

# **The Academic Office: Constitutive Entanglement and Organizational Matter**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores how a group of academics arranged and decorated their offices, revealing qualities of academic life of which academics are not usually conscious, such as the connectivity between academics, and the connectivity between practice and artifacts. The research confirms the importance of the sensory and aesthetic dimensions of organizational life, of artifacts and place and demonstrates the sociomateriality of academic practice.

The research took advantage of a situation where academics in the author's university were given some latitude on how they wanted to arrange their renovated offices. Interviews with colleagues revealed that the way they had (or had not) arranged, decorated and furnished their offices offered a rich source of data about their sense of place, purpose, practice and identity. Many of the things in these offices were embodied metaphors infused with meaning. Responses illustrated the way in which the office of an academic is a temporary construction site of relationships expressed through artifacts to which are delegated many profound tasks and responsibilities. It is a site where, through the material expression of self, that self and its work are theorized and the theories are materialized. Examining the aesthetic and materiality of the academic office illuminates how it is a prime site of "constitutive entanglement" and how the organization is constantly disassembled and reassembled.

**Keywords:** décor, materiality, things, artifacts and identity, the office, academic work

## The Academic Office: Constitutive Entanglement and Organizational Matter

The departure point for this article is Gagliardi's (1990: 13) observation that "artifacts can provide a key giving privileged access to the sensory and aesthetics dimensions of corporate life". This article vindicates his claim through exploring how a group of academics arranged and decorated their offices, which revealed qualities of academic life of which academics are not usually conscious. However, these qualities are important aspects of individual and institutional performance.

The research took advantage of a situation where all of us on a particular floor that was completely gutted were returned to our redesigned offices and given some latitude on how we wanted to decorate and arrange them. Inspired by ethnographies in visual and material culture (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981; Whincup 2004; Miller 2008) I interviewed ten colleagues about their new offices. As the interviews progressed, it became increasingly clear that the way they had (or not) arranged, decorated and furnished their offices offered a rich source of data about their sense of place, their sense of the purpose and practice of their work, and of their identity. Many objects and stuff, or matter, were akin to what Heracleous and Jacobs (2008) call "embodied metaphors". The responses illustrated the ways in which the office of an academic is a temporary construction site of relationships expressed through "stuff" and artifacts, to which are delegated many profound tasks and responsibilities. Clearly the academic office is not just a storage site or a place where the body of an academic sits. It is where, through the material expression of self, that self and its work are theorized and the theories are materialized. It is a prime site of what Orlikowski (2007) calls "constitutive entanglement".

Orlikowski draws on Law and Urry (2004) who point out that contemporary social science is ill-equipped to address issues of "ephemerality, multiplicity, dispersion, and mobility", and she remarks the difficulty in conceptualising the "inextricably material nature of our sociality". I have tried, by adopting an open-ended phenomenological approach, to overcome the social science equipment problem, and, by looking at a series of related offices as an assemblage of artifacts, sites of design and accident, intention and default, thing and person, thought and matter, I have sought to work through some of the difficulties involved in conceptualising the "inextricably material nature of our sociality" (Law and Urry 2004: XX).

Through examining the academic office as a site it is possible to understand how organizations flow over time and space. This study reveals how the organization is in a constant state of disassembling and reassembling. By looking carefully at things - for "things are the very medium through which we make and know ourselves" (Tilley *et al.* 2000: 61) - we may better understand this disassembling and reassembling from both an organizational and personal point of view.

Gagliardi refers to Hall's (1959) claim about culture, and "a universe of behaviour... *hardly observable*, which operates without emerging into consciousness ..." (Gagliardi 1990: 12). The problem, suggests Gagliardi, is the emphasis on mental processes and cognition that leads to holes in current organizational analysis. The solution is to attend not only to *logos* (beliefs) and *ethos* (values) but also to *pathos* (feeling). This *pathos* is linked to the aesthetic component of organizational culture and it is this that leads to the hypothesis of artifacts giving privileged access to corporate life. The office is "constructed" out of the system of organization. This is so at the material level, where doors, windows, translucent panels, thin walls and so on contribute to the porosity of office boundaries, and at the practice level. Organizing is about differentiation, a matter of in/out, here/there, now/then and so on and is always relative to disorganized. As Cooper (1986: 304-5) puts it, "the divisionary nature of the boundary reveals that the work of organization is focused upon transforming an intrinsically ambiguous condition

into one that is *ordered* so that organization as a process is constantly bound up with its contrary state of disorganization" (emphasis in the original). The very act of creating an organization is an act of boundary setting, an act of framing. The office is a frame in the organization, and it is a frame for this study.

The physical office has been an object of study for decades and it has been approached in different ways. Steele (1973) took a functional approach whereas Davis (1984) proposed a view of the physical environment in organizations in terms of physical structure, physical stimuli, and symbolic artifacts. He cited the classic studies of Festinger, Schacter and Back (1950) and Kotter (1982) that revealed the importance of relative physical location in buildings. However, my question is how the state of an office is the expression of an individual sensibility. Like Scheiberg (1990) I ask the how and why of individuals personalizing their work space – although I include any manner of decorating and arranging – and the meanings that may be inferred from this process. I draw on Davis' analysis of symbolic artifacts. Davis cites Becker's (1982) taxonomy of offices as creative (congenial to the user), administrative (for transacting business), and client-centered (to confirm the person's identity and status). The academic office is all of these.

The academic office is surprisingly understudied given that it is a prime site of knowledge production about organization. In a study similar to this one, Kuntz, Petrovic and Ginocchio (2012) examined how a change of building impacted on the professional practice and relationships of academics. They noted the built environment includes many overlapping spatial contexts (page 433) and their research revealed how changes in behavior forced by new buildings and material surroundings brought a neo-liberal order into a College. In another paper on the same project, Kuntz (2012: 771) noted that material context seems to fall away as organizational researchers "extract a few distinct variables from the discursive social spaces in which faculty work". The research I conducted affirmed the importance of material conditions and the link between space, place, building and practice.

The above is the overall frame for the inquiry. After describing the methodological approach below, I present the findings in terms of three themes: "space/place", "stuff and things", and "identity". I begin the discussion of each theme by framing it with reference to some literature specific to that theme. This leads to a conclusion affirming the importance of materiality in academic life.

### **The Methodological Approach**

Most of the above studies used variations of an ethnographic approach. Scheiberg (1990) interviewed individuals from two groups from contrasting units in a university. Belk and Watson (1998) selected five contrasting respondents from their 1-2 hours interviews with thirteen professors. Tian and Belk (2005) recruited 20 participants from a new venture organization and gave them a camera with instructions to photograph objects in their workplace that they valued. Cox, Herrick and Keating (2012) photographed one another's university work spaces then interviewed one another using the photographs as prompts. In these studies, and others cited above, such as Miller (2008), the general methodology was ethnographic. I too adopted an ethnographic approach, although given the specificity of the topic, I used a *focused* ethnography (Muecke, 1994) and an *institutional* ethnography (Smith, 2005). The unit of analysis is the individual academic in his/her office and the study can therefore be considered a collection of case studies. However, because the focus was on discovering patterns the approach is better described as a *collective* case study (Stake, 2005). It is on the basis of this combination of ethnography and case study approach that I seek to identify the "constitutive entanglement" of academic life.

The interviews were framed as “tours” of an office. Ten interviews were conducted over several months and transcribed by a research assistant. I then mapped out a rough identification of themes. One interview was selected for intensive analysis and findings presented at a conference. Insights from that conference were used to inform another round of coding. At this point each respondent was sent the transcript of their interview. This was deemed an appropriate step given that the respondents were my trusting colleagues and I did not want any individual to feel unduly exposed. Along with the transcript, respondents were given a brief summary of the theoretical background and literature and invited to make further comments on their views and feelings. This stage was then integrated into a seminar presentation to respondents only. Thereafter, a co-researcher was invited to code the transcripts. This coding was used to check and elaborate the initial coding. Out of this a more refined coding schema was developed and further analysis done. I then went back to individual transcripts and developed primary interpretations of each one and triangulated these with the analysis of a research assistant. This resulted in a final set of anonymized transcripts with final coding from which the following themes were extracted.

### **Space/place**

Space is not place. Space as a concept has a complex history and has been approached from sociology, anthropology, archaeology and cultural geography (Wilwerding, 2013). From a sociological perspective, place is a location that embraces the relationship between people, objects, and their surroundings as a meaningful and interactive structure. “Space is what place becomes when the unique gathering of things, meanings and values are sucked out” (Gieryn, 2000: 456, in Wilwerding 2013: 71). My concern is with the academic office as an organizational place. Bearing Cooper’s point about ordering quoted above, one could say that place is the ordering of artifacts in space. Space and artifacts constitute systems of communication (Gagliardi, 1990: xi) and artifacts are potent in the structuring of sensory experience (Gagliardi, 1990: 14). Sensory experience can be converted to aesthetic awareness, which has been claimed as a legitimate form of understanding organizational life (Strati, 2000). The associative and reactive capacities that people “construct” constitutes an important part of what is usually defined as tacit (Polanyi, 1996, Spradley, 1979) or informal (Hall, 1959) knowledge, as assumptions (Schein, 1985), or mute learning (Ginzburg, 1979). Artifacts and the organization of space are apt to reveal enacted themes as opposed to espoused themes (Gagliardi, 1992: 25). They can illuminate the relationship between physical labor and the structuring of space (Rosen, Orlikowski & Schmahmann, 1990: 69). Witkin (1992: 327) notes how he and others have stressed the importance of aesthetics as a mode of understanding, as a mode of knowing, and as intelligence. Spaces become places when they are infused with meaning.

As explained in the introduction this research took advantage of a situation where a group of academics were “rehoused” – in this case back into the same physical space which had been refurbished. Participants had a wide array of tools to support their work from large objects such as desks, drawers, chairs, shelves, and filing cabinets to small objects such as calendars, diaries, notebooks, pens, and pencils. Most offices contained an array of boxes that held an assortment of papers and of course, given the book as the traditional form of academic knowledge, the bookcase is a rich place to start because it embodied the themes of change and choice.

There was a constant tension between accepting and rejecting the institutional ordering. Prior to the shift, offices had wooden bookcases some of which were not up to the task, because their shelves bent under the weight of the books. That was the official line, but some staff managed to insist that those shelves were serviceable and they wanted to keep them. By and large organizational uniformity won out, and staff got large, grey, deep factory style shelving. Responses varied from “I don’t particularly like them” to a real sense of displeasure as they are “ugly”. Respondents felt they were pretty much

required to have essentially the same suite of furniture and this extended to the décor of the offices. A respondent said "we were instructed as to how the room would be furnished and I would never have had those – that kind of shelves and I didn't want them, but I had to have them". It sometimes entailed losing well-liked objects that they had a positive relationship with, replaced with furniture that was not only less aesthetically pleasing but left a sense of discomfit: "We had wooden furniture which looked supposedly a little shabby and was very haphazard but it kind of felt a lot better, you felt like you had something substantial to put your gear on and it felt like home, and I work better in that kind of environment".

The attempted imposition of organizational uniformity was subverted in different ways. A noticeboard becomes a site "which says something about me". It is a space that is seen as "not strictly utilitarian". On the noticeboard are placed postcards, pictures, awards, mementoes of past conferences and notices about forthcoming conferences: "I've put stuff up there that makes me feel good to look at". Glass partitions with a single frosted pane between the office and corridor next to the doors are altered through strategically placing posters over one of the clear glass panes. A couple of respondents had bought their own stationery, their own work tools in the form of notebooks and pens, portrayed as a slight indulgence and an affirmation of their particular sense of aesthetics, and a source of pleasure. Some respondents also had grey steel cupboards that they didn't want, and "[I] wasn't going to put anything in them ... as a protest". Another respondent said "I fling things on it - grey Meccano kind of thing - and then every now and then throw those away ... and because I resent it, I'm abusing it".

The lack of choice and the lack of sense of self in the arrangement diminished a sense of it as personal space at all. So one respondent was able to say "[I need] a good space – decent size full of light" and that the lack of it meant "I only work in certain ways here". Another described it as square, grey, sterile and lacking appeal. The impact of this on one person was that she tried to minimize the time in her office. Another resented the imposition, saying "we're forced to have this configuration". Another respondent eloquently pointed out the deeper implications. The office is

organized on the basis of what furniture would fit where, which is actually intensely irritating, so they put these in, these large book shelves which are actually more like giant installations which are exceedingly and unnecessarily deep. So, there was one place *that* could go, ergo there was one place the desk could go, ergo there was one place the filing cabinets could go, so it's not at all useful in terms of an office layout. It also means that in order to get no glare on my computer I have to keep the blind down all day every day ...

This irritation was compounded by the fact that the configuration precluded her from working in a certain way. As a visual thinker, she would have liked a second white board: "If I had my ideal it would be to have a really big one that I could work on – to brainstorm". This left a pervasive sense of the office as a purely utilitarian space. For some people important aspects of their work was carried out elsewhere, usually home. The implication is that this imposition of physical structure begins to structure the way academics work and eventually the very nature of that work (cf Kuntz et al. above).

Each person offered an example of how different the experience of organizational space could be framed. For one respondent, it was a matter of overall mood: "I come in, the office – if it's dark and dull and boring and you're feeling grumpy about things anyway then it all just kind of adds to it so it definitely can affect how I feel about other things and about how I feel about my work, yeah, absolutely". For another it was the layout that mattered and how he worked with it: "I find for example the shape of things and the layout really important. I can get very easily – you wouldn't think so looking at my office – but actually quite distracted by the way things are arranged and so on, you know". Finally there are quite specific aspects, such as smell: "I generally walk in

thinking I must open the window because there is a smell in these offices ... a sort of rubbery base ... then the next thing I do is I walk to the window, I notice the darkness and I generally pull it up a bit, the blind, and then I experience the ghastly filthy windows and at that time of the morning it's not really – it doesn't uplift me". There wasn't a uniform resentment and not everyone had strong feelings about the new arrangements: "Strong feelings about it as a space, no, I wouldn't say that I do. It's functional ... it's pleasant up to a point". For some it reflects "some of the worse and best things about the job" while others hold no particular attachment to the space.

One can see how the academic office is a site of embodied metaphors (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008) and the interplay of *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* (Gagliardi, 2007), where "organized" is in tension with disorganized (Cooper, 1986). The office is a site of power, boundaries, aesthetics and senses wherein we can see elements of the earlier frames of analysis developed by Steele (1973), Pfeffer (1983), Davis (1984) and Becker (1982). How academic work functions below the level of consciousness is even more apparent when we consider stuff and things.

### Stuff and things

It is space and artifacts that constitute place and here I draw on studies in visual and material culture and on the insights of Actor Network Theory (Callon 1986; Latour 1992; Law 1991, 1999). As explained by Candlin and Guins (2009: 5) this theory integrates human and non-humans into social networks: "Far from social and cultural practices attributing meaning to mute and lumpen stuff, this model suggests that social networks cannot *function or cohere without the delegated intentionality and agency of things*" (emphasis added). My ethnography of academic offices is not a simple act of decoding as in the act of semiotics applied to non-linguistic objects (Barthes, 1964) but rather an examination of the significance of objects (Gagliardi 1990: 29), their instrumental, social distinction and expressive functions. Gagliardi refers to Bromberger's (1979) notion of the "semantic dosage" of an object according to its functions; practical (*instrumentality*), as a sign in a system of culturally recognized conventions (*social distinction*) and as a function *expressive* of specific values and ideologies, manifested analogically and for the most part in an implicit way, escaping individual consciousness. The respondents in this study speak about the various things in their offices that indicate all of these functions.

Barnett (2004: 71) has pointed out that in a world "of unpredictability and challengeability – knowledge is being supplanted by *being* as the key term for the university". Miller's (2008) ethnography of London's Stuart Street contains the achingly sad story of George who has nothing and therefore seems *to be* nothing and The Clarkes who have so much and therefore seem *to be* so much. Miller's portraits illustrate how, socially, "things are the very medium through which we make and know ourselves" (Tilley et al. 2006: 61). Whincup (2004: 29) elaborates: "by charging objects with [the safekeeping of memories] the relationship between the owner and the object changes ... the personal mnemonic object becomes as priceless and unique as the memory to which it holds the key". An obvious artifact or "thing" in any academic office is a book, and more specifically, a collection of books. My shelves display an intellectual history of decades spanning several disciplines. It is an intellectual *Bildungsroman*, a dynamic memorial. It is evidence of "a collecting sensibility" (Shuker 2004: 311) common among academics and is associated with longing, desire and pleasure, ritual, near-sacred and repetitive acquisition, passionate and selective consumption, stewardship and culture preservation and obsession and linked to pathologies such as completism, accumulation and a preoccupation with collection size. The point made by Cooper (1986) about ordering can be extended to the particular location of objects through the famous assertion of Douglas (1996: 36) that dirt "is matter out of place". What is appropriate in one place becomes clutter in another. What is acceptable clutter can become distracting rubbish. Getting organized is putting things in their "proper" place. Of course, it depends on whose things and whose place we are considering, and that is a question of power.

Douglas' idea has been theorized almost, one could say, to the point of a paradigm - Matter Out Of Place (MOOP) - and has been used in the analysis of the management of academic work by Game (1994). The collection is abstracted from the larger flow of matter. The views of some respondents in this study suggested resonances between academic mobility and the mnemonic object.

There were many ways in which respondents used stuff and things to convert the office space into a place, sometimes to quite a substantial degree. One respondent's office "actually is my sanctuary, this is a place I enjoy being [in] when I'm at work, in my own space". Sometimes this effect is achieved through a piece of furniture. One respondent brought in a bright red bean bag, but "I could probably count the times I've actually sat on it ... I just like the color of it". The effectiveness of personal effects used to personalize the office often depend on the story associated with them, as in "I've got various things in my office and most things are quite personal and they have a story, because I've probably collected them from my travels, and they have got some significance to me. You can see I've got some different things from other people". These effects may be gifts, photographs of family, objects that carry a strong sense of history. Things are stories. Sometimes the boundary between personal effects and a work tool are blurred. An example of this is "my shoes calendar that was the highlight of last year, notice I haven't thrown it away. That was deliberate ... each day you change the shoe ... this was a gift, and I love it". At times it is the context of the personal effect that provides potency. One respondent had a teaching award on the wall which was "when all the dissolution of [previous department] was taking place and redundancies were happening, so it came at a good time for me, it made me feel good". The most obvious form of personal effect across almost all of the offices was the presence of family - in photographs, screen savers, spaces put aside for a child, precious gifts from a child or even tied to one's own childhood. Offices without any familial presence stood out. The gifts from children were typically simple in nature. One was a decorated stone from the respondent's 5 or 6 year-old daughter now in her thirties.

Objects are also associated with place. For one respondent a rock connected him to his life in a certain place as a child and was linked to his screen saver:

I got it when I was tramping behind [place], it still has its river smell, and its got seams of quartz through it ... so the place is very important to me because I live there ... it takes me to the other thing which is the screen saver which is those very same hills or mountains. So then that takes me back to my childhood where I was brought up on stories from the [place] and my grandfather's stories.

The flow between home and work is a recurring theme, and in some instances the work office is a depository for the flotsam and jetsam that needs a "home from home" such as a pot plant: "a spill-over from when I left, moved up to our new place. I had to put that pot plant somewhere and so it's ended up here"; an unappreciated gift: "I thought it was funny when I saw it and he [partner at home] didn't think it was funny, especially when he got a shock from it ... I don't know why I brought it in here, I must have brought it in here to show somebody and never took it home again"; or a collection of magazines: "... which I probably never looked at, they probably came from home because I got sick of them filling up my home office".

The organizing of paper in all its various forms - printing paper, sheets and piles of papers, journals and books, students' exams and assignments comprises a "constant negotiation of what's going where and what's going out and what's going home, and so while it looks like there are piles that I may not have gone near for a while I know where everything is". It can be highly organized: "That's my home reading box, it goes home at the weekend, so during the week anything that I'm not going to read goes in that box, and that then goes home". For others there is an ebb and flow in the tide of things, a

state of flux between clutter and a pristine environment: "Being in a state of clutter is more normal than not and I relish those odd moments when it becomes a pristine space once again ... At the termination of like, sort of, milestone events like projects or something". For many a key element of the presence of "clutter" is having "visual piles of stuff" in their line of sight. One respondent mentioned the role this plays and the danger of putting things away prematurely: "Well, I find if I put things away, because you're dealing with so many different things, topics, well I seem to be, that if I actually put them away, any other way than that, I never remember what I've done with them, I never remember what I file them under". Even one respondent who is effective in her filing system likes "stuff" in her line of sight: "I like to be able to leave piles of things in progress, sort of semi-orderly place so I know where they are ... [there's a] chronological aspect to what gets put where". To paraphrase the well-known statement about buildings, we organize our stuff and then it organizes us.

One respondent had his noticeboard and whiteboard follow him from a previous office to the current one. However, this carried an added layer, with aspects of the legacy from his predecessor as part of the old noticeboard being incorporated into his office setting. And the legacy was noted as such: "The legacy dates back even further if you look at those little prints up there, apparently my predecessor in the old office liked color prints, and I said, ok, a little bit of color here without being overboard". Another example was a pen/pencil stand used by his predecessor in the old office. Another respondent inherited files from a former colleague, which contained some personal things. The sense of prior ownership was enough for her to feel unable to throw them out because "I think they're not mine to throw out but I don't know who to ask and then it will just get complicated so I just leave them". One respondent was literally occupying another colleague's office, while she was on sabbatical leave. He felt as if he was "sort of squatting", with the office full of the other person's stuff. Thus, he wanted to "downplay the importance of work ... some part of me doesn't want to acknowledge the commitment to come to work every day, so I don't want to put more of myself into it than is absolutely necessary". It is perhaps inevitable that we come to this point of asking, what does it mean to be in this place? Who am I to be here? And we should ponder the fuzzy boundary between me and my stuff.

## **Identity**

The way academics arrange, decorate and furbish their offices (or not) is a complex expression of personality and organizational identity. Scheiberg's (1990) study referred to above illustrates how the personalization of work space mediates emotions, in both constructive and negative ways. Her findings also indicate the dangers of managerial control, and the importance of relating one individual's personalization with that of others in the work setting, especially in shared spaces. Belk and Watson (1998) provide five vignettes which engagingly illustrate how discipline and personality can be expressed through décor and workplace arrangements. Issues of freedom of expression, authority and status, separating and integrating different parts of a life, making connections, mood management and keeping in touch with roots (which, given the mobility of academics is especially germane to our theme) are identified. Belk has developed the notion of "extended self" in other settings (Tian and Belk, 2005) where personal possessions in the workplace serve as evidence of an extended self that can be expressed or hidden. In their study, the rituals of taking possession, using physical signals to bolster a sense of competence, prosthetic extensions of self ("my [rolodex/calendar/computer] is my brain"), using sound and aroma to create boundaries at work, identification with the corporate and importantly, the boundaries between home and work are identified. Cox, Herrick and Keating (2012) investigated the relationship between the experience of space and identification with the institution. Although their focus is on learning spaces, they confirm how space shapes experience and how in university spaces at large, the complex identification of academics with spaces is "a constant project of identity-formation and change within mutable spaces" (page 697).



Respondents expressed and protected their personal identity through accessibility, visibility and privacy. Lines of sight matter. One respondent did not like the attention her library books used to elicit: "My library books used to live in a pile there but then I got sick of people commenting on how many library books I had out so then I put them down there and people don't seem to comment as much ... everybody used to read the spines and ... would say, oh, ... tell me the name of that and I'll grab it off you after". On a more positive note, visitors may notice a pair of gym shoes, or walking shoes or a bowl that normally has fruit in it and other indicators of what the occupant does or what matters to them.

Color was an obvious indicator with some respondents quite consciously using it to express their sensibilities. However, personal sensitivities also had a negative aspect. One respondent (not the respondent quoted above on smell) used aroma in a quite complex way: "I don't want to be invisible and I feel invisibility is always just around the corner, or just behind the door ... so I use rosemary ... geranium ... I think that's about masking the stench [laughs] of institutional decay – or my decay in the institution to be precise".

The tensions around visibility and privacy are played out in different ways. As mentioned above, in these new offices there was a section next to the door, about the same size as the door, comprising three glass panels, with the middle one frosted. A perfect compromise one might think: "I always wanted to be visible and accessible and for that reason I quite like those, and the fact that the middle pane is frosted it means you do have at least some privacy... no one is staring at you". In reflecting on having very few personal artifacts in her office, one respondent says, "I'm probably protecting myself from scrutiny by others, so it's probably a privacy thing. I'm very private ... there are probably a whole lot of things I could do to this to make it more me, but do I want more me here in this environment? I don't feel particularly valued as me here so why would I want more of me here". And yet this same respondent could say "I really enjoy the various neighbors I have ... so there's a sense of community here that mitigates any sort of negativity around the lack of privacy".

The primary entity governing accessibility, visibility and privacy is of course the door. Some respondents left their door open as a means of remaining visible, with a typical comment being "I usually have my door open all the time – it's not usually closed unless I'm having a meeting or talking with a student in here, or a private phone call or something like that, might lead me to close it, but normally it's open all the time", although for some there was a hint of ambivalence: "When I'm here I tend to try and leave the door open as much as possible in order to engage with people when I am here ...". There are obvious drawbacks: "There's a lot of traffic going up and down here and unless I close the door I get distracted by it". And then there is orientation to the door, and, not unusually, "I've always felt that there was something very unwelcoming about having your back to the door, given that that's where your student or your colleague or your visitor or whoever it is is going to be coming in, that way, but the room was actually set up this way when I inherited it". And finally, the actual use of the door: "I try to put a sticky note on the door to say when I'll be back, and I was using an awful lot of sticky notes".

The office it would seem is a site of identity formation and protection. However, like the office itself, and the things in it, this identity is fluid, and its boundaries porous. We go from office to office, via corridors and stairs and lifts, with aspects of our identity in constant ebb and flow around us.

## Conclusion

Clearly the academic office is a place where “things are worked out”, where an academic engages in mental activity (*logos*), engages with others (*ethos*) and expresses *pathos*. There is a performativity of the sociomaterial assemblage that is “fleeting, fragile, and fragmented, entailing uncertainty and risk, and producing unintended outcomes” (Orlikowski, 2007: 1445).

This study supports the view of the academic office as a prime site of constitutive entanglement, a temporary construction site of academic relationships, filled with “stuff” and artifacts as “embodied metaphors” (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008) to which are delegated many profound tasks and responsibilities (Candlin and Gains, 2009). The academic office, with its acknowledged and unacknowledged stuff from other places and people, reflects the constant disassembling and reassembling of the university.

I have illustrated how organizations flow over time and space and shown how an individual’s office is a kind of hologram of the organization. Like the organization in which it is embedded, the individual office is also in a constant state of disassembling and reassembling. The person and the office is a kind of “spaghetti junction”<sup>1</sup> of organizational flow. It has been the attention to things as a medium of producing meanings and expressing “pathos” that has enabled this understanding which vindicates Gagliardi’s (1990: 13) claim that “artifacts can provide a key giving privileged access to the sensory and aesthetic dimensions of corporate life”.

In the time that this paper was under review and revision I experienced another relocation, this time from one campus to another. Reflecting on that experience and with the benefit of suggestions from reviewers of this article, I offer the following observations.

When I was unpacking my stuff in my new office, and placing things, I realized how contingent such arrangements are; “I don’t know where this goes, until that is sorted ...” and so on. Then, refurbishment began on some offices round the corridor. One afternoon the sound of drilling and sawing became unbearable. I went to the library. I was there for half an hour, when the sound of workman on the roof became unbearable. To cut to the quick, I had nowhere to go to think. Academics, it was brought home to me, claim that thinking is our basic activity, but we do not live in our minds. How does this relate to the peripatetic scholar, the worldly adjunct, the hot-desking temporary fixed-term assistant? There is much to be explored how place and matter shape thought.

Things are much more settled now, including dust. When a colleague pointed out the lack of dusting aggravated her hay fever we learned that dusting was not part of the University’s contract with the cleaning company. We may now, it seems, include cleaning in our job descriptions. How, we may ask, is power played out between health and responsibility for place of work? Cleaners are prohibited from touching computers, but not from shifting personal artifacts. The office, if you will pardon the pun, is a spaghetti junction of power lines.

If there is an ideal office for academics, what would it look like? A mini-library perhaps, or the room of a congenial club with all the resonances of male privilege? Or would it be a designed space of pale wood, glass and discreet technology? Or would you prefer the comfortable worn untidy ambience of a lounge off the kitchen? These all are archetypes for particular kinds of work and for attitudes towards work. Where in the kitchen do you put the computer? Or the rare book? One reviewer noted the absence of attention to computers in the above analysis. Indeed, and why is that? Is the computer an invisible

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<sup>1</sup> Spaghetti junction still does refer to Junction 6 of the M6 Motorway in the UK but has become a common label for complicated intertwined road traffic interchanges and a metaphor for such situations.

technology or has it become so pervasive that it is no longer observable outside ourselves?

Then there is the question of disciplines. We are a school of management. Our situation would be similar I think to colleagues in the humanities, but could be quite different to colleagues in chemistry who work in labs as well as offices, or engineering, where much work is done in engineering workshops, or designers and their studios. Besides indicating the limits to the generalizations about academics per se that can be drawn from the research reported here, the point about disciplines draws attention to the resonances between the shape, form and substance of the material and the conceptual.

Finally, although I feel I have explained a great deal about academic offices and academic work, the research has provoked an abiding sense of unease. I sense an amorphous threat on the horizon that has to do with the dematerialization of work, which, it seems to me, might entail my disembodiment. To be sure, "the changing nature of work" is a cliché. I find the truth of it however a spur to further investigate the relationships between changing places, changing things, and changing minds.

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