

## **Open spaces, closed boundaries: transparent workspaces as clerical female ghettos**

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**Abstract:** This research attempts to explore the link between organisational space and gender power relations. Drawing on extensive research conducted at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this paper demonstrates three spatial mechanisms, which construct and reconstruct a docile female body and a gendered identity:

- 'anonymisation' of space
- disabling the ability to control space
- subjugation of employees to surveillance.

By applying theories of feminist geography, this paper explores how planning and design is not gender-neutral, but rather anchored in power relations, which are deeply camouflaged. Furthermore, it illustrates that spatial arrangements render the body a site of control and organisational impression management.

**Keywords:** space; gender; organisational aesthetics; embodiment; panopticon; docile body; identity regulation; emotions; subjugation.

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### **1 Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the spatial mechanisms, which construct and reconstruct a docile female body and a gendered identity. More specifically, by exemplifying how organisational aesthetics is experienced and interpreted by female workers in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this paper illustrates how the body is colonised and used as a site of control and organisational impression management. This study focuses on the

open-office design style and aims at highlighting the fact that architectural decisions are rarely gender-neutral.

Designing workplaces as open spaces has been customary in many organisations for several decades, though the extent of ‘openness’ is varying from ‘bürolandschaft’ to cubicles, and the opinions regarding the effects of this design on interactions, emotions and organisational effectiveness differ greatly. Most of the research on this issue is functional-orientated and usually focuses on its impact on privacy, distance from windows and natural light, auditory disturbances, feelings of threat to territoriality and the difficulties that employees experience in such spaces (Sundstrom and Sundstrom, 1986; Ayoko and Härtel, 2003).

Nevertheless, organisations continue to design cubicles due to their low cost and without taking into account the wider implications of this choice, and the dominant logic in allotting location is according to a hierarchical order, so that senior employees are located nearby the windows and in closed rooms, and junior employees are located in the centre in open and visible cubicles. Even though in most organisations labour division is still gender biased, most of the researchers did not refer to the implications of the open-space design on gender relations.

Critical research in the field of organisational aesthetics has long acknowledged the interrelations between space and power and the ways in which architectural decisions are used in processes of identity regulation (Gagliardi, 1996; Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Dale and Burrell, 2008). Nevertheless, the power of aesthetics on gender identity has usually been implied by these researchers, but has not been their main focus.

Moreover, despite the richness of gender research in organisations and the acknowledgment that gendered identities are socially constructed, *inter alia*, through discourse, language and space, architecture and design were not regarded as important actors in the construction of gender identities and not enough attention has been paid to the role of organisational space in constructing gendered identities (for exceptions see Kanter, 1977; Tyler and Cohen, 2010). Examining organisational space from a critical perspective allows the researcher to study space as a significant factor in social relations and in the strengthening of specific groups and the weakening of others (Puwar, 2004; Hancock and Tyler, 2007).

This paper examines the multi-dimensional power of space and organisational aesthetics in constructing gender identities, and to expose its transparency in modern management and planning, I shall hereby elaborate its forms, its implications and the ways in which it is experienced as gendered by its users. Drawing on a larger project conducted at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IMFA), this paper seeks to contribute to the current literature in two ways: first, it expands existing research regarding the emotional effects of space by focusing on emotions and experiences related to gender. Second, the paper also demonstrates the gendered embodiment of aesthetic discipline and the ways in which the body is subordinated to the organisational aesthetic regime.

The paper is structured as follows: It begins with an overview of the literature on gender and space. Then, the methodology is outlined, followed by the presentation of a number of discursive and aesthetic mechanisms that create and reinforce gender segregation in the IMFA. These mechanisms include three modes of control: First, the manner in which the new Ministry’s space is perceived by its occupants, men and women alike, as a masculine space is addressed. Second, an examination of the significance as regards gender of organising the space into open-plan areas and how women employees feel within those areas is presented. In the same context, the emotions evoked in women employees, who experience the spatial setting as a ‘disciplining site’ of their femaleness, are highlighted. Finally, the paper addresses the bodily physical embodiment of those feelings and the creation of a ‘docile body’. The paper concludes by examining the way in which directives towards a ‘masculine aesthetic’ were disrupted by the women employees, who created alternative ‘maternal’ or ‘feminine aesthetics’.

## 2 Space and gender

In the field of organisational research, the past two decades have seen a growing interest in issues producing types of know-how that differ from those previously accepted in positivist organisational research. Thus, for instance, there has been increased interest in emotions in organisations (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987, 1989; Fineman, 1993, 2000, 2007; Ashkanasy et al., 2000) in organisational culture (Kunda, 1992; Hatch, 1993; Alvesson, 2002) and in organisational aesthetics (Berg and Kreiner, 1990; Gagliardi, 1990; Strati, 1999; Linstead and Hopfl, 2000; Carr and Hancock, 2009). These fields allow researchers access to processes of interpretation and social construction, thus offering an opportunity also to investigate the unmanaged aspects in organisations and not only those that are formal and managed (Gabriel, 1995). Nevertheless, each of these fields grew independently of one another, and there are only a few studies that link these different areas of knowledge.

Despite a recognition that the aesthetic experience is mediated by the emotions people experience in their encounter with the physical environment, in the field of organisational aesthetics only few studies exist that look into the emotional impact of aesthetic artefacts on employees. For instance, Bitner (1992) suggests examining the emotions (whether positive or negative) experienced by people towards the design of service organisations, while Wasserman et al. (2000) suggest examining a broader range of emotions towards different design styles. Further, Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz (2004) demonstrate the role of emotional responses towards organisational artefacts in sense-making processes in organisations. Elsbach (2003, 2004) studies the sense of threat experienced by people when the design of their work place does not reflect their distinctiveness, and Hancock and Tyler (2007) analyse the 'aesthetics economy' according to Hochschild's 'management of emotions' (Hochschild, 1983). However, the three-way connection between aesthetics, emotion and gender has rarely been much investigated, and it is for that reason that this paper examines the gendering and gendered experience of organisational aesthetics.

Are there certain shapes that are experienced as feminine or masculine? The existence of feminine or masculine architecture is called into doubt, and the dichotomous concepts of femininity and masculinity are not considered acceptable nowadays (Stratigakos, 2001). Nevertheless, both among feminist researchers (e.g., Weisman, 1992; Rose, 1993) and in everyday practise, certain aesthetic markers are commonly attributed with either male or female characteristics. For example, vertical high buildings are viewed by both architects and in the general, public discourse as phallic symbols, and linear and angular lines are considered to be an expression of western male thought. On the other hand, rounder, softer lines are often seen as more feminine in character. In general, these widespread views are further reinforced by architects, designers and other professionals involved in practical aspects of building, who tend to express themselves publicly in this manner when explaining their architectural choices to the general public. These images are also reinforced and reconstructed by films, books and other cultural means (see Panayiotou and Kafiris, 2010).

Gender identity, like other social identities, arises out of such discourses and social interactions that perpetuate the gendered self. People learn their gender identity roles from formal and informal socialisation processes, and they internalise gender order not as a symmetrical dichotomy but as a hierarchical gender identity construction, in which the male identity is considered superior to the female (Kanter, 1977; Hochschild, 1983; Acker, 1990).

Many and varied actions mark out gender, and these are influenced by social power relationships, interests and stereotypes. According to feminist geographers, space is an

important means of expressing hierarchical and patriarchal relationships, and it serves to reconstruct gender-based relations (Massey, 1994; Peet, 1998). Space should be seen, according to these researchers, as a product of social construction, and, in the same way, as syntax in language, spatial setting reflect and educate towards power-based relationships between the sexes, social classes and ethnic or racial origins. In effect, space becomes a 'silent language' representing the hidden dimension of human action (Bourdieu, 1979).

Likewise, in the organisational context, organisational aesthetics and the organisation of the daily workspace constitute part of that same system of social and symbolic images that reflect all the discriminatory and stereotypical practical aspects of social order. According to feminist researchers (Kanter, 1977; Weisman, 1992), the organising of the organisational space contains many masculine elements that render women invisible and unequal. Organisational aesthetics and the organising of the everyday workplace offer us a particularly interesting means of examining the construction of gender identity since they are considered neutral and transparent and are taken for granted, so that they are not only examined less in the context of gender, but generally do not figure at all in the consciousness of planners (the latter for the most part being men). Occupation, segregation and exclusion are conceptualised on the street and in residential neighbourhoods, in buildings and parts of buildings, and they are institutionalised by zoning laws, architecture and quasi-conventional usage. The creation of space depends on decisions based on questions of what should and should not be seen, what is 'orderly' and what is not and what should appear attractive and what merely functional (Zukin, 2000). These are perpetuated through the translation of such basic premises into a visible and practical spatial language designed for everyday use. Employing the tools of feminist geography might assist us in understanding the spatial exclusions created in buildings designated as workplaces (Wekerle et al., 1980; Massey, 1994; Rose, 1993) since it seeks to expose ways in which women are excluded from urban space and from architectural planning processes. For instance, feminist urban geography addresses the separation of the public space devoted to paid work as distinct from the private space devoted to home and family. The premise is that women's partial participation in public areas is translated into women's employment patterns, regional inequality and other issues related to the everyday life of women and changes in the developing world (Mackenzie, 1989; Peet, 1998; Sandercock, 1998; Fenster, 2004).

In masculine (or patriarchal) societies, architects' personal and professional dispositions, alongside their clients' demands, lead to gender demarcations through aesthetics and design (Rose, 1984, 1993). In his early study of the Kabyle house, Bourdieu (1979) stressed the role of aesthetical markers that tangibly distinguish between feminine and masculine parts of the home. A stranger to the house does not need to be told where he is allowed to go and which zones are restricted and protect women from outsiders' eyes (see also Fenster, 2004). In organisational contexts, historical studies have documented instances of spatially gendered segregation in organisational buildings from which women were traditionally excluded (Kanter, 1977; Weisman, 1992). The main aesthetic practise through which this type of gender segregation was implemented was zoning, namely, the physical separation of men and women to different parts of the building or separate entrances (Dale and Burrell, 2008). With the gradual disappearance of gendered zoning in modern organisations, the role of aesthetics and design in reproducing gender hierarchies has become less visible and has, therefore, received little scholarly attention.

Spatial gender segregation, whether a by-product of intent and consciousness or merely a result of force of habit, is characteristic of many workplaces. Even where gender-based

segregation in the workplace is intentional, as in cases of separate entrances and separate entry times to the organisation, as described by Crompton and Jones (see Baldry, 1999), or where unintentional and based mainly on occupational segregation that distinguishes between work areas for ‘men’s jobs’ and those for ‘women’s jobs’ – whichever the case, spatial segregation still manages to create a class stratification system that excludes women from the primary sources of knowledge. The fact that in modern western society such separation is not openly declared, but apparently invisible, strengthens it further by emphasising the gap in status arising between men in senior positions and women in junior positions (Spain, 1992), making any resistance harder (and rarer).

### **3 Methodology**

Studies of organisational aesthetics are commonly grounded in qualitative analyses of one or more case studies (Gagliardi, 1990; Yanow, 1995; Strati and Trento, 2006) and employ an interpretative-hermeneutic approach, which is considered best suited to aesthetic research due to the richness of the phenomenon being explored. This research follows this pattern and is anchored in a well-established tradition in organisational studies, which aims at formulating a grounded theory based on empirical evidence (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000).

A single case study, often seen as adequate for the purpose of generating theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Siggelkow, 2007), allows for the juxtaposition of the researcher’s interpretations of the space with those of the various organisational participants: workers, managers, clients and designers (Stake, 1994; Yanow, 2006, 2009).

### **4 The case study**

Foreign Affairs ministries are interesting sites for gender research due to their clearly separate distinction between outwardly directed public and representative sections and the inward orientation of the everyday ‘in-house’ sections. Following the Kabyle house of Bourdieu (1979), such a separation between front-stage and back-stage (Goffman, 1959) might be relevant to demarcate characteristics of ‘masculine zones’ and ‘feminine zones’ and their inherent aesthetic symbols.

Moreover, like its counterparts around the world, the IMFA is among the most prestigious and highly professionalised of Israel’s governmental departments. Nevertheless, it is a highly gendered organisation: while much of the Ministry’s work is conducted outside of Israel (usually by male diplomats), more than half of its workers (usually women in the administrative sector) are located in the country, providing head office services for those overseas. The reason for such a gendered division is primarily due to the unique demands of a diplomatic career, requiring long-term residence in different countries. In Israel, men make up 77% of the diplomatic corps (e.g., in the year 2010, of 28 cadets, there were only nine women). Moreover, even among the diplomatic corps, women serve in lower ranks. The administrative sector comprises 64% women, mostly in clerical jobs. The result is that the diplomatic positions are filled mostly by men, and the administrative sector predominantly by women.

The relocation of the IMFA from a kibbutz-like compound to a high-end building took place in 2002 and was accompanied by tenacious resistance, mostly attributable to aesthetic

choices that sharpened the divisions between the diplomatic corps and the administrative sector. Even though the building was awarded a prestigious AIA (American Institute of Architects) prize and was declared to be “one of ten most beautiful buildings in the world in 2004” (Figure 1), employees’ resistance remained a bone of contention in a prolonged labour dispute (for further details on these attempts at resistance, see (Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011).

**Figure 1** The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs from indoors and outdoors



Source: Kolker, Kolker, Epstein Architects Ltd. Used by permission

## 5 Data collection

The initial entrance into the research field followed a vigorous public debate regarding the new premises and the employees’ refusal to relocate into a building, which was defined by them as “unsuitable to the relatively egalitarian organisational culture” of the IMFA. Reviewing local newspapers, as well as two books published by the architects, allowed me a glimpse into the architectural and managerial vision and a better understanding of the deliberate intentions in the design mission. Interviews with the architects and managers who were involved in the planning of the building allowed me to juxtapose these various sources and so obtain a clearer understanding of what is named by Lefebvre (1991) as ‘the conceived space’, the conceptualisation of space with regard to the desired identity that the space is meant to project.

The *second* stage of data collection involved writing a field diary based on 20 observations each lasting 30–60 min, which were held at various sites in the building, especially in the cubicles area where most women are located. Observations were aimed at detecting movement patterns, architectural vocabulary (colours, texture and style), bodily gestures and social interactions. Moreover, based on Yanow’s (1995) insights, the researcher’s documentation regarding her own feelings, responses to the built space, behaviour and bodily gestures, which are corroborated with other empirical sources (such as observation, documents and interviews), are highly important in space studies. Therefore, special emphasis was placed on the field diary to better understand my own experiences and how it might affect my analysis (for the relevance of such data in aesthetic research, see Strati, 1999; Yanow, 2006, 2009).

In the *third* stage, an additional 45 interviews were held with users (managers and employees) both men and women from all hierarchical positions. These interviewees were sampled randomly according to the ‘snowball’ method (Lindolf, 1995), while emphasising an equal representation of both sexes and of various spatial experiences. For example, I made

sure that I was sampling employees from all floors and from all kind of offices (cubicles, shared rooms, private rooms, with and without windows etc.)

Most of the interviews were conducted from 2003–2007 and were aimed at obtaining users' accounts of their aesthetic surroundings and their interpretation of them (namely, the 'lived space' of Lefebvre). The questions were relatively open, asking the employees about their thoughts and feelings regarding the new building. For example, "What do you think about the new building and how do you feel in it?", "How comfortable do you feel in the new building?", "Where do you feel more comfortable and where less? Why?", "Please describe to me how you would put your feelings here into a drawing? Which colours would you use? Which shapes?" and so on.

In the first phase, interviews were not focused on gender differences and were relatively open-structured, but after the first few interviews, I became aware that such attributions were made by the users themselves. Interviewees expressed emotions regarding their own work space, which were attributed to gender differences. I decided, therefore, to ask specific questions at the end of the interview regarding gender, such as: "Who do you think planned the interior design – a woman or a man?"; "Is this a masculine or a feminine design? Why?"; "How would a woman [or man – depending on the interviewee's answer] design it differently?".

## 6 Data analysis

According to the hermeneutic reading used in critical organisational studies, I examined the data I had from all these above-mentioned sources to identify repetitive patterns and to decipher hidden meanings (Strauss, 1987; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The main advantage of this method is that it provides a rich description that enables the researcher to reach broader theoretical conclusions from a specific experience.

The analysis of these interviews follows the methodological process, which was put forward by Strauss and Corbin (see Strauss, 1987) and the stages of 'open coding' (the identification of general central themes), 'axial coding' (coding according to the axes of the analysis based on the initial characteristics identified in the first stage) and 'selective coding' (integrating data with categories while re-examining them and organising the data into a theoretical structure through these categories). For example, juxtaposing all data collected revealed linkages made by users between the design style and gender (e.g., between formal style and masculinity), as well as between emotions and bodily gestures (e.g., feelings of discomfort and the way they feel they have to sit) – These linkages will be elaborated in the next section. Furthermore, identifying the similarities between the interpretations offered by various users (as well as myself) made it possible to validate the connection between the design style and the gendered experience.

Such a comparison was carried out at a number of levels and through a number of stages using the collected data. *First*, after an initial reading of the interviews, central categories and themes were identified to understand better the attributions and interpretations made by the users themselves. After gaining an overall impression, I read the interviews several more times to look for repetitive themes (such as neutrality, colourless, formality, alienation, hierarchy and so on). As previously mentioned, having noticed after the first few interviews that gender attributes were being given to the design style chosen, I put more emphasis on this issue, and some interviews were repeated to clarify these interpretations in a more detailed manner.

This enabled me to turn to the *second stage* where more specific attention was given to the embodiment of the organisational aesthetics, namely, comparing material collected in the field diary with interviews. This data were sorted into several categories:

- 1 bodily gestures and spatial habits, especially in cubicles (such as sitting with crossed legs, leaning on tables, degree of mobility within the space and so on)
- 2 spatial artefacts and material accessories that were put by female employees in their room/cubicle (such as pictures, ornaments and so on)
- 3 my own physiological experiences and emotions, to identify the spaces I avoided and those that appealed to me.

Following Yanow (2006), I relied on my own corporeal and affective responses as a proxy for others' interpretations in formulating provisional inferences about how buildings convey meaning, but at the same time, I cross-referenced them with other sources of evidence.

In the *third* and final stage, I compared all data from the various sources to identify similarities and differences between them. The comparison showed that the gendered interpretation was not intended but still experienced by most of the interviewees (men and women) as well as by myself (as a woman?). It also showed that interviewees connect specific spatial symbols with masculinity and other with femininity (Appendix A) even though such a categorisation is rarely so rigid. Moreover, these emotional and cognitive attributes have implications for the spatial interpretations and on the bodily responses, as I shall demonstrate in the next section.

## **7 Findings: control and space – gender implications**

The relocation of the IMFA to a new building was from the start accompanied by architectural and administrative decisions, which highlighted dimensions of hierarchy, status and gaps between the administrative and diplomatic sectors. The separation between sectors and different levels of status was multi-dimensional and was reflected in various aesthetic forms: firstly, the ministerial and senior managers' building was separated from the general employees' building. This distinction is based on a notable aesthetic difference between the ministerial building and the employees' building (as seen in the standard of the finish, materials used and design styles and forms). Thus, the general employees' building was designed in an almost perfunctory, repetitive style, whereas the Ministry building boasts attractive and unusual design elements (Figure 2). Second, the spacious and more prestigious upper floors house diplomatic departments, while the administrative sector is located on the more crowded lower floors. Third, the size and nature of the rooms were determined according to rank so that typically managers and diplomats (above a certain rank) were allocated large, enclosed rooms, while average workers were placed in open-plan cubicles. Finally, the organisation's management decided to allocate eligibility for parking spaces in the building's underground parking lot on the basis of rank and seniority, creating another form of separation between senior management and diplomats and the administrative sector. (For additional figures, see the Ministry's Hebrew website: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFAHeb/General+info/About+us/Mfa+building+pictures.htm>).

**Figure 2** Aesthetic differences between the three buildings

*Source:* Kolker, Kolker, Epstein Architects Ltd. Used by permission

Each of these architectural decisions had far-reaching implications not only on the workers' emotions in terms of the threat to their personal status but also in terms of bodily aesthetics and the way in which employees felt about their physical presence in the new building.

The many above-described spatial divisions, ostensibly designed with the primary aim of formalising relative working relations within the organisation, produced a spatial segregation, which may appear neutral from the gender point of view. But in effect, many employees interpreted those aesthetic decisions as increasing not only gaps in status but also the gender gap. Angela [a pseudonym is used for all interviewees], a woman working in one of the administrative departments, put it like this:

“In the previous premises we had identical offices – the same size, the same shape and even the same water leaks. But as soon as we moved here the message we received was: female clerical staff are less important than diplomats you need to understand, it's not that you come to work here and are told up front, “You are a woman, you will spend all your life in a hut, and you are a man so you will be given a palace”. No, it's not like that, but that is actually the end result because the men who are in these miserable little cubicles do not stay here forever. They are usually young people who have just begun working at the office and are still in junior positions, but after one or two jobs they are out of here. Those who stay forever in these hutches are the female clerical staff.”

As is clear from the above quotation, the zoning does not set out in advance to be gender based, but it is presented as a neutral decision apparently connected to other issue altogether – that of rank; yet the actual result is a spatial segregation that is experienced as gendered in nature (and which did not exist in the previous premises). On the face of it, it may seem that any woman or man can improve her or his working conditions through promotion, but since status and gender are inter-related and since the promotion track at the Ministry is largely in the diplomatic sector, this option is not always realistic for everyone, and more specifically for many women. It is true that in many organisations, spatial division is likewise arranged according to status, but in the present case, because the division of work is gendered to begin with, the result was a segregated space that places many women in spaces, which are inferior in terms of size, aesthetics and the possibility of privacy.

The above quotation and other similar employee statements demonstrate that decisions based on architectural-aesthetic logic and bureaucratic-budgetary logic led in practise to the creation of an aesthetic mechanism that further constructs and replicates the ‘glass ceiling’, which differentiates and distinguishes between the core professional workers, the majority of whom are men and the peripheral bureaucratic administration, composed primarily of

women. Where secretaries for the most part share a common open space, surrounded by fewer walls and much more exposed to the surveillant gaze, many men work in large, enclosed and pleasanter spaces, behind closed doors.

Placing junior female staff in open-plan cubicles also has a wider symbolic significance related to their status in the organisation and their ability to control their destiny on a more general level. The concentration of large numbers of women in open floor plans and open spaces formed a kind of ‘clerical ghetto’ of women that would seem more typical of early 20th century organisations, where clerical work underwent a process of routinisation and standardisation in the spirit of Taylorism. Placing women in open-plan spaces of this kind excludes them from the core of the organisation by means of a number of principal mechanisms, including rendering them invisible by concentrating them into a single anonymous space, negation of the ability to control the conditions of their environment and visually subjugating them to anyone passing by.

The following three sections provide a breakdown of these mechanisms, with demonstrations of their relevance to gendering the workplace.

## **8 Anonymous open-plan space and rendering (female) employees invisible**

In many organisations, open-plan work spaces are designed in a neutral, repetitive and formulaic way, so as to encourage and promote business-like and practical values, efficiency and standardisation. The communal work environment, with dozens of workers sharing a common space, was popularised with the growth of the white-collar work market and the rise of Taylorism, which sought to engineer clerical work and integrate it into a production-line work style. Despite innovative design developments and the recognition of the alienation created by such spaces, many organisations still continue to favour such an anonymous and communal open-plan style. For instance, American television host Conan O’Brien paid a visit to Intel’s Santa Clara, CA headquarters for an episode of his popular talk show and openly mocked the uniform open-plan cubicle layout, which is not only painted in all-over grey but, to his mind, resembles a parking lot with no difference at all between one cubicle and the next (see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMpXbNI74\\_U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMpXbNI74_U)).

Observation of the cubicle layout at the IMFA shows similar results: long, neat, linear network corridors, cubicle partitions clad on the inside in grey felt; L-shaped, beech-veneer, processed wooden desks; beige carpet; simple, standard, grey office chairs of the kind available from any office supplies store; and so forth. According to the architect, this choice of neutral style was meant to represent restraint and prestige, efficiency and practicality and a harmonious uniformity – values which he feels underline the professional aspects of the work of diplomats. I argue that such aesthetic choices should be seen not only as the reflection of an ideology that emphasises order, logic and a mirroring of rational metaphor in organisational and bureaucratic thought (Guillén, 1997), but should also be considered as evidence of gendered symbolism. The advanced building techniques emphasised in the architects’ discourse, the sharp angles of the buildings, the straight, simple, grid-like corridors, the utilitarian planning of spaces and the neutral colours – all of these are signs of an ideology that prioritises the cultivated and utilitarian over the natural or irrational, and venerates values of restraint and power; hence these symbols are not neutral from a gender

viewpoint, nor are they experienced as such by the occupants of those spaces. Pamela, an employee in the administrative sector, commented:

“The design here is so neutral that quite simply no-one sees you, you become invisible, like air. People talk next to you as though you were not even there. I am supposed to pretend that I don’t hear, as though I don’t know what is being talked about. Sometimes it is exhausting... I was sick for three weeks and no-one noticed. It doesn’t surprise me – it is connected with the general practical atmosphere here... hence it is very clear that it was designed by a man. No woman would encourage this kind of alienation, this lack of communication between people. It verges on inhumanity personality is erased in favor of the harmonious uniformity of the architects and managers who wanted efficiency. That comes from a man, not a woman”.

As Elsbach’s (2003) found Pamela’s harsh feelings about the formal, prestigious design of the building derive from the removal of elements that might distinguish between the individuals occupying the cubicles, but unlike Elsbach, the findings of this study indicate that such feelings are gender based. Pamela interprets the repression of personality that she experiences as male oppression. She is ‘invisible’, her presence makes no difference and the knowledge that she acquires from incidental conversations held next to her is of no use to her. According to Pamela, all of these stem from an architectural choice that could not have originated from a woman. In other words, in her emotional experience, the impersonal workspace of modern organisations is gendered.

Similar findings arose during the collection of data, when I found that all the subjects interviewed (with only one exception and including the male subjects) attributed male characteristics to the design style. This consensus shows that aesthetics and its interpretation are not only mediated by emotions, which are almost universally agreed, but are embedded in a symbolism, which starts off by being gendered. Cold, artificial materials, efficient and business-like design, angular lines, neutral, ineffectual colours, repetitiveness and formulaic design shapes – all are experienced by the majority of people as cold, masculine design.

According to this logic, open-plan work areas that are designed anonymously, in a standardised, unimaginative way, are a means of creating a transparent work force where workers in open cubicles are neither seen nor heard. The spatial distribution of workers on the basis of status reconstructs the inferior status of the female clerical staff and even restricts their access to knowledge, power sources and important information since they are expected not to hear conversations taking place around them that overlook their presence. The obedience needed in public areas to keep secrets contributes to the workers’ inability to convert valuable knowledge into human capital that might advance or improve their status. Their ability to control discussions held in their space and the information they can convey in the open-plan space is limited (as distinct from a manager sitting in his private room, for whom it is easy to keep to himself any relevant information that might benefit him); the practical result of this situation for such employees could be impaired access to knowledge and prejudice to their advancement.

### *8.1 Negation of the ability to control the conditions of the environment*

In many organisations, the size of the physical space allocated to each employee and the quality of the materials used in that workspace serve as a major status symbol. Entitlement to privacy, proximity to a window and natural light, the ability to control air conditioning and lighting, degree of noise, disturbance and visual ambience in the open-plan area all

these have been covered extensively in the literature (Sundstrom et al., 1982; Sundstrom and Sundstrom, 1986), but there has been little in-depth focus on the significance of such a division of workspace in terms of gender.

Design in the open-plan workspace supports the inferior status of secretaries and withholds from them the ability to control their working conditions in such a way that it even damages relationships between them. Rachel, an employee in administration, reported:

“You need to understand, these areas are mainly for women, and because everything is open a dynamic is created between them that is not always pleasant. For example, there is a middle aged woman here who is having hot flashes. She wants to have air conditioning on all the time, while other women are freezing. On the one hand one can understand her – you have to feel sorry for her because there is nothing she can do when she feels hot and she is not sitting with her own private air conditioner – but on the other hand the others start to shout at her, they are angry and even resentful. So the resulting atmosphere is not simple and makes it difficult to work here ... and also our private phone conversations with our homes– everyone can hear, everyone is involved in what is happening to you at home, with the children and the house, and it makes for gossip, which can sometimes be quite malicious.”

The design of open-plan work spaces is meant to enhance communications and create closeness and intimacy, but as often happens in open workspaces, instead of empowering the women occupants, aggression and hostility are created between them that further add to their oppression and inferior status. The lack of any private territory and the inability to control the desired temperature increase their sense of distress and helplessness in respect of the environment and the employees become vulnerable to social surveillance, which is paradoxically both originating from and aimed at themselves. The physically crowded conditions also impose mental and physical constraint so that the women minimise their presence in the space as far as possible and their voice is silenced.

Moreover, the above statement shows us that the organisational space is perceived as monolithic, standardised and suited to an apparently homogeneous body placed in the open-plan workspace. The premise that the same temperature is needed for all employees might appear to be neutral from a gender point of view, but as is clear from Rachel’s statement, it fails to take into account the physiology of the female body and assumes a single, universal body. This requirement for physiological uniformity represents a type of bio-power, since it exercises power over the body, imposing on it practises adopted for a single, neutral collective. The body of the middle-aged woman becomes visible in this uniform space and creates a sense of discomfort both for her and for those around her, emphasising ‘incompatibility’ and reinforcing inferiority by means of a troublesome physical experience.

The inability to control the temperature and the sense of helplessness experienced by many women in their physical environment are also highlighted by the design of the cubicle itself, and in particular, the inclusion of furniture fixed in such a way that it is impossible to move or adapt it to the individual employee’s needs. This is how Yolanda described it:

“You can’t move a single millimeter here. Everything is bolted to the floor and predetermined for you. You are probably meant to think in a similarly inflexible way. You have to sit with your back to the entrance, no matter how you move things around, nothing can change that. I don’t understand why they had to make it so humiliating. Can you understand what it means to sit with your back to the entrance in such a way that you are unable to move one centimeter from your screen? One time I became so angry that I simply pulled the cables out from the wall by force. I don’t really know what I did, but I damaged something, so I called a techni-

cian and at least I managed to move the chair just a little, so that I wouldn't be like a monkey in a zoo with people throwing bananas at it ... I also bump into things frequently because it's all so immovable and small, so every movement I make has become carefully thought out and cautious. That is hard, because as you see, I'm not such a small person. I'm even careful not to stretch so that I won't bang my head. This minimalism is really irritating, it's hard to describe just how much, but there's no-one we can talk to about it."

Fixing the furniture to the floor and confining workers into such a small, cramped place are practises associated with women's jobs, such as supermarket cashiers, and the restrictions on freedom of movement within the cubicle reflect the subjugated status of the women's positions, especially the secretarial staff. In contrast to these women, most men of equivalent status in the same sector are mobile (usually outside the organisation's premises or employed in maintenance and security jobs, which necessitate moving around within the organisational space).

Yolanda's above statement also illustrates that the space allocated to the women workers is narrow and designed primarily for one specific body size, with the result that any physical deviation from that size limit further increases physical and mental discomfort. My observations of the organisation, in which I focused on the physical practises of workers in open-plan cubicles, corroborate this premise. When collecting data for this study, I noticed that I myself was always trying to avoid long days of interviews with secretaries in the cubicles. In the field diary, I wrote: "I cannot move in these small 'offices', "There is no place for the two of us here", and indeed my impression reinforces Yolanda's description regarding the difficulty of loosening up and being relaxed in the cubicles, of the closeness of the furniture and of the fact of its being fixed to the floor, which imposes further limitations on physical practises.

Such aesthetic decisions are not gender-neutral since they are based on a universal standard for the appropriate body, according to which the 'docile body' (Bordo, 1993) is designed and constructed. Such technologies are aimed at regulating the body and its size within a space and create a demonstrably uncomfortable mental experience for anyone with body measurements that do not conform. Furthermore, the transition to the new building also encompassed an updated dress code and employees were asked to attend workshops to learn how to conduct themselves in their cubicles (with reference to speech, strength and tone of voice, dress and more). Thus, the body was obviously a focus of deliberate regulation and control, in such a manner that bodily aesthetics would become part of the new organisational aesthetics. The new diplomatic body, as required by the organisation's managers, is in effect a body without organ, one that transmits values of restraint, reduction and invisibility. On the assumption that the open-plan spaces are occupied primarily by women, this requirement becomes part of the mechanism that perpetuates women's status in work organisations.

## *8.2 Visual subjugation to anyone passing by*

As mentioned earlier, work in cubicles is always associated with the negation of the employee's privacy, exposing the individual as it does to the surveillant gaze of anyone passing by and ensuring that he or she is constantly subjected to surveillance and control. The panoptic gaze directed towards workers in open-plan spaces has been the subject of

many other studies, but it is not usually examined from the gender angle, as highlighted by Debra:

“This type of design allows for no privacy. Anyone passing by sees even the smallest fault. Everyone can see exactly what you are doing and even what you want. You can never, not even for one moment, straighten your underwear or just stare into space, and worst of all you are sitting with your back to the door, and there is a carpet, so you don’t even hear footsteps approaching and anyone can look in on you, like some pervert peering inside your home ...”

In Debra’s experience, her body is violated by looks that can come from any quarter or any person. The body in this open space is not only exposed to the panoptic gaze of all passers-by, but it is experienced by Debra as a sexual object, in a similar way to a body being watched by a pervert. Perhaps Debra’s association is exceptional and not typical of the majority, but the interviews did indicate that the difficult reality of being constantly under inspection was stronger among the women interviewees than among the men and this could be the result of a deeper internalisation of submissiveness among women. This is how Maria, from the Protocol and Official Guests Bureau, described the changes in her physical surroundings:

“You may laugh, but since we moved here I am much more conscious of how I behave, dress and sit. Without a doubt I dress much better today. I even went on a diet once I realized that I was being watched all the time. So I benefited from it and I actually think it’s good for us to have a better appearance. It wouldn’t hurt anyone here and it is appropriate to an organisation of this kind ... I even fix my make-up more often during the day and try to sit well. You won’t catch me slouching.”

Women learn to discipline their bodies at a young age and the female body becomes an object that is embedded in their self-awareness; but gender identity and gendered performance – such as walking, sitting, behaviour and dress – are not acquired only through socialisation but are part of a physical disciplining and process of subjugation whereby the ‘appropriate body’ must be designed according to pre-determined standards. Workplaces in general, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in particular, are fascinating sites to examine such disciplining processes since body disciplining is directly linked to professionalism. Maria’s statement, and others like it that my interviews elicited, demonstrated that many women employees at the IMFA discipline their physical self for the sake of professionalism and internalise the panoptic gaze of men while judging themselves according to organisational expectations.

Again, internalisation of the surveillance of the body was achieved by associating bodily aesthetics with the aesthetic of the new workplace by means of workshops aimed at clarifying organisational expectations as to the required mode of speech (workers are expected to speak quietly, without getting excited), style of sitting (“I am expected to sit upright and well, not slouch over the desk even if I am tired”), appropriate dress (“I dress better now than previously because I am constantly on view”) and full control of the body (“I cannot straighten my underwear, not even for one moment”).

The bodies of women who are constantly under scrutiny function as a direct focus of social control, a suitable subject for taming, as influencing and influenced by social images relating to femininity and the ‘correct’ way of sitting. The way in which the employee submits to the aesthetic discipline imposed on her as a result of her exposure to the male gaze indicates an organisational mechanism designed to create a gender identity that is reconstructed and perpetuated by self-disciplining measures and the internalisation of the male gaze.

It is unclear whether this results directly from surveillance in the open-plan space or not, but my observations indicate that the internalisation of the male gaze produced a ‘maternal

aesthetic' in most of the secretaries' cubicles. In contrast to the original managerial decision that the design of the open spaces should be uniform and impersonal, many of the women displayed pictures and drawings done by their children in their offices.

Observations in the building made it clear that there is a marked difference between the decorations selected by most men for their offices (whether separate rooms or open-plan cubicles) and those characteristic of the women's cubicles, especially those of the secretaries. Many of the men's offices displayed maps of the world, a few well-known art works and/or one or two photographs of the room's occupant with some famous diplomatic representative, whereas the secretaries displayed several family photographs, their children's drawings, small models, plants, brightly coloured floor mats and scarves and other similar items. In some cases, the exceptional quantity of items and pictures was justified as "an attempt to breathe life into the aesthetics of the place".

Although the 'maternal aesthetics' may be understood as an expression of a spatial protest against the neutrality and sterility of standardised design, decoration, and especially over-decoration, is considered a cause for criticism on the part of management and even on the part of female managerial staff. Anna, a woman manager from the political sector, said:

"There are many women here who have piled up their ugly belongings and put so many things in the cubicle that it simply looks awful. This accumulation does not look good from the outside. It breaks the standardization and does not have a clean look. The pictures of children and their nursery school drawings, the bits and pieces picked up on their last trip to Europe – they are inappropriate and also do not help them improve their status. They just look messy ... you won't find decorative items like that among the senior ranks ... it's true that men are less inclined to display such things in their rooms. It detracts from [the women's] status and they are making a mistake in doing it."

The decoration of work cubicles is seen as a kind of 'feminisation' of the space, leading to a further lowering of status for their occupants, among other reasons because it is considered an unprofessional activity. Personalisation of workspaces is frequently an attempt to stand out from others in some visible, tangible way and is often directed against enforced aesthetic uniformity and neutrality. On the other hand, it represents a threat to the existing order, hence it is disparaged and rejected in organisations.

## **9 Discussion**

This study illustrates the way in which space and design constitute an integral part of 'doing gender', that is: they are part of a social discourse that has an impact on the organisational action, perpetuates gender experiences and identities, distinguishes between women and men in contemporary organisations and demarcates the confined status of female clerical personnel within glass ceilings and glass walls.

Gendered power relations and inequality are created through spatial and metaphorical structures in society, which determine who is at the centre and who on the periphery. The interior design of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, based on a hierarchical principle whereby some workers are entitled to preferential spaces and others placed in inferior ones, creates symbolic boundaries between groups, status levels and genders, and those boundaries become apparently objective forms of social differences (Lamont and Molnár, 2002), expressed in terms of accessibility and unequal division of resources and social opportunities.

The symbolic boundaries created by status markers thus form a key mechanism in the perpetuation of social inequality, direct exclusion and self-exclusion and camouflage the power relations underlying the creation of spatial-social significance. Architectural space imposes status differences on social relationships by the location of the worker's physical body within the space, the degree of surveillance the worker is subjected to and the degree of submissiveness needed to fulfil those imperatives.

Unintentional decisions, such as those pertaining to zoning and open space, are based on prejudices and gendered work divisions that existed in the organisation before any architectural decisions were made, and they draw their strength from a public-social debate that is not directly connected to the organisation but influences it in implicit and subtle ways. The result is a gendered space that perpetuates and reinforces the separate identities and distinct work experiences of men and women in an organisation, making the glass ceiling very clear to women, not merely metaphorically but in a very tangible manner.

Since degree of privacy and size of work space have long been accepted and recognised as signs of status in organisations, it clearly follows that any administrative-architectural design decision that furthers and underlines the organisation's hierarchical gaps must take into account the usual division of labour between men and women in that organisation and its significance in terms of gender because it is not possible for that decision to remain gender neutral.

Furthermore, in accordance with Höpfl (2003), this research demonstrates that the embodiment of gendered power relations turns women in open spaces into a 'docile body' (Bordo, 1993) that is visible through panoptic surveillance and male gaze. As a result of this male gaze, women become subject to the expectation to render their body into a homogenous, unitary, male body, whose presence is absent in the organisational space. When not conforming to this expectation, they lose power and are often perceived as 'not adjusting to changes', hysterical, over-reacting and 'too feminine'.

The feminine body, in contrast to male brain, is excluded from organisational life and is perceived as a disturbance to the rational machine, since organisations are supposed to be 'organs without bodies' (Hassard et al., 2000), and the organisational space should be an 'empty vessel' of universal/abstract bodies. The female body thus becomes an obstacle to professionalism and women are often evaluated according to their bodily disciplining and dissemblance, a playing down of their feminine side. The open-space design, as exemplified in this paper, is experienced by many women as highly corporeal, and their constant awareness of the male gaze perpetuates the hierarchy of the human divergence when idealising an absent, male body. By disciplining their 'bodily self' for the sake of professionalism, women internalise the male gaze, evaluate themselves according to these standards and further weaken their social positions. Open-space design, colours, design style, zoning – all these are interpreted differently by men and by women, and shift the attention of performance appraisals from the quality of the work itself to irrelevant issues, which are aimed at taming and subjugating. Surveillance and disciplining by design style and zoning decisions reproduce regimes of inequality (Acker, 2006) by ignoring bodily and mental variances of humans with different needs.

Furthermore, the aesthetisation of workers' physicality empties and dissolves the body into discourse and sign, and it becomes a subjectified Foucaudian body, which one 'does' or 'should do' (as opposed to the body one 'has' or 'is') (Harding, 2002). Colonisation of the female body to the aesthetic dimension in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs increases the gap between women and men because the 'ideal type' of the diplomatic profession is mostly

male, body-less, ascetic, controlled and leak-proof, and women are expected to perform an aesthetic role which is rarely, if ever, reachable.

This research exemplifies the ‘instrumentalisation of aesthetics’ (Hancock and Tyler, 2000), which ‘commodifies’ the aesthetic dimension to use it not only for managerial control but also as part of the organisational impression management, and in this case, the commodity is a national one. Future research should look further into the mechanisms, which colonise the aesthetic dimension of organisations and examine how it is used for projecting various images.

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**Appendix A: List of attributes made by interviewees to ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ design**

<i>Masculine design</i>	<i>Feminine design</i>
Formal and business-like	Home-like and intimate
Cold material (concrete, marble, glass)	Warm material (fabrics, carpets, curtains)
Neutral colours (beige, grey, white)	Vivid colours (red, orange)
Sharp angles, straight and grid-like forms	Rounded and curved forms
High phallic buildings	Low buildings
Hierarchical	Non-hierarchical