Taking control of your space

Jon Sutton meets **Craig Knight** (University of Exeter and Director of IDR) to talk about identity and the design of our environments

We're sat here in an hotel which is amongst the finest that Leicester has to offer. You look around – what do you see, from a psychological perspective?
A fairly lean space, I suppose. It's quite a sparse hotel generally, as is the trend. If this was a workspace, which is what I'm particularly interested in, it wouldn't be a great one, because there's not a lot to engage you. Of course, we're sitting amidst food, and you can select your own food, you can choose what you want and choose your own conversation.

So that's the key, having some control over your space?
Certainly. While this looks sparse, we are enriching it and we are empowered to enrich it. But if we put a few more plants and bits of artwork around the place, it would be interesting to see how people felt.

With a workplace, people have more opportunities for empowerment. Stepping back a bit, you run IDR – Identity Realization – looking at the psychology of working and living space. How did you get into that?
I got into it quite a while ago. I used to work in office design, and I saw how people used office space, how varied it was and how heuristic it was in terms of why people did what they did. Managers would say: 'We do it this way because this is how our industry does things.' You ask the designers, and they say, 'This is the latest thinking we have from our industry', but there is no science in it. It follows fashion and heuristics, and I suspected there had to be a better way of doing it rather than just putting people in a room. When you start to look at this fashionable idea of lean, clean space, it seems to have no psychological validity at all.

It's a purely modern trend?
No, it is far from being a modern trend. Lean allegedly came from the Japanese manufacturing model in the 1980s and 90s, yet its governing principles, the 'Five Ss', are explained in Frederick Taylor's 1911 book *The Principles of Scientific Management* in beautiful detail: *Sort* – you look at a workspace and you see what is needed for the job; everything else, pictures, food, drinks, anything apparently superfluous, you take out. Then you *Set* in order, so for example if somebody is right-handed you'd make sure you they were sitting in a right-handed workspace. Then *Shine* – you take everything off and clean – or shine – the workspace, so that managers can see that you're doing your job and nothing else. Then you *Standardise*, so that if you're in Leicester or Lima it's the same recognisable corporate space. Then *Sustain*, always said to be the hardest one – keep it going. Of course Sustain is difficult if you go into a workspace and mess around with it in this way, you generate the Hawthorne effect – a quick peak of interest and then a trough of disappointment, so Sustain is hard. But the psychologically interesting thing is that people still think, 'It must work'. We don't understand psychologically why putting someone in an impoverished space should work, when it doesn't work for any other animal on the planet. Put an ant in a lean jam jar or a gorilla in a lean cage and they're really miserable, so why should it work for people? So we started to experiment.

What were you expecting to find?
A crossover – that in lean, as with every other animal, well-being would fall, but we still suspected that productivity would rise. It didn't. Every time we've experimented, we've found well-being and productivity have been inextricably linked. Over eight years, lean has always, without exception, been the worst condition you can put anyone into. It's interesting when you look at other environments, lean has been kicked out years ago. Alex Haslam, Cath Haslam and I have worked with older adults in care, where the lean environment was effectively banned in 1948. Older adults live under a hotel model of care, more or less. But in offices, lean is continually reinvented as 'the thing'.

Is that simply because it's easier and cheaper to set up?
I don't think people are going in and saying: 'I'm a lean person, I've done the six sigma business management strategy course. I'm going to impose it, even though I don't think it's the right thing.' They're doing it because they believe in it, and I think some of that is based on heuristics, a lot of other people are doing it. But also, it's to do with identity realisation. The best space is where you can go and realise some of your identity – 'that's a bit of Jon, that's my picture of my kids, that's my souvenir from when I went to Mauritius…' Whatever that happens to be, that's your space. In a lean space, if you're a worker, there's absolutely none of that. But, if you're a manager, you've been on a course, you come back as a black belt in six sigma, you are massively empowered over a complete workspace, and it's hugely empowering to run that space.

So you've got that control that none of your workers have? I suppose another 'S' to chuck into it would be 'Surveillance'. A lot of office design came from the panopticon, didn't it? – the idea in 18th-century prisons of having one central tower, where the supervisor can efficiently watch over large numbers of inmates.
It didn't necessarily come from it, but the parallels are worthy of note, whether accidental or not. The whole idea of the panopticon was that you had this central tower with obscured glass windows, so guards could look out into the cells and the prisoners in those cells wouldn't know whether they were being monitored or not. Two guards could see twice as many cells as one guard, but of course no guards would be just as effective, because the prisoners don't know whether they're being watched or not. Foucault called it the perfect surveillance system. When you phone up to pay a bill, or your bank, and you hear 'this call may be monitored for training purposes', we want to know why, really. Why do we always monitor the poor buggers at the bottom of the heap? Why do we monitor the people who make the cheapest mistakes? The empowerment, the identity realisation, is vested very much in management, where it has been since the clerical job was Taylorised. When the job of a clerk was split into serial parts – filing, typing,

accounts, and so forth – the kudos that was vested in the job of a clerk went upstairs to management, where it has been ever since.

It's interesting to hear you talk about it in these terms, because I suppose a lot of psychology and science is probably in the service of management and the 'ruling classes'. A lot of occupational psychology is to do with management, so for you to talk about the identity and well-being of those at the bottom of the heap is quite unusual for our discipline.

I think you're right. I think that in some sense, psychology has abetted all this. We've developed psychometric tools, and so forth, which let management decide how they recruit, who they recruit, when they recruit. Psychometrics themselves are interesting, because some companies have either no faith or complete faith in them – either end of that spectrum has got to be wrong. With even the best personality test, all you're going to find out is what that person thinks they are like, not what they are actually like. So they're always going to be flawed. We haven't helped the cause sometimes. But some of the stuff – the stuff that Alex [Haslam] has done and Chris Baldry with some of his colleagues at the University of Stirling – has been brilliant, really seminal, and that's helped. We just think it's quite interesting if you put a scientific perspective, a psychological perspective, on office space, rather than looking at it through this rather distorted management lens.

So when you go into a company now, how do you add value? Does it boil down to 'put some plants over there', 'put some nice artwork up'?

It's funny, isn't it? If you've got a small company, six people sitting in an office, they will almost certainly do the psychologically best thing automatically – they'll talk about where they want to sit, what colours they should have, all the rest of it. But when you get to a medium-sized company upwards, say 30 people to three million people, suddenly it becomes one person's right to tell everybody else how they should work. It's a very simple thing that we need to do, but an incredibly complicated thing to put into place. People will turn round fearing anarchy and say, 'Look, we've got a thousand people here, how can you have a thousand people doing what they want?' First of all, we don't have a thousand opinions, we develop stronger social and corporate bonds working as teams. Secondly, if you turn that question on its head… how is it right for one person to tell a thousand people how they should work? It's farcical. So we're just examining a heuristic and seeing how it stands up.

So a lot of your work is about overcoming that resistance?

Well hopefully we're getting to the point now – with eight years of overwhelmingly consistent results – where we can go into a space and we can be pretty confident of

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how that space could be improved, what it is going to be like, and how people are going to feel. So we can go to less cooperative organisations and be fairly confident that we can improve their space, and show them the evidence.

And then you evaluate it after they've made those changes?

We always try to do things using the modesty of science, because although we haven't come across one yet, I'm sure somewhere in the world there is a lean space which operates better than anything else. So we'll always have the company view of what they think works best, the

scientific view of what works best, and then maybe a couple of others too, and then compare, just try to find the best use of that space. So we don't take the typical management consultancy approach of 'we know best, this is what you should do'. We can hypothesise what's going to happen, and then we can see.

When you make these changes, do you find that people don't just feel different, they act differently as well?

First of all, in terms of offices, people are consistently more productive. We've just finished a study with a large, international accountancy firm, and their productivity went up by 15 per cent. All we did was enrich the space: from a six sigma, very high-designed lean space, we just enriched it with plants. We didn't empower the staff, because I cocked up the experiment! We used seven-foot high, very heavy plants in pots. Comparing the enriched with the lean spaces, we found a 15 per cent increase in productivity. This is spot on the average increase that we have found from laboratory, to offices, to this latest study.

When we've worked with older adults in care, we have given them a say concerning their social space. Typically, when older adults move into a care home, or move between care homes, they retreat into their own space with its familiar artefacts. As a result, levels of social interaction fall, with one of the side-effects being increased risk of death. So the care organisation wanted to know if there was some way around this. When we empowered people within their own social space, there was much less retreating to their own room. Compared to the control condition, which had no additional empowerment, there were four times as many people using the social space at the key phase of the experiment. And now, you can go into the social space and find – on average – half of the residents using it.

It all links back, in terms of social interaction, to the working space and productivity. You think of high-profile cases, like at Apple when Steve Jobs introduced a central atrium with a water fountain, so the tech staff and design staff were forced to interact.

But that's interesting, because again you've got a manager saying 'I know what's best'. Whether it's benevolently applied or otherwise, the research suggests there's always a better way. Take these high-designed spaces – the classic example is the Google offices. All our

research suggests it's improved by letting people have a say in what is going on.

So it's all very well having table football, beanbags and a slide in the office, but...

Think about that for a minute – table football, a beer fridge, the slide… that could be designed by the guys from *Men Behaving Badly*! I haven't yet seen the opposite extreme where the company plays romantic comedies on the television, where Colin Firth lookalikes arrive to take you from one room to another, and where you've got white wine in the chiller! In Australia recently, somebody showed me around a table football, beer and ping-pong space. It was unsurprisingly dominated by men.

And I suppose a lot of the companies where we've heard they've done that kind of thing, they seem like quite male-dominated arenas. So the Lego head office looks fantastic to me, but would they to most women?

Would you want to go down a carbon-fibre slide in a skirt? Probably not. We had a female designer from Google, and she said, 'Look, Craig, what you don't understand is that Google is tribal.' I can buy that entirely. And if a tribal company is doing well, that's great. However, as soon as the company starts to deteriorate in terms of performance, then the fact that you're only picking certain types of people for the workforce, and *de facto* excluding most others, is unlikely to do your business much good at all. So the sexiest-designed offices aren't the best-functioning offices. You don't live in a showhouse, you always mess around with it to make yourself more comfortable.

How much empowerment is too much empowerment? If it is an office that everyone has to work in, is it possible to give somebody too much control over their working space?

What tends to work is making your decisions as a group. It's not a case of us and them – we're not saying to management 'Give up this power'. We're saying share the power. So suddenly you are developing a group sense of shared space. If you look to Cath Haslam and colleagues' work with reminiscence amongst the elderly, all the evidence

suggests that reminiscing as a group is most effective in terms of well-being and social cohesion. Similarly at work, if you work together as a group, you develop group bonding. If the organisation facilitates this bonding, then you can reasonably expect to see enhanced team *and* organisational identity. So empowerment becomes a group activity rather than an individual pursuit. If someone has, say, a calendar that someone objects to, you talk about that in the group. If you and I work together, and I like pink and sharp and spiky and noisy and you like clean and lean and monochrome and quiet, then we're going to fall out developing our adjoining individual spaces – it's much better if we can come to a mutual decision.

So if we think of 'sick building syndrome', that's perhaps about working relationships rather than the environment?

Look, you can get Legionnaires disease from air-conditioning, there's no doubt about that. If you have that, you're going to be a poorly rabbit whether you're empowered or not. But what the research shows is fascinating. You can take an identical space, and you just move plants in or out, and people can feel significantly sicker – headaches, dry throat, too hot, and so forth – simply according to whether or not plants are there.

I should stress that all the research we do is based on a between-participant design. So it's not that we take the same people, given them plants and they feel better – the people in the lean condition aren't aware that there is any other condition available to them. In many ways our results are not that surprising. Think of the benefits of green space when it's outside! When you view management practice through a scientific lens, a lot of it suddenly looks like nonsense.

This work has led to you having some quite unusual funders, hasn't it? I didn't even realise there was such a thing as plant rental!

We would have been lost without Ambius! It's quite interesting how our relationship came about. Because we're psychologists and we have small purses, we thought, 'What can we do to enrich a space cheaply?' We could have used different carpets, paint, screens, all kinds of things. But plants were cheap, portable, and we thought we could get a big bang for our buck. And we did. So this company, which was at the time Rentokil Initial Tropical Plants, became interested in what we were

doing. They've been brave, because all we do is our science as impartially as possible, and we could have found that their plants were rubbish, but we haven't.

So you've looked at the working space and care of the elderly – are there any other environments you can see these principles extending to?

Lean, as I said, came from Taylor. And lean doesn't work in offices. Maybe lean doesn't work in factories either. I'm looking at your iPhone, and thinking of all these suicides in the factories in China, which may in part be due to their notoriously lean production methods which date back to Taylor. We're talking to a company at the moment, and we're looking for them to give us three production lines in well-separated areas. The control we're going to keep as lean; the second we are going to enrich; but the third we're going to hand over to the workers. In essence our hypothesis is that the production line which is empowered will be the best of the three.

We're not saying we know best, we're saying we think this might work better, but let's see. If you just look at it scientifically, if lean workspaces don't seem to work, then why should lean production methods work any better?

I think that's the most interesting part of our discussion, about looking through the lens of management and you taking that different perspective.

I suppose I'm being a little too generalist in equating management with lean, and design with enrichment. There's a huge grey area between the two. There is some truly horrible lean design, and very empowered management space. You've only got to read people like Tom Peters, a US writer on business management practices, to realise how empowered management can be. However, the imposition of any business system is usually viewed through the management lens. It may be more or less benevolent, but management remains at the forefront of where the control lies.

Are you happy with your own working space?

Yes and no. I can look at my working space and think 'this is appalling', but it's entirely within my remit to change it. Sexy design is all for people Paul Morrell, former Chair of the British Council for Offices, called the 'self-managed, self-monitored privileged few'. The poor buggers at the bottom of the food chain – the over-managed, over-monitored majority – are still working in conditions essentially unchanged for over a century.

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