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Piazzas Where to Meet: Organisational Settings and Their Un-manageable Spaces in-Between

Main Description

This paper discusses the role of users in collaborative workspaces and offers the view that within organisational settings people should be enabled to experiment, contribute, create, change, design, use.

The paper is divided into three sections.

The first part provides an overview of the notion of collaborative workspaces arguing that it is a space in-between, which behaves like an ecology and that is part of an ecology. The main focus of this section is on the place (rather than space) where collaborative practices can emerge.

In its second part the paper offers a metaphorical interpretation of collaborative workspaces as piazzas where people can meet, emphasising the role of users and the un-manageable nature of these environments.

The paper finally offers a reflection on the role of design and management in organisations suggesting that these two disciplines could blur to create new figures capable of enabling the development of collaborative workspaces.

Short Description

This paper discusses the role of users in collaborative workspaces and that they should be enabled to experiment, contribute, create, change, design, use.

Keywords

Collaborative Workspaces

Organizational Ecologies

Role of Users

Participatory Design

Role of Management and Design

This paper discusses the role of users in collaborative workspaces, offering the view that the inhabitants of an organisation should be enabled to experiment, contribute, create, change, design, use.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first part provides an overview of the notion of collaborative workspaces the author intends to promote. The second part offers a metaphorical interpretation of collaborative workspaces as piazzas where people can meet. The third section offers a reflection on the role of design and management in organisations.

The author suggests that participatory design methods should be employed for the development of collaborative workspaces and that this requires design and management to blur creating new figures capable of enabling people so they can develop their own collaborative workspaces.

Collaborative Workspaces

This section promotes a notion of collaborative workspaces as *spaces in-between* that *behave like ecologies* and *form part of larger ecologies* to highlight the immaterial qualities of these spaces and the role of their inhabitants.

Spaces in-between are spaces delimited by the experiences, presences, and practices of people and could be seen as metaphors for collaborative workspaces as they are ‘landscapes of possibilities and suggestions’¹. This view implies that within collaborative workspaces *people* play a key role: they shape such environments through their everyday activities.

Collaborative workspaces behave like ecologies² as they are systems of ‘people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment’³. The social and physical spaces of these complex entities complement each other in an interdependent relationship⁴ and this characteristic highlights the role of *experiences* and *relationships* in the development of collaborative workspaces.

A collaborative workspace is also part of a larger ecological system: the organization. This implies that a study of collaborative workspaces must be respectful and mindful of their *context* and that to develop these spaces context-based methods must be employed.

The above propositions emphasise the immaterial qualities of collaborative workspaces and indeed this paper argues that these environments should be seen as *places* rather than spaces. Walck⁵ offers the following definition of place:

A place is where I am situated, where I find myself, physically, but also emotionally, spiritually, intellectually. A place is the space I inhabit, and all the beings that inhabit with me. Place defines me and I define it: it acts on me and I act on it. A place encompasses me, sustain me. I live in a place.

A sense of place should be fostered by users and among users when developing collaborative workspaces. The feeling of identity and belonging which is associated with this sense of place is crucial to the establishment and sustaining of collaborative workspaces as conceptualised in this paper.

To conclude and summarise this section, it is proposed that collaborative workspaces are complex entities characterised by immaterial qualities where context, people, their practices and relationships play key roles.

Piazzas where to meet

The immaterial qualities discussed in the previous section require appropriate situations to develop. To better unfold this notion it is proposed to interpret (and eventually shape) collaborative workspaces like piazzas⁶: places where to congregate, feel safe, discuss, respond to others; places where creativity is encouraged; places where to share opinions, artefacts, ideas, values, and dreams.

These are not only and necessarily physical places: piazzas can exist within a community as intangible interstitial spaces existing in relation to shared values, dynamics, and understandings.

To discuss these ideas the visual representation of a real piazza is adopted, looking at the notions of edge and middle.

“The life of a public square forms naturally around its edge. If the edge fails, then the space never becomes lively”⁷. Nobody likes being alone in the middle of a public square, especially when it is empty. For instance, not many people like standing in the middle of a circle of chairs during a meeting: one feels without protections, exposed and vulnerable. This is why protective edges have an important role in generating piazzas. The piazza exists in dependence of its edges – one implies, influences, and develops the other.

It is proposed that in the context of this paper *the relationships between people can be interpreted as the protective edges of collaborative workspaces*.

A second aspect of a piazza is its middle as “a public space without a middle is quite likely to stay empty”⁸. If a piazza is without a middle it is likely it will become a transit area. On the other hand, if something is placed in its middle, people will be drawn there as they will have a reason to congregate there.

Similarly, collaborative workspaces need *a middle* so its inhabitants have a reason to collaborate. It is proposed that designed triggers can act as such middles.

A middle is a *trigger for people to generate relationships* (protective edges) and provides a situation where to meet, talk, share, create and, if necessary, change. It encourages people to be aware of each other and of their context.

The above propositions highlight that collaborative workspaces, similarly to piazzas, are hybrid environments created by the relationships occurring within them, stressing once more the role of people within these spaces. Consequently, these spaces should be “softer, less rigid, more open to the indeterminableness of experience” places where “multiple dimensions coexist – even opposing ones” and where “different ways of inhabitation and use during the course of the day and with the passing of time” are enabled⁹.

Moreover, due to their ecological nature, collaborative workspaces dynamically grow via evolutionary mechanisms: they are fluid entities constantly morphing, growing, and changing. This implies that it is not feasible “to think in

terms of building them. However it is possible to facilitate a diverse range of user practices in order to watch for and eventually capitalise on patterns and trends”¹⁰.

Consequently, the collaborative workspaces this paper promotes cannot be managed or designed using traditional tools and methods: they can be facilitated and engendered. These spaces “should be uniquely adapted to individual needs and sites” and their plans “should be rather loose and fluid, in order to accommodate these subtleties”¹¹.

It is proposed that the inhabitants of collaborative workspaces should not adapt to pre-designed spaces, but rather develop and manage their own through participatory practices. As Steele¹² highlights:

Management processes should enhance the sense of self-worth of members, not degrade it. People should be able to influence or control some elements of their immediate work surroundings, so they do not feel powerless and so they can get information back about the effectiveness of their choices over time.

To summarise this section, collaborative workspaces are fluid and hybrid environments created by the relationships among people. This implies that they cannot be designed and managed adopting traditional tools and method but rather facilitated and engendered.

This paper proposes that the inhabitants of an organization should be enabled to develop and manage their own place where to collaborate via participatory design practices that place people at the centre of the design process.

To do this the relationships between people (protective edges) must be developed and nurtured through a series of triggers (middles) as such relationships are considered necessary conditions for such participatory practices to be sustainable.

Blurring design and management

Who is in charge of enabling the inhabitants of a collaborative workspace to develop and manage such an environment? Who should design the previously mentioned triggers?

This paper proposes that the discipline of design can offer its participatory design skills and knowledge¹³ to develop triggering tools¹⁴ (middles) and create relationships (edges) among the inhabitants of collaborative workspaces.

The above proposition opens up a debate on the intersections between design/designers and management/managers. In particular, how does such an intersection generate new roles within organizations?

This paper proposes that opportunities for a substantial shift in the notion of design and management and the roles of designers and managers should be considered and discussed. Such opportunities see design and management blurring to create new figures that, within organizations, can act as enablers for collaborative workspaces to emerge via co-design activities which imply a direct involvement of those that will inhabit such spaces.

It is suggested that these enabling figures could for instance be:

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- managers adopting design capabilities (if designers embark on a journey where their capabilities can be shared, adapted, and possibly expanded by interacting with managers); or
- designers engaging in management-like roles and operating within organizations on a constant basis (if they acquire the appropriate managerial skills); or
- teams made of designers and managers working together toward shared objectives.

This paper proposes a reflection on roles within organizations to provide useful insights to understand how to enable collaborative practices and to design suitable spaces to house such practices. Such a reflection impacts on design and management and on the role of design and management practitioners.

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¹ Paola Strozzi in Project Zero & Reggio Children, *Making Learning Visible: Children as Individual and Group Learners* (Reggio Emilia , Italy: Reggio Children, 2001), 67.

² Emery and Trist, *Towards a social ecology: contextual appreciation of the future in the present* (London, New York: Plenum Press, 1972); Morgan, Gareth, *Images of organization* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1986); Steele, F., *Making and Managing High-Quality Workplaces: An Organizational Ecology* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986); Trist, E.L., “A Concept of Organizational Ecology”, *Australian Journal of Management* 26 (1976): 161-175; Trist, E.L., “New directions of hope: recent innovations interconnecting organizational, industrial, community and personal development”, *Regional Studies* 13 (1979): 439-451; Trist, E.L., “Referent organizations and the development if interorganizational domains”, *Human Relations* 36 (1983): 269-284.

³ Nardi, B.A. and O’Day, V., *Information ecologies: using technology with heart* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 49.

⁴ Alexander, Ishikawa & Silverstein, *A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 941.

⁵ Walck, C.L., “Organizations as places: a metaphor for change”, *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 9 (n. 6, 1996): 27.

⁶ *Piazza* is the Italian term for *Public Square*.

⁷ Alexander, Ishikawa & Silverstein, *A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 600.

⁸ Alexander, Ishikawa & Silverstein, *A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 606.

⁹ Ceppi, G. and M. Zini, *Children, Spaces & Relations – Metaproject for an Environment for Young Children* (Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children S.r.l. & Domus Academy Research Center, 1998), 9 and 17.

¹⁰ Burrows, Coburn and Loi, “Finding a place in the e-publishing ecology”, *Markets for New Book Products*, eds. Cope and Kalantzis (Altona, Australia: Common Ground Publishing, 2002), 194.

¹¹ Alexander, Ishikawa & Silverstein, *A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 963.

¹² Steele, F., *Making and Managing High-Quality Workplaces: An Organizational Ecology* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), xii.

¹³ Refer for instance to: Bjercknes and Bratteteig, “User Participation and Democracy. A Discussion of Scandinavian Research on System Development”, *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems* 7 (1995): 1; Ehn, P., “Scandinavian Design: On Participation and Skill”, *Usability: Turning technologies into tools*, eds. Adler, P.S. and Winograd, T.A. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Kuhn and Winograd, “Profile: Participatory Design”, *Bringing Design to Software*, ed. Winograd, T. (London: Addison-Wesley, 1996); Sanoff, H. *Participatory design : theory & techniques*, Henry Sanoff (distributor) (N.C.: Raleigh, 1990); Schuler and Namioka, *Participatory design: principles and practices*. (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1993).

¹⁴ These triggering tools will be central to a series of papers the author will publish in the near future.