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# Creating Creativity: The organizational manipulation of aesthetics in a web-design department

Sam Warren  
University of Portsmouth Business School  
[sam.warren@port.ac.uk](mailto:sam.warren@port.ac.uk)

## **Preface**

This paper is a preliminary discussion of qualitative data gathered during a research project recently carried out in a web-design department (dept. X<sup>1</sup>) of a large IT firm (M.C.S.) based in a rural location in the south of England. The data is still in the process of analysis and consequently the findings presented here are tentative themes that began to emerge during the research process and from the analysis carried out so far. Using narratives centring on four common stories retold to me by many respondents, I explore the extent to which an 'aestheticization' programme (undertaken within the department to enhance the creative appearance and 'feel' of the department's office space) has impacted upon the design community within the department. More specifically I am concerned here with the relationship between the newly 'aestheticized' physical environment and the designers' perceptions of their creativity as they worked within it. Consequently, given that this is work very much in progress, this paper is not intended to be a finished theoretically saturated account of creativity itself. Instead, I present the data in conjunction with the theoretical and methodological context of this research project in order to invite discussion, reflection and critical dialogue among participants in this conference track.

## **Introduction - Organization, aesthetics and society**

The field of organizational aesthetics is a thriving and relatively new area of interest within the wider discipline of organization and management studies. Born in the late 1980's, interest in the aesthetic dimensions of organizing grew from a recognition by writers such as Pasquale Gagliardi (1990) that the material contexts of work and organization are complex and important symbolic artefacts which can tell us much about the culture, values, ideologies and belief systems of those who organize. Coupled with the so-called postmodern turn in organizational research and the rejection by growing numbers of writers of the notion that organization is a solely rational endeavour under the jurisdiction of the mind, attention to the aesthetics of organization as a significant and illuminating mode of exploring organizational life began to take hold (Gagliardi 1996, Strati 1992, 1996, 1999; Hopfl & Linstead 2000;

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<sup>1</sup> The anonymity of the organization, the department and the respondents has been preserved through the use of pseudonyms. In the case of the images, distinguishing features have been omitted using digital enhancement where necessary.

Organization 1996). Issues of emotion and embodiment were at the same time coming to the fore of sociological debate both within organization studies and wider social research (for example Fineman 1996; Shilling 1993) contributing to the growing scholarly recognition that people at work are as fully human as they go about their occupations as they are when they are outside work. As Antonio Strati beautifully summarises in the introduction to his monograph on organization and aesthetics:

*“In fact, most of the research and analysis published in the area of organization theories and management studies describes the following, somewhat bizarre, phenomenon: as soon as a human person crosses the virtual or physical threshold of an organization, s/he is purged of corporeality, so that only his or her mind remains. Once a person has crossed that threshold, therefore s/he is stripped of both clothing and body and consists of pure thought, which the organization equips with work instruments and thus reclothes. When the person leaves the organization, the mind sheds these work instruments and resumes its corporeality, and with it the perceptive faculties and aesthetic judgement that yield aesthetic understanding of reality, but only in society lying outside the physical or virtual walls of the organization...”* (Strati 1999: 3)

Thus, aesthetics are of importance in organizations just as they are in wider social life, because it is people who are organizations as well as people who are organized. Moreover, I would add to this emerging and more fully human picture of organization, that the wider social and cultural influences that shape and are shaped by our behaviours outside work also permeate organizational boundaries in the same way by virtue of the fact that we are culturally situated social beings regardless of whether we are at work or not. And one of the most pervasive and important social and cultural features of contemporary society (in the West at least) is that we are increasingly governed by a ‘romantic’ ethic of consumption (Campbell 1989). These macro factors are not extraneous to an understanding of organization but inextricably entwined with it. In short, studies of organization that fail to recognise both the ‘aesthetic-intuitive’ (Gagliardi 1996: 576) dimensions of human being at work and the wider cultural context that organization is performed within are likely to generate – at best – a distorted view of organization, artificially removed from the physical and social world as if studied in a vacuum.

The triad of organization, aesthetics and consumption forms the theoretical foundation for this research, in particular – the attempts by management to manipulate the aesthetics of the organization to achieve organizational ends as I discuss below. However, before I outline this contemporary organizational practice as it pertains my data, I will first expand on the relationship between consumer culture and aesthetics.

## Consuming work?

The importance of aesthetics in contemporary consumer culture is paramount according to writers such as Zygmunt Bauman (1998) and Mike Featherstone (1991). This claim rests on the idea that the capacity of things to provide emotional fulfilment through their aesthetic qualities is what gives them their value – functionality has taken a back seat to desirability and it is not just commodities themselves that are judged on such criteria. As George Ritzer (1999) has argued, the spaces in which we consume come under similar aesthetic ‘scrutiny’: *“A revolutionary change has occurred in the places in which we consume goods and services, and it has a profound effect not only on the nature of consumption but also on social life...”* (Ritzer 1999: x). The spectacular grandeur of shopping malls, sports stadia, leisure facilities, Las Vegas hotels, and designer shopping villages, to name but a few, do more than lure us to the check-out – they are entertaining in themselves and part of the consumption ‘experience’. These *“cathedrals of consumption”* (ibid.) are engineered to make consuming fun – as an experience in its own right, regardless of what is actually purchased. Thus the ‘new spaces of consumption’ (ibid.) can be seen to be ‘consumed’ themselves. Bright, bold, vast arenas built to award-winning architectural designs and organised so as to place the consumer ‘centre-stage’, these spaces play on our aesthetic sensibilities, they are ‘enchanted’ and they exist to please their temporary inhabitants.

But the aesthetic enchantment of public spaces has a profound, far-reaching effect on other areas of social life. As the spaces created for consumption and leisure become ever more sumptuous, other public buildings and institutions appear dull and dreary by comparison. Libraries, hospitals and universities, for example, often do not offer us the same pleasant ‘customer experience’ when we consume their services and yet increasingly (in the UK and US at least) they compete for our custom. Moreover, we have become used to being entertained as we go about our daily lives – a large proportion of which we spend at work. Zygmunt Bauman (1998) has recognised this link between the experience of work and consumption in his thesis of the ‘aestheticization of work’:

*“Like everything else which may reasonably hope to become the target of desire and an object of free consumer choice, jobs must be ‘interesting’ – varied, exciting, allowing for adventure, contain certain (though not excessive) measures of risk, and giving occasion to ever new sensations. Jobs that are monotonous, repetitive, routine, unadventurous, allowing no initiative and promising no challenge to wits nor a chance for self-testing and self-assertion, are ‘boring’. No fully fledged consumer would conceivably agree to undertake them on her or his own will, unless cast in a situation of no choice... Such jobs are devoid of aesthetic value and for that reason stand little chance of becoming vocations in a society of experience-collectors.”* (Bauman 1998: 33-34)

It is therefore arguably a short step to the realisation that we might expect our work environments too, to be aesthetically appealing – just as we have become accustomed to all other arenas of life being

'spectacularised' for our entertainment (Debord 1994), is it not reasonable to assume that we may come to expect these things from our work and organizations as Bauman suggests? It is important to note here that Bauman is talking of a favourable aesthetic attachment to the work itself, whereas the empirical element of this research project focuses on aesthetic regard to the work **environment**. It is possible to argue that I have taken Bauman's ideas and applied them to a very different conceptualisation of work and aesthetics. However, I do not view this as problematic since, as Sundstrom (1986: 1) tells us: *"People and their physical environments exert mutual influence, and together form interdependent systems."* To separate the work 'itself' from the physical environment it is performed within and indeed from the people who perform it is in my opinion to forge an artificial 'academic' divide between what is, for the majority of people, a holistic experience. The way we define ourselves by our occupation when introducing ourselves to strangers, and the way we refer to the physical buildings of the organization when we talk to others about 'where we work' demonstrates how integrated self, work and material context is. Furthermore, Bauman (1998: 33) talks of aestheticized jobs as *"...giving occasion to ever new sensations..."* which surely would include the encouragement of play in the workplace, the addition of toys and unusual furnishings for example. Consequently, the manipulation of physical space in organizations I see as one part of this aestheticization process which may in fact be evidence that it is indeed occurring. If employees-as-consumers require an overtly aesthetic element to their work, then perhaps the recent en masse appearance of 'trendy', 'cool', exciting workspaces that Nathan and Doyle (2002: 1) call the *"golden age in office design"* might be an organizational response to this need for aestheticized work (for examples see Ashworth 1997, Gillies 1998, Goodwin 2000, Hoare 1999, Murphy 1995). Indeed what could be more obviously linked to company image than the aesthetically apprehended and regarded material elements which are there for all to see? (and of course hear, feel, smell and even taste). As Tim Davis (1984: 279) notes in his brief discussion of the 'aesthetic cues' present in office environments,

*"For many low paid office workers, especially typists and clerical staff, the conditions that surround the job such as modern offices, plush furnishings, nice restrooms and a good cafeteria may be highly valued aspects of the job and may be a primary reason for joining a particular organization and continuing to work for a given firm."*

I would contend that this holds true even for highly paid professionals – most of the respondents in this study told me how much they valued not only the pleasant office surroundings that had been created (although they resented it in other ways as the data below illustrates), but the countryside location of the company itself.

However, these issues are not the subject matter of this paper. Rather they are issues that concern the broader research project from which this data is drawn. Nevertheless, the link between consumption,

aesthetics and organization is important to form at this stage as a theoretical backdrop to the aestheticization of dept. X. I describe here. Before I turn to these data however, I will first outline the methodology surrounding their collection which I hope will provide a rationale for the way I have chosen to present the data here.

## **Talking sense**

A second theme in the literature concerned with organization and aesthetics is that aesthetics might be a way to 'know' organizations (Strati 1999) as well as constituting a dimension of the process of organizing itself. Aesthetics as a methodology, provides a challenge to positivist social-scientific perspectives within organization studies that strive for objectivity and value-freedom in the accounts of organization they present. Furthermore, the intensely subjective and personal nature of individual aesthetic response requires a method suited to capturing that data in as much richness as possible. With this in mind, I have employed a qualitative methodology in attempting to explore and draw out the richly nuanced aesthetic experiences of the respondents in this study. Following ideas put forward by Antonio Strati (1999) Pasquale Gagliardi (1996) and Suzanne Langer (1957) I have also tried to develop a methodological 'tool-kit' to capture these experiences and re-tell them in my research. However, before I discuss the process of data collection itself, I am aware that I have only hinted at elements of a definition of 'aesthetics'. At this point I therefore feel it would be useful to take a brief aside to clarify my usage of these somewhat slippery terms and define exactly what I mean by the word 'aesthetic' and what constitutes an aesthetic response.

The term 'aesthetic' comes from the Greek word to describe artistic perfection through sense perception (Williams 1974). However, this early definition of the word was expanded primarily by Emmanuel Kant who used the term to cover the conditions of sense perception (ibid.) Thus we can begin with the idea that 'aesthetics' is a mode of experiencing that comes to us through our senses. But clearly, aesthetics is more than mere sensory stimuli. If that were the case, then every single perception would count as an aesthetic one. What differentiates aesthetic experience from sensory stimulation is, in my view, the emotional response that the stimulus provokes. When confronted with an unpleasant smell, we usually recoil in revulsion – that is an aesthetic experience. That is to say it is a sensory piece of 'information' associated with an emotional response about which we make a value judgement – ie: 'that's revolting'. Similarly, when we hear an uplifting piece of music we can almost enter an emotional 'trance', again – this experience is aesthetic in nature.

The definition I am developing here is deliberately centred on the experience rather than the idea of an 'aesthetic attitude' as formulated by Kant (1952), or by the idea of 'pure form' central to the work of Clive Bell (1958). The aesthetic attitude locates aesthetics as a peculiar category of emotional response

which could be considered to be 'proper' – aesthetics as a phenomena is thus firmly embedded in the subject and not the object. Bell's 'pure form' does the opposite. He argues that some objects are aesthetic and others are not, based on some kind of universal formalism (such as rhythm, balance, perspective etc) which is recognised and responded to in an aesthetic manner. Neither of these explanations is to my mind satisfactory since both seem oblivious to the importance of social interaction and the cultures that grow from them. The aesthetic attitude, a quasi-biological explanation, assumes individual emotional responses that are 'triggered' by an object. Formalism on the other hand reduces the aesthetic to a set of absolute criteria which once identified can be defined as aesthetic in nature and appreciated by all<sup>2</sup>. There is no account taken here of social interactionist perspectives which argue that 'individuality' is shaped by cultural conventions, ideologies and norms. Moreover, the formalist approach ignores the process of socialisation on common definitions of what or is not worthy of aesthetic appreciation. Supposedly individual judgements on what is regarded as beautiful or ugly for instance, are at least mediated if not entirely constructed through interaction with cultural norms, (what Berger and Luckmann (1984) call the 'generalised other'). However, by conceptualising 'the aesthetic' as residing in the experience itself we can think of it as both intensely subjective emotions arising **in the act of** apprehending an object that 'moves' us (either pleasantly or unpleasantly). In doing so, we take account of both subject and object, but importantly we avoid reducing the aesthetic to either one or the other. The idea of being 'moved' is precisely what I wish to capture here – it evokes a sense of flow – of continuing mutual exchange between subject and object that does not disregard the social and cultural context the movement occurs within, nor the importance of the object itself, or the individual and fleeting nature of the visceral experience of the subject. Moreover, the fluidity that the word 'flow' implies is a useful metaphor for the shapelessness of the experience when removed from any particular context. In using this metaphor, I am thinking of liquid spilled from a glass. Until the liquid meets something which will contain it and 'give it shape' it is formless, dynamic and ever-moving. What gives the flow of aesthetic experience shape (or put another way, meaning) is the cultural context it is flowing within. The 'shape' of an experience as sublime, or comical for example, is only so because as cultural vessels we stabilise it and hold it steady through the attribution of cultural and contextually bound meanings. Thus although the experience itself is beyond us in its authenticity (or 'pure' form) we can reduce it to something with form, shape and meaning – we quite literally '**make** sense'. Apart from these contexts, 'the aesthetic' cannot be defined. My thinking here has been influenced by the philosophy of Georges Bataille (in particular 1988) who describes 'authentic' aesthetic experience as part of the realm of inner experiences which he describes as bursting in on us and 'rupturing' our rational thinking selves.

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note here that the definition of a formalist notion of aesthetics is largely ideological in nature and reflects the aesthetic preferences of a dominant social group, therefore 'true' aesthetic appreciation of 'pure form' is only possible to those who have been socialised within that group, thus leading to a division between so-called high culture and low culture. For a fuller discussion of this, see John Berger (1974)



Furthermore he suggests that inner experiences are not end-directed. They are not evoked voluntarily 'on demand' in order to achieve a desired result:

*"By **inner experience** I understand that which one usually calls **mystical experience**: the states of ecstasy, of rapture, at least of mediated emotion. But I am thinking less of **confessional** experience... than of an experience laid bare, free of ties, even an origin, of any confession whatever... I wanted experience to lead where it would, not to lead it to some end point in advance. And I say at once that it leads to no harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense). I wanted non-knowledge to be its principle..."*

(Bataille 1988: 3 emphasis in the original)

This echoes Immanuel Kant's third movement of aesthetics (1952) in which he tells us that to be truly aesthetic in nature an experience must be 'disinterested', existing only for its own sake. There are issues here around what might constitute 'authentic' aesthetic responses as opposed to 'non-authentic' ones which I have yet to satisfactorily unpack, but suffice to say it is important that the potentially ideological and arbitrary classification of what is and is not authentic needs to be noted. I return to this point in my discussion of the data below – since the respondents aesthetic descriptions of their organization and environment illustrate that on an individually subjective level at least, it is possible to divide what we feel to be genuine from what we regard somewhat disparagingly as kitsch.

To return to our methodological discussion then, by conceptualising aesthetic experience as flows between subject and object I have made the gathering of data about these experiences rather harder for myself than had I, say, taken a formalist approach and looked for defining features of what is aesthetic and what is not and built a model of aesthetic experience from them. Instead, I have had to find ways of getting the respondents to reflect on their experiences and describe them to me – a process that inevitably relied heavily on my imaginative and empathetic capacities as a researcher, and continues to rely on your imaginative participation as a reader. As Antonio Strati (2000: 30) tells us:

*"[Aesthetic approaches] require empathetic understanding by the reader. By evoking knowledge, and by relying on the concept of plausibility, they involve the reader in a process of both seeing and not seeing the organization studied and they place him/ her in a situation that he/ she finds plausible."*

Various strategies (for want of a less instrumental word) have been suggested to help achieve this empathetic understanding of both researcher and reader of the aesthetic realities of those researched. Perhaps the most obvious of these is to ask the respondents to tell you! But as Suzanne Langer (1957) notes, aesthetic experiences are notoriously difficult to articulate in language given that these experiences come to us as a 'gestalt' – something she refers to as 'presentational symbolism'. Aesthetic experiences

assault all five senses simultaneously and are felt emotionally, viscerally and cognitively all at the same time. To separate out each of these feelings, thoughts and sensations in order to fit them within the syntactical confines of language “requires us to string out our ideas even though their objects rest one within another; as pieces of clothing that are actually worn one over the other have to be strung side by side on a clothesline...” (Langer 1957: 81). A useful example here is musical notation. Unless one can read music, one cannot ‘hear’ the music that the eyes can see – thus the aesthetic experience of hearing the music is lost (to the untrained reader) once it is codified and reduced to a language. As Gagliardi (1996: 576) explains, this is a central dilemma in art criticism as well a concern for the exploration of organizational aesthetics:

*“...either one describes the work of art, pointing to its analytically observable canons – rhythm, sequences, proportions, correspondences – which usually in no way help ‘to feel’ the work, or one deploys an evocative, poetic language intended to transfer to the listener the aesthetic emotion experienced by the critic.”*

### **A novel approach**

The use of evocative poetic language is just how we attempt to convey our aesthetic experiences. Although we know that language can never transfer the **actual experience** to another person, using the evocative language of metaphor we can more or less successfully make our experiences understood by others. The literary genres of novel writing and poetry have employed these techniques for hundreds of years to linguistically conjure up the emotional and aesthetic experiences of the writer and her or his characters, plot and setting. Despite the similarities between organizational research (or indeed any other area of social investigation) and the telling of a good story, the historical importance of forcing social research into a scientific mould has left as its hang-over a hesitancy among academic writers to employ ‘unscientific’ techniques. As Barbara Czarniawska (1999: 26) appeals: “...all of us who studied management as a practice engaged in story-writing in one or another way. My plea is thus not very radical: to recognize that which is a common practice, and to cultivate it instead of apologising for it.” Similarly, Antonio Strati (2000: 31) repeats this call to distance aesthetic accounts of organization from the rationalist, so-called objective canons of validity, reliability and generalizability, stating that: “*The aesthetic approach prompts the organization scholar to develop new awareness of organizational life rather than devise new ways to rationalize it.*”

The idea of using a story-telling approach in presenting (and collecting data) is increasing in recognition. John Law (1994) writes adamantly that his findings from an ethnography of a scientific laboratory are no more than one partial, situated and fragmented story of what he experienced: “*we tell stories, offer metaphorical redescriptions, ethnographies, fairy tales, histories – so called ‘think descriptions’.* And we do not take them too seriously, we do not puff them up with hegemonic pretensions.” (Law 1994: 14) In a similar vein, Yiannis Gabriel (2000) puts forward the view that stories can be far more effective at communicating a

reality than a report of the 'facts' alone. Stories, as he puts it *"will often compromise accuracy in the interest of poetic effect, itself an expression of deeper fantasies, wishes, and desires."* (Gabriel 2000: 135) This intuitive point he does not see as problematic however. Instead of reducing their potential as methods of dissemination, he argues that *"...paradoxically the inaccuracy, the distortion, or even the lie in a story can offer a path towards the deeper truth it contains at an individual or collective level"* (ibid.) These distortions might be seen as fictions – which at first certainly sounds less than professionally desirable – how can a plausible account of organization have any value if it is fabricated?

However, the notion of a fiction presupposes that there exists a factual counterpart. Even if it were possible to establish what the 'facts' were, as Linstead (1994: 1330) notes, we have to recall them from memory which *"instantly creates meaning and creates an account... for everything we experience is instantly past and instantly subject to recall... As Kosinski states "The remembered event becomes a fiction: a structure made to accommodate certain feelings"...*' Linstead (1994: 1335) also notes that texts do not have authors, in the sense of someone who has ultimate authority over the meaning of the text. Every reading will be different, and so regardless of whether a text is fact or fiction, it has no absolute meaning. From this perspective then, the critique of story-telling as 'mere fiction' seems somewhat redundant. However, I do believe that the telling of organizational stories should be well grounded in the realities of the respondents – so far as it is possible to achieve this. Simon Gottschalk (1998) believes that this is achieved through intersecting narratives of observations from the field ('facts') with emotional contexts. For these reasons I draw extensively on transcripts of many taped conversations with the respondents. Although I have selected which extracts to use, and therefore the respondents are not entirely 'speaking for themselves' I hope that their voices will add to the plausibility of the stories they tell. This leads to what Marcus (1994: 567) calls the 'messy text' which he defines in one sense as messy because *"[it sits] on an open-endedness, an incompleteness, and an uncertainty about how to draw a text/ analysis to a close."* The inconclusiveness of messy texts – or stories – can be seen as a recognition by the researcher of the 'precariousness' (Law 1994) of meaning in retelling social worlds. The following summary from Yiannis Gabriel is helpful I feel, in knitting together all these threads:

*"...researchers who want to use stories as a research instrument must be prepared to sacrifice some of the core values of their craft and adopt instead a rather alien attitude to their subjects and their texts... Faced with distortions and ambiguities, researchers must resist the temptation of 'setting the record straight'; instead they must learn to relish the text... At the same time, researchers must not lose sight of the relation between stories and facts: facts are not dissolved by stories, they re-created through them... this approach represents not merely a valid and useful way of doing research, but can also be highly engaging and enjoyable<sup>3</sup>."* (Gabriel 2000: 135-136)

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<sup>3</sup> I find this note from Yiannis ironically amusing in the context of the discussion of aestheticization above. It seems that as academics, we too seek fun and enjoyment in our work!

With the above in mind, I present the data in this paper as four stories told to me by the respondents about their feelings towards the aestheticization programme in the department. These stories were not recounted to me in words alone however. They were narrated in conjunction with photographs of objects, spaces and places which the respondents felt 'visualised' their points as I discuss below.

## **An aesthetic lens**

As I have already mentioned, aesthetics is about **all** the senses and so it seems reasonable to try to employ as many of those senses as possible in the research process as well as in the dissemination of data in the form of research papers and articles such as this. As far as I am aware no research methods are available as yet that can capture the smell, taste and tactile feel of the world around us, but there are certainly methods that can capture what we can **see**. It was at this point that I first considered the role of the visual in researching aesthetics, which developed from a rough idea into one of the central research methods of the study. As Sarah Pink (2001: 3) is realistic and pragmatic enough to admit: *"...methodologies are developed for/with particular projects, they are interwoven with theory and as most good researchers know, it is not unusual to make up the methods as you go along."*

So, in conjunction with semi-structured interviewing and my own aesthetic experiences of being in the environment of dept. X (which I also drew upon to aid my understanding of the respondents words) I asked the respondents to literally 'show me how it feels to work here'. For practical reasons of privacy, to enable future analysis, and to add a further dimension to my written descriptions of the department, I gave the respondents a digital camera and asked them to take photographs of any aspect of their environment they wished, rather than ask them to physically take me round their space to show me. I had intended to give no more instructions than that, but in practice, the respondents were uncomfortable with such a loosely defined brief and so I gave prompts such as 'take pictures of things you have strong feelings about, or no feelings about' and 'what objects, places and spaces are important to you, have particular meanings for you'. The resulting set of approximately 250 images from 30 respondents is truly fascinating, and the photographs were discussed during the interviews, where I asked the respondents to 'talk me through' the photographs they had made. We discussed the choice of object, the way the image had been composed – intentionally or unintentionally – framed and selected as well as the symbolic meanings the subjects represented in the images had for the respondent. This collaborative approach to researching with visual images goes further than the term 'photo-elicitation' employed by Wagner (1979) to describe interviewing with images. The idea that the image is 'extracting' a meaning from the respondent or that the image 'contains' the meaning which the respondent has to extract from it, is too simplistic to capture the gentle and exploratory process of discussing the respondents photographs with them. As Sarah Pink (2001) and Dona Schwartz (1994) both note, this

type of approach can lead to a greater sense of involvement with the participants, which in my opinion, enhances relationships with the respondents leading to richer data. Rob Walker and Janine Weidel (1985: 212) call this process of stimulation “*the can opener effect*” suggesting that data is generated **through** the image as well as the captured **by** it. Thus meaning is actively constructed through the dialogue surrounding the image, rather than ‘extracted’ from either the image or the respondent.

For the reasons outlined above, I have included some of these photographs as part of my stories about dept. X. It is important to note here that I have selected which photographs to use – and these choices will inevitably reflect a great deal of my personal aesthetic preferences. This is largely unavoidable, but by reminding you of this I can hopefully temper some of the authoritative ‘truth’ attributed to images – in particular photographs – when used as ‘documentary evidence’, something I am keen to avoid. Just as my words are partial and abstracted traces of a subjective reality that has passed, so are these images. Nonetheless, as photographs do bear an iconographic resemblance to the subjects they represent, they are potentially useful in the descriptive process – helping to engender a sense of the plausibility that Strati (1999, 2000) advocates we should strive for as researchers of aesthetics. The debate about the ontological status of images as truth rages healthily in visual research communities, and for the sake of brevity I shall not discuss it further here, apart from to say that in presenting the words of the respondents alongside the images they have taken, I am borrowing from Mitchell’s (1994) idea of the ‘image-text’ in which words and images are placed in equal juxtaposition rather than in a hierarchical relationship (eg: image as a mere illustration, or words as a title). Thus the words contextualise the image and the image adds a visual dimension to the words. I have placed respondents and words and pictures together to help this contextualisation. Also, many of the quotes I use were taken from conversations about the image displayed.

Furthermore, this visual dimension is itself more fully aesthetic in nature than a pictorial representation seen with the eyes. Images (and real things) are not just seen, they are gateways to a whole host of experiences. Sight evokes emotional memories (as do other senses), sparks cognitive contemplation and remembrances of other sensory stimuli unconsciously associated with that image in our minds. To get a quick sense of this, close your eyes and imagine a frying pan full of crisp juicy bacon – can you ‘smell’ it?, ‘hear’ it sizzling?, or even ‘taste’ it? Of course, the images you see in the next section of the paper are not places and things that you have encountered before – but when juxtaposed with the respondents words, my allusions and your own experiences, I hope to communicate some of the presentational symbolism of dept. X.

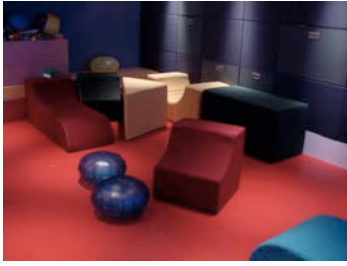
## Dept. X – Spring 2001

This is a story about dept. X – a web-design department of a large I.T. company. In the spring of 2001, Dept. X had about forty permanent members of staff, with various roles including designers, programmers, project producers, technical support, consultants and administrators. The following accounts of life in dept. X at that time are drawn primarily from my observations, conversations and aesthetic engagement with thirty of these people. As I mention in the preface to the paper, these data are still in the process of analysis and the respondents' accounts of their experiences that I use in the stories that follow are taken from the tape recorded interviews that I have transcribed so far. I also draw on my own aesthetic experiences of the environment of dept. X and casual conversations with other people there who were not 'formally' part of the study. About a third of these 'formal' respondents are female and the rest male, which for the purposes of illustration (rather than any claim to generalisation) is fairly representative of the gender split in the department as a whole. The respondents were aged between 21 and 42 years, although most of them were between the ages of 27 and 35. Regardless of official job-title, approximately half of them described themselves to me as having a creative role in the company (which was interesting as I had imagined programming Internet code to be rather non-creative). The three months worth of conversations and deliberations that I had with these people are told here to build a picture of how they felt about what had happened to their work environment. A large spacious office, their workplace had been designed (predominantly by management) to be a place which would foster and communicate creativity, as Lewis (the production director) told me:



*"The original intention was to try and provide a sort of very different relaxed, non-businessy sort of environment that did look very sort of creative in its own right because every animal needs its own type of cage and the sort of animals that we put in it were designers and animators and producers and they just can't work in the sort of cube environment that [the company] has traditionally given its programmers in the past. Um, you know they need external stimulants to try and drive ideas and um, and you don't get good ideas without external stimulants – very rarely anyway. And we also, the designers work in groups – they flock, when they're having brainstorming ideas a whole bunch of them will get together and they'll bounce things between each other and the environment that they do that in, should be a bit different which is why the brainstorming room is slightly different to the way that normal offices are."*

People's feelings (especially the designers) towards their 'new creative space' however, were more mixed. Whilst they all told me that they liked the environment and enjoyed working within it, there was a



strong feeling of contempt at the aims of the project, with most respondents agreeing that the programme had been a superficial attempt by management to give the department a face-lift with little or no consideration given to what the designers actually wanted. Very few respondents told me that they thought the new office had had an impact on their creativity, in fact most felt this assumption was rather insulting as Lewis goes on to say:

*"...but to be truthful, going back, we used to be in the dungeons of [another building] it was a shitty horrible space and it was traditional MCS – it was even worse than traditional MCS cos it was lab space and in the labs they give scientists little box rooms to work in and they go in there and they just tap away*

*and we basically took that sort of space and lived in it for a good four or five years and we still delivered outstandingly good stuff before we had here. So we made do with what we had and we had the brainstorming sessions in horribly cramped rooms – but the majority of the time we actually went outside which is why one of my photographs is of trees. MCS, because its in the countryside I mean, the grounds of MCS are surrounded by nice places – I didn't go out to take it I just took it out the window.*

**Me: Some people went outside – it was great!**

*Have you got one of the sunken gardens?*

**Me: Yes**

*So you're gonna get some of us saying the same stuff – the sunken gardens... that's one of them [Lewis fiddling around with laptop.] Yeah, um taken from my window to represent outside. I think, - coming back to where I was at, most of the designers and*



*stuff in our competitors – our competitors are agencies, agencies and web integrators and they've all got a flashy space, um and to be truthful the fun in your space is the people and what you do in it not what you've got there. We had a lot of fun downstairs, loads of fun – we used to play lots of computer games in the evenings and stuff, throw balls around the office, have lots of toys and the fun was working together as a team and the office actually didn't matter to us at all and I think, you know, for our customers it matters a lot cos they don't really believe we can have fun in such horrible places like you don't expect kids in a slum to have fun compared to some kid that's got like everything in a reasonably wealthy environment. I mean your perception is that you can't. So a lot of our environment is more for perception with clients than it is for the individuals – I think anyway. That aside, we have got something here that none of our city agencies and competitors have got, and that's the countryside and literally we can go and sit on the lawn and have a brainstorming session in the sun and its far more effective than being stuck in any office no matter how pretty it may be. I'll give you another example – one winter we all went out and had a massive snowball fight in front of the house, we built a great big huge snow-penis which was superb and everybody had such a good laugh and went in and then we*

*all went and did some really good work because everybody was just like, they just liked being at work. And people literally would spend more, they do spend more time here than they do at home with their families – which is bad – but it actually says something about the enjoyment of the job. As it happened, security knocked the bloody snow-penis down within minutes!*

Furthermore – and this is where I diverge from the practice of good novel writing by revealing the ending before the story – as Lewis explains above, the people of dept. X recognised the contrived nature of their environment – for them, true aesthetic experiences (from which many of them believed their creativity flowed) were to be had **away** from the office, in amongst the trees and the fields surrounding the company's buildings. For these people, the idea of freedom in various guises was what they prized above all else: freedom to work as they chose, freedom to play, freedom to express themselves as **they** wanted to be recognised. Although they didn't use the language of 'kitsch' and 'authentic' they clearly recognised this distinction in their experiences. Their new environment held the promise of all these freedoms. From the installation of a pool-table to the promise of a dedicated kitchen area (which never materialised) the environment should have been the perfect place to be playful and free. Few people saw it this way though, although they made full use of the facilities and to me as an outsider, the fun and frolics that I observed and took part in seemed like the actions of an unrestricted group of people. The reality as told to me by the respondents was very different. There was an incongruity between the freedom that the aesthetically designed workplace tantalisingly offered, and the company rules and regulations which still had to be adhered to – despite the glossy paint, coloured lights and giant foam chairs. This tension was explained to me again and again through different stories and with differing degrees of emotion. Some spoke with resigned acceptance, others with disillusionment, whereas some were clearly passionately angry about what was happening to them and their community.

## **Russian Dolls, Redundancies and the Representation of Creativity**

As you come up the rather plain stairs and through the electronically locked door into dept. X, you walk round the corner and find yourself at the bottom of a long elliptical corridor illuminated with blue up-lighters and lined with glass offices. A shiny strip runs down the centre, which I was told was particularly effective for racing up and down on the micro-scooter (but that's a different story!) At the end of the corridor are a collection of over-sized Russian Dolls, described below:





“...certain things like these *stupid* Russian dolls which there’s so much fuss going on about at the moment. They’re kind of a centre of gossip. They [SIGH, LAUGH]. There’s so much to say.... I can say there is a general feeling of complete dissatisfaction with the Russian dolls because of the way they were, it was executed – it was forced down our throats. It was something that was [management’s] concept not anybody else’s. Now whilst he’s the



creative director, um and it goes without saying that his direction is the direction that the centre should take. Um there is a certain definitely a feeling of being railroaded into something that nobody had the faintest idea what he was talking about. Even the people that were involved. I think everyone was basically thinking about breaking it.

**Me: So was it a deliberate thing?**

What the punch? Oh it was deliberate, yeah! It was just because they are stupid things.. Um Er-hum [LAUGHING] I know at least five other people who have and I know that we will now get sacked on the spot if we caught doing it and I know they’ve just laid off 5 people and have then spent £10,000 on a CCTV system to cover the Russian dolls.

**Me: £10,000?!**

Yeah. In that range. And that’s something that I – that is causing bad feeling and will definitely continue to cause bad feeling.” (Jason, Graphic Designer)

The Russian Dolls were perhaps one of the most prominent features of dept. X. As the first things you see when you enter the space (along with the sculptures of the over-size tap and tape-measure) they are fairly striking, and some of the people I spoke to liked the fact that they were unusual things to have around in a work-place. They had become almost iconographic representations of the dept. through their use in internal and external communications and marketing materials as Marcus mentions above. Amongst the design community they were intensely disliked because they symbolised the hypocrisy of management’s intentions. From the perspective of several of the designers, the dept. had been intended to be a creative space that reflected the personalities and talents of the people who worked within it – namely the designers. I gained a strong feeling that people related to their space in an intensely personal way – they wanted clients and visitors to get the right impression of them as a group of people when they came into the office, and the Russian Dolls were considered by most to be ‘material lies’ about who they were (my phrasing). The Russian Dolls were therefore an example of the lack of consultation or involvement the designers had with the planning and execution of the programme. This was a really interesting point, since the manager of dept. X had been keen to tell



me how much consultation there had been with the creative teams during the programme – but according to almost all the respondents they weren't involved at all. The exception to this was the buying of the toys, when two of the designers were given £500 and told to go to Toys'r'Us and buy whatever they liked.

As we have seen from the Jason's story above, the Russian Dolls were at the centre of a great controversy at the time I was carrying out the research. It had been noticed with great horror by Management that these expensive and symbolically precious objects had been sabotaged. In fact, on my first day in the dept. the manager, Pamela, actually took me to one side and explained with all seriousness that the Russian Dolls had been beaten up by someone. I found it hard not to laugh as personally I found the seriousness with which she was telling me this highly amusing, given that in the big scheme of things, this was to my mind rather trivial. She also explained that since we had last met a couple of months previously it had been necessary not to renew the contracts of several staff and that this process was likely to continue as the dept. was not attracting enough 'externally billable' work. She seemed surprised at my suggestion that perhaps the dolls had been damaged as an act of sabotage in the light of the news of redundancies, preferring to think that it was probably someone just being silly. I found this response quite telling of the beliefs Pamela had about employee relations in her department. The following extract is taken from my field diary on the day of this conversation.

Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> March

### **Initial Visit**

[Pamela] explained to me about 2 incidents that have happened since we last met.

1. **Redundancies** Workload to the [creative team] is low and four of the more junior team members have been made redundant. Three of them are at [the other MCS site] and one is here. [Pamela] seemed quite surprised about how 'devastated' they all were and that they have chosen not to take garden leave and are staying on. She seemed really unhappy that the redundancies have been necessary and says that it has shell-shocked the team.
2. **The Punching of the Russian Doll** Several weeks back, somebody/bodies had maliciously attacked the Russian doll by punching it in the face. Unofficially, [Pamela] knows it was someone from the [design team], but has no idea of their motive. Senior management were livid and threatened to summarily dismiss the culprit. [Pamela] hoped that she had dealt with the incident and that the offending person had been warned by their team leader. However, it has happened again and the team have been threatened by senior management with a fixed focus camera trained on the doll. She circulated an e-mail to the creative team and was astonished at the level of opposition to the camera (civil liberties etc). She doesn't know if its is just someone being stupid or something else. When I suggested sabotage (not in so many words) she seemed to dismiss the idea – or at least gave the impression that she did. She certainly didn't find the incident amusing (whereas I did – but didn't let on of

course). I can see her point however, and sensed that she felt annoyed and hurt that someone had damaged something which they had worked so hard to be allowed to have.

Here are Marcus's feelings about the Russian Dolls:

*"The Russian Dolls in particular I think are - well they're not very popular!"*

**Me: I gathered that!**

*I'd like to think I was one of the first people to find out how resilient they are by punching one in the face and leaving and leaving my knuckles dented in there! Which was a trend I actually discovered had been carried out at [another company site] as well. Cos they've got an identical set of Russian Dolls with similar kick and knuckle marks all over them!*



**Me: That was completely independent of what was going on here?**

*I think so! Unless they had someone cos I might have done it once – well a number of times, lets say! But it certainly had a few other people having a crack at them as well. So they are particularly offensive. Not really looking like Russian Dolls, not coming apart like Russian Dolls, and just being big and stupid in a 'It's a Knockout' kind of way. What are they for? There's no decent explanation of why they look so bad. There's a semi-decent, no actually, it's a bollocks story as to why they're there in the first place.*

**Me: Isn't it something to do with information in layers?**

*Yeah, apparently it relates to the [a web-site] which is – well it's an excuse, or it's a story that doesn't really tally with what the web-site was doing. (Marcus, Graphic Designer)*

The initial cost of the dolls, their kitsch nature and the disproportional importance of them to senior management were the main sources of dissatisfaction for the respondents. Not all of the respondents felt quite so strongly however, Hannah, a technical support officer told me:



*them."* (Hannah, Technical Support)

**Me: What do you think about the sculptures – the tap and stuff?** *Um to be honest I really don't have an opinion on them – I know some people do and some people think they're fantastic and other people think they're just a complete waste of money. I think it's a novel idea, and I think its um with the touch screens there telling the tale and telling the story and everything it's a novel idea. But they're just non-descript, I just pass them by. I get used to*

I also think that it is important to note that at least one person did actually like the Russian Dolls, but she was not a designer (she was a customer support officer), which I believe is of significance given that, to her the dolls were appealing to her on a purely aesthetic level. For the designers, however they symbolised something fundamentally linked to their sense of identity as creative people, something they felt these dolls diminished and distorted. Moreover, the willingness of management to spend considerable amounts of money keeping them under surveillance was ‘a kick in the teeth’ to a team who had just been notified of job losses.

*“This basically is a picture to describe the sort of gap that exists between the higher management and the people that actually work here – and them thinking that that was a good idea and everyone else thinking it wasn’t a good idea. It’s. - there’s some sort of gap between the people that are in charge of this place who don’t seem to have a clue about what they’re actually trying to – they know what they wanna do – but not really how to do it.” (Jamie, Graphic Designer)*



Other people talked about the dolls as reminders that dept. X might have been given a little more freedom than other areas of MCS but that the corporation was still watching over them like ‘Big Brother’. The photograph shown here on the left was taken by one male producer, Tim, to symbolise the oppression he felt in an environment meant to ‘set him free’. In a voice thick with sarcasm he told me “You can have free rein here – so long as you follow the rules!” Another respondent expressed this sense of ‘corporate-ness’ he saw in the dolls by drawing my attention to the fact that they looked like some “*stupid fucking politically correct family – all dressed in business suits – they don’t even **look** like proper Russian Dolls*” (Godfrey, designer)

The word oppression was hard for me to match to my experience of dept. X, its people and environment however. I could understand why the designers might feel oppressed, but for me – perhaps because I had far less personal involvement with the dolls, I felt that a slightly milder description of ‘regulated freedom’ was a better way of expressing what these respondents were telling me. This theme is better illustrated by the next story which continues below.

## Skate and Bake: Regulating Freedom



One of the most talked about and enjoyed objects in dept. X was the micro-scooter. The height of fashion in the UK for adults and children alike, some of the 'toy budget' had been used to buy a scooter which was used for instrumental reasons of getting from one side of the office to the other usually in order to get to the chocolate machine (it's quite a big place, although I never actually

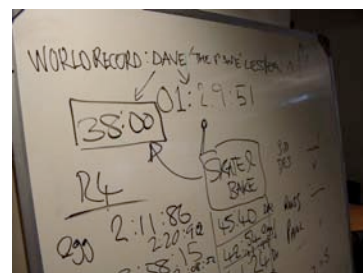
measured it, so as an estimate, the office is about the size of two football pitches at least). However, it was most enjoyed as a toy, for whizzing around the office just for the sake of it. Indeed, this had become a competition with to see who could race round a set circuit of the office in the quickest time. I'll let the inventor of this game tell you about it.

**Me:** What's this board all about? *That's all mine, that's my idea – I think there's a bigger picture of that board... basically one night we stayed late and er we were doing a bit of a speed pool thing and we drew it up on the board and er I got the 1min 29 and it was like half anyone else's score*

**Me:** That's to pot all 7 balls?! *The whole table! – 15 balls and that stood for a long time until [names a colleague] did 59 seconds – that's dodgy, but he is a [clever boy]! At the same time we came up, well I came up with the skate & bake ie: do a circuit all the way round the whole [department] on the scooter as fast as you can and it absolutely takes it out of you – its so hot, such a hot thing to do!*

**Me:** How do you do the corners? *You go as fast as you can and just before you hit the corners you skid it [MAKES 'COMEDY' SKIDDING NOISE] and you just pull it round and carry on - a lot of leg work involved, so its skating and baking while your doing it! And these are the times, and I triumphed with 38 seconds last one – so that night I held the record on both things!*

**Me:** Is it something that's not done so much now? *No – it could lead to injuries so its quite a dangerous sport!*  
(Jamie, Graphic designer)



The scooter was a good example of the enjoyment that people got from interacting with their material environment. This chance to play was seized by most of the respondents and those who either didn't want to use the scooter or felt they were too busy to play spoke of how good they thought it was that it was being used by others and that it was around. Incidentally, the support staff felt that they were as free to use the toys and play equipment as much as those with more 'creative roles' but that they often



didn't get the chance due to the nature of their job, and that when they did have time to play, other people looked at them as if to say 'why are you playing with that? However, to return to the plot, the use of the scooter caused a few problems in the rule-bound context of MCS as Deb's story shows.

*"...the microscooter thing is just for naughtiness because I've had, we had a laugh on the microscooter a while back, we got told off by the site services guy, we had a race around the [department] with the microscooter. There was only one person on it but there was a crash and it all got really ugly, but we got a whiteboard and somebody with a stopwatch and we had to go round the circuit and see who could do it quickest. And about half way through one of the site services guys came round - who's a very very miserable man and has no joy.. and someone was going a bit too quick to make the corner and did a huge sort of like falling action over the settees and stuff over the end and this guy jumped out and said 'Stop! Health and Safety!' and we were all, we dissolved into fits of laughter on the floor and er so the most the biggest laugh I've ever had in the office came out of the microscooter.*

**Me: Is that why the signs were put up?** Well they hid the scooters for a while because they thought they were a bit dangerous.

**Me: Who's they?** I dunno who they was, I know it was stashed in one of the designers desks I think maybe [Pamela] had asked them to be put away for a while, maybe [management], but the health and safety guy complained to [management] and tried to get us to stop, tried to get them taken away I think.

**Me: Are Health and Safety outside the department?** He's [MCS], He's a [MCS] labs kind of person and yeah and I think he kind of when he went and told the teacher and the teacher said 'Bugger Off' which was great and so they just represent naughtiness, which is kind of cool!  
(Deb, Graphic Designer)



Deb doesn't really answer my question about the warning signs that are displayed on the two entrances to the department. The office is locked electronically as I have mentioned before and signs are displayed alongside them. I later discovered that this was a compromise between the department and the management of MCS to comply with Health and Safety law. The management of dept. X refused to ban the scooter so they had to display a warning sign to people entering the office that they did so almost at their 'own risk'! Unlike the resentment caused by the Russian Dolls however, the scooter sign was generally seen as amusing because it was just so ridiculous to have to warn people that fun was being had behind the locked door as Jason explains:

**Me: What do you like about the scooter sign?**

*It shows fun. It shows that fun is being had here and the fact that you have to warn. They took it away from us, they were going to take it away from us completely and there was like war cos there was like one of the more expensive items we bought apart from the table football and it was like well, its not really that dangerous – the problem was that*

*somebody hurtled round a corner and went crash into somebody who was a health and safety guy! Whoop! Doh! Yeah, so I think its we're poking fun at the establishment by doing them, by doing the signs, although I know we're not, I know we're conforming to the health and safety, but its actually more fun than that. When [my mate] did these, when he did them, it was very much a case of I can't believe we've got to put signs up! Um but as it goes they're actually a bit more fun than they initially looked!*

**Me: I haven't seen many people using it?**

*Oh you missed me on yesterday when I was hurtling round with a pink feather boa flying behind me along the corridor past the consultants... it was like Oops – there's a client in here!*

**Me: Has there been a scooter race here? I noticed a board by the pool table**

*Yeah Skate and Bake. You have to get round the office in as quick a time as possible and its called skate and bake cos you skate around and you're all [MAKES PUFFING NOISE] sweat pouring off your face and stuff. But [Jamie] managed, [Jamie's] got it down to 38 seconds which is pretty good! I have my roller blades as well which I tend to put on and scoot around on...*

This tension between freedom and control is further illustrated by the story of the 'Think-tank' that I tell next.

## **The Thinktank: Creating Creativity**

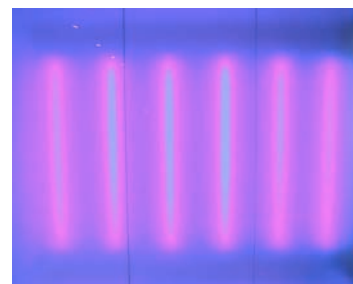
One of the most distinctive parts of dept. X was a small room variously referred to as the 'brainstorming



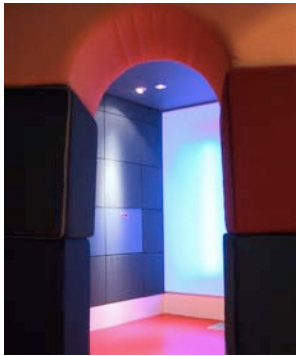
room' or the 'think-tank'. In a converted glass-walled conference room at the end of the main corridor, it had been designed to be a completely different kind of environment in the hope that people working within it would be inspired to think more creatively than they would normally do in their usual surroundings. I loved the think-tank, I thought it was a wonderfully pleasing space to be in, with a bright red cushioned wipe-clean floor, foam blocks and a

whiteboard which covered one whole wall. As Duncan, told me whilst showing me the photographs he had chosen to take in the room:

*"The brainstorming room which we've been in, and you probably noticed me turn on the purple neon-lights when I was in there while you were outside, so I decided to take a photo of the purple neon lights behind the frosted glass. I think this was about the fifth different colour that they tried in there and they started off with bright yellow and it was really it REALLY hurt your eyes and the quality of the lights as well must have*



been really poor cos they flickered a lot. Instant headache within 5 seconds -absolutely horrible and if your facing this for too long it can be a bit painful but er, it does give a nice glow to the whole room... So the purple lights I do like.”



“I decided to build a foam arch in the er... the foam arch out of all the foam blocks which we normally use for sitting on

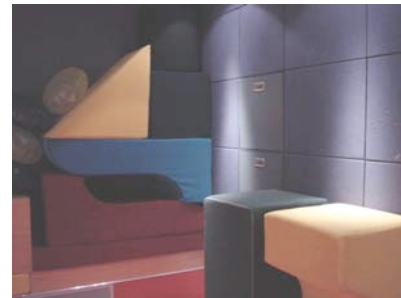
**Me: But they're not comfy are they?**

There just a bit uncomfortable after a while you start slouching and if you slouch for too long its just not comfortable on your back. I was looking around and other than the purple neon strips that I took pictures of seeing where I could take a nice photo inside the brainstorming room, and er again I suppose my liking for neatness and stuff I figured I had to find something somewhere and there was nothing natural

there to provide a framing shot so I built the arch up!

**Me: Is it the whole room that you like?**

Yeah I do. The floor 's sort of a bit soft and textured - that red stuff and you've got the lights on one side, the ceiling with different lights that you can dim down and adjust - spotlights and downlighters. Carpeted walls - pinboardy type materials across all the different squares - some of them which open into cupboards and you've got network ports in there and fold desks and things and up the other end there's another wall and on this side you've got the giant - the whole wall is a whiteboard here. Er its nice seeing something different on each wall - its just quite an interesting novel room. Again - these things stand out more because of the environment we're used to I guess.



Interestingly, the think-tank was not used very often. During the three month I was at dept. X I saw it being used only once or twice and this was confirmed by the respondents who recognised that they rarely used the room for brainstorming. As I noted in my field diary:

### **27<sup>th</sup> March**

The brainstorm room is not being used again today – at least not at the times I’ve walked past it. Mentioned this in passing to [respondent] who said it would have been nice if the room had been a more open area where people could just hang out.

### **30<sup>th</sup> March**

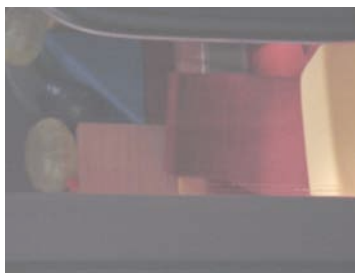
Went into the brainstorm room by myself today – I found it an exciting place to be – it made me feel playful. Interestingly I asked [respondent] (support team) for the code and he said he didn’t have it, and that he’s never been in the room. Probably has no need – although this is something interesting to explore with the support staff in the interviews, whether they feel they have ‘permission’ to use the centre’s facilities in the same way as the designers.



**22<sup>nd</sup> May**

*Actually saw someone using the brainstorm room today. There were three people lying on the floor and lounging on the soft blocks writing notes on paper.*

Perhaps the most surprising thing that I discovered (as I mention in the field-notes above) was that the door to the room was kept locked, and only certain people knew the access code. In the light of the tension between rules and freedom that I discussed in the story about the scooter, this seems perhaps the most striking example of this paradox. Using the camera, Scott explained to me how he felt about the room:



*“That’s through the door. The Thinktank... Basically I didn’t open the door and go in because there’s a certain [PAUSE] the fact that the door is locked and you have to use a code to go in, its like this great big kind of playroom with lots of kind of tantalizing shapes and colours but if you don’t know the code – well I did, but I thought I won’t use it – its like ‘Ooh – hidden treasures!’ like a little Aladdin’s den of fun, why isn’t it out? Why aren’t we allowed just to walk*

*in and.. the whole idea of that door – if its not being used it should be wedged open that’s what I reckon cos then people can think – oh I need to have a quick chat and just go in. But the fact that the door’s shut means a conscious effort has to be made to go in.*

**Me: I completely agree with you – I was shocked it was locked. Why is it locked?**

*It might be that it used to be a printer room, and all the printer rooms have got codes on, but... I’m not convinced. They could have taken it off. Whether they think that we might be tempted to go in and nick cushions and sit on them, well if we do, we do – so what? That’s used probably once every fortnight as far as I can work out.*

**Me: Have you used it?**

*No. Well I had a meeting – I have done different bits and pieces and [Lewis] and I had a meeting about [a project] in there, but it was like [we] needed a chat and it was just to thrash a couple of issues out. So you used it just because it was there? Yeah. It wasn’t because it was lets be open and creative... it was the room closest to where we were sat with a door that was lockable! Not that that was important! I think that’s why I took it is the fact that it promises much but its not accessible. (Scott, Project producer)*

Similarly, as Jason noted somewhat sarcastically when I asked him why he thought the door was kept locked, “Oh god, its bloody [MCS] isn’t it! Of course its locked! Has no-one told you the code? Yeah – keep people out of creative spaces” (Jason, Graphic Designer).

The think-tank was a place that people liked however – often for purely aesthetic reasons of liking the colours, shapes and textures in the room. People did seem to feel it helped them feel more creative as it

was a space, partly because of the toys and things inside it, but underlying this was a sense that people felt it was a quiet private space they could relax in, and that it was this peaceful relaxation that ultimately helped them to think in more innovative ways:

*"I've never used it actually. I've been in it but I've never used it for a brainstorm – I've been in there for a meeting or two – its just a room, er well – if you can get into a very lazy comfortable position... I don't, I would say – it was a year or two back, but everyone got to go on the De Bono's six hats 'how to brainstorm' thing and my kind of feeling is that kind of thing is a lot better than, its nice to have a room where people can be comfortable but it doesn't have to be magically special with all kinds of little toys to play with. You know you can do pretty well, and as long as you've got plenty of space to scribble – that's important – and a place to stick things, there are some things that you need, but it doesn't have to be y'know something like that. But that's just the way I think about it."* (Nathan, Programmer)



*"...I think our one here gives a bit more of an intimate feeling, and because you block yourself in because its quite a wonderful door that nobody can really see inside and the lights are quite different and the floor is red, I mean it makes it more, it feels more like a playpen than it does a room so you can go in there and have short quick meetings and play with the environment and you fiddle.*

**Me: One of your favourite places is it?**

*Yeah. Because I'm scruffy. I don't like sitting at desks and tables with whiteboards, its far better to sit on the floor and doodle on the wall at floor level, or pull down one of the little tables with a laptop and lounge on the floor – I mean its just better. Its better for me, its not better for everybody....*

**Me: A lot of people said they didn't have much call to use the room but they quite like it.**

*Yeah. I mean I've used it quite a lot, but I've not used it for brainstorming, I've used it as a general purpose sort of meeting room. We had some clients that have gone in and have been absolutely 'Ooh this is excellent!' you know cos they can really, and they relaxed a lot in there – they threw away their client thing and started to talk as people. You almost break a few barriers down putting them in such a relaxing environment. Which is what it was, it was about – they were supposed to leave their baggage at the door and come into our centres and feel liberated and relaxed and have a bit of, of fun at the same time as doing the work."* (Lewis, Project Producer)



Simon talks about this relaxation as a sense of calm below.

*"This is the thinktank – I think I did a few. Right this is me standing in the doorway. It shows a reflection of, I had hoped to capture someone silhouetted against the window but they moved out of the doorway – it was a graphic thing.*

*I'm a graphic artist – this is like art to me. And as you say, as you walk around the place, these colouring glows are very important for some reason and blue is my favourite colour and we're called [dept. X] and this is the think tank and it does make me think ta-da! [LAUGHS]*

**Me: Do you use it?**

*I use it a lot. Sometimes I use it just to take myself away. Cos I think um, although the community's very important, personal space and peace and quiet is also very important. So I can go in there and lie on the floor with my laptop if I want just to get my head down in isolation. It can be important.*

**Me: Does it spark your creativity – is it a good environment to brainstorm in?**

*Well its not the best... it was a bit of an afterthought but it does the job for me in certain moods, definitely, definitely helps me. Concentration – cos part of being – it is an internal room so it doesn't have windows which is always something that freaks me out I guess and people don't find terribly um, er, a good environment for creative thought or whatever. But we have these windows outside and there's plenty of light in the outer space that we all work in, but that community is also busy – busy area, it's a buzzing area and because of that its important to interact and there's a lot of noise which can be a distraction from time to time – and also if you really need to key into something you can take yourself away. That's really important to me – I don't know about others. So that just is a kind of emotional shot."*



(Scott, Graphic Designer)

Jason told also me about his experiences of feeling relaxed in the room, although interestingly, for him, the room was not a calm place but suggested violence to him:

*"I think it's a great room. I don't like it as a room, I don't think they've done a particularly good job of decorating it, but I think it's a great room cos you can just go in and shut the door and throw things around.*

**Me: Can I sit in on a brainstorming session?**

*I tried to find you two or three days ago cos we did a thing in there... We could set one up just for a laugh!*

**Me: Do the projects use it?**

*Um they should but they don't. The thing is because of the lack of work at the moment there's no real projects coming in where we would use it anyway. It would be a kick-off kind of position. There is something going on Thursday this week, but its not a project, its we're trying to set up a training course for new staff. I'm not very good on processes, because I buck the system so I don't tend to do processes – I don't tend to follow any processes. But that's a process itself!*

**Me: What is it you like about the room?**

*I like the whiteboard – I love throwing things around. I love the idea of violence in a*



room and I mean it is a very violent room. Its great to just be able to slouch in any kind of vague weird shape um, I'm slightly screwed up from an early drug habit in life so I tend to er, [PAUSE] I don't think its entirely for effect – it maybe because I'm an absolute lovey may have something to do with it, an absolute drama queen, but um I do sort of try and find the weirdest positions possible I can get myself into.

**Me:** There's quite a lot of thinking that says about making the familiar unfamiliar to release creativity...

I probably find, I find it [PAUSE] um much easier to relax. I think my main gripe with any work really is the ability to be able to relax. You must be able to relax – if you can't relax at work, then you can't let the creative juices flow and all that standard crap.... No, well I like the shapes, the relaxed chilled out environment. The one in [the other MCS site], have you been [there]? The brainstorming room there is quite a lot different to that, its more, I find it more starchy as well – more rigid, although its not, but it doesn't I think this one's more relaxed because of the foam shapes everywhere. I think it works better. So but it's cool, but its not. I prefer this one although the other one's a much cooler room – cos you go in and you think 'Wow'"

(Jason, Graphic Designer)

The theme of relaxation and freedom was common to most of the reasons people gave as to why they liked the room as a workspace. However, as I've mentioned before, there were different sorts of toys inside the room, which had been purchased (by whom I was not too sure) and were intended, by management at least, to be instrumental aids in the web-site design process. A recent local news report about dept. X had shown a group of the designers in the Think-tank playing with Lego blocks as a way of visualising the information flows around an Internet web-site,. Despite Pamela, the manager of dept. X telling me that the designers had 'loved' this and that they had thought it was a great way to encourage 'out of the box' thinking, the designers themselves told me of their embarrassment and humiliation at being asked to get down on the floor and play for the camera. As with the Russian Dolls, they felt that it had misrepresented their identity as creative people as Deb tells us:



"I don't think I'll ever be able to make the transition with playing with toys at work. There was a - we had this TV crew in - yeah South Today and [Pamela] was encouraging us to do this metaphor thing playing with Lego as a brainstorm for overcoming some sort of, we made up this brainstorm off the cuff that was just totally, total fluff and nonsense. And we were pretending that we use Lego in order to brainstorm customer ideas [SOUNDING CYNICAL AND EMBARRASSED] - we don't use Lego for that. It's a nonsense and in fact I think South Today used it as a stick to take the piss with - beat us with really.

**Me: I didn't get that impression, but that was certainly what they focused on.**

*We don't. We use our brains to brainstorm really. We don't use Lego, I think that's a nonsense. We might muck about with it every now and again but that has nothing to do I don't think with 'imagine the customer... and imagine an e-business shopping space...' [MIMING MOVING BLOCKS ABOUT]. We don't do a lot of that."*  
(Deb, Graphic Designer)

The idea that the designers used these items to aid their creative thinking was seen by most of the people I spoke to as an embarrassing explanation which would only be believed by the gullible. However, the environment and the toys within it were liked – and genuinely so – for the pleasure they gave. The department was an aesthetically pleasing place to be for most people. I asked all the respondents who described themselves as having a creative role in the department whether they felt the aestheticized environment had any impact on their creative thinking, and where they felt most inspired. Their answers were surprising and ironic considering the amount of money that MCS had spent on dept. X's office. Almost all the respondents took at least one photograph of the grounds and countryside outside their office. Some even went outside to take their photographs. This sense of freedom threads right through the three stories I've told so far, and indeed through all the data (there were many more stories told to me!). This emphasis on the external natural environment was completely unexpected, I had asked people to take photographs of their work environment, and had expected them to understand this as their newly aestheticized office space. The last story I shall tell then, is of the 'Great Outdoors' below.



### **The Great Outdoors: An aesthetics of escape?**

At the very beginning of the data-stories told in this paper, Lewis told us how he valued the fact that dept. X was situated in a countryside location. Along with several other people he went so far as to say that he sacrificed the possibility of a higher salary in London to stay in such a pleasant location. The theme of 'outside' began to emerge when I asked the respondents where they felt they got their inspiration from. As we've seen, relaxation and freedom from restriction were important, as was the social interaction and spontaneous fun that as a community of designers (and others) they valued so highly. Generally, people spoke of their inspiration coming from a mixture of 'sparking' ideas off one another in a social context and of 'escaping' from the immediate context of their work. Various examples were given such as surfing the Internet, listening to music, but the most prominent way that people escaped for inspiration was by physically or virtually leaving the office by either going outside or gazing out of the window. Whether people went outside briefly (usually to have a cigarette) or went for long walks in the grounds, the strongest and most commonly visualised example of this escape to freedom



was the pleasure and freedom they got from being outdoors – or looking out of the windows at least. The following extracts from interviews show the different ways people valued being outdoors.



*“ This one is more than just the entrance porch really. When I was at the FT – we had one smoking room and we weren’t allowed to smoke outside cos we were in the city and it was a bad image etc. And the smoking room was – I loved it cos you would find out what was really going on, especially when it all hit to a point where non-smokers would hold their breath and come in and have a little listen to what went on. So you don’t get quite that same kind of hotbed of gossip – not even gossip, just finding out what’s going on, but you do to a certain extent – its still nice to be able to take time out and say well I might be polluting myself with 10 fags a day, but I’m also having 10 snippets of fresh air, 10 breaks away from my screen, 10 chats with people I know and I like that. I like the fact that you can just go whenever you want – you don’t have to wait for certain factory hours and stuff.”*

(Scott, Project Producer)

**Me: Do you use the toys and stuff as a break from work?**

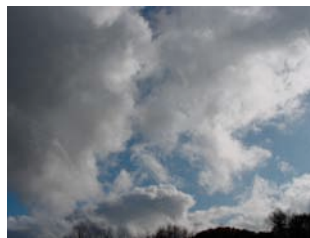
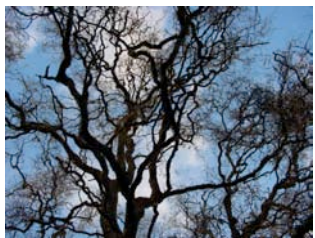
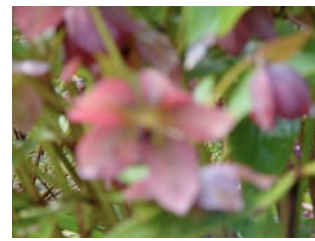
*“No, that’s more of a social thing. I generally find other ways to break myself out of something and take five minutes off to usually sit out of the way or something instead. Its nice that [the office environment is] like this, but I generally work wherever I am as long as the desk is somewhere comfortable so, um its not actually that important. One of things I like about working here is just where we are out in the country, that’s nice. This is a view out of the window I took to just generally to represent here. Again cos I’ve worked here quite a long time and it’s a nice place. Much better than working in London or wherever.”* (Nathan, Programmer)



*“Oh that’s just the view outside my window which is always quite nice. When my eyes start to go, turn inside out from staring at the screen for too long, its nice to look outside and I love [it here] because its surrounded by trees and the countryside and the best time of year here is autumn and there’s about 5 trees outside the door that way [POINTING] um, in between the main buildings and the car park that turn the most amazing colours in Autumn every year. And every time I see them I think about getting my watercolour paints out cos they just, they slowly turn from all the colours of the spectrum, all the browns and oranges and yellows and lime greens and stuff and go the most amazing colours and so I LOVE the trees [here]. I think there, they’re, they just make you feel good coming to work and it makes me feel grateful that I don’t commute up to London everyday.”*

(Deb, Graphic Designer)

As I mentioned above, other people went outside into the grounds and took photographs of some of their favourite places. Interestingly, it was the female respondents who did this the most, the reasons for which at this stage I can only speculate. Nonetheless, those male and female respondents who photographed the countryside spoke of the pleasure it gave them just by experiencing it – and to briefly return to my methodological discussion earlier in this paper – this is where the visual dimension to the research that using the camera facilitated was the most useful. The images overleaf were taken (by three different respondents) to represent sensory stimuli. The smell of freshly cut grass, the country air with its characteristic taint of manure from the farm next door, the sound of bird song, rustling leaves and the peace and tranquillity with which the fish seemed to swim and the clouds move. If this description seems rather romantic, then that's a fair way to describe how these aesthetic experiences were discussed



as we looked at the photographs and talked about their meanings. Siobahn, one of the project producers explained to me why she liked outdoor sports so much. We were talking about the things she liked to do outside work that she felt a real 'aesthetic attachment' to (although I didn't phrase the question in quite such academic terms):

*"...one of the reasons I do them is I get a real kind of just a kind of a flow – you aren't conscious of anything other than the fact that you're out with the fresh air, with birds in the sky, water around you, whatever and yeah you can just lose yourself in what you're doing – and that happens quite a lot of the time, even when I'm in the pool, kind of just steaming up and down, its like meditation you know which is kind of.... I just get really gitty when I don't get out and do exercise. Its like you get absorbed in the physical processes and cant think – very much so."*

(Siobahn, Project Producer)

She went on to explain how going outside when she was at work meant she could leave the artificiality and regulation of organizational life behind her and enter a world which was unpredictable, chaotic and under no-one's control. She took this photograph to show me this, the random growth of the plant symbolised this 'natural order' for her.



These aesthetic experiences were given as reasons for the enjoyment of working at dept. X and MCS, by designers, technical and support staff. Some spoke of the inspiration being outside gave them, whereas others simply found the experience pleasurable. What was interesting was the fact that some of the most intense aesthetic experiences the respondents associated with their 'working environment' were to had outside the office. In contrast to the ways in which they talked about their consciously constructed 'creative space' inside the office, I gained the impression that somehow these 'natural aesthetics' were more authentic to them than those of the office. Although respondents did tell me how they liked and disliked aesthetic aspects inside the building (as we have seen in the stories of the Russian Dolls and the Think-tank) overall there was a sense that the aesthetics of the department were superficial, that the aesthetic responses they felt were almost expected of them. The conclusion I draw from this is that the promise of freedom offered by the aestheticization programme was at odds with the rule-bound culture of the organization. The respondents felt distanced from their space through their limited input into its design and the regulated freedom they felt within it. Similarly, the importance placed by the department management on the appearance of the department for marketing reasons was at the expense of the designers wish that they construct their own identities through the objects in the office.

It's important to note that none of the respondents **disliked** the changes that had taken place in their office. I am keen to avoid giving that impression – on the contrary, everyone appreciated and enjoyed having an aesthetically designed office. One respondent took the photograph on the right of this text to show me the difference between the rest of MCS office space and theirs.



While I was carrying out the research, I did spend some time looking round other parts of the MCS buildings, and there was no doubt that dept. X was a far nicer environment and something that the respondents were proud of and according to them had made other MCS employees jealously suspicious. According to Jason, the graphic designer whose stories I have re-told in this paper, dept. X was known as 'The Bouncy Castle' of the company and few internal employees took them seriously.



*"I'll tell you one thing – most of [MCS] are pissed off with this, with us here. When we were on TV and they showed pictures of people on scooters and pool tables and shit, there's was, there's internal forums which you can chat about things, and the people around [MCS] were "Why should they get this? How much are they spending...?" There was a real envy problem we've also got a real – they think that we're elitist, because we've been given all this, you know, this freedom to work differently, but I think there's a real yearning for everybody to have the same stuff. You know people just don't want to be in their shitty offices. They want – they really do want.... And across [MCS] these centres have caused all kinds of ripples because even the fact that we've got toys and the way that people dress and the way that they can, and they way that their desks are and the way that the whole environment looks. Its actually quite an appealing place. If you look at where you are to where you could go to, the majority of [MCS's] working environment is quite dull, I mean incredibly dull. Everybody would choose to be somewhere different...."*

**Me: Do you think it makes that much difference?**

*I think it does, it affects somebody if they're not in there and I think it also, I mean its also quite attractive for new starters and new hires and people. If you want to get some very good people then the environment is part of the benefit of being in the company, you know certainly some people would come to [MCS] because of the way we are"*

*(Lewis, Production Director)*

## **Summary**

As Lewis's opinion above demonstrates, I believe there is evidence here and in the stories above, that the respondents in this study did value their environment on the basis of its aesthetic capacity to excite – both inside **and** outside the office environment. Moreover, the sense of authenticity that people seemed to feel when they talked about the aesthetics of being outdoors, or the experiences they had of liking (or disliking) aspects of the office for purely aesthetic reasons, such as the 'feel' of the place, or the colour of the lighting for example seems to resonate with Bataille's (1998) argument I briefly mention in my discussion of the theoretical context for this research above - that true aesthetics are not under our control to manipulate for instrumental reasons.

The fact that the research was carried out in the creative environment of a web-design department was deliberate, following Yin's (1994) idea of the 'critical case study' and Denzin's (1989) notion of the 'epiphany'. These ideas suggest that exploratory research can most usefully in the first instance be carried out in a place where one might expect to find the research phenomena to be occurring and secondly that significant 'life-changing' events offer the chance for respondents to reflect on their thoughts beliefs and behaviours both before and after the event in question. In the future I plan to carry out explorations of other less overtly creative industries to see if perhaps the absence of exciting aestheticized work and workplaces does make those jobs less attractive to those involved as Bauman (1998) suggests. Therefore, I have decided not to call this final section of the paper 'conclusions' since that would imply that firstly this study is complete and secondly, that I have absolute authority over the

meanings of the stories I've told. What I will do however, is draw together some of the threads that seem to run through all the stories I have told here (and others that I haven't) and loosely knot them into some kind of tentative summary. I think the overall feelings about the department are best expressed by the people who work there:

**Me: Do you think it does help?**

*Oh definitely – of course, if it was just some static tied environment you'd just feel annoyed all the time and there wouldn't be – you'd feel reluctant. But because, I find that because of the up until now anyway, because its been quite free and easy attitude – as long as you get your work done – there's a free and easy attitude and no sort of strict guidelines and having to be in at 9am and go at 5 – there's nothing like that which all other jobs I've ever done have been, this is the only job I've ever found that I don't look at my watch when I'm here – definitely the interesting environment that we're in definitely helps in the way we work. (Jamie, Graphic Designer)*

*"I was thinking about everyone will probably tell you that it's a great place to work in compared to your bog standard office and I'm sure it has an effect on your mood for the day kind of thing - that you have a nice place to work, its relaxing, the colours, the lighting, a quick game of pool at coffee break or something - just doing something different and er so I think most people would agree that maybe it makes them feel more creative, probably relaxes them more - it's a space that they like to be in, but whether genuinely it makes any difference to the quality of their work output is another question." (Duncan, Programmer)*

*"Its not quite as, [PAUSE] I think the environment looks nice, but the energy doesn't seem to be quite there." (Ness, Graphic designer)*

*"I think here is a severe mish-mash of different ideas which I don't think sit well together. In fact I don't think the execution of a lot of things round here is particularly pleasant. The environments 'alright' – it's a little bit harsh, when we came in here the lighting was very bad and its still – it makes my eyes hurt, and the air as well....*

*...and everything has to have a story to it – which you can kind of see the point at, but there's something that maybe, coming from the art school background I can spot arty pretentious bollocks in a way that sometimes I find a little bit nauseating." (Marcus, Graphic designer)*

*"the over-riding objective of any business is to make a profit and they don't really care if employees' creativity is enhanced or not. If there was an easier and cheaper way to do it then they would. They don't really want to make life better for their employees. I can see their point though, I don't blame them, it just makes me cynical." (Tim, Producer)*

I have deliberately tried to show through my choice of the respondents words above the paradox that people felt. These paradoxes and ambivalences in their experiences represent the tension throughout the data between freedom and control, placed in an aesthetic context. As Vicky Singleton and Mike Michael (1993) have noted, 'politics, overlaps and interferences' within people's experiences are inevitable and researchers should not attempt to solve them by looking for one common definition of what is happening. In refusing to reduce everything to a single order, they argue that the richness of the phenomena is retained and the precariousness of organization is preserved – something I have tried to do here.

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*Pink Machine* is the name of a research project currently carried out at the Department of Industrial Economics and Management at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. It aims to study the often forgotten non-serious driving forces of technical and economical development. We live indeed in the reality of the artificial, one in which technology has created, constructed and reshaped almost everything that surrounds us. If we look around us in the modern world, we see that it consists of things, of artefacts. Even the immaterial is formed and created by technology - driven by the imperative of the economic rationale.

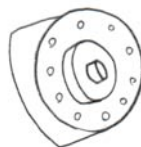
As Lev Vygotsky and Susanne Langer have pointed out, all things around us, all these technological wonders, have their first origin in someone's fantasies, dreams, hallucinations and visions. These things, which through their demand govern local and global economical processes, have little to do with what we usually regard as 'basic human needs'. It is rather so, it could be argued, that the economy at large is governed by human's unbounded thirst for jewellery, toys and entertainment. For some reason - science's inherent urge for being taken seriously, maybe - these aspects have been recognised only in a very limited way within technological and economical research.

The seriousness of science is grey, Goethe said, whereas the colour of life glows green. We want to bring forward yet another colour, that of frivolity, and it is pink.

*The Pink Machine Papers* is our attempt to widen the perspective a bit, to give science a streak of pink. We would like to create a forum for half-finished scientific reports, of philosophical guesses and drafts. We want thus to conduct a dialogue which is based on current research and which gives us the opportunity to present our scientific ideas before we develop them into concluding and rigid - grey - reports and theses.

Finally: the name "Pink Machine" comes from an interview carried out in connection with heavy industrial constructions, where the buyer of a diesel power plant worth several hundred million dollars confessed that he would have preferred his machines to be pink.

Claes Gustafsson



[www.pinkmachine.com](http://www.pinkmachine.com)

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