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In the last decade a strong managerial interest has grown for projects aiming at modernising workspaces and work practices in various third-sector organizations. Clustered under the fashionable label “*New Ways of Working*” (NWoW), those projects are built on strikingly similar conceptions of organizational space (De Leede, 2017). Despite local declinations that may emphasize some features rather than others, *NWoW* discourses entail homogenous normative elements about how the workspace should be designed. We summarize those elements on four dimensions: fluidity (space is inhabited by mobile and flexible users); activity-based (space is separated in zones which serve a different purpose); deterritorialization (space do not belong to specific users or teams); horizontalisation (space should be devoid of any hierarchical symbol). The aim of this paper is to question how this discursive ideal type of space is translated into concrete devices and practices in organizations.

To achieve this, we performed a comparative study of two Belgian cases which are part of a larger sample of organizations that committed to a *NWoW* project. In both instances, the project has been officially finished some years ago, so that stabilized forms of space can now be observed. We had the opportunity to gather extensive information about the change management process in both cases. We performed a qualitative analysis made of observation periods of stabilized spaces (10 to 20 weeks per case), semi-structured interviews with project leaders, strategic managers, middle managers and employees (respectively 43 and 45) and documents analysis.

We deliberately selected those two organizations from our sample because of the apparent contrast in their ways of introducing and conducting their project of modernisation. Our intent is to use the sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) to account for the introduction of two change processes based on *NWoW*. In this perspective, attempts from strategic actors to build and diffuse convincing interpretations within the organization on the one hand (sensegiving) and spontaneous reconstructions of meanings by other actors on the other hand (sensemaking) should impact the conduct of the change. We therefore expect the articulation of sensegiving and sensemaking activities in both cases to be decisive in the way the ideal type of space advocated by *NWoW* promoters is progressively embodied into concrete spatial devices and patterns.

In our first case, a Belgian insurance company (BIC) initiated a strategic reflexion in 2012 that led to a relocation of the company’s activities as well as to the implementation of a project based on *NWoW*. In BIC case, sensegiving practices of the top managers were numerous. Discourses promoting “autonomy” and “responsibility” among others were actively publicized by the project teams. Simultaneously, strong mechanisms of enrolment were deployed: a detailed training plan for both managers and employees was put in place and coaches were recruited to provide team managers with individualised support. As team managers were given an important role, they quickly become aware of the project’ stakes and were therefore able to make sense of them.

Our second case study, BELTRANS, is large public transport company operating in Belgium. The company also committed to a relocation of their headquarters to a renovated building organized according to the principles of *NWoW*. A project team was set up and began to commit to sensegiving activities, claiming that a “new company culture” was needed and that the new building had to become a “concrete evidence of the company’s ambitions”. However, contrary to BIC case, the importance of sensemaking practices at the middle

management level was not recognized. Team managers were never officially given any specific role by the project teams and were not enrolled as supports of the project. Consequently, they adopted very individualized forms of sensemaking, much less impacted by former sensegiving activities of project leaders.

Surprisingly, despite two very different ways of conducting the change in the two cases, we witnessed striking homogeneity in the employees' modes of space appropriation in their new working environment. In both cases, the ideal type of space conveyed by *NWoW* and embodied in the workspaces of the two new buildings ultimately became an object of contestation. Four forms of contestation, which refer to the four aforementioned dimensions of the ideal type of space, were analysed:

Fluidity/Sedentarization

Regardless of the sensegiving or sensemaking activities that had previously been performed, users tended to behave in a much less mobile and flexible way than expected.

Activity-based/Constraints-based

Instead of acknowledging the formal division of their workspace in a series of zones having different properties, users adopted the same practices regardless of the zones they worked in, claiming to be restrained by operational considerations and constraints.

Deterritorialization/Colonisation

Users gathered together by teams, always settling in the same spaces, privatizing their working environment despite not having formally attributed places. In both cases, teams redefined informal territories by circumscribing specific portions of the workspace.

Horizontalisation/Stratification

Although *NWoW* workplaces were supposed to be devoid of any clue of hierarchic rank, middle managers both at BIC and at BELTRANS found strategies to reassert their position and reclaim visible symbols of their status, such as the systematic occupation of specific small, closed and private meeting rooms.

Our findings illustrate a striking contrast between a discursive and normative ideal-type of space –fluid, activity-based, deterritorialized and horizontal – and our observations of two cases of lived spaces – which turn out to be sedentarized, constraints-based, colonized and stratified. This ideal-type, supposedly flexible and malleable, eventually bears a disciplinary conception of space that generates systematic contestations from the field actors. Furthermore, our research shows the limitations of sensegiving and sensemaking in providing a convincing explanation of the political structuration of space (Lefebvre, 1991). What seems to matter, beyond sensegiving and sensemaking activities, is the users' political relationships with space as well as their individual and collective strategies of appropriation.

References

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