
Between organisation and architecture: end-user participation in design

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Abstract: This paper contributes to our sparse knowledge on the relationship between organisational and architectural design. It is based on an ethnographic study of the process of designing a municipality town hall, in which end-user participation constituted an integrated part of the design process. In this process, the open-office layout was introduced as a premediated design condition, a format that the users initially resisted. The paper discusses how end-user participation as a method and spatial design as a perspective may inform change in organisations. Although the users' resistance toward the open layout remained, their perception of this solution concurrently modified.

Keywords: end-user participation; open-office layout; architectural design; organisational design.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, scholars and practitioners have found shared interest in how the spatial design of organisations might form an important determinant of performance and collaboration. The interest reflects current societal tendencies, such as the substantial focus on individual needs and wishes as a parameter to inform organisational practise, and also on the continuous request for new ways of working and collaborating in organisational contexts. To support the development of new products and services, managers aim to explore approaches that can endorse such innovations. The spatial design of an office environment is increasingly recognised as a relevant component to enhance these new practises and relationships.

This paper addresses the relatively new spatial turn in organisation studies (e.g., Sydow, 2002; Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Marrewijk, 2009; Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010) by exploring the relationship between architectural and organisational design

processes, and a few of the aspects that this interface may hold. On the basis of an ethnographic study of the process of designing a municipality town hall, in which formalised end-user participation served as an integrated part of the architectural design process, the paper discusses how participation as a central method and spatial design as a central perspective may inform organisational practise and thus contribute to shape or reshape organisational design.

The empirical context is a municipality administration north of Copenhagen, Denmark, where the establishment of the new town hall building was used as a central opportunity to support organisational development in a structural merger between two neighbouring municipalities. Two design processes were thus seen as integrated; a potential reciprocal resource from which both could benefit. Although end-user participation served as a vehicle to inform the emergence of an architectural design concept, the same processes were considered a catalyser to induce organisational design developments, with regards to the merger. In this project, a great number of staff was invited to partake in interactive processes (workshops, plenary meetings and surveys) that had the spatial design of the future office environment as its overarching theme and a substantial amount of material devices (sketches, diagrams, pictograms, cardboard games and more) as vehicles to accommodate the participation activities. As the process was set forth, the organising structure of an open-office layout was presented as a premediated design condition – a format that the majority of the participants strongly resisted. Aware of that the open layout represented a basic premise, the participants continued to address this particular subject as a design issue, all the same. The empirical findings indicate that although the reluctance toward the open layout generally endured, their perception of the structure concurrently adjusted. These activities, which regarded work processes in a spatial perspective, seemed to enhance the organisation's ability to comprehend new aspects of its practise and thus somehow to accommodate its complexity.

This empirical situation involves a dilemma, which seems to characterise end-user participation as a way to induce developments in organisational design; that between decisions made prior to the participation activities (which may favour particular developments such as the open layout), on the one hand, and the ideas, requirements and attitudes that the participation uncovers, on the other hand. Below, I question the extent to which the organising structure of the open layout might be said to have been decided prior to, or as an integrated part and thus a result of, the participation activities and how the participant's perception of the open layout can be said to change and sustain, in the cause of the same process. This paper discusses how formalised end-user participation, which regards spatial design issues may form a 'double design process' (Stang Våland, 2010) that represent important questions, which may support our understanding of change and development in organisations. In this work, I have been inspired by writings that have attended to organisational design on the basis of concepts that derive from the sensemaking literature (Weick, 1979, 1995; Weick et al., 2005; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) as well as from sociological interactionism (Goffmann, 1959/1990, 1972).

The paper is organised as follows. First, I describe the theoretical background for this research interest and the methodological approach that has guided the study, upon which the paper has been based. Then, I provide a few examples of how formalised end-user participation as a method and open-office layout as design precondition were enfolded in

the case. Finally, I discuss what we might learn from these empirical events, with regards to understanding change and development in organisations.

2 Theoretical background

In organisation studies, the interest in space and architecture has brought forth a number of issues that aim to explore how space and social relations can mutually constitute each other in organisational contexts (e.g., Gagliardi, 1990; Becker and Steele, 1995; Boland and Collopy, 2004; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004; Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Yoo et al., 2006; Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Elsbach and Pratt, 2008; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010). The available studies focus on issues, such as space, as symbolic carriers of meaning that produce organisational identity (Gagliardi, 1990; Hatch, 1997; Yanow, 1995, 1998; Buhl Pedersen, 2006); space and architecture as factors that may communicate and thereby support legitimacy in strategic decision making (Trexler Proffitt and Zahn, 2006); spatial organisation as a catalyser to power and control in organisations (Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Amhøj, 2004; Dale, 2005; Dale and Burrell, 2008) and more 'philosophical' studies that regard space as a broader concept that offers new perspectives on organisational practise (Hernes, 2003, 2004; Kornberger and Clegg, 2003).

Within design fields, such as industrialised product design and computer systems, the involvement of users as an integrated part of the design methodology has been considered central for decades. This focus has established through methodological concepts or practical tools, as well as through extended theorising in often overlapping areas as for example, participatory design (Greenbaum and Kyng, 1991; Schuler and Namioka, 1993), human computer interaction (Anderson, 1994; Dourish, 2006), ethnography in design (e.g., Blomberg, 1993; Forsythe, 1999; Ivey and Sanders, 2006; Dourish, 2006) and new ways of working (Duffy, 1997; Bjerrum and Bødker, 2003; Hansen, 2007; Bjerrum et al., 2007; Bakke, 2007).

In the field of architectural design, this prioritised integration of end-user inputs as a part of the methodological design approach has established at a considerable slower pace (CINARK, 2006; Arkitektur Magasinet, 2009). But as the client's influence has increased due to a number of societal tendencies, her role in the area of architectural design is presently going through current redefinitions; from a singular figure in charge of the budget in a traditionally close relationship between architect and client (Gutman, 1988; Cuff, 1991) to involve a broader and more indistinct assembly of people (Stang Våland, 2010). This indistinct client body is engaged in the actual process of designing and increasingly characterised as a potential co-designer (Boland and Collopy, 2004; Binder et al., 2009), alongside of the architect. Within organisation studies, user involvement has been widely explored, starting with Lewin back in the 1930s and the search for alternative ways to understand and approach change in management and organisation (Lewin, 1951). Although many studies, and also many empirical studies, have addressed employee ownership and participative management, very few studies address architectural projects as contexts to study end-user participation. Luck (2003) and Penn et al. (1999) are exceptions.

If we accept the idea that the relationship between architectural and organisational design processes represents a mutual opportunity, we need to study the interface of these processes at a closer range. There is a lack of empirical studies that discuss how

spatial perspectives might – in practise – contribute to organisational contexts and how organisational and architectural design features might be said to intersect. There are, however, exceptions, where the crossroad between space and architecture, on the one hand, and the life and structure of organisations, on the other hand, has been empirically explored (Gagliardi, 1990; Yanow, 1995, 1998; Amhøj, 2004; Yoo et al., 2006; Ewenstein and Whyte, 2007a, 2007b; Warren, 2008; Marrewijk, 2009; Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010). Among these are studies that address the open-office layout and its implications for motivation and communication (Oldham and Brass, 1979; Hatch, 1987); for knowledge sharing (Bjerrum and Bødker, 2003; Bjerrum et al., 2007; Bakke, 2007) and for power relations (Amhøj, 2004; Hansen, 2007). Other studies focus on organisational space as a producer of stories and the link between texts and buildings (e.g., Yanow, 1995), and on visualisation and material devices as vehicles that enhance embodied experiences and thereby support development in organisations (e.g., Ewenstein and Whyte, 2007a, 2007b; Warren, 2008). Recent studies support a more specific link between architectural and organisational design processes, where the emergence of an architectural design concept and the development of the organisational design are discussed as being mutually influential (Yoo et al., 2006; Marrewijk, 2009). But there is still a need for research to explore the interface between the two design processes: microstudies of how they may influence one another in actual and practical contexts. This paper aims to contribute to fill this gap.

3 Methods and data collection

This paper is based on a longitudinal, ethnographic study of formalised end-user participation in architectural design processes that involved two empirical cases, of which the Town Hall project represents one (Stang Våland, 2010). The data collection took place over a period of approximately 3 years (2005–2008) and involved three main methods: participant observation (Van Maanen, 1988; Emerson et al., 2001; Baszanger and Dodier, 2004; Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2005), semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1997; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002; Holstein and Gubrium, 2004; Järvinen, 2005) and document analysis (Smith, 2001; Prior, 2003, 2004; Atkinson and Coffey, 2004).

In this process, participant observation served as a central point of departure. It included access to the majority of the participant activities included in the project: I attended six full-day interactive participation workshops, each with 30–60 participants from the client organisation and two 3 h plenary meetings, to which the municipality administration at large (approximately 500 staff at the time) was invited. The observation study also involved eight preparation and development meetings between the parties in the project: gatherings between the client's top management team and the so-called 'process designers' who were responsible for facilitating the participation activities, as well as meetings between client representatives, process designers, architects, engineers and constructors.

Alongside the study of the participation activities as they took place in the client organisation, I also spent 5 months of full-time participant observation at the process designer office during the period when the end-user participation was at a peak (2005–2006). This somewhat new role seems to go beyond the services involved in, for example, facility management. The idea is not only to secure the resonance between client's general requirements and the emergence of the building as a construction but also

to consider the participation activities as a strategic change opportunity for the client as an organisation. In the project, this closer integration between architectural and organisational design processes was an articulated aspiration. During this period of field work, I was involved in numerous informal conversations among the process designers about how the participation could challenge and support a stronger link between the two design processes. These conversations regarded the participation's content (practical exercises), its organisation and facilitation, how the results were applied into the two parallel processes of developing the building (as a design concept and a construction) and the organisation (as a part of the merger between the two municipal administrations).

I undertook 20 semi-structured interviews with representatives from the client organisation (managing director, department managers and staff members), the process designers and the architects. In each interview, I used a provisional, handwritten interview guide, to support a number of issues and questions I considered relevant. But I also kept up an open approach in these exchanges, where relevant (and sometimes) surprising issues and stories that came up during the interview were given substantial space and time, to produce new and significant data. Finally, I had access to a substantial amount of documents (written proceedings and reports; sketches; diagrams, and more) that regarded the development of the town hall as a building project and the organisation's involvement in this process.

4 The central dilemma: participation as design method vs. open-office as design condition

In the following, I describe how end-user participation as a method and the open-office layout as a structural design condition seemed to encounter in the project. I do this by first illustrating the potentially conflicting nature of these two phenomena as it came forth in the case. On this basis, I provide a few brief examples of how these (participation as method and open layout as design condition) were introduced and unfolded.

Before the Town Hall project was set off as a design process, the managing director of the municipality administration went on a promotion tour, to provide staff with information about the forthcoming building project. In these dialogue sessions, the open-office layout was presented as a design precondition in the project, and the staff's resistance toward this structuring principle was obvious. In their opinion, the new layout would involve substantial changes to the work processes and routines they knew from the present facilities. As one staff member remarks in a subsequent interview:

“It's no secret that we, the staff, have been really, really worried, because we think that our work is very well suited for small offices, where we can sit with the clients and discuss things, etc. [...] [W]e had some meetings about it [the participation activities], and the staff did come forth with some statements, but it was made clear very quickly that it wasn't going to be like that. [...] The staff could kick and scream – management had already decided that we would have these open offices.”

They ‘could kick and scream’ she says, but the decision of the open-office layout was already made. Her statement represents a complex meeting between two current societal tendencies that both represent what the municipality's director repeatedly characterised as a ‘modern, public organisation’ in later interviews. Here, end-user participation is considered a vehicle to support processes of strategic change in organisational contexts,

while the open-office structure represents a catalyser for extended knowledge sharing and collaboration (as well as an economising opportunity). With reference to how spatial design and organisational development may intersect, it seems relevant to consider the relationship between these tendencies. As the staff member points out in the above statement, the outcome of the participation activities was premediated to suit the open layout as a basic design premise. But as a design approach, the process was also based on the notion of emergence through the continuous interactions, in which a large number of staff was asked to express their meaning. To understand more about the association between these somewhat contradictory forces, I now provide a few examples of how they were characterised in official documents and public speeches of the project.

5 The open-office layout as presented in the official documents

The open-office layout represented a general design precondition that was widely communicated to the staff. However, although the staff knew the decision was conclusive, they kept returning to this subject. In my aspiration, to understand this persistent revisit to a decision that was seemingly already made and a topic that was not in question, I have looked into the project's available document material to see how the developments of the building's interior layout was presented. What I found was that the open-office structure perhaps was not so definite after all. The following three accounts represent internal proceedings that report on the progression of the interior design process, which were shared with the staff through the intranet. They are produced in the period of approximately 1 year (2005–2006), in which continuous end-user participation represented an integrated part of the development of the building:

“Although this work [that regards the conceptual development of the interior layout] has come far, no steps have been taken that locks the process or the new town hall into a particular design solution”

“The interior design principles should, however be reconsidered when [the neighboring municipality in the merger] has become integrated in the project organisation. It should be clear that the principles of ‘new office’ and open office should be nuanced and further developed, according to functionality [...] in the new joint unit”

“Everything is up for grabs [with regards to the interior design process] and no stone should be left unturned!”

Considering the open-office layout as a basic precondition, the three accounts might have left the alert participant confused. Was it, or wasn't it, possible to influence the open-office layout? As “no steps have been taken that locks the process”; “open office should be nuanced and further developed” and “Everything is up for grabs” the participants found it pertinent to make continuous investigations into the matter. Below, I discuss how such contradictory messages may form in the cause of these interactions.

6 The participation activities as presented in the official speeches

As a methodological approach, end-user participation also represented a precondition in the project. It was the staff's opportunity to inform the architectural design solution and

thereby to secure the connection between the building and the practise it was supposed to accommodate. The point was emphasised by the managing director in his introduction to the first participation workshop:

“At this point it is important that we identify what kind of building we aim for, what we need in our building. [...] In this workshop and the next, it is important to bring all opinions forth. [...] This is a marvelous opportunity for us. Most of us have never tried to influence our workspace to such an extent.”

In this statement, the managing director emphasises the invitation to contribute to the design process. With expressions like “identify what kind of building we aim for”, “what we need” and “influence our workspace”, he somehow appoints the participant as a co-designer, alongside of the architect. Also, the consequent use of pronouns like ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’, makes the staff’s responsibility appear more accurate by being shared (see Weick, 2003 for a discussion). In his introduction to the second participation workshop, he repeats the invitation:

“We keep pulling colleagues in and make demands on the form and function of the building. [...] It is a big responsibility to represent someone else, and you need to be in correspondence with your backing group in this work. You are also advisors to those who are designing the building. But you will not be taken hostage: you can bring in ideas and opinions and needs, but you won’t be held responsible. Management will work further on the suggestions with the winning consortium [in the architectural competition].”

Again, the managing director gives the staff an active role as being ‘representatives’ and ‘advisors’. But with regards to the staff’s actual opportunity to inform in the design solution, the confusion from the document material seems to persist. In the second part of the statement, he ruptures the image of the participants as co-designer by pointing out that they would not ‘be held responsible’. In this way, responsibility seems to be given and withdrawn by the same means and on the same occasion.

The examples above illustrate how these preconditions not only represent a contradiction by their basic constitution as the design solution you are invited to contribute to is already established. Also, they indicate the considerable inconsistency that decisions in organisational practise is often surrounded by. It was not entirely clear how the open layout as a structuring principle and the staffs’ position as co-designers would turn out, and it is on this basis, the participants can keep on discussing an issue that was presented as having a decisive solution to it. As I outlined in the introduction to this paper, the staffs’ attitude toward the open layout did not as such change as a result of the participation, with reference to their preference for individual cubicle offices. However, the continuous discussions seemed to catalyse an important modification in their position. In the following, I briefly present three empirical events that might illustrate this attitudinal adjustment toward the open layout, which seemed to form among the participants in the cause of the participation activities.

7 Attitude toward the open layout 1

The first round of workshops served as a kind of preparation before the building project set off (and also prior to the architectural competition). Here, my field notes report of a substantial resistance toward the open layout:

“We just want to hold on to our individual offices!”

“Why do we choose this layout? Because it is cheaper, because it works better or because we can’t see other options?”

“What is our actual right to privacy?”

The quotes illustrate the participants’ initial approach to what the open layout might mean to their work processes and relationships. In short and definitive statements, they point out their stand without considerable reflection.

8 Attitude toward the open layout 2

The next round of workshops focused on departmental location; on the proximity between colleagues as well as that between staff and clients. The participants were asked to produce scenarios for how the departments should be spatially organised. My field notes report on considerations that might be said to hold an increased level of reflection. The following accounts are quotes from the discussions:

“Even though we have individual offices today, we always keep the doors open in order to secure connections and knowledge sharing [...]”

“I worry about the passageway traffic [caused by the open layout]: in order to get through to the appendages of the building you have to pass through certain hallway zones, which may cause disturbance [...]”

“There will always be 10–15% who don’t want to engage in it [the open office]. They don’t like it and they will probably never will. So they should probably also consider whether it’s the right place for them to be [...]”

The quotes illustrate that the anxiety persists, but seemingly in a more reflexive format. While the accounts from the first workshops predominantly involved biased statements, these seem to reveal reflection about complex issues such as knowledge sharing and whether workspace layout may exclude certain staff from the organisation.

9 Attitude toward the open layout 3

In the third round of workshops, the staff at large was invited to partake in departmental workshops (19 totalled), in which each department discussed the organisation of their future workspace. In exercises that were organised in a scale, which corresponded with the department’s forthcoming physical size, the staff produced concrete input to their own spatial layout. The events took place in an empty hall, where the scale was simulated with chalk marks on the floor and a number of different foam replica were used to represent office furniture. The exercises addressed issues such as how the workstations could be arranged to secure good collaboration opportunities and a quiet work environment. One participant describes this experience in an interview conducted shortly before occupation:

“[I]t is difficult to imagine in detail – I haven’t tried it yet. No one in my department has yet experienced the open office. [...] You have to make it

visible. In that way it was quite an enjoyable process. [...] I think that, all in all with the process with those bricks we moved around [the foam replica] and all... [T]hen we got a design suggestion back [from the designers] and we responded to that, and then we got to the last negotiation. It became a good process. [...] Here, we got to influence it, and you probably can't prevent such things [design adjustments] to happen in the process. [...] These are things we realised on the way."

Here, a further shift seems to have established. First, the staff member acknowledges that she cannot know how the open office will work as she has not yet experienced it. Second, she recognises the material objects and visible effects that characterised the workshop as means to understand more about the issues at stake and describes the exchanges between participants and designers as 'negotiation[s]'; mutual processes of interpretation, through which decisions about the design solution can be made. Finally, she emphasises that these processes are not static but rather dynamic accounts, and that she has learned from the participation: "These are things we realised on the way".

10 Discussion

The empirical examples outlined above suggest that the staff's attitude to the open-office layout as a central structural principle somehow modified as the project evolved. The development went from strong hostility and biased resistance, toward reflective hesitation and possibly extended knowledge about the organisational practise that the new building was supposed to accommodate on the basis of, for example, the merger. The data indicate that the staff's ability to discuss and comprehend the open layout as a framework for professional activities matured, as the participation activities evolved and the building project emerged. In this process, the participant's arguments seemed to become more complex as they became accustomed to converse about the spatial organisation of their practise.

In addition, the data suggest that although the open-office layout formed a fixed design precondition in the project, the way it was articulated and documented in the project proceedings cannot be considered as clear-cut. Not only did the level of determination come forth as blurred with regards to how decisions were made and what they may have meant. In addition, the role and responsibilities of the participants seemed somewhat unclear.

Returning to the idea of a link between architectural and organisational design processes, the aspiration in this paper is to explore this association by discussing the dilemma between end-user participation as a design method and open-office layout as a design condition – and a few of the questions that the dilemma might reveal. In the following, I first turn to the nature of the participation activities by revisiting the sociological tradition of interactionism and in particular Goffman's concept of impression management (Goffman, 1959/1990, 1970, 1972). In the paper's final section, I bring this notion of negotiation and turn-taking in social action further by discussing the empirical events in the case as processes of sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). This paper concludes by providing three analytical points that may be drawn on the basis of the study.

11 End-user participation as processes of social interaction

As a method, participation is based on interactions between people in a social context; on numerous different smaller and larger exchanges, through which the engaged actors interpret and negotiate their practise. Attitude and identity form as the actors affect each other and are being affected; a process that takes place as one continuous succession of reciprocal exchanges, where we become shaped and reshaped as a result of the social exchange (Goffman, 1959/1990, see also Mead 1934/1998).

In the Town Hall project, the participation activities formed a central design approach, in which a main methodological characteristic was the organisation of meetings or interactions between the various parties that were involved in the project (in this paper, staff and managers are in focus, but the project also counted architects, process designers and other advisers). To analyse a few of the developments in the project, we need to understand more about the dynamics that these meetings may hold. One of the concepts Goffman developed to comprehend the strategies we navigate by as participants in social interactions is impression management (Goffman, 1959/1990; Kristiansen, 2005; Mik-Meyer and Villadsen, 2007). The concept describes how we as participants in interactions naturally attempt to define and control them, with reference to the messages and intentions we want to bring forth to support the situation's preferable outcome (e.g., that the open-office layout is a good idea, which would support the organisation's ability to perform as a 'modern, public organisation' – or that the open layout is not a good idea as it substantially mismatch the type of services that the organisation is supposed to manage). In addition, it refers to the image we as participants want to be presented by (e.g., as a director who continuously engage in the participation activities on equal terms as the rest of the staff; who will have a workstation in the open office on the same terms; who actively listens to the input produced and so on – or as staff who continuously accepted the invitation to engage in the participation activities and thus in the creation of the forthcoming work environment; who critically respond to how the new spatial environment may affect the services, and so on). In this interplay between the participants and the intentions they represent, on the one hand, and the opponents they interact with, on the other hand, the negotiation unfold.

In the interactions that constituted the participation activities in the Town Hall project, we might say that the participants involved in continuous exchanges, in which they mutually controlled or affected each other's behaviours and reactions. Although the participants' position and status was known and often commented by especially the participants of lower rank ("*The staff could kick and scream – management had already decided that we would have these open offices*"), managers and staff did participate side-by-side in the project, across status and with reference to the same conceptual event: the interactive conversations about the spatial organisation of work processes and relationships. In Goffman's approach, rank and position are of minor importance in social interaction. Rather it is the rhythm or dynamics of these exchanges that are at issue (see also e.g., Weick, 1979). Again, the open-office layout is a relevant example. As a theme, it never occurred as a subject matter that was formally addressed in the exercises that constituted the participation activities. But it was indeed the topic that caught most attention. In the process of interaction, it is the participants' ability to handle or balance this subject, which was not as such on the menu. Through their continuous acceptance of the invitation to participate and their insistent revisit to this particular theme, the staff in part controls the interaction and its content and dynamics. Conversely,

the managers, with distinct help from the process designers, who facilitate the participation activities, not only select the themes and issues that form the activities as a framework. Also, they strongly influence the extent, to which the insistent interest in the open layout is being reflected in the interpretations of the input, provided by the participants. In this way, the participants mutually form each other's arguments in what Goffman calls 'strategic interaction' (Goffman, 1970, 1972). We act strategically and intentionally, but across rank and social order and always according to context. This means that although our intentions seem clear, they get reshuffled as a result of the interaction and the strategic preference of the other half.

Elaborating on this notion of strategic negotiation and the means we use to navigate it, Goffman (among many others) also emphasise the importance of metaphors and symbols (e.g., Goffman, 1959/1990). As we know from the previous descriptions and empirical example from the case, material devices played a central role in the project. First, the project was physical in its basic constitution: a new house with all of the material aspects it represented. Also, many of the devices and 'tools', as they were called by the process designers that facilitated the participation activities, were material and visual. These devices also affected the negotiation. In one of the above statements, a staff member points out this aspect as a particular asset:

“You have to make it visible. In that way it was quite an enjoyable process.
[...] I think that, all in all with the process with those bricks we moved around
[the foam replica] and all...”

Here, the focus is not on the shape of the layout, but rather on the process; the way through which the participants were given the chance to comprehend the implications that the new workspace would potentially produce. The data shows that the process designers responsible for organising these workshops (where foam replica simulated possible furniture in a setting that corresponded to the actual size of the future workspace), in retrospect found the high level of tangibility problematic. Considering the considerable disappointment among the participants, who experienced adjustments of their department's spatial layout (which is indeed considered common in a building project of this size) after the workshop, they found the exercises to be too concrete and lifelike. Here, the workshops represented a sense of realism, so genuine that the participants somehow became 'designers'. However, it also comes forth in the interviews, with process designers and staff alike, that the concreteness gave the participants a tangible sense of the approaching conditions of the building (with regards to work routines, professional relationships, exposure and many other aspects).

Returning to the central dilemma at issue in this paper, between the participation as a method that is based on interaction and the open layout as a premediated design condition and the way that these were negotiated among two of the core groups of participating actors (managers and staff), we might say that both parties set off with resistant intentions. Although management had chosen the open layout, possibly to reflect a normative societal expectation of developing into a 'modern, public organisation', the staff objected to the layout for reasons that may have been professional (with regards to how their work had been hitherto organised) as well as emotional (basic resistance to change). In my exploration of how interactive processes of social action are constituted by continuous turn-taking and incessant reciprocal negotiation of meaning and intentions in organisational contexts, I now take a step further into how these exchanges took place between management and staff in the project.

12 Strategic change as turn-taking between processes of sensemaking and sensegiving

From a management perspective, we might consider the empirical events that have been outlined above as steps in a process of strategic change. With reference to the merger between the two municipalities and to the open-office layout as a fixed design condition, the participation activities can be perceived as the director's attempt to implement certain organisational adjustments of strategic observance and thereby to be considered as manipulative. In the following, I draw on the idea of strategic change in organisations as reciprocal processes of sense making and sense giving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007) to explore how these complex exchanges seemed to evolve in the project, where the participation activities were applied as the central crossroad.

In this approach, the development and implementation of change in organisations are based on an ambiguous initial vision. It is in the ability to negotiate, establish and continuously adjust this vision that the opportunities to change resides. With reference to the events from the case, we might recognise the notion of a somewhat abstract vision that evolved through the process of participation. In this process, the idea of the municipality administration as a 'modern, public organisation' could be perceived as a vision that the open layout might support. In the project, the participants produced inputs to inform the (architectural) design process, while concurrently being informed by the same production process (thus, affecting the organisational design). It is in this reciprocal process of participation that the staff's possible acceptance of or adjustment to the open layout as an idea may have emerged. By partaking in the continuous conversations about their work and relationships in a spatial perspective, the staff's comprehension of the project's indistinct vision evolved – in the interface between the articulated preconditions, the content of the workshop conversations, the symbols and material objects that characterised the participation activities and more. Not in a direct transference from the director's original intention, with reference to the previous discussion of the potential dissolution of formal rank in such complex negotiations, but in an adjusted version where organisational perceptions and architectural shapes develop among the participants in the project. Gioia and Chittipeddi explain that

“As a result of the sensemaking and sensegiving efforts, the original abstract vision is likely to become more well-defined and undergo some modifications.”
(Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p.434)

The approach might contribute to explain a few of the developments in the Town Hall project. First, the director established an understanding of the organisation's attitude by undertaking a promotion tour where he informed the staff about the building's general prospects. In this sense making process, he developed “an overall impression about [the organisation's] history, culture, strengths, and weaknesses” (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p.442). The tour also produced sense making by the staff, who tried to comprehend and respond to the information given. Both parties were thus

“trying to figure out the meaning of the proposed strategic change effort, what its effect on them would be, and what their role in it would entail (which in some cases led to resistance to the proposed changes).” (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991)

The open-office layout represented one such case that the staff openly rejected to in these initial dialogue sessions.

After the tour, the director took on what may be characterised as a 'sense giving mode' (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p.443). He captured the results of the promotion tour in a brief report and used this as a means to inform the staff about the messages he had received on the basis of their input. He returned their input by "supplying a workable interpretation to those who would be affected by his actions" (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). His report made up such an interpretation:

"Management also notes the explicit skepticism in terms of the open offices. Management is still of the opinion that the advantages attached to the open office and its adjacent common facilities (fx. meeting rooms, contemplative spaces as well as phone- and conversation spaces) weighs more heavily than the disadvantages, and should thus still be pursued. We focus on collaboration in a learning organisation, and call for a physical framework that can accommodate this type of organisation."

The statement may be seen as an example of how sense giving is activated by an experience of a gap in the process of sense making (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). Although aware of that the open-office layout represented a basic condition in the project, the staff attempted to fill this gap of sense making by actively engaging in the participation and openly bringing forth their contemplations (sense giving). In this way, sense making and sense giving took place in a reciprocation, in which the participation activities endorsed "a discursive ability that allows [the involved parties] to fashion persuasive accounts" (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007, p.58). Here, we recognise Goffman's balance act of strategic interaction from the discussion above.

As the project's aspirations involved prospects with a high level of ambiguity (e.g., the idea of using the building project as an asset to become a 'modern, public organisation' and as illustrated in the statement above to induce "collaboration in a learning organisation"), the participation activities represented an exchange opportunity, where the constitution of these somewhat vague descriptions, what they meant and for whom, was continuously discussed and negotiated in the workshop. So although "sensegiving carries with it several uncertainties, including whether others will adopt one's preferred definition of organisational reality" (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007, p.78), the different parties (staff, management, architects and process designers) all contributed to inform the emergence of the final design solution.

In this complex development process, the manager seemed to use this ambiguity as a means to maintain involvement and thus to support the opportunity for exchange to take place and thereby influence the many design decisions that were made along the way. As a result of this process, we might say that a mutual understanding of the design solution (that included an open structure) may eventually have established in the organisation. The process potentially legitimises the open layout as a decision, while it concurrently supports the organisation's ability to discuss and articulate complex organisational issues through the continuous opportunity to discuss these (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). Here, the 'discursive ability' did not lead to a reestablishment of the traditional office layout. Rather, it might have supported the organisation's capability to comprehend some of the complexity a modern, public organisation contains. From this perspective, the design of the interior design of the town hall might be seen as a result of a process, rather than that of premediated decisions.

The adjustments did not only affect the staff's rationale and initial intentions, as their ability to discuss the open layout matured. Also, the director, who engaged in the majority of the participation activities in the project, modified his approach accordingly.

In this way, we might say that the outline of the vision developed on the basis of the continuous turn taking. In an interview, which took place after the participation activities, he declared:

“After all, it’s not a laboratory we run. It is professional, social work place. So there will be some who say: ‘we can’t thrive in such an exposed environment. We can’t make it work when being watched over all the time’. Then we have to find out how many they are and what we can do to protect those people. We have had the discussions about steady or dynamic work stations. In this organisation, we have dynamic work stations, battling to get a table every morning. Well, if one department says: we get much more peace and quiet if we have steady work stations. Great! Give them steady work stations. You can choose! If we then experience too few work stations [...], then we have to handle that by some kind of alteration agreement.”

Here, the director somehow seems to emphasise that change can only take place in collaboration with the people who constitute the organisation (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995). In the Town Hall project, this framework was constituted by the participation activities, and the response from the participants was used as a catalyser to secure progress in the project, as a design process. In this approach, it is the exchanges that occur through the participation, rather than the premediated conditions that represent the central design parameter. Not so much for the content of these decisions, but more for the process of making them. On this tension span, organisational developments can take place.

13 Conclusion

In this paper, I have aimed at exploring the link between organisational and architectural design processes through an empirical study of how end-user participation was applied as a means to inform both designs. The process of designing a municipality town hall has served as the case, while the dilemma between participation as a method and the open-office structure as a design prerequisite has served as the guideline. The incompatibility is based on the argument that the participation activities facilitate discussions about decisions already made and that the method is thereby generative and redundant by the same means. Generative, through the developments that the interaction in these activities may produce. Redundant, as a disguised attempt to implement specific strategic changes. By looking at how the open-office was presented and perceived among managers and staff throughout the project, my aspiration has been to discuss a few of the characteristics of end-user participation as a method and how this approach may have affected the participants’ viewpoints during the project.

In the following, I make three points that refer to how a closer link between organisational and architectural design may be considered productive and how the participation method may enhance such opportunities. The first point is that although the open-office layout kept up as a structural principle and the participants’ general attitude to it stayed the same, the rationale, upon which the format of the open office was perceived, adjusted among the participants. While the participants produced inputs to inform parts of the spatial design, they concurrently gained knowledge about their organisational practise and the condition of such. Here, the rationale upon which they based their attitude toward the spatial design reflected the current organisational design.

But in the intersection between these two design processes, the rationale changed – to concurrently designate an organisational redesign. People cannot foresee a practise they do not know (Weick, 1995),¹ indeed not when the arrangement involves a new building and a merger between two organisations, as was the case in the Town Hall project. We comprehend the changes we are subjected to in retrospect – subsequent to the events that constituted the change. But what we can do in organisations is to discuss what we are doing now and have done in the past, and thereby indicate opportunities to modify practise (Weick, 1979, 1995). By consistently prioritising and exploring the notion of this ‘double design process’ between organisational and architectural design (Stang Våland, 2010), where the spatial organisation of work is the perspective, through which the participation unfold and material devices are used to enhance the interaction, we may contribute to establish new ways to support change in organisational contexts.

The second point elaborates on the first. This study showed that the enhancement of the link between organisational and architectural design processes produces an opportunity to revisit an old mantra in organisation studies; that to know better is to see better (e.g., Weick, 1979, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), so to speak, in the flesh. The data illustrate that the spatial perspective and the use of material devices: sketches, pictograms, cardboard games, photographs – as well as the foam replica that illustrated furniture in the simulated future workspace – outlined with chalk marks on the floor of an empty building,² affected the participants’ ability to comprehend the future work conditions and the opportunities and challenges these would possibly represent. Here, the material quality represents an approach, through which practise can be embodied (see e.g., Ewenstein and Whyte, 2007a, 2007b; Warren, 2008). The data even indicate that the participants almost got to see too well: that when the workshops were too concrete and lifelike, the disappointment was desolating to some and thus potentially destructive to the subsequent interaction and the progression of the project. On the other hand, the data also report that the participants generally acknowledged the material qualities as leverages to extended understanding, and thus potentially as additional organisational pieces to form new meaning. They were given the chance to train their ability not only to see better but also to see more.

As a method, end-user participation in architectural design processes produces an extended organisational repertoire among the participants; ways through which they can understand and approach work processes and relationships. It is on the basis of this extended repertoire that their rationale and initial intentions can modify (Goffman 1959/1990, 1970). We cannot know how this extended scope will unfold among the users, how it may affect their practise in the future and be applied as leverage to support further developments in the organisational design. But we can establish that the double design process, which includes spatial and organisational matters, support not only the production of alternatives but also the ability to navigate them, which is my third point.

When we get used to seeing more, we learn to see the alternatives and to use these as a resource (Boland and Collopy, 2004). As a method, the participation can be said to increase the participants’ experience of complexity. The many interactions and devices that constituted these processes produced a multitude of outcome; concerns, preferences and ideas that held a considerable indistinct shape. On the other hand, the same processes may also have reduced the level of complexity. Through these continuous interactions and negotiations, the chances that their interpretations got influenced by the knowledge obtained in these processes also seemed to increase. Looking at it from an investment perspective, these activities clearly represented a substantial expenditure for the client on

a financial, practical and emotional level. But if the investment produces increased understanding of central organisational aspirations and a broader scope of perception, it might be said to overshadow the initial costs. The participation activities may have caused an extended understanding of the complexity that organisational practise is necessarily surrounded by and established an organisation able to navigate the joys and sorrows of a modern work environment. In this way, the approach may also enable the design of the end users as organisational members. It shapes and forms the user to mentally fit the potential physical and organisational structures of the future practise. Who not only comprehend an open-office structure but also challenge and manoeuvre it accordingly. We need to develop our knowledge about this analytical tension between the increase and reduction of complexity to understand more about change and development in organisations. This study suggests that the link between organisational and architectural design processes may help us to do so.

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Notes

¹We also know from several studies that user representatives who are invited to contribute to an architectural design process are likely to suggest disguised versions of their present workspace (e.g., Weick, 2003; Gehry, 2004).

²The inspiration to this workshop arrangement was taken from the Danish dogma film *Dogville* by Lars von Trier, where the story's physical setting was presented by chalk marks rather than walls, in order to provoke or dislocate our viewpoints as audience. This shift in perspective is also relevant with reference to the events in the project.