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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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***Objects at Work:
How Do Artefacts Work Aesthetically in Everyday Organizational
Life?***

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ABSTRACT. This paper aims to open up new analytical perspectives on the uses and roles of artefacts and space design in everyday organizational life, by addressing the aesthetic dimensions of the everyday world of *work* and drawing attention to the aesthetic *agency* of artefacts. The first section addresses theoretical–methodological issues to lay bare specific principles and methods for analyzing the aesthetic character of organizational life, space and actions, and answering the question of how do objects work aesthetically to shaping habits, behaviors and lifestyles in organizations. The second section provides an application through two case studies: the new space of co-working *Stables* (2020) that repurposed recently the former Austro-Hungarian imperial stables in Cluj-Napoca (Romania), and the new brand buildings of *Bosch Engineering Centers* in Cluj-Napoca (2020) and Holzkirchen, Germany (2022). I argue that these are not mere cases of practices of renovating and repurposing spaces or urban regeneration of former industrial sites. Rather they exemplify blatantly the role that aesthetic elements play in mediating action, control and performance in organizations as well as the different “aesthetic imperative(s)” in postmodern organizations, including the issue of their “artification” when compared to modern organizations.

1. Introduction

Everyday Aesthetics (EA) has largely focused on the analysis of our world of *objects* and

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provided consistent contributions to understanding “the aesthetics of design” (Forsey, 2013; Iannilli, 2019), the “moral–aesthetic judgments of artefacts” or other key aspects of the everyday “aesthetic life”, such as the role of ambiance and “the aesthetic texture of mundane life” (Saito, 2007, 2017). However, on the one hand, the EA’s research scope included typically the *private* world – dwelling at home surrounded with artefacts –, while eluding another major area of our everyday life/experience, the everyday world of *work*. On the other hand, it often brings into play the notion of “object” – thing, tool or artefact – without taking into consideration a proper questioning of the ontological aspects it might raise. Such as, what mode of existence is that of an “object” and how does it co-respond to that of the “subject”? Are objects simply passive stuffs or should we consider instead their *agency* – the capacity for action on human subjects?

This paper aims to open up new analytical perspectives on the uses and roles of objects/artefacts and space design in everyday organizational life. On the one hand, by questioning the notion of “object” and drawing attention to the aesthetic *agency* of artefacts/objects highlighted by various philosophical theories, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer’s practical hermeneutics (1988), Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) with the precise role granted to non-humans (2005) and the pluralism of modes of existence (2012), and Graham Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology (2018, 2020). On the other hand, by addressing the aesthetic dimensions of the everyday world of *work* and examining it with the analytical-descriptive language established by philosophical aesthetics. Unlike EA’s mainstream approaches, which usually pass over it, Organizational Aesthetics (OA) considers the aesthetic as a characteristic of everyday *organizational* life and explores the work relations, objects and spaces through the lens of aesthetic principles. Afterward, I apply these principles and methods through two case studies: the new space of co-working *Stables* (2020) that repurposed recently the former Austro-Hungarian imperial stables in Cluj-Napoca (Romania), and the new brand buildings of *Bosch Engineering Centres* in Cluj-Napoca (2020) and Holzkirchen, south of Munich (2022).

2. Theoretical and Methodological Issues: Key Principles and Methods of Analysis

2.1. The aesthetic agency of artefacts/objects

To put it shortly, Gadamer's notions of the reciprocal "belongingness" (*Zugehörigkeit*) of "subject" and "object" and the "fusion of horizons" of present experience and tradition in the process of understanding capture some of their key ontological characteristics: i) tradition, which encompasses institutions and life-forms as well as texts and artworks, is not a mere, passive "object" for a "subject" (as nature is for natural sciences); it is itself a "subject", that is, endowed with agency; ii) the transformative character of the aesthetic experience (of art): this is an event of understanding in which both the "subject" and "object" of experience are transformed; iii) the aesthetic experience, as an experience of understanding, is a key means of an ontological self-formation (Gadamer, 1988, pp. 230–232, 271–278, 311–318, 340–341, 416–419).

Latour's Actor-Network-Theory goes farther than Gadamer who recognizes artworks' capacity for action: for Latour, "objects too have agency". With the notion of "actor-network" he gives *non*-humans a type of *agency* that "is more open than the traditional natural causality": objects (including non-human organisms) are "actors" in the sense of their capacity for action in social relations; in this way, "the couple human/non-human should be substituted for the insurmountable dichotomy between subject and object" (Latour, 2005, pp. 10-11, 63, 70–73). More recently, Latour uses the notion of "pluralism of modes of existence" in order "to get ourselves out of the prison of the Subject/Object division", to rethink the "network" as *a* mode of existence among others and to highlight the ontological singularity of both common things and technical objects as well as of values – politics, law, religion (Latour, 2013, pp. xxv–xxvii, 6–8, 10–12). His project of re-categorization also includes, in Chapter 14 "Speaking of Organization in its Own Language", "to ask what it means to act and to speak *organizationally*" in order to reveal the "paradoxical situation of organization" (Latour 2013, pp. 389–390).

Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) advances an *aesthetic* conception of things related to the domains of aesthetics and design. The basic principles of OOO, outlined in

Harman (2018), are as follows:

(1) All objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional. (2) Objects are not identical with their properties, but have a tense relationship with those properties, and this very tension is responsible for all of the change that occurs in the world. (3) Objects come in just two kinds: *real objects* exist whether or not they currently affect anything else, while *sensual objects* exist only in relation to some real object. (4) Real objects cannot relate to one another directly, but only indirectly, by means of a sensual object. (5) The properties of objects also come in just two kinds: again, real and sensual. (6) These two kinds of objects and two kinds of qualities lead to four basic permutations, which OOO treats as the root of time and space, as well as two closely related terms known as essence and *eidos*. (7) Finally, OOO holds that philosophy generally has a closer relationship with aesthetics than with mathematics or natural science. (Harman, 2018, p. 10)

In short, Harman views OOO as “an extremely broad method in the spirit of actor-network theory, but one that rescues the non-relational core of every object, thus paving the way for an *aesthetic* conception of things” (Harman, 2018, 168). In *Art and Objects* (2020) he addresses in detail the relation between art and OOO aesthetic theory, which “conceives of art as activating a rift between what we call real objects (RO) and their sensual qualities (SQ)” (Harman, 2020, p. 8). In the meantime, he preserves for “object” a far broader meaning than solid material things – as “anything, including events and performances, can count as an object as long as it meets two simple criteria: (a) irreducibility downward to its components, and (b) irreducibility upward to its effects” (Harman, 2020, p. 2) –, and holds the same basic principle of the non-relational autonomy of objects:

As a philosophy committed to the autonomous existence of objects apart from their various relations, OOO endorses the basic formalist principle of the self-contained object, while flatly rejecting the further assumption that two specific *kinds* of entities – human subject and non-human object – must never be permitted to contaminate each other. (Harman, 2020, p. x)

Instead, OOO defends the unusual claim that their (beholder and artwork) contamination constitutes “a third and higher object”, which “is the key to shedding new light on the ontology of art” (Harman, 2020, pp. 11, 173).

This kind of topic or questioning is already at work in the so called “strong” version of OA (Strati, 2000, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2014, 2016; Gagliardi, 2006; and Warren, 2008, among others), which cultivates an increased methodological awareness of the specific and weight of concepts employed in the aesthetic study of (everyday life in) organizations.

2.2. Principles for Exploring the Aesthetic Character of Organizational Life and Space

Next, I draw on specific contributions of the “strong” version of Organizational Aesthetics to lay bare some key principles and methods for analyzing the aesthetic character of organizational life, space and actions. In brief, these principles include the following notions and viewpoints³⁵²:

1) Defending a new conception about the nature of organizations that reframes the ontology of organization. First, by the notion that an organization is not a stable, permanent object, but an “ongoing phenomenon”, a product of specific processes and practices that also refer to aesthetics. Thus, temporariness and mutability are distinctive features of organization, which is as dynamic as human actions and interactions. Along these lines, an “organization *is* aesthetic”, meaning that the *aesthetic* (element) is a “constitutive feature of organizations”, not a simple decoration (Strati, 2000, p. 30; Strati, 2008, pp. 230–31; Witz, et al., 2003, pp. 43–44; see also Ratiu, 2017, pp. 179, 181). Moreover, the organization’s “symbolic landscape” is constituted by organizational artefacts, together with individuals and their embodied-sensible, “tacit knowledge”, which is essential for organizational practices and the formation of “communities of practice” in organizations (Strati, 2010b, pp. 885–888; Strati, 2014, pp. 120–123; see also Ratiu, 2017, 182).

2) On this basis, OA makes new claims about the experience of organizational life and its aesthetic dimension: a core principle is that organizations should be understood in terms of relationships between aesthetics and materiality. The “strong” accounts look for and emphasize the *material*, *sensible*, and *emotional* dimensions of everyday life and work relations in organizations; they demand as well attention to the *corporeality* of human action in

³⁵² For a previous extended analysis of these principles, see Ratiu, 2017.

organizations, as thematized by early French phenomenology and Georg Simmel's sociology of the senses where the body is treated in regard to its "capacity for sensory knowledge and social relations" (Strati, 2010b, pp. 880-883; Strati, 2013, p. 228; see also Ratiu, 2017, pp. 180, 182).

3) Another core principle is that organizations should be understood in the context of "post-social relations"; that is, "those relations among individuals and groups which are intermediated, or indeed generated, by the capacity for action of organizational artifacts" (Strati, 2014, p. 109). Hence, the emphasis on the presence of both *human* and *non-human* elements in the everyday routine of organizations and the *agency* of physical/organizational artefacts: these are protagonists or "actors" in the ongoing collective construction of the aesthetic meaning of organizational process, because of their capacity to arouse aesthetic feelings and emotions, at a pre-cognitive level (Strati, 2010a, pp. 84-85; Strati, 2014, p. 110; see also Ratiu, 2017, p. 182).

These principles strongly impact on the actual research design and agenda. New methods of analysis using alternative ways have been established, such as the innovative "sensual methodology" set up by Samantha Warren (2008). Its aim is to unveil the "felt meanings" of organization's members about their organizational life, based especially on their sensory encounters with(in) the world of work. This illustrates well the challenges of an aesthetic agenda in organizational research:

- "the inextricability of aesthetic experience and judgments from objects that provoke them" entails a clear need for the "material world" to be brought within the aesthetic frame of reference;
- the "ineffability of aesthetic experience" and the "non-verbal nature of aesthetic knowing", as the aesthetics pertains to embodied, sensuous experience, asks for new means to read (or stimulate) the alternative languages within organization members – e.g., "life-history narratives", "photo-interviewing" or "photo-elicitation", that is, obtaining and discussing photographs of work environment taken by participants;
- the "intersubjectivity of aesthetic judgments" presents a further challenge to aesthetic research on organizations, that of "contextualization"; it asks for new means to account for socio-cultural influences on aesthetic judgments when

gathering aesthetic data – such as an “aesthetic ethnography” (Warren, 2008, pp. 561, 568-573; see also Ratiu, 2017, p. 183).

These principles and methods are helpful in exploring the complex roles that organizational artefacts and physical spaces play in everyday life at work, and in answering the question of how do objects work aesthetically to shaping habits, tastes, behaviors, and lifestyles in organizations; and then, in exploring the questions or challenges of aestheticization or “artification” of everyday contexts, particularly the world of *work*.

3. Application: Two Case Studies on How Do Objects Work Aesthetically in Organizations

I propose to answer these questions by applying those principles and methods through two case studies: the new spaces of co-working *Stables* (2020) that repurposed recently the former Austro-Hungarian imperial stables in Cluj-Napoca (Romania), and the new brand buildings of *Bosch Engineering Centers* (BEC) in Cluj-Napoca (2020) and Holzkirchen, south of Munich (2022), both subsidiaries of The Bosch Group – a global supplier of technology, services and consumer goods.



Figure 1. *Bosch Engineering Center*, Cluj-Napoca, 2020 ©Bosch Engineering GMBH

The new building of *Bosch Engineering Centre* in Cluj-Napoca is located in the vicinity of a

former industrial site, yet located in the central area close to the historical city center. Since 1860 there was a Tobacco factory, replaced in 1962 by a clothing–textile factory, “Somesul”. Like other old factories in Romania, after 1989 this factory went into decline and its buildings were demolished in 2007-2008. *The Office* business center was built in that place.



Figure 2. *The Office and Record Park with the old Stables, Cluj-Napoca 2017*

This former industrial site included the stables of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that are approximately 200 years old and, in the past, also housed a Romanian textile factory (the former “Argos” industrial platform). Instead of being demolishing, the old stables buildings were rehabilitated and converted in 2020 as spaces of co-working, named *Stables*, which includes dedicated and private offices, conference rooms, networking spaces and work-cafes. *Stables’* buildings are integrated into the large-scale *Record Park* project, a mixed one with residential spaces, as well as retail functions and office spaces. Together with *The Office* business center nearby, it forms the largest business hub in Cluj-Napoca.



Figure 3. *Stables co-working spaces, Cluj-Napoca, 2023*

Are these buildings – *Bosch Engineering Centre* and *Stables* – cases of practices of renovating and repurposing spaces or urban regeneration of former industrial sites? Certainly, yet they are more than that. I am rather interested in them as they exemplify blatantly the role that aesthetic elements play in mediating action, control and performance in organizations as well as the different “aesthetic imperatives” in modern and postmodern organizations.

3.1. Aesthetic Mediations: the Aesthetic Imperative and Agency in Modern Organizations

Before starting the study of these organizational spaces, I would like to remind a noteworthy example of an innovative account of the aesthetic dimension in organizational life. This was provided by Robert W. Witkin’s article “The Aesthetic Imperative of a Rational-Technical Machinery: A Study in the Organization Control through the Design of Artifacts” (2009), an amended version of the original study published in 1987. Here Witkin introduced the notion of “aesthetic imperative” and critically highlighted the organizational control based on the agency of artefacts and the disciplining of “organizational presence”. The key question he raised was “how do aesthetic factors contribute to action and production?” The main aim was to

understand the nature of both modern organizations and organizational action, which was itself seen as an aesthetic accomplishment (Witkin, 2009, pp. 59–60).

In his case study, Witkin focused on the aesthetic correlates of the ideal-typical modern organizations – the large, formal organizations that Weber referred to as “rational-technical machineries” for the production of goods and services, and the generation of profits. The example proposed by him was a meeting room at Unilever, an Anglo-Dutch multinational company, typical of many such rooms in organizations all over the world in the 1970s–1980s. The description has paid attention to the styling of both organizational *artifacts* and *subjects*. In brief, the design of buildings, furniture and furnishing, the organization of physical space, the use of colors and texture, and organizational artifacts of all kinds were characterized by the sharpness and simplicity of line, the suppression of color, and the preference for planar. The attire and personal presentation of members using the room looked similar: they were dressed in the conventional business manner with dark suits, plain in color and smooth in texture, which give a dual impression – of obscuring the sensuous life of the body, flattening it and restricting its possibilities for expression, on the one hand, and of practicality and effectiveness, on the other (Witkin, 2009, pp. 64–65).

Witkin’s core idea is that all these aesthetic correlates of such “rational-technical machinery” are integral elements of an aesthetic system, or an “aesthetic imperative”. This is capable to calling out an “organizational presence” in the members and imposing a definite “aesthetic discipline” on them. Conveyed in negative terms, the imperative here consists in the “suppression of sensuous values”, which are expressive of the individual as a “living subject” – such as body’s relations, moods and tensions –, and the “emphasis on the linear and planar”. Still, as Witkin rightly observes, this imperative can be also conveyed in positive terms, as the cultivation of certain values of importance in organizational context: practicality, effectiveness, power and charisma. These are seen as organizational rather than personal attributes and having their sources not in personal life but in organizational relations and functions (Witkin, 2009, pp. 65–66). Thus, in a modern organization, the “aesthetic imperative of flatness” – the preference for clean lines, plain and smooth surfaces, and sharp contrasts – plays a significant role in mediating organizational behavior and action by calling out “appropriate” attitudes and responses in members:

The development of an organization as a ‘rational-technical machinery’ gives rise to an *aesthetic imperative* characterized by those familiar elements of modernist design: the sharpness and simplicity of line, the suppression of color, the smoothness and hardness of tactile values, and the preference for planar forms. By such aesthetic means, *modern organization* [like Unilever] successfully cultivate, in their members, a presence through which the organization is made and remade; this presence is characterized by the separation of head and body, of work life from private life, of rationality from sensuous values, of production from consumption, and of organizational function from personal expression. (Witkin, 2009, p. 68)

According to Witkin, this aesthetic imperative and the structure of action are converging in case of modern organizations defined as “rational-technical machineries” (Witkin, 2009, p. 67; see also Ratiu, 2017, pp. 185–186).

A question can be raised as to whether Witkin’s findings and notions of “aesthetic imperative” and “aesthetic discipline” or “control” apply as well to ordinary organizational life in the so-called “postmodern” organizations of today.

Many authors have observed that these encompass different work patterns and include promotion of new ways of thinking and doing that break away from the previous *modus operandi* of modern organizations. While the former were based on linear and goal-directed planning, controlled order, stability, continuity, rationality, measurability, and predictability, postmodern organizations emphasize instead creativity, spontaneity, inspiration, passion, improvisation, experimentation, and constant innovation (Linstead and Höpfl, 2000; Darsø, 2004; Adler, 2010; Saito, 2012, pp. 2–3; see also Ratiu, 2017, p. 187). However, while the particular aesthetic system or “imperative of flatness” that underlined modern organizations seems to have lost its influence (as it did in the art world), a certain system of aesthetic values is still modeling organizational practice and life. What would be the characteristics of the aesthetic system or “aesthetic imperative” today? How do artefacts, materiality, design, and atmosphere shape everyday organizational life in organizations?

3.2. Stables and Bosch Engineering Centers: Uses and Roles of Artefacts and Space Design in Everyday Organizational Life

To answer, I provide, in the first step, a visual analysis of these spaces/organizations combined with a discourse analysis of their (inaugural) legitimizing statements.

Let's have a look first at the *exterior* and *interior design* of these buildings or their “material world”: the organization of physical spaces and their style, the use and qualities of *materiality* – colors, textures, lines and forms that enables them to be experienced aesthetically and to collectively construct the aesthetic meaning of organizational processes.

The co-working space *Stables* embraces overtly a postmodern style, a *fusion* between historic and contemporary functional–technological style, in opposition to the “familiar elements of modernist design” – the “emphasis on the linear and planar” and the “suppression of color” –, reported by Witkin (2009, p. 68) in his case study at Unilever in 1980s. The renovation project preserved the historical footprint of the building and key material elements such as cast-iron pillars, wooden beams and brick cladding.



Figure 4. *Stables* – dedicated desks, Cluj-Napoca 2020 ©Stables

The furniture includes, for example, wood chairs and stools covered with natural textiles and comfortable sofas with colorful pillows with vegetal prints motifs or abstract symbols; sofas with cushions having the brown color of the wood; small round tables and decorative objects in glass or metal, and carpets with floral and geometric motifs.



Figure 5. *Stables – conference center, Cluj-Napoca 2020 ©Stables*



Figure 6. *Stables – open space, Cluj-Napoca 2020 ©Stables*

Statements of *Stables*' officials attest their intention to create a particular sense of place through materiality and design:

By arranging this space, we wanted to keep a perfect balance between history and the present. [...] The name *Stables* emphasizes precisely the fusion between the historic building and the new space arranged in art-deco style, adapted to the needs of contemporary people, having a functional and technological style. (Christophe Weller, founder and CEO of COS-Corporate Office Solutions, main shareholder of *Stables*; Marius Mârza, Managing Partner *Stables*; in: Colt, 2020)

According to *Stables* architect, Laura Dragomir, the interventions through new elements in the old building – architectural details that complement the original basic materials, preserved and refurbished, such as wood, brick, and cast iron – were intended to highlight its specificity. In particular, “the integration of Art-Deco inspired elements, most of them designed and executed specifically for the new office spaces, gives the unique character of the space”:

The wooden beams and brick inherited from the old merge with geometric and rounded shapes, stylized and repetitively combined, vegetable prints motifs and abstract symbols, furniture pieces with rounded shapes, pastel color combinations and elegant textures. (...) Symmetrical lighting fixtures, stained glass windows and mirrors are among the design touches taken from the Art-Deco style adopted by the architects (...) Mirrors are the key element in achieving expansion effects. They actively participate in the feeling of discovery in traveling through the space, especially in traffic intersections. (Laura Dragomir, *Stables* architect, in: Bogdan, 2022)

This building/description offers a good example of the *agency* of physical artefacts and space design through the aesthetic feelings and emotions they may arouse. The aesthetic qualities and design of organizational *artifacts* – their surface, texture, color, form, reflection, and other physical characteristics based on the specific materiality of the objects, such as the use of wood vs. metal or concrete – all work to activate a particular experience of *ambiance* or *work atmosphere*: one closer to the warmth or pleasantness of a household, a sense of being at home, rather than a neutral or cold working space. Along with the *fusion* between the historic and art-deco style, this mediates an “organizational presence” characterized by the *fusion* of work life and private life, and a workstyle or experience embedded in an *art-like* environment.

*Bosch Engineering Centers (BEC) in Cluj-Napoca and Holzkirchen – which are subsidiaries of The Bosch Group, a global company comparable to Unilever whose office room was the object of Witkin’s analysis in 1987/2009 –, display intentionally a *work atmosphere* similar to that described at *Stables*, focusing on *creativity, freedom, innovation, flexibility and cooperation*.*



Figure 7. *Bosch Engineering Center, Holzkirchen, 2022* ©Bosch Engineering GMBH

Although their architecture looks closer to modernist style, except some wood insertions, these centers are defined and promoted as being “more than just an office building” – they are “attractive spaces for creative tasks”: “The new location’s defining characteristic is its *campus atmosphere*, providing an ultramodern and *creative* working environment that offers *freedom* for *innovation* and *flexibility*.” (Press Release Bosch Engineering GMBH: New Campus in Holzkirchen, July 12, 2022; my emphasis.)

Both Bosch’s buildings are characterized by a mix of work and relaxation spaces. At BEC-Holzkirchen, “on the first floor, along with offices and lab facilities, there is a health and

relaxation zone, a café, a staff restaurant, and a customer-meeting zone.”



Figure 8. *Bosch Engineering Center – Entrance area, Holzkirchen 2020* ©Bosch Engineering GMBH

One finds the same space design/organization at BEC Cluj-Napoca: new spaces and functions are added to the open space offices: cafés and recreation areas – gym area, playgrounds, gardens, terraces, and many other facilities. The Advertorial (2020) at the opening of BEC Cluj-Napoca refers overtly to this mix:

In addition to innovative workspaces such as shared offices and open spaces, diverse meeting rooms, training rooms or custom-designed relaxation areas, the new building offers various facilities such as underground parking, bicycle racks, medical center, gym area and customized spaces, such as the Design Thinking areas or the Engineering Hub. The latter will serve both the development of internal Bosch projects and as a venue for events such as hackathons, academic competitions or other projects dedicated to students. Up to 70 percent of the existing furniture in the office spaces was designed and customized by small local manufacturers and family businesses, thus reiterating the company’s support of the local ecosystem. (BEC Cluj-Napoca, Advertorial

2020)



Figure 9. *Bosch Engineering Center, Cluj-Napoca 2020* ©Catalin Hladi



Figure 10. *Bosch Engineering Center, Cluj-Napoca 2022* ©Catalin Hladi

The styling of organizational artifacts and the material environment in these buildings bring out the *corporeality* of human action in organization and a fusion of *work* and *play*, as seen in the gym area and other custom-designed relaxation or playground areas. Moreover, they convey a playful spirit or *playfulness* – as seen in the academic competitions or other projects dedicated to students hosted here, such as Bosch Future Mobility Challenge 2022.



Figure 11. Bosch Engineering Center – Bosch Future Mobility Challenge, Cluj-Napoca, 2022 ©Nicu Cherciu

The *aesthetic qualities of dress* directs toward a similar “organizational presence”. The attire and personal presentation of members at BEC Holzkirchen consists of casual-business dress, distinct from the conventional business manner with dark suit and tie reported by Witkin at Unilever in 1987. The emphasis on the impression of “practicality and effectiveness” is obvious; yet this kind of dress does not restrict the “sensuous life of the body”, rather unveils it and extend its possibilities for self-expression. All these elements mark aesthetically an “organizational presence” different from the “suppression of sensuous values” in modern organizations: instead, it allows and displays the *corporal* and *emotional* dimensions of everyday life and work relations, which are expressive of the individual as a “living subject”; it includes equally organizational function and personal expression, production and consumption, work life and private life.



Figure 12. Bosch Engineering Center, Holzkirchen 2022 ©Bosch Engineering GMBH

It is worthy to note that “the aesthetic qualities or properties are not only *formal* (harmony, symmetry, balance, contrast, repetition, and unity) and *expressive or sensory* (color, sound, etc.); these are also *representational* properties for *identification* (symbolic value, history, congruency with values and goals, etc.)” (De Groot, 2022, p. 4). The Press Release on the opening of the new Bosch Campus in Holzkirchen (2022) calls attention as well to the intended use of aesthetic dimension *of social interactions* for mediating action, control and performance in organization. The aesthetic qualities manifest in *actions, relations* and *atmosphere* may convey and boost up the values and goals pursued by the organization, such as *creativity, cooperation, and productivity*:

The idea is to encourage both *creativity* and *productivity*. Behind this versatile workspace is the Smart Work concept that Bosch has already implemented at other of its locations. This encourages *a new and modern style of cooperation*, marrying the best of both worlds through a smart mix of

on-site and off-site working. Associates are therefore free to organize their working day. What counts, in the end, is what this work delivers. (Press Release Bosch Engineering GMBH: New Campus in Holzkirchen, July 12, 2022; my emphasis.)

To conclude this part, I would say that these organizations manifest tendencies opposite to typical tendencies of the “aesthetic imperative” in modern organizations: unlike the demand of “radical separations” noticed by Witkin (2009, p. 68), there is instead a *fusion* of work life and private life, of head and body, of rationality and sensuous values, of production and consumption, and of organizational function and personal expression. The aesthetic qualities manifest in *artefacts*, *space design* and *atmosphere* as well as the aesthetic dimension of *social interactions* play a significant role in mediating organizational behavior and action by calling out attitudes and responses in members specific to postmodern organizations: new ways of thinking and operating, notably the focus on self-discovery and self-expression, creativity, inspiration and innovative ideas, sharpening of one’s perception/aesthetic life, and an intense *art-like* work experience.

4. Future Challenges: the Artification of Postmodern Organizations

That conclusion opens up the issue of the “artification” of postmodern organizations, seen as one of the key future challenges in the world of *work*.

There are various readings of recent changes in postmodern organizations’ values and operating systems after adopting such intense *art-like* work experience and transposing the cardinal values of artistic competence (see Ratiu, 2017, pp. 187–189). Here I briefly take up the account of ‘Everyday Aesthetics and Artification’ (2012) by Yuriko Saito that addresses these new ways of thinking and operating in terms of *artification*. This designates “the introduction of artistic practice and aesthetics into areas not usually associated with them”, in particular in workaday environments, whether it is in business, industry, and organizational operations. In brief, “artification”, as a new concept and practice, encourages us to experience various aspects of our daily or organizational lives from an artistic viewpoint (Saito, 2012, pp. 1–2).

The value of artification strategy in organizations is controversial. While some authors highlight its benefits (Darsø, 2004; Adler, 2010), Saito is skeptical on whether what works

effectively in art – the focus on self-discovery, self-expression, and so forth – is readily transferable to real life affairs or the organization life without the accompanying emphasis on expanding one’s “horizon” and engaging in “self-critique”. This is because, if exclusive, such focus can inversely lead to “un-reflected self-aggrandizement” (Saito, 2012, pp. 3–4). More important and problematically is, in Saito’s view, the fact that the adoption of artification strategies for organizational purposes could provoke some tricky consequences, if it is indiscriminate and uncritical. Therefore, she critically examines the idea of “artified life” and expresses deep concern with some possible problems, in particular in case of the “artification” of organizational practices or operations. The main arguments are as follows.

First, according to Saito, such artification would leave no room for ordinary, practical matters of work and life, and would dilute the very intensity and specialness we seek through it. Another problematic consequence is that aesthetic judgments would take precedence over other judgments, whether moral, social, or political, since “an indiscriminate artification program implies that every aspect of life, self, organization, and society becomes justified by its contribution to the artified whole” (Saito, 2012, p. 4). Third, a major difficulty arises from the fact that, unlike the art world which is subjected to public assessment or critical interpretation, artified practice in organizations is closed to public scrutiny, reflection or challenge. And, without a critical discourse, it would end up enhancing the conformist attitude (Saito, 2012, pp. 6–7). Therefore, Saito concludes that, in case of organizational daily life and operations, artification or permeability of the boundary between art and work-life is a twofold strategy: “While something may be gained [...], there is also a price to be paid by both art and business”. This price could be the undermining of the intended purpose and the value of art in a workaday environment and organizational practice, in favor of an opposite anaesthetizing effect and conformist attitude (Saito, 2012, p. 8; see also Ratiu, 2017, pp. 188–189).

These arguments are sound. It is possible that the artification strategies in organizations trigger unintendedly such costs. However, on the one hand, it should be noted that, just as the aesthetic does not identify with the artistic, the aesthetic dimension of organizational life which is discussed here is much broader than the artified operations or practices in organizations.

On the other hand, organizations as well may be open to the outside world, “to public scrutiny, reflection or challenge.” As already seen in the case of BEC Cluj-Napoca, spaces such as “the Design Thinking areas or the Engineering Hub serve both the development of internal

Bosch projects and as a venue for events such as hackathons, academic competitions or other projects dedicated to students”.



Figure 13. Bosch Engineering Center – Bosch Future Mobility Challenge, Cluj-Napoca, 2022 ©Nicu Cherciu

Likewise, BEC Holzkirchen states publicly that “a key characteristic of the campus concept is its *connectivity with the outside world*”. As the site manager Jens Hofmann explains:

We want to create a place where people from Bosch, ITK Engineering, and the world outside can meet and work together. In the future, the campus will stage, for example, networking events with other companies and also *open its doors to visits from the general public*. (Press Release Bosch Engineering GMBH: New Campus in Holzkirchen, July 12, 2022; my emphasis.)

Certainly, such statements are not taken for granted and these aesthetic systems/imperatives and their effects (beneficial or not) should be verified. This article is a work in progress: the visual-discourse analysis will be followed (pending approval) by semi-structured biographical and photo-interviewing with members of these organizations, based on the “sensual methodology” outlined by Warren (2008). The aim is to unveil the “felt meanings” of

organization's members about their organizational life and to verify their felt "aesthetic life" and "tacit knowledge", which are essential for organizational practices and the formation of "communities of practice" in organizations.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on specific contributions by various philosophical theories highlighting the aesthetic *agency* of artefacts/objects and by Organisational Aesthetics, in the first part I addressed some theoretical and methodological issues in order to lay bare specific key principles and methods for analysing the aesthetic character of organizational life, space and actions. Among these: understanding organization as an ongoing phenomenon, a product of specific processes and practices that also refer to aesthetics; highlighting the agency of organizational artefacts in the context of "post-social relations", that is, intermediated by non-human actors; using alternative ways, such as the "sensual methodology", to address the *material*, *sensible*, and *emotional* dimensions of everyday life and work relations in organizations (Strati, 2000, 2014; Warren, 2008; Ratiu, 2017). These principles and methods have proved helpful in exploring the complex roles that organisational artefacts and physical spaces play in everyday life at work, and in answering the question of how do objects work aesthetically to shaping habits, behaviours and lifestyles in organizations.

In the second part, I applied these principles through two case studies: the new spaces of co-working *Stables* (2020) and the new brand buildings of *Bosch's Engineering Centres* in Cluj-Napoca (2020) and in Holzkirchen (2022). I argued that these are not mere cases of practices of renovating and repurposing spaces or urban regeneration of former industrial sites. Rather these cases exemplify blatantly the role that aesthetic elements play in mediating action, control and performance in organizations as well as the different "aesthetic imperative(s)" in postmodern organisations, including their "artification" when compared to modern organisations. This paper added to existing literature on these topics (Witkin, 2009; Saito, 2012) by providing, in the first step, an in-depth visual analysis of the above-mentioned spaces/organizations and a discourse analysis of their inaugural legitimizing statements. These will be followed by interviews with members of these organizations, based on the "sensual methodology" outlined by Warren (2008), aiming to unveil their sensory encounters with(in)

the world of work.

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