

Women-oriented workspaces: Organizational aesthetics as a tool for gender change?

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Abstract

This chapter explores how women-oriented coworking spaces (WOCWS) utilize organizational aesthetics to construct feminist "other" spaces that resist the masculinized norms of traditional workplaces. Drawing on a qualitative, multi-sited study of WOCWS in Tel Aviv, New York, and London, we analyze how aesthetic and sensory elements—ranging from spatial design and décor to smells, sounds, and textures—are mobilized to foster belonging, empowerment, and a sense of community among women. We show how home-like and nightlife-inspired aesthetics create a hybrid feminine space that balances safety, intimacy, and expressive sexuality, enabling a collective reimagining of workplace norms. Empowering art, sensual artifacts, and multimodal design serve not merely as decorative elements but as integral to shaping gendered identities and enacting resistance at both individual and organizational levels. While WOCWS offer refuge from the male gaze and experiment with feminist values of care and inclusion, they also risk reproducing essentialist gender tropes. We argue that these spaces function as laboratories for alternative organizational models, advancing a critical understanding of aesthetics-in-use as a vehicle for organizational change, while raising questions about the limits and contradictions embedded in feminist spatial resistance.

Keywords: Gender and space; women-oriented workspaces; spatial resistance; multimodality and sensory aesthetics; Gender identity construction; Critical Management Studies (CMS)

Introduction

Can organizational aesthetics serve as a tool to foster gender equity and to promote the construction of "other" spaces, which provide safe and inclusive work environments for women? This intriguing question lies at the heart of exploring the power of organizational aesthetics in women-oriented coworking spaces (WOCWS)—shared workplaces founded, designed, managed, and occupied by women, where individuals from different professions work independently or collaboratively in a common setting. As organizations increasingly recognize the impact of their physical environments on employees' experiences and identities, the role of aesthetics in shaping gender dynamics and challenging traditional power structures has recently evoked research interest (e.g., Simpson et al., 2024). Nevertheless, while most existing studies explore how women feel marginalized in gender-mixed workplaces, the question of how aesthetics may construct an identity that reinforces their sense of belonging and challenges conventional gender norms is yet to be explored.

The development of WOCWS around the world represents a significant shift in addressing the unique needs of women in the workplace. These spaces are planned not just as separated spaces for women but as environments that embody a distinctive feminist agenda. Their design is intentionally crafted to offer women a sense of safety and empowerment, thereby subverting the masculine-dominated workspace. WOCWS' popularity in recent years is frequently attributed to the discomfort women often feel in traditional gender-mixed environments, where their needs are overlooked and design is replete with sexist elements, such as beer taps, games, and macho décor (e.g., Grazian, 2020). These gendered designs often create a hostile atmosphere for women, subjecting them to the male gaze (Spain, 1992). However, the processes of designing alternative, particularly feminist, spaces remain underexplored.

Based on a qualitative study conducted in WOCWS in Tel Aviv, New York, and London, this chapter seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of how organizational aesthetics can be leveraged to promote feminist values and disrupt gender norms. By examining workspaces for women, we highlight how these spaces serve not only as means for creating inclusive work environments but also as alternative, "other spaces" that aim to resist the existing gender order and possibly catalyze social change. While coworking spaces in general are designed to offer flexible shared environments that foster both independent and collaborative work, they are also often intended to cultivate a sense of supportive community. Thus, the process of becoming a community in women-oriented spaces is deeply intertwined with the space itself: rather than responding to the needs of a pre-existing, organized community, these coworking spaces were intentionally designed to foster connections and cultivate a sense of belonging among women who had not previously shared a unified identity. The sense of community within these spaces is continually shaped through members' everyday practices and interpretations vis-à-vis how space is used and imagined; in this way, the aesthetics not only reflect organizational ideology but also actively participate in the ongoing making of a community through shaping users' lived

experiences and collective imaginaries about organizing as well as perceptions of appropriate femininity. To examine these questions, we explore the intersection of aesthetics and gender dynamics, offering valuable insights into how aesthetic choices promote feminist values and create a more equitable workplace while simultaneously perpetuating existing gender dynamics.

Gender and organizational aesthetics

Critical research in organizational aesthetics has long acknowledged that aesthetics may serve as a significant organizational mechanism for control and identity construction, often reflecting and reinforcing social hierarchies and norms (Dale & Burrell, 2008; Korberger & Clegg, 2003; Kingma et al., 2018; Strati, 1999; Zhang & Spicer, 2014). By embedding particular spatial designs, artifacts, and sensory elements, aesthetics act as subtle mechanisms of control, prescribing acceptable behaviors and power relations. Scholars argue that organizational aesthetics are more than mere design elements; they are "identityscapes," where identity and power are intersected and constantly enacted (Hancock & Spicer, 2011). Spatial arrangements and spacing practices often reproduce organizational values and norms, subtly excluding or privileging specific identities. For instance, open-plan offices might promote transparency and collaboration but also facilitate surveillance and amplify hierarchies, often favoring dominant groups while marginalizing others (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011, 2015). Such dynamics underscore the role of aesthetics in solidifying existing power structures and shaping identity within workplaces.

Some scholars have shown that organizational aesthetics is gendered, influencing how men and women experience, interpret, and enact their identities within workplaces (Hirst & Schwabland, 2018; Nash, 2018; Simpson et al., 2024; Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Sargent et al., 2021; Wasserman, 2012, 2020; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015). These studies highlight that women often experience organizational spaces as disempowering or marginalizing, particularly in settings like open-plan offices, which amplify exposure to the "male gaze" (Wasserman, 2012). Gendered spatial practices—such as the tendency to design space according to hierarchy—further reinforce gender inequalities, as lower-status employees (often women) are assigned to open, surveilled spaces, while high-status employees (often men) are allotted to enclosed and private offices (Spain, 1992; Weisman, 1994). Furthermore, the gendering of space was found to be reinforced by women's practices, such as personalization and incorporating familial or aesthetically pleasing elements into their workspaces that may conform with expectations of femininity and nurturing roles (Elsbach, 2003; Tyler & Cohen, 2010).

However, employees do not always comply with the power of aesthetics; they can also utilize it as a tool for resistance (Dale & Burrell, 2008; Taylor & Spicer, 2007; Taylor & Hansen, 2005). They may actively disrupt or reinterpret the organization's intended aesthetic message; modify their workspace; evade the controlled spaces; and even damage artifacts and the overall design

(Shortt, 2015; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011). These seemingly minor acts of personalization can cumulatively challenge the homogenizing effects of corporate aesthetics, allowing for the expression of diverse identities and perspectives. Thus, viewing space as a resistance site reveals the agency of individuals and groups in negotiating meaning and challenging dominant power structures through creative appropriations of organizational aesthetics. Nevertheless, resistance should be understood as much more nuanced—sometimes reinforcing gendered expectations while also questioning them. Thus, by conceptualizing space as a contested terrain, spacing processes are seen as complex dynamics that highlight the dual role of aesthetics (maintaining and contesting traditional power structures) rather than as dichotomous opposites between control and resistance (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011).

In the gender context, studies have shown that women's resistance to organizational space is often characterized by personalization of space through photographs, plants, or other items that reflect their individual tastes and identities (Elsbach, 2003). Others have shown that women may resist oppressive spatial norms through acts such as "hot-nesting" in non-territorial offices or subverting design elements that prioritize male dominance (Halford, 2004). These acts are seen by some scholars as forms of symbolic resistance creating micro-spaces of autonomy and self-expression within a larger, often homogenized, corporate aesthetics (Panayiotou, 2015). However, other scholars (e.g., Tyler & Cohen, 2010) have argued that women's resistance to organizational space also perpetuates gendered stereotypes and expectations, as many women tend to maintain an aesthetically pleasing environment that accommodates their male colleagues rather than their own needs.

Recent studies have extended the understanding of spatial resistance by highlighting the emergence of "other" spaces—environments that affirm and support marginalized social groups and allow for various identities to be constructed and openly displayed (Sapir et al., forthcoming; Steyaert, 2010). For instance, spaces for queer communities often challenge binary aesthetics, employing fluid and non-traditional designs to reflect diverse identities (Vitry, 2021), and religious groups leverage aesthetics to create sanctuaries that reflect their values while resisting secular or mainstream corporate aesthetics (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2020). In the same vein, feminist workspaces—serving as physical, social, or intellectual settings that center feminist values and practices—may emphasize collaborative, inclusive designs that prioritize equality and empowerment while deliberately rejecting hierarchical aesthetics and dismantling oppressive structures such as patriarchy, racism, and other intersecting systems of power (Oberhauser et al., 2018).

These alternative spaces highlight that spatial resistance may be executed not only bottom-up by individuals but also top-down by organizations with a specific agenda. However, most studies on spatial resistance have concentrated on how individuals oppose organizational aesthetics, largely ignoring the aesthetic decisions made at the *organizational level* to resist the existing social order. Moreover, only scant attention has been given to feminist spaces as "other"

spaces, mostly ignoring the material/aesthetic dimension and design choices made in these spaces.

Thus, to better understand how aesthetics can transcend control to embody gender liberation and how feminist-inspired design choices may inspire broader organizational change, an in-depth examination is still required. The current study seeks to fill this lacuna by illuminating the nuanced dynamics of spatial resistance that characterize the construction of an "other", feminist space as a resisting act at the organizational level. By scrutinizing how aesthetics is realized through spatial practices, experiences, materiality, and planning agenda, we provide critical insights into the transformative yet complex role of feminist-inspired aesthetics in shaping equity and empowerment.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative approach to analyze the dynamics within women-oriented coworking spaces (WOCWS). Using a collective case study method (Stake, 1995), we examined three WOCWS situated in different countries, enabling us to uncover repeated practices and gain broader insights into their operation. The selected cases—referred to as Artemis (Tel Aviv), Enlightenment (Manhattan), and Domicile (London)—represent private, for-profit organizations that combine characteristics of women-first and social club coworking spaces (Poussier, 2020). Despite their geographical and cultural differences, the shared vision of empowering and supporting women entrepreneurs links these spaces, reflecting a consistent managerial mindset.

Our research spans from 2019 to 2022, during which the first author joined these WOCWS as a member to observe their professional and social activities. Data collection included 50 semi-structured interviews with founders, employees, and members, as well as 650 hours of participant observation. This allowed us to document social interactions, spatial habits, and the aesthetic and material qualities of the workspaces. Visual data, such as photographs of design elements (furniture, lighting, artwork, and artifacts), were also collected with consent.

Thematic and visual analyses were employed to interpret the data. The thematic analysis involved coding interviews and observations to identify recurring behavioral patterns and first-order concepts. The visual analysis examined the organizational aesthetics to discern the cultural and social messages conveyed by these choices. The data were synthesized to construct theoretically significant themes, offering nuanced insights into the interplay of organizational dynamics, user practices, and aesthetic forms within these spaces.

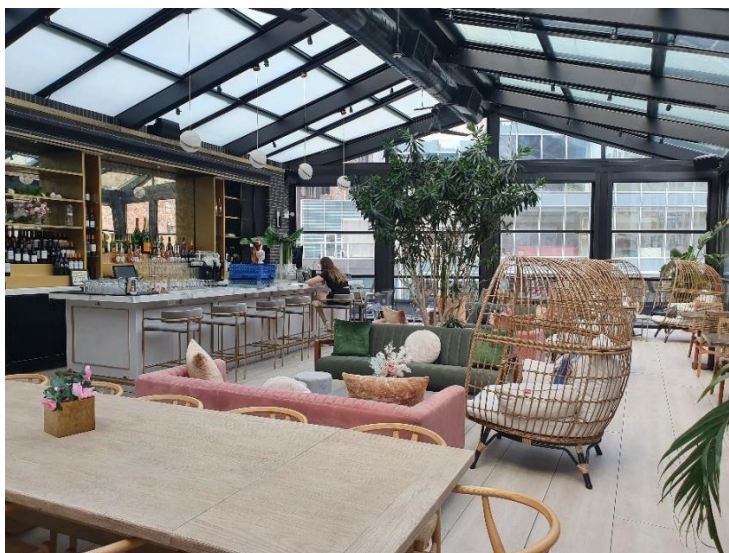
Findings

Data analysis of the three women-oriented workspaces suggested that the founders established and designed them based on a complex ensemble of ideas, symbols, structures, language, norms, and actions constituting a distinctive femininity that aims at challenging conventional gender norms but at the same time embraces some stereotypical images of femininity. This multifaceted identity was formed by constructing a separate, safe space for women, away from the male gaze. We elaborate on three spatial elements—integration of home-like and nightlife designs, empowering artifacts, and multimodality—which collectively underpin the experiences and behaviors of space users.

A. Integrating home-like and nightlife design styles

To create a feminine, pleasant, safe, and appealing space for women, all three WOCWS designs integrated elements of what was defined by Alexandersson and Kalonaityte (2018) as home-like and nightlife design styles. On the one hand, sofas, armchairs, coffee tables, soft lighting, and bookcases were arranged to resemble a living room, and circular, oval, or rectangular shared worktables imitated a home dining table. On the other hand, a performing stage and alcohol bars were located at the center of the communal area (see picture 1). Together they constitute an aesthetic assemblage that was aimed to encourage two sets of gender performances: interpersonal intimacy derived from the home-like design, along with outgoingness, fun, and sexuality associated with the nightlife image. Both design styles were meant to promote closeness and loving care as well as to challenge existing gendered assumptions of the standard masculine workplace.

Picture 1: Bar and sofas in Enlightenment



Eva explains her decision to place a bar and a stage in Artemis:

That's the very center of the space. Women come, sit, drink, and dine.... Our events, parties, and birthday celebrations—it's all there... In the morning, the bar isn't active, but in the evening, it looks and feels just like a bar. That's our social club.

The home-like design was aimed at blurring the boundaries between home and work, and it evoked a sense of intimate domesticity and belonging, thus promoting feminist values of inclusivity, safety, and mutual support, subverting the standard, conservative, and alienated workplace. In this spatial setting, women felt more at ease and were able to express themselves authentically and communicate with each other. When asked to describe WOCWS and its ambiance, nearly all interviewees used words such as 'home,' 'womb,' 'cocoon,' and 'home away from home.' Monica, a member of Artemis, attested:

The space is charming. It's very beautiful, warm, homely, and pleasant. What makes me feel comfortable is that everything is designed like a home—the living room, the library, the kitchen. The colors chosen for this space are soft, and the space itself isn't overly large. You don't walk into an enormous room filled with thousands of people; instead, there is a sense of intimacy here, which I find wonderful... I feel it is safe here.

Associating femininity with domesticity is seen by some scholars as an act of resistance that challenges the masculine design (Panayiotou, 2015), while others perceive it as perpetuating stereotypes and gendered expectations (Tyler & Cohen, 2010). As elucidated in the quote, it was experienced by women both as a familiar marker of their life outside the workplace and as "something else," different from what they encounter in standard workplaces. Moreover, by offering an "other" space, the founders wished to provide a comforting oasis, a semi-isolated space that offers a sanctuary where women can retreat from the pressures and demands of the corporate world, allowing them to focus on their work in a setting that feels safe and protected.

To complement this sense of freedom from the impersonal design of many workplaces, some areas in WOCWS were designated to meet needs (stereotypically) perceived as unique to women. For example, there was a glow-up room used for applying makeup and styling hair, a therapy room, a fitness studio, and a lactation room. Assigning specific rooms to cater to women's needs was crucial, in the founders' eyes, for promoting an inclusive and supportive environment. Dedicated rooms for women symbolized a means to promote gender equity and acknowledgment of their needs for privacy and comfort, and made women feel valued and respected. Such women-oriented amenities attracted new members as they reflected a managerial vision of what constitutes a "feminine space" and how space should be organized to accommodate working women. Furthermore, all WOCWS restrooms were equipped with complimentary feminine hygiene products and other "female items" that are usually absent in workplaces. For instance, the beauty bar in *Enlightenment* included hair styling products and toiletries for removing or applying makeup, while the one in *Domicile* offered hand cream, perfume, and other "feminine" products. Beyond convenience, the visible presence of these items in the space marked it as feminine, even for women who do not necessarily use them.

However, although WOCWS' design signaled opposition to conventional workplaces, this domestic design also largely reinforced gender stereotypes of femininity, according to which women feel more comfortable at home.

In contrast to the home-like design that fostered a nurturing image of femininity, the **nightlife design** represented a sexual one. While Alexandersson and Kalonaityte (2018) contrasted these two design styles, in our case, they were entangled to comprise an aesthetic assemblage that reinforces interpersonal intimacy. Consequently, a more complex and multilayered aesthetic form of femininity was constructed for WOCWS members, which is both subversive and preservative. Spacing such an aesthetic assemblage involved harmonizing between the two aesthetic designs and constructing a new femininity, as Artemis's designer stated:

It's very difficult to create a space that, on the one hand, functions as a very pleasant work environment in the daytime and looks dramatic and powerful in the evening. We decided to take the [furniture] colors from the greens to blues and velvets to that drama that takes place at night.

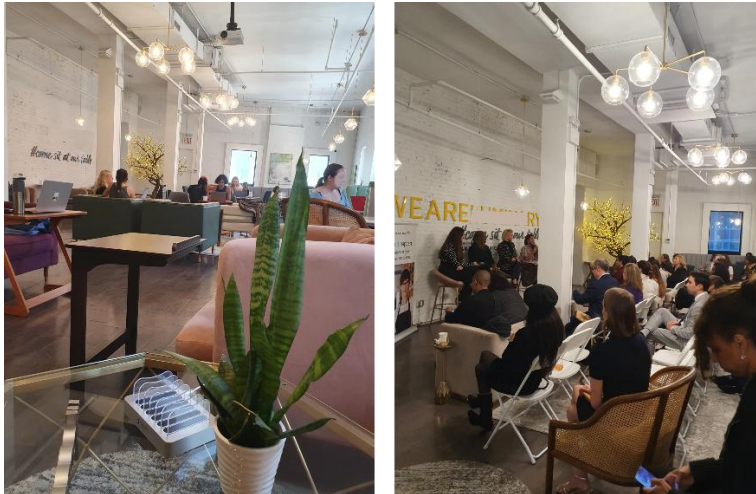
Specifically, the nightlife design drew on bold colors and images, imitating restaurants, bars, or nightclubs. After work, when the nightlife design replaces the home-like setting, the main working space transforms into a party space: the working desks, carpets, plants, books, cushions, and coffee tables are set aside and chairs are arranged around a stage where performances take place. Most women responded to these spatial changes and adapted their behaviors accordingly: they stopped working and instead engaged in social activities, such as talking and laughing, drinking and eating, and occasionally dancing together. This transition between workspace and leisure space enabled the formation of a community and fostered connections among women who had not previously known one another.

Furthermore, the nightlife design was also aimed at enhancing physical intimacy, outgoingness, and enjoyment by shaping a lively, contemporary, and dramatic environment. The social interactions aroused by the nightlife design encouraged sexual behaviors that contributed to a heightened sense of intimacy among women. These behaviors were not merely aimed at entertainment but served as a visible form of an "other space", which rejects the gendered work conventions that sanctify rationality and the erasing of emotionality and affection at work. The way women performed their sexual bodies not only marked the space as belonging to and safe for women but also allowed them to express sexual behaviors free from the male gaze and any sense of danger.

Importantly, to allow both designs to co-exist simultaneously, WOCWS were constructed and designed to enable constant exposure to feminist actions within space. For instance, in Enlightenment, the central areas were transformed from workspaces into "women's empowerment zones". For example, a shared space that women typically used as a work area, where they sat with their personal computers around long worktables, was changed at specific times: the long tables were moved to the sides by the staff; the chairs, which were previously

arranged around the tables, were placed in rows facing a white wall, similar to a setup for a performance or presentation; several high bar stools were arranged near the wall and facing the rows of chairs, and a large sign reading "#weareallenlighteners" was hung above them. The women who were previously working became the audience, while the performers occupying the bar stools were often businesswomen who had "made it" or were considered "role models" in the labor market, offering tips to the women audience and encouraging them to achieve their business goals (see picture 2).

Picture 2: Transformative Space in Enlightenment



The founders' decision to dedicate the main, most prominent area of the workplace to empowerment workshops that are visible and accessible to all women members served as a deliberate physical and symbolic manifestation of their feminist ideology, demonstrating that changing gender power relations and prioritizing women's continuous development, professionalization, and empowerment is not a secondary or peripheral activity but central to the organization's culture.

B. Empowering art-décor and artifacts

The second related spatial element through which WOCWS established alternative femininity was through empowering art décor and various artifacts. These material means further reinforced the nurturing and the sexual images of femininity that the founders envisioned, and were therefore aimed to reflect two interrelated goals: reinforcing a sense of safety and reclaiming feminine sexuality.

In all three WOCWS, the artwork displayed on the walls was created by women artists and selected by women. Showcasing art by women artists served as a powerful affirmation of women's creativity, talent, and contributions to culture, providing constant visual reminders of female empowerment and achievement. These artworks presented mostly female figures and were often very large to transmit a clear message that women are cherished, thus making their

voices and stories more visible and prominent in the workplace, as is evident in the large artworks. Eva, Artemis's founder, said:

Have you seen the enormous pictures? I wanted huge pictures of women that would magnify the presence of the women sitting here. When they look at these pictures, they will say to themselves, "I am marvelous."

And Jane, Artemis's designer, adds:

The art exhibited here demonstrates how, as women in a male-dominated world, we sometimes wear masks and how, in this space, we remove all of them. Here, we're permitted to do everything, and within this feminine world, we must relinquish these masks entirely. On stage, we displayed our "Kitty" [a large and impressive sculpture of a black panther] to show how strong we are as women, like the goddess of wild animals.

As evident from the quote, the selection of artwork displaying women's images ensured that the art resonated with the feminist agenda of the founders. The large and dangerous panther is "tamed" and presented as "Kitty"—a cute, domesticated version of the wild beast. By calling the panther "Kitty," women appropriated and neutralized traditional symbols of aggression and dominance, transforming them into playful, controlled forms that still retain traces of their original strength. This gesture exemplifies how gendered power is not rejected outright but re-scripted through irony and aesthetic re-appropriation. The wildness of the panther, a classic signifier of untamed, threatening force — often associated with masculinity — is aesthetically rendered within the space as both magnificent and harmless. The sculpture thus becomes a visual metaphor for how women in patriarchal systems negotiate power: not by mirroring masculine aggression, but by subverting its signs and re-inscribing them into a feminine, self-authored grammar of strength.

Ada, Artemis's member, explains how she experienced the aesthetic choices:

"I love sitting and working here, beneath this large picture of the goddess, as I call the figure in the picture. When I feel stuck or find it hard to move forward, I lift my eyes and look at her, and I hear her saying to me, 'Come on, don't give up. You can do it.' It encourages me to keep going. I can't disappoint the great goddess." (see picture 3).

Picture 3: Ada is inspired by the artwork at Artemis



Other decorative symbols were also utilized to convey empowering messages to women. For example, at the entrance to Artemis, there was a large gold inscription on a black background that read: "Thrive in your natural habitat." Similarly, at the entrance to Enlightenment, there was a large gold inscription with the "Ten Commandments": "Be Confident, Be Open, Be Passionate, Be Genuine, Be Yourself." Furthermore, resonating with the nightlife design, sexuality was promoted in Enlightenment through artworks—large pictures presenting women in sensual gestures, which were perceived by interviewees as sexual and powerful (see picture 4).

Picture 4: Artworks in Enlightenment



At Artemis, overt sexuality was conveyed through the use of red in the images and artworks displayed throughout the workspace—a color interpreted by space users as evoking temptation and seduction (Picture 5: women with sensual lips and a red eye mask).

Picture 5: Artworks at Enlightenment and Artemis

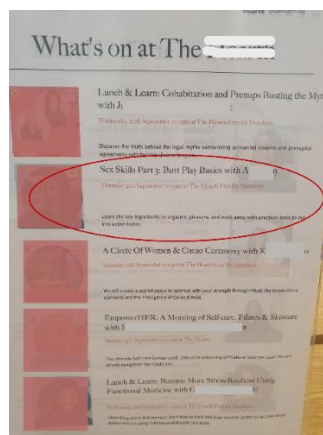


Liz, Enlightenment's founder admitted that sexuality was intentional and that the sexual images constituted a feminist declaration aimed at reclaiming the female body. Liz asserts that the artwork's message is that female nudity is not meant to satisfy male desire, but rather to instill pride among women:

These images were created by a woman artist who took old magazine advertisement shots and transformed them into something artistic. Instead of using a woman's body to sell some product, here we celebrate it, looking at it as something artistic.

Reclaiming sexuality was also manifested in other artifacts within the workspace. On each desk at Domicile, there is an event schedule inviting women to participate in a three-session workshop on sexual pleasures (see picture 6). These workshops generated a sense of autonomy and self-awareness and provided a safe and supportive environment where women can explore their sexuality, challenge societal taboos, and gain a deeper understanding of their pleasures and desires.

Picture 6: Sex workshops at Domicile



C. Multimodality in the service of spatial enchantment

A third means through which a feminist workspace was established in WOCWS was the use of multimodality and various sensual cues. Specifically, the home-like design during work hours

and the nightlife aesthetic in the evenings established two distinct modes of engagement with women expected to work by day and participate in parties by evening. This transition between the work and leisure was facilitated through a carefully crafted multisensory experience that enchanted members to move between these two modes of behaviors. Through the deliberate use of sensory cues, the space actively shaped how members imagined, inhabited, and redefined what it meant to belong to a distinctly feminine environment.

Smells: In all three WOCWS, olfactory cues were employed to delineate organizational boundaries, thereby distinguishing the interior environment from the exterior and marking it as a women-friendly surrounding. When entering each WOCWS from the bustling streets of the big city, a wave of natural scents washes over the visitors, subtly instilling a sense of calm and tranquility. The fragrances in these shared workspaces stood in stark contrast to the urban smells of exhaust, food, and people, evoking imagery of a lush meadow in spring or a serene forest in early autumn. Brenda, a receptionist at Domicile, shared that the open workspace is equipped with two scent diffusers and that the overall fragrance in the area is based on natural scents, including herbs and trees (see picture 7):

Every week, we receive a kit containing various scents, such as eucalyptus, rosemary, lemongrass, and lavender. I love these scents; they are very calming. Each morning, when I arrive here, I can choose which scent to use for the day. It has become a small ritual for me; I select the fragrance according to my mood and what I feel like that day.

Picture 7: Fragrance kit and diffuser at Domicile



Similarly, Rachel in Artemis:

We decided on the scent together... it is important to us that when people enter, there is a burst of scent to separate the outside world from our space. When I enter the door, I smell that good scent, and it makes me feel relaxed and elevated.

Based on Riach and Warren's (2015) notion that smell is a significant aspect of the organizational experience that influences the social and cultural dynamics of workspace life, our findings show

how smells may be used as signifiers that define WOCWS as feminine. Women's experiences corroborate that smells have a profound effect on their experiences, with many associating them with femininity. One woman at Enlightenment described this connection during a casual conversation in the kitchen: "I love coming here; there is such a pleasant scent—it's the smell of women."

Moreover, smells were also used to signal the shift from the home-like design to the nightlife design and the corresponding behaviors these designs prescribe to members. For example, every Wednesday afternoon at Artemis, the bar opens and the barman prepares trays of beverage samples, which are brought into the conference room and throughout the communal workspace, emitting a pleasant aroma of alcohol and sugar. This smell tempts women to halt their work and consider indulging in a communal drink at the bar, rather than immediately departing for home. These two behaviors were seen as complementary underpinning the balance between professionalism and socializing that defined WOCWS' agenda to construct an alternative model of a woman entrepreneur.

Similarly, before a social event in Enlightenment, the aroma of freshly baked pastries emanates from the kitchen, which functions as a gathering spot. During social occasions, a skilled chef is recruited to bake freshly made pastries in the kitchen. As the smell of freshly baked bread permeates the air, it entices everyone in the nearby area to abandon their workstations and gather near the kitchen. At Domicile, the women's social events are accompanied by fragrant aromas of food and beverages. For instance, the aroma of the tea and cakes offered in the lounge entices women to participate in the "Chat and Cake" event (see picture 8), transitioning them from work to social interaction. The practice of using the aroma of food and wine as a means of seduction is remarkably consistent across all three locations.

Picture 8: 'Cake & Chat' at Domicile during fun-time



Sounds: Similar to the use of smell to stimulate the senses, sounds were also employed to establish the shared workspace as feminine since most of the background noises heard in the WOCWS are women's voices, as explained by Clara, Domicile's founder:

Listen, this is what makes this place special – listen to the quiet. We have two pairs of teams working together here, and yet everyone does so quietly. The atmosphere here is calm, peaceful, and respectful.

The quote illustrates how the presence of feminine background voices created a unique atmosphere in WOCWS, different from other workspaces that are gender-mixed. As Molly, an Enlightenment member, explains:

It's nice to have a place where you can relax... I've been to other coworking spaces where you constantly hear male voices and competitive conversations; it's exhausting. Here, the atmosphere is very different. You can relax, you're not in competition, and you're not threatened.

In line with Shortt's (2013) idea that workers use sounds as a way to escape the emotional demands of their work, the findings showed how the auditory routine of the space helped women escape the competitiveness and aggressiveness often typical of the male-dominated entrepreneurship sector. This allowed them to create a calm "other space" where they could work comfortably and securely.

Sounds were also an additional mechanism to transition women across the home-like and nightlife images. Rachel is responsible for Artemis' background music/playlist:

We have calm music that doesn't dominate the ear and doesn't bother too much... That's the daytime music. For the afternoons and evenings, I have a different chill playlist with stronger beats... at that time, you're sitting on the balcony with a drink or a cigarette, talking to your friends...

When the background music is calm, it signals that one needs to concentrate on work activities, and when it becomes more upbeat, women are encouraged to stop working and start socializing. Other sounds, besides music, serve that purpose as well. During work time, interpersonal talks must remain at a low volume. For example, it is forbidden to talk on the phone or have a Zoom meeting without headsets, and conversations are allowed only in specific areas. Ada (65, therapist, Artemis) explains what happens to people who converse loudly during work time: "You have the lounge here, and the offices, and the workstations, where it's forbidden to talk and, Lord have mercy, if you talk there, you'll be reprimanded immediately." When it comes time to socialize, however, laughing and talking get boisterous, and no one reprimands those whose voices are audible in the workspace. Mia (32, Enlightenment) describes the influence of noises on women's behavior in space: "When I hear laughter and people talking, it often makes me want to step out and see what's going on." And Daria (48, Artemis): "I left the office because the sounds pulled me out. I heard music and laughter, and that the bar was working, so I came over to have some fun".

Sense of touch: In all three WOCWS spaces, there was extensive use of soft textures through velvet or faux fur fabrics on the furniture, numerous decorative pillows, and carpets (see picture 9). According to Jane, Artemis's designer, the softness of the textures was an implicit way to hint at the femininity of the place. Leah, Artemis's founder, also associated softness with femininity:

I used to work in cafes and bars, and often, the chairs were hard and uncomfortable stools. Here, everything is cushioned. The chairs around the bar and those around the tables are all soft and comfortable. We dedicated a lot of effort and money to ensure that women feel comfortable here.

Picture 9: Soft textures at Domicile



To further enhance a sense of homey coziness, furniture was soft and adapted to the female body. Ergonomic chairs were carefully selected and designed to support the unique curvature of women's spines, desks were adjustable to women's heights, and aesthetically pleasing and functional elements that reflect women's preferences made them feel comfortable. By tailoring these elements to meet the ergonomic needs of women and using soft materials, the workspace was supposed to become more than just a place to work; it was aimed to be a personalized space where women could feel comfortable and at ease. Rachel, Artemis's founder/manager, explains:

Every chair here has been tested by four different women's butts. We, the entrepreneurs, along with the designer, tried each chair ourselves. Each of us has a different butt type: one has a slender build, Eva has a muscular build, and I have a wider build. We selected only the chairs that were soft and comfortable for all of us.

Discussion

This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of women-oriented coworking spaces (WOCWS) as "other" spaces—deliberately crafted environments that resist the dominant masculinized workspace to promote women's inclusion and empowerment. By analyzing their spatial design,

materiality, and sensory elements, this study reveals how these spaces are experienced and practiced as sites of both resistance and identity construction, offering a critical lens for contemporary coworking spaces as well as for understanding their role in challenging gender norms.

Our analysis shows that WOCWS distinguish themselves by rejecting the masculinized aesthetics of traditional workplaces—characterized by cold, hierarchical, and impersonal designs—and replacing them with elements that prioritize belonging, inclusivity, and safety. Features such as adapted furniture, soft lighting, and communal areas for fostering interpersonal close relations are a sharp contrast to the impersonal conventional office spaces. These spaces integrate home-like and nightlife-inspired aesthetics, fostering an environment where women can feel both safe and empowered. These design choices align with feminist values of nurturing, equality, and solidarity, offering women a sense of belonging and refuge from the male gaze and other oppressive dynamics often encountered in traditional work environments. By prioritizing women's needs, WOCWS create opportunities to experiment with alternative workplace models, promoting close interactions and mutual support while challenging the individualism and competitiveness valorized in conventional workplaces.

Aesthetic resistance in WOCWS is not solely about rejecting traditional norms; it also involves women reclaiming their own space and sexuality. This resistance operates on both individual and organizational levels. On the individual level, women felt a sense of autonomy and were free to display sexual gestures and dancing that reinforced intimate closeness between women, thus constituting subtle forms of resistance to the homogenized corporate aesthetics. On the organizational level, WOCWS institutionalized resistance by creating environments that collectively challenge gendered power structures. These spaces allow women to resist as members of a collective, united by solidarity and shared feminist values and goals. For example, the inclusion of artwork, empowering artifacts, and sexual elements embodies a deliberate aesthetic that reclaims and celebrates feminine identity. While much of the literature on spatial resistance focuses on individual acts of resistance against dominant organizational aesthetics, WOCWS provide a context where resistance is also enacted at the organizational level. The visual presence of empowering symbols, such as curated artwork or feminist slogans, reinforces this collective identity and serves as a constant reminder of the shared values that underpin the unique workspace. Thus, by embedding feminist values into the very fabric of the workspace, these spaces foster an environment where women can feel safe, valued, and supported.

WOCWS further challenge traditional workplace norms by incorporating holistic and sensory design elements. The use of pleasant scents, calming sounds, and tactile materials encourages a connection between emotional well-being and professional development. These sensual and emotional cues disrupt the rationalist, productivity-driven ethos of conventional workspaces, offering a more human-centered and feminist vision of work. By creating environments that prioritize women's comfort, safety, and needs, WOCWS act as isolated islands that provide a

refuge from traditional workplace dynamics, enabling women to experiment with alternative workplace models and allowing them to thrive both individually and collectively.

However, the aesthetic choices in WOCWS carry inherent contradictions. While they seek to empower women by affirming their presence and needs, they also risk reinforcing stereotypical gendered associations. For example, the emphasis on home-like elements such as soft sofas, warm colors, and inviting spaces underpins the cultural association between femininity and domesticity. Similarly, the incorporation of amenities like lactation rooms, beauty bars, and glow-up stations—while addressing practical needs—may inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes that frame women as caregivers or as preoccupied with appearance. This tension underscores the dual role of aesthetics in WOCWS and the complexity of spacing as a dialectic process between agency and compliance with social constraints. Women-oriented spaces navigate between resistance and conformity as they subvert the masculinized status quo while simultaneously reproducing elements of the very norms they seek to challenge reinforcing traditional notions of femininity.

Despite this limitation, one of the most promising aspects of women-oriented workspaces is their potential to catalyze broader social and organizational change. WOCWS challenge traditional workplace norms by emphasizing feminist values—such as equality, inclusion, and empowerment—through their spatial design and multimodality. By reimagining the physical and social structures of workspaces, these spaces aim to disrupt hierarchical, patriarchal work cultures and create new models of collaboration and gender relations. However, while these spaces represent innovative attempts at promoting gender equality, their impact on mainstream organizational practices remains a critical area of investigation. The extent to which "feminist aesthetics" and values can inspire change in conventional workplaces is an open question. WOCWS can serve as a model for other organizations seeking to foster more inclusive, supportive work environments. Yet, many mainstream organizations may resist adopting such practices, especially when they challenge deeply ingrained gender norms and power structures. One key factor in determining whether WOCWS can inspire broader change is their ability to engage with and influence organizational policies. For instance, if the aesthetics of a feminist workspace emphasize collaboration, transparency, and egalitarianism, these values can be reflected in the organization's internal policies regarding decision-making, leadership, and communication. Moreover, if the space is designed to cater to the specific needs of women—such as providing comfortable seating, quiet spaces for reflection, or rooms for lactation or self-care—it sends a message that the organization values and respects its female employees' well-being. These design choices could prompt mainstream organizations to reconsider their

policies and practices, especially as the importance of employee well-being and work-life balance becomes increasingly recognized. At the same time, there are challenges to integrating feminist-inspired practices into mainstream organizational settings. Many organizations, especially those in industries dominated by men, may resist adopting such changes due to perceived costs, fear of alienating male employees, or concerns about productivity. In such cases, feminist workspaces may serve more as "laboratories" for alternative organizational models, providing a space for experimentation and innovation that could eventually influence broader workplace trends.

Beyond the question of what makes a space “feminine” or “feminist,” this chapter draws attention to how WOCWS function as experimental sites for new modes of organizing: flexible, temporary, and situationally responsive. WOCWS are more than architecturally distinctive workplaces, and aesthetics is not merely an ornamental layer added after formal structures are set. Rather, these unique spaces demonstrate how sensory, material, and affective elements can become the very substrate of a new, complex way of working in which caring, relationships, and audacious behaviors are woven together as mutually reinforcing logics of action. This new way of organizing subverts the classical trade-off between emotional containment and economic rationality: affect is not suppressed in the service of efficiency, but is harnessed as a productive, collective resource. This reconfiguration invites researchers to revisit long-standing questions about hierarchy, membership, and control by tracing how power circulates through scents, textures, and soundscapes as much as through roles and routines, and it asks practitioners to consider the politics embedded in every design choice.

These unique workspaces also disrupt core assumptions of traditional organizations regarding clear boundaries between inside and outside and instead foreground fluidity, provisional belonging, and aesthetic-emotional cues as organizing principles. Rather than relying on hierarchy or fixed procedures, WOCWS mobilize sensory and affective signals as a different kind of organizational compass. Precisely in their ephemerality and their iterative re-making of belonging, they raise new questions about what it means to be a member, and how responsibility, community, and leadership might be reimagined in light of that.

In this sense, WOCWS propose an alternative organizing that draws on the architecture of belonging — one based on shared sensory experience, identity fluidity, and emotionality. This infrastructure invites reflection not only on how to design more feminist organizations, but on a deeper question: what kinds of presence, emotion, and temporality are we willing to organize a new world of work around? The practices observed here hint at a future in which

organizational participation is no longer anchored in contracts and roles, but in momentary alignments, atmospheric attunements, and collective rhythms that come together — and fall apart — with intention. One might imagine an aesthetic revolution in organizational design that extends beyond the “islands” of WOCWS. Such a revolution would center aesthetics-in-use as a strategic lever for redistribution, embedding principles of softness, sensory inclusivity, and multipurpose fluidity into mainstream buildings, digital platforms, and governance systems. Open-plan offices could be re-enchanted as modular, emotional environments that allow individuals to work and celebrate simultaneously. To realize such shifts, managers would need to acknowledge aesthetics as an arena of structural change rather than of surface branding, while scholars could trace how these interventions recalibrate power relations across lines of gender, class, and race. WOCWS thus function as early signals of possibility: by foregrounding the visceral textures of work, they invite both theory and practice to imagine—and to organize—worlds in which equity is smelt, heard, touched, and danced, as much as it is written into policy.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This chapter focuses on the aesthetic and sensual dimensions of women-oriented coworking spaces (WOCWS) as tools for feminist identity construction, but feminist spaces, like all our organizational settings, are rarely free of conflict. Understanding how dissonance and dissent are handled through space may offer a more nuanced account of belonging and empowerment. Thus, future research should delve deeper into the political, relational, and conflictual dynamics that often accompany such processes of community formation. Questions concerning struggles over norms, practices of inclusion and exclusion, boundary work, and the emotional labor required to sustain a sense of belonging may enrich the understanding of how such spaces operate not only as sites of care and empowerment, but also regulate or constrain participation and voice and become arenas of negotiation, contestation, and power relations.

While WOCWS' founders and designers are central figures, everyday organizational life involves ongoing negotiations: who gets to curate the space, who is invited to speak, how dissent is expressed, and how inclusion is practiced. Although these spaces are presented as open to all non-men, in practice they predominantly attract cisgender, middle- and upper-middle-class women. This raises questions about the classed, racialized, and gendered politics of belonging that aesthetic practices may both conceal and reinforce. These issues merit further exploration to fully grasp the ambivalences and political stakes of aesthetic resistance in

feminist organizing. Addressing these issues may shed light on the potential reproduction of privilege and the limits of aesthetic resistance as a means of structural change.

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