

Conference theme: The Process of Social-Symbolic Work: Understanding the Role of Agents in the Ongoing Construction of Organizational Life

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‘The only place to get peace and quiet around here is in the women’s toilet!’: Women as agents in the (re)creation of gendered space in elite architecture firms

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One of the enduring appeals of architecture, both as a profession and an artistic endeavor, is the ability to design seemingly permanent objects. Buildings tower over cities for centuries, the foundations of dwellings millennia old remain grounded in the earth. Permanency, however, is a seductive myth. Empires fall, disasters strike, protests tear down walls. It is not just the materiality of objects that is at risk. Spaces and objects are understood socially, and the meanings of those spaces change over time. Buildings once revered become symbols of oppression, what constitutes *public* space is continually contested. In short, there is no pure permanency, spaces are in constant flux, and inhabitants (re)construct meaning through intertwined material and social practices.

Participants in our ethnographic study of elite architecture firms in Sydney, Australia, were imagining buildings, gardens, rooms, and public spaces on a daily basis. As such, architectural work makes space a highly visible concept in day-to-day working life. Additionally, participants (architectural) work also played out in their own workplaces and thus they were agents in the processes of understanding their work and identity through the spaces in which they worked. Far from being a ‘neutral container’, working spaces were continually (re)constructed through intertwined social and material processes. Importantly, scholars of organizational space have emphasized that identities are something that gets ‘done’ in and through space (Hirst and Schwabenland, 2018; Skoglund and Holt, 2021; Tyler and Cohen, 2010). Such studies demonstrate there are ongoing, complex interactions between the use of built environment, organizational artefacts (walls, signs, lighting) and the socio-political meaning attributed to the design.

For participants in our ethnography, gender was one such identity that was salient in architects’ organizational space. Gender is integral to space (Acker, 1990) and is always woven into the construction and occupation of space (van Amsterdam, 2015), as are the materialization of gender inequalities (Liu and Grey, 2018). This confluence of identity and power is experienced by all genders (Skoglund and Holt, 2021). Importantly, gender identity is not something static or singular. On the contrary, scholars of gender, space and organization have underscored that gendered inequalities or hierarchies are processes, that are done and undone in the built spaces of everyday organizational life

(Hirst and Schwabenland, 2018). In other words, gender is a process and agents negotiate the ways in which organizational spaces such as toilets, desks, open plan offices, and board rooms inform the social construction of gender identity. One participant in our study for example, stashed her young son under her desk to hide from the rest of the office. In our case, open plan office spaces were not for family or having children, and the visibility of motherhood had to be carefully separated from the working self.

How can we understand these complicated interactions and processes between space and gender identity? Lefebvre (1991) proposed three understandings of space: the ‘conceived’, the ‘perceived’, and the ‘lived space’. *Mental Space* refers to images of space, such as a maps, that are *conceived* by experts; the *concrete space* refers to the material properties of space that we *perceived*, and *lived space* combines the two and refers to the space we deal with in everyday life. Lefebvre’s framework has been widely used in organizational studies and adapted by scholars to specifically consider the features of built, organizational space. For instance, Taylor and Spicer (2007), argue that there are three conceptions of socio-political space in organizations: space as distance (measurements of space), space as materialization of power, space as experience. These dimensions help us to focus specifically on the processes through which we organize space and how organizing is done through space. While these concepts are all useful analytically, we must remember that they are interrelated processes which are ultimately collectively constitutive of social space.

Drawing upon these understandings, our findings demonstrate how women were agents in the co-construction of gender and space. Women in architecture considered themselves working in an ‘elite’ space characterized by meaningful work and development opportunities. These ‘elite’ spaces, however, were significantly more complex such that women experienced the unsettling conflict between inclusion/exclusion, empowered employee/disenfranchised worker, and gendered hierarchies. We suggest that the *lived experience* of gender in and through these spaces was influenced by space as a *materialization of power*. Women were agents in the construction and reconstruction of their gendered identities that often involved complex processes which reproduced

and repurposed the masculine norms of the 'elite' space. For example, open plan office spaces were built to encourage participation and communication. Yet, the lived experience of many women was that this 'elite' space resulted not merely in improved interactions but also intensified disquiet and distractions which interrupted their day-to-day work in office space and pushed essential work into the domestic sphere.

Accordingly, we focus our attention on the disruptions, reconceptualization's, and most importantly, the fluidity of gendered space. Our key contribution is to advance understandings of social-symbolic work by examining the processes through which we conceive, perceive, and experience gender through space and the socio-political effects of differing processes. Practically, this means questioning binary notions of man/woman, work/home, mother/worker, and exploring the processes of how the built environment is purposed and repurposed in relation to gender.

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