



LH Color

SEATTLE'S EXPERIENCED MUSIC PROJECT:

On Color Language and the Framing of Organizational Reality

ABSTRACT

Traditionally architects have used the language of 'function and form' to shape reality. But post-modern architecture adds a third language of materials and recently a fourth linguistic venue – a color language. And while architects have mastered reality shaping in ways appealing cognitively and emotionally, organization theorists and change architects possess only limited understanding of the managing of change beyond the functional, i.e. how to design and frame new realities in emotionally intelligent ways desired by change recipients. We propose that for change management efforts to succeed, multi-language expressions should be employed similar to practices followed by leading post-modern architects.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND 'REALITY'

The 'innovation craze' where companies climb on the 'differentiation roller coaster' in an ever-ending attempt to distinguish their offerings from competing alternatives in the market place is far from being successful. While most companies form multidisciplinary teams assuming that the bundling of heterogeneous knowledge will yield the desired innovation results, only very few companies report on successful new knowledge creation capabilities [Lechner, 2000]. The rhetoric of change used by many often falls on deaf ears and resisting hearts. The language used, that of frequent restructuring and streamlining confuses organizational citizens and alienate many rather than recruit their energy and brainpower to support the desired collective differentiation and innovation efforts [Beer and Nohria, 2000; Jick, 1993]. And while most typical restructuring efforts are aimed at increasing the organization's agility and responsiveness, rarely do these efforts focus on facilitating personal 'state of heart' capable of handling uncertainty and changes and reach higher levels of inventiveness and creativity [Kotter, 2000].

Coupled with key strategic and structural questions that 'live' at the heart of this dramatic shift towards differentiation, innovation and customer centric solution strategies, is a challenge of *framing new realities* of competition and employment relationships in ways that will appeal to involved and impacted constituencies. Some of this challenge actually stems from the type of reality that change architects attempt to shift, that for the most part is the outer reality, one that exists outside of the persons involved and is

collective, explicit and organizational by character. Individuals' inner reality is of course impacted indirectly but less attention is given to the way organizational changes influence individuals' self [Jick, 1993]. Emotions of fear evoked by uncertainty associated with this paradigm shift are largely ignored [Nussbaum, 2001].

Metzger (1963) disentangles the confusing treatment of 'reality' defining and describing different meanings of 'reality': "Reality1" is the trans-experiential reality consists of everything that we assume to exist independent of and/or beyond our experiences. "Reality2" refers to the totality of one's experiences, the phenomenal experienced and manifested world. Lack of similarity between reality1 and reality2 is due to mistakes made in the selection and/or interpretation of characteristics of reality2 which are taken as indications of certain qualities of the physical world (reality1). Change architects in organizations focus attention mostly on shaping reality 1, the reality that is manifested rather than the one that is experienced. Shaping internal reality is of course a complex and intriguing challenge that we can intuitively assume to require very different set of levers, as we will elaborate on later.

Still, to the question of how reality is perceived different professions and disciplines would respond differently. From psychologists to musicians and to the Greek sophists different presuppositions would guide this discussion, yet with one commonality – that implicit in each such view, as unique as it might be, there rests the assumption of a *language*, a set of accepted codes and rules with which ideas and abstractions are being articulated and realized. For the musician this is a language of notes, a language of noise and silence that produces sounds. For the psychologist this is the language of symbols and archetypes that describes human emotions. For the sophists these are the verbal expressions that capture mental constructs and logic. And for the manager it is the language of organizing resources to realize goals and in general convey desired meanings to communities inside and outside the firm. As noted, language of course is not confined to the verbal expression of ideas and propositions. Crystal offers that common purposes of language include emotional expression, social interaction, recording of facts, *shaping reality*, providing an instrument of thought and expression of identity. For those in the business of 'shaping reality', outer-manifested and inner-experienced, for example

thought leaders, politicians, educators, managers and others, the appropriate use of appropriate language is of considerable importance [Handy, 1997:7], but how to think of appropriateness in this case? And is it possible that complex messages need to be delivered using multi-language?

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ARCHITECTURE ABOUT MULTI-LANGUAGE AND REALITY FRAMING?

For decades architects have perfected the language of *form and function* as an expressive tool with which they realize thoughts. Still, within the architectural community we find some notable expressions of the effect of overlaying different languages to create a rich framing of architectural reality. An acknowledged leader in this arena is Frank O. Gehry whose work in the past two decades represents an interesting and successful attempt to reach a cross-language expression of architectural art. In works from the early 80's Gehry demonstrates his mastery of the traditional architectural language of form-function for example in his 1984 California Aerospace Museum. His seminal work in Bilbao however revolutionizes the architectural language forever where 'form-function' is 'talked' in a new dialect, the dialect of 'materials'. Coating parts of the building with unconventional materials such as titanium Gehry is able to introduce new meaning to enhance the form-function expression creating interesting relationships to the building's stone-covered areas, and allowing for environmental changes of light and weather to affect the building's presence and make it exceptionally versatile. The overlaying of languages – that of function-form and that of materials allowed Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao to establish new presence, new meaning of what buildings are about, and above all, new meaning regarding the embeddedness of architecture in nature and the relationship between design and context, or an organization and its environment [Lechner, 1999].

Commissioned to design Paul Allen's Experienced Music Project building in Seattle, WA [that opened in 2000] Gehry, now more attentive to the affects of multi-language as means of reality framing, is entertaining the introduction of a new language-intersection, that of function-form-materials, and COLOR. Gehry's use of color comes to amplify desired meanings. The EMP building was inspired by the sexy curves and colors of electric guitars [Brady, 1998] and at its heart is the spirit of Jimi Hendrix, the demigod of the rhythm-and-blues,

funk and psychedelic music that is captured by the purple haze exteriors.

Introducing a fourth language, a Color Language, Gehry is able to frame the meaning of the EMP in the utmost richest way, making the architecture expression truer to the ideas it represents. Gehry is evoking an intuitive implicit color schemata, one he assumes is universal and can be engaged in the audience primarily because it is already there! His use of color to connote meanings of the music world, presupposes the existence of a *color language*, one that associates colors and meanings in a systematic way.

But can the same rationale that guides Gehry be applied and leveraged within the context of organizations? Here we are interested in tapping what Metzger referred to as reality², and propose that in crafting change messages and paths for organizations to become agile, responsive, thoughtful and innovative, it may worth the while to attend to the languages used to construct the new reality so that people can relate to new cognitions and experiences rather than be threatened and alienated by them. And if indeed change processes are multi-faceted by nature and involve the simultaneous shifting of cognitions, emotions and actions then change messages should use multi-language expressions to appeal to these three existential levels and address these various needs.

INTRODUCING COLOR LANGUAGE INTO OUR THINKING OF ORGANIZATIONS

Conceptually, what guides this inquiry is the presupposition that transition from one reality to another, from an old managerial paradigm of control and efficiency to a new one of innovation and trust, elicits a rich gamut of cognitions, emotions and reactions. We further suggest that the language used in framing this transition is often directed at managing reality¹ rather than 'structuring' reality² per Metzger. That is, the change efforts are usually approached with the goal of establishing a clear collective-rational notion of what the new reality is about [i.e. flat, networked, responsive customer-centric organization] without attending to way[s] through which this transition is perceived and experienced by the recipients of change [for example fear of voicing one's views and lack of self efficacy to manage new demands, etc]. We postulate that the barrier to address reality² is lingual by nature and similar to the one crossed by



Elevation of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain designed by Frank O. Gehry

Frank O. Gehry in his design of the EMP building. We posit that effective framing of new organizational realities should be done tapping and addressing reality² through the use of multi-language, that is, the current language of change coupled with a language that facilitates expression of emotions and transition from emotions of fears and negativism to those of efficacy, inspiration, and embracing of change.

But 'emotional language' as we know it from the field of psychology is not only foreign to the management field but is also challenging in that it needs to effectively address defense mechanisms of individuals which for the most part get highly activated during times of uncertainty and change. Such language therefore is non-confrontational and facilitative in nature. It is geared at framing conditions that will allow for certain emotions and behaviors to emerge. It is archetypal in the Jungian sense as it attempts to evoke associations and mental schemata that are assumed to exist and engage them in the creation and framing of experiences as positive [Riley, 1995]. *We theorize that Color Language has the power and capability to act as such facilitative instrument of creation.*

Color psychologists have identified that people are responding to colors as meaning cues often times in a universal fashion [Birren, 1950]. Color is most commonly associated with affective rather than intellectual stimuli. This finding is based on the learning that color and visual elements activate the right side of the brain, while printed words activates the left-brain. As a 'right-brain activator' color plays a role of a physiological trigger that is considered to have a universal and uncontrollable effect [for example blood pressure rising when seeing the color red, a well measured phenomenon with consistent reoccurrence across age, race, and sex conditions]. Birren suggests that hues in the red area of the color wheel are called 'warm' while those in the blue and green range are referred to as 'cool'. Birren defines this commonality of the colors of the spectrum by associating each with two moods. The warm colors are active and exciting such as a red and its neighboring hues. The cool colors, which are passive and calming, are blue, violet and green

We propose that if color language is indeed deeply rooted and embedded in such a universal way, than it would also be reflected in people's notions of their work life and changes in organizational reality like the paradigm shift we proposed organizations to currently

undergo, would also be referred to or talked about using different color schemes. We further assume that if such an implicit language is tapped it would have tremendous impact on our conceptualization of organizational realities as well as pragmatic implications to the way we influence human emotions in times of organizational transition.

METHODOLOGY

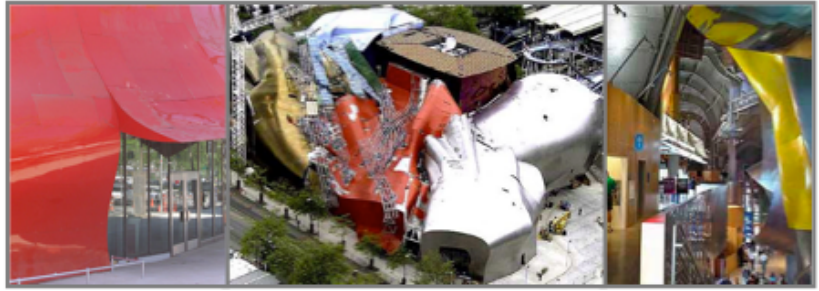
This study was centered on the proposition that the old paradigm of 'management of efficiency and obedience' will be associated with color schemes that are different from those attributed to the new paradigm of 'leadership of innovation and trust'. The empirical part of this work considered associations managers make between colors and managerial constructs of the 'old' and 'new' paradigms of organizations described by Ancona et al [1998]. Six constructs were selected to represent these two paradigms including: 1. Management, Efficiency, and Obedience – for the 'old' paradigm, and, 2. Leadership, Innovation and Trust – for the 'new' paradigm

A sample of managers [n = 82 with equal gender distribution] from various industries with average managerial experience of 8.2 years was selected. . In gathering data we presented subjects with a short questionnaire and asked that in answering the questions they will reference specific colors from the color chart included in order to ensure collective standard color reference point. For the purposes of our analysis, we used multiple comparison χ^2 test.

FINDINGS

A χ^2 test revealed significant color-construct matching difference for all six constructs. A further pair-wise comparison of color per construct analysis was then conducted to define the source of difference of colors per construct revealed earlier. This analysis yielded the following conclusions:

- For the Management construct - Blue seems to have the greatest explanatory power
- For the Trust construct - Green and Blue show the greatest explanatory power
- For the Leadership construct – Red seems to have the greatest explanatory power
- For the Efficiency construct - Green seems to have the greatest explanatory power



Two views of the Experienced Music Project building in Seattle, WA designed by Frank O. Gehry

- For the Innovation construct - Yellow seems to have the greatest explanatory power
- For the obedience construct - The values of Black are the highest in comparisons to all other colors but none of the colors are significantly different in their explanatory power

INTERSECTING THE LANGUAGES OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT AND COLOR

The challenge of the change designer, the architect of social realities per Senge [1990] is of framing reality, new and different, in ways that are not only accepted by the audience, but also inspire and commit them to view this new reality as desired and meaningful. Frank O. Gehry has demonstrated his capability to continually create new realities for his audience. His use of multiple languages allows him to constantly tap greater richness of creation and expression and astonish his audience time and time again. Apparently, *the overlaying of various languages seems to be a key practice that we in organization theory can benchmark*. Can managers too use a color language to support and amplify change messages and programs and infuse them with inspiration and meaningfulness?

Our findings are intriguing and startling! Our data provides preliminary support to the existence of color language within organizations, one that attributes different colors to different constructs' meanings hence supporting this research proposition that the old paradigm of 'management of efficiency and obedience' will be associated with color schemes that are different from those attributed to the new paradigm of 'leadership of innovation and trust'. Two color schemes emerged, one that is 'cold and one that is 'warm', to represent the old and the new managerial paradigms respectively.

Recall the discussion of Birren earlier when he introduced the cold and warm color families and interpreted the 'cool' to be removed and detached from the world, while the 'warmth' is strongly relating to its environment. Interestingly, the new managerial paradigm discussed here, is one that embraces strong interdependencies between organizations and their environment, a shift that is ever so challenging for the Weberian bureaucracy to follow. As the context of organization behavior, be it the environment of the organization or the individual, becomes more demanding and challenging the 'Blues of

management' give place to the 'Reds of leadership' and 'Yellows of innovation'.

For us to better understand the impact of a *color language* we should re-state a key purpose of language as means to frame reality through its 'referential', 'propositional' or 'ideational' role of communicating ideas [Crystal, 1997]. If we are to follow this view then language *creates* and *controls* the way reality is being shaped, experienced and enacted as suggested by Handy [1997]. And thus, color language too is participating in this delicate framing of meanings, just as our data shows.

The interesting question for us arises as a direct derivative from our findings. Will red color on the wall, evoke greater leadership behaviors in the room? Will yellow spaces lead to greater creativity and innovativeness? Leading architects have demonstrated over recent years their implicit, intuitive, experience-based belief that coloring architectural spaces with specific colors will evoke certain emotions and meanings. Psychologists too have asserted similar connections. For example Color plays a vital role in Jung's Mandala. In 'Mandala symbolism' Jung writes: "The color of the star is blue - of a cool nature therefore. But the nascent of the sun is yellow and red - a warm color. The sun itself usually denotes consciousness, illumination, understanding. Hence we could say of this Mandala; a light is gradually drawing on this patient, she is waking out of her formally unconscious state... the new state is characterized by red [feeling] and yellow or gold [intuition]. There is thus a shifting of the center of personality into the warmer region of heart and feeling..." [1972:95]

The Jungian conscious use of colors to describe meanings and frame ideas and reality in this deeply rich way as demonstrated in the Mandala as well as in Gehry's Experienced Music Project. is similarly present in organizations and/or managers' cognitions of organizational constructs, basic and well established in their world like efficiency, innovation, leadership and so forth. But would Jung's patient become more intuitive if she would constantly be exposed to yellow-golden color? Do the visitors of the Seattle EMP experience emotional transition that takes them to 'mental places' where music rules in 'purple' tune? Would people in organizations show more self-management, efficacy and creativity, if they would be continually exposed to red and yellow colors?

Upon establishing the existence of color language in organizations as supported by our findings, this becomes *the* key question for further research to center on. This issue is of major importance mainly because if we establish a two way connection, an interdependency whereby meanings connote colors *and* colors connote meanings, that we can support change processes by identifying colors people associate with desired meanings and continually embed those colors in the environments of these recipients of change to enhance the change experience and frame a new reality in ways that are psychologically and emotionally accepted to these individuals. Overlaying a color language on top of a change language enhances the interlacing of reality¹ and reality² and the framing of new desired reality in rich meaningful cognitively-emotionally accepted/embraced way of the kind demonstrated through Gehry's work.

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