

THE SYMBOLIC APPROACH TO PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

*“Wouldn't it be great if your work environment could be a reflection of what you would like to become?”
-A department store architect interviewed during a recent PBS special*

The work of Cooley and Mead provides the intellectual foundation for a theoretical perspective referred to as symbolic interactionism. This perspective suggests that human beings exist in a symbolic and physical environment of social objects and shared language. We shape and reshape our reality through an ongoing interaction among social objects, self, and others. Blumer (1969) declared that symbolic interactionism rests on three premises: First, human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the person may note in his or her world, including physical objects, other people, or institutions. Second, the meaning of things is derived from, or arises out of social interaction. Third, meanings can change over time as interpretive processes are modified. Blumer (1969) wrote about the nature of objects being classified in three categories: (a) physical objects such as buildings, desks, or hallways; (b) social objects such as professors, students, or architects; and (c) abstract objects such as integrity, compassion, or control. According to Blumer, the nature of all objects (in all three categories) has meaning for the person or persons for whom it is an object.

The basic tenets of symbolic interactionism have been applied within the context of understanding the physical structure of organizational life. In her book, *Organization Theory*, Hatch (1997) proposes two approaches to the study of designed environments within organizations: the behavioral approach and the symbolic approach. Whereas the behavioral approach sees behavior as being shaped by the design of a physical environment, the symbolic approach sees physical environments as containing cues that communicate messages to people reminding them of their expected roles. Hatch broadly defines the physical structure of an organization to include elements such as people, equipment, furniture, floor plans, communication systems, work processes, spatial arrangements, and interior design. Hatch proposes that researchers need to understand the symbolic meaning of the physical environment of an organization. According to Hatch (1997:251), “Those who adopt the symbolic view see the physical structure of an organization as shaping and maintaining a system of meaning that helps organizational members to define who they are and what they are doing.”

Urry (1991) argues that buildings have the potential to help occupants construct what they feel and think. Similarly, Pasquale Gagliardi (1996), in his essay “Exploring the Aesthetic Side of Organizational Life,” builds upon Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s (1981) study of transactions between people and things. Gagliardi asserts that material reality performs a significant role in the construction and development of self. He also points out an important casual loop or feedback process wherein we also perceive and give meaning to these material things. As an example of Gagliardi’s latter assertion, we recall one recent design project that involved the programming, design, and construction of a new office for a local newspaper operation. The newspaper group decided to move from an older office building to a new high-rise office building, and the executive editor, who had been writing for the newspaper for some 40 years, did not want to part with his 40-year old desk. For him, the desk represented more than a desk – it represented the meaning of his life.

In workplace and organizational studies there have been historical ebbs and flows regarding interest in studying physical environments. Beginning in the early 1900s,

economic psychology (e.g., Munsterberg in 1913) and scientific management (e.g., Frederick Taylor in 1911) were influential in determining the design and management of work. Management personnel viewed the worker as being machinelike either efficiently or inefficiently producing output. As an outcome of this view, industrialists and architects began to develop standardized work processes and standardized work environments (Montana 1993). This study of the physical environment continued until the famous “Hawthorne Experiments” of the late 1920s and early 1930s (Stallworth 1996). The experiments, conducted by Elton Mayo and his colleagues at Western Electric’s Hawthorne plant near Chicago, were originally designed to examine the effect of illumination on worker productivity. As expected, when illumination was increased so did worker productivity increase. However, when illumination levels were reduced, worker productivity did not decrease as was expected but in fact continued to increase. Mayo and his associates then concluded that managerial attention was seen as gratifying by workers and therefore it was social influences that impacted worker motivation. Thus, the so called “Hawthorne effect” represented the notion that social influences, not physical effects, were of greater importance in terms of worker productivity. This pivotal study led to decreased interest among later organizational theorists in studying physical structure (Gifford 1997; Hatch 1997; Stallworth 1996). Ironically, however, sociologist

George Homans (1950) later noted that the social effects discovered by the Hawthorne researchers were in fact initiated by a change in the physical environment (i.e., the workers were relocated to a new space for the experiment and illumination was the environmental stimulus employed). Thus, one could reasonably argue that the physical environment took on a new meaning to workers and set in motion the dynamics of a changed human response. Homans has provided a more complex interpretation of the original Mayo findings—one that links physical and social causality.

The study of the physical environment lay relatively dormant immediately following the “Hawthorne Experiments” until the Civil Rights Movement triggered the birth of “social design” in the 1960s. A wide variety of social and intellectual issues arose in the 1960s and 1970s to refocus our attention on the physical environment and human affairs. This was a tumultuous time in our society as issues of gender, civil rights, race, education and environment caught our attention. In fact, the social design movement arose to correct misalignments between people and the built environment. Sommer (1983), a social psychologist by training, described social design as the process of creating physical environments that meet the social and physical needs of the occupants. During the time period, architects invited social scientists into the design process to help them better understand the human-environment relationship. Sommer

(1983) and others assisted architects from the pre-design phase through post occupancy in six major areas: human use of space, awareness and environmental cognition, environmental preferences, user needs analysis, participatory design, and post occupancy evaluation. Sociologists collected data through surveying, interviewing, and participant observation to identify the current and future space and social needs of the future occupants of a building and to design a physical environment to enhance the lives of these occupants. Additionally, Sommer (1983) noted that the physical design of space strongly influences the behavior of its occupants, and he advocated continued inclusion of sociologists as part of the design process. In sum, Sommer’s research points to a broader thesis - one that suggests physical space and all of objects that comprise it potentially have associated symbolic significance. We shape and give meaning to our physical environment and it shapes and gives meaning to us (Churchill 1944). Indeed, architecture involves more than the construction of a building – it also involves the construction of social reality (Cuff 1996).

The above described studies of physical space and objects as social phenomena were radical departures from the formalistic practices of the time, or the tendency to treat buildings as pure shape, with little regard to their practical or social functions (Arnheim 1977). Nevertheless, social psychologists and others continued to study the

impact of the physical environment on the formation of self. During the 1970s and 1980s Steele (1973, 1983) further addressed the functions of physical space to include social impact. According to Steele (1973), a space affects an individual by providing opportunities for security and shelter, social interaction, symbolic identification, task performance, pleasure, and growth. "Security and shelter" refers to the space providing a sense of safety for the occupants, such as a roof protecting the person from the natural elements. "Social interaction" refers to the space allowing occupants the opportunity to gather and meet. Examples could be a town-square or an office meeting room. "Symbolic identification" refers to the direct and subtle messages sent by the space. For example, a large executive suite within an office setting might indicate a hierarchal type organizational structure. "Task performance" refers to the appropriateness of the space for the task to be performed. Steel provides the example of the use of a soundproof room when recording music. "Pleasure" involves the way in which the space stirs emotional response within the hearts and souls of the occupants. Garden settings or sunrooms might elicit such pleasures. Finally, "growth" refers to the self-knowledge and self-awareness acquired when using the space. Perhaps to devoted and knowledge-hungry readers, a home library would be an example of such a space. Other humanist scholars reiterate Steel's concepts in their own work. French philosopher and post-modernist Jean Baudrillard (1981) writes

about the seductive power of objects as sources of pleasure and passion, and about the logic of objects having use value, exchange value, symbolic exchange value, and sign value. Lorraine Daston, Director of Max Planck Institute of History and Science, writes about the courses that objects take generating trails of symbolic attachment, identity, and investment as they travel across time and space (Daston discussed by Burrell 2002:357). And finally as Gagliardi (1997:569) asserts, "We seek confirmation of our identity as thinkers through the working out of ideas, it is only the written page in front of us – it is only the materialized idea – which reassures us about our capacity to pursue such aims." And, so it is with the physical environment, one's identity and definition of self are bound up in interaction with physical objects.

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