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Designing Organizational Settings

The Interplay between Physical, Symbolic and Social Structures

1. Preamble

Organizations, understood as utilitarian forms of human association, are social artifacts. We can define organizations as artifacts in that they - just like material artifacts - are contrivances intended to serve a purpose: they come into being when the goal to be achieved - the satisfaction of a desire or the solution of a problem - cannot be arrived at by the individual alone but requires a collective effort of cooperation, and they are, like any other artifact, the product of a design.

It is largely to organizations that the complex societies in which we live entrust the translation of collective values and expectations into social action and the management of the problems generated in their turn by the satisfying of social needs. The designing of organizations is thus an activity of great social importance and the designers of organizations contribute no less than the architects of buildings to determining the shape of the contemporary social landscape in that they invent or operate upon recurrent patterns of social interaction.

Under such different labels as organizational analysts, planners, designers, experts, consultants the design of organizations is often undertaken by specialists who boast a specific professional expertise in the field. More frequently, however, it is implicitly or explicitly considered part of a more general competence - that of the entrepreneur or manager - or simply the expression of the power these may exercise over the organizations they set

up or control. It should also be said that very rarely is it a question of designing an organization from scratch. More often it is a matter of bringing up-to-date some pre-existent - if only embryonic - form of co-operation that already has its own story and which has given itself an autonomous shake-up. These autonomous arrangements undergo critical reappraisal when they are judged ineffectual or inefficient, when, that is, they no longer permit adequate achievement of the corporate goals or when the cost of reaching the goals is considered too high.

In any event organizational design follows the designer's beliefs about the goal-oriented operational principles the organizations incorporate as teleological constructions (Polanyi 1958). In the case of specialists and - to a lesser degree - that of generalist managers, these beliefs are likely to reflect the expert knowledge produced by researchers and academics, and commonsense knowledge or the idiosyncratic beliefs of the designer in the case of the entrepreneur.

The purpose of this essay is: a) to consider the type of knowledge most frequently adopted in the design process; b) to examine the relationship between this knowledge and the expert knowledge produced in recent years by one current in organizational thinking - the so called cultural approach to organization studies - which has challenged and toppled the previously dominant paradigm; c) to explore the implications for organizational design of a deeper knowledge of the fact that organizations are not only social structures governed by instrumental rationality but culture-bearing milieux as well (Louis 1981), artifacts endowed with physical and symbolic properties which dare not be overlooked since they steer and channel organizational action no whit less than deliberately instrumental strategies and structures.

2. Theories-in-use in the Design Process and New Theoretical Perspectives

What interpretations of organized reality and what theories of organizing are still - implicitly (Argyris and Schön 1974) or explicitly - most current in organizational design, even where the designer is a professional claiming

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a competence based on the expert knowledge produced by organizational research? I would like to answer my own question by analysing the artifact most typical of the designer's effort, the organization chart. Any organization chart, no matter how sophisticated, describes - in what must be confessed to be a somewhat poverty-stricken ideographic language - a system of social relationships. The organization chart assigns spheres of activity to individuals and groups outlining a constellation of roles - linked by hierarchical or other relationships - which optimize according to criteria of instrumental rationality the opposing needs for specialization and co-ordination of tasks in function of the organizational goal to be achieved.

For the corporate designer the organization chart *is* the structure of the organization, and - in effect - when one asks anyone who works in an organization to describe its structure the chances are he will sketch out the organization chart. Behind this view of things lies the notion that a system of prescribed roles constitutes the most important - if not the sole - factor operating for stability, regularity and endurance in the life of the organization. And in its turn this notion assumes that organizational behaviour is essentially conditioned by role prescriptions, since they are understood and accepted - out of conviction or calculation - by the actors involved.

In his celebrated essay »Foundations of the Theory of Organization« (1984), Selznick underlined yet again the inadequacy of these notions. On Selznick's view, no formal structure is capable of dealing with the complexity of the organizational reality: informal structures - by definition unplanned - arise spontaneously under the pressure of individual and group needs that the prescribed system neither conceives of nor satisfies. These ideas have been recently reproposed by Ciborra (1990) who sums them up in an evocative metaphor: rationally designed organizational »forms« are simply »platforms for surprises«, occasions and tools for the »bricolage« that individuals and groups engage in every day in their constant renegotiation of the organizational order.

Selznick (1957) more generally observed that any organizational mechanism - designed in abstraction as a rational set of subdivided and co-ordinated tasks - becomes a concrete artifact only through the human beings who embody it: but the very people who give life to the organization pollute the rational purity of the original design through the mere fact of

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being »human«, endowed with rationality but also with feelings and emotions, capable and even eager to idealize and give a special »significance« to what they do. The instrumental enveloping shell thus becomes »infused with values«, the organization takes on its own special character which is shaped through processes difficult to foresee, basically determined by circumstances, by experience and by history. In a word, the living organization becomes culture.

Selznick's suggestions for long remained neglected. Organization theory and research were dominated up to the end of the 'seventies by a reductive and rationalist paradigm which preferred to ignore those aspects of corporate life which were not expressions of the organization as »economy«, and therefore instrumental, observable and quantifiable (Ouchi and Wilkins 1985). But since the end of the 'seventies a growing number of scholars has begun to look at organizations as expressive forms and systems of meaning, to be analysed therefore in terms of their ideational and symbolic aspects. For these scholars organizations *are* cultures (Smircich 1983), and the richness of organizational life can only be grasped through the use of holistic, interpretive and interactive models.

Organizational culture literature has undergone exponential development in recent years, achieving great popularity even outside academic circles, as shown by the remarkable number of books setting out a cultural approach to corporate phenomena which have attained best-seller status among managers and the public at large (Ouchi 1981; Pascale and Athos 1981; Deal and Kennedy 1982; Peters and Waterman 1982). Nevertheless, even though the metaphor of culture seems to have replaced that of the mechanism or the organism in the collective imagination of academics and practitioners, the new theoretical perspectives have not - whereas theoretical perspectives previously did - significantly influenced practice, i.e. the way in which organizations are actually designed and run. I have dealt elsewhere in detail (Gagliardi 1991) with the reasons for this gap and argued the need to fill it. I shall limit myself here to the remark that the reasons for the gap lie mainly in the impatience of practitioners, on the one hand - anxious as they are to construct causal models and therefore inclined to interpret complex theories in a simplistic way - and on the other in the reluctance of organizational researchers to concern themselves with

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the problems of practitioners. This reluctance is symptomatic of the debt the cultural movement owes to the epistemological and ethical principles of anthropology, particularly those of relativism and non-interference in the social realities investigated.

The impetus behind this paper is the wish to help in filling the gap between expert knowledge of organizations as cultures and practice, specifically that of organizational design.

3. A New Approach to Organizational Design

As I see it, the knowledge that what truly counts in the life of organizations takes place on the cultural plane has some important implications for organizational design: a) first it should lead us to modify our traditional way of conceiving organizational design as a process; b) it should then lead us to enrich the traditional concept of organizational structure, sharpening our eyes to the complex weave of instrumental and expressive, material and symbolic, programmable and non programmable elements that is created in the situation; c) lastly, it should enormously expand the de-
signer's shaping capacity by allowing him to include in his design elements entirely neglected previously, while paradoxically awakening him to the fact that the organization will take on forms that he will never have been able to mould. I shall now expand these three claims one by one.

3.1 Design as Dialogic Exploration

Since no abstract design, no matter how precise and no matter how energetic its attempts to anticipate high levels of variance, can handle the complexity of corporate life, the organizational order never arises solely out of a preordained project, but will be constantly negotiated and renegotiated by members of the organization. This means that we cannot go on thinking of design as an intellectual activity, an exercise of mind which precedes the concrete creation of the organization as a co-operative reality. More ap-

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propriately design must be seen as a social process and as a dialogic exploration (Lanzara 1985) during which differing views of the world, cognitive maps, strategies and interests are set against each other and mediated.

Even when the conscious goal of the project is the rational arrangement of productive practices, we cannot ignore the fact that technical rationality itself is judged in function of culturally determined criteria and conceptions: differing conceptions of the order and different ordering metaphors (Meadows 1967) can lead to quite opposed conclusions about the type of arrangement judged technically suitable to any given circumstance. Furthermore, even when there are shared criteria for evaluating the functionality of a practice, productive practices do not necessarily accord in a functional manner with the problems to be resolved but are determined in equal measure by expressive needs. From this viewpoint every productive practice is directly a symbolic appropriation of the world (Duby 1980). The organization as a living teleological construction thus incorporates goal-oriented operational principles which constitute the temporary distillate of the negotiations by differing actors of inter-subjective codes of interpretation of reality.

The designer is thus only one of the actors on the scene, even if his power - based on his competence, charisma or control of resources - may be great. Ideally he should be able to make better use of it if he does not adopt the role of champion of an assumed abstractly optimal order but shows an ability to grasp the complex dynamics out of which the possible organizational order is born.

3.2 Patterns of Organizational Relations and Deep-seated Structures

A designer sensitive to the cultural dimension of organizational phenomena will have to question the concept of structure devised by the classic theory of organization still widely and implicitly used in practice. Apart from the prescribable patterns of subdivision and coordination of tasks there exist other and deeper factors working for regularity and persistence in time: I refer to those factors which draw their strength from being mediated not by mental but by sensory and emotional experience and which often condition

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the actors without their awareness or perception of it. Basic assumptions, taken for granted, orient organizational behaviour more effectively than the most precise job description; shared values make it possible to hold onto a unity of collective action despite functional and professional differences; and there is no such thing as a »committee« - or any other formal mechanism of integration - which can resolve the disharmonies that exist between divergent systems of meaning.

Implicit assumptions, routines, cognitive schemata and »ways of feeling« - which make up the hard core of every culture - are embodied in the field within which the actors operate, which is at the same time a physical and symbolic ground whose properties and contours are defined by artifacts.

Physical space and the material artifacts which populate it constitute a dimension that the designer of organizations generally ignores, regarding it as the »territory« of other professions - efficiency experts working at the operative level and architects or interior designers. But space and artifacts can be made to structure organizational relationships, stabilize the distinctions between activities and social groups (Goffman 1959), reinforce behaviour patterns, administer contradictions and tensions. They constitute alternate communication systems to language (Hall 1959), reflect the cultural quiddity of an organization and represent the emblematic manifestations of a socially constructed reality.

In a recently published collection of essays (Gagliardi 1990) I brought together a number of scholars who share a way of looking at organizations from perspectives commonly associated with interpretive and phenomenological views of reality. In their essays they explored not only the hermeneutical aspect of artifacts (what and how artifacts may say to us when we seek to interpret an organization as culture), but also their pragmatic dimension (the relationship between artifacts and organizational action). These explorations, based largely on empirical research, show beyond question that what we might call the »tangible« organization - whose perceptual forms are profoundly influenced by the expressive needs and strategies of the social group which embodies the organization - may be consistent with and reinforce deliberate instrumental strategies or on the contrary deny them or oppose them in irremediable fashion.

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Since I cannot pretend here to summarize the long and detailed work of a number of scholars, I shall limit myself to mentioning some particularly relevant points concerning design. Doxtater (1990), taking as his starting point the symbolic patterns observable in the structuring of space within traditional societies, suggests that in the work-place the scansion of the space according to the binary code »sacred/profane« may correct or underpin the scansion of space according to the rational claims dictated by the exigencies of practical life. Hatch (1990), in an empirical study which compares attitudinal and behavioural responses of employees assigned to private offices with those of employees assigned to non-private offices, shows that in the situation she studied the open spaces created to encourage social relationships tend on the contrary to reduce them and that the relation between the forms of offices and the behaviour/satisfaction of those involved is only amenable to interpretations through the meaning the individuals concerned attribute to different forms. Sassoon (1990) shows how changes in the shade and density of colours can express changes in the ideological vectors and in the social meaning of artifacts. Berg and Kreiner (1990) discuss the modes whereby physical settings - in particular corporate buildings - are turned into symbolic resources, more or less consistently with the hoped-for corporate profile and identity. Witkin (1990) explores the subtle relationship between the stylistic qualities of artifacts and the sensuous experience of members of the organization, showing how the design of artifacts can be a tool for control in bureaucratic organization. I myself suggest that the three levels of organizational control identified by Perrow - control which is expressed in direct orders, control operating indirectly through programmes and procedures, control exerted by operating on the ideological premises of action - »should be increased by a fourth: that exercised by operating on the sensory conditions and premises of action, and for which organizational artifacts constitute the vehicle and the expression« (Gagliardi 1990, p. 21).

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3.3 Organizational Designers as Landscape Gardeners

Since corporate behaviour is conditioned at least in equal measure by mental experience as by sensory experience, since the territory in which the organization operates as a social group is always a physical field and a symbolic realm at the same time, since the same prescribed patterns of social interaction influence action in different ways according to the meaning with which they are invested, we cannot conceive of organizational design except as the design of the total setting within which there is incessant and reciprocal interplay of physical, symbolic and social structures.

This expansion in the field of action should suggest to the designer of organizations possibilities of coherent intervention on multiple aspects of the setting whose importance he may perhaps have been unaware of, but at the same time it should make him conscious of the complexity of his task and the limitation of his own power. He cannot now help but know that the corporate order is always a reflection of the cultural order and that the cultural order is the living historical product of collective processes of scanning, experimentation, problem solving, categorization, routinizing. Knowledge is undeniably better than ignorance and knowledge of one's own limits is preferable to the demiurge's delusion that he can fix the forms of a living artifact, though the paradox, however, remains.

Nevertheless, making use of an analogy, I would like to point to a possible way out. My suggestion - and the conclusion of these remarks - cannot of course have the clarity and trenchancy of a prescription, rather perhaps the evocative power and ambiguity of a metaphor. As I mentioned at the start, the designer of organizations has for a long time been used to thinking of the object of his work as a mechanism and thus as an artifact made out of inert components, or as an organism capable of adapting itself to its environment according to invariant biological laws. My suggestion is that he conceive of the organization as a garden and of his role as that of landscape gardener. The garden designer works with living elements whose characteristics and predispositions he is concerned to know but whose finished forms he will be able to determine only partially - and at the expense of considerable effort. In a small Italian garden, where harmony is generated by symmetry and the rigour of layout, a box hedge may be

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clipped perfectly square or cut into any shape whatever, but only at the cost of being constantly and scrupulously trimmed. The scale and complexity of modern organizations, however, make the metaphor of the Italian garden inappropriate. More often it is a matter of designing a landscape in which the overall harmony arises out of the fusion of carefully planned elements with spontaneous growth and where the same care is given to ensuring that structures which can be preordained are given fixed form as to creating spaces that favour the development of forms whose evolutionary pathways we can only guess at.

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