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Book Review

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Styles of Organizing: The Will to Form.
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Reviewed by

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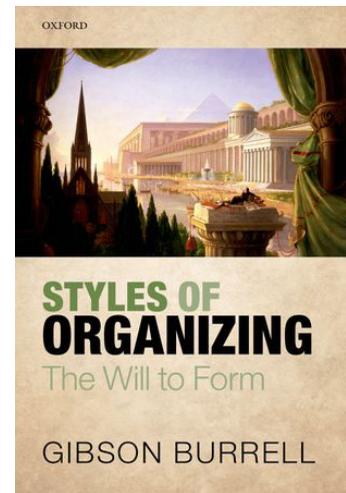
We have learned with Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis: *Elements of the sociology of corporate life* (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) and *Pandemonium* (Burrell, 1997) that a new book by Gibson Burrell brings with it a challenge to conventional ways of looking at organizations. *Styles of Organizing: The Will to Form* is not an exception. Whereas *Sociological Paradigm* (1979) mapped the assumptions of organization analysis and *Pandemonium* (1997) chartered what organization theory does not dare to think and tell (see, for a review of the latter: Corvellec, 2002), Burrell comes this time with the claim that "styles of organizing have elective affinity with styles of architecture and styles within design and even styles within politico-economy theory" (p.19). The styles that characterize the field or management and organization studies are thus exogenous. The matter here is not to point at management fashion, as in Jackson (2001). It is a matter of bringing forth that styles of organizing are not endogenous but shared with design, architecture or politico-economic systems. All these practices and/or disciplines share a "will to form" in the sense of an "effort to order the world into meaning" (p.8), and it is the different styles taken by this will to form that Burrell intends to map.

Burrell adopts a broad approach to style for his purpose:

The word 'style' is taken to mean in this book a mode or manner of living or behaving; a characteristic way of producing a thing and of executing a task; a distinctive type of architecture; a particular shape and structure of artefacts; and as a customary procedure for undertaking activities." (p.60)

Style is a specific albeit shared way of combining aesthetic (form) and purposefulness (content). A style is not only matters of appearance, such as how things look at first glance. It is also a structured and structuring way of addressing issues and doing things. A style is a cognitive structure in which we are often required to live our lives, something that enables us to find solutions as much as it prevents us from seeing alternative solutions. Burrell's contention is that the will to form follows a similar range of styles

in architecture, design, politico-economy theory and organizing. Styles differ and evolve, but they have in common to attempt answering to the returning problems – Burrell speaks of problematiques – that all wills to form encounter. He writes: "the questions remain really quite similar, but it is the answers that differ dramatically" (p.91).

Reminding of numerous efforts made to identify fixed patterns of organizations – for example, the centralized, linear, radial, clustered, or grid organizations (p. 23-31) – Burrell advocates a processual approach and recommends looking at organizing, that is the becoming of organizations – for some reason without making any mention of Karl Weick. He argues that two dimensional patterns are not capturing the dynamics of organizing, and, suggest instead thinking three dimensionally. This brings him into proposing that one can arrange all possible styles of organizing as a cube that he calls the style cube. The description of the style cube is rather technical and takes up two thirds of the book.

Three axes design this cube: 1) sensibility-rationality, 2) sedimentism-rupturism, and 3) a part of nature - apart from nature. Burrell calls these axes for "lines of flight" (Chapter 6) in a not fully clear reference to Deleuze and Guattari (1987). The sensibility-rationality line of flight renders the opposition between those who believe in the importance of emotions and the soul to understandings of selfhood, in contradistinction to those who rely on rationality to deduce objective truth. Sedimentism refers to the idea that social structures and systems lay down patterns in the sands of time and that the present results from accretion, in contradistinction to rupturism which refers to the idea that social structures break suddenly and dramatically to be replaced by innovative, distinctive forms. Finally, a-part-of-nature considers humanity as fully integrated into the natural world, whereas apart-from-nature proceeds from a fundamental separation of humanity from the natural world. If placed at right angles to each other, these three lines of flight produce a three dimensional space where one can position different styles in relation one to the other.

The design cube has eight corners where the lines of flight-axes meet three by three. Burrell calls these corners for "points of opposition" (Chapter 7) to stress that he views point on a diagonal are in opposition. The eight points of opposition build a typology built on a systematic inversion of the variables that characterize one, two or the three axes that design the cube (See, Table 1).

Burrell spend Chapters 7 and 8 attributing a building or school of architecture, a political regime or political theory, and an organization to each of these points of opposition (see Table 1). For reasons of space, I cannot render in detail Burrell's justifications of why he attributes these particular items to these particular points. I can only mention, as an example, that point a is defined by a combination of Sensibility, Sedimentism, and Naturalism, and for Burrel this corresponds to Gaudi's architecture, the political theory of Green environmentalism, and an organization like the National Trust (UK). Inversely, point f is characterized by the combination of Rationalism, Rupturism, and A-naturalism, and he sees it as corresponding to the extremely unadorned Wittgenstein house in architecture, the political theory of neo-liberalism and the Ford Motor's company as an organization. Point a is opposed to point f, point c to point g, point d to point h, and point b to point e.

Table 1. Points of oppositions

Corner	Axes that meet	What the point of opposition stands for
A	Sensibility, Sedimentism, Natural	Gaudi's Casa Milà in Barcelona/Art Nouveau Green environmentalism National Trust (UK)
C	Sensibility, Sedimentism, A-natural	Potlach Economics Beauvais Cathedral Freedom Tower / Skidmore, Owings and Merill
B	Sensibility, Rupturism, A-natural	Frank Gehry's Stata building at MIT Schumpeterianism Virgin Galactic
D	Sensibility, Rupturism, Natural	Maison du Peuple (Brussels)/Art Nouveau Pol Potism Zapatistas
E	Rationalism, Sedimentism, Natural	Neo-Palladianism of Thomas Jefferson Heritage Economics Tilting (a community in Newfoundland)
H	Rationalism, Sedimentism, A-natural	Palace of Versailles/Baroque Keynesianism Enron
G	Rationalism, Rupturism, Natural	Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion/Postmodernism Techno-environmentalism Enval
F	Rationalism, Rupturism, A-natural	Wittgenstein House in Vienna Neo-liberalism Ford Motor Company

The author asks for indulgence for his nominees (p.173). I am inclined to grant him such an indulgence since it is the idea of finding a resonance between objects that belong to different realms or fields that matter, more than singling out this or that object. Moreover, some coming together are very convincing, for example Wittgenstein House in Vienna and the Ford Motor Company; others are truly evocative, for example coupling Dymaxion and Enval. But I have also major difficulty finding the self-defense mobilization movement of Zapatitas in the same corner as the genocidal regime of Pol Plot, or finding Enron in the same corner as Keynesian government. Before anything else, I regret the strong Euro-American centrism of the examples retained. More than half of them come from the UK and the USA. Asia, a munificent architectural history and a much diverse political traditions notwithstanding ends up being only represented by Pol Plot and Africa is absent: I wonder whether Burrell's cube of styles is for the Euro-American world only, whether the world outside this world has never contributed to anything that can be deemed as exemplary. Likewise, I am a bit puzzled by the total absence of companies such as Facebook, Apple or Spotify that have radically challenged recently traditional industrial and service business models, or organizations such as single person companies, time-limited organizations such as flash-mobs, or networks organizations that have blurred the criteria for what can be considered as an organization. This exclusion of non- Euro-American examples and of alternative experiences of architecture, politics and organizing is particularly surprising when one remembers the plea made by the same author in Pandemonium (1997) for paying a due attention to what management and organization theory has for a regrettable habit to routinely leave out.

In Chapter 9, Burrell names the six faces of his design cube after the ends of the three axes that constitute it: Sensibility-Rationality, Sedimentism-Rupturism, and Naturalty-A-naturlity. To render the fact that there is numberless point in a line, and thus many intermediary possibilities between the corners of the cubes or points of opposition, Burrell identifies six organizations that he considers stand in the middle of each face. Greenpeace stands for the face of Naturality because of its voluntary, participative, utopian, and Arcadian character. BBC Radio 1 stands for the face of Sensibility for the emotive and gut feel mode of its management. The British National Health Service (possibly the most studied organization in the whole world, my note) stands for Rupturism because of the standing reforms that it is subject to, whereas the British Conservative Party stands for Sedimentarism because of its Aristocratic, sexist, club-based, and traditional traits. Finally, the RAND corporation stands for Rationality and the infamous Blackwater, which provide mercenaries and all-round security services, stands for A-naturality.

Finally, the cube has an inside where styles co-exist, and Burrell uses schools of architectures such as Romanticism, Art Nouveau or Neo-Classicism (all schools with an European origin, my note) to describe in Chapter 10 how the faces of the cube radiate toward other faces and the centre where they fight for attention. To illustrate his view that styles are different answer to the same problematiques he describes systematically the organizational principles that underlie each of these styles. For example, the Gothic is said to stand for ferocity and violence aimed at domination (a view that I do not share without reservation after having experienced a surprising meditative mood in the shades of the stained-glass of the Cathedral of Chartres) whereas Postmodernism stands for the use of flexible specialization rather than Fordist mass production.

The design cube is now complete and it can serve as a library of style open for scholars and practitioners to use. What is your preferred style, Burrell asks, suggesting the following list to choose from:

a.   Sinous intertwined leaves
f.   Decorationless perfection
b.   Explosive alteration
e.   White painted picket fence
c.   The collapsing tower
g.   Geodesic domes
d.   Sunlit poppies
h.   The hidden grotto

This list is only indicative, though. As Burrell says: "I have sought to construct a space that opens up, rather than closes down, debates" (p.243). His project is to invite everyone to assert one's own style of organizing by positioning oneself on the three axes of 1) sensibility-rationality, 2) sedimentism-rupturism, and 3) a part of nature - apart from nature, and with the help of the examples in the book.

Friends of orderliness may be seduced by Burrell's ordering of things – the author does call on Foucault's Order of things (1970) at both ends of his book. But there are also grounds to question how original, coherent, and comprehensive is this ordering.

About comprehensiveness, I have already mentioned the flaw of a universal classification that is so exclusively EuroAmerican (with a central role given to

the UK) in its sources of inspiration, and so biased toward the 20th century. I have concerns about how well Burrell's cube can travel to the slums that crowd the earth, underground artists' studios in China, or the Bitcoins economy. Is it anything for the geeks who are inventing the next path breaking site, game or program?

I have also concerns about the originality of Burrell's project. How intrinsically different is the style cube from six interconnected two-by-two matrixes where each corner and each squares of these matrixes are given a name? Styles of Organizing sounds at times like a DeleuzioGuattarian ritournelle (1987) on labels and classifications that reminds of classic matrixes such as the cash-cow, rising star, dogs and ? in the Boston Consulting Group's strategy model.

I question also the idea that the construction can be and needs to be a cube. There is no reason to assume that Burrell's three axes are at right angles, that all corners are equally telling and important, that the six faces are of the same sizes, and that all distances are Euclidian. The figure of a cube rests on a series of geometric assumptions that Burrell leaves implicit. One could imagine instead that the same axes had designed a sphere – another symbol of perfect order – or an irregular volume such as a cloud with borders that progressively dissolves into the surrounding sky. Looking into the margins of the cube, I wonder if the edges are folds (Deleuze and Strauss, 1991) that creatively combine rupture and continuation, or simple manifestations of the building axes? And whereas Burrell makes some efforts, neither clear nor convincing, at describing the inside of the cube, he does not say what can be found outside of it: is this the locus of surfacing innovation?

Likewise, Burrell promises to extend our understanding of organizations to organizing, but this would have required integrating the fourth dimension of time, which he does not. Yet, people and systems can opt for different styles at different moment. One can be an adept of routines in the morning, practice adhocracy at work during daytime, and be driven by unrestricted emotions reading a novel in the evening. Likewise, organizations can change style when leaving the entrepreneurship phase or entering the stock market.

Showing the correspondences there exist between the will to form in design, politics, architecture, or organizing is a yet another true contribution to organization theory. Gibson Burrell offers a persuasive example of the relevance of transversal studies. But I have major concerns about the idea that a 3D cube can encapsulate once and for all the variety and dynamism of this will (see Table 11.1 page 251). Even if the author denies (p.255) that his intention is to produce a Grand Unified Theory, a cube feels so definitive, nearly aggressive.

I pass a suburban commercial zone. From the train's window, I can see further down an alignment of cubes where retail companies offer one after the other a virtually endless variety of stuff for purchase. My compartment and the room toward which I am heading are also quite cubic in their design. There are already cubes everywhere. But for a Lego, could another cube be (part of) the solution? Or is the abundance of cubes part of the problem? To paraphrase a worn out motto, I think that rather than imagining new cubes, it would be more creative and rewarding to think out of the cube.

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