

Aesthetic Reflection in Managerial Theory and Practice

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Research on the aesthetics of organisations, conducted for several decades, has led to organisations being no longer regarded as aesthetically neutral entities, but as forms of expression, susceptible to several aspects of human perception, interpretation and reaction. This approach can be of particular importance for supporting creativity, innovativeness, knowledge conversion, and for critical reflection on the theory of management and managerial practice. In order to take full advantage of the potential of this cognitive perspective, one should turn to applied practices (e.g. the work of designers and artists) combined with theory (of perception, design or art), which have thus far remained beyond the purview of mainstream organisation and management theory.

Keywords: organisational theory, aesthetics, philosophy, design, visualisation.

Refleksja estetyczna w teorii i praktyce zarządzania

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Prowadzone od kilkudziesięciu lat badania nad estetyką organizacji spowodowały, że organizacje nie są już traktowane jako byty estetycznie neutralne, ale jako formy ekspresji, podatne na wielorakie aspekty ludzkiej percepcji, interpretacji i reakcji. Podejście to może mieć szczególne znaczenie we wspomaganie kreatywności, innowacyjności, konwersji wiedzy, a także krytycznej refleksji nad teorią i praktyką zarządzania. Aby w pełni wykorzystać potencjał tej perspektywy poznawczej, należy zwrócić się w kierunku stosownych praktyk (np. pracy projektantów i twórców) oraz teorii (percepcji, projektowania, czy sztuki), które do tej pory leżały poza sferą zainteresowania głównego nurtu teorii organizacji i zarządzania.

Słowa kluczowe: teoria organizacji, estetyka, filozofia, projektowanie, wizualizacja.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary research on organisations remains deeply anchored in the paradigm of social sciences, which dates back to the early twentieth century. While the progress of economic sciences has been quite clearly reflected in management theory, parallel developments in social sciences have often been overlooked. Although modern social theories have turned towards interpretative (critical, phenomenological and hermeneutic) approaches (Johansson & Woodilla, 2008), managers and employees are still being prepared for functioning in the world of structural functionalism. The commonness of the functional approach – marked by the need for distance and normalisation, and whose purpose is quantitatively understood efficiency – has resulted in simplifications in the understanding of management processes, particularly in areas where it is difficult or downright impossible to comprehensively measure the observed phenomena. For example, in the pursuit of easier operationalisation, the idea of quality is frequently identified with compliance with formalised norms, intellectual capital is reduced to being an accounting entry, knowledge becomes an item in a database, and innovation is mistaken for the sheer number of new products. While the overall paradigm shift in modern management is not possible, or even desirable (given that the functional approach fits perfectly the problems of business economics), new cognitive perspectives would allow a deeper understanding of the essence of creating market value. As a consequence, philosophical approach is increasingly adopted in reflection on management. For many years, the theory of organisation and management has referred to one of the spheres of axiology, the ethics. It turns out, however, that another field of the theory of value, namely aesthetics, can have a significant impact on the theory and practice of management.

2. Aesthetics of the Organisation

Along with ethics, aesthetics is one of the fields of the philosophical theory of value, which examines matters related to beauty, but also relations between content and form, sensations and experiences that accompany processes of perception and creativity, and shapes the criteria and canons of beauty. The name of this discipline was coined by Alexander Baumgarten in 1750 and it is derived from the Greek word *aisthesis*, which means sensual perception or feeling. Today, the category of aesthetics is polysemous (see Welsch, 2005, pp. 52–58) and no unambiguous and universal determinants of beauty exist (see Weiner, 1994). There are, however, certain common and universal conditions for aesthetic judgments (Dutton, 2001), and despite cultural differences, most people can recognise the work of an artist, a piece of creative work or the outcome of skilled craftsmanship (Nelson, 2006). Therefore, regardless of individual or culturally determined theories of

beauty, it is impossible to ignore the influence of the aesthetic experience on organisational and market behaviour. In the economic sphere, ancient notions of *mimesis* and *techne* remain essential, and technical perfection, the pleasure of use, cohesion, harmony, or uniqueness often determine the attractiveness of products sold by an enterprise (Dzidowski, 2011). Therefore, since the 1980s, the theory of organisation has encompassed an approach in which aesthetic criteria, judgments and experiences are regarded as essential elements of management (see Strati, 1999, Linstead & Höpfl, 2000; Guillet de Monthoux, 2004; Hatch, Kostera & Kozminski, 2005; Gibb, 2006). Not only is this the result of a progressive aestheticisation of the world, but above all can be accounted for by the fact that polysemantic meanings of aesthetics (see Welsch, 1996), analysed with reference to perception, value and beauty, have an impact on understanding contemporary organisations.

The evolution of the concept of organisational aesthetics began with the recognition of the aesthetic dimension of organisational culture: first through demonstrating the role of organisational symbols and artefacts, then examining the materiality of everyday life in an organisation, relationships between actors within the organisation and their forms of expression (so-called negotiations of sensuality). Currently, it focuses on the artistic dimension of management, which takes into account creativity, pleasure or play (Strati, 2014). As a result, the aesthetics of organisation is considered one of the directions of organisational research (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, pp. 318–320, McAuley, Duberley & Johnson, 2007, pp. 453–455) and organisations are no longer regarded as aesthetically neutral, but as forms of creative expression, subject to the aspects of human perception, interpretation and reaction. Through the prism of organisational aesthetics, organisational changes can be analysed as changes in stakeholders' perception of reality. The strategic use of art, aesthetics and related cognitive processes seem to be particularly interesting today, taking into account the development of management theory, which focuses on creating conditions for innovative or even improvised processes (agile, virtual organisations), while ensuring autonomy and self-organisation of structures (fractal, liquid organisations). Reconciling these often contradictory conditions requires a holistic and unconventional approach to solving management problems, which are often based on creative methods of work employed by makers, artists or designers.

3. Visuality and Aesthetic Reflection in Management

Visuality is what originally connected the aesthetic reflection with management processes. While visuality is not synonymous with aesthetic experience, which encompasses sensations generated by senses other than sight, as well as emotions and the intellectual dimension, it is the most cognitively accessible concept. We can define visual identity through such conceptual axes as 'anything that we can see', 'anything that has been

manufactured or created by people, which can be seen', 'functional or communication assumption: a project' (see Barnard, 1998, p. 11–17).

In the reflective dimension of visuality, the concept of 'visual competence' becomes important – in German, it is referred to as *Bildkompetenz*. It means a cultural skill that encompasses matters related to the reception of images (Posner, 2003). Visual competences, however, are only the basis for reflective functioning in the sphere of visual culture. They are not usually active, which is a requirement when visuality is to be used in management (Dzidowski, 2013). The model of visual competences developed by Marion G. Müller (2008) defines visual competences as the ability to react appropriately. In particular, it includes four stages that form a closed cycle (Müller, 2008):

1. Perception (assignment of meaning)
2. Interpretation (emotional and cognitive reaction)
3. Reception (physical reaction and taking action)
4. Production (dissemination, creation)

Individual stages take place in the individual, situational and systemic (social, cultural or organisational) context. This means that visuality in management is not limited to the forms of information transfer or to the visual identity of the enterprise. Visual communication supports many organisational processes, in particular decision making, through the use of conceptual diagrams, such as mind maps, process flow diagrams, graphs, networks, Gantt charts, Venn, Sankey or Ishikawa diagrams. In business, especially in the context of knowledge management, there are even dedicated models that organise the visualisation of knowledge on the basis of its type, the purpose of visualisation, recipients, context and available methods and formats (Eppler & Burkhard, 2007). However, the most important change in the contemporary understanding of visualisation is its use for strategy building. The most popular tool is the *Business Model Canvas* employed to describe, visualise, evaluate and change the business model of an enterprise (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2012). This model takes the form of a visual diagram and is used for the purpose of predefined structuring of management problems.

A much more interesting and innovative approach to the analysis and development of organisational solutions, however, is the drawing process (Dzidowski, 2016b). Dan Roam has advocated the use of drawing in business communication (see www.danroam.com); his book *The Back of the Napkin: Solving Problems and Selling Ideas with Pictures* (2008) was a bestseller and paved the way for many other creators who combine their knowledge and skills in the area of graphic design and management. Masters of improvised, hand-drawn visualisation, such as Mathias Weitbrecht (author of *Co-Create! Das Visualisierungs-Buch*), began to offer their business sketching services (see visualfacilitators.com) in the form of graphic recordings of meetings, training sessions and conferences, visual support for decision-making processes or knowledge management. Other authors, for instance David

Sibbet, the author of *Visual Leaders: New Tools for Visioning, Management, and Organization Change* (2012), in addition to services and workshops (see www.grove.com), directly translate visual competences into leadership, management and organisational development. A similar approach to visualisation is represented by Christine Chopyak in her book *Picture Your Business Strategy: Transform decisions with the power of visuals* (2013).

The reflective and cognitive dimension of various forms of graphic representation of reality has been known for a long time. Such studies as *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (1956), or *Visual Thinking* (1969) by Rudolf Arnheim, theoretician of art and psychologist of perception, analyse the relationship between visual perception and cognition, sensual and verbal knowledge, idea and experience. American graphic artist and illustrator Milton Glaser argues in his book *Drawing is Thinking* (2008) that drawing is much more than a simple reflection of reality: it is a manner of understanding and experiencing the world. In turn, Barbara Tversky's works explore the role of drawing in innovative processes (Tversky & Suwa, 2009). In particular, sketching for one's personal purposes can be regarded as an element of one's dialogue with oneself, the purpose of which is to extract hidden knowledge (Pfister & Eppler, 2012; Heikkinen, 2017). This, in turn, is part of the knowledge conversion process known from the Knowledge Spiral model (Nonaka, Toyama & Konno, 2000). Consequently, it turns out that we can analyse organisational structures and processes through reference to aesthetic categories, metaphorically linked to management problems. These categories include (Neumeier, 2009, p. 71):

- contrast – the ability to stand out,
- depth – integration of management levels,
- focus – key skills,
- harmony – efficiency,
- integrity – synergy effect,
- line – the trajectory of development,
- motion – the speed of change,
- novelty – the capacity to astound one's competitors,
- order – the adequacy of the structure,
- pattern – the possibility of using one's experience,
- repetition – economies of scale,
- rhythm – optimisation of time,
- proportion – strategic balance,
- scale – size of the enterprise,
- shape – the boundaries of the enterprise,
- texture – artefacts affecting the organisational culture,
- homogeneity – organisational identity,
- diversity – innovation.

The above list is only a proposal of the criteria useful for aesthetic organisational analysis. However, if we examine the proportion of

organisational structures, we can make recommendations regarding the choice of the span of control and the number of levels within the organisational hierarchy. Lines, repetitions and patterns on diagrams of production processes may suggest directions of their integration. In turn, changes in the scale and shape of the network of relations with business partners may indicate that the organisational structure needs to be modified. Sketches and organisational drawings can serve as tools of such analysis (Dżidowski, 2016b). No guidelines for creating visualisations exist. They are usually so individual that the hermetic language of graphic forms would prove an obstacle to further communication. However, universal principles of perceptual grouping derived from the Gestalt theory, or the architectural theories of design can be resorted to the process of such graphic notation. For example, emotions and non-structural dimensions of organisations could be denoted by the use of the so-called ‘mood lines’, presented in the book *Landscape Architecture: A Manual of Environmental Planning and Design* (2006) (Figure 1). The use of such notation would pave the way to visual communication not only at the level of organisational structure representation, but also organisational culture or strategic assumptions.

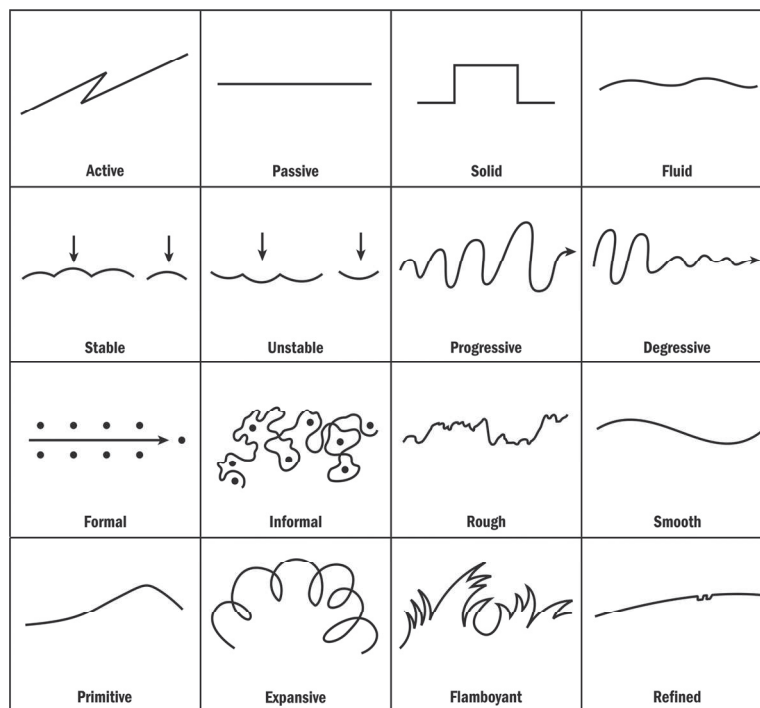


Fig. 1. Mood lines. Own study based on Starke and Simonds (2006, p. 167-168).

An interesting example of such an approach could be found in the works by Hein Duijnste, created as part of the *Purposeful social space* project (see www.purposefulsocialspace.com). They are an attempt at a new way of thinking about organisations, especially in terms of design and space. The author illustrates all matters he discusses with drawings (Figure 2), the form of which extends from the creation of new symbols and graphic conventions that illustrate organisational problems, to abstract sketches depicting selected management problems (see Duijnste, 2016).

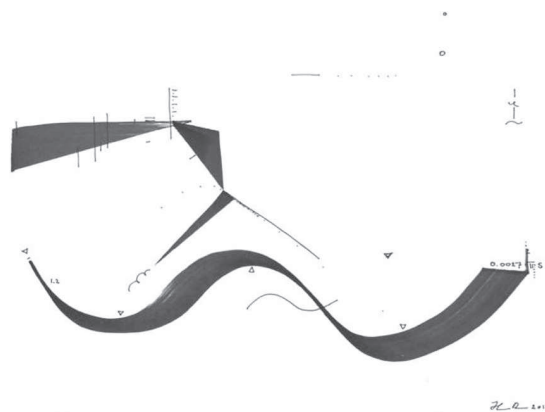


Fig. 2. Example of a sketch by Hein Duijnste: 'the strategic design of organisations as time transformers' (Duijnste, 2015).

It is no accident that Hein Duijnste, a business consultant and architect, uses sketching to analyse management problems and reflect on them. His works combine the previously discussed methods of architectural visualisation and echoes of research in which urban planners and architects tried to capture the perception of the city by its residents, asking them to draw mental maps of the nearest neighbourhood, which revealed the importance of individual places, zones and paths (Lynch, 1960). It is worth noting that organisations themselves can be captured in the architectural perspective. In their essence, architectural theories are consistent with theories of organisation, as they express the idea of interdependence between people and structures created for them and, at the same time, they represent a step forward from general design theories (Dzidowski, 2014b).

5. Designing as a Pragmatic Aesthetic Reflection

Design is a special area in the theory and practice of management, in which aesthetics has been present for a long time. For many years, however, it was only regarded in the narrow context of industrial design

or building visual identity. Only in certain particular cases did it become the foundation of a company strategy (fashion, interior design or luxury goods market). Nowadays, design processes form the basis for achieving competitive advantage by enterprises operating in various sectors, as a result of extending the original idea of design into the process of 'design thinking'. The latter is a term coined by Tim Brown, the chair of IDEO (Brown, 2008), who presented it in an article published in 2008 by *Harvard Business Review*. From the point of view of organisation and management theory, Brown referred to the A/D/A paradigm proposed by Andrew Jones in the book *The Innovation Acid Test: Growth Through Design and Differentiation* (2008, p. 20), in which Architecture, Design and Anthropology are resorted to in order to 'build the unknown' and, consequently, to create and diversify value. These types of undertakings stand in opposition to the traditional M/E/P paradigm, where Mathematics, Economics and Psychology are employed to 'manage the known' in order to replicate structures and create the effect of scale.

Design thinking is a management concept that uses methods and tools typical of the work of creators and designers (empathy, user observation, usage context analysis, prototyping) to solve problems in a creative and engaged manner (e.g. when creating new products, but also improving production processes, changing the organisation of work, or even shaping the company's strategy). Design thinking is a process of generating many ideas that are only subject to verification in subsequent stages, through interaction with prototypes and the actual context of their use. It is aimed at eliminating the fear of failure and encouraging the creation of physical representations of ideas (sketches, maps, models, rough constructions, simulations, performative forms) with which one can enter into natural interactions which are to result in their further improvement (Dzidowski, 2014a). Design thinking is, above all, a way of thinking (a cognitive process) that can be understood on three levels (see Visser, 2010):

- as problem solving (Herbert Simon describes design as any activity aimed at changing the existing situation into a preferred one, in which objects, processes and ideas are brought to life; others can also see how they were created),
- as reflection-in-action (Donald A. Schön states that designers not only give meaning to their constructs, but also create ontologies for these meanings. Continuous interaction with the matter in the process of creating solutions shapes what they do. As a result, the designer engages in a reflective dialogue with the essence of the problem, discovering it again and again),
- as a construction of representations (Willemien Visser emphasises the self-referential and iterative nature of the design process, in which artefacts and solutions not only reflect design requirements, but also

co-create them in the process of constructing subsequent, indirect images of the final product, refining, detailing and concretising them until they become the final representation of the required specification).

All three levels can be directly referred to specific management problems. First of all, design thinking is a form of abductive reasoning, conducive to solving new and poorly defined problems. Secondly, design thinking is closely related to learning through experience; hence its strongly pragmatic, yet also reflective nature. Thirdly, design thinking, through the continuous prototyping of solutions, allows us to move forward in conditions of uncertainty, becoming a form of embodied knowledge paramount for innovative processes.

From the point of view of aesthetic reflection, design has a special position, as it can be referred to the aesthetic dimension of cognitive processes, presented for example in the works of John Dewey. On the one hand, Dewey's reflections on the aesthetics of the cognitive process (see Dewey, 1938) are close to the Design Thinking concept. On the other hand, the concept of aesthetic experience (see Dewey, 1934) can be used to better understand decision-making processes in design (Hekkert, 2006). Just as in design processes, the process of cognition is, according to Dewey, induced by imbalance and uncertainty. Given the necessity to notice inconsistencies within a given situation, perception becomes a key element of the cognitive process. In addition, thinking in aesthetic terms helps to complete the cognitive process, to the point in which the ultimate unity of all elements is experienced (Rylander, 2012).

It is worth mentioning that aesthetic and design related dimensions of cognitive processes correspond with an interesting axiological and epistemological problem, namely the relation between beauty and truth. Scholars and philosophers continue to debate whether choosing a theory or a solution for its beauty – manifested by simplicity or internal cohesion – is cognitively justified. It seems quite likely that aesthetic categories are important decision heuristics (Reber, Schwarz & Winkielman, 2004). Beauty as a criterion of truth may be an unofficial and subjective criterion, but its impact on the fate of science and civilisation is significant. Often, the elegance of a potential solution gives the decision-maker confidence about the correctness of the choice made, necessary to make him/her invest in an uncertain and expensive undertaking. Many renowned scientists like Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg and Henri Poincaré were advocates of this way of thinking (see Marciszewski, 2003). If, therefore, we recognise that there is an aesthetic dimension of the decision-making process in organisations, enterprises and other social structures, then a natural consequence is their analysis using appropriate tools and criteria, both these already available (e.g. in visual sociology) and those derived from the theory of perception, art and design (Dzidowski, 2016b).

6. Conclusions and Directions of Further Development

When applying the aesthetic approach to management, we cannot limit ourselves to sensory experiences, or even to the analysis of organisational forms of expression. Instead, we should consider aesthetics in the performative and philosophical context, just as we would seek the identity of the organisation, or even the truth about it. This means that considerations on design processes should be carried out not only in the perspective of *techne* (proficiency, craft, or even art), but also *phronesis* (empathy, virtue and foresight). Consequently, design thinking enters the area of existential considerations referred to by Heidegger as *Dasein* (being-there, or the way in which things reveal themselves), combining embodiment relations with hermeneutic relations (Wendt, 2015).

Speculative design is a specific example of how reflective design thinking could be. In the book *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*, Dunne and Raby (2013) ask if it is possible to operate outside the market reality and, at the same time, for the benefit of consumers. Referring to the ideas of Italian Radical Design from the 1970s, solutions created as a result of speculative projects undermine assumptions about the role that goods and services play in everyday life. In contrast to affirmative design, which strengthens the *status quo*, speculative design serves as a catalyst for social reflection and debate on both the current state and the future of humanity. Designers and architects representing this movement create visualisations and prototypes of products, services, buildings or urban layouts. On the one hand, they illustrate the possibilities of new technologies; on the other hand, they point to imminent problems, thus contributing to the reflection on the future of our civilisation (Dzidowski, 2016a). Speculative design is obviously not a popular form of reflection in market conditions: new products are designed using different prognostic techniques, but they rarely are of critical nature. However, the elements of speculative design can be found in certain prototypes of vehicles of the future or consumer electronics created by well-known corporations (the so-called *design fiction*). Although they are still affirmative, often the very fact of their creation sparks discussion about consumerism and sustainable development.

By the same token, if the aesthetics of organisation is to maintain its reflective character, it must be oriented towards the future and take into account not only changes within organisations, but also changes in the aesthetic experience. In today's enterprises, neural networks, genetic algorithms, and artificial intelligence become decision-making entities that resolve problems without human involvement, often as part of procedures they have independently created (machine learning). Therefore, we may wonder whether the humans are the only perception subjects in modern organisations, and what are the consequences of the growing importance of machine-based sensing. This question is part of the reflection on new

aesthetics, object-oriented ontology and speculative realism. An interesting illustration of this problem is the presentation of independent visualisations created by Google's neural networks, responsible for recognising objects in pictures (see Mordvintsev & Tyka, 2015). These systems were given the task of visually describing a specific object, thus reversing the process of image recognition. Psychedelic and oneiric visualisations obtained in this experiment allow us to understand how genetic algorithms perceive analysed images. It also reveals the essence of machine learning which, instead of causal relationships, is based on probability. The emergence of hybrid organisations, in which computer systems may be independent entities of business processes, sparks discussions about the new aesthetics of organisation and the potential consequences of the progressive dehumanisation of organisational processes (Dzidowski, 2015).

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