

A visit to the Arsenal

Review of: *The Metamorphosis of Cultural and Creative Organizations: exploring change from a spatial perspective* by F. De Molli and M. Vecco. Routledge. 2021.

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When I first entered one of the naves of the Arsenal in Amalfi¹, I felt estranged but also at ease, sad and happy, in some way anxious and excited at the same time. I was there to see the work by William Kentridge² at the end of 2020. There was a crowd marching, and so were my thoughts. It was the first time I came back to an exhibition space after 2020's lockdown and the following restrictions to our mobility. The little town of Amalfi was full of lights and people. One of the things I missed the most in these recent uncertain times was just having the chance to decide to isolate oneself from the crowd in a protected space, taking some time to reflect, while the rest of the world was running fast. The lockdown timeframe, and the months following, have made us accustomed to an opposite scenario: having to isolate ourselves from a world that was all of a sudden slowing down. This is why I felt so strange while entering the dark and empty corridor of the building.

It would be typical to start the review of a book by summarizing its content, but I think that "The Metamorphosis of Cultural and Creative Organizations: exploring change from a spatial perspective" calls for something different.

The book employs various lenses and dimensions from philosophy to management to bring together the work of academics focused on cultural and creative industries from very different theoretical angles.

Thus, I have decided to use the tools and hints provided by the book to analyze one of the most interesting experiences I have had after the lockdown, as one experience which truly motivated me to rethink my research focus on the past year. I have picked a recent event

¹ Amalfi is a town situated in the Gulf of Salerno (Campania, Italy). Amalfi is the main town of the coast on which it is located, named *Costiera Amalfitana* (Amalfi Coast), and is today an important tourist destination together with other small towns on the same coast, such as Positano, Ravello, and others. Amalfi is included in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites. As one of the Maritime Republics, the town hosts an ancient arsenal. The main function of the arsenal was the building, repair, and storage of warships (among the largest to be found in the Mediterranean Sea during the early Middle Ages). Today, the Arsenal also acts as a venue for visual art exhibitions.

² From September to December 2020, the Arsenal of Amalfi hosted "More Sweetly Place the Dance" (2015) by William Kentridge. The artwork was presented by the artist online, on September 2020, due to Covid-19 restrictions to public mobility.

because I believe the book helps to connect the dots of how the cultural and creative industries have changed (and *are* changing) in the present times through the lens of space; consequently, how we – as users of space, as well as researchers of space – perceive the space is crucial.

I wish to rely on the methodology recommended by the book – the reference to the aesthetic, the symbolic, and the instrumental dimensions – to interpret and narrate my experience of the organizational space of the Arsenal in Amalfi, in the frame of William Kentridge's exhibition. I have started from how I felt on entering the space, I will shortly move to how I experienced the artwork based on my values and experiences, to conclude with a reflection on how the exhibition was organized to meet time and space constraints and opportunities.

It was a warm October night, a typical one in this part of Italy. To enter the exhibition space, I accessed the building of the Arsenal from a tiny door on the seafront of Amalfi. Once inside, there was a dark corridor with red lights on the floor, small red bulbs on each side. Having walked for a few seconds, I reached the very core of the Arsenal space, two large naves, where boats used to be stored and repaired in the Middle Ages. The exhibition area was wide and very dark; we were surrounded by cold walls, made of lime and volcanic stone. Everything was so dark but the piece of art itself: a series of screens, resembling a set of parchments to me, arranged on the right nave, where the sequence of "More Sweetly Play the Dance" (2015) by W. Kentridge was played over and over again. While the exhibition area was cold, the artwork was releasing warmth from the use of vast projectors. We, a group of four, were the only visitors that evening. There were some chairs, about 15, quite distant from one another, along with the series of screens the artwork was shown on. I sat alone for a while to participate in the experience of the artwork by myself. There was a piece of trumpet music playing which some black profiles dance upon. I vanish in the sequence of drawings.

So, the aesthetic dimension. The book refers to the aesthetic as the capacity to acquire knowledge through our five senses, as a form of sensorial expertise derived from the very first perception of a space.

The book draws on different nascent concepts from philosophy and management to analyze the aesthetic dimension from a unique perspective, by considering the physical as well as the digital spaces and the evolution of their perception in creative and cultural organizations. First, the book employs the concept of atmosphere to analyze how people feel when they perceive the artistic space, the artistic object as well as the artistic performance (Chapters 2 and 3). An atmosphere can make people know emotional states, as driven by the perceptions associated with the aesthetic dimension (i.e., *a dark and cold room, listening to instrumental music*). These perceptions are critical when spaces are visited and experienced for the first time. Moreover, the first part of the book includes an analysis of how established and traditional spaces, such as classrooms, can be perceived differently by individuals. These different perceptions can contribute to the craft of organizational spatial change (Chapter 4). These concepts are considered central to understanding the socio-cultural changes performed and experimented by cultural and creative contemporary organizations, as well as perceived by users, both in physical and digital spaces.

The artwork represented people moving away from somewhere, dancing while celebrating both life and death. They knew where they were going, or maybe they didn't. They kept dancing throughout, in a moment that I perceived as resistance and celebration of life. They could be refugees, slaves, migrants, and

they were carrying a variety of physical objects with them, from different historical cycles and a variety of cultures. They carried symbols.

That dance was able to give you the sense that holding on is what people always do, in any circumstance. So, while the people were marching, I started reflecting on my experience with the topic of moving away from something, or somewhere. I thought back to how I had to migrate from my hometown myself, when I left my city to move to Northern Italy, to study, and get my Ph.D. in Organization Theory. Words such as "migration" and "refugee crisis" are familiar to any European citizen, mostly in a bad way, while the concept of "moving away" can take different nuances. While the crowd was marching, I started reflecting on my role as a citizen, and as a researcher, on how to contribute to helping individuals hold on in their marches. Once out of the Arsenal space, an intense discussion with my peers at a table in a restaurant followed. I am still quite convinced that the exhibition and the following debate guided me to grow up my following research idea (to explore contestation work in apparently safe and institutionalized organizational spaces).

So, the symbolic dimension, or where the aesthetic experience brings us. The symbolic dimension stands for the "messages and values [...] that are not explicit, but subtle and allusive". Part II of the book clarifies how organizational spaces, in the form of events, shape who we are and activate renewed considerations. These meanings are perceived differently, as based on previous experiences and knowledge.

In the book, festivals (Chapters 6-7) and museums (Chapters 8-9) are symbolized to show how experiential spaces can be transformed from a concrete and conceptual point of view across modern cultural and creative organizations. The concepts of "safe" and "supportive" spaces are theorized in Chapter 6, with the ones of "temporariness" and "liminality" being relied upon (Chapter 7) to explore how cultural events are transformed to generate new meanings (i.e., *an Arsenal, once devoted to war, becomes a space to reflect on faith, temporality, life and death*). Art spaces can be made, reflected, and shared to change the fruition of the artwork (Chapter 8); at the same time, different forms of museum spaces can be theorized and experienced through the symbolic dimension, so to strengthen the relationship with the physical and digital audiences (Chapter 9).

The editors of the book did a terrific job in including cases of spaces that have changed under the observation and the hands of the people projecting and experiencing them, including the researchers. In this way, as a reader, I was able to find the perceptions of the researchers, and the symbols and theoretical streams they decided to rely upon, as part of their interpretation. As for the last part, the book presents cases of how the spaces had to be quickly and unexpectedly reorganized to meet the Covid-19 outbreak risks and restrictions.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, William Kentridge could not travel to Italy to launch the project. A video was instead shared via YouTube and spread from the official website to the ones of art magazines and other media. In the video, the artist, from his studio in Johannesburg, presents the artwork and its meaning while emphasizing how the conditions of Covid-19 (the epidemic, the uncertainty) could be reconnected to his work. So, we met the artist digitally, thanks to a video via a digital platform, and we accessed the video through our own devices and physical spaces. I watched the video on the couch in my living room. My very first experience with the artwork started there, and I could think about it widely enough before physically accessing the space of the Arsenal. So, before a physical perception of the space, the emotional states and the expectations

on the artwork had been growing in me from earlier on when I first saw the presentation video.

Last (or back to), the instrumental. In Part III, the book takes a further step by employing the instrumental dimension – defined as “how the space is designed and built by the organization to favor certain behaviors and to prevent others”; in other words, the focus moves to how spaces are thought of for the experience of users.

The book moves from an analysis of the experiences and perceptions of spaces (Parts I and II) back to how these spaces had to (and *will be*) organized to invoke some reactions. In doing so, the academics involved in this part of the book have reconsidered some traditional concepts of management and organization studies in the light of the recent happenings, such as the Covid-19 restrictions and the growing demand for digitalization.

The dichotomy between the production and consumption of culture (“prosumer” approach) is reconsidered in the light of the use of technology in the music industry (Chapter 10). Chapter 11 contains a reflection on the role of rural spaces for cultural entrepreneurship by presenting the advantages and disadvantages associated with these areas as compared to the case of large cities. To conclude, Chapters 12 and 13 analyze how museum spaces have been rethought in the light of the Covid-19 shock. The shift to a “place without space” is theorized in Chapter 12 as a consequence of the need for cultural actors to create and perform only online. In this chapter, emergent notions of space, such as the “quarantine transitional space”, are theorized. Chapter 13 focuses on the analysis of the solutions established by superstar museums to face the pandemic, to highlight how they were among the ones able to accelerate the digitalization process of museums to rethink completely the relationship with the museum audience.

Thus, the use of both physical and digital spaces is re-directed by considering how different actors (i.e., concerts organizers, entrepreneurs, museum curators) have decided to alter these spaces to incorporate renewed (and necessary) purposes (i.e., *to launch an exhibition online*).

The book “The Metamorphosis of Cultural and Creative Organizations” explores how cultural and creative spaces have evolved from an aesthetic, symbolic, and instrumental perspective in the last decades, with a spotlight on the drastic changes of the past two years.

With this book, as researchers and academics interested in organizational spaces, we first of all become aware that our knowledge, perspective, as well as the methods we use, need to evolve as spaces around us do. Moreover, our classes are changing as well, and we know how important it is that these rooms need to evolve into creative and inspirational spaces (even more nowadays, with online teaching). Related to this, I truly believe the book has what it needs to guide and inspire researchers, educators, and students.

About the Author

Daniela Aliberti is a Post-Doc Researcher at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milan, Italy). Her research explores the processes by which individuals, teams and entire organizations negotiate their structure, position, and evaluation in institutional fields. She is particularly keen on understanding these dynamics in cultural and creative industries, while clarifying the role of gender and ethnic differences, and the dyad personal-professional life, with respect to the mentioned topics. Her research has often been presented and discussed at national and international conferences. She is also lecturer at Università Cattolica for the course of Organization Theory (Bachelor). From 2019, Daniela Aliberti collaborates with the University of Notre Dame (Indiana, USA) on a series of research projects on the above mentioned topics.