Designing a Counter: the Constitutive Entanglement of the Social and the Material in Architectural Design

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Introduction

The relationship between the design and construction of architectural objects – the material – and the social context in which these objects are shaped and used – the social – is a key issue within the sociology of architecture. The relationship between the material and the social is contested: some tend to reify one, be it the material or the social, at the expense of the other, whereas others consider the material and the social to be ‘constitutively entangled’ (Orlikowski 2007:1437). In keeping with the latter perspective, we investigate the recursive interplay between the material and the social in the context of a design process that involved both architectural and organizational design. Particular emphasis is given to how extensive user participation was brought to bear in developing the architectural design and the implications of this for the users’ sense of their work and organization, as well as for the architectural designers’ sense of their professional practice.

The empirical context for our study is the construction of a new office building for a newly established municipality, created through a merger of two smaller municipalities. The merger entailed not only a substantial number of organizational changes but also a physical relocation of the various municipal departments to one location. These changes provided a unique opportunity for the managing director of the new municipality to experiment with both the organizational and the architectural design, both of which were informed by extensive user participation. As we shall see in the case below, the managing
director characterized this reciprocal interplay as ‘a double design process’ (Interview with managing director).

Based on our theoretical interests in addressing the constitutive entanglement of the material and the social in the context of architectural design, the research question pursued in the following is: what roles are played by the materiality of architecture in the context of organizational change? In answering this question, we draw upon insights from organizational theory and actor-network-theory (ANT). Although much of the literature argues that spatial organization, architectural design and material artefacts can support organizational change and development, little attention is paid to the details of how this takes place and what it can produce. Our aspiration in this chapter is to explore the relationship at close range in order to understand more about the implications these associations may have on the arrangements or practices involved in its constitution.

The chapter is structured as follows: the next section describes its theoretical backdrop and the subsequent two sections describe the methodological approach and the empirical setting. We then present an example of how the materiality of architectural design enabled representatives from the organization to perceive and comprehend their organization in new ways. The example also illustrates how the encounter between users and material objects affected the relationship between users and architectural designers. In the ensuing discussion, we attend to what it means to consider these design processes as intricately interwoven.

The theoretical backdrop

The issues of organizational change and design are both salient domains within organizational theory. Although the latter has a long history within organizational studies (Thompson 1967; Galbraith 1973), research on the topic has predominantly focused on the organization’s formal design (Burton, Obel and DeSanctis 2006). From this perspective, organizational design is considered to be the structural and strategic configurations intended to enable the organization to achieve its goals. In recent years, however, interest in design has been revitalized. Inspired by the work of Herbert Simon (Simon 1996:xii), who argued that ‘engineering, medicine, business, architecture, and painting are concerned not with the necessary but with the contingent – not how things are but how they might be – in short, with design’,