###### Designer labels and the nouveau riche? Re-designing academic spaces and identities

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“A foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices. He then asks ‘But where is the University’?”   
([Ryle, 1949/2009: 6](#_ENREF_66))

# Introduction: Material and symbolic investments in academic infrastructures

“Apparel oft proclaims the man” advises Polonius in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, an idea further developed in Mark Twain’s “Clothes make a man. Naked people have little or no influence on society”. Such statements would suggest that a person is defined more by clothes than character, by dress than behaviour. Or, in the least, such statements affirm that dress influences character and behaviour. But then, does putting lipstick on a pig make it human rather than animal? As higher education institutions around the world increasingly invest significant resources into new campus construction, such debates can be extended to the organisational context by asking is it buildings or practices that define an organisation, or is it a combination? These questions are entirely relevant for planned investments in campus construction by universities in the UK alone totals over 9 billion pounds in the period 2013-2017 ([Burns, 2014](#_ENREF_15)), while in Australia capital investments in campus development exceeds 6 billion dollars ([Gilmore, 2014](#_ENREF_40)). A question that remains is whether or not such massive injections of capital translate into positively transformed teaching and research outcomes, that is, changes in academic work behaviours.

In this study we explore the relationship between university campus development and academic work practices by examining the case of an Australian business school (UTS) that has embraced both a massive investment in capital infrastructures with the expressed aim of redesigning workspaces to promote greater internal and external engagement and collaboration in research, teaching and learning. The current study focuses on the early stages of relocating the Business School into a building designed by a world famous architect to investigate the dialectic between the rhetorical, symbolic use of the building along with any changes in academic practices. The current analysis of an ongoing change management process in a leading business school complements other research in the same field ([Lancione and Clegg, 2014](#_ENREF_47); [Lancione and Clegg, 2013](#_ENREF_46); [Berti, 2014](#_ENREF_5)), enriching the literature on the application of design thinking to business education in terms of concrete consequences and modalities.

A rupture in work practices occasioned by moving to a new workspace constitutes a unique opportunity, for both the researchers and the observed practitioners, to examine routines and activities otherwise taken for granted. Using mixed methodologies of focus groups, ethnographic observation, quantitative building access data and surveys, our inquiry considers how the material form of an artefact—in this case, a new building—frames established and emergent patterns of practice in a creative and knowledge intensive context. The empirical evidence reveals different, although still relevant, outcomes from those relating to research and teaching.

There are strong indications that the power of the building to enhance research and teaching is undermined by the ambitions of a university seeking legitimacy even at the expense of adequately facilitating the work practices of academics. The symbolic sway of the building increases the university’s social capital above expectations as the prestige of the internationally acclaimed designer adheres to the school itself. The daring architectural lines emphasize the ambitions of the young institution to project an image of success, while the sinuous forms soften the cynicism of many academics, even subtly altering their identities. Heightened social expectations about the distinctiveness of the Business School, sometimes expressed as a sort of ‘moral responsibility’ in occupying a landmark piece of architecture, have inspired a renewed interest in formulating visionary strategies within the organization.

The stylistic character of the building therefore appears more salient and dominant than its functional attributes. Thus the building becomes akin to designer attire, a finery exuding supposed taste and class that affects both the demeanour of its wearers and the social expectations placed upon them. We interpret and frame this phenomenon using the sociological and organizational literature on the politics of distinction and impression management in general, and of clothing in particular. Our conclusion is that the building is a form of ‘dressing’ for an ambitious institutional actor struggling for recognition based not on a glorious past but rather a most promising future.

Initially we discuss the specific relevance of the new building within the context of the recent push for design driven management education. Next, we consider different implications of design thinking as an adjective, verb and noun: design, designing and designs. We then present an overview of the research methodology and data. Finally, we construct a theoretical framework that combines Bourdieu’s concept of distinction with the literature on impression management and the social role of clothing to interpret our findings about the forms of power exercised by the building on its inhabitants. Ultimately our reflections challenge the notion that workspace redesign affects social practices by disciplining the use of space, and suggests instead a need for more research on the ‘seductive’ and emotional impacts of organizational architecture.

# The building in the context of design-driven management education reform

Following a crisis of credibility faced by business education as an industry, intensified by the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) ([Podolny, 2009](#_ENREF_60); [Currie et al., 2010](#_ENREF_25)), a vigorous debate has emerged concerning the social role of education in and for business ([Navarro, 2008](#_ENREF_56)). Doubts have been expressed about the effective capacity of executive education to produce a return on the investment ([Pfeffer and Fong, 2004](#_ENREF_59); [Dunne and Martin, 2006](#_ENREF_28)) and the ability of business schools to provide MBAs with knowledge relevant to organizational practice ([Datar et al., 2010: 78-80](#_ENREF_26)). Influential commentators also accuse business schools of undermining good managerial practices by teaching ‘bad’ (socially and morally irresponsible) theories ([Ghoshal, 2005](#_ENREF_39)), suggesting that management cannot be taught theoretically ([Mintzberg, 2004](#_ENREF_54)).

One response has been the emergence of a burgeoning literature that promotes the concept of Design Thinking as a new paradigm for management ([Boland and Collopy, 2004b](#_ENREF_7); [Boland et al., 2008](#_ENREF_8); [Cross, 2006](#_ENREF_23); [Cross, 2011](#_ENREF_24); [Brown, 2008](#_ENREF_12); [Martin, 2009](#_ENREF_51); [Brown, 2014](#_ENREF_13)). As a tool for transforming management education ([Dunne and Martin, 2006](#_ENREF_28); [Martin, 2007](#_ENREF_50)), Design Thinking has become a global phenomenon ([Matthews et al., 2011](#_ENREF_52)). Since 2009 UTS Business has formally endorsed and pioneered the introduction of this approach in Oceania ([Lancione and Clegg, 2013](#_ENREF_46)), connecting with and learning from cross disciplinary design programs that have been developed in numerous higher education institutions worldwide, contributing to the application of design thinking to management education as a global phenomenon ([Matthews et al., 2011](#_ENREF_52)).

The choice to revamp existing approaches to teaching and research found explicit and powerful support in the decision to relocate its facilities from a dysfunctional and *ad hoc* site of architecturally dubious value into the newly erected ‘DCCW Building’ between 2014 and 2015. Designed by Frank Gehry, the architect whose creations inspired the entire “managing by design” movement ([Boland et al., 2008](#_ENREF_8); [Boland and Collopy, 2004a](#_ENREF_6)), the building was conceived as a “tree house” ([UTS, 2010](#_ENREF_72)) that would “excite people and encourage them to engage with the Business School” ([UTS, 2014](#_ENREF_73)). The building acts as an extraordinarily powerful discursive device, reinterpreting past, present and future in light of a new destiny: becoming a world class school through, in the words of the UTSB Dean, “linking creativity, technology and innovation” ([Lancione and Clegg, 2013: 131](#_ENREF_46)). The UTS Business change initiative is now about to shift gears from a rhetorical and physical construction to a social reality as the faculty pragmatically adapts to the new site of operations.

Investigating the dynamics of this process, charting its driving forces and its resistances, contributes to the literature on design thinking by detailing organizational behaviour in terms of both architecture and workspace design ([Kornberger and Clegg, 2004](#_ENREF_44); [Cohen, 2007](#_ENREF_21); [Elsbach and Pratt, 2007](#_ENREF_30); [Morrow et al., 2012](#_ENREF_55); [Peltonen, 2011](#_ENREF_57); [Peltonen, 2012](#_ENREF_58)). Architectural design is known to be an instrument of disciplinary and hegemonic power as well as a creative force that unsettles an established social order ([Clegg and Kornberger, 2006a](#_ENREF_19)). The DCCW building offers an ideal case study in such ambiguities, revealing how tensions are experienced as either continuing contradictions or temporary conflicts that achieve resolution in a new synthesis.

As an innovative art-object the building aspires to stimulate creativity and divergent thinking by leveraging both aesthetic drivers and technical characters that privilege good functional design. Thus the new UTS Business School building embodies the multiple practical identities of the concept of *design*. Three particular modes can be identified, following [Wittgenstein (1958)](#_ENREF_76): design, designing and designs. Each defines a distinct ‘language game’ that produces alternate meanings by means of different, situated uses ([Wittgenstein, 1958: 6](#_ENREF_76)).

As an adjective, design seeks to convey a positive value eliciting positive sentiments ([Verganti, 2006](#_ENREF_75)) that imbue a building with symbolic capital (‘as a design object’). As a verb, designing signifies an organizing activity that intends to produce a new order and/or new sensemaking perspective (‘designing a new business school’). Finally, in terms of the plural noun, designs bespeak strategic (even Machiavellian) intentions (‘the Dean has designs on the future’) that explicitly invoke power relations.

These three manifestations of design are deployed as an analytical lens for observing the reaction of various actors to the new workspace. Investigating the first dimension (*design*, adjective) provides empirical evidence of the impact of the aesthetic dimension on innovation ([Eisenman, 2013](#_ENREF_29)). The DCCW building can be considered an “aesthetic product” ([Charters, 2006](#_ENREF_18)) that influences its dwellers and shapes their professional practices ([Strati, 2007](#_ENREF_70); [Strati, 2010](#_ENREF_71)).

The second dimension (*designing,* as averb) concerns individual and collective organizing efforts. Many of these efforts, insofar as they are taken for granted by actors reliant on tacit knowledge, are invisible ([Polanyi, 1966](#_ENREF_61)). But the sudden and dramatic disruption of routines that occurs when adapting to a different work space necessarily brings tacit understandings and practice to the surface; as ethnomethodology suggests, breaching behaviour likely produces breakdowns in local social order ([Koschmann et al., 1998](#_ENREF_45); [Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011](#_ENREF_67); [Geiger, 2009](#_ENREF_36)), exposing attitudes, values, concerns and practices otherwise hidden in the depths.

Analysing the third dimension (*designs*, as a pluralnoun) facilitates exploration of the disciplinary and panoptical functions of the workspace ([Foucault, 1979](#_ENREF_35)) as a means for regulating professional identities ([Alvesson and Willmott, 2002](#_ENREF_4)). It enables research into how design may embody designs. It also highlights how material spatial arrangements may channel and control the behaviour of those who inhabit the space even in relation to other non-physical spatial dimensions ([Go and van Fenema, 2006](#_ENREF_41)). More generally, this perspective encourages a consideration of the consequences of architecturally driven transformations in a phronetic perspective ([Flyvbjerg, 1998](#_ENREF_32); [Flyvbjerg, 2001](#_ENREF_33); [Flyvbjerg et al., 2012](#_ENREF_34)) by recognizing how new spatial arrangements seek to create and stabilize new ‘truths’.

Design differentiates: The new building distinguishes UTS from its competitors and signals its status as a world leader in business education. The architect, Frank Gehry, is himself a highly respected elite brand; his own designer label. Just as driving a luxury car or wearing designer clothes and accessories can showcase higher social status, so too can occupying a designer building fulfil the objectives of university administrators with designs on achieving elite status within a competitive education marketplace. Evidence of these designs is found in the ongoing media and marketing campaigns, which emphasize the architect and his unique credentials. His status is meant to transfer to the Business School. The stunning design of the building suggests that the school within belongs to a “different school of thought”.

# Theoretical framing and methodology

A mixed research methodology involving qualitative focus groups and quantitative ethnographic and survey data were used to capture the interplay among rhetorical statements, materiality, as well as actual and perceived work practices. How much rhetoric and reality affect practice was of special interest. Theoretically the data was analysed through a discursive frame, following Wittgenstein, with the objective of unravelling the threads of discourse that knit together organizational domain ([Alvesson and Karreman, 2000](#_ENREF_2)). A discursive lens provides a view of the Business School as something constructed out of discursive moves, particularly as they relate to a narrative of design, centred on both material and social construction. Not everyone in an organization will draw the same conclusions from the same stories, of course, so pluralism and conflict in organizational discourse is normal. Events may be assembled and re-assembled into stories presenting, contesting and sometimes agreeing on meanings that form different inter-subjective and simultaneously existing organizational realities ([Browning, 1992](#_ENREF_14)). Practice theory ([Bourdieu, 1977](#_ENREF_9); [Bourdieu, 1990](#_ENREF_11); [Gherardi, 2000](#_ENREF_37); [Knorr-Cetina, 2001](#_ENREF_43); [Savigny et al., 2001](#_ENREF_68); [Raelin, 2007](#_ENREF_63); [Corradi et al., 2010](#_ENREF_22); [Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011](#_ENREF_31); [Gherardi, 2012](#_ENREF_38)) also provides a broad theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenological nature of the routines and patterns of actions of the actors. Considering practices as performances emerging from the entwining of institutional forces, individual creativity, tacit knowledge, material tools and environmental conditions capture the process of diffused organizing.

The key research questions include the following: (1) What is the relationship among the official vision of the building’s purpose, its actual material form and the perceived effects it has on practices? (2) How does the new building alter the microphysics of power inside the organization, and how do its effects become rationalized in internal discourses? (3) To what extent will the new building become a symbolic object? Of what kind? And For whom? Could it become a ‘fetish’ (an object imbued with magic power) or an ‘icon’ (a representative symbol worthy of veneration)? A ‘totem’ (a symbol of kinship), a Kafkaesque Castle (intimidating and alienating) or a playground (facilitating imaginative and collaborative play)? How do different actors and stakeholders interpret and translate something as material as a building into a symbolic object?

Data have been collected by means of focus groups and surveys paired with anonymous data recorded by the building security access system (See Table 1 for an analytic description of all the types of data collected).

*Table 1 - Types of data collected*

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# Data analysis

## Surveys

***Survey 1****:* Two surveys were administered, one before and another nine months after the move to the new building. Survey 1 was administered to 200 staff (with 51 responses) just before the move to the new premises (see Table 2). Respondents demonstrated scepticism about the building’s anticipated role in increasing cross disciplinary collaboration within industry, and they were evenly divided on its predicted capacity to transform the way they work. On the other hand most people looked forward to the move, a feeling that resonates with a widespread sentiment that the new building increased their pride in working at UTS Business. Conversely, a majority of respondents anticipated that moving to the new building would increase the organization’s expectations of their performances, with a consistent proportion believing they would enter a ‘rigid’, non-customizable workspace, one that would even cause an increase in regulations and controls. Overall, the vast majority of opinion converged in perceiving the building as a good marketing tool to promote the school.

*Table 2 – Survey data*



Interestingly, reactions to the building tended to be more lukewarm among the academics (especially the most senior ones) who, in comparison with the professional/administrative staff, tended to have even less trust in the actual capacity of the building to deliver results in terms of changing work habits or increasing collaboration. Also younger academics were especially likely to feel that the new facility implied enhanced expectations (Table 3).

*Table 3 – Survey data (selected comparisons – rating average)*



When asked what they liked and disliked the most about the new building (see Table 4) respondents concurred in identifying either aesthetic elements or the novelty of its form as strong points, and the lack of individual space (small offices) or other functional aspects as the main limitation. In terms of perceived constraints and opportunities the building is seen a source of branding and identity (“It will enhance the pride and prestige of the school and all who work here”) and an opportunity for a fresh start that might reinforce collaboration. At the same time half of the respondents expressed concern for the lack of space or inadequate functionalities. These mixed expectations, attributing to the building a relevant symbolic potential but a number of functional shortcomings, demonstrate that prior to occupying the new building faculty members were not immune to the fascination of the building. Yet at the same time they were sceptical about the capacity of the new workspace to change their work practices, despite the rhetoric used by the leadership to justify the investment.

*Table 4 – Survey data (open questions coding)*

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***Survey 2****:* Questions from Survey 1 were grammatically modified to the present tense and readministered as Survey 2 to 200 academic staff (54 respondents), with additional questions generated from the themes that emerged from the focus groups, nine months after the move to the new building in September 2015 (see Table 5). Re-administration of the survey provided an opportunity to compare responses from before and after the move into the new premises. Better than expected change was found in questions related to increased conviction about the building’s usefulness as a tool for promoting the business school (delta 0.55), increased pride to be working in the UTSB (delta 0.20), increased industry collaboration (delta 0.11), and better accessibility to the building (delta 0.90). Another interesting finding is confirmation of staff expectations that the building would place a heavier burden on staff to increase their performance (delta 0.46), yet in contradiction to this, staff also hold that changes to their work practices have not been as substantial as anticipated (-0.42) and that increased burdens of regulations and controls were also not as bad as expected (-0.32). Academics also found more opportunities for customisation of their workplace than anticipated (-0.94).

*Table 5 – Comparisons between Surveys 1 & 2 for academic staff:*



The findings become more interesting when analysed on the basis of the respondent’s office allocation as internal, external or hot-desk (Table 6). Increased collaboration and engagement between academic peers, academics and students and student peers were objectives informing the design and justification of the new building. One way that this was to be achieved was creating a more egalitarian environment where all offices spaces were of equal proportions and supplemented by a greater amount of open communal spaces for collaborative engagement and chance encounters. Yet when the new offices were allocated, hierarchy became apparent with professors and administrators receiving ‘external’ offices with windows, junior academics receiving ‘internal’ offices without windows or views, and research students, doctoral students and support staff receiving open workspaces with hot-desks. These data suggests that those who were not assigned private offices tend to have much more critical/negative views of the building (high impact highlighted in red). It is also noteworthy that females were most likely to report that their activities have been negatively affected by the new workplace design (32% versus 14% of their male colleagues). Female respondents were also more likely to highlight inequality issues than their male colleagues (“It is a more egalitarian work environment”: male average rating = 2.9 VS female average rating = 2.2).

*Table 6 –Survey 2 analysis by workplace allocation*

 When asked again what they most liked and disliked about the new building (see Table 7) it appears that amongst the greater proportion of respondents who initially appreciated the building’s aesthetics before the move, some of the shine of the design aspects had worn off. On the positive side amongst the smaller group who initially disliked the building’s aesthetics a greater proportion had apparently warmed to it. There was also a slight increase in appreciation of the building’s functionality and ambiance amongst some, but overall a greater percentage of respondents had actually increased their disliking for the building’s functionality. Overall these mixed responses reinforce the building’s symbolic potential as a tool of promotion but limitations as mechanism to actually change academic research, teaching and learning practices.

*Table 7 – Comparison of survey data (open questions coding)*

# Based upon the findings of the focus groups and the access data (described below) an additional set of survey questions were developed administered as part of Survey 2. These questions related mostly to collaboration and engagement as well as questions about the emotional experience within the workplace since the move to the new building. On the whole most responses were just above average (ranging from 2.56-3.83 out of 5). When questions relating to collaboration and engagement within the building were analysed according to office allocations it was found that those who were not assigned private offices tended to have more critical/negative views of the building/work conditions, yet interestingly people who have less prestigious/beautiful internal offices seemed to be more positive/enthusiastic about the opportunities offered by the building than those external office allocations. This apparently ‘odd’ finding can be explained by noting that internal offices have been typically assigned to more ‘junior’ academic staff (usually ECRs). Possibly this population have more to gain from the building’s potential to enhance their image than their more senior colleagues (maybe because the senior academics have other stronger sources of professional identity than the UTS ‘brand’).

*Table 8 – Comparison with the previous building*

# Respondents were also requested to indicate who they felt was the greatest beneficiary of the new structure with a dropdown menu to provide a number of responses. Out of 53 respondents just under half (n=24), felt the greatest beneficiaries are the business school executives, 23 felt it was UTS, and 14 said it as Frank Gehry and 12 each nominated academics and students as the greatest beneficiaries.

## Focus groups and ethnographic observations

Two focus groups were organised with academic staff between March-April 2015, corresponding with the first teaching semester. Focus groups were privileged over one-on-one interviews as a data collection tool to capture how opinions are shaped by peer interactions. This choice enables us to investigate how actors shape their understanding of the new workspace through a collective sense-making process, in which conversations and exchanges of individual experiences and perceptions play an important role in constructing a social reality. The focus groups have been conducted in such a way as to stimulate ‘natural conversations’ among colleagues who share their perceptions on a collective experience. The researchers (known to the informants as colleagues and familiar faces) started the conversation with an open question about the perception of the building, and then participated in the flow of the ensuing conversation by asking clarifications or stimulating further reflection on emergent themes rather than asking a series of preordained questions.

An interesting consequence of this technique is that in the two focus groups two very different dominant ‘moods’ emerged. The first discussion assumed a more critical and sceptical tone, as participants highlighted structural or organizational limitations that seemed to hinder the ability of the building to deliver on its promises in terms of internal integration. In contrast discussants in the second group were more optimistic about the opportunities offered by the building, focusing on how the intrinsic aesthetic qualities of the new space are opening or stimulating new possibilities. Positive and critical voices were present in both groups, but the interaction generated two different micro-discourses: one stressing the constraining and the other the liberating characteristics of the new space.

*Critical views*

A central theme of the first, dominantly critical, micro-discourses was the disconnect between the image of flow and openness presented by the rhetorical promises of the building ([Lancione and Clegg, 2014](#_ENREF_47); [Lancione and Clegg, 2013](#_ENREF_46)) as well as the daring curves of its architecture, and a reality that is perceived as more rigid and stifling. In the words of one participant, a senior academic, “Any building with some sort of mix of offices and open space will deliver (some improvement in collaboration) (...) I don't think the extra layer of aesthetic gives me anything in terms of collaboration result”.

The inherent ‘bureaucratic’ nature of the organization is in this context evoked as an inescapable element that, although intangible, has more sway than the tangible spaces: For instance the possibility of organizing meetings on the spot seemed to be compromised by the way spaces are managed, rather than by the design of the spaces. In the words of one participant, “We have this amazing, new building that looks amazing from the outside but there’s clearly a disconnect with how we get to use the workspaces.”

In addition, a clear class division seems to emerge between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in terms of space allocation. The former are the staff members who possess a private office, the latter those who are using open-space work stations. In this case the allocation of space becomes a visual, tangible representation of the divide between fulltime permanent and casual staff members. The ‘have-nots’ frequently feel that their freedom to customize their space is limited, even if they cannot specify any instance in which explicit prohibitions were enforced. In the case of the ‘haves’ is remarkable how the previously central issue of the size of the office has lost relevance once the workspace was experienced. The new offices are sufficiently spacious and comfortable to assuage the original concerns. A new preoccupation has emerged, however, in the first phase of the building occupation: the rush to secure ‘a place in the sun’, literally. This refers to the competition to obtain an office space with an external window or access to natural light (approximately 60% of individual offices have external windows and 20% some natural light, while another 20% receive no natural light). Office allocation has been fundamentally based on seniority, and episodes of political manoeuvring to obtain a better space (e.g., individuals ‘pulling rank’, requesting to be assigned a different space etc.) are not unknown. A senior academic candidly reports: “I exerted finally my own little authority because I was put in a little box (…) away from the windows. (…) I was really insulted and furious”. The emergence of ‘political economy of space’, wherein a central function of the workspace is to reflect the status of the staff member, is a well-known phenomenon ([Clegg and Kornberger, 2006b: 19](#_ENREF_20)). It appears to be reproduced even in a building that was supposed to offer a more ‘egalitarian’ environment, based on offices of equal size.

Issues of ‘functionality’ are customarily conjured as a rationale for organizing spaces, and yet the conversation among the users of the building reveals different ways of describing the ‘functionality of the building’: as an aid to sociability (the notion that it should facilitate encounters and social interactions leading to increased collaboration); a support to creativity (the idea that the imaginative design of the building would inspire creative thinking); or an assistance to increased productivity (thus helping academics to achieve more in terms of their various key performance indicators). The way in which the new workspace could achieve this ‘functional’ gain is now, however, obvious to informants. On the contrary some highlight the limitations caused by certain features. In the words of a junior academic: “A workstation, it’s much smaller. It doesn't allow you to spread out. It doesn't allow you to work like an academic need to work. There’s lots of conversations and interruptions happening”. Another problem is that many spaces designed to help interaction seem to be, at the moment, only partially used. One example is the ‘staff lunch room’ on level 8: “I really am surprised by this, so little use of this lunch room. There’s been a lot of money poured into that room. There’s a lot of design features in there. There’s hardly anybody there, in particular academics”.

The lack of flow between different floors constitutes another invisible barrier: Few academics circulate among different floors, and even the internal stairs connecting levels are seldom used. Physical proximity is not automatically translated in desire or opportunity to meet, even if chance encounters are—in everyone’s perception—more likely to occur than in the past.

*Positive views*

While many criticized the lack of tangible results in transforming practices (possibly a self-fulfilling prophecy), in the second focus group another micro-discourse emerged, one stressing the inspiring effect of the amazing contours of the building, the positive feeling evoked by some aesthetic aspects of the new workspace (the quality of light, the acoustics, the finishing touches, the furniture). This was connected to the idea of the building as a (still) unexplored cache of possibilities, a treasure that has not yet been fully appreciated: “I had for example an architect show me fixtures that I hadn’t noticed. I think one of the worst things you can do would be to take [the building] for granted.”

This also connects with the notion of the building as a powerful statement that puts UTS on the map, so to speak, attracting positive attention and generating interest and goodwill. The idea of working in an ‘iconic building’ creates a sense of pride: “There are people who are taking pictures. There are artists doing drawings of the school. There would be a dozen people around taking notice of the school. When you say to them: ‘Would you like to come and have a look?’ their eyes light up and they come in. (…) I love that.” The Business School capitalizes on the attention the building captures by aggressively pursuing a series of actions and initiatives aimed at engaging industry representatives by involving them in advisory roles, for example, inviting them to give guest lectures, hosting industry events, or offering executive education modules. The frequency of and attendance at such events have increased significantly since the move into the new building, as the result of a combination of ‘pull’ (the attractiveness of the spaces) and ‘push’ factors (the fact that such an engagement policy is now pursued earnestly given the desire to exploit the opportunities offered by the asset). A casual academic who also works in an administrative support role remarks: “I’ve been out trying to draw in speakers (…) and there’s people that are keen to come to the building”.

The essence of the micro-discourse that dominated the second focus group is perfectly encapsulated in the words of one participant: “The reason why the windows are so deep is to draw your eyes outside. I feel the building is very externally focused, which I think is great. I don't know whether it’s bringing us together as much as helping us be out there.”

## Access data and other ethnographic observations:

Exploring different areas of the building offers completely different experiences: While the academic offices are characterized by an austere, almost monastic, quiet, with few people moving around in a rarefied atmosphere, the student areas (three lower levels of the building plus half of level 5) are livelier and more vibrant. Especially during the semester, large numbers of postgraduate students (undergraduates have limited access to the building) occupy lounges, collaborative spaces, ‘thinking pods’. There is a distinctive ‘buzz’ there. Part of this difference can be attributed to the fact that most members of the academic staff have private, sound-proofed offices. But the key determinant is the actual presence or absence of academics. In the past academics’ workplace attendance could only be gauged by asking individuals to self-assess the amount of time they were spending in their office (a notoriously biased method) or by looking at the number of occupied/empty offices. In the new building, access to academic offices is regulated by a series of security doors that can only be opened by a magnetic badge. Analysing the ‘transaction data’ recorded by the system reveals how many staff members are in the building at any given time. Because the system records individual transactions, it is theoretically possible to know exactly who has entered which area and when (exits are not recorded); however, for privacy reasons the data are de-identified, so we cannot distinguish between academic and non-academic staff members.

Selected access data for the second half of April are exhibited in Table 5, which shows the number of individuals who gained access at all of the security doors leading to staff offices during weekdays. More specifically, these transaction records identify how many individual staff badge holders have entered at least one the doors leading to staff offices on any given day. To understand the data, consider the staff roster: The Business School employs 210 academics (including casuals and fixed term) and 95 professional staff members. In addition, there are 70 individuals listed in the staff roster who might access the building, but do so only occasionally: adjuncts, research assistants, visiting scholars.[[1]](#footnote-2)

It is safe to assume that most members of the professional staff have, given the nature of their role and of the condition of their employment, a much more regular workplace attendance pattern. Therefore, if we consider it is likely that at least 80% of the professional staff members will be in attendance on any given day (i.e., 75 people), and we subtract that figure from the number of individual staff holders who gained access to offices at least once in a day, we can calculate the approximate number of academic staff members who come to their office on any given day.

*Table 9 – Building Access data – staff members entering office areas*

 It is evident from this data that the amount of time academics actually spend in their offices is only a fraction of their actual working time. Even when workplace attendance was at its peak in the considered period less than two thirds of academics spent *any time* in their offices. In practice it can be assumed that time in the office probably accounts for less than half of actual working time. It is also worthwhile to notice the difference in staff attendance between the first (16 to 23/4) and the second week (17 to 30/4) in the records. This is most likely due to the fact that the former was a non-teaching week (mid-semester break). This indicates that, in absence of specific commitments compelling them to come to the building (i.e., teaching), most academics prefer working elsewhere.

This type of work habits presents, above and beyond all considerations of the ‘functionality’ of the workspace, the greatest hindrance to the possibility of using the design of space as an effective disciplining mechanism to shape collaboration patterns or individual work practices. How much power can office layout exert on people who don’t actually spend too much of their working time at the office?

Beyond the quantitative analysis of behaviors and the collection of individual opinions and perceptions, ethnographic observation reveals some emerging social phenomena that can be connected with the move to the building. The new building has emphasized the ambitions of the organization. Becoming “unambiguously recognized as a top 3 Australian business school” (Dean’s message to the Faculty, 27/2/15) has become a central objective. Moreover, frequent references in public speeches are made to the necessity to “live up to the expectations” (e.g. Dean’s address at Faculty Forum, 12/6/15) created by the new building, and thus the need to design effective corporate strategies to this end.

The fact that the building is a powerful attractor is undeniable: All events organized in the new building in the first semester of its opening have been extremely successful in terms of external attendance; the staff in charge of external engagement finds it particularly easy to persuade industry members to volunteer their time to take part in educational initiatives organized by the school; numerous members of the public can be seen wandering in the ‘open’ areas of the building. Such attraction has been harnessed as a key asset by decision makers: The building is the main feature in the promotional campaign aimed at recruiting students. The slogan “Think here”, used in conjunction with the unmistakable architectural lines of the edifice, explicitly conveys the centrality of the site in defining the projected identity of the Business School.

The original and imaginative forms of the building provide an ideal stage (and possibly even serve as a muse) for the discourses of innovation and entrepreneurship to shine as distinctive elements of the Business School. The emphasis on what is groundbreaking, innovative, pioneering has definitely increased. This is unsurprising for a young and ambitious institution, and very much aligned with a widespread obsession with the need to be ‘disruptive’ in order to survive ([Lepore, 2014](#_ENREF_49)). The physical presence of the building demonstrates of the force of such commitment, legitimizing efforts to explore and experiment. As predicted by some observers ([Lancione and Clegg, 2014](#_ENREF_47)) this effort risks being characterized by superficiality and a lack of reflexivity, but its allure and its capacity to alter by seduction should not be underestimated.

Finally, another ethnographic observation that can provide an additional insight into how individuals adapt to the building regards the level of personalization of the workspace. It has been observed that workspace personalization serves the purpose of symbolically communicating identity information both to others and to the self ([Byron and Laurence, 2015](#_ENREF_17)). This recent research shows that employees who limit their personalization do so to “enact a boundary between their work and non-work lives” ([Byron and Laurence, 2015: 319](#_ENREF_17)). In this particular case, however, other dynamics might be involved. For instance the vast majority of the offices displaying a higher degree of personalization—with more personal touches, including diplomas, photos or memorabilia—are the ‘nicer’ ones (the ones with external windows). On the other hand preliminary observations suggest that the level of personalization is not correlated with actual workplace attendance. Matching this datum with another observation, the apparent lack of correlation between the ‘quality’ of an office and the level of attendance of its occupier suggests that the symbolic value of the occupancy of a particular space rises above its functional use. In other words owning the right office, and ‘marking’ it as a personal space, is for these nomadic academics a more relevant aspect than the actual functionality of the office as a work-space.[[2]](#footnote-3) This can therefore be considered as another instance in which the influence of the building is wielded in the symbolic rather than in the material sphere.

# Discussion and conclusions: the building as a designer garment

Despite the frequently repeated statement that the building has been designed “from inside-out” ([UTS, 2015](#_ENREF_74)), its most remarkable effects appear to occur ‘from outside-in’. The implicit assumption that a building is first and foremost a working space directing and conditioning behaviors does not correspond to the way in which the edifice projects its power. The findings indicate that building’s capacity to alter and discipline behaviors is significantly limited by the fluid nature of academic identities and practices, which are shaped by multiple forces and not really contained by any workspace ([Berti, 2014](#_ENREF_5)) as suggested by the physical absence of academics from the building. A space in which individuals spend only a fraction of their working time has limited potential in altering their ways. At the same time, according to these preliminary data, the building seems to have had a much stronger impact in symbolic terms: re-branding the Business School, redefining stakeholders’ expectations, and creating conditions that support certain strategies and deny others.

From a discursive perspective the different manifestations of design outlined in the first part of the paper (design, designing and designs) are all seen to be at work. The political *designs* of university decision makers drove an ambitious agenda of growth and expansion based on signalling the presence of the institution as original and daring, playing on the exceptionality of Gehry’s design. The sensorial qualities of this revolutionary *design*-building appear to have been more effective in influencing academics than the actual ways in which the workplace is *designed.* Even at the level of micro-politics, individuals’ *designs* aimed at securing prominent spaces were guided by the desire to acquire the symbolic capital embodied by ‘*good design’* features rather than a real motivation to leverage on the new space in re-*designing* work practices. An individual’s location in the building becomes a tacit representation of their role and position.

The role played by aesthetic and ostensive factors in promoting a transformation in the professional identities of academics is central, while the disciplinary effect of the new disposition of bodies in space appears quite weak—at least for fulltime ongoing academics, who were supposedly the main target of the initiative. This symbolic role of the building can be seen as a form of interpellation ([Althusser, 1971](#_ENREF_1)), the process through which an ideology constitutes identities. The ideology being promoted and embedded in the design is of the Business School as a “porous space” ([UTS, 2015](#_ENREF_74)) that facilitates interactions and exchanges among academia, society and industry. It promotes an image of entrepreneurship and initiative, at the same time highlighting the importance of academic work in producing influential, engaged, relevant research. While this ideas suggest an image of a ‘generative’ building that opens possibilities rather than delimiting correct behaviors ([Kornberger and Clegg, 2004](#_ENREF_44)), there is a potential dark side to the ideology embodied and transmitted by the building. Engagement with industry can yoke independent research to the sole pursuit of profit; attractiveness can become a mere marketing device, equating influence with popularity; entrepreneurial agility might encourage a superficial form of engagement, chasing low hanging fruits rather than tackling wicked social problems.

Again, employees’ subjectivities do not depend primarily from spatial arrangements ([Alvesson and Willmott, 1992](#_ENREF_3)) but can be influenced by the social expectations that emerge from the visual aspect of the workspace. This phenomenon operates both through positive and negative reinforcement. As shown by the opinions expressed by a good number of academics, the beautiful architectural form acts by means of seduction, whereas people identify themselves with a built space ([Dovey, 2014: 16](#_ENREF_27)). On the other hand an implicit threat is also suggested. Architecture has been used throughout history to construct superiority ([Burrell and Dale, 2003](#_ENREF_16)), and by occupying a ‘world-class’ building, the Business School sends a strong message about its ambitions to become universally acknowledged as a world-class institution. Even in absence of a formal human resource explicitly aligned with this objective, the building is a token of the seriousness of this aspiration. It subtly sends a message of increased expectations, reinforced by frequent references to the development of more stringent performance benchmarks to assess the quality and quantity of academic outputs. Becoming more active, productive, entrepreneurial is therefore promoted as an essential survival strategy, especially for non-tenured academics.

These observations on the are consistent with the finding of a previous study on a similarly “mould-breaking example of contemporary university architecture”, a Scottish university library ([Hancock and Spicer, 2011: 92](#_ENREF_42)), wherein the arrangement of space produces an *identityscape* aimed at stimulating the development of a desired professional self in students. In the case of the new building at UTS the space arrangement cannot be explicitly used to alter practices, since such an attempt is invariably met with strong resistance. Such resistances can sometimes assume an active form, as in the case of the strong dismissal of Frank Gehry’s suggestion to replace individual offices with creative open spaces similar to the ones in his own practice, or they may be passive, as in the choice of limiting the amount of time spent at the office to a bare minimum.

In any case, the building’s capacity to influence actors is mostly based on its being a discursively conceived, rather than lived or perceived space ([Lefebvre, 1991](#_ENREF_48)). More than as a container the building seems to ‘function’ as an outfit, an item of clothing. Its glamorous design and the eminence of its designer convey an image of distinction and prestige, signalling its ambitions and prospects in the competitive higher education market. It also shapes and reinforces the identity of the academics working in the Business School both as sporting an expensive bespoke suit can change the demeanor of the wearer. It does so by altering social perceptions and expectations while also inducing a set of behaviors consistent with the dress.

Architecture and organizational dress codes play a similar role in organizing and can be considered different types of visual artefacts used to construct and propagate meaning ([Meyer et al., 2013: 34-35](#_ENREF_53)). According to [Simmel (1904/1957)](#_ENREF_69) fashion is central to the acquisition of social distinction, acting both as an element of social unification and segregation. The effects of fashion in constructing social expectations are mediated by the notion of taste, an element of social distinction used to mark and differentiate class belonging ([Bourdieu, 1984](#_ENREF_10)). In this regard the architectural attire that universities don appears to play an explicit role in defining their lineage, as is well demonstrated by the informal denomination of ‘sandstone universities’ used in Australia to identify the oldest (and most prestigious) tertiary education institutions. As a newcomer, UTS cannot acquire distinction by wearing a traditional starched suit but could choose to mark its difference and vitality by becoming a trend-setter, wearing a flippant and garish attire—albeit one fashioned by a renowned stylist.

Dress choices are used by organizational actors to convey strong messages about the nature of their organization and the type of people who work there ([Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997](#_ENREF_62); [Rafaeli and Pratt, 1993](#_ENREF_65)). Clothing is also instrumentally used by organizational actors to perform their roles ([Rafaeli et al., 1997](#_ENREF_64)), sending and receiving messages about expectations and behavioral norms, while asserting control and exercising power by imposing appropriate codes. The new building of the UTS Business School sends an unambiguous message: This is a place for creative, innovative, ambitious scholars who have a very entrepreneurial, engaged and proactive approach to their role. Academic staff identities are therefore influenced and disciplined by means of these cues, which are progressively creating the discursive conditions to define who the ‘appropriate individual’ to work at UTS Business is ([Alvesson and Willmott, 2002](#_ENREF_4)).

In Shakespeare’s literary classics identity and social status are frequently proclaimed by attire, whether it be Polonious receiving fashion advice from his father, Christopher Sly ‘wrapped in sweet clothes’ to portray himself as a member of the aristocracy, or Lucentio swapping garments with his servant Tranio such that others are unable to distinguish master from man. Shakespeare’s characters appear comic because the audience knows of the ‘reality’ of the non-correspondence between the character’s actual status and their garb. In the case of a young university constructing a designer building; while the buildings may embody and exude power, entrusting the development of a new identity and reputation to a building is not necessarily an affirmation of strength. To some, the flaunting of a trendy designer label may seem as a hallmark of the nouveau riche in making a too-obvious bid for elite status based on money and style rather than wisdom, taste and strength of character—qualities of distinction that are demonstrated more by behaviour rather than dress.

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1. Other UTS staff members who regularly access to the building but who do not appear in the school roster are those with ancillary roles (e.g., security staff, janitors etc.). Since the frequent movements of these particular employees add a lot of noise to the ‘transaction records’ the data have been cleansed by excluding those staff ids which patterns of transaction are consistent with such roles. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. At this stage this should be treated as a research hypothesis rather than a definitive finding. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)