15. Fun-parks or *parkour*? The ambiguities and paradox of planning pro-creative office design

*Torkild Thanem and Sara Winterstorm Värlander*

Over the past century open office design has taken a number of forms, of which the open-plan office and office landscaping may be the most well known. The open-plan office, which traditionally was adopted in work environments housing white-collar workers such as typists and book-keeping assistants, lines up workstations to expose individuals to supervision (Hofbauer 2000). Conversely, office landscaping is less linear, more informal, and organises employees in circles and groups to facilitate communication and interaction. Nevertheless, it often organises workstations to make different groups easily recognisable, and employs principles of distance and visibility to inscribe differentials in status and authority between employees at different hierarchical levels (ibid.). While dividing walls and doors and private offices are at odds with any school of open office design, both the open-plan office and office landscaping are underpinned by a formal definition of office space, its use and purpose. But in recent years organisations have started to adopt distinctive forms of office design that give a new edge to openness in the workplace. By removing spatial and social structures by design, these approaches are typically intended to increase performance by fostering openness, spontaneous interaction and learning: like a fun-park. And, as such, many have associated this new way of organising with increased creativity.

Many trace the beginnings of this workplace architectural revolution to the invention of Apple Computers. Apple made much of not being IBM, and they did not want any corporate uniforms, strict timetables or rigid job descriptions. Nor did they want their employees to sit alone in an allocated office box. New terms such as ‘hot-desking’ and ‘hoteling’ entered the vocabulary of office design, and an increasing number of workplaces have come to contain ‘chill-out rooms’ and fitness centres (Bell 2007). By 2001, a UK government report entitled ‘Tomorrow’s Workplace: Fulfilment or Stress?’ (Moynaoh and Worsley 2001) used the recent past as a guide to the future and envisaged the twenty-first-century office as a ‘recreational
centre’ where the toys and tasks differed little from those found at home. Today, much has been made of Google’s revolutionary and autonomous organisational processes. Many hold it up as a beacon that should be leading other organisations away from the traditional, closed spaces of organisational architecture. However, as underlined by the Google CEO Eric Schmidt, there is only a small part of Google that works like this: the parts where new ideas and innovations are developed. Most of the organisation is very ‘tight’ and very conventional. The company could not function otherwise (Bilton and Cummings 2010).

The substantial increase in open office design has prompted growing interest amongst researchers into the values it offers organisations and individuals. However, research within this stream remains divided and contradictory (Maher and von Hippel 2005). Some researchers maintain that open office design impacts negatively on employee satisfaction, leading to loss of privacy, job dissatisfaction, impaired performance (Sundstrom et al. 1980, Block and Stokes 1989, Hofbauer 2000, Maher and von Hippel 2005, Oommen et al. 2009), and increased labour control (Hofbauer 2000). Conversely, Kornberger and Clegg (2004) have argued that negative control can be turned into a positive power through ‘the generative building’ which houses a number of open spaces and meeting places. In their view, the generative building stimulates open-ended use and spontaneous encounters between people from different organisational levels and departments. Similarly, others have contended that open office design constitutes a flexible space which allows for reduced set-up and renovation times, accommodates greater numbers of employees in smaller volumes of space (Brennan et al. 2002), and facilitates social interaction and communication (Zahn 1991). On the whole, this has been seen to improve job satisfaction, staff morale, information exchange and productivity (Brennan et al. 2002).

In summary, some of the more recent accounts have tended to highlight the power of open office design to shape, control or otherwise facilitate particular forms of employee behaviour and unleash their creativity, while others have warned against a one-dimensional view on open office design as enabling creativity and efficiency. Although previous research has argued against spatial determinism and acknowledged that open spaces may be enacted by employees in a variety of ways (e.g. Sundstrom et al. 1980, Hatch 1987, Elsbach 2003), this remains an under-researched topic. In particular, little attention has been given to the ‘new spirit’ of open office design that is explicitly geared towards boosting fun and creativity and to the ways in which the intentions of this ‘pro-creative’ office design may be subverted and resisted.

In this chapter, we investigate how pro-creative forms of open office design may afford a broader range of behaviour than originally intended.
More specifically, we argue that it may undermine the kind of spontaneous interaction and creativity that it is intended to foster, and instead lead to subversive practices through which its incumbents express alternative forms of creativity. More specifically, we argue that greater spatial openness may inhibit difference and originality and thwart ‘liberation’ from conventions and habits as employees re-invoke spatial and social structures and boundaries.

To do this we introduce three perspectives that help us investigate the unintended consequences of this ‘new spirit’ of open office design: Gibson’s theory of affordances to study the connection between office design and behaviour without invoking spatial determinism; Foucault’s notion of panoptic surveillance in combination with Gabriel’s notion of the glass cage to examine the disciplinary politics of office design; and de Certeau’s notion of tactics to highlight the ambivalent ways in which people may challenge and subvert the intentions of office design. We then investigate two examples that problematise the positive values currently prescribed to open office design and its promotion of spontaneous interaction, creativity and learning. The first example draws on our study of open office design and work practices at a Swedish occupation pensions specialist. The second example draws on our study of open office design and work practices at a new model call centre in another European country. Finally, we conclude that a more fruitful approach, if organising for creativity really is the aim, is an organic mix of open and closed, new and old, private and public spaces and the concept of parkour, or transgressive free running within, between and across these spaces.

UNDERSTANDING THE AMBIGUITY OF PRO-CREATIVE OFFICE DESIGN

Affordances

Gibson’s (1979) concept of affordances provides a way to avoid spatial determinism without ignoring the power of space and spatial design. In other words, it provides a way to understand how spatial design features affect people without determining social behaviour, interaction and practice. The concept of affordances concerns what the environment offers its inhabitants – what it provides, furnishes or affords. In other words, it suggests that the environment affords, suggests and makes itself available to certain uses while constraining others. For example, a stairway affords walking more than it does sleeping, a bench with a backrest affords comfortable sitting more than a bench without a backrest, and, as in the
example from Japan in Figure 15.1, we can see how this ‘anti-homeless’ bench affords sitting but not lying down.

In this sense, affordances are functional and objective aspects of the environment (Hutchby 2001: 448). But affordances are also relational and subjective aspects of the environment: what an environment affords is different for different users. What is afforded depends both on the environment and the user (Gibson 1979: 129). For example, perceived and attained boundaries in bipedal stair-climbing are affected by body size and body proportions as well as by hip-joint flexibility and relative leg-strength (Meeuwsen 1991). Moreover, affordances are a result of people’s past knowledge and experiences (Lakoff 1987, Norman 1988, Jordan et al. 1998), and the use afforded by certain environments and artefacts are governed by social or technical rules that must be learned by its users (Hutchby 2001). For example, for fellow employees to stop and talk to each other in the photocopier room or by the water-cooler they must feel that this is socially acceptable (Fayard and Weeks 2007).

The importance of learning and knowledge is further emphasised through the concept of dynamic affordances. In management and organisation theory, this concept has been introduced to understand how learning, knowing and knowledge emerge through dynamic interaction with the
world or with an artefact, a technology or a discourse in the world (Cook and Brown 1999, McNulty 2002). However, this can be further applied to understand the affordances of an environment. As dynamic affordances ‘emerge as part of the (dynamic) interaction with the world’ (Cook and Brown 1999: 390), learning, knowing and knowledge do not merely result from learning rules or from past experience and knowledge. People learn, know and develop new knowledge about an artefact or environment and how to use it by interacting with it – and what is afforded changes with the interaction. Changes or developments in dynamic affordances create facilities or frustrations. The theory is that facilities result when more is afforded and frustrations result when less is afforded. Hence, we might think that greater open space would afford more creativity. A room without chairs, for example, offers many possibilities.

While the concept of affordances makes it possible to analyse how particular features of open-space office design are materially constituted and how an open-space office is spatially organised to afford certain uses and users more than others, most affordance research presumes a simplified and depoliticised understanding of the human subject and social relations among humans. This may be the case because affordance research has primarily concerned itself with relations between humans and the natural or technical environment, ignoring how affordances may affect social relations between humans. Arguing that the alteration of the natural environment by humans has made life easier for humans and acknowledging that humans thereby have ‘made life harder for most of the other animals’, Gibson (1979: 130) does not recognise that these alterations may profoundly alter relations between humans, frustrate rather than facilitate human relations, and make life harder for some humans. This is a problem of power relations which remains largely neglected in recent organisational research on ‘social affordances’ (see Fayard and Weeks 2007). Although the notion of social affordances recognises how spatial and social features of a setting combine to promote or hamper social interaction, a more politically conscious re-articulation of affordances is needed to understand how open office designs are embedded in the spatial politics of organisations – that is, how open office designs are infused with power in ways that facilitate certain uses, users and social relations but frustrate others.

**Disciplinary Politics**

Since the 1980s Foucault’s (1977) studies of panoptic surveillance have had a significant impact on the understanding of power and control mechanisms in contemporary organisations. Panoptic forms of surveillance have been found in a number of management technologies, from
accounting, to information technology, to human resource management and teams (see e.g. Miller and O’Leary 1987, Zuboff 1988, Townley 1994, Sewell 1998). While it may seem obvious that the lack of dividing walls and doors in open office design makes its inhabitants visible to colleagues and managers, the notion of panoptic surveillance remains a powerful tool in helping us shed light on the politics of affordances and understand the visual logic and power relations of open office design (e.g. Visker 1995).

Gabriel’s (2005) notion of the glass cage extends Foucault’s understanding of panoptic surveillance and further problematises the visualisation of contemporary society and organisations. ‘Like the panopticon, the glass cage acts as a metaphor for the formidable machinery of contemporary surveillance’ (ibid.: 18), which exposes employees to the gaze of colleagues and managers through a range of electronic, spatial, psychological and cultural technologies. As such, the glass cage is an entrapment, but it is more fragile and ‘affords greater ambiguity and irony’ than the panopticon (ibid.). The glass cage ‘seeks to hide the reality of entrapment rather than display it’ (ibid.: 20), and constitutes a display case, container or glass palace which highlights ‘the uniqueness of what it contains rather than constraining or oppressing it’ (ibid.). At the same time, Gabriel, like Foucault, acknowledges that power is not without resistance. However, the glass cage provokes ‘more subtle and nuanced acts of disobedience and defiance’ as employees seek to ‘create spaces that are sheltered from continuous exposure or, at least, are only semi-visible from the vantage of power’ (ibid.: 18).

**Tactics of Subversion**

Several studies have shown that the spatial layout of organisations is central to understanding power relations within the workplace and that managers perceive space as a tool to control employees through various forms of visualisation techniques such as self-surveillance or peer-surveillance (Perin 1991, Collinson and Collinson 1997, Ezzamel et al. 2001). At the same time, it has been shown that attempts to implement organisational change through office re-design often provoke resistance as employees feel their identity (Elsbach 2003) or status (Baldry 1999) is under threat. Thus, management control over spatial settings of work is limited (Fleming and Sewell 2002).

However, the particular ways in which employees resist and subvert open office design remains under-theorised. In this chapter, de Certeau’s (1984) notion of tactics enables elaboration on how people may resist and subvert open office design.
A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance [. . .] A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus, it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organised by the law of a foreign power. (De Certeau 1984: xix, 37)

Tactics, then, are ways of operating that seize the opportunity and ‘make do’ (or create) by combining the heterogeneous materials at hand. More specifically, this may include ‘victories of the “weak” over the “strong”’, ‘knowing how to get away with things’, clever tricks, manoeuvres, and joyful discoveries. Furthermore, the quote above underlines the close connection between tactics and ‘imposed space’, and shows how this enables, encourages and stimulates the use of tactics among the inhabitants of space. Within imposed places, tactics create space, and while strategic place can be described as disciplining and normalising (e.g. Hjorth 2004), tactics are forms of resistance towards such places.

Underlining the emergence and unpredictability of tactics, De Certeau (1984: 37) stated that ‘it must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is guileful ruse.’ Tactics, then, are a different form of power from the strategies of the dominant: ‘occupying the gaps or interstices of the strategic grid, tactics produce a difference or unpredictable event which can corrupt or pervert the strategy’s system’ (Colebrook 1997: 125). Thus, tactics give rise to emergent and unexpected outcomes, which makes it suitable for understanding how office design that is imposed on employees may also encourage employees to use tactics creatively, as creative resistance, rather than unequivocally produce intended creative behaviours.

Research in organisation studies has actualised the use of tactics in organisational life by focusing on how employees may resist dominant notions of subjectivity. Kondo (1990) has investigated how female part-time workers in a Japanese factory resist corporate culture by retaining it on the surface yet using humour and irony when talking about it amongst themselves. Similarly, Collinson (1992) has shown how shop-floor workers at a UK heavy vehicles manufacturer expressed resistance by cynically distancing themselves from managers, management and management values and culture in order to retain an autonomous sense of masculine, working-class identity. Further, Fleming and Spicer (2003: 166) have argued that workers may submit to job requirements and overtly endorse organisational roles, norms and values, but cynically reject or distance themselves
from the ascribed corporate culture through clandestine countercultural expressions.

While these studies highlight the mobilisation of tactics in the pursuit of alternative subjectivities, tactics can revolve around spatial dimensions of organisational life. For instance, in the case of ‘physical distancing’, male shop-floor workers worked ‘flat out’ in the mornings to maximise their bonus but withdrew to the toilets in the afternoons to play cards and read pornographic magazines out of sight from management (Collinson 1992). In a somewhat different vein, it has been argued that entrepreneurial practices may tactically play in and with the spatial settings of organisations (Hjorth 2004). In this chapter, we show how employees mobilise spatial tactics as a response to open office design in ways that rearticulate and modify the social and spatial dimensions of work organisations.

In summary, our theoretical framework enables us to avoid spatial determinism in design–behaviour relations and highlight the unintended consequences of pro-creative forms of open office design. While Gibson’s concept of affordances enables us to investigate what uses, behaviours and interactions pro-creative forms of open office design might afford, a combination of Foucault’s, Gabriel’s and De Certeau’s work enables us to elaborate the control mechanisms of open office design and how they may be subverted. This is not to suggest a dichotomy between the power of open office design to control behaviour and the power of employees to resist open office design. Rather, this enables us to highlight the ambiguous ways in which open office design – and spatial design more broadly – is mobilised and re-mobilised to create multiple and contradictory effects.

INVESTIGATING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PRO-CREATIVE OFFICE DESIGN

Our aim in this research is to study a contemporary phenomenon in an area where there are some largely unquestioned assumptions in play: particularly the idea that the freedom provided by open spaces and an emphasis on fun promotes creativity. Our empirical investigation seeks to use the theoretical lenses described above to explore the relationship between the practice of opening space in organisations and organisational creativity.

To study the case of pro-creative office design we therefore employed the principle of purposeful sampling (see e.g. Strauss and Corbin 1990, Bickman and Rog 1998) to select two organisations that had worked systematically to promote fun and creativity through the implementation of open office design. One is a Swedish occupational pensions specialist
Example 1: Office Re-design at OPS

OPS manages the pension savings of 1.6 million individuals. There are 600 employees working at the head office and in 2004 the company undertook a complete re-design of these facilities – out with the many small rooms, dusty drawers and old-fashioned fixtures which were associated with a rigid, bureaucratic organisation as opposed to a modern, transparent and creative organisation. The aim of the re-design was not only to become more ‘space efficient’ but also to facilitate spontaneous interaction, creativity and learning. Almost all employees now sit in open office landscapes, the only exception being staff doing calculation work as this is considered to require quietude. One manager underlined his conviction that the new design would produce favourable learning outcomes: ‘when employees sit together in a shared space they are in the middle of the information flows. They are constantly exposed to what is going on, and they can speak more freely with each other.’

Prior to the re-design, employees worked in isolation in separate offices. With the open office design, workspace is allocated on the principle of ‘hot-desking’. Hot-desking enables employees to easily change workspace when moving between projects or when taking on new tasks or positions within the company. In general, employees change workspace a couple of times a year.

Whereas the old design only housed one canteen, each floor of the headquarters building now houses a large flashy kitchen where employees can meet and gather for a fast bite to eat or a cup of tea or coffee. Comfortable sofas and chairs have also been put in to encourage employees to spend more time talking and interacting. Adjoining this informal meeting area is a number of isolated meeting rooms for formal meetings.

Even the CEO and the managing director have left their top floor private offices and now sit in one of the open office areas. Before the re-design, many employees were hesitant to approach and talk to senior management unless they had a clear purpose for doing so. Now the new office design makes it difficult to avoid bumping into them or spontaneously exchanging ideas. Most of the managers work in the open office environment, and we were told that the few who do not create much frustration because they are not seen to ‘practise what they preach’. That managers sit in the open space office environment was regarded positive because it reflected a sense of equal treatment. However, as emphasised by one
employee: ‘naturally, when you have your desk beside your manager, you cannot avoid feeling that they have their eyes on you.’

Have spontaneous interaction, creativity and learning between employees been enhanced, then, with the office re-design? Well, some findings could support this argument, but there are also contradictory findings that seem to suggest that this may just as well be hampered by open office design. Arguably, our interviews suggested that the feeling of being a team had been strengthened since the employees within a project or a department see each other frequently and are therefore forced to conform to certain social codes of conduct, such as greeting each other with a hello or a goodbye.

However, sharing the same space also created problems within the team which may not have occurred in a traditional office design. Our respondents claimed they had difficulties ignoring what their colleagues did in the open office area. As one respondent said: ‘In the beginning it was almost unbearable; I spent so much time and energy looking at what my colleagues were doing. Now after a year it is easier, but I still get annoyed several times a day.’

There was also much irritation between employees as not everybody conformed to the behavioural rules which had been developed step-by-step by the employees to cope with the increased noise levels and disturbances resulting from the new office design. These rules were written down and distributed to all employees. Eating and drinking was prohibited in the open area. And to avoid co-workers being disturbed by loud conversations, telephone use and interaction was restricted. It was also not allowed to bring additional chairs to individual desks, even when two or more people were working together on the same task or when experienced staff were involved in the training of new staff members. Instead, meetings and training sessions were supposed to be conducted inside the formal meeting rooms. Indeed, when people violated these rules – by making private phone calls, talking loudly or gobbling and slurping at their desk – arguments frequently broke out as co-workers were quick to remark on and rectify such behaviour.

Furthermore, quarrels were triggered by certain employees seeking to monitor the work schedules of their colleagues – counting the actual time spent working and commenting on arrival and departure times as well as on the number and duration of coffee breaks and cigarette breaks. Thus, teamwork was not always facilitated by the open office design. But at the same time, the number of sick days among employees had decreased significantly after the re-design. Two competing interpretations may be given to this phenomenon: Firstly, it may be that employees were more satisfied with the new setting, feeling more involved, empowered and
motivated to work; but secondly (and this is gloomier), it may be that the increased visibility brought about by the new design had amplified the panoptic eye. This panopticism does not emanate from an epicentre of management control. Rather, it is a decentralised form of panoptic control where everybody controls everybody through the internalisation of peer surveillance as ‘auto-surveillance’. In a place where employees are defined in terms of seeing and being seen, not being seen is more conspicuously noticeable than in a setting where employees typically work in separate offices.

Our interviews and observations at OPS suggest that spontaneous interaction, creativity and learning were not an automatic effect of the new open design. On the one hand, the open design was apt at promoting frequent spontaneous meetings between employees – it made it easy for employees to spot one another from afar and pop by for a chat. The kitchen areas and the adjacent seating areas situated on each floor also made it easier for employees to engage in spontaneous conversations over a cup of coffee. On the other hand, employees engaged in loud discussions risked disturbing their colleagues. So even though the landscape potentially affords spontaneous interaction, this was considered so disturbing...
that employees were requested to relocate to continue their ‘spontaneous’ interaction inside the meeting rooms. Consequently, the meeting rooms tended to be overbooked. At the same time, the new kitchen areas on each floor made employees interact less with other departments, creating a stronger feeling of group belonging and ‘us-and-them’ mentality. In order to counter this sense of group segregation, employees actually started to make personal visits to sort out queries with colleagues in other departments instead of using email and the telephone.

Furthermore, the surveillance afforded by the open design made some employees adopt a more strictly professional identity at work, feeling that it left less room for their private selves. As one employee stated: ‘You feel that you have to play your professional role for the whole day, at least this is the case for me, as I don’t want to become too private with my colleagues. This can be really exhausting sometimes, to always keep up the façade. I often feel that I would like to have a small private space where I could think clearly and silently without thinking about how I behave, just to be myself for a short while.’

Such sentiments led employees to tactically manipulate the flexi-time arrangement at OPS, working more from home than before the re-design. In summary, then, our findings from OPS suggest that their open office design hindered rather than encouraged spontaneous interaction and creativity.

Example 2: Office Design at CC

Whereas OPS had re-designed their existing headquarters, CC had gathered their call centre operations in a new state-of-the-art open-space facility known as ‘the dome’. The dome combined the pursuit of feel-good, fun, vibrancy and creativity with open-space office design. In a recruitment ad CC portrayed itself as ‘a fun place to work, with a fantastic team atmosphere – we all work hard, play harder and take great pride in celebrating our successes’. While we did not directly discuss the notion of creativity with staff, CC viewed the open design itself and its indoor facilities as a creative approach to recruit and retain creative and highly motivated employees capable of improving sales and customer satisfaction. Spatial boundaries and clear-cut structures were avoided. Rooms were large and open, encouraging employees to move between and interact with colleagues in different workspaces. Like OPS, CC applied the principle of hot-desking. Moreover, CC’s dome contained open, flexible and undefined spaces located between work areas. For example, drink machines and kitchenettes were strategically located on busy passages, near elevators and bathrooms, to help generate spontaneous interactions
between employees and create, and set in place, positive relational patterns. There were also a number of activity rooms with different themes, including a sports-themed room with table soccer, pinball and ‘Nerf’ balls and a Mediterranean café.

The architects that built the centre described it on their website as follows under the title ‘Creating an environment that helps to attract and retain employees’:

[The company’s] vision for their operation was to create a vibrant and fun call centre that would accommodate 1000 people. Their goal was to attract and retain the highest quality personnel . . . . The scope of [our] work was wide. Before designing the environment, we determined the ideal configuration of teams to gain maximum efficiency. The teams are mostly made up of staff aged 18–23 so we developed a concept that appeals to them.

So, was this workspace fun? It certainly appeared that many employees were enjoying themselves. There were regular competitions to meet
performance targets and announcements made to declare winners. There was certainly a lot of noise or ‘buzz’. Most of the teams seemed very tight-knit, engaging in much gossiping and socialising. The teams would generally hang out together. As noted above, hot-desking was promoted in principle, but in practice most groups – particularly those who were most competitive and those who had been in place for a while – would establish a spatial and social position in these principally non-territorial office arrangements, marking out their spatial territory with posters, slogans and personal artefacts and moving furniture around to create their own personalised space. We saw nobody seeking to move into the personalised space generated by other teams. Teams would use the ‘fun rooms’, but much the same way as any group would use a more conventional cafeteria: at regular times in accordance with the desires of the most established groups. Moreover, employees tended to stick to their own teams, interacting very little with other teams. And they reinforced team boundaries and identity and enacted and created spatial structures by putting up posters and slogans and relocating furniture.

Was this workspace creative, then? It was certainly competitive, and this led to some interesting team tactics being used to inspire victories over other teams, such as holding back on calling ‘good targets’ if a ‘game’ was tight and the end of a competitive period (which was determined from above) was near. Indeed, any competition requires the rules and criteria for performance to be established in advance and generally from above: target numbers such as going after particular demographic or geographical segments or cross-selling. We did not observe any questioning or thinking differently about performance targets at the operative level and the workers that we spoke to claimed to have not thought to question or adapt these.

Further, cultural and sub-cultural norms were strong, with teams developing a shared identity which often meant socialising with members of their group during breaks and after hours, and gossiping about members of other groups. It seemed very difficult to step outside of these norms and ‘cross-fertilise’ or socialise with other teams and team members – partly, it seemed, because the boundaries between social groups and work groups had become blurred as these groups had built their own structure around themselves to create efficiency and order within the space provided by the organisation.

Certainly, while the open space had enabled different groups to generate their own structures and flows, these were quickly synchronised with the flows of others. For instance, groups did not all arrive in the same ‘fun spaces’ at the same times. There were definitely flows that appeared to have originated from employee behaviours rather than decreed by
management. But, because of this, people seemed to be more wary and shy about going against ‘the flow’ than they may have been in a more conventional structure imposed from the top–down, as their actions would be more obvious to their norm-setting co-workers.

At the same time, many claimed that the bright, open environment was wearing. Unusually perhaps for such a large building, there was little personal space. Indeed, the open-space office design here seemed to deprive employees of any homely space or individual haven and social interaction was imposed on the employees. An interesting issue that surfaced at CC was the problem caused by the sharp light created by the initial open design. On the one hand, the carefully designed glass ceilings brightened the whole building and visualised the space by letting in solar lighting. But on the other, it led to complaints from staff who found it too bright and somewhat overpowering. After some time, managers had to take employees’ concerns into consideration, despite their persuasion that the lightness was beneficial for efficiency. The employees did not share the same perspective, and claimed that the brightness in the building was repressive on sunny days. The architects that won the contract to fix the problem explain their task on their website as follows: ‘In a call centre for a major [. . .] company, staff were complaining that the solar glare was hindering their work. [We were] approached to install some skylight diffusers to control the glare and blend into the industrial style of the open plan office.’

In summary, the open-space office design adopted in this call centre did not necessarily afford a more creative workspace than other more normal spaces that we have visited. To some extent, the fun rooms afforded employees to engage in games and play and have fun at work. And the Mediterranean style café, for example, afforded what many agreed was a ‘feel-good atmosphere’. The sports room was claimed to be ‘good for bonding’. But, the open-space design itself may be seen to have afforded surveillance, control and normalisation, but this was initiated by the employees themselves more than their managers. Moreover, it appeared difficult for an individual or group of employees to resist these tactics, and instead of increased socialisation, which was supposed to foster a creative and dynamic organisation with high team spirit, some employees claimed that the organisation was more fragmented and inter-group boundaries and differences even more visible than at other organisations they had worked for.

While the design afforded employees unobstructed movement between different areas of the call centre building, it also made employees highly visible to each other. Indeed, the open design made performance, success and failure visible. Thus, employees were able to monitor their own behaviours, movements and performances as well as those of their colleagues and
other teams. This seemed to play an important role in shaping employee behaviour, movements and performance. Employees used fun rooms and recreational spaces according to fairly structured schemes that largely complied with what had been established as mainstream expectations of work breaks, work behaviour and performance, and they typically strived to copy the ‘best practices’ of other groups they observed or heard about.

This suggests that the visualisation afforded by the open-space design enabled employees and teams to exercise self-control in pursuit of a normalised form of work performance and best practice and divide and separate themselves from others. While this took place in a competitive environment, the lack of interaction also helped teams avoid conflict. Hence, these are not just social affordances affecting social interaction within teams and between teams. They are micro-political affordances too, affording power, surveillance and control to be exercised. The importance of the team structure suggests that the surveillance and control afforded was more a matter of neo-liberal self-surveillance and self-control than management surveillance and control. It further suggests that the use afforded by the open-space office design in this case was not static but dynamic. Inhabiting this workspace afforded employees to change the space and change and adjust their behaviour. As employees working in the dome experienced sunlight as a problem, the sun screens that were installed to deal with this changed the spatial design of the dome. And as employees watched other teams and top performers in their own teams, they changed and adjusted their own behaviour to copy and maximise their own performance rather than create anew. Inhabiting the workspace therefore afforded creativity, learning and changes in behaviour, but not necessarily in the ways that were initially intended.

DISCUSSION

Rather than providing universally generalisable findings, our cases help us rather explore and question the ambivalent affordances and politics of pro-creative office design. Despite their architectural and organisational differences, our two cases of pro-creative open office design show a number of similarities in how they were enacted by employees, fostering other outcomes and different kinds of creativity than what was originally intended by the organisations. Almost 50 years ago, Koestler (1964) stated that: ‘It is obvious that innovation or discovery takes place by combining ideas. The Latin verb cogito for “to think” etymologically means “to shake together”.’ This casts doubt on the assumption that openness facilitates creativity, suggesting instead that ongoing creativity requires
a combination of light and dark, openness and secrets, an operation across and shaking together of mainstream worlds and marginal otherworlds. We should therefore carefully think through the unintended, and sometimes counterproductive, consequences of exposing everything in an organisation out in the open, even (or perhaps especially) when it is done in the name of creativity.

Affordances are typically evaluated in terms of how they facilitate certain behaviours while frustrating others (see e.g. Gibson 1979). The pro-creative open office design implemented at OPS and CC did not unequivocally afford and facilitate creativity through an increase in spontaneous interaction, a fun atmosphere, and exciting learning processes. Indeed, our findings suggest that they set in motion differential and dynamic affordances that facilitated a range of different responses which also changed over time as employees interacted with and within these office environments. In part, we found that the pro-creative open office designs at OPS and CC afforded surveillance and control of employees by colleagues and managers – and ultimately an auto-surveillance whereby employees disciplined themselves – in ways that frustrated rather than facilitated spontaneous interaction, fun and learning.

Previous research has highlighted that post-bureaucratic organisation may produce post-bureaucratic forms of ‘concertive control’ (Barker 1993). But whereas the shop-floor workers at the medium-sized US manufacturing company in Barker’s study ‘concertively’ developed written rules to enhance peer surveillance and team performance, the written rules developed by employees at OPS were rather a direct response to cope with the strains of the pro-creative open office design. Furthermore, Barker (1993) and others (see e.g. Sewell 1998) suggest that peer surveillance may be more repressive (from an employee perspective) and more effective (from a management perspective) than management surveillance. Indeed, at OPS the open design did make employees tone down the personal and instead adopt a more professional identity which they thought would be more in line with management expectations. And at CC, the open design did seem to facilitate a competitive and performance-oriented team culture.

However, and more intriguingly, employees at both OPS and CC creatively and tactically responded to and subverted the frustrations created by the panoptic ‘glass cage’ architecture of the pro-creative open office design. Rather than simply accepting the enhanced surveillance afforded by the open design, employees managed to avoid or at least reduce surveillance from co-workers and managers by introducing and imposing spatial and social structures and boundaries that streamlined, normalised and formalised social interaction. Similar to Collinson’s (1992) notion of...
‘physical distancing’, at OPS more employees started to work from home after the re-design or they gathered in the enclosed meeting rooms, and at CC different teams regularly withdrew to the play rooms and cafés, thereby avoiding not only interaction with co-workers and other teams but also avoiding management surveillance.

This is also in contrast with former studies that highlight how employees modify the physical aspects of open office design by using personal artefacts such as personal photos and calendars or gym wear to affirm a personal or team identity and to claim or mark out a distinct personal space in open and non-territorial office arrangements of hot-desking and hoteling (see e.g. Elsbach 2003, Edenius and Yakhlef 2007). Sure, employees at OPS and CC would sometimes claim a spatial or social position in the open office environment to avoid surveillance or affirm team identity. But they did not merely subvert the open office design by making physical modifications to the space. The structured ways in which CC teams used common areas, the increase in OPS employees working from home, and the frequent booking of meeting rooms also suggests that the open office designs were subverted by employees mobilising and imposing social structures.

Rather than leading to more social interaction and to the disruption of norms of behaviour, interaction and performance, as might have been an expected effect of the pro-creative open office designs, employees therefore responded to the open office spaces with tactics to avoid and regulate socialisation. These socio-spatial tactics are therefore also somewhat different from the tactics described by De Certeau (1984) and by later applications of his work in organisation studies (see e.g. Hjorth 2004). Tactics are typically seen to involve people playing with, subverting and moving in and out of strategically organised places in unstructured, dynamic and unpredictable ways. Although the particular ways in which OPS and CC employees enacted the new office designs might not have been predictable from the perspective of top managers and architects, they engaged with these designs through creative and subversive tactics that eventually turned out to be rather structured and predictable. Indeed, employees moved in and out of the strategically organised open office areas and they moved between these areas and their adjacent enclosed rooms according to formal booking schemes (OPS) or at regular times and intervals (CC).

This further complicates conflicting arguments about fun, play and creativity pursued in previous organisational research. On the one hand, Hjorth (2004) has argued that play may be tactically staged in heterotopian spaces of organisation which blur the boundaries between art and work so as to facilitate creativity and entrepreneurship. On the other hand,
Fleming (2005) has problematised the power of organisations to stage fun and play through blurring the boundaries between work and non-work, even when physically heterotopian elements such as kindergarten-style colour schemes and fluffy mascots are introduced into the office environment. Rather, Fleming argues, this creates widespread employee cynicism. In contrast to Hjorth’s argument, our findings suggest that employees at OPS and CC undermined the fun, play and creativity which management and architects intended to facilitate through pro-creative open office design, but not quite in the ways argued by Fleming. Rather than playfully enacting the space or cynically dis-identifying from the ascribed corporate culture, they creatively and tactically restructured social interaction within the space.

Now, is it possible to argue that employees at OPS and CC tactically restructured rather than playfully enacted social interaction within these spaces because they were not heterotopian spaces but homogeneously open spaces and therefore strategically organised places? In other words, that had they been heterotopian spaces then employees would have inhabited them in more playful ways? No, we don’t think so. Although our findings argue against overestimating the ability of organisations to create and stage heterotopia, the open office designs at OPS and CC and, more importantly, how they were enacted by employees, did actually incorporate certain heterotopian elements. Firstly, the enclosed meeting rooms and common areas adjoining the open office areas indicate that neither the OPS head office nor the CC dome were unequivocally open-space environments. Secondly, the attempt at staging fun and creativity in a work environment indicates that neither OPS nor CC were unequivocally designed as work environments. But thirdly, we would argue that employees at OPS and CC added heterotopian dimensions to the pro-creative office designs by tactically and creatively imposing socio-spatial structures. And in the case of certain OPS employees starting to work more frequently from home, this expanded the heterotopia to include the space of the home as well as the space of the OPS head office.

The organisation studies literature on resistance tends to associate resistance with opposition to and subversion of organisational goals (see e.g. Collinson 1992, Fleming and Spicer 2007). Our findings do not echo this. While the tactics mobilised by OPS and CC employees subverted the intentions of the new designs, they did not seem to subvert the overarching organisational goals of OPS or CC. Rather, their allegedly subversive introduction of socio-spatial structures actually seemed to facilitate the achievement of overarching organisational goals, improving efficiency, productivity and performance. Interestingly, these structures seemed to
harden into established norms that it was difficult to challenge and shift because they were enacted by the very same employees who produced them.

CONCLUSION

The new lenses that we have employed in this study – the dynamic of affordances, the effects of disciplinary ‘glass cage’ visibility, and the serious tactics which impose rather than disrupt structures – have highlighted both the limited power of organisations to stage and promote certain ideas, values and behaviours in the workplace and the limited politics of employee tactics in so-called ‘pro-creative’ workplaces. Previous studies have already warned against the difficulties in crafting politically effective resistance tactics when organisations transform initially non-work things such as fun, playfulness and creativity into organisational variables to be exploited in the interest of work and organisational performance (see e.g. Fleming 2005). In a sense, the picture indicated by our findings is even gloomier. Employees do not necessarily dis-identify with the ascribed corporate culture of fun, playfulness and creativity, but they do impose structures that help them both avoid surveillance and the intensification of work performance.

The question, then, is not so much whether or not employees can still have fun at work, but to what ends employees put these tactically created structures. In our two examples, the planned and intentional nature of these structures (for organised fun) made them, paradoxically, effect antisocial, mean-spirited and even inhuman behaviours. And even though these structures may be futile in terms of the resistance they afforded, they draw attention to the creative and tactical use of space as a potentially important aspect of resistance. Indeed, the fact that the structures imposed in response by employees at OPS and CC helped them avoid surveillance from peers and managers suggests that employees may learn to mobilise such structures in the pursuit of alternative ends. In a nutshell, if we see creativity as new, unforeseen or unpredicted developments of lasting value, the investment in shiny new fun and open workspaces may not make employees more creative for an organisation. Paradoxically, such investment may even reduce the likelihood of such an outcome.

Our response to this finding, and an alternative suggestion to those organisations interested in creativity (rather than predictable intended outcomes), resonates with Daskalaki et al.’s (2008: 51) notion of parkour, or ‘free running’. They use this notion as a metaphor to discuss the need for spatial structures in the workplace that are not planned, regimented and limiting, but instead exist to encourage the kinds of chance,
interaction, imagination and change that can lead to creativity. Indeed, free-runners, or ‘traceurs’ (a derivation of the verb ‘tracer’, or to trace, in French) can be at their most creative in the most mundane environments, with the focus on what an individual can do within the limitations of an environment rather than what the environment does to or makes him or her do. This is about people overcoming and adapting to mental obstacles as well as physical barriers rather than these obstacles and barriers being removed by an overseer (see Foucan 2008, Belle 2009).

Indeed, the parkour metaphor reminds us of some of the diagrams used by Arthur Koestler to describe the creative process in the 1960s, such as Figure 15.4, which describes Archimedes moving around on a single plane (what was known about the science of volume) until the juxtaposition with a second plane of thought/experience (taking a bath) helped him find a creative solution to the problem of how to determine the actual volume of a coin.

Consequently, the best way for organisations to organise for creativity might be to plan or organise less and just let things happen more. Indeed, much in the architecture literature encourages mixed space: open and closed, public and private, urban and rural, new and old, indoor and outdoor (Bell 2007). Given that getting around barriers, obstacles and divergences are often key stimulants in the creative process, it may be that such organic bricolage mixtures can allow employees to do more of

Figure 15.4  Koestler’s diagram (1964) explaining the creative process related to novel discoveries such as Archimedes’ ‘Eureka’ moment (T)
the sorts of things that lead to genuine unpredicted or ‘surprising’ creativity: to follow or trace a line of thought while transgressing or flowing across pre-determined boundaries (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). Perhaps ‘free-running’, then – transgressing between and across different spaces – may help employees create their own fun and creatively resist existing organisational strategies to create the new. And our findings would therefore suggest that it would be better to invest in creative people and creative practices (such as those described in the next two chapters) rather than completely new architecture to promote the serious play of creativity. Ironically, less ‘pro’ intentionality may be more in seeking to achieve what was supposed to be the end of pro-creative office design: more creativity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the challenges with organising for flexibility, i.e. encouraging ‘free-running’? How can organisations use space to achieve this?
2. Provide examples of what an organisational space constituted of mixed spaces could look like.
3. The current chapter illustrates a view on space as affording rather than determining organisational members’ behaviour. Discuss how this view enables us to understand emergent and unexpected outcomes of spatial design. Drawing on your own experience, provide examples of emergent uses of spaces.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank Stephen Cummings, who worked closely with us in the preparation of this draft and for furnishing the parkour analogy. This paper draws on a previous paper by Thanem, Värlander & Cummings entitled ‘Open space = open minds? Unintended consequences of pro-creative office design’ in International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion 4(1) January 2011. We gratefully acknowledge Inderscience Publishers for letting us reuse parts of that paper for this chapter.

REFERENCES


Hjorth, D. (2004), ‘Creating space for play/invention – concepts of space and organizational entrepreneurship’, *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 16(September), 413–32.


Handbook of management and creativity

APPENDIX 15.1: RESEARCH METHODS

Case data was generated through interviews, observations and documents, and both organisations and respondents have been heavily disguised in the interests of anonymity. At the occupational pensions specialist (OPS), one of the authors spent a full day observing the re-designed facilities and interviewing members of staff. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with four representatives: the vice CEO and three employees in various positions. During these interviews we used a general interview guide designed by the authors. The guide included questions about the underlying intentions of the office re-design, employee attitudes towards it, and how employees enacted the new office environment. Each interview lasted for 20–60 minutes. Further, the semi-structured interviews fostered a conversational style and elicited open responses in such a way that the conversation itself rather than the interview guide dictated the order in which the various issues were discussed. All interviews at OPS were tape-recorded and transcribed.

At the UK call centre (CC) two academics were invited by company representatives to spend a day observing operations, and open access was granted to talk to a range of staff (from senior managers to telephone operators) about their work and the new open office environment. We asked a range of questions about the intentions and design of the new facilities and about work practices at the new facilities. In total we interviewed five members of staff. We were not given permission to tape-record our interviews or take photographs at CC, but notes to remember key issues were taken during and shortly after returning from the visit. According to Holahan (1978), the impact of design is often subliminal. Furthermore, Donovan and Rossiter (1982) insist that the effects of design are difficult to verbalise and to recall. Therefore, we also conducted observations with the aim to capture aspects of office design which it may be difficult to articulate, and to gain a self-experienced understanding of how the open office design affected creativity.

Ten hours spread over two days were spent in the occupational pensions specialist, and five hours were spent at the call centre. During these observation sessions, we focused on how the offices were designed and how employees behaved and interacted in the offices, and both discursive and visual material was collected in the form of notes and photos. In addition, we generated data through textual and photographic material made available by the two organisations, including corporate reports, policy manuals and company descriptions from their websites. In the case of CC, we also generated documentary data through job advertisements and through architectural reviews as their new office facility has been widely discussed.
in architectural circles. While we are aware that the amount of time spent in each organisation is too short to get a deeper understanding and record repeating patterns within the setting (Spradley 1979), the observations and documents enabled us to complement our understanding of the interview material.