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Document Version

Final published version

Publication date:

2005

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Citation for published version (APA):

Elgaard-Jensen, T. (2005). *Future and Furniture: A Study of a New Economy Firm's Powers of Persuasion*.

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Download date: 15. Oct. 2024



Working paper presented at
Kolloquium: Diskurs, Zeit und Materialität
Institut für Theaterwissenschaft, Freie Universität,
Berlin, April 21st, 2005

Future and Furniture

- A Study of a New Economy Firm's Powers of Persuasion

Torben Elgaard Jensen

Abstract:

The article is an empirical analysis of how a Scandinavian new economy firm was able to persuade a number of business journalists that it represented 'the future'. It analyses how visitors to the firm were met with a specific and persuasive combination of rhetorical and material resources. It suggests that the persuasive power of the firm was based on its ability to evoke and articulate a series of pointed contrasts between the attractive working life within the firm and the ordinary and problematic work life elsewhere. The article suggests that this strategy of drawing contrasts together differs from the mode of persuasion usually described by STS.

Keywords:

Sociology of expectations, Sociology of futures, Sociology of anticipation, New Economy, dot-com, persuasion, power, actor-network theory, materialised contrast argument.

Introduction

One of the powers that routinely get out of hand in technological projects is the power to persuade. In some cases the protagonists of a project simply fail to generate enough persuasive power; although the prototypes and ideas look promising, it turns out to be impossible to gather sufficient support (Latour 1996). At other times, a project seems solid and supported by many disciplined allies. But then suddenly without warning the ability to persuade a relevant constituency breaks down and the project begins to unravel (Callon 1986). And at yet other times people say in retrospect that the persuasive powers of particular projects were far too strong: the projects were

hyped. A recent and most clear example of the latter problem is the boom and bust of the new economy (Reingold 2004).

The present article is a study of the persuasive powers of a Scandinavian firm that claimed to be a part of the new economy. As we shall see the persuasive powers of this firm were strong; many people were convinced of its virtues. In retrospect, one might argue that the persuasive powers were too strong. Many people were later disappointed when the firm closed, or felt that it had exaggerated its claims. But the purpose of this article is not to pass judgement on the recent past by standards of the present. Instead my purpose is to explore positively the situated achievement of persuasion. How did this firm, for a time, manage to become extraordinarily persuasive? By framing this question this way I am relating to a small but growing literature, which has been called the sociology of expectations, or the sociology of futures and anticipation (Brown & Michael 2003, Brown, Rappert & Webster 2000). The crucial move in this stream of work is to shift the analytical angle from “*looking into* the future to *looking at* the future, or how the future is mobilized in real time to marshal resources, coordinate activities and manage uncertainty” (Brown & Michael 2003: 4). Correspondingly, my interest is not to study the Scandinavian new economy firm as a more or less successful device for predicting the future. Instead my interest is to explore how this firm mobilised the future in such a way that persuasiveness was achieved and resources were marshalled.

To explore this question, I will delve into rhetorical as well as material details of the firm and the work it did to persuade others. But before I turn to this, I will briefly discuss some of the prevailing explanations of dot-com persuasiveness.

Madness and Metaphors

The collapse of the dot-coms generated a stream of commentary from external observers along with confessional tales from insiders (Kuo 2001). In these texts, there was a widespread tendency to describe the previous period in pseudo-psychological terms. People, we were told, were crazy, mesmerized, or seduced. There was talk of cyber-insanity, dot-com mania, and New Economy madness not to mention that stock traders were - yet again - described as hysterical. It is difficult to discern the precise meaning of these terms. At times they are used as realistic descriptions of particular individuals involved. But more often they serve as an up-beat way of summarizing a wild and confusing period of high hopes, time pressured experimentation and extremely hard work. What is frustrating, however, from a social science point of view is that these pseudo-psychological

terms offer little by means of explanation. In fact they often stand in the way of a more serious investigation of the dot-com persuasiveness. When the previous period is described as mad it is implied we have now returned to sanity and realism. It is also implied that the new economy boom was exceptional in a way that defies explanation. In these ways the use of ‘madness’ works to the effect of assuring the author and the reader that they should not be disturbed by the disturbing events of the recent past.

A more sustained attempt to understand the persuasiveness of the new economy is developed by Sally Wyatt (2004), who analyses the language use of prominent Internet enthusiasts in *Wired Magazine*. Wyatt argues that the *metaphors* used to describe the Internet is a particularly interesting focus of analysis. Metaphors, she argues, do not simply have a descriptive function they are also normative and cognitive structuring devices. “Metaphors not only help us to think about the future; they are a resource deployed by a variety of actors to shape the future” (Wyatt: 257). Wyatt shows that *Wired* magazine repeatedly used metaphors such as “revolution” and “salvation” to describe the nature of the Internet. In this way, *Wired* disseminated the image and the aspiration that the Internet was about dramatic all-encompassing positive change, and that no critique or reservation from the standpoint of the ‘old’ economy would be valid. Furthermore and rather surprisingly, Wyatt shows that even after the dot-com collapse *Wired*’s arsenal of metaphors did not change significantly.

Wyatt’s analysis is a pertinent example that close investigations of language use, such as favoured metaphors, are useful to uncover the assumptions and aspiration of powerful actors. But this kind of analysis also has its limitations. In an introductory remark, which I find both admirably modest and admirably precise, Wyatt says: “Language, alongside social practices and material objects, is an important tool in attempts to construct the future”. This remark contains no less than two provisos. First, that language is only one important tool alongside various others. And second that the analysis of metaphors is merely an analysis of an *attempt* to persuade, not the actual effect. In the present article, I will draw on a broad variety of empirical materials collected during a field study of a new economy firm. This variety of material allows me to turn Wyatts provisos into two methodological recommendations. Firstly, my intention is to study not only the persuasive attempt but also the persuasive effect, i.e. the speaker as well as the audience. And secondly, I will consider language use not in isolation but in combination with other sources of persuasive power.

The two methodological principles that guide this article, it should be recognized, are close to key notions in Actor-Network Theory. Thus ANT argues that power does not reside with a manager or some other speaker that we may assume to be powerful. Power is a performative effect that is generated when the audience follows the speaker. For this reason, a study of power, and this includes persuasive power, must focus not merely on the what is spoken but on how the initial statement is translated, blocked, directed, or passed on by a network of others (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Latour 1987). In addition to this notion of power as network effect, ANT calls attention to the heterogeneity of networks (Law 1986; Callon 1986; Latour 1990). Through a large number of empirical studies, ANT has articulated the crucial role that is played by materialities such as papers, machines, tools, buildings and bodies in the construction of knowledge and power effects. In these studies ANT has consistently argued that the power of networks is generated from the interweaving of human and non-human entities, which implies that linguistic and non-linguistic resources play a combined role. Hence the importance of studying language in combination with other sources of persuasive power.

The outline of the article is as follows. First, I will introduce the firm and illustrate how and of what the manager routinely attempted to persuade the visitors to the firm. Second, I will analyse how a small crowd of individual visitors – business journalists – responded to the manager’s attempt to persuade; To what extent and how did the journalists relay the manager’s claims to *their* audiences? Finally I will consider the role of material artifacts, in particular office furniture, in the process of persuasion.

“It is the office of the future”

In May 2001 a company called *United Spaces* opened its new office in Copenhagen. The company was founded three years earlier in Stockholm by two Swedish consulting firms with the support of venture capital from the international contractor NCC. Basically speaking, United Spaces was an office hotel; its business was to rent office space and office facilities to other companies on a monthly basis. But the ambitions of United Spaces went far beyond the provision of space and photocopy machines. Their vision was to create a ‘united space’, that is strong and mutually supportive community between the member companies. The managers of United Spaces in Copenhagen worked hard to attract small and interesting start-ups, to stimulate the networking

between the firms, and to create an atmosphere of creativity, playfulness and success. They also worked hard to communicate this image to a larger Danish public. They were, as we shall see later, quite successful in this endeavour. Clearly, the managers were inspired by phenomena like the rapid development of the Internet, the rise of dot-coms and the success of Silicon Valley. They proudly announced United Spaces to be a part of the New Economy.

In the February 2002 I became a member of United Spaces in Copenhagen for a month with the intention of conducting a field study of “networking”¹. I was present in the offices full time and had ample opportunity to observe the daily work. I interviewed the managers and a number of the members. I was invited to participate in meetings, seminars and parties. And I was allowed to copy various written materials about United Spaces including their collection of press reports about the company.

In November 2002 United Spaces in Copenhagen closed because of economic difficulties; the managers had not been able to sell a sufficient number of memberships. But United Spaces in Stockholm is still in business.

Since the purpose of this article is to discuss the persuasive powers of a company like United Spaces, I will now describe in more detail a situation where this persuasion is routinely achieved. The situation, which I have observed a number of times, is the ‘standard tour’ given by one of the managers to new visitors at United Spaces in Copenhagen. Through the synthesized account below, I invite the reader to imagine herself to be a first time visitor to United Spaces.

You arrive by taxi just in time to your appointment at the newly opened office hotel. The manager, a smiling and energetic man in the early thirties, greets you at the doorstep. He invites you in and shows you where to hang your coat. “Welcome to the office of the future”, he says and asks you a few questions about your work. He then walks you to a large open office space, which he calls ‘the networking arena’. You see a large rectangular room furnished with 70 workstations that are scattered across the floor in small clusters or faced against the windows. You see people busily working with papers, mobile phones, and laptops that are all connected to a wireless network. Each workstation consists of a relatively small table about the height of a bar table. At the front of the each table there is

¹ To preserve anonymity, this reference will be added later.

a transparent Plexiglass screen, shielding the user to the shoulders, but allowing him or her to talk to person sitting opposite. Between the screen and the table there is a small lamp, and sockets for electrical plugs. Each workstation comes with an office chair – tall as a bar stool – and a roller cabinet. The office space has a wooden floor, a concrete ceiling and nicely designed lamps. Large panorama windows on the right wall make the room very light. The view of the harbour is magnificent. Along the left wall there is a number of small conference rooms. The manager tells you that people from 35 different small innovative companies work here, and people work in constellations that constantly change. “At United Spaces you are not just stuck in a closed office with your own little business”. We also have a special rule here, the manager explains: everybody must clear their desk at night and sit at a new workstation the following day. In that way, he tells you, you will automatically meet a broad array of people, companies and competencies. A perfect place to grow your network. And then he uses the term again: “it is the office of the future”.

This standard tour as portrayed above immediately suggests a rather complex picture of the process of persuasion. Most importantly it is clear that the manager is not merely ‘emitting’ metaphors. He is facing a particular listener in a particular situation, who might question his statements. Although the description does not fledge out completely what the manager says and does and how the visitor responds, there are still indications that the manager is trying to handle a potentially sceptical audience. Take for instance, the peculiar statement, “it is the office of the future”. This is a kind of statement that discursive analysts (eg. Edwards and Potter 1992) call *factual reporting*. Note the wording: ‘it is’ not ‘some would say that it is’ or ‘I believe United Spaces to be’. Presumably the manager is presenting a naked fact. According to Potter and Wetherell, factual reporting is the prime way to handle a problem that all speakers are faced with. What a speaker says may be rejected on the grounds that he is simply furthering his self-interest (Edwards and Potter 1992, 7). The manager may, quite obviously, speak favourably about United Spaces because of economic self-interest. If, however, the speaker is able to frame his statements as mere facts, it is more difficult for the listener to reject them. Another discursive tactic, which may be discerned from the description above, is a so-called *contrast argument* (Edwards and Potter 1992, 163). A speaker can make his version of the facts more persuasive if he installs a contrast to an alternative, which appears to be problematic or unconvincing. Thus when the manager says that at United Spaces, you are not stuck in a closed office with your own little business, he is making United Spaces credible by contrasting it to being stuck alone, which might be the alternative working environment for a start-up firm.

Both the manager's use of factual reporting and contrast arguments clearly indicates that work is being done to persuade a particular listener. We may also note that the guided tour around the office involves a series of staged opportunities to see, feel, touch and smell United Spaces, all of which may contribute in important ways to the process of persuasion. But thus far we do not know to what extent the manager is persuasive, and neither do we know what specific combinations of rhetoric and materiality that might generate this persuasiveness.

A natural experiment

To get a firmer grip on these issues I will now attend to a kind of natural experiment of which I became aware during my fieldwork. United Spaces was regularly visited by journalists who were taken for the standard tour by the manager. The journalists listened to the manager, saw the office environment, sensed the atmosphere, and sometimes they interviewed a few members. Each of these visits could be regarded as an experiment in persuasion, where the effect may be measured by analysing if and how the resulting articles repeated the claim that United Spaces was the office of the future. In the following I will investigate all the 27 articles² that were written about the Copenhagen office of United Spaces in the Danish and Swedish business press within the timespan of roughly one year³. The articles were written by 23 different journalists; 4 journalist wrote two articles, and the remaining 19 journalist wrote one article each.

Three rounds of analysis will be made on this material. First I will identify the strongest positive claim in each article. The purpose of this is to establish a rough measure of the persuasive effect of

² The 27 articles in order of publication: Børsen. Iværksættere i kreativt kontormiljø. 30.3.2001; Erhvervsbladet. Fremtidskontor på vej i København. 3.4.2001; Computerworld. Højteknologisk fællesskab. 10.4.2001; Ingeniøren. Netværkets mester. 18.5.2001; Computerworld. Netværksmiljø: Skift skrivebord hver dag. 18.5.2001; Sydsvenskan. Det nya kontoret är som en jättelik lägerplats. 20.5.2001; Børsen Informatik. Et nyt mekka for den ny økonomis iværksættere. 22.5.2001; RUM. Future Workplaces. May 2001; Reboot. Spagettikontorhotellet. May 2001; Freelancer.dk. United Spaces of Chaordia. May 2001; Personalechefen. De frie agenter deler kontor, kopimaskine og kultur. May 2001; Freelancer.dk. Hun arbejder med det hun elsker. May 2001; Søndagsavisen. Paradis for unge iværksættere. 17.6.2001; SheVita. Vild med netværkshuset. 29.6.2001; ASE Nyt. En ny tids løsarbejdere. June 2001; Spektrum: Indkøb, IT & E-handel. Det nye hus på Christianshavn. June 2001; Byggeindustrien-Byggeforum. Nyt fleksibelt kontorhus. June 2001; Erhvervsejendom. Kontor omkring ild power. 21.8.2001; Job.Karriere. Den urbane landsby. 6.9.2001; BNY. Fremtidens kontorkultur. 10.9.2001; Erhvervsbladet. Flokdyr på kontoret. 18.9.2001; MetroXpress. Zap, zap, et ny job, tak... 21.9.2001; Berlingske Tidende. Arena for inspiration. 25.9.2001; Computerworld. Kunsten at lede et fællesrum. 21.12.2001; Ingeniøren. Kontor med netværk. 11.1.2001; SAS Magasinet. Fællesskab inspirerer. January/February 2002; Ingeniøren. Arbejdslivet bliver fleksibelt. 18.1.2002.

³ From March 2001 to February 2002.

United Spaces. It will become apparent that a substantive number of journalists were indeed persuaded. Secondly, I search for the ways in which the journalists argue that United Spaces is the office of the future. In particular, I will investigate the kinds of contrasts that are evoked between United Spaces and other workplaces. Through this analysis I will flesh out the elements of an elaborate contrast argument that is repeatedly deployed by the manager. In the third round of analysis, I will draw on my observations of the daily material practice of United Spaces. I will point to a number of material circumstances that are lending force to the statements, which are later carried by the newspapers and magazines. This final round of analysis will thus attempt to depict the specific combination of rhetoric and materialities that made United Spaces such a persuasive candidate for the office of the future.

First analysis: A measure of persuasiveness

In the following, I will construct a rough measure of the persuasive effects generated by United Spaces. Imagine 23 journalists visiting United Spaces, talking to the manager, looking at the office environment, sensing the atmosphere and perhaps interviewing some of the members. We know that the manager will try to persuade the journalists that United Spaces is the office of the future – and a bright future at that. But to what extent will these journalists repeat the manager’s claim in their articles and thus relay the claim to their readers? It should be noted that I use here an entirely pragmatic definition of persuasion (cf. Latour & Woolgar 1979/1986)⁴. Journalists are persuaded if they lend their force to the manager’s claim: their time, their credibilities, their abilities to write, their access to printing and circulation. One might of course imagine that journalists do not entirely believe what they write, or that they do not feel convinced on some personal level. This however does not change the most important practical reality namely that the journalists are strengthening the manager’s claim by repeating and disseminating it⁵. A claim gains credibility by being cited and repeated. A claim loses credibility by being contradicted or – even worse – ignored (Latour&Woolgar 1979/1986).

I have examined the 27 articles that were produced by the journalists, and selected the strongest and most positive claim in each of them. These ‘peaks’ of utopianism have then been sorted into categories according to their strength.

⁴ In Latour and Woolgar’s (1979/1986) seminal book ‘Laboratory Life’, they study how persuasive scientific statements are constructed, deconstructed, and circulated within and between laboratories.

⁵ Similarly, if parents beat their children out of love my proposal is to focus on the beating, not the love.

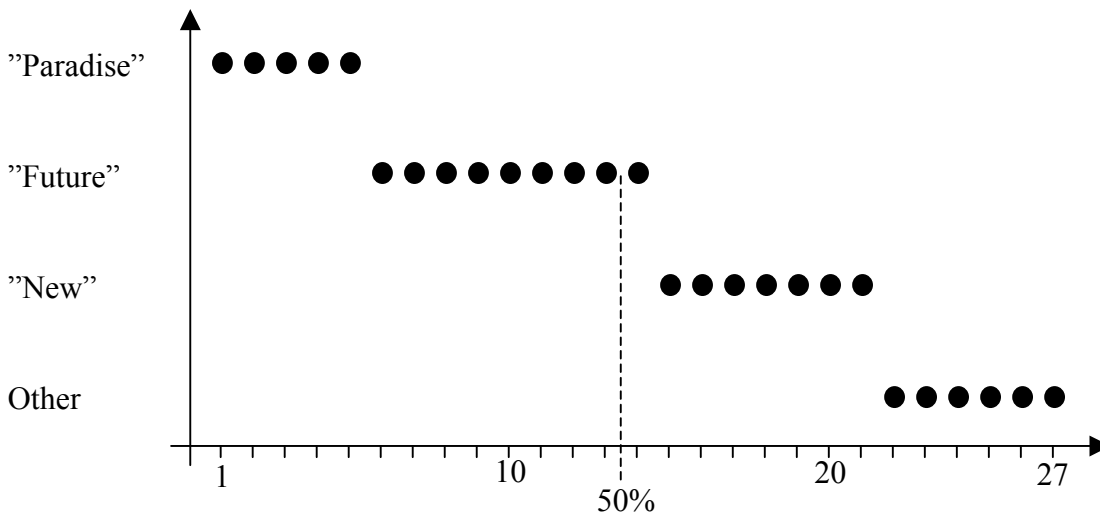


Fig. 1. The strongest utopian statement about United Spaces in 27 articles.

The category labelled ‘Paradise’ contains 5 articles, which evaluate United Spaces extremely positively and set the company apart from any normal business. These articles describe United Spaces as “a mekka for the innovators of the new economy”, “a giant playground”, “a well-ordered chaos for ‘free agents’”, “a goldmine of sparring partners” and indeed a “Paradise for young innovators”.

The second category contains 9 articles, which claim that United Spaces is the future. A number of these statements are relatively unspecific about how United Spaces is the future. They merely call it ‘the future office’, ‘a future oriented office concept’ or claim that the manager and the members of United Spaces ‘look into the future’. Other articles are somewhat more specific by saying that United Spaces is the future workspace, the future office culture, or the future corporation.

The third category contains 7 articles that describe United Spaces as ‘new’. Four of these articles use the term ‘a totally new concept’ whereas three articles merely describe United Spaces as a new concept or say that United Spaces frames a new way of working.

Finally, there is a mixed group of 6 articles, where the journalist does not make any particularly strong statements about the utopian nature of United Spaces. The articles do however contain statements that suggest that United Spaces might be something out of the ordinary. One article

quotes the manager of United Spaces for saying it is the office of the future. Another article quotes him for saying that in addition to being an office community it will be developed into a cultural and social community. One article is based on an interview with member of United Spaces. She declares that she is crazy about the place, and that she fell in love with it at first sight. Two articles report that the vision behind United Spaces is to create “a physical network, where people from different companies can share knowledge, network and creativity”. Finally and most modestly, one article says that United Spaces is merely one take on how our workplace will look in the future.

This first analysis of the articles indicates clearly that United Spaces is persuasive in the sense that journalists are willing to lend it their force. A majority of journalists are willing to describe United Spaces in terms that suggest this place to be set apart from the rest.

The next question is how these more or less utopian statements are argued. This calls for a second analysis focusing on *why* United Spaces is ‘completely new’, ‘the future’ or even ‘paradise’ in contrast to the old, non-ideal and presently existing state of business.

Second analysis: contrast arguments

In the second analysis of the articles, 44 statements were identified that draw attention to the contrast or difference between United Spaces and ‘normal business’. E.g. “at United Spaces you are *not* stuck in a closed office”. Such statements of contrast read as an arguments for the distinctiveness of United Spaces.

The 44 contrast statements were sorted into four broad categories, each of which defines a particular *other* of United Spaces. These others are: (1) social isolation, (2) professional demarcations (3) stable patterns of work, and (4) distrust⁶. Positively speaking, the contrast statements argue that United Spaces is a place of community, boundarilessness, flexibility and trust. In the following I will spell out these four dimensions in more detail.

⁶ The quantitative distribution of the 44 contrast statements were as follows: Social isolation: 11; Professional demarcations: 13; Stable patterns of work: 9; Distrust: 11.

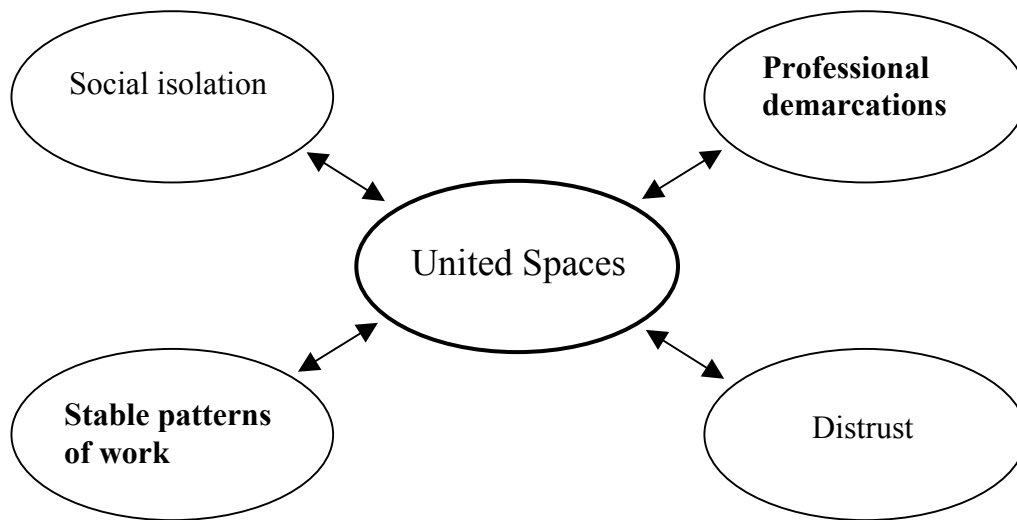


Fig. 2. Themes of contrast in 44 statements.

Community in contrast to social isolation

Several articles strike the theme that life as a ‘free agent’ is not always as pleasant as one might think. With the absence of colleagues, the free agent runs the risk of loneliness, boredom, lack of professional contacts, and lack of inspiration. United Spaces, however, is presented as a possible solution to these problems. United Spaces is “an office community for free agents ... that have had enough of closed offices with no contact to the outside world”. Another article quotes the manager for saying that “free agents [...] do not need an office with four walls and a closed door. They need to surround themselves with other people, and let themselves be inspired and fertilized (sic)”. Moving into United Spaces, it is suggested, is to enter a different kind of social interaction. “The spirit is different here”, one member is quoted for saying. “[P]eople come over and ask what you are doing. And then perhaps, we set up a meeting and see where it leads”. Another article quotes a member for the idea that visibility is an important difference between United Spaces and other working locations. “In many organisations people tend to duck – here you must make yourself visible”.

Taking the themes of interaction and visibility one step further, a number of articles make the point that mutual involvement is more than accidental feature at United Spaces. It is in fact an obligation. The manager is quoted several times for saying that the members are obliged - through the signing of a so-called cultural agreement - to share knowledge and to participate in the community culture. A crucial vehicle of this participation is the obligation to sit in a new seat every day. The emphasis

on community - and the contrast to the isolated lives of free agents elsewhere - is summed up by the manager with the following statement “to put it shortly, United Spaces is a kind of an urban village”

Boundarilessness in contrast to professional demarcations

The lack of boundaries between members is a second recurrent theme in the articles. One of founder of United Spaces recalls: “it was our goal to create an interactive environment where people could use each other, join networks and in that way develop and renew themselves”. The room for unbounded interaction is further commented by a member of United Spaces “No one here thinks that you are weird because you go into creative lab [a meeting room with playful interior decoration, including toys] and throw a ball, when you need to stress out. A lot of people do that here”. Another article concludes that the concept of United Spaces works because “people with different backgrounds, agendas and ages use the place and the competencies of others in each their way”.

Whereas the three statements above loosely suggest that boundaries between people or members are transgressed at United Spaces, there are a number of articles that point more specifically to the types boundaries that are crossed. Some articles argue that United Spaces makes it possible to work across *companies* and in joint network projects. In relation to this it is argued that different *types of companies* (start-ups, large corporations and small companies) meet at United Spaces. Other articles talk about the meeting and mutual enrichment of different *cultures*. And yet other article emphasise that *different lines of business* (eg. market research and computer games) are joined. Again the manager stresses the importance of the seating arrangements “Traditional open offices in a company do not have the same effect, because they do not create the same exchange of ideas, as when you are sitting with people from other lines of business”.

Finally there are articles, which quote enthusiastic statements about the plurality of connections at United Spaces. In the words of one member “Here we get access to an ocean of knowledge that we don’t have ourselves. We are seven employees, in here we become seventy”. Or in the words of one of the founders: “[United Spaces] is like a physical Internet, where people participate in a community and break down boundaries between cultures, genders, religions, and races. In the cooperation between people, there is a force and an energy which is completely unheard off”.

Flexibility in contrast to stable patterns of work

So far, two contrast themes have been described: United Spaces is *not* a place of social isolation, and United Spaces is *not* a place with boundaries between people. These two arguments spill into the third type of distinction between United Spaces and the rest. The argument here is that work at United Spaces is characterised by flexibility and constant change as opposed to the putative stability or repetitiveness of work elsewhere.

Again the argument and the evoked contrasts come in various shades. One article talks about the dynamism and development that is created by the mutual inspiration and networking. Other articles quote the manager for saying that the physical movement to a new seat every day create new impressions and contacts, and hence a ‘mental’ movement. Taking the theme of constant change one step further, another article argues that “change is born out of chaos. Therefore, personal development and company growth can be stimulated by the simple means of sitting a new place every day, as opposed to going into a closed office”.

Finally, one article draws up a stark contrast between the rigidities of a ‘traditional office’ and the flexibility of United Spaces. “The traditional office with timeclock, working time schedules, and other kinds of rulebound surveillance is losing ground to the modern workplace. You must be able to move the entire office to the desk that is most appropriate for the work of a particular day. Mobil phones and laptop computers are self-evident.”

Trust in contrast to distrust

The fourth and final theme running through most of the articles is about trust. It is suggested that outside United Spaces, people and companies view each other as adversaries or competitors. In United Spaces by contrast, there is a culture of sharing. One member remarks: “I do not miss having my own workspace, because I am more interested in networking than in building a fortress”. The manager explains the overall ethos by saying that “to give is to gain”. Another member says that she “fell in love, head over heels, both with the physical environment and with the thought of ‘networking’ and sharing knowledge with others”.

What is given and shared at United Spaces is not only professional knowledge. According to a number of articles the sharing also includes ideas, inspiration, network, creativity, and even business opportunities. In sum, the articles describe United Spaces a community where a variety of

resources are shared or even given away in an atmosphere of mutual trust, and with the confidence that good deeds will be returned.

Third analysis: Combining rhetorics and materialities

This is the story: At United Spaces community replaces social isolation. Boundarilessness replaces professional demarcations. Flexibility replaces too stable patterns of work. And finally, collaboration and trust replace distrust. One should perhaps not be too surprised that the manager would tell this story. But what on earth, or better - what in the room persuaded a majority of the journalists to convey this portrait of a workplace utopia?

Let us examine first the claim that United Spaces replaces social isolation with community. With his own eyes, the visitor can see that United Spaces offers an office space that is shared rather than divided. The visitor can see people talking to other people or sitting near other people at the workstations. The contrast between this spectacle and the individual cell offices known from countless other workplaces is directly evoked in some of the quotes brought by the journalists. United Spaces is “an office community for free agents ... that have had enough of closed offices with no contact to the outside world”. “Free agents [...] do not need an office with four walls and a closed door. They need to surround themselves with other people, and let themselves be inspired and fertilized (sic)”. These quotations make at least two moves. First, they *conflate* any difference between traditional ways of working and the physicalities of traditional offices. An office with four walls and door is almost by definition a ‘closed office’ with no contact to the outside world. A closed office in this usage becomes both a physical description as well as a generalised characterisation of an isolated way of working. With this conflation in place the second move is to evoke a strong *contrast* between these closed offices/ways of working and United Spaces, which is of course an ‘open office’. At his point the full implication of the previously described conflation becomes clear: when the office at United Spaces is ‘open’ in the material sense, then this by implication means that the way of working is also ‘open’. The clearly visible physical contrast between United Spaces and the dis-united spaces of cell offices becomes a strong indication that a different way of work is taking place here. So when the journalists see - with their own eyes - that the office of United Spaces is different, then this material structure becomes evidence that a different way of working is taking place here.

What is at play here is akin to the rhetorical contrast argument that I mentioned previously: The support of version A (United Spaces) is generated by undermining the alternative version B (old forms of work). But the rhetoric of the contrast argument is combined with and enforced by materialities in a crucial and novel way. Old forms of work are translated into the material form old forms of offices, and this material form is contrasted to an alternative material form of the open office space, which is presented as identical to a new form of work. The implication is that not only is United Spaces completely *different* from old forms of work, it is also a realistic, already materialised alternative. It *is* the office of the future. I will call this rhetorical-material configuration a *materialised contrast argument*. It is a combination of resources that gather support and ‘realism’ for United Spaces by contrasting it to an absent, problematic alternative, and by suggesting that a set of tangible and observable materialities proves that a different form of work is present.

The materialised contrast argument is also important to the other differences between United Spaces and the rest. The second claim of contrast in the articles is that work elsewhere is associated boundaries and professional demarcations as opposed the boundarilessness of work at United Spaces. What a visitor to United Spaces can see is a number of people from different professions, companies, and lines of business located in the same room. The argument then goes that elsewhere these different kinds of people are held apart, which is associated with the lack of interactivity, the lack of creativity and the lack of mutual enrichment. At United Spaces these people are together - as we have just seen - which implies that interactivity, creativity and mutual enrichment is taking place. Again the translation from a way of working to office materialities is crucial to the argument. Unproductive boundaries between professions, companies etc. are translated into the physicality of not being in the same room. This in turn is contrasted to the shared space at United Spaces, which implies that boundaries have been broken down at this location. Again the articles weave a seamless web of office materialities and of forms of work, thus one article explains that ideas are exchanged “when you are sitting with people from other branches of business”. So when visitors *see* people sitting together, it works to persuade them that ideas will be exchanged.

The third claim of contrast, according to the articles, is between the too stable patterns of work elsewhere and the flexibility at United Spaces. On this issue the visitor will hear the manager explain that everybody is encouraged to sit at a new place every day. And the visitor can see that the workstations don’t seem to belong to anyone particular, they are not marked by personal

belongings, and that each member has a roller cabinet and a locker, where his or her papers can be stored. Again the articles deploy a materialised contrast argument: “change is born out of chaos. Therefore, personal development and company growth can be stimulated by the simple means of sitting a new place every day, as opposed to going into a closed office”. In this argument the lack of change and a closed office are conflated and then contrasted to ‘sitting a new place every day’, implying that this physical environment will generate change and growth. In the same vein the manager is quoted for arguing that mental change will follow from the physical movement.

The fourth and final claim of contrast is about trust. Work at United Spaces is characterised by trust and collaboration, whereas people working elsewhere tend to see each other as adversaries or competitors. It is perhaps difficult to see how trust is materialised, or argued materially at United Spaces. I suggest however, that the distribution of the workstations provide an important clue. The majority of the workstations are placed in clusters with four or six inwardly facing tables. The rest of the tables are placed ‘should by shoulder’ facing the windows. Practically, this arrangement enables a person at any location in the room to see the faces of the people sitting near him, either frontally or through the corner of his eyes. This arrangement precludes certain antagonistic and distrustful social arrangements. Hidden surveillance in the Foucauldian sense is one (Foucault 1975); People at the United Spaces are visible to people near them, but arrangement of tables does not enable surveillance by hidden observers. Another version of distrust is described by Serres as parasitism (Serres 1982). Like pickpockets, parasites are little actors that are close up but still lurking behind your back and trying to stay out of sight. But again this form of sociality is contradicted by the arrangement of the workstations that allow no one to sit closely behind the back of others. The furniture at United Spaces can be seen to arrange an environment where the members can interact in a trustful way. And again, the physical structures may persuade visitors that a new and trustful form of work is taking place here.

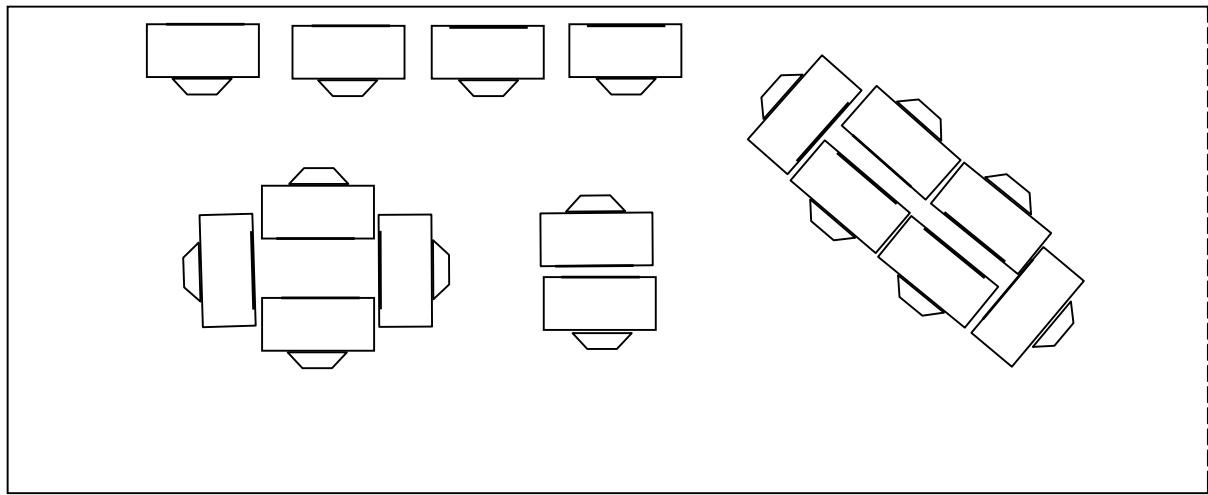


Fig 3. The arrangement of workstations in inwardly facing clusters and along the wall.

Conclusion

Two empirical conclusions emerge from this analysis of rhetoric and materialities of a ‘new economy’ firm. The first and most straightforward conclusion is that persuasiveness was indeed achieved: United Spaces effectively persuaded quite a number of journalists that the place was the office of the future. Perhaps United Spaces was not the most archetypical⁷ or spectacular new economy firm ever seen. But it is fair to say that this firm, like a diffuse crowd of new economy enterprises in the late 1990’s, demonstrated an extra-ordinary ability to persuade others that it was ‘the future’.

The second conclusion is about the ‘mechanics’ of this persuasive power. The point I have argued is that a so-called materialised contrast argument played a crucial role in the construction of United Spaces’ persuasive power. The manager deployed a combination of rhetorical and material resources in a way that turned the physical difference between United Spaces and work elsewhere into a convincing argument that a novel form of work was unfolding here. And the journalists used

⁷ It is possible to argue that United Spaces was not really a new economy firm. For instance, one could say that it was simply borrowing the rhetoric and the media attention. Or one could argue that its products ‘office space’ and ‘office culture’ did not have anything to do the Internet, which could be seen as the defining characteristic of new economy firms. Although this line of reasoning may seem reasonable there are several problems with it. One problem is that it depends on a very sharp boundary between what was and what wasn’t a part of the new economy. The managers claimed that United Spaces was a part of the new economy and they were supported in this claim by many members, visitors, and the large corporation that donated venture capital. Furthermore, a number of the members were producing internet-based products such as computer games and tools for marketing research. And finally one could argue that the work process of lateral and ever-changing networking that United Spaces was trying to generate was very ‘new economy’. The balanced view on this, I suggest, is that United Spaces was a part of the new economy phenomenon in the broad sense.

somewhat similar combination of rhetoric and physical description when they portrayed the (four-dimensional) uniqueness of United Spaces in their articles.

It is interesting to compare United Spaces' articulation of contrasts to the account of persuasive power, which has by now become well known within STS. Drawing on ethnographic studies of scientific laboratories (Knorr-Cetina 1995), scholars such as Bruno Latour have made the argument that power is constructed by drawing things together (Latour 1990, 1999). Strength, power and truth is constructed by establishing a progressive chain of translations that allow later entities – say a scientific paper – to speak on behalf of earlier 'entities' say samples of matter, experimental procedures, graphs, and comparisons. Latour uses the metaphor of electricity through a wire. Truth is attained, he argues, "so long as this circuit is not interrupted" (Latour 1999, p.69). The strength of the scientific paper derives from its ability to faithfully *represent* others. The persuasiveness of United Spaces, however, does not fit this image. The materialised contrast argument does not work by creating a similarity or reference, but rather by articulating difference and contrast. The strength of United Spaces is not that it connects with work elsewhere, but that it disconnects from it. More specifically, United Spaces does *not* represent social isolation, professional demarcations, too stable patterns of work, nor distrust – but the opposite. Rather than the metaphor of electricity, the image of *kite* comes to mind; United Spaces gains upward drift by blocking and resisting the flow of the wind. Thus United Spaces' source of power is that it draws *contrasts* rather than things together. With its arrangements of tables and with the rule of sitting at a new place every day, it has found a way to articulate a number of problems or even absurdities of 'normal work'. And like a protest movement, it lifts off the ground at the precise moment that it is able to channel diffuse dissatisfaction into support for a clear rallying point.

If one is so inclined, it seems appropriate to admire the craft; it is not easy to find a suitable rallying point and to draw a series of contrasts in towards this point. But there is also a lesson to be learned by contemplating the *means* that are deployed in the strategy of drawing contrasts together. United Spaces' list of means is long, but the most crucial ones seem to be a series of contrast arguments, 70 specially designed tables/workstations, and a large room in an attractive office building. These means are of course not available to any firm, let alone any person. But on the other hand, they are not completely out of the ordinary. And they are certainly not means that belong exclusively to a particular 'epoch' such as the wildest years of the new economy in the late 1990's. This suggests

that the case of United Spaces does not lend support to the idea that exaggerated persuasiveness or 'madness' belonged to a previous era as opposed to the 'realism' of the present. Instead we must acknowledge that the things we feel powerfully convinced of today are constructions too. They are constructions in the strong sense that they build on something; they draw together things or contrasts. But they are also constructions in the weak sense that their stability is never guaranteed. At some time in the future they may lose support and fall apart. So even though it now seems tempting and easy to laugh at the new economy, the case of United Spaces suggests that the lightness of this laughter is unbearable. The 'era' has gone, but the strategy and the means of persuasion are still around.

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