

## **Putting power in its place: The centrality of edgelands**

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### **Abstract**

Many organizations use spatial reconfiguration as an attempt to transform and modernize their work practices and external image. While most studies have focused on the way high status new offices are used to showcase putatively changed organizational practices, less attention has been paid to the peripheral sites which service them. Drawing on a longitudinal ethnographic study of an initiative to modernize a UK local authority via spatial redesign, we analyse the relationship between a new strategic centre office building and a paper storage unit situated in an 'edgeland'. Edgelands are interfacial areas between town and country and are sites where essential but despised functions are located (Shoard, 1992). Based on an understanding of power as something that is created through relationships with nonhuman actors, we foreground the spatial and temporal agency of buildings, artefacts and places. We show how 'modernization' involves attempts to create a purified space constructed only from human and material actors deemed 'modern', and expel that which is designated as outdated. In our study, the edgeland site functioned to maintain the centre as a pristine environment in which fluid networking could flourish, and preserve the external image of the

organization as transformed and modernized. Thus, we illustrate the dependence of high status workplaces on functions, objects and people which contradict projected desired images.

## **Keywords**

Organizational space, power, edgelands, centre, periphery, actor-network theory, modernization

## **Introduction**

This paper investigates how spatial reconfiguration was used as an attempt to modernize a UK local authority organization. It focuses on the relationship between two separate but connected workspaces: an architecturally state-of-the-art headquarters which accommodated strategic managers and was located in the county town, and a peripheral unit that serviced it. This unit was created to store large volumes of paper-based files and was located in an isolated warehouse situated in an out-of-town 'edgeland' – an 'interfacial' area, neither town nor country, in which necessary but distasteful functions are dumped, 'lest they despoil preferred environments' (Shoard, 2002, p. 122).

Recent analyses of organizational space have focused on new offices introduced as strategies for dismantling bureaucratic hierarchies, shaping flexible, energized networks and transforming the identity of organizations. As Dale and Burrell (2008, 2010) note, the growth in such workspaces has been furthered by the work of the influential architect Frank Duffy (1997), who advocates open design and 'uplifting' collective areas in the 'new office' to facilitate 'interactive, complex, open-ended teamwork' and 'not reflect hierarchies or status' (p. 56). Studies which have commented critically on such new workspaces typically follow Kornberger and Clegg (2004) in assuming that 'power is inscribed into the heart of spatial organization' (p. 1104), conceptualizing them as 'materializations of power relations' (Taylor & Spicer, 2007, p. 332) or 'bright Satanic offices' (Baldry, Bain & Taylor, 1998) which facilitate surveillance and control. As powerful symbolic resources which express the

intended identity of the organization (Berg & Kreiner, 1990; Yanow, 1998), work buildings can be used to signal 'the change from industrial production towards knowledge development, services and innovation' (van Marrewijk, 2011, p. 72) and legitimize the organization's standing in civic society (Dale & Burrell, 2010). Taking a productive view of power, Kornberger and Clegg (2004) also claim that designs with ambiguous spaces and boundaries can be 'generative', fostering open-ended, collaborative inquiry. Cairns (2002) reflects on the dichotomy between interpretations of 'new offices' as either controlling or empowering, and argues that neither view can be assumed to be correct, but as 'framed by different contexts of thought and action' (p. 808).

As Taylor & Spicer (2007) point out, most studies of organizational space focus on the 'micro' scale, concerning the social life emerging within the walls of particular workspaces. This perpetuates what Ashcraft (2007) terms the 'container metaphor', a misunderstanding of the organization as 'a finite place where work gets done, and culture as a reality emerging among those who work within the borders of that space' (p. 11). Assuming that organization is 'contained' in this way leads to the neglect of the movement and simultaneity inherent in organizing (Czarniawska, 2004) and also allows the power relations which *establish* boundaries to be hidden (Gregson & Rose, 2000; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1995). As Gupta and Ferguson (1992) put it, '[t]he presumption that spaces are autonomous has enabled the power of topography to conceal successfully the topography of power' (p. 7).

This paper focuses on how boundaries are established and maintained, and who and what are included and excluded. Our analysis draws on a wider study of a UK local authority, Western County Council (WCC), whose acquisition of a new office building, Enterprise House, enabled all managers whose roles were defined as 'strategic' to be brought together. The new centre was officially presented as something which would encourage fluid networking among senior managers, reduce hierarchy and 'silo' working, and represent the organization to the outside world as modern and flexible. WCC's decision to refashion its workspace aligned with then current Government guidance in which 'asset management' was framed as an important strategy for the modernization of

the public sector. Local authorities were issued with guidance and exemplars of 'good practice' (e.g. Allen, Bell, Graham, Hardy & Swaffer, 2005), often drawing on Duffy's (1997) approaches to spatial design, and organizations which were judged to have responded appropriately were rewarded with national recognition and new freedoms in terms of capital borrowing. In WCC, many of the new occupants of Enterprise House claimed that paper documents were needed for the proper performance of their work, but these became the target of repeated and sustained managerial efforts to eradicate them. Three years after Enterprise House was occupied, the Records Management Unit (RMU) was created as a repository for such 'surplus' paperwork, and located in the periphery of the town.

We have found that work in social geography and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has been of most use in making sense of the organizational features of these changes. Although these literatures operate at different scales, they share basic assumptions, which Law (1999) labels 'relational materiality' and 'performativity' (p. 3-4). In this understanding, entities do not have inherent qualities, but acquire their form and attributes in, by and through the performance of their relationships with other entities. Divisions and distinctions are recognized, but understood as effects or outcomes rather than essential differences. A relational understanding of space therefore treats space and social life not as distinct, mutually constitutive dimensions, but as the simultaneous coexistence of materially-embedded relations, so that 'the social and the spatial are inextricably realized one in the other' (Keith & Pile, 1993, p. 6). As Massey (2005) puts it, 'identities/ entities, the relations between 'them', and the spatiality which is part of them, are all co-constitutive' (p. 10). Abandoning taken-for-granted understandings of such basic categories as 'space' or 'materiality' and 'society' is tricky, as Latour (2005) admits. ANT addresses this problem by redefining 'social', not as a particular type of human 'stuff', but as the formation and undoing of associations between human and nonhuman entities. A consequence of this move is a reconsideration of agency, simply as 'making a difference', and in turn that 'any thing that modifies a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor' (Latour, 2005, p. 71).

We make three contributions. First, we show how a new strategic group was created, with the aid of a building which supplied a physical boundary for it. Enterprise House enabled new forms of power to emerge, including the ability of senior managers to redefine themselves as mobile, flexible and active. The building itself became a 'macro-actor' (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009, p. 474) or 'spokes-object' (Cooren, Brummans & Charrieras, 2008, p. 1360) which could authoritatively represent the organization. Second, we illustrate how space is meshed with time and the temporal agency of places. In our case, managers made repeated attempts to maintain the strategic centre as a 'pure', modern workspace, including banishing the paper files that could contaminate it to a distance where they could be used, but not seen. Modernization involved attempts to concentrate and purify human and material actors deemed 'modern' and exclude what was designated as outdated. Our third contribution relates to the edgeland site we consider. Although millions of people work in or visit them, edgelands have so far been an ignored, 'untranslated landscape' (Farley & Roberts, 2011, p. 5), not only in organization studies, but generally. Central to the literature on social space is the proposition that space is '*actually constructed out of, is a product of, the relations between social phenomena*' (Massey, 1995, p.1; italics original). Our exploration of this previously unanalysed site illustrates how tight managerial controls articulated with agencies associated with the edgeland's agglomeration of industrial sites and manual trades (such as the smell emanating from a sewage works) to confine and isolate employees.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In order to locate our study within the growing literature on organizational space, we begin by briefly setting out our assumptions. We then consider two relevant trends in the configuration of organizational space, as something to support networking and movement, and the creation of discrete, 'purified' spaces aiming to fulfil official intentions. Turning to the next area of literature, ANT, we consider how power and agency emerge from relationships between humans and nonhumans (such as buildings, spaces and other artefacts). Following a description of our research methods, we present our case study. In the subsequent discussion we argue that our case demonstrates the value and importance of taking account of peripheral edgelands in studies of organizations.

## Space as relational

As Unwin (2000) points out, the idea that space is socially produced has become foundational in social geography, and is frequently claimed without apparent need for justification. However, this broad claim encompasses a range of theoretical standpoints. In this paper, we proceed from a relational understanding of space as 'the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny' (Massey, 2005, p. 9). Space is therefore complex, heterogeneous, emergent, and active, because the space we create has 'an impact back upon the structuring of society and of our lives' (Massey, 1995, p. 1). A consequence of a relational position is that all essentialist divisions (between agency and structure, human and nonhuman, and materiality and sociality) should be understood as effects or outcomes, rather than as a priori distinctions (Law, 1999). These include the conventional dualism between space and time, which Massey (1993) suggests frames space as passive, something that is worked on and changed by time. Reformulating the relationship, Massey (1993) argues that '[i]t is not that the interrelations between objects occur *in* space and time; it is these relationships themselves which *create/define* space and time (Stannard, 1989, cited in Massey, 1993, p. 154.). Gregson and Rose (2000) use a performance metaphor to illustrate such a relational understanding: 'performances do not take place in already-existing locations: the City, the bank, the franchise restaurant, the straight street. These 'stages' do not pre-exist their performances ... rather, specific performances bring these spaces into being' (p. 441).

Since space is an ongoing product of inter-relations, it is 'by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation' (Massey, 1993, p. 156). Lefebvre's (1991) work, 'The Production of Space', has been influential in drawing attention to the power of (specifically) capitalist relations to configure the built environment, and, through it, exert control over everyday routines and understandings. For Lefebvre (1991), capitalism dominates, so that the production of space refers to the 'structuration

and rationalization of social relations according to the abstract spatiotemporal logic of capital accumulation' (Brenner, 1997, p. 141). Critiques of Lefebvre's work acknowledge the significance of capitalists' actions, but argue that space is constructed through struggles among capitalists, politicians, managers, workers and nature (Harvey, 2006), so that '[t]he world is not simply the product of capital's requirements' (Massey, 1995, p. 7). Further, Unwin (2000) argues that Lefebvre's (1991) emphasis on space as a final 'product' leads again to a dichotomy between the materiality of space and social relationships, an understanding which has also skewed studies of organizational space which draw on Lefebvre (Beyes & Steyeart, 2012).

### ***Modernizing space***

Continuous struggles to mould space draw on dominant understandings of how space and social processes interrelate, producing taken-for-granted ways of modernizing space. Harvey (1973, 2005) uses the term 'spatial fix' to refer to the institutionalized spatial configuration that is widely presumed to align with the requirements of production at a particular time. Currently, shifts in the mode of production to 'post-Fordism' (Harvey, 1990) or 'neo-capitalism' (Lefebvre, 1991) are alleged to have produced what Castells (1996) calls the 'space of flows' (p. 378), a spatial logic which aims to support movement and fluid interaction. Cities and their interconnecting routes have become 'smooth, frictionless spaces that hurry the postmodern subject onwards like a slippery slope' (Buchanan, 2005, p. 19). To participate in the network society, organizations must also be configured as 'network' forms, Castells (1996) argues, and the design of cities has been matched by interior design which likewise is 'characterised by the freedom of movement and action it purports to afford its citizens in leisure and work' (Pimlott, 2007, p. 9).

While acknowledging 'the establishment of new power-invested spatial configurations', Massey (2005, p. 93) suggests that arguments for a space of flows slip into normative judgements about spatial evolution or progress, and thus assumptions that particular places are more or less 'advanced'. Labelling places as 'behind' or 'backward' is a rhetorical move common to modernization discourses, applied to those who need to be 'brought up to date'. As Massey (2005) points out, such arguments

present 'behind' places as a being at a different (earlier, less advanced) point in time, rather than as places which are unique and have the potential to develop in their own way. Modernizing discourses thus convert space into time, because coexisting heterogeneity is reformulated as 'different stages in a single temporal development' (p. 69). This frames those targeted for modernization as inferior, 'incapable of shaping their own history, let alone of influencing developments elsewhere' (Harvey, 2006, p. 72).

The momentum to realign space as a support for flows articulates with a parallel trend towards the 'purification' of space, which divides it into discrete, single-purpose realms (Sibley, 1988). Spatial separation between conception and execution is a dominant, purified spatial structure, referred to as the 'linear' model (Massey, Quintas & Wield, 1992). In this spatial logic, innovation is assumed to arise from interaction between elite workers, whose demands for high status workspaces in pleasant locations must be met in order to attract and retain them. The creation of strategic headquarters also creates production-only outposts, which require a less skilled workforce and can be located in inexpensive areas. Headquarters sites tend to present themselves as the locus of control over strategy, finance and innovation, and thus they may be able to assume a dominant relation to other sites. Giddens (1984) argues similarly that those who occupy spatial centres assume control over resources and 'employ a variety of forms of social closure to sustain difference between themselves and those in peripheral regions, who are effectively treated as inferiors or outsiders' (p. 131).

Attempts to purify space in this way help to explain both the bland homogenization we associate with 'non-places' (Augé, 1995) and fragmentation and inequality between spaces, which Lefebvre (1991) describes as 'hierarchical, ranging from the lowliest places to the noblest, from the tabooed to the sovereign' (p. 282; see also Brenner, 1997). As Massey (2005) insists, though, such spaces 'can never be definitively purified' (p.95) and dominant relations cannot be secured.

Duffy (1997) advocates a 'design logic' which specifies a technique for the purification of organizational space. According to this logic, office workers can be classified according to the degree of interaction and autonomy required by their work and then located in separate buildings designed to support it. Thus, high status 'transactional knowledge' work, involving 'highly intellectual

staff [and] open-ended problem-solving' (p. 65) should be located in city-based headquarters buildings, whereas unskilled 'individual process' work should be based in 'hives' located 'away from the creative teams and decision-makers' (p. 57) in 'cheaper office accommodation out of town' (p. 61). Duffy claims that over time this model will reduce hierarchical differences because 'individual process' work will progressively disappear as it is either automated or moved offshore.

### **Agency, materiality and power**

We now consider Actor-Network Theory (ANT), because it addresses directly the problem of how to conceptualize 'spatial' and 'social' as integrated, and because it enables us to conceptualize the roles played by buildings, spaces and other nonhumans in the formation of organizational power and control. Like Nimmo (2011), we use ANT as part of a wider repertoire of ideas and do not seek explicitly to add to this body of theory (he calls this an 'ANT-ish' (p. 114) study, a term which also fits our purpose well).

As Latour (2005) explains, in ANT, 'the social' is understood as the formation of associations between entities. A consequence of this definition is that 'there exists no relation whatsoever between 'the material' and 'the social world', because it is this very division which is a complete artifact' (p. 75-76). In a departure from conventional sociology, nonhumans are regarded as active agents in the formation of associations. For Giddens (1984), while agency 'refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place' (p. 9), as Robichaud (2006) points out, Giddens maintains that agency is something only possessed by humans, because only they are knowledgeable, reflexive and purposive. In ANT, humans must enter into relationships with nonhumans in order to become agents, and all action is a 'hybrid phenomenon', because it 'mobilizes the participation of entities with variable ontologies (material, discursive, human, nonhuman)' (Cooren, 2006, p. 82; Cooren, 2004; Cooren, Taylor & van Every, 2006a; Robichaud, 2006). When agency is shared between humans and nonhumans, a new, third agent emerges out of the connection (Latour, 1994), in which both are redefined. Machines, tools,

documents, architectural elements and artefacts more generally can all make a difference, because they can authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on (Latour, 2005, p. 72).

Nonhumans are central actors in the formation and maintenance of organizational control, because their durability and transportability enable a degree of stability over time and across space that could not be achieved through human face-to-face interactions alone. People are ingenious when it comes to producing technological and textual devices which aim to fulfil their intentions, a process termed imbrication (Cooren, 2006; Taylor & van Every, 2000). Objects imbricated with particular intentions thus enable people to act at a distance and over time by appropriating the action of other actors. Indeed, Cooren (2006) argues that:

... what characterizes the organizational world precisely lies in these various attempts to control from a distance and through time what humans and nonhumans are doing in the name of their organization (or at least their supervisor). (p. 96).

Action is more likely to be appropriated if the nonhuman actor 'appears to be official, that is, coming from some authorities who had it specifically designed for that purpose' (Cooren, Thompson, Canestraro & Bodor, 2006b, p. 537). Some agents may cohere into a 'macro-actor' (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009, p. 474) with the capacity to act in the name of an authority-rendering source, such as an organization or a policy. The existence of enduring hierarchies and asymmetries can only be explained if we take account of the agency of nonhuman actors (Latour, 1986, 2005) and enduring power comes from 'all the entities already mobilized to render asymmetries longer lasting' (Latour, 2005, p. 68).

Nonhuman actors are complex because they have multiple agencies packed into them which originate from past organizing (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009). As Latour (2005) writes, 'any given interaction seems to *overflow* with elements which are already in the situation coming from some other *time*, some other *place*, and generated by some other *agency*' (p.166). Some actors are

directly present, and some are only spectrally present; these 'dislocal' actors haunt the interaction (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009, p. 476). Latour (1999) gives an example by identifying a panoply of agencies connected with a speed bump, and which make slowing down happen. These include the speed bump itself, but also the driver, the citizens who requested the imposition of a speed limit, the authority which approved the installation of the speed bump, the work crew that made it, their tools (and so on). Most of these 'upstream' actors come from another time, but are spectrally present in the sense that the driver recognizes the injunction made by the speed bump. Czarniawska (2004) refers to this complex, folded, multiple *times*, all existing concurrently in the here and now, as 'kairotic time', which 'jumps and slows down, omits long periods and dwells on others' (p. 775). This links well with Massey's (1993, 2005) argument that space is not 'not time', but the meeting up of different histories.

## **Research design**

### ***The places***

The strategic centre building we investigate was originally commissioned by X-En, an energy supplier, and, according to the architect who led the design team, aimed to stimulate a more flexible, networked organizational culture in X-En. However, due to unforeseen fluctuations in the price of energy, X-En went into administration before the building was completed, and it was put on the market at a cheap price. It was purchased by WCC to accommodate 'strategic' employees, supporting staff and councillors. The design specification was modified to include a council chamber and the building was renamed 'Enterprise House'.

Staff moved from the 'old campus', a cluster of six buildings of different vintages, each of which housed employees from a single directorate. Using what was termed the 'principle of occupation', staff whose responsibilities covered the whole of the County were defined as 'strategic' and were moved to Enterprise House. Senior managers fought off several attempts by staff whose roles did

not fit this strategic definition to move into the new building. The managers openly insisted that the strategic 'purity' of the building must be maintained to enable anticipated benefits to be achieved. Enterprise House thus facilitated a spatial reconfiguration based on the 'linear model' (Massey et al., 1992), with creativity and innovation presumed to arise from serendipitous encounters between high status staff members. WCC was an interesting site for researching spatial modernization because the design of both the new centre and the wider organizational configuration appeared to have been strongly influenced by Duffy's (1997) 'design logic', and aligned with Allen et al.'s (2005) recommendations for 'good practice' in spatial redesign in the public sector.

Early interactions with the architect and senior managers involved with the design and commissioning of Enterprise House led us to regard them as 'organization designers', concerned with the simultaneous redesign of the physical environment and organizational processes. They granted a high level of research access to all WCC's buildings in return for periodic reports detailing our analysis. We attributed this to the pride that they expressed in Enterprise House and the fact that it had become the focus of admiring interest. This came from representatives of other local authorities who visited it, and also from the wider public, with Enterprise House being described by a local media outlet as '[a] revolutionary new building of international standard<sup>ii</sup>'. Three years later, Enterprise House had assumed a central role for the Council, housing civic events and art exhibitions, and acting as a media 'hub' from which local and regional broadcasts were made.

Prior to the move to Enterprise House, an official 'de-cluttering' exercise encouraged staff to dispose of surplus paperwork, and during the early phase of occupancy, the organization designers made concerted attempts to minimize the visible presence of paper artefacts in the building. Initially, these efforts were successful. Three years after the initial occupancy, however, many work areas were again submerged beneath paper files. As a further attempt to rid the workspace of these objects, the RMU was created and quickly relocated to Cliffedge Business Park at the extreme margin of Weston. Two years after the fieldwork had ceased, we discovered that the RMU site had been abandoned, and the function of file storage and retrieval had been outsourced to an

organization for which this activity was core. We had been researching a moribund organizational function.

### ***Fieldwork and analysis***

We used an ethnographic approach to investigate the spatial reconfiguration of WCC. Watson (2011) advises that in order to find out 'how things work' in organizations, 'we must get close to human action and interaction' (p. 204) – to which we would add, the actions and interactions of nonhumans. Nimmo (2011) suggests that ethnographic methods are suited to 'ANT-ish' studies, because they share an interest in the messiness of reality, a preference for induction and an emphasis on meticulous description.

In our study, fieldwork was conducted by the first author over a period of three years. It included two phases of intensive interviews and participant-observation, corresponding with the final stages of the design of Enterprise House and its initial occupancy, and, three years later, the reconfiguration of the organizational periphery. Fieldwork included 46 semi-structured interviews, ranging from 55 minutes to 2 hours, conducted with a total of 40 employees. Most interviewees participated voluntarily by responding to an item posted on the Council's intranet about the research project. Participant-observation involved travelling to, and working in, WCC's buildings, attending formal and informal meetings, doing administrative work relating to the research project, and shadowing organizational members. This close involvement put the researcher in a situation where she might possibly witness the elusive 'social', 'at the meeting point when new associations are sticking the collective together' (Latour, 2005, p.159). The longitudinal research design enabled us to analyse successive sociomaterial 'enactments' (Leonardi & Barley, 2010), but our start and endpoints were nonetheless arbitrary, and we acknowledge that there is 'no essence that [we] might reveal in time' (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 786).

All interviews were professionally transcribed and the length of interview transcripts ranged from 8,000–12,000 words. Fieldnotes were also compiled throughout the period, recording details of conversations, places, buildings and other everyday artefacts such as road signs, windows, computers, files, storage cabinets, cartoons (etc.) and their participation in social life. This large volume of documentary material ‘concretized’ fleeting experiences into a form which we could subsequently contemplate, assess and manipulate (Cooren et al., 2006b, p. 545). The ‘memory’ these texts provided was invaluable, especially since we initially presumed that the edgeland was insignificant.

According to Latour (2005), fieldwork and analysis involves tracing the connections formed within and between human and nonhuman actors. In the first phase of fieldwork, significant human actors were the ‘organization designers’ who spoke of how Enterprise House could catalyse the modernization of WCC. These were WCC’s Chief Executive and Director of Communications, as well as the lead architect and facilities management consultant (both of whom had transferred from the previous X-En owned phase). Important nonhuman actors were Enterprise House itself – its spaces, the artefacts inside it (turnstiles, desks, bridges, storage cabinets, etc.) and its environs. In the second phase, both the senior managers interviewed had left for high status jobs in new organizations and the task of implementing the continuing spatial reconfiguration had been devolved to a new department created specifically for this purpose.

The RMU investigation introduced new interviewees and new nonhumans (lorries, dust, and unpleasant-smelling air). Although objects are mute, Latour (2005) identifies particular points in their life cycle at which they are ‘talkative’. When they are being designed, ‘objects live a multiple and complex life through meetings, plans, sketches and trials’ (p. 80). Inexpert users can disrupt, or be disrupted by, unco-operative objects, and when objects break down, we notice their agency through its decline or withdrawal. In our analysis we focused on the negotiations through which decisions about design were made, ways in which occupants folded space and artefacts into their everyday practices, and the structures that became institutionalized over time.

As a participant-observer, the researcher formed new networks in the organization, introducing new agencies from present and 'dislocal' actors (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009) (such as digital recorders, the professional transcriber and the textual codings used to analyse the empirical materials). The author was also explicitly required to provide periodic research reports to WCC's managers. As Hardy, Phillips and Clegg (2001) write, '[t]ransplanting the results of the study back into the network is a political act' (p. 552) and in our case, one such report which commented on the work conditions in the RMU was rapidly followed by the discontinuation of research access. In the context of pressure on local authorities to avoid a 'bad press', a text drawing attention to poor working conditions in the Council and which could have been replicated into multiple sites with a mouse click had potentially significant agency. We suspect that the report was then quashed, and it may possibly have speeded the closure of the Unit.

In our attempts to understand events in WCC, we were initially inclined to focus mainly on the exciting new 'container' for strategic managers, since this appeared to be the principal site of interest to organizational members, the local media and research audiences. The edgeland site seemed, in contrast, to be epiphenomenal to the spatial modernization of the organization. This ejection from the field caused us to puzzle over the role of the RMU, and eventually to conclude that it was central to the ongoing modernization project in WCC.

## **Spatial modernization in WCC**

### **Centre**

Enterprise House is located near the centre of Weston, where it forms part of a 'civic quarter', including the new County Court, the Police HQ and several car parks. Easily accessible by road and rail, Enterprise House is connected to neighbouring regions, enabling its occupants to move easily between it and other powerful centres.

The building is constructed mainly from frameless window walls, so that its internal structure and even people moving around within it are visible from the outside. A popular architecture website described Enterprise House as '[m]odern and elegant, this is new-look local government ... more like a smart corporate headquarters than a centre of regional government'. Its design implies 'a story of social difference' (Yanow, 1995, p. 414) in which association with it 'confers the social status represented by the edifice and its decor' (p. 411). The new building quickly became the standard way of representing the organization across the media.

The public entrance leads into the atrium, a very large, bright space, with light flooding through the glass roof and walls and reflecting off the pale, polished limestone floor. As well as fulfilling its purpose to 'make the whole organization visible to itself' (Duffy, 1997, p. 30), the atrium 'manages an exhilarating civic presence', as the architecture website enthused. From the 'holding pen', the route into the building proper leads through card-operated turnstiles into the central concourse.

Employees based at Enterprise House are issued with a pass that they carry on a lanyard worn round the neck. WCC's 'core values' are woven into the cloth of the lanyard: 'I deliver excellent results; I put customers first; I work for a team with no boundaries; I learn, I adapt, I create'.

Bridges and stairs zigzag across the atrium, giving access to the four floors of offices lining each side of the building. Breakout areas with kitchen facilities are situated outside each office. Works of contemporary art are placed throughout the building, implying an overlap between work and pleasure, and the presumption that occupants are cultivated, sophisticated individuals. Employees gain entry into the office areas using their swipe cards, which release the glass doors. Each office is lined with a row of small meeting rooms with glazed sliding doors, with the rest of the floorplate being taken up with small desks arranged in 'benches' of eight. There are low level storage cabinets between the benches, but no partitions, so that it is possible to see across the entire floorplate.



Enterprise House: the restaurant



Enterprise House: the atrium

In the early stages of occupancy, the organization designers talked frequently about the contrast between Enterprise House and the old campus. They argued that the separate, dated buildings of the old campus had separated and enclosed managers, encouraging 'silo' working and a false sense of complacency. Their lack of engagement with anyone other than their immediate colleagues had created an isolated organizational culture which had fallen behind other local authorities. Simon, the Project Consultant, compared WCC unfavourably with the defunct energy company, X-En, saying that 'they are ten years behind them on the cultural change journey'.

The organization designers presented the new building as a moral project which could speed up WCC's 'cultural change journey', transform the services it provided and ultimately induce a shift in the social character of the County, from what James (the Chief Executive) described as a 'sleepy backwater' into 'vibrant, high ambition communities' where people's life chances would be enhanced.

Simon paraphrased the official 'vision' for the strategic centre:

.. we had a vision for moving into this building which was, we're not just building a building or even just building an office ... it's about creating a work environment that will help encompass and stimulate cultural change and values and ultimately a service to the citizens of Westshire.

The new 'work environment' was framed as active, an intervention which was associated with a reborn and redeemed, ideal organization (Jeffcut, 1993), transforming its relationships with staff, the public of the County, and the agencies and Government partners with which the Council collaborated.

The organization designers appeared confident that Enterprise House would stimulate the emergence of fluid networking practices, and a shared sense of raised ambition and team spirit. James spoke fervently about how its open spaces enabled him to reconceptualize and enact his leadership role in ways that would not have been possible on the old campus:

At my level, being a leader and a Chief Executive, actually it's about being around, it's about being visible, it's about being seen, it's about communicating. I love this building because it fits my style ... it gives us the capacity to bump into each other, the capacity to engage and discuss quickly with each other, the capacity to think, oh so-and-so, I really ought to have a word with them ... I tell you what, I'll just pop along and see them. I can see ten people in thirty minutes and I haven't got to engineer it, I just walk through the building. Actually that's the way in which I think you keep in touch with what's going on and what matters to people, and if that can convey a sense in reverse in which people can say to you what they feel, that's very important.

James's repetition of 'I can', 'I just', and 'the capacity to' suggest a sense of excitement about the new forms of agency that the building (its walkways, bridges, open floorplates, glass doors, etc.) shared with him. Dislocal actors can also be glimpsed in his statement which, although only 'spectrally' present, were authoritative sources in this situation (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009) – such as central government injunctions about modernization through enhanced flexibility and speed, recipes for enhancing creativity and innovation in public sector organizations (Newman, 2002), and the reproduction of Duffy's (1997) design logic itself.

Since similar hybrid agencies were, in principle, available to all staff using the building, it was argued that they would see the senior managers popping along and bumping into people, and would then feel permitted to follow suit. As Simon put it, 'by [the senior managers'] demonstration it becomes acceptable that this is the way we do things around here'. Enterprise House's sharing of agency with James constituted a 'new James', who, simply by walking around, provided a 'how to' demonstration to other staff about how they should now be behaving.

During the design phase, it had been decided to locate the kitchen facilities, toilets and breakout areas in the shared atrium space rather than within office areas, so that staff from separate departments would come into proximity as they shared these 'interaction promoting facilities' (Allen & Gerstberger, 1973). As Rory, the architect, argued, informal encounters were encouraged 'by bringing the tea points out into the space, to force [people] out into the space, they couldn't stay in their office areas'. By linking this aspect of the design with employees' biological needs, Rory seemed to attach their routines quite firmly to the organization designers' intentions. In the early phase of occupation, these informal spaces were busy with groups of people sitting together with drinks and notebooks. Simon suggested that 'they're already starting to realize the potential of those spaces, without us doing that much to promote it' and a story was circulating about a service improvement that had already resulted from an unplanned encounter at the 'tea points'.

Marcus, Director of Communications, compared the old and new workspaces on the basis of how they spoke to the outside world about the organization's status:

So if you were coming into dusty old Weston Court, that immediately says to you ... dusty, crusty, fallen-down, tatty, shabby. So what sort of service am I going to get from somebody here? Whereas if you go into glitzy, smart, efficient, modern, you think well these people must be pretty switched on, I'm not going to mess with these people.

Marcus seemed pleased with his new association, via Enterprise House, with a powerful, high status, combative identity. In this phase, all the organization designers exuded a confident, 'bullish' air,

presenting the entire building as an enormous manifestation of their own agency (Brown, 1997) and themselves as 'organizational heroes' (Cassell, 2005, p. 175).

### ***Managing recalcitrant practices and objects***

A considerable amount of thought appeared to have been devoted by the organization designers to the issue of tidiness. Despite the 'de-cluttering exercise', many staff arrived with volumes of files, books and other material resources. In common with many 'new offices', Enterprise House had a clear desk policy which was policed by a 'Building User Group' (BUG). The policy defined an escalating range of sanctions for individuals who failed to leave their workspace entirely clear of all paperwork and personal items, culminating in an order from the Director to 'move that stuff off', as Simon put it.

The question of how to maintain the tidiness of the building had also exercised the organization designers at the design stage. The tops of the storage cabinets were finished with sections of polished wood, and there had been intense debate over the question of whether to set them at an angle, so that objects placed on them would slide off. As Rory explained:

We all took a decision that the storage units would be low, so that people couldn't corral themselves in. But then, the decision was 'we'll put a timber top on it' ... and at first I thought well isn't that encouraging people to put paperwork on, but now I think it's a demonstration that your attitude is about instilling a sense of responsibility. If we'd made an angled top everybody would get irritated and try to get a way round it ... you're treated like adults and that's part of the culture change as well.

Initially, the researcher was puzzled by what seemed like an irrational preoccupation on the part of the organization designers (all of whom were high status, clever people) with the seemingly trivial issue of paperwork. However, they argued that surplus paperwork posed risks to both the desired new practices and the external image of the organization. Simon suggested that by piling things on

top of the units, people could 'create a virtual office' which would create a poor impression with visiting 'customers'. James argued that this risked losing 'the transparency and the capacity to work across, because some people will create six foot stacks around them and ... we don't need that, we don't want that'. In this context, the 'timber tops' debate is one about how the managers' intentions could best be imbricated into the timber tops, so that these risks could be minimized. An angled top would overtly imply a resistant user and would suggest mischievous workarounds (such as wedge-shaped adaptations restoring a horizontal surface) parodying this managerial assumption. The decision to create a flat top (and thus, a tempting but illicit surface) challenged employees to demonstrate their commitment to the project of the transformed organization through their most mundane practices.

In the early months of occupation, this combination of actors appeared to be effective and the new building looked tidy and minimalist. As Latour (2005) says, however, stability is not a norm, but something that 'has to be explained by costly and demanding *means*' (p. 35). Three years later, several means had disappeared: the BUG had been discontinued, and the two senior managers, James and Marcus, had left WCC. Many staff had 'nested' (Warren, 2006), and paperwork and personal items were stacked on and near their desks. This appeared to be a divisive issue. Some staff (particularly those with specialist or research roles requiring access to substantial printed resources) defended their entitlement to these materials. Others confided that papers and personal objects were effective deterrents to potential hot-deskers. Yet other staff appeared irritated by what they saw as the visual defilement of the workspace. As Claire (Transport Manager) stated:

You can still sit there and build your towers up with your paperwork and some senior people do do that. And you can see all their piles of paper and it just says inefficiency doesn't it, it says 'we are local government and we work in a mess and we don't really know what we're doing'. ... The public, other organizations are going to get the image that we work in a fantastic new building but actually it's the same old Council! One of our BVPIs<sup>iii</sup> is about the public's satisfaction with us as an organization. And often that's built on perception, that isn't built on reality of the services they get.

For Claire, paperwork implied the organization's failure to modernize ('the same old Council!'). This could have tangible effects in terms of a reduction in public satisfaction, and in turn a reduction in the amount of Government funding given to the Council. As Brummans' (2006) footnoted comment says, "Things" ... act, even if they are "lying around doing nothing" (p.198). Papers which were just 'lying around' appeared to be acting as 'mediators' (Latour, 2005, p.37) whose action is unpredictable. At this time, the RMU was expanded and relocated to Cliffedge Business Park at the margin of the town. Shoard (2002) advises us, 'if we visit the high street this will not give us a clear idea of what makes that town tick economically. You'll get a better idea by taking a trip to the interface' (p. 131). We do this now.

### **Periphery**

Cliffedge Business Park is situated in the outskirts of Weston, on a bulge of land banking the estuary. This area is mostly taken up with a 1930s housing estate, lacking in any shops or services and without an apparent 'centre'. Neighbouring workplaces are an HGV testing station, yards storing building materials and skips, and a sewage works. Behind these sites, a derelict railway runs through patches of scruffy wasteland. This place is an 'edgeland' (Shoard, 2002) or 'back zone' (Rosen, Orlikowski & Schmahmann, 1990) created when unwanted functions are 'pushed to the edges of town, pushed to less affluent adjacent municipalities, or architecturally screened from sight' (p. 75). Despite our dependence on the functions located in the edgeland, as Shoard (2002) observes, 'we somehow fail to register it on our retinas. .. [they] seem no more than repositories for functions we prefer not to think about' (pp.118-119).

Tom, a Records Management Officer, contacted Alison with an email which stated that he was 'happy to have a shadow'. When she first visited the RMU, it proved difficult to find, because of its peripheral location and the absence of any road signs indicating its presence. It was also hard to

know whether one had actually arrived, because the signboard at the entrance to the business park did not include the familiar WCC logo in the list of occupants. The business park consisted of two large warehouses, one elderly, dilapidated building close to the road and a newer, giant corrugated metal shed at the back. The buildings and surrounding car park were enclosed by spiked metal fences and barbed wire, with brambles encroaching onto the tarmac.



Unit 5, the RMU



The view from the carpark

The RMU was located in the new warehouse, in Unit 5. It consisted of two tiny offices in which Tom and his two colleagues sat, and a larger storage area taken up entirely with shelves stacked with files belonging to staff from Enterprise House and other Council offices. Tom's office had no windows and was lit by overhead strip lights. The only regular traffic between the RMU and other organizational sites was a van which visited every day to deliver and collect files. The manager, who was based in Enterprise House and oversaw a range of functions, including the RMU, visited occasionally.

The general atmosphere in the RMU combined industriousness, old-fashioned courtesy and humour. A continuous current of banter and tomfoolery included V signs, threats to drop trousers and satirical observations about the conditions in the workplace, such as references to it as a 'gulag'. On her first visit to the unit, the researcher was greeted with the remark 'Welcome to the shithole!' In an ethnographic study of humour in a Taylorized environment, Korczynski (2011) argues that humour shows 'an embodied knowledge of the alienating hierarchical context which confronts them' (pp. 1423-24). The RMU appeared to be such a

Taylorized environment. Tom described the entire work process of storing and retrieving files as seven short steps, a simple process that had to be repeated many times each working day, with complete accuracy.

The RMU drew our attention to a range of nonhumans which we did not previously think of as actors, but which made a difference in this situation. The physical conditions in the unit were austere, with several discomforts, such as artificial light, dust and cold. As Tom commented:

We managed to persuade them to put something in to make hot water, so you can make a cup of coffee. Apart from that it's ... as you can see... there's no sunlight in here. It's all overhead lights. The reason it's warm in here is I've had the fire on all morning. It's ice cold in here ... concrete floor, no heating inside.

The material resources provided by this environment appeared to be close to the minimum required for the function of storing and retrieving files. The immediate locale outside the building also seemed inhospitable, as Tom suggested:

We can't walk to the shops because there aren't any. You can't step out and do something because you've got lorries turning round here very fast. And you're lucky today the wind's blowing the other way. The sewage farm is just 200 metres over there. And ... Nick! Nick! What's it like here when the wind blows the wrong way? Stinks; he's very polite. It smells of the sewage farm and you can't go out because it's just rancid. So we start about quarter to nine, finish about quarter to five and I'll be in this office nearly all day.

As Shoard (2002) points out, waste-processing operations are often located in edgelands, in order to protect more valued environments. In the case of the RMU, the smell, danger and lack of amenities created by the jumble of work sites that made up the place, appeared to suppress a range of everyday activities for employees ('walk to the shops', 'step out', 'go out'). The RMU employees' daily negotiations with these nonhumans (the absence of amenities, lorries and the smell of sewage)

confined them within the warehouse, even though they reported that it too was a hostile environment.

A further difficulty associated with this work environment was its physical remoteness from other organizational sites and thus, its social isolation. Apart from direct colleagues working in the RMU, there was no one else to talk to. As Tom said:

Here we are totally isolated. There's absolutely nobody else up here with us. I don't even know anybody in the other units, we're like on our own. They won't even put a sign up at the main entrance to say we're here.

The absence of a sign is curious, because as Augé (1995) observes, modern spaces are full of signs directing appropriate behaviours among users. As Cooren (2004) also recognizes, texts are key to organizational control, because they represent the chain of actors involved in their production and are enduring. By remaining, textual agents 'invite or enforce humans to follow specific organizational pathways' (p. 388). The lack of a sign in a place specifically created to display such signs suggests that managers were inclined to hide the RMU, or at least were reluctant to draw attention to it.

Tom and his colleagues had attempted to exert influence by suggesting changes which could improve their work processes, and which appeared to be in the interest of the wider organization. Tom had a good working knowledge of IT and had offered to convert the paper-based file storage system then in use to electronic form. However, the response given by managers suggests that Tom's offer was framed as resistance which it was felt necessary to quash:

I was told that I was stepping out of my chair. There's no reward for me, there's no someone giving me ... a well done, here's a bonus or here's a promotion. I've actually been shooting myself in the foot basically because someone will take the idea and then they'll take it up.

Tom incurred the displeasure of managers in other ways. Prior to the move to Cliffedge Business Park, his emails concluded with a sign-off quoting Hebrews chapter 11, verse 11, '[t]he substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen'. This was reported by Tom's manager to the head

of Human Resources, who instructed him to remove it. He had also displayed smutty, humorous cartoons on his office wall, and had been ordered to remove them. Tom divulged that the manager at Enterprise House had told him that he was seen as 'trouble', which Tom construed as bullying.

Tom told the researcher about the physical symptoms he was experiencing:

All this morning since 11 o'clock, all I've been doing is filing. I know when I'm doing too much, I start grinding the back of my teeth. And I get a headache. The problem is, there's no job fulfilment for me. That's just me, I like to feel like I've done something useful with the day. Here, at the end of the day, I just think, thank God for that, one less day to do. I've gone back to taking sleeping tablets at night to put myself to sleep. (laughs) Just the thought of coming here sometimes is enough to keep me awake at night.

The headaches, sleeplessness and teeth-grinding he spoke of were perhaps an element of Tom's embodied knowledge (Harquail & Wilcox-King, 2010) of his workplace, some of which 'remains ineffable, residing in our bodies, perpetually escaping our ability to articulate it fully in words, yet still forming a significant part of our understanding' (p. 1620). These unwelcome nonhuman actors had contributed to Tom's decision to leave the organization. As he said, 'I'm going shortly - just going home! Bugger it, I've had enough!'. He seemed worried, though, about the colleagues he would leave behind and who had no similar means of 'escape', saying 'it's a dead end, there's nothing here for them'.

### **Discussion: The segregation of ancient and modern**

Our case illustrates how the strategic centre was created and became a key element enabling a wider concerted effort to transform a traditional local authority into a modern, networked organization. Enterprise House enabled an attempt to create a purified space including only strategic

staff, and the reconfiguration of the organization's spatial structure, aligned with the 'linear model' of innovation (Massey et al., 1992). Latour (2005) sets out the processes that take place when such new groups are formed:

.. groups are made to talk; anti-groups are mapped; new resources are fetched so as to make their boundaries more durable; and professionals with their highly specialized paraphernalia are mobilised. (p. 31).

Enterprise House supplied a durable boundary to help stabilize the definition of the strategic grouping. Workspace professionals (architects and facilities consultants) teamed up with senior managers to share their expertise in imbrication – how to make the building work as hard and as effectively as possible, so that the managers could 'control from a distance and through time what humans and nonhumans are doing in the name of their organization' (Cooren, 2006, p. 96). The old campus and the practices it was said to facilitate became an important 'anti-group' designated as 'empty, archaic, dangerous, obsolete' (Latour, 2005, p. 32). The modernized organization was thus defined simultaneously by its identity and alterity (Czarniawska, 2007) in this case as modern, flexible, networked and active, as opposed to 'behind', bureaucratic and shabby, reminiscent of a 'bureaucratic monastery' (Larsen & Schultz, 1990).

As Robichaud (2006) observes, the nonhumans to which people delegate agency may 'take on a life of their own in the sense that they may surprise their creators' (p. 107). Soon after it was occupied, Enterprise House emerged as a spatially and temporally active 'macro-actor' (Fairhurst & Cooren 2009, p. 474) capable of acting in the name of the organization because it was haunted by a variety of dislocal but authoritative agencies (such as central government), all representing public sector modernization. The building explicitly enabled an attempt to purify space in the way defined by the official 'principle of occupation' (strategic/ not strategic). As Latour (2005) argues though, time is folded into space because agencies from other times and places are worked into the nonhuman actors with which we share agency. As a 'macro-actor', Enterprise House also facilitated an attempt to purify time in this way. It concentrated a multiplicity of 'modern' agencies born in upstream

projects to advance networked organizations and excluded the dusty and ancient agencies of the old campus which were associated with old-fashioned bureaucracy. The organization designers framed the new office as something which could pull its occupants forward in time, from their previous situation of being 'ten years behind' the supposedly more advanced X-En.

Enterprise House came to stand metonymically for the organization, a 'charismatic element' (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009, p. 477) representing it to the public, media and other organizations. It shared 'leadership presence' with the senior managers – a quality that Fairhurst and Cooren (2009) argue 'resists essentializing because it derives from *in situ* attributions' (p. 484). As Robichaud (2006) suggests, actors are redefined through their relationships with other (hybrid) actors, and power is the result of action, not its source. WCC's senior managers presented themselves with unusual confidence and expansiveness, appearing to enjoy new powers deriving from the agency they shared with the building, and being redefined through their association with it. 'Tele-appropriation' (Cooren, 2006, p.82) seemed to be a form of power that was particularly satisfying for managers to exercise. The building, and its spaces and artefacts (the atrium, the lanyards, the tea points, the bridges and walkways) were always busy, working on the modernization of the organization – transmitting its image to the public, showing employees appropriate new behaviours and forcing them along predetermined routes, at the same time as enlivening their bodies and spirits.

The creation of the centre had neatly excluded much that was designated as dated (such as the old campus). However, the paperwork that many managers brought with them could not be excluded all in one go. As Edensor (2005) writes, '[o]ne of the ways of materially ordering the world and imprinting power on space is by making and enforcing decisions about what matter is waste' (p. 314), and in our case, managers defined paperwork as a form of waste. It became an issue which divided staff, and was referred to by those opposing its presence using rather exaggerated language (towers, six foot stacks, virtual offices), which seemed to imply its belonging to the ancient 'anti-group', speaking of the obsolete, 'behind' organization. The combination of actors deployed to suppress the appearance of papers (the timber tops, the BUG, the policy and the Director who haunted it) was notable in a building that was otherwise meant to imply new freedoms. Meier and Hill (2005, p. 52)

point out that the only difference between present-day bureaucracy and Weber's (1946) original ideal type is that the 'written files' that enable management of the office are now often replaced with equivalent documents provided in electronic form. This vestige of the old Council was perhaps seen to represent the (almost) bygone 'bureaucratic' spatial fix and provoked repeated attempts to push it off stage.

The timber tops are interesting nonhuman actors in this situation. They made a difference in a similar way to Latour's (1999) speed bump, which makes its presence felt when the motorist drives over it (especially if he or she is driving quickly. The imbrication of the timber tops with intentions of 'tidiness' was subtle, in the sense that they were designed to forbid action by permitting it; the equivalent to the physical jolt caused by the speed bump was the concealment of their beautiful polished surface. The timber tops performed this part of their intended work effectively when combined with other actors (such as the BUG) but without this extended team of humans and nonhumans, the agency that the architect spoke of melted away and they became instead a convenient flat surface. The timber tops perhaps did not make the authority of the organization present *enough*; and papers had other uses for people in structuring and reminding them of their work, and defending the personal territory of their desks.

The creation of the RMU, in which all surplus paperwork could be concentrated, can be seen as a form of bureaucratic 'goal displacement' in which an unanticipated problem created in one department is met with the creation of a new department (Selznick, 1949). Its location in the edgeland, where it was 'close enough to serve us, but far enough to be ignored' (Farley & Roberts, 2011, p. 193) and the absence of a sign meant that it was hard to find or to connect with the Council. The 'hiding' of the RMU may help to explain the managerial sensitivity around Tom's Hebrews quotation, which (as well as making reference to a religion) could have aroused readers' curiosity about the existence, location and nature of the RMU.

In contrast with the effort devoted to minute details of Enterprise House's design, little thought appeared to have gone into the design of the RMU. Shoard (2002) observes that the edgeland

'embodies naked function more than any other type of environment' (p. 122), and in the RMU, this 'naked function' was restricted to the intensive manipulation of large quantities of paper files. Like the shopfloor analysed by Collinson (1992), the RMU appeared to be a strongly controlled work environment. In addition, and as a result of its collocation with an assortment of industrial sites, it was populated by nonhuman actors which made a significant difference to RMU employees: the low temperature; lack of natural light; the smell of sewage; lorries turning in the car park; and dust. These actors were not consciously designed by managers (there was no managerial purpose behind the smell as there is in a shop where manufactured smells are pumped in to encourage people to buy), but they still had agency of their own, independent of any human intentions. These nonhuman actors which were just 'there' because they were features of the edgeland confined, intruded and caused illness. Leonardi and Barley (2010) suggest that when objects resist users' intentions, this 'does not mean that users are at [their] mercy ... only that they must adapt their practices accordingly' (p. 34). Occupants of the RMU might not have been at its mercy, but there appeared to be no obvious ways to 'work around' the difficulties it presented. These actors made a difference just as firmly as did the positioning of the tea points in Enterprise House, and on the same basis (biological, working on the body).

Tom and his coworkers attempted various strategies to increase their discretion and autonomy, and improve their working conditions. They worked hard; they indulged in humour and sought to imprint it on the workspace (using irreverent cartoons and the excerpt from Hebrews on email); and they achieved a small victory in securing a source of hot water. However, like the workers Collinson (1992) writes about, resistance and compliance co-existed in these practices. Tom's suggestion to convert the filing system into electronic form can be seen as compliant because it aligned with WCC's modernizing ambitions, but was also resistance to the official definition of his role and status. Exactly as Collinson (1992) describes, these attempts to defend against or circumvent their commodified status only appeared to justify the tight controls placed on them, which were then intensified, so that '[w]orkers' search for security reinforced the commodification

of their labour and reproduced their own material and symbolic insecurity' (p. 128). There was no evidence of an indulgency pattern (Gouldner 1954) and employees' own acts of resistance ground them down.

In his analysis of industrial ruins, Edensor (2005) argues that in 'exhibitionary spaces' (such as shopping malls and museums), 'objects are deliberately spatialized so that they serve as aesthetic focal points or forms of functional apparatus' (p. 312). When carefully placed against each other and against uncluttered backgrounds, 'the excessive sensual and semiotic effects of objects can be purified to single meanings and purposes' (p. 312). In order for this purification to be achieved, the expulsion of waste, or 'yet to be disposed of objects' (p. 311) is needed. Thus, the RMU in our case can be seen as a container for the 'yet to be disposed of' human and material spoil of the paper-storage function, in an attempt to maintain the purity, intelligibility and agency of the modern, 'exhibitionary' strategic centre. A further attempt at disposal, or the purification of the organization's space, was subsequently made in the contracting out of the function, in line with Duffy's (1997) prediction about the likely trajectory of 'hives' (p. 61).

'Yet to be disposed of' status invites further exploration. Bauman (1993) comments on the vexing problem of dealing with strangers, people in the middle ground between neighbours and aliens, and suggests that the prevalent Western strategy is 'anthropoemic' (derived from the Greek 'to vomit').

Thus:

.. we throw the carriers of danger up – and away from where the orderly life is conducted; we keep them off society's bounds – either in exile or in guarded enclaves where they can be safely incarcerated without hope of escaping. (p. 163).

The edgeland of the modern landscape obliges, since it 'relishes what other landscapes vomit up and ... laughs at current notions of taste' (Shoard, 2002, p. 133). We think that other examples of the 'not yet disposed of' condition exist. Sinclair's (2003) peregrinations around

the London Orbital take in the abandoned mental asylums, built on the sites of former leper hospitals, which form a necklace around the extreme outskirts of London. Illustrating the potential costs of this strategy, the ancient Greek Spartans' subjugation of a neighbouring population, called Helots ('captives'), in order to maintain Sparta in a state of constant battle-readiness, 'ensured that the Spartans found themselves entangled forever with an enemy within' (Cartledge, 2009, p. 75), with the Spartans having to regularly suppress revolts by the oppressed group. Further contemporary organizational examples of the phenomenon may be found in the 'offshoring' of administrative and technical services (Contractor, Kumar, Kundu & Pederson, 2010) including in the public sector, where 'back office' services which do not need to be in proximity to the public can be placed in separate organizations (Marchington, Grimshaw, Rubery & Willmott, 2005) and relocated offshore in a 'lift and shift' operation (Dossani & Kenney, 2004).

## **Limitations**

As with all research projects, this study has limitations and these suggest the need for further research. One limitation is our empirical focus on a single public sector organization with some unique characteristics. This cannot account for the diversity of edgelands, which Shoard (2002) argues 'has expanded in area, complexity and singularity' (p. 117). Additional studies could investigate centre-periphery relationships in different types of organization, particularly private sector outsourcing and/or offshore operations, taking these peripheral and often concealed sites as their central focus. A second set of limitations arises from the choices we made in fieldwork and analysis, as well as the barriers that were erected in the research site, which have shaped and constrained our access to the networks we were seeking to trace. The departure of the senior managers and the closure of the RMU obstructed what might have been fruitful enquiries about how organizational members had changed as a result of their relationships with particular nonhuman actors, adding to studies of identity and place (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Halford & Leonard, 2006). And, as Grint and Woolgar (1997) point out, the network is not objectively available to

observers at the scene. Our belated recognition of the possible significance of the RMU has rendered invisible many of the relations which connected it and the centre. Although the RMU's function of paper storage has been contracted out, this represents a new iteration, in which the records are still being maintained somewhere, by some people. This points to the need for studies which focus explicitly on the decisions which contribute to the closure or outsourcing of organizational functions.

## **Conclusion**

This study has investigated how power and agency emerged through relationships between people, buildings, other artefacts and places. We have shown how the acquisition of a strategic headquarters enabled two simultaneous attempts to purify space, by including only 'strategic' staff and 'modern' artefacts, and excluding staff and objects that were deemed anti-modern. Enterprise House itself became a powerful actor, encouraging networking, representing the organization as modernized and transformed, and redefining the managers associated with its inception. In both sites we studied, there were cycles of control and resistance. In the strategic centre, paper files were both compliant with the requirements of work for many staff, and resistant to desired networking and aesthetic requirements. Control in the RMU was attempted through the organization of the work and its isolation and invisibility, and this was compounded by the agencies associated with its edgeland location. Again, compliance and resistance co-existed in the forms of offering to improve the system and in what managers framed as impertinent and troublesome humour. Generally, we conclude that managers with the authority to decide where they and other staff are located, exercise significant power because the places in which employees work *do* something to them. In people's relationships with workspaces and their surrounding locales, new agencies come into existence, while others disappear, are suppressed or must be adapted in order to work around new spatial and material circumstances. Then, because scale is often reified by social actors in their daily activities (Brenner, 2000; Taylor & Spicer, 2007) the enlargement,

alteration or narrowing of agency that is brought about by putting groups of employees 'in place' may, over time, come to appear natural and incontestable.

## Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to the guest editors and the two anonymous reviewers for the stimulating and constructive dialogue they engaged us in, which enabled us to significantly improve the paper.

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<sup>i</sup> All names are pseudonyms

<sup>ii</sup> Weston Society website

<sup>iii</sup> BVPIs: Best Value Performance Indicators – part of the way central government measured the performance of local authorities and which was used to determine the amount of funding they received.

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