

A Beautiful Journey Through The Familiar Unfamiliar

Review of: *Organisational Aesthetics: Developing Beautiful Organisations* by Steven de Groot. Warden Press 2020.

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Humans are biologically, psychologically, and socially wired to appreciate beauty. Yet, for something so familiar the study and understanding of aesthetics as it affects our organisations, workplaces, and work is rather unfamiliar to many managers and leaders despite bringing so many benefits to workers, workplaces, and society. It's for that reason that Steven de Groot's book *Organisational Aesthetics* is such a critical addition to the bookshelf of researchers, practitioners, and entrepreneurs alike.

Steven de Groot does a masterful job of balancing a variety of demands for a book that provides an introduction to an emergent, growing and still relatively obscure field of study while also offering something substantive to those who are familiar with the body of work that encompasses organisational aesthetics. This was no easy task for organisational aesthetics is a broad-based field that brings together disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, art, design, and organisational behaviour to list only a few. Combining all of these perspectives into a single work that is both rigorous in its scholarship, yet accessible to novices is no simple task - and yet, it's achieved in *Organisational Aesthetics*.

The book is organized into four sections that provide this balance by first introducing the reader to the concept of aesthetics as understood historically through to the modern-day. Even those well-acquainted with the literature in this area will find value in Steven de Groot's survey of the philosophical and empirical traditions and practice and research-based evidence that have laid the foundation for what is the *aesthetic lens*. In the first section, de Groot takes the reader on a stepwise journey through the process of making aesthetic choices and judgements placing this within the context of how aesthetics has been framed and understood historically and empirically. It's a section that is remarkable in its depth as well as its accessibility, providing a strong orientation for novices and a useful refresher for experienced scholars.

The second section builds on this foundation and places aesthetics within the organization and the various roles, positions, and functions of people and operations. While short, this section is among the most densely filled with details setting up the reader for understanding how aesthetics fits within five 'C's' (Coherence, curiosity, completion, contact, and congruence) and three spaces (understanding, exploration, and relatedness). This may be the most critical and challenging part of the book on account of the depth of material laid out, which is both an asset and overwhelming at times. I'd recommend reading through this section in stages, not all at once for that reason.

Practitioners - managers, leaders, and front-line staff - will likely find the third and fourth sections the most useful. Here, de Groot makes a substantive contribution to the field by linking what we know and how we've come to think about aesthetics in organisations with practical strategies for applying this knowledge into making beautiful work and work environments. A strength of the approach is linking aesthetic practices to more conventional, widely used quality improvement processes such as Lean and use of KPI's to measure progress. The book concludes with profiles of organisations that have taken or originated some of these ideas and applied them to their operations, strategy and human resources.

In any book concessions must be made. *Organisational Aesthetics* is compact and comprehensive, yet the ease of access also means that certain concepts do not get ample treatment. For example, design thinking could have benefitted from more discussion as could discussion of approaches like Agile and organisational psychology, which are all touched on in some way. However, this would come at a cost of making the book larger than it needs to be. In its current form it is difficult to suggest changes that would not come at the expense of the book's strengths. Like any great design, it has to work within constraints and to this extent Steven de Groot has managed this, dare I say, beautifully.

This book finds itself occupying a "sweet spot" between academic scholarship and practical utility in serving the needs of those looking to make their organisations more beautiful, effective, sustainable and humane. Its size, layout, structure, and astute design choices makes this an indispensable book that I cannot recommend highly enough. It is the perfect vehicle for making the relatively unfamiliar knowledge base on organisational aesthetics more connected to the familiar experience that we all have with beauty in our lives. If it inspires more organisations to embrace aesthetic practices in their form and function that will be a beautiful thing indeed.

About the Author

Cameron Norman is a consultant, researcher and educator based in Toronto, Canada. His work draws on his background in psychology and behavioural science, design, and public health and focuses on helping organizations to develop, innovate and grow. His interests are in ways to create and sustain cultures of learning and innovation in organizations through design-driven, human-centred approaches to inquiry, creativity, and co-creation. He is the President and Principal of Cense Ltd. and is an Adjunct Professor in the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto.