Why Power Matters: Material and Embodied Entanglements of Power in Project-Based Organizations

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we seek to contribute to debates into new modalities of power within project-based organizations. Using a targeted ethnography we explore specific episodes within the creative environment of an architectural practice. Here we explore how control and creativity are reconciled through specific relations of power, but in contrast with other critical accounts of power in project-based organizations, we explicitly examine the influence of embodiment and materiality on social relations. Our research reveals that despite an overt attempt to play down hierarchical modes of organization, management control is still apparent, albeit it in a form that is highly embodied and intertwined with material relations. Thus, power is not manifest in social relations per se, but plays out across embodied and material registers, from the layout and use of office space to the actions and emotions of individuals within a meeting. The research importantly reveals that power in project-based organizations is multiple in that ‘hierarchy’ enables decisions to be made, responsibility to be apportioned and disputes to be settled, whilst ‘heterarchy’ encourages creativity, co-learning, motivation and communication. We argue that if we can understand power in an organization in more nuanced and positive terms, then we can better understand how work is done and through what techniques. This could lead to deeper theoretical insights into project-based forms of organizing.

Keywords: Power, architecture, hierarchy, heterarchy, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

The ‘projectification’ of work (Lundin and Söderholm, 1998) is frequently celebrated as encouraging a more flexible, democratic and creative approach to working life than traditional functionally divided, bureaucratic organizations (cf. Heckscher, and Donnellon, 1994; Lundin and Midler, 1998). Such claims essentially revolve around the benefits of more “heterarchical” forms of organization in project-based organizations (PBOs), wherein control is manifest horizontality through collective communication with peers rather than through vertical, rigid, centralized lines of authority. In other words, project working promises to counter some of the negative effects of relations of power in hierarchical organizations, such as inflexibility, low innovation, poor communication and poor job motivation, by creating small teams of individuals motivating each other, collaborating in setting objectives to achieve common aims, uninhibited by overly centralized control and rigidly defined roles and boundaries (Heckscher, and Donnellon, 1994; Lundin and Midler, 1998; Pinto, 1996). Whilst the progressive promises of project work would seem intuitive, they have, however, increasingly been challenged by various
‘critical’ project studies that have drawn upon Critical Management Studies perspectives (cf. Fournier and Grey, 2000) to reveal how PBOs exhibit and maintain, more potent even pernicious, though less perceptible, relations of power. Significantly, these critical studies have highlighted ‘informal’ relations of power that are galvanized within seemingly heterarchical, project-based, organizations, including notions of identity (Andersson and Wicklegren, 2009), norms of good work (Styhre, 2011) and flexible work cultures (Sage et al. 2010).

In this paper, we aim to contribute, and extend these critical debates around power and projects, by focussing on how power in PBOs is influenced by a range of material and embodied practices. In contrast to much previous research on power in PBOs, our focus is on practices that are non-verbal or non-discursive in character. We will argue here that such practices provide a particular apposite conduit to maintain a balance of creativity and control in PBOs. We are also mindful that many of the recent ‘critical’ studies of projects, (e.g. Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Cicmil et al. 2009; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006) focus on the negative consequences of power for individuals working within PBOs. The negative consequences of power are however only part of the analytic of power. As will be explained below, power can also be considered positively, or rather productively – essential for productive, happy and motivated individuals and PBOs. Power can be especially positive within heterarchical organizations, conceivably PBOs, where the possibility of co-ordinating individual wills, and their accounts of the ends and means of a project are constantly deconstructed and negotiated among a wide group of agents without the imposed will of superior singular actor. Nevertheless, as Clegg et al. (2006) explain positive power is often forged at the expense of others:

“power may be positive and may serve collective goals, but only if one is incorporated within its remit. If one is other to power, if one is the object of its exercise by those who are its subjects, then its authority to do what it wants with one’s life chances might seem rather less than legitimate.”

Accordingly we also aim to critically examine the negative connotations of power in PBOs as offered by various critical project studies. We will address the operation of power in PBOs through an ethnographic study of an architectural design office, located in London, UK (hereafter named ‘TOPDESIGN’).

The architectural profession, and indeed the creative or cultural industries more generally, are an important, though relatively underexamined, setting in which to explore project management practice. Most architectural practices can be defined as PBOs. Architects often work together in small design teams, frequently working with other disciplines, including structural engineers, model-makers, planners and lawyers, as well as construction contractors to carry out a design service to fairly fixed time, cost and quality targets. Moreover, architectural practices, including TOPDESIGN, frequently emphasize the heterarchical nature of their working practices – sometimes even explicitly defining the creative and collaborative culture of their project teams against the perceived rigidity and formality of corporate bureaucracies and hierarchies. Architectural practices must encourage creativity and innovation, whilst adhering to project targets imposed by the client and/or construction contractor. This creates an inevitable
tension between the creative and more prosaic organizational aspects of architectural practice (Cohen et al. 2005). Architectural practices provide a good setting to examine how such tensions between the creative, post-bureaucratic promises of project work and the need for control are being resolved in practice.

This paper is organized into four sections. First, we will briefly examine why mainstream studies of the analysis of power in PBOs are rare. Secondly, we will turn towards more ‘critical’ studies of power and PBOs and question why these studies have tended to downplay the role of material artefacts and embodied practices as conduits of power. Thirdly, we will describe the research setting and methods employed within this paper. Fourthly, we will present three ethnographic accounts related to the operation of power in TOPDESIGN across material and embodied registers. By way of conclusion, we will discuss how the data gathered from TOPDESIGN can develop academic debates about the role of material and embodied practices in PBOs.

**PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND POWER**

Despite a small number of exceptions (e.g. Lovell, 1993; Pinto, 1996; Newcombe, 1996), the operation of power within projects received little scholarly attention until the fairly recent interest in project organizations by Critical Management Studies (CMS) (e.g. Cicmil et al. 2009; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006). Power continues to remain a substantially less prominent object of analysis than other concepts within major project management journals (Lovell, 1993), such as ‘success’, ‘failure’, ‘value’ and ‘risk’. There are numerous possible explanations for this tendency, not least the tendency to view power in negative terms as Machiavellian, self-interested, backstabbing – perhaps a project should, or can, expunge itself of power and politics by becoming more technically rational and efficient, and in the process create a unitary purpose (Clegg et al. 2006: 3). Moreover the pervasive interest in the analytic of power by those interested in developing critiques of modern management and organization, as in Critical Management Studies, inadvertently seems to support this negative reading of the operation and consequences of power. However, as Clegg et al (2006) explains, the effects of power can be positive or negative, and moreover it should rather be understood as the main contributor, not threat to, rational and efficient (project) management and organization: “Power is inscribed in the core of organizational achievement. If it were not, there would be nothing to remark on because, whether for good or evil, the social relations that constitute organization, the collecting together and coordinating of individual wills, endeavours, and energies, would not occur” (p3). In other words, power, that is the co-ordination through some, or many, relational techniques (e.g. morality, expertise, tradition, charisma, class, deception, diversion, physical force or reward) of individual wills into a collective purpose, is essential, or “immanent” to all organization (Clegg et al. 2006), not least project organization.

The negative image of power might explain the reluctance of project management researchers to engage with the concept, after all who wants to be seen to be openly encouraging the submission of individual will. Viewed in Clegg et al’s (2006: 3) terms, all project management research implicitly involves an analysis of power. For some, this broadening of
power might imply that power is everything and therefore nothing, everywhere and therefore nowhere, and thus of little utility to (project) practitioners in getting things done. However, this critique of an immanent view of power depends on the effects of power being understood abstractly beyond lived social relations. Yet, power effects are never mobilized abstractly; they are always contextually situated. For example, the relations of power that organize prisoners (threats of confinement) are not the same as between soldiers (official ranks), doctors and patients (expertise) or call-centre workers (surveillance, incentives): “power requires and is specific to a particular organisational context” (Clegg et al. 2006). If we are to properly understand power we must make explicit the specific social relations, including organizational practices, through which it is expressed. In the context of project management, this practice-based approach involves asking questions about the specific ways in which individuals wills are co-ordinated within PBOs, and perhaps, better still, also conducting observational studies of how individuals interact in real-time to achieve, or attempt to achieve, tasks together.

Unfortunately the small number of “mainstream” studies of power and projects have lacked practice-based perspectives and as a result tended to obscure the relevance of the analytic of power to practitioners and perhaps other researchers. Lovell (1993), for example, theorizes the general application of power, and especially the potential value of techniques such as trust, participation, empowerment and motivation in gaining the support of colleagues to become ‘powerful’. Whilst Lovell’s (1993) sentiment that individual power “depends to a large extent on the willingness of others to accept it” (p77) is correct, it is difficult to diagnose how such consent might be practiced in abstract terms. A similar shortage of empirical detail about the practices that effect power is apparent in other “mainstream” studies (e.g. Newcombe, 1996; Pinto, 1996).

**CRITICAL STUDIES OF POWER AND PROJECTS: EMBODIED AND MATERIAL PRACTICES**

Critical approaches to the analysis of power have only relatively recently been applied to PBOs (e.g. Cicmil et al. 2009; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; 2007). Unlike “mainstream” studies of power and PBOs (e.g. Lovell, 1993; Newcombe, 1996; Pinto, 1996). These approaches are related to practice-based studies of PBOs, wherein “actions, decisions and behaviors are understood as being embedded in and continuously re-shaped by local patterns of power relations and communicative inter-subjective interaction in real time” (Cicmil et al. 2006: 676). For example, Styhre (2011) describes in detail how norms of good work and credibility, policed by peer surveillance, provide an informal mechanism of control on construction projects, somewhat independent of bureaucratic formal control processes. Clegg and Courpasson (2004) empirically document the careers of project managers internalizing bureaucratic formal monitoring techniques of project management as part of their professional reputation, creating new forms of “remote control” for themselves and their colleagues (p545). These critically attuned studies offer contrasting views of the PBO contexts within which formal rules, and informal norms, might offer modes of control but they share a common interest in empirically understanding the local techniques of power through which individual will is co-ordinated in PBOs. The interaction between different modes of control, and the need to ensure
creativity, innovation and motivation, is an important, probably daily, concern for most project practitioners. This is particularly salient in the case of architectural design practices, where any sideling of the creative process is likely to lead to the erosion of the architect’s power (Cohen et al. 2005). However, few “mainstream” studies of PBOs explicitly mobilize the analytic of power, as developed over decades in the social sciences (Clegg et al. 2006), to understand how control/creativity is balanced in particular PBOs, and with what outcomes.

It is noticeable that critical studies of power within PBOs tend to focus upon the verbal registers of power, rather than embodied and/or material manifestations. The bureaucratic reporting system, through which projects are accounted for, in Clegg and Courpasson’s (2004) study, for example, appears rather passive to the will of the users of this system. Likewise, Styhre (2011) describes how poor quality craftsmanship can undermine professional status creating peer pressure, yet we learn little about the building materials or facial gestures, that are presumably involved in definitions of ‘poor’ or ‘good’ work. It is important, therefore, that embodied and material practices are considered in practice-based accounts of power in PBOs. In the case of embodied practices, a plethora of studies, from Taylor’s time-motion studies onwards, have illustrated how bodies are a critical mechanism to effect, and bear witness to, the co-ordination, or rather subordination, of individuals wills in organizations (see Clegg et al. 2006: 39-93). More recently, a growing number of organizational studies (e.g. Ball, 2005; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Flores-Pereira et al. 2008; Harquail and King, 2010; Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006) have examined how non-verbal, emotionally charged behaviour such as facial and hand gestures, eye contact, bodily contact, dress are equally important conduits of social interaction, and by extension domination, seduction, authority, coercion, manipulation in organizations. These non-verbal practices evidence and effect relations of power, offering a glimpse of conscious and non-conscious interactions that shape the social organization of work. Moreover project-based work often necessitates increasing attention to non-verbal, or affective (emotionally charged non-verbal interactions) – behaviours. Thrift (2008), for example, sums up two drivers for what he terms “the affective corporation” that also typify PBOs: (i) “The fluidity and subsequent lack of clarity of relations of accountability and authority and the substitution of networks of influence and persuasion for formal lines of authority in these management structures, coupled with the subsequent need to generate trust, have all highlighted the importance of affective ties and skills as key elements in corporations” (p244); and (ii) “the pressure for higher rates of innovation in many corporations has promoted high interactions cultures which often have very high emotional strains attached to them” (p244). Hence aspects of the flexibility and creativity, or in other words heterarchy, that typify PBOs actually may actually place more emphasis on non-verbal emotionally charged interactions, or what Thrift (2008) terms “affective”, modes of organization, and by extension power.

The significance of material practices to an analysis of power in PBOs is twofold. First, objects, including technologies like reporting systems are not merely passive intermediaries; they often fail to do what people ask, or expect, of them, and indeed when they do behave as we might like this often involves the enrolment of other unruly technologies with perhaps further unintended consequences (cf. Latour, 2005). In other words, objects continually make a difference to our socialized relations, thoughts and actions; they are more than simple ‘tools’. Secondly, objects equally do not determine our lives. By focussing on their influence on social relations, and by extension power, we can also avoid exaggerated claims about the potential for objects, such as technological systems, to bring about revolutionary changes in the nature of
project management (Harty, 2005). Both of these points have important ramifications for practitioners interested in understanding how to get things done in projects. Recent practice-based studies of power and organizations contain numerous examples of how power in organizations is some way materially constituted, from ICT performance monitoring systems in call-centres (Winicki, 2009) through knowledge management technologies in law firms (Brivot, 2011) to the office architecture of utility providers (Dale and Burrell, 2008).

For analytical clarity embodied and material practices can be conceptually differentiated (as above), but within the ethnographic accounts presented in this paper they will be discussed together. After all, to fully appreciate the interaction between people and things, we should consider people as corporeal rather than cerebral entities (Dale and Burrell, 2008). Indeed, our facial or hand gestures are modified by materials such as make-up, glasses, dress, desks or the machines we use at work, whilst objects frequently take into account, or supplement, the potential of human bodies. By focussing on these interactions between people and things we seek in this paper to develop fresh insights into new modalities of power within PBOs. With these theoretical imperatives in mind, we will now turn towards to the research setting of this study.

**RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHOD**

TOPDESIGN is a large UK architectural practice. The firm is located in a single office in London. The architects working in TOPDESIGN undertake a variety of design projects from small-scale residential developments to large commercial projects. The organization primarily works upon projects within the UK, particularly in London and the Southeast of England. This firm was selected as a case-study for several reasons. Importantly, unlike many architectural practices, very few formal messages are given by TOPDESIGN as to how the practice organizes its power relations. For example, some architectural practices contain vision statements on their websites, and in marketing material, relating to their heterarchy organization, whilst other practices place an emphasis on the creativity of “signature” architects or describe quite formal organizational structures. It appeared that TOPDESIGN was a good candidate to observe power-in-action, in that there was no explicitly codified consensus on how power was being organized, in essence no corporate mantra on, for example “people and power” that might obscure, or at least, complicate an ethnographic study. Moreover this architectural practice was large enough and concentrated in one organization so as to readily observe a large variety of different social interactions over a fairly short period of time. The architectural practice was also prepared to provide a level of access that was broadly appropriate for a small-scale ethnographic study.

The research approach deployed in this study is in keeping with what Alvesson and Deetz (2000) refer to in the context of Critical Management Studies, as “targeted ethnography”. Targeted ethnographies differ from “classic” ethnographies in that instead of a fieldworker spending several months in the field to provide a holistic understanding of a culture, they target significant episodes within an organizational culture to examine specific conceptual themes. Pink et al. (2010) suggest that short-term ethnographic interventions are particularly well-suited to industrial applications, wherein “project timescales are limited by industry deadlines and/or budgets” (p649). Moreover research resources are often justified on the basis of delivering
insights into specific conceptual issues, with a practical import, rather than providing the holistic cultural analysis as developed within classic ethnographies.

During our research study, a single fieldworker observed a series of project design review during Summer 2010 and also shadowed one of the founding partners. In addition, this fieldworker interviewed several practitioners, including structural engineers and model-makers, to understand how they made sense of their work and the spaces they inhabit. These interviews were not simply another mode of collection but were treated as part of the analysis process, functioning as “ethnographic” interviews, providing an opportunity to reflect upon the theoretical insights generated by observations of design review meetings (cf. Spradley, 1979). More generally, following ethnographic practice (cf. Pink et al. 2010; Watson, 2011) the analysis of data began in the field, rather than through discrete period of data collection and analysis, through the organizing of fieldnotes across relevant theoretical themes related to the expression of power (as summarised in the review of literature above) and reflection on these themes in collaboration with informants in informal conversation and interviews.

In this study, we were broadly interested in how control and creativity are reconciled within TOPDESIGN through specific relations of power. Hence we chose to primarily target observations of project review meetings where senior and junior architects met to review, amend and approve on-going design work. These observations then informed unstructured “ethnographic” interviews where practitioners in TOPDESIGN could collaborate with the fieldworker in the analysis of particular ethnographic encounters. Indeed, ethnographic techniques uniquely offer a beneficial degree of reflexivity about the theories of researchers (cf. Clifford and Marcus, 1986): permitting practitioners to collaboratively inform “our” theories within the analysis process (see e.g. Pink et al. 2010; Watson, 2011), instead of a more traditional model of research where scholars speak about and for their research subjects. In addition ethnographies enable researchers to be more self-reflexive about the positionality of their own observation, ideas and theories – admitting that research takes a view from somewhere (O Reilly, 2005):

Even your choice of topic is influenced by your own personal biography, by funding bodies (who are themselves influenced by internal and national politics), your academic institutions, your academic and personal biography. Who you gain access to and the type of access you gain are affected by your age, gender, class, personality and nationality. Your interpretations are affected by all of the above, plus your foreshadowed problems, your theoretical orientation, your academic training. (O Reilly, 2005: 222)

In keeping with the self-reflexive position of ethnographic research, it is important to acknowledge the social context of this study. Notably, within our study our approach was heavily influenced by the fieldworker’s social relationship with Peter, one of the founding partners of TOPDESIGN. No doubt this relationship itself was influenced by the fieldworker’s personality, appearance and background and its relative legibility, even acceptability, to Peter. Peter was
incredible useful in arranging access within TOPDESIGN and provided excellent engagement with the conceptual themes of the study, however he tended to organize access around his own diary. Hence it was often difficult, simple because of time, to speak to employees without Peter’s presence; especially given that the resources required for the study were limited both financially and geographically (the researcher was based at some distance from London). The focus on Peter, an outwardly “powerful” actor, is not however necessarily a problem for this study. The aim of this study is not to map all power relations across TOPDESIGN, or indeed address the issue of who has and does not hold power (a notion which itself reinforces a sovereign rather than immanent view of power – Clegg et al., 2006: 248), but rather as already explained, the aim of this paper is to examine the more theoretical question of whether, and how, objects and embodied practices might play a role in the immanent projection of power, as positioned within debates around the professed transformation of power within PBOs. This theoretical question can be examined empirically by, in part, observing and interacting with Peter, as he interacts with colleagues, and thus encountering the expressions of power that accompany these interactions. We do not claim that these insights are representative of all PBOs, or even TOPDESIGN, but they do illustrate the viability and value of an approach to the study of power in PBOs that considers power relations across material and embodied, not simply discursive registers.

It is also important to note that Peter asked for minimal explanation as for the presence of the fieldworker as an observer with TOPDESIGN. The researcher simply suggested to Peter that he was interested in understanding the design process as a social interaction. In turn, Peter simply told attendees in meetings that the researcher wanted to know how they worked and how they got things done together. In The remaining empirical discussion in this paper, we will continue this self-reflexive approach by and adopting a first-person voice that acknowledges the positionality of the insights gathered (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; O Reilly, 2005).

**DWELLING AND WORKING IN HETERARCHICAL SPACE**

The design and use of the TOPDESIGN office building outwardly reproduced many heterarchical ideals of work (e.g. high degrees of flexibility, collaboration, creativity) that for many should and do typify PBOs. As I entered the ground floor, I was struck, for example, that it was replete with building models. As Peter, the founding partner of TOPDESIGN, later explained to me, this was part of a city-wide exhibition of architecture and therefore the entire ground floor was open to the public. Peter explained that the ground floor had been designed as a highly-flexible and welcoming, open-space for the public rather than a corporate vestibule to screen unwanted visitors. Despite this level of openness, there was little security creating a barrier between the ground and first floor. Indeed a spiral staircase, placed prominently in the middle of the ground floor, seemed to invite, not discourage, me to walk upstairs. The TOPDESIGN office building also contained no information about the work of the organization contained within. Whilst this absence can be read in rather less egalitarian terms as a cloak, maintaining a powerful barrier of understanding between those inside and outside TOPDESIGN, the absence of a visual corporate brand prevailed across the office building. There were no artistic renditions of TOPDESIGN buildings hanging in corridors, no poster displays, no logos, and no corporate slogans. This rather non-corporate atmosphere within the office building also
offered a rather egalitarian space for creativity, where architects could operate with scarce attention to the ‘TOPDESIGN’ brand. This egalitarian mood continued in the non-hierarchical lay-out of office furniture and equipment. For example, Peter, the founding partner of TOPDESIGN, sat at a standard size desk at one end of a long open-plan office on the second floor. Peter worked with the same computer and architectural pens as all the other architects. Peter’s Personal Assistant sat at another desk behind a bookcase facing towards him. I struggled to identify any obvious physical markers of seniority within this outwardly heterarchical office space. Perhaps the only notable example of hierarchical division in the office layout was the use of single, large top floor meeting room for all board meetings.

The absence of signs within the TOPDESIGN office space also precluded me from gleaning any obvious functional demarcations of space. It was impossible to know where ‘accounts’, ‘legal’ or the structural engineers were located within the office without asking someone. This approach to functional boundaries seems to parallel the promise of PBOs as cross-disciplinary and highly flexible. Indeed there were small movable ‘pod’ desks located within each bank of desks, allowing co-workers to quickly rotate their chairs and set up informal meeting to quickly discuss design issues on projects, without having to book office space. On numerous occasions I witnessed architects, modellers and engineers meet informally in this way. Peter also explained how the office had been designed with a high degree of flexibility for expansion; for example, door lintels had been pre-positioned within walls, allowing future doors to be easily inserted. Similarly, the windows overlooking the car park could be easily adapted if the car park was converted into more office space. This last option would become reality as TOPDESIGN had decided to expand their office in response to their success in winning design projects and the need to accommodate the requirements of specific technical specialists, particularly their growing in-house architectural modelling team. The physical materiality of the TOPDESIGN office, and the agenda of Peter in creating this design, seemed to resonate with the post-bureaucratic ideals of power in PBOs, in terms of encouraging a more democratic, flexible, empowered, collaborative, creative and egalitarian approach to work. However, I remained sceptical of any notion that power was somehow absent within this organization. After all, as Clegg et al (2006) suggests, without power there can be no organization. To understand how this organization gets work done, and whether new, perhaps more egalitarian, forms of ‘project-based’ power were being cultivated, I observed a series of design review meetings.

EMBODIED POWER IN ACTION

These design review meetings were critical within the cycle of project work of TOPDESIGN. They enabled the dozen partners of TOPDESIGN to review the design work of the 200 more junior architects. The meetings were usually attended by one partner – in my ethnography Peter attended all the meetings I witnessed – and two or three junior architects. I was immediately struck by the lack of time junior architects seemed to spend discussing their designs within design review meetings. Given the collaborative atmosphere of the TOPDESIGN office, and Peter’s desire to uphold these sentiments, I had expected the meetings to be a very egalitarian event, where the junior architects felt empowered to explain their designs and even question some of the assumptions of previous TOPDESIGN approaches. Instead the meetings were
dominated by Peter with rather minimal involvement from the more junior architects involved. However, Peter did not dominate the meetings by speaking loudly over the junior architects; rather Peter actually spoke very softly, quietly, often pausing for thought, though with an articulate clarity. He would often intersperse into his views on design historical or cultural references. I recall one example where he explained the poor design of contemporary housing in the UK, by singing the theme music to the American television series, *Weeds*: “There’s a green one and a pink one. And a blue one and a yellow one. And they’re all made out of ticky-tacky. And they all look just the same…” The junior architects, by contrast, tended to speak in hesitant and hurried bursts, often referring to technical details about the contract, building materials, or client specifications. Their voices were frequently lost in the rhythm of paused reflections and clipped consonants that pervaded Peter’s voice. I found Peter’s voice engaging, in a rather pensive, reflective, almost mesmeric way. Unlike most of the junior architects, Peter would often also draw upon design plans in the meetings. He seemed to acquire an embodied feel for a design by drawing. As his pen moved across the design the junior architects would sit and watch silently, waiting to see how their designs could be challenged, adapted, revised or even abandoned. When challenged by Peter the junior architects would respond often with rather defensive, apologetic remarks or technical information about their designs. Peter appeared much more emotionally upbeat about the design process; he seemed to explicitly enjoy his work. Peter would frequently offer jokes about design, hinting at the fun or frivolity of design work, in a manner that contrasted with the earnest attention to detail of the junior architects. For example, in one meeting about an extension to the TOPDESIGN office I recorded the following exchange:

Peter: What is this table for in the model workshop?

Junior Architect: This table... this table is for...

Peter: If they feel faint and need a bacon sandwich or something?

Junior Architect: I’ll tell you what it is. The story of this table is that the current set-up is that you have machines on the ground floor and then assembly and computers on the first floor. Of course they don’t need the whole of the first floor. You have one bay which is actually the 3D group. So here you have desks.

This tension between differing vocal patterns, emotions, and actions (e.g. drawing) in the meeting, seemed to reinforce, not simply reflect, relations of power within the organization. Peter’s slow, studied, occasionally light-hearted, reflections, intermixed with drawing, provided a tangible reminder of his seniority, and experience: he did not have time to prepare for the design meetings; he did not need to be well versed in the technical details about a design, current building codes, or a contract or tender, but rather Peter offered an embodied, or tacit, knowledge, based on decades of enjoyable success, of finding the balance between what architecture can do aesthetically, culturally, emotionally, commercially and functionally. The junior architects in the review meetings would almost never challenge aspects of the design that Peter felt were inappropriate or badly conceived. I was surprised at the level of submissiveness within these meetings. After all, these events seemed rather at odds with the egalitarian atmosphere that
seemed to be actively promoted by Peter elsewhere within TOPDESIGN. It is also important to note, however, that I observed no recognizable bravado, machismo or heroism from Peter within the design meeting, as other authors have observed in studies of powerfully charismatic corporate leaders (Fletcher and Watson, 2007; Law, 1994), rather there was a curiously submissive power dynamic that seemed to hinge upon non-verbal, emotionally charged, even non-conscious, interactions, or what Thrift (2008) terms ‘affect’. Perhaps we might categorize the ‘affective’ quality of the meeting as mesmeric charisma: a benignly, even seductive, though powerfully commanding, mood seemed to pervade the design review meetings I attended. To better understand, and contextualize, the embodied and material, power dynamics within these design review meetings, and my observations about the TOPDESIGN office, I conducted an interview with Peter. This interview illustrates some significant, yet subtle, relations of power at work within TOPDESIGN and perhaps other PBOs.

“IT’S OUR SHOW”: MATERIALITY, EMBODIMENT AND POWER

I conducted my interview with Peter towards the end of my time at TOPDESIGN. This interview can be categorized as an ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979), in the sense that it was informed by my participant observations at TOPDESIGN. I did not have a template of questions to ask Peter but rather sought to broaden and deepen (and not simply validate) my understanding of power within TOPDESIGN. I began the interview by recalling my thoughts on the design review meetings I had experienced. I asked Peter whether, or how, he sought to encourage the junior architects to participate in these meetings. Peter began his reply by stating that ultimately “it’s our show...it’s our responsibility” (emphasis added). The ‘our’ in this sentence clearly refers to the TOPDESIGN partners and their work in making sure that the outcomes of the design process are as good as possible for their clients. He offers further explication on the purpose of design review meetings:

But we do rely on these conversations to – you know because otherwise with.... [so many architects working here] we couldn’t possibly draw everything ourselves, we absolutely need teams to go away and work things up and then bring things back and of course part of that process is that you’re giving up a little bit of what it is you do to them and that’s why they will work here, because they know that they’ve got room for manoeuvre.

Peter’s reply indicates a much more pragmatic, even hierarchical, attitude towards work and the asymmetrical relations of power that enable successful design projects in TOPDESIGN, than the heterarchical nature of the office space might seem to suggest. In the above extract Peter seems almost reluctant to delegate work to others, recognizing it as pragmatic necessity, given the success of TOPDESIGN, rather than part of any essential organizational mission towards a post-bureaucratic ideal of work. Peter seems to view empowerment almost negatively in this reply in terms of a sense of loss of himself and by extension his control. It is worth noting, given my
observations about the highly embodied nature of Peter’s power in design review meeting that he also speaks about delegation in quite corporeal terms as a loss of part of himself.

As the interview progresses Peter starts to talk about the challenges posed by junior architects that do not fit with the ethos of TOPDESIGN:

they are caught up in style and you know everyone is looking at the latest magazines and they want to do – oh that’s a fantastic housing scheme in Spain, I really love that, isn’t that wonderful, we can do that in Milton Keynes. You can’t, you know you have to understand and accept the limitations of the thing that you are doing. As long as you can understand that, then you can make something of it, because you make things out of limitations..

In this response Peter identifies a quite explicitly place-based ethos of design, where vernacular knowledge is more prominent that current design trends or iconic buildings. Peter is keen to instil this ethos, even brand, of place, into the architects in TOPDESIGN. Indeed inattention to the limitations of local context was often behind many of the criticisms that Peter had within the design review meetings. Peter recalls the experience of a meeting with one architect:

The plans will be impeccable, the dimensions for all the rooms, door swings, stairs, how things arrive, quality of daylight, you know the fact, the soil pipes, the structure, you know all the practical things will be really well understood, but what she won’t understand is the characteristic of an English village

This place-based ethos is far from easily compatible with a heterarchical ethos in TOPDESIGN. Indeed, as Peter explains, place-based design invites some fairly inflexible restrictions on the design process: “it’s just it’s all about place making and responding to things that we understand intuitively like hierarchy and legibility and so on”.

I then asked Peter about the TOPDESIGN office, and how it shaped the work of those at TOPDESIGN. I began by asking Peter about the design and use of meeting space within the large open-plan areas of the building:

You know we didn’t want them to be far from a place to sit and talk and there would almost be a place to do it, but that place should be not behind closed doors and so that if possible a conversation about design that’s going on can then be shared also by people who aren’t in the meeting, because they are sitting in the computer…
I knew that the TOPDESIGN building was designed by Peter and his partners and therefore that he would be able to offer an insight into the intention behind its design. In this answer Peter reinforced my view, expressed in the early section of this paper, that the open-plan office space was intended to promote social interactions across the organization, enabling creativity, collaboration and flexibility, or in other words many of the heterarchical ideals of work in PBOs.

I then ask Peter about the organization of functions within the office. Peter explains that

You can end up on any floor unless you are John [the other founding partner] and myself. We are the only people who are still sitting where we first sat seven years ago, because there hasn’t ever been a reason to move us, but the teams are always changing and we do that rather deliberately, so that it’s not built up around a prevailing hierarchy. So another partner doesn’t have his patch as it were.

In his reply Peter again notes a very conscious effort on the two founding partners to encourage social interactions, to break up any burgeoning silo-mentality within the organization, and enable the kind of highly flexible and adaptable working practices that for many typify PBOs (cf. Heckscher, and Donnellon, 1994; Lundin and Midler, 1998). Peter explicitly emphasizes his caution about instilling hierarchical lines of authority within the organization. Nevertheless the immutability of Peter and John’s location within the office perhaps seems to suggest some immunity for the founding partners from their drive towards heterarchy. Later in the interview Peter continues to explain the use of the office space:

If someone is shown round the office, they probably could work out where Bob and I sit, but we don’t have – you know everyone has got the same chairs when you sit round the table, everyone has got the same chairs. If we need more chairs, we either bring them from somewhere else or we bring stools in, there is no overt hierarchy whatsoever... We’ve never had our own rooms or anything. So nobody has any advantage spatially or object wise over anyone else, so there is no express seniority.

Peter explains that this heterarchical, rather egalitarian, impetus is designed to encourage confidence in his junior architects so that everyone working at TOPDESIGN feels able to add maximize value to design projects:

The intention is everyone sits down at the table and they are equal, you know we hate it if people are over quiet at a meeting and we want them to – because it’s in our interest that we get the benefit of their ideas, but it’s also very, very much in our interest that they grow in confidence and develop as people, which through work you do.
However, Peter admits that this heterarchical view of the organizations is necessarily partial, and that relations of power remain a necessary and unavoidable part of TOPDESIGN:

I’d be kidding if I said that there’s equality in the office, because we’re all paid differently, you know there’s different levels of decision making process, but the intention is that there’s no obvious hierarchy.

DISCUSSION

The TOPDESIGN ethnography reveals a number of unique ways in which power flows within PBOs. In contrast to many critical project studies (e.g. Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006), TOPDESIGN adheres in practice, not simply rhetoric to many of the heterarchical, and by extension post-bureaucratic, ideals of organization as outlined by Clegg et al. (2006) wherein:

Heterarchy means the separation of powers; it builds sovereignty into practice rather than the precedent of domination. It sets up, at best, internal systems for the exercise of voice, the calling to account, and the checking of power, and encourages coevolutionary, learning and innovation, and is committed to pluralism. In diversity it sees strength rather than division.

Peter makes it clear that the design of the TOPDESIGN office is actively promoting a strongly collaborative and less explicitly hierarchical, formal and functionally divided mode of work. The way office space was actually used during my visit repeats Peter’s intention. Peter explains that this way of working enhances the exchanges of creativity between colleagues within projects. These ideals are not simply socially or discursively operationalized (e.g. in mission statements or training workshops) but rather they are materially manifest in office designs and embodied patterns of use. Clearly the example of TOPDESIGN is rather unique in that the organization deliberately created its own space in a very direct manner, however all PBOs work in environments that are not completely accidental and passive but rather have been shaped by and themselves shape social action. The materiality of our working environments holds significant influence over social relations of power, a point which is clearly not lost of architects routinely thinking about place making, such as Peter, but is perhaps overlooked in discussions of project organisation. As Dale and Burrell (2008) put it:

We need to take seriously the interwoven nature of materiality, social relations and organisation. The coffee machine, the computer, the lift and so on are mundane features
of organisational life that bring the body to particular points in space and organise them there, although their relation to social processes are routinely obscured. (p230)

It is perhaps more important in PBOs, than other organizations, that the influence of materiality on social relations is taken into account both by researchers and practitioners. After all, PBOs rely upon the cultivation of a highly flexible and creative workforce. As Peter observed, project work may be poorly served by overly formalized working environments, or ill-thought out open-plan offices, that cannot adapt quickly to different project demands or encourage informal, yet creative, conversations and collaborations.

Nevertheless, despite Peter’s insistence on downplaying hierarchical modes of organization, TOPDESIGN is still pervaded by subtle yet potently hierarchical social processes. The design review meetings that I witnessed illustrate the necessity within PBOs to counter-balance creativity with control. However, management control within TOPDESIGN is a rather subtle affair, perhaps in keeping with the generally heterarchical ideals of the organization. Instead of primarily practising control through impersonal and formal bureaucratic checks (e.g. project monitoring forms); Peter has developed a style of control, and leadership, which is highly embodied. His voice, actions and feelings are co-ordinated in a display of power, as he posed questions, tells jokes, drops esoteric cultural references and challenges the junior architects. This exhibition of control cultivates, and references, exactly the kind of ‘affective’ corporation that Thrift (2008) tacitly associated with PBOs. Peter does not rely upon verbal confrontation, or even sheer technical expertise, to exert control over the design projects; rather in design review meetings he invites a mood of calm, cerebral, yet light hearted, deliberation, on the quality of the design. Exhibiting to the junior architects his ideal of the architect whose thoughts develop with each pen stroke – creativity embodied – rather than the architect who works outside herself in abstracted fashions, trends and technical possibilities. If we had not undertaken an ethnographic study of this design practice it would have been extremely difficult to tease out these subtle performances of power.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Various critical project studies (e.g. Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Sage et al. 2010) have argued that power effects within PBOs are perniciously “crypto” bureaucratic: increased flexibility and empowerment will lead to the re-assertion of rigid, formal hierarchies of control, as, for example, bureaucratic control processes become internalized as part of an employees’ identity (see Andersson and Wicklegren, 2009; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004). In this scenario, as project workers are given more responsibility and control, somewhat paradoxically project workers’ lives become even more dominated by an ‘iron triangle’ of project targets. As Clegg and Courpasson (2004) argue, the PBO therefore creates a form of remote rather than direct control, perhaps through project audit processes (Sage et al. 2010), which is no less potent than more direct, and explicit, forms of bureaucratic and hierarchical control. These critical studies suggest that power is a rather negative force within PBOs,
undermining work-life balance, producing poor job satisfaction and creating increasing levels of anxiety and stress, and ultimately reducing project efficiency and efficacy (see Cicmil et al. 2009; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006). However, our study of TOPDESIGN reveals few of these negative sentiments about power, not least because TOPDESIGN does not easily fit within such neat dichotomies of formal and informal control; TOPDESIGN displays a mix of heterarchical and hierarchical organization, formal and informal modes of control. However, neither of these forms of control is explicitly bureaucratic or formal. Indeed, whilst architects at TOPDESIGN recognize the need to complete bureaucratic controls within their work (e.g. to map changes in design), rather little of this bureaucracy is evident within perhaps the most important episodes of “control” within project work – the project review meeting with the most senior architect in the organization.

Our limited ethnographic encounter with TOPDESIGN offers at least four tentative lessons in understanding power relations in PBOs. First, power is not simply manifest in social relations per se, and in particular verbal interactions, rather it often operates across embodied and material registers from the layout and use of office space to the actions and emotions of individuals within a meeting. Secondly, as Thrift (2008) suggests, these material and embodied registers are particularly important within modern organizations, like PBOs where there is a pressing need to balance control and creativity. This case study appears to lend some credence to Thrift’s (2008) thesis. Cumbersome bureaucratic processes, and the rigid hierarchies they often imbue in organizations, appear (to Peter) too restrictive in ensuring control at the expense of creativity, compared to subtle affective techniques. Meanwhile mission statements about collaboration are equally too trite in encouraging creative exchange when contrasted to inventive office design. Thirdly, power can be understood in more positive, or rather neutral, terms. Power is crucial to the ability to organize, for work to be co-ordinated and should not be reduced, and thus avoided, as a Machiavellian quest (Clegg et al. 2006). If we understand power in an organization in less pejorative terms we can understand more about how work is done and through what techniques. Fourthly, power is multiple. TOPDESIGN is neither a pure hierarchy or heterarchy, it is rather both, simultaneously. And moreover it is both because both forms of organization, or rather relations of power, serve different productive purposes within TOPDESIGN: heterarchy encourages creativity, co-learning, motivation and communication, whilst hierarchy enables decisions to be made, responsibility to be taken and disputes to be settled quickly (see Clegg et al. 2006: 135–140). To Peter these two modalities of power appear necessary and contingent within TOPDESIGN.

It has only been possible to empirically examine these four points because of the ethnographic approach towards the study of power as employed within this paper. However, thus far, relatively few studies of power in PBOs, and opposed to projects per se (e.g. Bresnen, 2009; Georg and Tryggestad, 2009; Harty, 2005), have adopted an ethnographic approach (for one exception see Green, 2006). If we are to adequately understand the imperative to balance creativity and control in PBOs and the specific techniques through which power is being reworked in PBOs, such ethnographic approaches are essential. However, in making this leap, we must abandon recourse to ideal types of organization such as “hierarchy”, “bureaucracy” and “heterarchy” and “post-bureacracy” as “off the shelf” explanatory resources to account for power in PBOs; instead we should seek to develop these concepts through engagement with practice. Or, in the words, as Latour (2005) puts it: “We must not confuse a powerful explanation with an explanation of power” (p85). Given the professed “projectification of society” (Lundin and
Söderholm, 1998), further empirically detailed explanation of how power is being reworked through PBOs are required. This work can, in essence, help us understand what a PBO might be and do, providing a sound empirical basis for normative discussion on the design of future PBOs. This paper has offered a tentative step in this direction.

REFERENCES


