbol in organizations. In organizational interior design the pureness of the fabrics specified can be used to denote stratified roles. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Wallendorf and Arnould, (1988) wrote that home interiors contain a wide variety of objects that hold special importance for identity. Such objects are meaningful because they remind people of their pasts- travel experiences, achievements, close friends or because the objects are symbols of religious or ethnic identities. Treasure objects also may be used to silently convey and express self to others. But the individual- level self is not the only one that may be conveyed through such objects. In analyzing individual differences in favourite objects in the home Cikszenmihaly and Rochberg- Halton (1981) detected a dimension of 'differentiation' and 'integration' involving the choice between symbolizing self (differentiation) and symbolizing others (integration).

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Current research has examined the role of identity and organizational dress but highlights a gap in the knowledge in connection with the organizational built environment from which the following research questions arose.

The purpose of the present study

My interest in how organizational actors make sense of the changes within their organizations through the built environment drew me to the case of three colleges within the same umbrella management system dealing with changes both to its management structure and to its built environment. These colleges had the same organisational structure and delivered a similar course profile, where approximately the same size and all located in the United Arab Emirates. However the top management team of each college had a different leadership and management style.

From this the following research questions arose:

Research questions

1. What is the process and the extent by which we as organizational actors interpret physical symbolic artefacts in the organizational built environment and does this change within differing contexts and over time?
2. How is the information obtained from interpreting physical symbolic artefacts used by organizational actors to influence/ affirm actors'

perceived threat to identity, identity affirmation, organizational identification or identity change?

Methods

A case study methodology was chosen because my goal was to generate and build theory in an area where little data or theory existed (Yin, 1984) where I could study a process as it unfolded over a three year period to study changes over time. Having selected a qualitative interpretive research paradigm a flexible research design which would allow findings to "unfold, cascade and emerge" (Lincoln and Guba, 1986, p. 210) was developed.

Data sources

The story of how the organizational actors of ABC colleges interpret physical artefact as part of the process to alter/influence their workplace identity was built from the following sources (1) Participant ethnography recorded by photography and field notes and reflexive journals. (2) Interviews over four phases, Phase 1: interviews focusing on the organisational culture and background to the organisation Phase 2: interviews using an issue focus; Phase 3: interviews using auto driving techniques, Phase 4: Interviews using laddering techniques.

Population and sampling

A multi national staff from different departments and split between academic and administrative staff within a college were selected as the unit of analysis for the main study. But sampling was also emergent in nature, with informants chosen on the basis of insights gleaned from previous informants (Belk et al. 1988; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Data collection was programmed to cover the three colleges, and several age, socio-economic, and cultural subgroups. In order to access the range of informants and behaviours of interest and to achieve saturation, a total of 105 interviews were conducted. While the sample design provided a broad range of responses, informants were by no means randomly selected or statistically representative of the entire college population. A total of 60 participants took part with 14 participants going through from stage one to stage 4 of the interviews.

The identity of ABC

Nine attributes summarize the informants view of the characteristics that distinguished ABC at the point of time the study took place during the amalgamation process: a powerful director, authoritarian management style, commitment to the region welfare, custodial approach to student welfare, loyalty to government education aims, high tech teaching, efficient and effective, and a well educated staff and in addition an external image of quality and success. Table 1 illustrates the separation in this case site of workplace identity, including self and group from organizational identity. The table also illustrates the progression from emotion to identity.

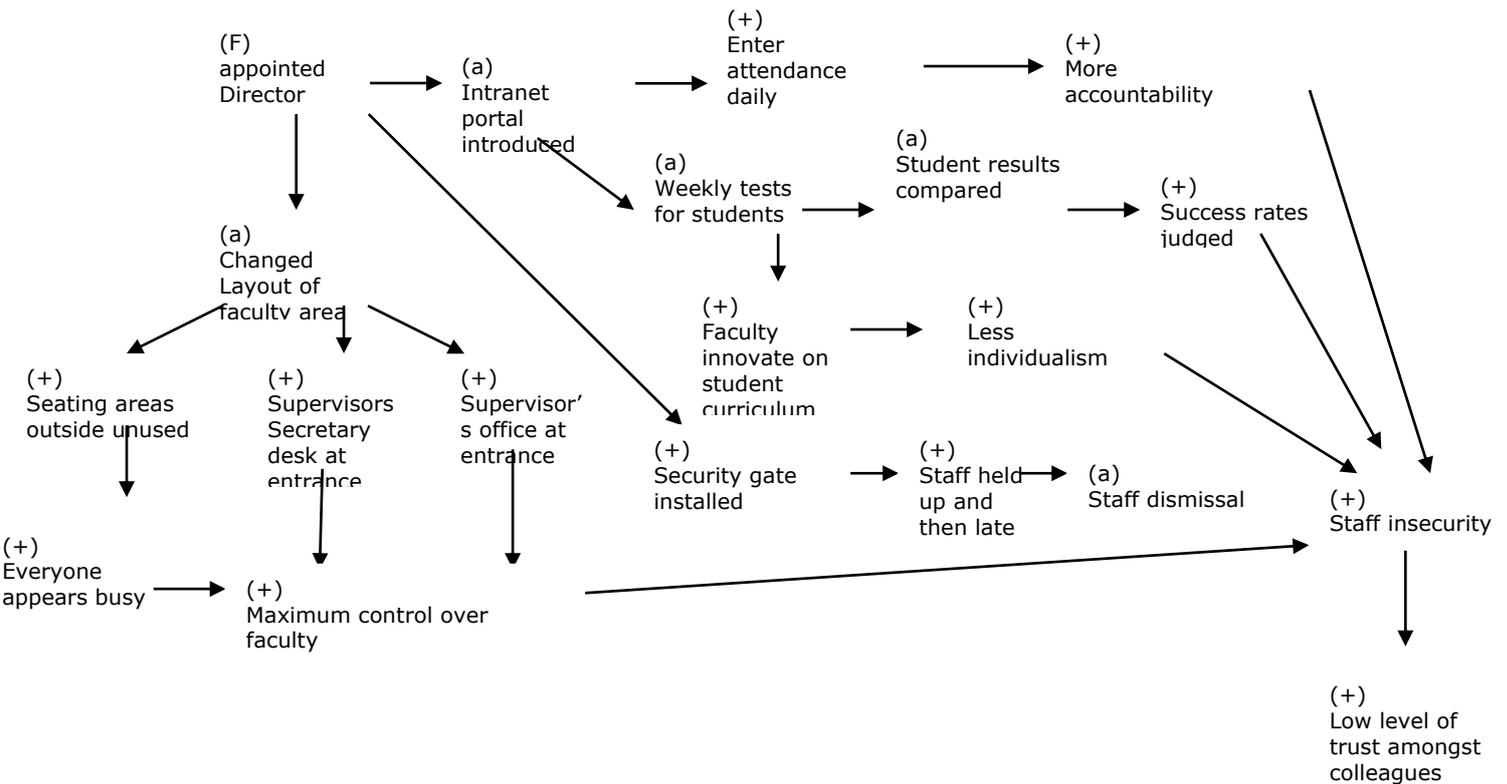
Table 1: Identity in relation to interpretation of artefact ABCw/ABCm

Identity	artifact	interpretation	emotion	Workplace identity	Organizations identity
1	New case building Students facilities	Staff have no decision making power/ no consultation with staff	Staff feel powerlessness	Insecure in workplace	Directors power
2	Staff facilities workstations	Faculty feel there is no respect for staff as professional no trust	Staff feel undermined and undervalued	Insecure in workplace	Authoritarian management style
3	Buildings city hall Auditorium Sports pavilion	The mage of quality through the facilities does no match the internal quality of work by students	Ridicule dissonance	Lack of social responsibility leads to lack of trust	Displays image of quality and success
4	Security gates	Interpreted as a conformist approach which top management maintain to ensure their job security	Disgust	No buy in on managerial priorities	Commitment to regions welfare
5	Security gates	Respect for staff less important than directors own security Lip service to tradition Controlling staffs entry and exit times	disappointment Skeptical Annoyance Negative response at lack of trust	Lack of trust towards staff	Custodial approach to student welfare
6	Security gates	Ensure directors own position is safeguarded	disappointment	No buy in on managerial prioriteis	Loyal to government
7	Students facilities	Student facilities compared with staff facilities	Respect undermined Insecurity within staffs own position	Insecure in workplace	High tech
8	intranet	Controlling actions of staff	Staff feel controlled and insecure threatened	Insecure and threatening environment	Efficient and effective
9	Staff workstation and facilities	Compared with other staff areas and with student facilities	Disappointed resentment	Lack of respect within org	Well educated staff

This table illustrates how various artefacts where interpreted, what type of emotion resulted from these interpretations and the impact of these emotions on the formation / alteration of workplace identity.

**Fig 1: Emotional issue one and two:
No empowerment of staff**

Lack of respect for staff



This sample causal map resulting from the analysis of one participant's data illustrates the structural relationship between appointment of the director and the introduction of the intranet portal by the director and resulting staff insecurity and the low level of trust among colleagues. The changes in layout of faculty areas also resulted in staff insecurity and lack of trust.

Figure 2: Process of interpretation of physical symbolic artefacts in an identity forming/influencing process in relation to image and culture

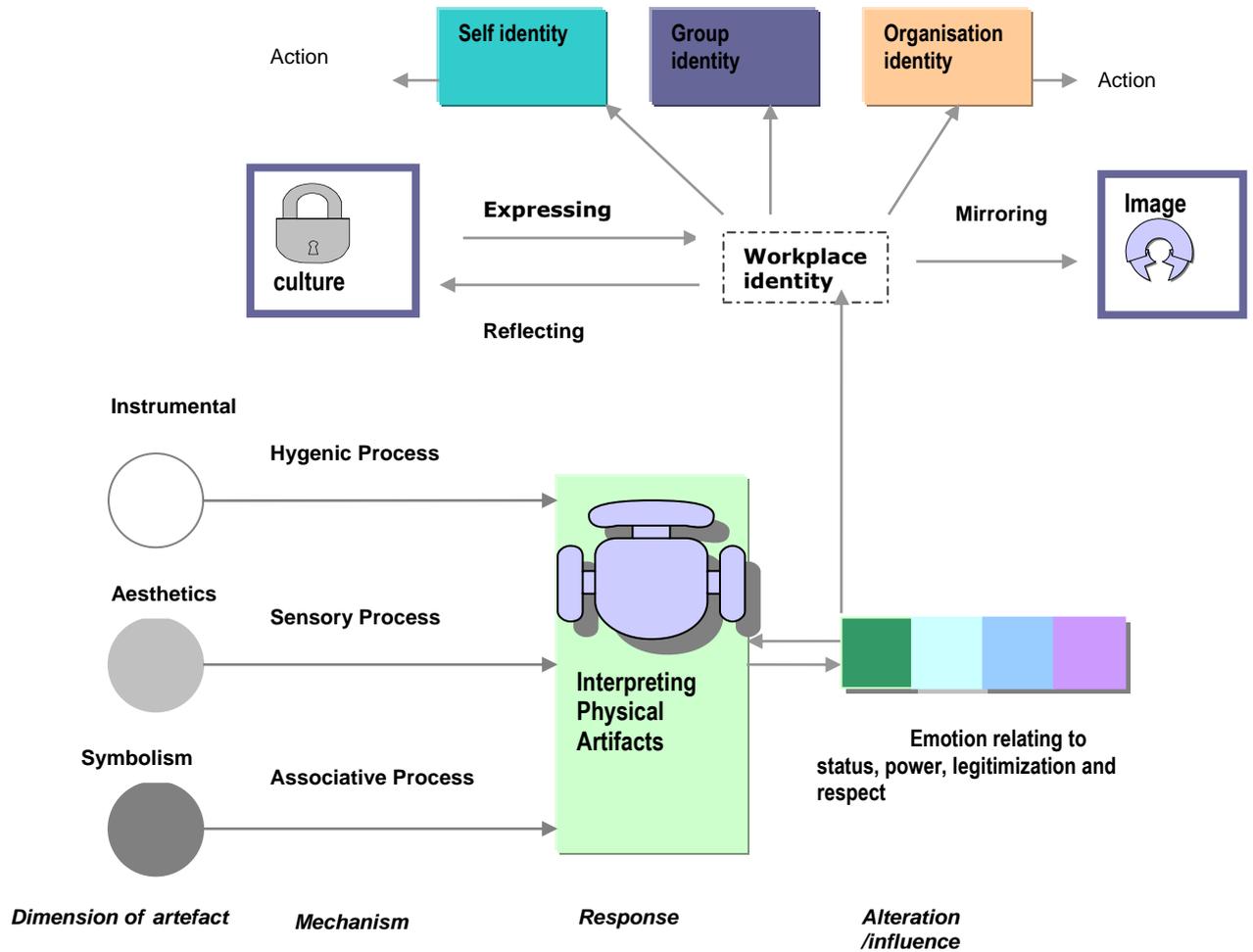
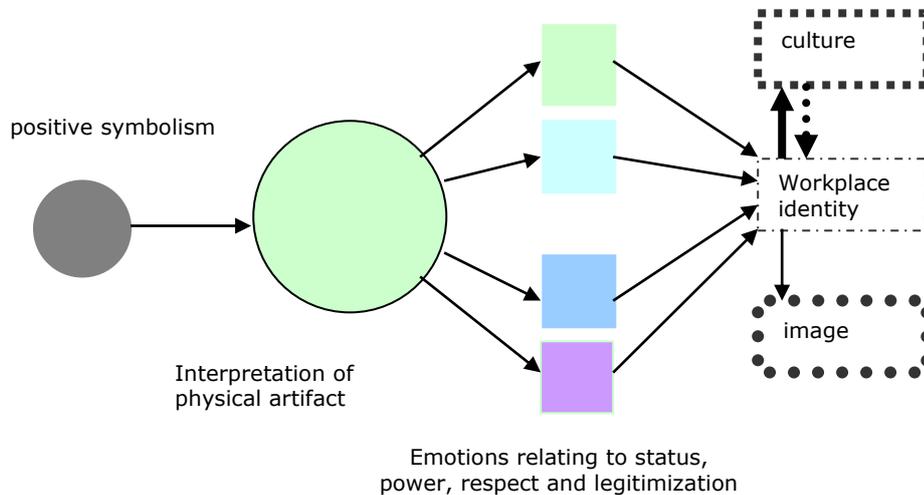


Figure 2 illustrates the process of our interpretation of physical artefacts and the dimensions of the artefacts we interpret through the relevant processes. This study found that when there were negative issues concerning status, respect, power and legitimization, identity split away from the workplace identity definition of including organizational identity, self and group identity and self and group identity were formed and influenced independently. Fig 3 goes on to elaborate in more detail the micro processes involved in identification using symbolic artefacts.

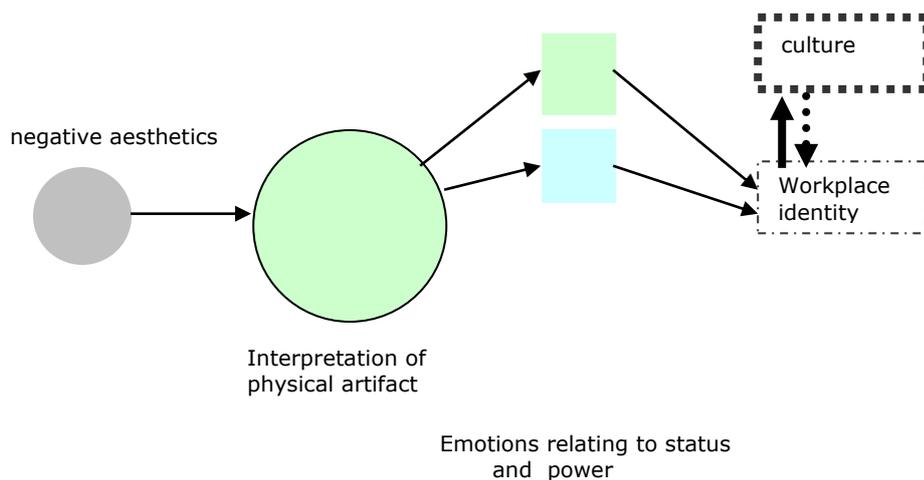
How artifacts were interpreted

Figure 3/1



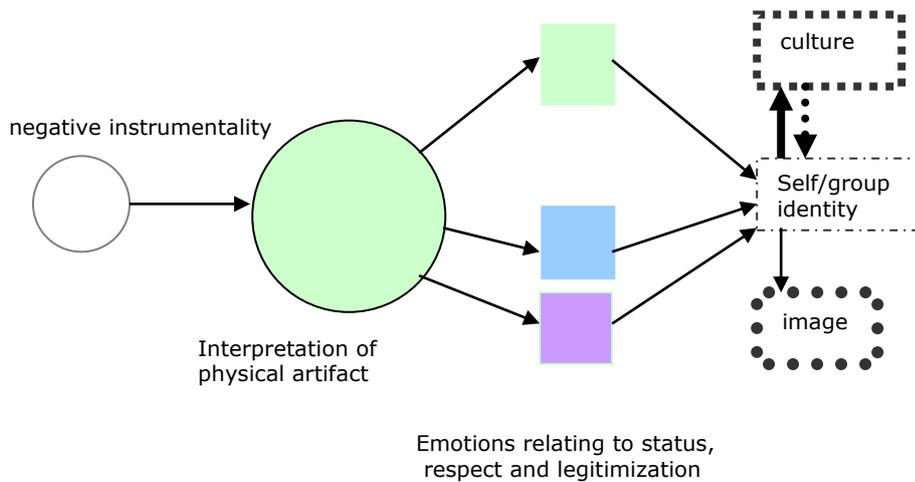
You get all sorts of staff coming up and asking to move into our quadrant, because it's about the best. It's taken us years to get here and you can't have part time staff who have just arrived thinking they can get a prime spot like this you know. You need to be careful because we are not conformists here and we don't want someone repeating conversation- you don't know who gets to hear about it. We've got two sets of windows so we can see everyone coming and going, but we are tucked away in the corner so someone has to enter the quadrant to see if we are here and they very rarely bother.

Figure 3/2



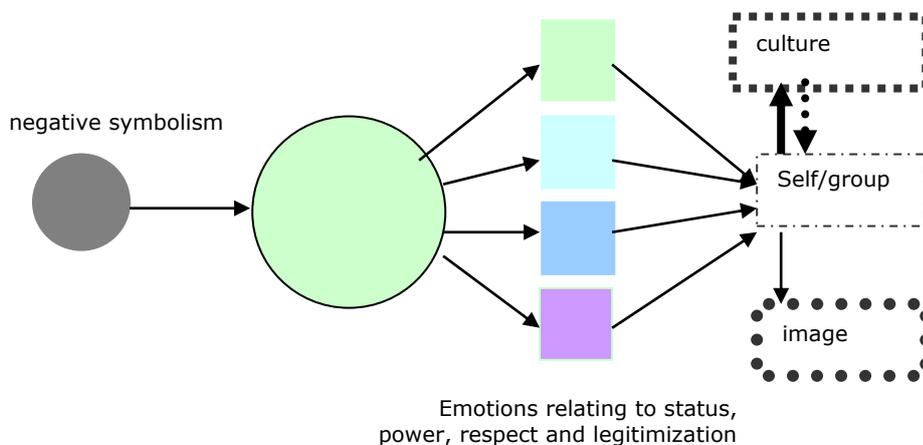
*My work station then I would relate to other staff work stations above me or in my department or in other departments. The building is unfortunates being above the cafeteria but the furnishing are simple yet practical. There is **not a lot of privacy** but then there isn't a lot of privacy for anyone. Only supervisors and heads have an office so it can sometimes be difficult to speak to students when you may disturb other faculty. **The meeting rooms have gone now too which doesn't help.** I like to be able to **put my kids photos on the panels** that makes me*

feel as though I am still me- a human being- and somehow not exactly the same as everyone else. It reminds me who I'm working for as well- the kids well being.
Figure 3/3



*There is a clock next to the computer which I use to make sure I'm **always in time** for my classes and meetings- we are really driven by time here which is so unlike Islamic traditions. My name tag is on the panel – in yellow the same as everyone else- just in case I walk past my own area and sit at someone else's because they are all the same. It also means the supervisors can see if I'm at my desk and if not my timetable is on the wall or on the intranet so she can **check up on me** and doesn't have to remember where I sit. There are photos of my kids on the panel which reminds me **that I stay here at the college to give them a reasonable standard of living**. The computer is fairly old fashioned- I'm not a computer whiz kid- but it's a bit slow and all the money here seems to go on student's equipment. We are supposed to be valued well educated staff- It's a joke isn't it? The workstation itself is the **same as everyone's** but at least I'm next to a window and **my chair is comfortable- some aren't**. You can see on the photo how **low the ceiling** is and I've got the AC fan directly over my head **which blows cold air** on the back of my neck- it doesn't help the migraines at all.*

Figure 3/4



*It's not really the noise, you get used to noise, and it's just that I don't want to be near the photocopier. It's **not a good work area** and **seems inferior** to the*

others and that makes me feel inferior. If you are in a poorer position in relation to people who are the same grade as you then everyone thinks you have done something wrong. Why have you been given this workstation? We can't choose our own work area, sometimes there is a bit of negotiation but essentially it's allocated to us, so if we're allocated one for example with a position next to the printer then we are in a less favour able position, especially if someone who is essentially doing the same job has a better one. It also makes me wonder if I've done something wrong to be allocated a work station like this. Is something happening that I don't know about?. Is something happening on CD2?? I've tried to put a few things on it that are important to me but also there are items that symbolise the organisation. I've bought a poppy for poppy day but kept it there. That shows my background and where I come from but it's not offensive to anyone and would not mean anything to anyone who doesn't come from the UK.

Analysis

At this stage inductive analysis was used rather than formal content analysis which was used to create the causal maps. The transcripts were interpreted to inform Figure 3 which illustrates how interpretation takes place and how that interpretation differs in varying contexts. Vignettes have been included to illustrate the context of the study. The major results were developed inductively from immersion in the data. Prior to this form of analysis, content analysis and documentary coding and laddering had taken place to establish the importance of the incidents to the participants. It became clear that not all incidents were of equal importance in comparison to one another and that their importance differed across the contexts of the three case sites. In order to examine the effect of the varying contexts within which the interpretations occurred, I developed these descriptive models of the process of interpretation which demonstrate which facets of the artefact are used and what types of identity are formed or influenced. These results were then compared from one case site to another.

Results

Data revealed that participants interpreted artefacts through the dimensions of aesthetic, instrumentality and symbolism and that this produced emotion which concurs with the Rafaeli & Vilnai – Yavetz (2004) findings but in contrast to the Rafaeli & Vilnai – Yavetz (2004) findings data revealed that we use interpretation of artefact to differing extents depending on the state of flux/ context of the organization (more flux- more interpretation). Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz (2004) proposed, within the confines of their case study, that

these reactions are conceptually and empirically distinct from reactions to the activity in which individuals are engaged and from the interpersonal interactions in which they engage. However, my data revealed that within a differing context, when issues of respect, status or power are reported, the reactions observed and analyzed were directly linked to the activities of the organizational actors and to the interpersonal relations they experienced. Data revealed that the participants held views of their collective self that were central, distinctive and to an extent enduring but that during the merger in ABCw/m when issues of insecurity, respect, status and power were apparent these aspects were changing. Data revealed that during the changes when issues of respect, power, status were apparent, the identity split into an 'us' and 'them' and organizational identity was viewed separately by the participants to workplace identity which then became a self and group definition. Data provided empirical support for Hatch & Schultz's (2001) process model of organizational identity both with regards to the organizational identity and the workplace identity (self and group) in connection with the aspect of different types of processes being used. Data however, revealed that physical symbolic artefacts were interpreted to provide information for not only the expression process as indicated by the authors but also mirroring and reflection processes. Some variables are extremely difficult to pin down systematically but having been involved in the organization for nearly three years and been involved in participant observation during this time I believe that it is justifiable to interpret this section of the data inductively.

Conclusions

I suggest that organizational actors have an emotional reaction to physical artefacts and interpret meaning from them and this reaction is then used in an identity forming/influencing or altering process. Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz (2004) proposed, within the confines of their case study, that these reactions are conceptually and empirically distinct from reactions to the activity in which individuals are engaged and from the interpersonal interactions in which they engage. However, I would argue that within a differing context, the opposite is the case and our reactions, as organizational actors within, or stakeholders outside, the organizational built environment are intrinsically linked to the

activities in which we are engaged and socially constructed from the interpersonal interactions in which we engage.

The findings of this case study suggest that when issues of respect, status or power are reported, particularly within a change situation, the reactions observed and analyzed were directly linked to the activities of the organizational actors and to the interpersonal relations they experienced. Importantly the role of physical artefacts in the built environment has been found to be used within three, rather than the previously envisaged one, aspect of identity and image creation. The overall conclusion within this paper is that the role of the built environment and the physical symbolic artefacts within it is more extensive than has been demonstrated in previous research. By inference, this means that the role of design and management of the design process can affect the success of a management of change program which includes change in the built environment. It is therefore important that as designers and managers we have a more complete understanding of the interpretation of both our designs and management intentions.

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