

Organizations as Designed Islands

Pasquale Gagliardi

Catholic University, Milan, Italy

&

Secretary General, Giorgio Cini Foundation

Venice, Italy

pasquale.gagliardi@cini.it

Abstract: The literature and practice of organizational design are mostly based on simplistic conceptions which ignore recent theoretical developments in organizational studies. Conceiving of organizations as ‘designed islands’, it is argued, can contribute to a more solid theoretical foundation to organization theory, viewed as normative science. Relying on the work of Peter Sloterdijk, who describes the forms of life in space in terms of spheres, the heuristic power of the island metaphor is explored. What can be learnt from the art of isolating in order to construct lived organizational environments is then discussed, and the paradoxical relationship between connection and isolation is highlighted.

Keywords: connection, islands, isolation, organization, Sloterdijk, spheres

© 2009 - Institute of Island Studies, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada.

Theorizing the Organization

At the core of organizational and managerial studies there is an epistemological issue which most authors largely imply but do not expressly address: namely, whether organizational theory is a positive science (defined on the basis of a phenomenon to analyse) or a normative science (defined on the basis of a project to construct). In other words, and with reference to the classification of the sciences proposed by Piaget (1977) and adapted by Le Moigne (1990), it is often not clear whether one considers organizational theory to be a life science or an engineering science.

Thompson (1956: 103) stated unequivocally that:

“[A]dministrative science ... [should stand] approximately in relation to the basic social sciences as engineering stands with respect to physical sciences or medicine to the biological”.

However, he himself formulates his views on organizational action as “conditioned” positive propositions (Thompson, 1967). Stating, for example, that “under norms of rationality”, organizations seek to seal off their core technologies from environmental influences, he shows, at the same time, how organizations which tend to use criteria of

instrumental rationality *really behave* (assuming, evidently, that actual organizations can act differently), and how an organization that intends to act rationally *should behave*. Thompson's (positive) assertion that organizations are natural systems which *strive* to act rationally effectively sums up his position.¹

In general, however, within the broad community of scholars of both management and organizational studies, two distinct sub-communities can be identified: on the one hand, the academically oriented who consider organizational theory to be a positive science and are therefore interested in exploring the real dynamics of organizations viewed as social and cultural phenomena; on the other hand, the practitioner oriented who are driven mainly by normative concerns and are therefore interested in understanding how organizations should be designed and managed. These sub-communities often act as separate worlds, each with its own journals, paradigms, constellations of beliefs, and reference values (Barley *et al.*, 1988). Academically- and research-oriented scholars are often reluctant to concern themselves with the expectations of practitioners, although these would likely welcome assistance in designing and managing the organizations in which they work. Besides having no interest in organizational design, research-oriented scholars tend to see problem-solving research as fieldwork of a strategic and restricted sort (Schein, 1987; Gagliardi, 1991). On the other hand, the frequent conceptual weakness of practitioner-oriented discourse – often due to excessive haste in translating new ideas into simple causal models – is likely to fuel suspicion of other groups, exacerbate a reciprocal tendency to differentiate and distinguish, and further reduce interest in communicating.

As I have previously observed:

“... for a number of years, academic research on management and organizations has been aware that organizational order never arises solely out of a preordained rational project, because organizations are the living product of processes where historical and political, instrumental and expressive ... aspects are inextricably interwoven. Processes are then more relevant than structures, and design could be more appropriately seen as a social process and as a dialogic exploration during which differing views of the world, cognitive maps, strategies and interests are set against each other and mediated” (Gagliardi, 2006b: 4).

Moreover, anthropologically oriented organizational research (also called organizational anthropology) has shown that organizational behaviour is conditioned at least to an equal extent by mental and sensory experiences, and that the territory in which an organization operates as a social group is always both a physical field and a symbolic one. Physical

¹ Thompson's phrasing seems to imply the assignment of agency to organizations, rather than to their members. In the preface of his book, Thompson (1967: xxvii) states: “My focus is on the behaviour of organizations; behaviour within organizations is considered only to the extent that it helps us understand organizations in the round. In order to focus attention on organizations as such, I have resorted [...] to some verbal simplifications which are indefensible if taken literally. Specifically, in considering organizations as “actors”, I employ terms usually associated with human actors – terms referring to purpose and motivation. I realize that organizations act only as the result of action by their members [...]. Meanwhile, the reader is asked to consider such phrasing as shorthand conventions employed only temporarily to facilitate communication”. I fully share Thompson's position on this matter.

space and the artefacts which populate it constitute a dimension that the designer of organizations generally ignores, regarding it as the territory of other professions: efficiency experts and architects or interior designers. But space and artefacts can be made to structure organizational relationships, stabilize the distinctions between activities and social groups, reinforce behaviour patterns, and administer contradictions and tensions. They constitute alternate communication systems to language, reflect the cultural quiddity of an organization and are the emblematic manifestations of a socially constructed reality.

Consequently, I proposed to compare the work of an organization designer to that of a landscape gardener (Gagliardi, 1992). This expression should be taken in both its literal and metaphorical senses. The organization designer cannot evade the responsibility of giving form to the spaces which constitute the scene of organizational action: in this sense, he is literally the artificer of the organizational landscape. The metaphor instead consists in the comparison between the organization and a garden. Like a garden, an organization is an artefact composed only in part of inert components. Rather, the majority of its components are living beings whose definitive form can be prefigured only partially; and, similar to a garden, the overall harmony arises out of the fusion of carefully planned elements with spontaneous growth. Harmony also arises where the same care is given to ensuring that structures which can be preordained are given fixed form as to creating spaces that favour the development of forms whose evolutionary pathways we can only guess at.

The Enduring Dominance of Structures

The metaphor of landscaping has not met with much success among organizational designers. Still, it has aroused the interest of radical management theorists who have explored from a critical and emancipatory standpoint the way in which the corporate stage is conceived, constructed, and invested with meaning (*e.g.* Carter & Jackson, 2000; Cairns, 2002; Witz *et al.*, 2003). They have also highlighted the relationship between aesthetics and power (Gagliardi, 1990, 2006a).

Still, therefore, the most widespread conception in the literature and practice of organizational design is that what has to be designed is a structure, and the structure to be designed is mainly viewed as a system of tasks and roles which can be formally communicated and consciously learnt. These social patterns mediated by mental experiences are still viewed as the main – if not the only – factors working for regularity and persistence in time: the interplay between physical, symbolic and social structures is largely neglected. The organization chart has been, and continues to be, the most widely used representation of the organizational structure viewed as a ‘construct’.

Nevertheless, if it is true that it is above all organizations – understood as utilitarian forms of human association – which are tasked by the complex societies of today with translating collective values and expectations into social action, the design of organizations is an activity of great social importance, and organization designers contribute no less than the architects of buildings to determining the shape of the contemporary landscape. We therefore cannot disregard the quality of the conceptions of organization and organizing

implicitly adopted, in the majority of cases, by those who design organizations, be they practitioner-oriented scholars, professional designers, or managers. If, as Giambattista Vico (1744) maintained, we *truly* understand only what we ourselves are able to do, the science of organizational design (that is, the development of organizational theory as a normative science) is more important than what academically oriented scholars seemingly believe.

Enter the Sphere

My effort to make explicit the simplistic theories implicitly employed in the design of organizations drove me to reflect on a curious parallelism between the flatness and two-dimensionality of the most typical artefact produced by organizational designers – namely the organization chart (as described above) – and the flatness and two-dimensionality of the cartographic representation of the island in traditional geography. Whilst the two-dimensionality of the organization chart is still not seriously questioned, overcoming the two-dimensionality of the cartographic representation of the territory is at the centre of a new conception of geography. The territory is not a portion of a flat surface but a habitable sphere of life. The limits of a world of two dimensions have been effectively illustrated in *Flatland*, the novella by Abbott (1844) which describes a two-dimensional world whose inhabitants are geometric figures, and where the protagonist of the story, who is a square, meets a sphere from Spaceland (the world of three dimensions) who opens his mind to the existence of the third dimension.

The image of the sphere is also at the centre of the theoretical work of Peter Sloterdijk, who describes the forms of life in space in terms of spheres. The metaphor of the sphere proves to have extraordinary generative power. In the third volume of a series termed ‘plural spherology’, entitled *Écumes* in the French version (*Foams*, after *Bubbles* and *Globes*), Sloterdijk (2005) devotes the first chapter to the theme of ‘Insulations. Pour une Théorie des Capsules, des Îles et des Serres’ (‘Towards a Theory of Capsules, Islands and Greenhouses’). Here, he describes an island as resulting from the action of ‘isolating’ and shows how different ways of ‘isolating’ create different types of islands.

It has been frequently observed that organizations are ‘societies written small’, deliberately created microcosms in which it is possible to view – as if magnified by a microscope (and therefore easier to understand) – social processes that are less legible in society as a whole (from communication to socialization, from mobility to control). This on its own would justify organization studies as a distinctly useful branch of the social sciences. Likewise, islands are models of the world, ‘continents in miniature’, as Bernardin de Sainte-Pierre (1846: 12) called them. In his *Sociology of Space*, Simmel (1903, quoted by Sloterdijk, 2005: 275) observed that the sea resembles a picture-frame in that it circumscribes and contains - a social group like a work of art – in opposition to the world surrounding it: “the frame announces that lying within it is a world which is not subject to any laws other than its own”. The island is a complete and simplified world in which miniaturization has the effect of giving visibility and tractability to relations and processes, so that matters become more manageable and orderable. If ‘the island’ and ‘the organization’ share a number of

properties, we can use a metaphorical approach to improve our knowledge of both realities: we can learn more about organizations by viewing them as islands; but, at the same time, we can learn more about islands interpreting them as organizations, and using them as testing grounds for new forms of territorial governance and new organizational forms.

The Art of Isolating

Sloterdijk's first observation, which reveals the extraordinary relevance of his thought to organizational design, is that isolating activity – the delimitation of an ambit and interruption of a continuum – is a general technical idea. The action of isolating creates an island sufficiently separate from the external context for it to accommodate experimentation with a totality in reduced format. If this isolating activity is performed by the sea and by the air – non-subjective agents – why can it not be performed by an intelligent actor? To this possibility refer the etiological myths about the birth of islands. When the Titans rose up against the heavens, the Gods of Olympus hurled boulders at the rebels: the origin of Sicily was thus a rock thrown by Athena at Enceladus, daughter of Gaia and Tartarus. Similarly, myths widespread in the Pacific Islands (Nunn, 2003) recall how islands were 'fished up' or 'thrown down': submerged lands or big fishes – squirming and trashing before being transformed into islands – brought to the surface by a (demi)god dropping a hook and line into the ocean, or earth spilled from a basket being carried by a flying giant.

Myths thus tell us that islands – be they spent projectiles, coffin lids, fishes turned to stone, or earth thrown down from the sky – are the result of a practice, the outcome of application of a technique. With the advent of the Enlightenment, the casting of the archaic island became the technical-political designing of an island; and the island definitively shifted "from the register of the 'found' to the register of the 'made' " (Sloterdijk, 2005: 279).

The current project that perhaps better than any other exemplifies the strength of the Enlightenment utopia is Saadiyat Island now being constructed off the coast of Abu Dhabi and intended to become the emirate's cultural centre (<http://www.saadiyat.ae>). Side by side on a surface area of only 4.4 km² will miraculously stand some of the most prestigious cultural institutions in the world, from the Louvre to the Guggenheim and New York University. A golf course planned by Gary Player will flank a Performing Arts Centre designed by Zaha Hadid, whilst Tadao Ando's Maritime Museum will cohabit with luxury boutiques and facilities for sophisticated and expensive entertainment. The modern idea of more refined aesthetic pleasure, and of what is able to produce it, will be embodied in a microcosm that makes it perfectly intelligible.

Sloterdijk observes that the art of isolating – that is, constructing prostheses of islands that repeat the essential features of the 'natural' island – has developed astonishingly in modern times. Humans are able to design and build islands of three specific technical types: (1) 'absolute islands', which do not have coasts but walls on all sides, of which the most striking example is the spaceship; (2) climatic or atmospheric islands, of which the most

obvious example is the glass greenhouse, within which are recreated the practical conditions which allow the growing of tropical plants in countries whose climates would never allow them to survive; and (3) anthropogenic islands produced by means of social engineering.

The design of organizations combines the arts of social engineering and of spatial engineering. This entails mastery of distance technologies (Lussault, 2007), knowledge of the means that create and dispel distance, the art of separating things and beings, and then to reassemble them into an appropriate arrangement. This arrangement is the habitat, by which is meant the set of conditions necessary for the development of a particular form of life – animal, vegetable or social – or favourable for the pursuit of a particular project of collective action. For Sloterdijk, living means ‘being in space’, viewed, as said, not as a flat surface but as a ‘sphere’. Every individual lives in a microsphere enclosed in larger bubbles which in their turn are tied to further bubbles. ‘Foam’ is the metaphor which evokes this set of bubbles, this tissue made up of protected spaces and thin walls, of independences and of bonds. It is a much more pertinent metaphor than that of the network (*reseau*): for a network presupposes a stability and homogeneity that are extraneous to the coexistence of beings and things in space, whilst foam instead emphasizes its hybrid, fragile, mutable, and transitory nature.

Sloterdijk’s metaphor of the sphere highlights two issues which strike me as of central importance in organization design: (1) the ‘construction’ of an environment suited to a specific life form: what, in organizational terminology, is understood as a culture-bearing milieu which expresses competence consistent with a competitive strategy; and (2) the paradoxical relationship between isolation and connection.

Lived Environments as Connected Isolations

At the basis of the first issue is von Uexküll’s (1965) distinction – fundamental in ecology – between *umgebung* and *umwelt*, between objective environment and lived environment, between ‘entourage’ and ‘milieu’. Every species lives in its ‘milieu’, which consists of everything that the species extracts from the ‘objective’ environment to satisfy its needs and its specific interests: the milieu of a snake, whose eyes see infrared, is different from the milieu of the butterfly, which sees ultraviolet. Also, organizations ‘build’ – or ‘enact’ in Karl Weick’s (1969) formulation – the environment in which they operate according to their distinctive competences and the courses of action necessary for their survival. The milieu is the place that beings – or organizations – generate so that they can exist as they are: the sphere of protected and familiar life on which their subsistence depends. It is therefore not necessarily a matter of ‘carving out’ a physical space, a portion of territory, or one of sheltering on an island wherein to build one’s world. The lived environment is constructed according to a subjectivity which, depending on its needs and competences, and exploiting all the resources and technologies of the globalized world, is able to create a sphere of protected and familiar existence without relying upon a territory. The image of the island loses every naturalistic connotation, but it preserves all of its metaphorical power: the meetings of a profession’s members mediated by information and

communication technologies ground their identity, just as daily life in common cements social relations in a community of fishers. Online forums or chat rooms can be frequented as familiar places and lived as climatized and comforting greenhouses. *The New York Review of Books* is for many intellectuals a space of protected existence in which they feel at ease and can know, propose, and do things impossible elsewhere. Far from being opposites, anchorage (to a physical territory) and mobility are increasingly complementary in so far as the opportunities offered by a nomadic planet and the multiplication of virtual occasions for aggregation based on competences or preferences are exploited. Those concerned with organization planning can easily realize that these reflections problematize and enrich their work, revealing the ingenuity of practices based upon distinctions and assumptions which fail to capture the complexity of reality.

Sloterdijk's reflections on the close connection between the right to isolation and the right to connection – aptly expressed by the oxymoron 'connected isolation' – are illuminating for the organization designer with reference both to the internal organization of the 'milieu' and the relationship/boundary between the 'milieu' – the sphere of protected existence – of a specific organization and its 'entourage', seen as the set of the other spheres of protected existence that constitute the 'foam'. Suitable to neither of these two aspects is a dichotomic and oppositional approach.

As regards the internal structure of the milieu of a sphere which englobes a utilitarian organization - a social aggregation formed to achieve a specific goal - the problem that constantly arises is the relationship between specialization and integration, between the 'diabolic' pressures for fragmentation produced by division (of labour, of space, of power, of competences) and the 'symbolic' demand to recover the unity of collective action. The organization/sphere which wins the competition against the other organizations/spheres is the one which succeeds in being simultaneously highly diversified and closely integrated to its interior, even though the two conditions would naturally seem to exclude each other. In design terms, this requires inventing social practices that tolerate or support the paradox. That this is actually possible is demonstrated by Lawrence and Lorsch's (1967) empirical study², despite it having been conducted with the most classical of positivist approaches.

In contrast, with respect to the relationship between a sphere and other spheres, Sloterdijk's analysis highlights more than ever the paradoxical nature of boundaries, which are and must be both barriers and membranes, instruments of defence and vehicles of exchange. How can this demand be translated into specific social and organizational practices? Whoever has conducted organizational ethnography knows full well that the ways in which an organization's boundaries are safeguarded, outsiders are admitted into the protected territory, relations are conducted with the external world, and natives communicate between themselves and with others, tend to arrange themselves along a continuum from closed to open, from difference to similarity.

² Lawrence and Lorsch explored the relationship between structure (analyzed in terms of different degrees of internal differentiation and integration) and performance, amongst a number of chemical processing companies. A key finding of their research was that, although organizational integration and differentiation were usually inversely proportional to each other, the most successful organizations simultaneously achieved high levels of both.

Yet, even in this case, design must allow the paradoxical coexistence of opposite characteristics. How can an enterprise be at the same time open and closed? What physical and symbolic expedient can enable it to be so, beyond the obvious possibility of distributing the horns of the dilemma in time and space (the door is closed at night and open during the day, we communicate some things to the world but jealously guard others, we select who can be admitted into the sphere and who must be excluded)? Water, the natural boundary of islands, seems to allow the coexistence of opposites: a stretch of sea is at the same time a barrier and a road, it distinguishes and it separates but it can easily be crossed. On the same wavelength, I propose another example of a boundary which is simultaneously a membrane and point of passage. As has been well illustrated by Mario Maffi (1998) – a leading expert on the history of New York – that city has over time undergone migratory waves extremely heterogeneous in ethnic, cultural, and linguistic terms. Each wave has appropriated a territory, creating villages/districts modelled on its own architectural and social traditions. These villages – cultural islands profoundly different from each other – cohabit. They are part of the city but also extraneous to it; and the coexistence of such rich cultural and diversified heritages constitutes the wealth of the entire city. This has been possible because the boundaries of the districts are the ‘main streets’ which separate and unite at the same time; they mark difference, but can be crossed if one wishes.

A Personal Note

I conclude with a personal reference. I have already stated that islands can be extraordinary testing grounds for new forms of territorial governance and new organizational forms. I myself am witnessing how true this is on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, Italy, where the Cini Foundation, which I have the privilege of directing, has its headquarters. The island/sphere of San Giorgio is separate from and connected to the larger island/sphere that is Venice, which in turn is part of the archipelago of islands – or network of bubbles - that is the Venetian lagoon. (Using the metaphor of foam, and recalling that in Greek mythology the goddess Venus was born from the foam, it seems particularly appropriate to speak of a city that seemingly emerges like a marble Venus from the waters of the lagoon.) The island is located exactly opposite Piazza San Marco, a stone’s throw from the city. Seen from San Marco it seems unattainably distant, yet it takes only a few minutes to reach it by *vaporetto*. On San Giorgio we try to create a protected space, a sphere where life is immune to the contagion of the devastating mass tourism that afflicts Venice and is transforming it from a ‘liveable city’ to a ‘visitable theme park’, but able to converse with the rest of the city and with the world. Recounting the story of this endeavour is, however, best left for another occasion.

Acknowledgements

This essay is based on a keynote address delivered at the 2nd Annual Conference of the Åland International Institute of Comparative Island Studies (AICIS), in Mariehamn, Åland Islands, Finland: June 10-11, 2008. Some of the ideas developed in this paper took shape during conversations with Bruno Latour – whom I heartily thank – on issues of landscape, territory, and identity.

References

- Abbott, E.A. (1884/1963) *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, 5th edition, New York, HarperCollins.
- Barley, S.R., Meyer, G.W & Gash, D. (1988) ‘Cultures of Culture: Academic, Practitioners, and the Pragmatics of Normative Control’, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 24-60.
- Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, J.B. (1846) *The Studies of Nature, to which are added the Indian Cottage and Paul and Virginia*, London, Henry G. Bohn.
- Cairns, G. (2002) ‘Aesthetics, Morality and Power: Design as Espoused Freedom and Implicit Control’, *Human Relations*, Vol. 55, No. 7, pp. 799-820.
- Carter, P. & Jackson, N. (2000) ‘An-aesthetics’, in S. Linstead & H. Höpfl (eds.) *The Aesthetics of Organizations*, London, Sage, pp. 180-196.
- Gagliardi, P. (1991) ‘Organizational Anthropology, Organization Theory, and Management Practice’, *Hallinnon Tutkimus (Finnish Administrative Studies)*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 173-180.
- Gagliardi, P. (ed.) (1990) *Symbols and Artifacts: Views of the Corporate Landscape*, New York, Walter de Gruyter.
- Gagliardi, P. (1992) ‘Designing Organizational Settings: The Interplay between Physical, Symbolic and Social Structures’ in R. Eisendle & E. Miklantz (eds.) *Produktkulturen. Dynamik und Bedeutungswandel des Konsums*, New York, Campus Verlag, pp. 67-78.
- Gagliardi, P. (2006a) ‘Exploring the Aesthetic Side of Organizational Life’ in S.R. Clegg, C. Hardy, T.B. Lawrence & W.R. Nord (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Organizations Studies*, 2nd edition, London, Sage, pp. 701-724.
- Gagliardi, P. (2006b) ‘A role for humanities in the formation of managers’ in P. Gagliardi & B. Czarniawska (eds.) *Management Education and Humanities*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, pp. 3-9.

Lawrence, P.R. & Lorsch, J.W. (1967) *Organization and Environment: Managing Differentiation and Integration*, Boston MA, Harvard University Press.

Le Moigne, J.-L. (1990) 'Epistémologies constructivistes et sciences de l'organisation' in A.C. Martinet (ed.) *Epistémologies et sciences de gestion*, Paris, Economica, pp. 81-140.

Lussault, M. (2007) 'Habiter, du lieu au monde. Réflexions géographiques sur l'habitat humain' in T. Paquot, M. Lussault & C. Younès (eds.) *Habiter, le propre de l'humain: villes, territoires et philosophie*, Paris, La Découverte, pp. 35-52.

Maffi, M. (1998) *Sotto le torri di Manhattan. Mappe, nomi, storie, luoghi*. Milano, Rizzoli.

Nunn, P.D. (2003) 'Fished Up or Thrown Down: The Geography of Pacific Island Origin Myths', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 93, No. 2, pp. 350-364.

Piaget, J. (1977) *Epistémologie des Sciences de l'Homme*, Paris, Gallimard.

Schein, E. (1987) *The Clinical Perspective in Fieldwork*, Beverly Hills CA, Sage.

Simmel, G. (1903/1983) 'Soziologie des Raums' in *Schriften zur Soziologie. Eine Auswahl*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.

Sloterdijk, P. (2005) *Écumes. Sphérologie plurielle*, Paris, Maren Sell Éditeurs.

Thompson, J.D. (1967) *Organizations in Action*, New York, McGraw-Hill.

Thompson, J.D. (1956) 'On Building an Administrative Science', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 102-111.

Vico, G. (1744/1977) *La scienza nuova*, Milano, Rizzoli.

Von Uexküll, J.J. (1965) *Mondes animaux et monde humain. Théorie de la signification*, Paris, Gonthier.

Weick, K.E. (1969) *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, Reading MA, Addison-Wesley.

Witz, A., Warhurst, C. & Nickson, D. (2003) 'The Labour of Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Organization', *Organization*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 33-54.