

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/264273577>

Developing Beautiful Organizations: a conceptual framework (July 2014)

CONFERENCE PAPER · AUGUST 2014

READS

43

3 AUTHORS, INCLUDING:



[Joan Ernst van Aken](#)

Independent Researcher

57 PUBLICATIONS 1,032 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



[Steven Adriaan De Groot](#)

Technische Universiteit Eindhoven

11 PUBLICATIONS 6 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Designing and Developing Beautiful Organizations a conceptual framework

(contribution to a session of the 2014 AoM Annual Meeting)

Joan van Aken, Steven de Groot and Mathieu Weggeman
Eindhoven University of Technology

Abstract

The concept of the beautiful organization is at once appealing and elusive. In this working paper a conceptual framework is given with respect to beauty of and in organizations to give people concepts and a language to discuss the beauty of their organization and to support their efforts to make it more beautiful. It is also meant as a contribution to the field of research on organizational aesthetics.

This version only gives the conceptual framework, not the names and texts of the giants on whose shoulders we stand, nor the empirical research (largely by Steven de Groot) done to enable the development of this framework.

1. Introduction

The concepts of beauty-at-work and beautiful organizations have a strong intuitive appeal. Like the Muses in Greek mythology sang “that what is beautiful is loved, that what is not beautiful is not loved”. However, they prove to be elusive concepts once one tries to use it in studying or developing organizations. Questions emerge like: we understand the beauty of art, but what do you mean with the beauty of organizations, especially if you don't mean the beauty of its material artifacts? Do you want to discuss the functional beauty of organizations and, if so, what is this and to what extent is it different from the disinterested pleasure beauty can give to an observer?

To support dealing with such questions this working paper gives a conceptual framework with respect to the beauty of and in organizations. In this framework we refer not primarily to the beauty of material artifacts, associated with the organization, like the beauty of its housing, of the interior decorating of this housing and of its possible works of art. Instead it refers to the beauty of the organization itself and of its components, which is largely the beauty of the immaterial. This beauty is an instance of functional beauty, the beauty of an artifact that has an evident function, but can give at the same time a positive aesthetic experience, like a chair or a car can be beautiful.

This conceptual framework has been proven as useful in a number of workshops as it does give people concepts and a language to discuss aesthetic issues with respect to their organization. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of work needed to make it to a really effective tool to develop more beautiful organizations. This working paper is organized more as an essay than as an academic article in order to focus on the core ideas. References to the giants on whose shoulders we stand will be given in a later version.

The development of this framework has been inspired on the literature on aesthetics and on organizational aesthetics. Although the latter research stream for a greater part deals with the beauty of the material artifacts associated with the organization, it has informed us in developing our framework. Furthermore, beauty-at-work can be linked to approaches like

classic Organizational Development, positive psychology, happiness research, appreciative inquiry, humanistic management, and even Total Quality Control. The ideas to be discussed below add to them, but a discussion of these approaches themselves and their links with ours falls outside the scope of this working paper.

Another important source of inspiration for this framework has been (and still is) the empirical and theoretical work by Steven de Groot on beauty in and of organizations. He has successfully defended his doctoral thesis on July 3rd, 2014 at Eindhoven University of Technology. Where we refer in this working paper to empirical research we refer to the work by De Groot.

This conceptual framework includes discussions on

- organizational beauty as functional beauty, different from beauty as disinterested pleasure
- organizational beauty as the beauty of the immaterial, evoked through sense making which is different from beauty evoked by material objects through the senses
- aesthetic experiences (a matter of emotion), aesthetic judgments (a matter of cognition) and the sources of such experiences and judgments
- operational definitions of the concepts of the beautiful organization and of beautiful work processes
- approaches to develop beautiful organizations.

2. Beautiful Organizations

Why are some organizations singing and swinging, great places to work, motivating and inspiring their members to outstanding performance and why are some others rather perceived by their members as “iron cages” (Weber, 1978), where work is perceived as boring, repetitive and closely supervised, where processes are rigid, ineffective, where social relations are impersonal and exploitative and where employee withdrawal, absenteeism and even burnouts may be common? In this working paper we explore how the concepts of the beautiful organization or beauty-at-work can help us to design and develop organizations of the first kind, organizations that are perceived by its stakeholders as beautiful organizations and great places to work.

In conversations on beauty people tend to link it with art. Indeed, the motives to contemplate or experience art often include the desire to experience the disinterested pleasure of beauty, apart from direct material or economic motives. Typically, art is produced without a direct relation with the bare existence, like producing food, clothing, shelter and safety. Art is something that can be dropped without direct consequences for the bare existence. Yet, all human cultures produce art, even materially very poorly endowed cultures like the rock paintings of Lascaux and Aboriginal art make clear. Even if art is not needed for the bare existence resources are spent to produce it: art is not regarded as luxury. People have a deep felt need to experience something next to the purely functional, the purely instrumental.

Almost all artifacts are designed on the basis of a combination of functional and aesthetic requirements. Yet, organization design tends to be driven only by functional requirements of effectivity and efficiency. We will discuss below approaches to use aesthetic requirements as well. There are various reasons to do so. These include the (humanistic) idea that nobody should spend a significant part of his/her life - significant both in terms of time and of relevance - in an ugly environment or the idea that beauty should not be regarded as a luxury in one's (working) life. Working in a beautiful organization, using beautiful processes,

producing beautiful outcomes can be an important element of the quality of working life as well as the quality of life in general. For many people their work is a defining element in their life, see also the research on the impact of meaningful work on self-reported happiness. As beauty-at-work can be a powerful catalyst, this can also, as a kind of spin-off, enhance employee affective commitment and performance. But it is up to the stakeholders of the organization to decide whether and to what extent they want to make their organization more beautiful and what they deem as organizational beauty: beauty is in the eye of the beholder, even if aesthetic judgments can be shared and can mutually influence one another.

3. *Functional beauty as good plus 'ein gewisses Etwas'*

Our interest is in beauty-at-work, more specifically in the possible beauty of work related social systems, of work processes and of the products of work, as experienced by stakeholders of the work in question. Beauty-at-work is a special case of beauty, because these stakeholders typically have material interests in this work; they are not disinterested observers of work.

Kant has made a distinction between 'free beauty' and 'dependent beauty'. In the case of free beauty the experience of beauty is "ein interesseloses Gefallen" (a disinterested pleasure), not connected to material or immaterial gain. However, at the workplace a possible judgment of "interesseloses Gefallen" is almost always made in the context of a judgment on the functional value of the work or of its products. This is dependent or functional beauty, beauty that depends on, or is at least strongly related to the functionality of the object in question. At the workplace the first question is "is it functionally good?". "Does it do what it should do, is it according to specifications?" This is a pragmatic judgment, not an aesthetic one. Then a further question can be: "but is it also beautiful?" The aesthetic judgment is added to the pragmatic one.

Functional beauty can emerge through a combination of satisfactory functionality and some specific positive aesthetic properties. A theory can be experienced as beautiful because it is both true and elegant. It is sometimes said that beauty can be a proof for truth. But beauty can be quite misleading. It is rather the other way around. It is not true, because it is beautiful (cf. Keats: beauty is truth, truth is beauty), but beautiful because it is true as well as elegant. Functional power is a prerequisite for beauty-at-work.

In our framework an entity can have functional beauty if it is *functionally good plus 'ein gewisses Etwas'*, something extra: functional beauty = good + X. An entity is defined by us as 'functionally good' if it has everything that is needed to fulfill its function *according to common practice or according to specifications*¹.

Now we need to find out what this 'gewisses Etwas' or X can be to make an entity beautiful in the eyes of its stakeholders. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, there are no general rules defining this something extra. However, empirical research can give more insight in functional beauty as experienced by various stakeholders. One can, for instance, ask lawyers: what is a good council's address or a good verdict and subsequently what is a beautiful one; what must be added to a good one to make it beautiful? In criminal law a *good* verdict may be one that takes sufficient account of the arguments of the prosecution and of the defense, gives a clear verdict and a sufficient account of the grounds and of the nature and size of the sanctions. It is one that is instrumentally good. The 'gewisses Etwas' that could

¹ People may, for instance, judge a non-working (not functional 'good') Renaissance clock as beautiful. An object, that may have a function, can be not 'good' but can indeed still be judged as beautiful. But then it is not a case of functional beauty.

make it a beautiful one might be a complete but at the same time very concise reasoning (producing the combination of functional power and elegance) or the fine language that is used, or the addition in the verdict of a concern for the feelings and interests of the victims. Likewise one may ask what the difference can be between a good insurance policy and a beautiful one, or what the difference could be between a good medical operation and a beautiful one. The latter question can refer to both the beauty of its results and of its process.

This ‘gewisses Etwas’ can be a beautiful form. With respect to form, “form follows function” is a well-known adagio. However, here we would like to follow Frank Lloyd Wright, who maintains that this adagio is misunderstood: “form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union”. Likewise, we feel that in organizations functional power should be one with this ‘gewisses Etwas’ that can make an organization or organizational processes beautiful.

Questions on the difference between functional power, making something ‘good’ and the additional properties that can make it ‘beautiful’ can be asked both with respect to the products of work (e.g. verdicts) and to the processes making these products (e.g. deliberations to produce a verdict) and to the system or organization enabling the emergence of beauty (the court).

A requirement for a beautiful process is that it has produced a good product; work cannot be functionally beautiful if it is not ‘good’ (or if it *appears* to be no good, as one can experience beauty without having *proof* of good functionality). In this respect the following well-known dictum on a medical operation is interesting: “operation succeeded, but patient died”. This can mean that the operation was functionally ‘good’, meaning for instance that the extremely difficult clean removal of the tumor was successfully completed *and* that the subsequent death was not directly connected to the operation. However, it is difficult to imagine that the surgeons would emotionally experience the operation as beautiful if the patient died on their table; functional beauty requires functional effectivity if the work itself and its outcomes are considered as being important.

4. Beauty-at-work as the beauty of the immaterial

Beauty is not a concept readily associated with work. Yet a well-executed, risky but successful surgical operation may evoke a sense of beauty in the surgeons in question, a positive aesthetic experience. A similar emotion may emerge during or after a meeting in which an innovation team has solved a difficult problem in open, respectful conversations, building on the input of the various team members and creating a new, promising approach to their project. People may even exclaim: “that was really beautiful!” People can also have negative aesthetic experiences when bullied or unfairly treated by peers or superiors, after which they may say: “that was a really ugly experience”.

Our interest in the beauty (or ugliness) of organizations and in beauty-at-work is primarily an interest in the aesthetics of non-sensory experiences, not primarily triggered by the senses but by cognitive and emotional sense making. It is like being moved while reading a novel: there is sensory input - the text is seen - but it is through sense making of this text that the experience of beauty is triggered. Even if the novel may convey images of people and scenes, typically the main mechanism producing a sense of beauty through literature is by sense making. The same applies to experiences of beauty-at-work; it is not primarily what you see, hear and smell while working, but the meaning you attach to what you see, hear and smell, that moves you, that triggers the positive or negative aesthetic experience. Sensory experiences may support and strengthen the aesthetic experience, but the prime mover is sense making.

Even further away from sensory experiences than literature is the beauty of certain theories or even formula's. If simple, elegant and yet really effective, this can evoke a sense of beauty for those that can appreciate this elegance and effectiveness. For instance, Einstein's famous formula $E = mc^2$ has extreme explanatory power and yet is very elegant; for those who can appreciate it, it is a beautiful one.

5. *Aesthetic experiences and aesthetic judgments*

One can make a distinction between positive aesthetic experiences (PAEs), matters of emotion, and positive aesthetic judgments (PAJs), matters of cognition. These can be distinguished, but not separated. They are strongly interconnected and can reinforce one another. The reinforcement of emotion by cognition is called 'cognitive penetration'. Conversely one may call the reinforcement of judgment by emotion 'emotional penetration'.

A similar distinction can be made between negative aesthetic experiences (NAEs) and negative aesthetic judgments (NAJs).

Everybody can experience PAEs/NAEs; the capacity to have such experiences is an innate property of humans (and possibly of several other species in the animal world, e.g. in the context of the search for mates). Such experiences can be stronger if one has developed a certain aesthetic sensitivity for the type of entity in question. However, the aesthetic sensitivity of people for organizations and work tends to be quite limited. People are not used to think and talk about work using aesthetic categories. (Therefore, if one asks people what they consider as beautiful in their organization – in search for this 'gewisses Etwas' – one often gets answers containing a lot of 'noise' if these questions are not accompanied by some development of aesthetic sensitivity). Furthermore, for cognitive penetration of emotion one needs a language, a set of concepts, to articulate beauty for oneself and to share this with others. Therefore, a conceptual framework as presented here, is a prerequisite to do good empirical work in this field.

Positive or negative aesthetic experiences, as opposed to PAJs/NAJs, are involuntary, like humor is. You cannot *tell* somebody to laugh; what you can do is to create a setting in which people will laugh, like telling a joke, possibly supported by other means like body language, a theater performance for which people expect humor, etc., but all this will not guarantee laughter. Likewise, one cannot tell people to have a PAE; what you can do is to create conditions for (organizational) PAEs. But you *can* ask people to give a (cognitive) aesthetic judgment on something (which will get you better answers, as discussed above, if the respondents have a certain aesthetic sensitivity for the entity in question and if they have a language for expressing their aesthetic experiences).

Aesthetic experiences are also essentially transient. However, these experiences leave traces, memories, which can be quite lasting. PAEs penetrate PAJs (but they are not the only factors influencing PAJs, as factors like aesthetic education and the opinion of significant others can also have a strong impact on a PAJ). Recurring PAEs can over time produce a quite sustainable PAJ. The idea of the beautiful organization is not that its stakeholders continually experience beauty, but that they develop over time a positive aesthetic judgment with respect to their organization, department or work. A PAJ is essentially a cognitive statement. However, it may color one's subsequent feelings with respect to the entity in question and, as opposed to the pure PAE, these feelings can be quite lasting. One might compare this with the feelings of lowlanders who love mountains, having a sustainable positive emotion of me-in-the-mountains while having a holiday in the mountains. The idea of the beautiful organizations is to create such positive feelings for me-in-this-organization.

The development of a strong PAJ with respect to one's organization can be promoted by creating conditions for recurring PAEs and, which is at least as important, to create conditions to avoid NAEs.

6. *The Stendahl scale and the Stendahl grid*

Aesthetic experiences may lead to aesthetic judgments, i.e. conscious aesthetic attributions to an entity, like the attribution of beautiful to a painting, mountain, person or organization. Beauty is but one of the possible aesthetic attributions. Other aesthetic attributions are for instance daintiness, elegance, harmony, authenticity, balance. However, beauty and its converse ugliness, may be regarded as the iconic aesthetic attribution. Therefore we propose to use the beauty or ugliness of an organization as the greatest common multiple of all possible positive, respectively negative, aesthetic attributions. This ties in with the approach of the classic Greeks to beauty. They tended to use beauty as a kind of container concept, associating it with concepts like harmony, moderation, symmetry and justice. An inscription at the temple of Delphi read: "the most beautiful is the most just". As mentioned in the introduction, at the wedding of Harmonia and Cadmus the Muses sang "that what is beautiful is loved, that what is not beautiful is not loved". Also in common parlance 'beauty' often is used as a container concept. One can say "that was beautiful", not as a specific aesthetic judgment, but as a judgment of general approval, associated with beauty in general.

An example of a very intense positive aesthetic experience is the one experienced by the French writer Stendahl in 1817. In his book *Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio* he describes how he was totally overcome with emotion when confronted with the beauty of Florentine art on a visit to this city. We draw on this example to define a '*Stendahl scale*' with a zero (neutral) position and with positive values running to +7 (extremely beautiful) as well as negative values, running to -7 (extremely ugly). We use -7 and +7 as end points of the scale and not -10 and +10, as this may suggest to people reading scores to interpret a score of +3 as quite ugly, where it should be read as somewhat beautiful. In using a Stendahl-scale all types of aesthetic judgments someone makes on a given entity are concentrated at one point on this Stendahl-scale.

In using this Stendahl-scale one gives a score to one's aesthetic judgment with respect to a given entity. But the impact of a PAE/NAE, and with this the traces this experience leaves in one's memory, depends not primary on this 'degree of beauty or ugliness', but much more on strength of the emotions associated with the experience. One can give a quite high score to an entity on the Stendahl-scale and still have no strong feelings. We, therefore, propose to use a two-dimensional *Stendahl-grid* to score and share with others aesthetic experiences: the horizontal axis of this grid is the above-discussed Stendahl-scale, used to score the 'degree of beauty/ugliness. The vertical axis is used to score the strength of the emotions associated with the experience, running from 0 (no emotion whatsoever) to +7 (extremely strong emotion), see fig 1. No negative scores for emotions: negative emotions associated with NAEs can be scored at the negative side of the horizontal axis (and possible mixed positive and negative feelings can be aggregated to one score; we don't want to make things too complicated).

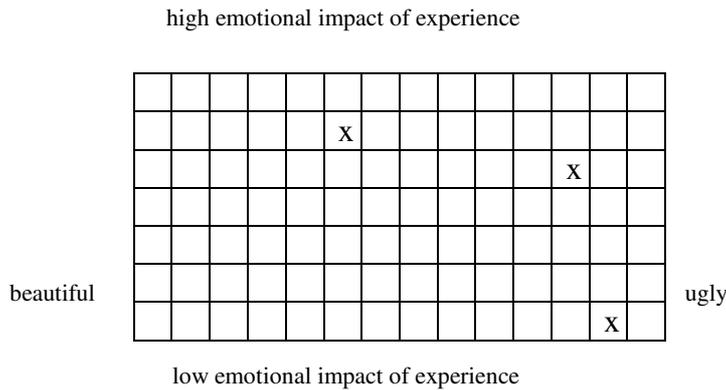


Fig 1. An example of a Stendahl-grid as designed by De Groot in his empirical work (with as examples a fairly insignificant ugly experience, but with a high emotional impact and two beautiful experiences, one with a high and another with a low emotional impact)

7. Aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties of organizations

Entities can have aesthetic properties and non-aesthetic ones. The aesthetic properties of an entity are its properties that can induce an aesthetic experience, positive and/or negative if they are present 'in sufficient strength'. Non-aesthetic properties are – unsurprisingly - properties that cannot induce such an experience. Color and smell are examples of quite general aesthetic properties. The smell of flowers can easily induce a PAE, likewise the smell of spoiled food can induce a NAE (even if not all people will call this an aesthetic experience).

Empirical research by De Groot has found a number of organizational properties or characteristics that can induce positive (as well as negative) aesthetic experiences. These aesthetic properties include

- the nature of the social relations among colleagues (e.g. by being respectful and collegial)
- the nature of leadership
- the nature of cooperation; organic (so non-mechanistic) coherence and consistency of processes and roles
- the success of collective ambition and joint action
- value congruence between the organization as such and its members (which may result in a powerful identification with the organization)
- autonomy and self-realization, developing and wielding competence within a meaningful social context.

Knowledge of which properties of organizations are aesthetic ones can direct further research on organizational beauty. Aesthetic organizational properties can also be used as entry points for conversations by stakeholders on the possible beauty of their organization.

8. *The beautiful organization*

The beautiful organization can now be defined in terms of sustainable positive aesthetic judgments. These judgments can be developed over time by series of positive aesthetic experiences of its stakeholders, possibly reinforced by social processes like sharing PAEs among stakeholders and awareness of positive opinions of significant outsiders.

We use the following definition: *a beautiful organization is an organization whose stakeholders share a sustainable positive aesthetic judgment on it.*

This is not a really unambiguous definition. It is primarily meant to be used as a starting point for research and for conversations among stakeholders on the beauty of their organization. Rarely *all* stakeholders will have a sustainable positive aesthetic judgment on their organization and their positive aesthetic judgments will not have the same scores on the Stendahl-scale. Sometimes it may be more meaningful to confine the argument to only a specific group of stakeholders of the organization, like its members. Also, beauty is not an issue of yes or no, but often rather more or less, both in terms of Stendahl-scores and in terms of the number of stakeholders with positive judgments, compared with those with less positive judgments.

An organization may be considered as beautiful if there is a certain degree of consensus on this between significant stakeholders. We don't see it as an issue for unrelated individuals: organizational beauty is a social phenomenon. Therefore we use the term 'share' in the definition. Finally, a positive aesthetic judgment does not imply that the stakeholders in question judge everything in their organization as beautiful. The judgment whether an organization is beautiful is a holistic one, an overall judgment on the organization, taking both pluses and minuses into account.

The outcome of an organizational process can also be judged as beautiful, but this is typically a transient issue. The beauty of an organizational process itself can be sustainable to the extent that this process itself is sustainable.

The beauty of an inanimate entity, like the beauty of a mountain or a painting, can be permanent, the beauty of a living entity is not. Over time it will decay, the beauty of living entities has to be maintained. So one has to keep working on organizational beauty if one wants to retain it. The research by De Groot has shown that a sense of organizational beauty will fade over time if one stays in the same job in the same organization. One gets used to it and maybe over time a bit bored by even the most beautiful job.

9. *The ugly organization*

Both from a design and a research viewpoint the ugly organization is at least as important as the beautiful organization. Unfortunately it is a very common phenomenon and it is fairly easy to create and develop, probably much easier than a beautiful organization. For instance, abusive leadership can be a strong source of negative aesthetic experiences and, if continuing, can easily lead to sustainable negative aesthetic judgments.

Ugliness is not the same as failure or disappointing or even catastrophic events. Setbacks and crises may mobilize resources and may help organizations to develop and improve. In line with the definition of functional beauty as 'good + X' we can define functional ugliness as 'setback + X'. With 'setback' we mean something that happens or is not like common practice or according to reasonable expectations. Like with functional beauty the question is now what makes a setback ugly. For instance, negative feedback from a superior because of

unsatisfactory performance (in his/her eyes) can in this context be regarded as a setback, but not necessarily as ugly. However, but if the feedback is given in an abusive way, it would probably be experienced as ugly. Also, if the negative feedback would be felt by the subordinate as undeserved, the setback – the negative feedback as such – could also be regarded as ugly by the subordinate. Like beauty, ugliness is in the eye of the beholder.

Organizational ugliness can also give pointers for the design and development of beautiful organizations: what makes an organization ugly, what type of characteristics are important here, so what do we need to avoid in organization design and development to develop a beautiful organization?

We can use here the literature on ugly experiences (like the consequences of bullying, perceived unfairness and burnout). Beauty can lead to positive affective commitment and enhanced performance, while ugliness can lead to employee withdrawal, expressed in e.g. absenteeism, turnover, work alienation, self-medication with alcohol, etc.

10. Designing and developing beautiful organizations

Almost all human artifacts, like buildings, cars and clothing, are designed on the basis of both functional and aesthetic requirements. But organizations are almost only designed on the basis of functional requirements, like effectivity and efficiency. They are designed like most factory buildings, another of the few examples of human artifacts typically only designed on the basis of functional requirements. Our working paper is based on the idea that it has merit to design and develop organizations on the basis of a combination of functional and aesthetic requirements.

However, we think that you cannot design a beautiful organization, like you can design a beautiful building. An organization is a social system; its beauty has to be developed over time. But what one *can* do is to create favorable conditions for the development of organizational beauty. The creation of these conditions refers to changing the organization and its processes as well as to changing its stakeholders by developing their aesthetic sensitivity and awareness of organizational beauty.

There are two basic scenarios for developing beautiful organizations, or for making organizations more beautiful:

- A. An organization development project which has beautifying the organization as prime objective
- B. An organization redesign and change project which is initiated because of functional problems or opportunities, but in which the organization redesigning uses aesthetic requirements next to the usual functional ones.

In scenario A the process of beautifying the organization can follow more or less the following process steps.

- A kick-off 'organizational beauty workshop', resulting in
 - . the development of sensitiveness for organizational beauty and a language to share aesthetic experiences
 - . the articulation of what the relevant stakeholders regard as organizational beauty
 - . the definition of actions to promote the occurrence of PAEs and to avoid NAEs
- The subsequent creation of conditions for PAEs on the basis what has been learnt, decided and planned at the kick-off workshop
- The actual occurrence of PAEs (and the non-occurrence of NAEs)
- The development over time of PAJs.

In scenario B the process follows more or less the usual process steps of organization design and change, but during the project definition phase one organizes an ‘organizational beauty workshop’ like the one discussed above and uses its results in the project definition and in subsequent process steps.

The reasons for wanting to beautify the organization may vary, as said in section 2. An indication for starting scenario A is a situation in which all goes well, but routine reigns, the organization does not ‘swing’, there is little collective ambition, there is little energy. Another indication is that there is some slack in the operations, owners and management allow some room for this ‘gewisses Etwas’; the organization is not regarded as just a money making machine.

The contra-indications include

- a situation in which the organization is not yet ‘good enough’, is not sufficiently able to fulfill its mission. In that case the first thing is to improve operational performance before looking for the ‘gewisses Etwas’ that can make the organization more beautiful
- the absence of slack: one needs some room to develop beauty (which does not mean that developing organizational beauty is always a cost; it can also have material benefits next to the immaterial ones)
- the organization is already so beautiful that stakeholders feel that there is not much room for further improvement. In that case the issue rather is how to maintain this level of beauty.

11. The ‘organizational beauty workshop’

As said in the previous section, in both scenario’s a good way to start a process of beautifying the organization is to organize an ‘organizational beauty workshop’ for relevant stakeholders (or a series of such workshops for large organizations). The objectives of this workshop are given above in section 10. Below the key question at the workshop with respect to content will be discussed. This question is:

“What can make your work process, your product or your department or organization (more) beautiful in your eyes and in those of other relevant stakeholders?”

More specifically, one can ask people questions like the following.

- In your line of work what properties need a product to have to be considered ‘good’? For instance: what is a good lecture, a good council’s address, a good insurance policy, a good dinner? What does a product need to be considered beautiful as well?
- Is it in your opinion possible that your product is not good or good enough but still can be considered as beautiful? (For instance, some people might consider an antique, but not functioning clock still as beautiful because of its appearance, while other people might feel that the function of the clock as an instrument is so vital that it cannot be beautiful if it does not work well; people thinking otherwise are probably not really interested in clocks).
- In your work did you have positive or negative aesthetic experiences, triggered by your work process, your output or your organization or organizational unit? If so, can you describe the experience and the events that triggered these experiences? What were the characteristics of these events? What were the after effects (if any) of these experiences? Did they influence your image of the organization in question? If so, did

this have an influence on your relation with the organization (commitment or withdrawal)?

It will probably prove that respondents will have difficulties in formulating aesthetic requirements for work related entities, but that they are quite prepared to put effort in finding answers to such questions. For many people the concept of beautiful organizations is an intriguing and appealing concept. On the basis of the answers to these questions one can develop criteria for assessing the beauty of work processes, products and institutions for various lines of work.

The answers to the above given questions will make it possible to analyze what conditions for positive aesthetic experiences will be makeable, in other words, what one intentionally can do to beautify present output, processes or systems or to design and realize beautiful output, processes or systems from scratch.

12. Conclusion

Organizations are extremely important social institutions, both for society and for individuals. Their functioning has a very powerful impact on their members as well as on other stakeholders, including the people using their products and services. Making them more beautiful can contribute significantly to the quality of working life of their members as well as the quality of their life in general and also to the quality of life of other stakeholders. However, in practice the concept of the beautiful organization is difficult to operationalize. This working paper presents a conceptual framework that can support the stakeholders of an organization to make their organization more beautiful as well as researchers to study this important and fascinating phenomenon.

This framework is still in development. We will be happy with any comments.

Eindhoven, 14 July 2014

Joan van Aken
Steven de Groot
Mathieu Weggeman