Organisational Aesthetics

Steven de Groot

Developing beautiful organisations

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Contents

The Analysis of Beauty

The image on the front cover of this book and the background image behind the text of the introduction are illustrations from William Hogarth's The Analysis of Beauty *from 1753. Hogarth conducted extensive research into the sublime form of everyday things such as faces, corsets, and pillars. In this book, you will encounter several of his studies as a metaphor and to underpin my quest for beauty in organisations as it unfolds from chapter to chapter.*

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Prelude

In 2014 in The Netherlands, stress or a burnout was the most commonly reported work-related health condition, affecting a massive 77% of workers.[1] A study by employee survey firm Effectory shows that 67% of employees do not feel engaged at work and want to change jobs or work in a different environment. Steven de Groot's (doctoral) research shows that these worryingly high rates are largely down to the destructive ugliness that plagues our organisations. Ugliness that manifests itself in things such as the greediness and money-grabbing attitude of the owners, the disproportionate inequality between people, with a top executive making 500 times more than regular workers, the sickening power games, the rat race, the arrogance, the narcissism, and so on and so on.

Many organisations get stuck in their management practices, caught as they are in the perspectives of the True and the Good. The True is all about efficiency, the primary objective of *scientific management*. You can calculate and monitor it using dashboards, scorecards, indicators, and real-time online spreadsheets. The Good is taken care of by quality management. But the perspective that we have not mentioned yet is that of the Beautiful. Are work processes allowed to be beautiful? Are we allowed to make things that are beautiful?

In this book, Steven de Groot shifts the focus to a positive, as yet largely neglected feature of organisations: their ability to create opportunities for people to experience beauty. Beauty that can be experienced in work processes, in the organisation's products and services, and in how collaboration between people is organised.

A solid design study will give managers and consultants a ready-made approach that will allow them to increase the chance of their employees experiencing beauty in their work. This book will help them set up and manage their organisations in a way that produces more positive aesthetic experiences and reduces the number of negative aesthetic experiences. This, in turn, will help forge greater engagement among employees, and we know from other studies that greater employee engagement leads to higher productivity and boosts job satisfaction. Everyone's a winner!

So, I say read this book and get to work: make your organisations more beautiful!

MATHIEU WEGGEMAN,
Professor of Organisational Science at Eindhoven University of Technology

Introduction

This book was inspired by a number of startling realisations and observations of our day-to-day lives within and outside organisations.

Firstly: aesthetic experiences are an important ingredient of our day-to-day existence. The choices we make when it comes to the clothes we wear, food we eat, house we live in, friends we hang out with, countries we visit on holiday, or music we listen to are generally made on the basis of our aesthetic preferences, on the basis of whether or not we consider something to be beautiful. A positive aesthetic experience makes us feel good and triggers a positive emotion. Many of these day-to-day choices are entirely irrational, based on our feelings.

Secondly: most disciplines in the design domain, such as architecture and product design, distinguish two kinds of value that they seek to unite in a design:
1 functional value (a car has to be safe to drive; a house must keep its occupants dry), and
2 aesthetic value (that same car and house must also be nice to look at).

In the ideal scenario, these two values reinforce each other. In trying to make these values mutually reinforcing, designers set out to meet the needs of their primary clients, i.e. the users, us human beings.

And finally: we spend a significant part of our lives working. The average working life extends to roughly 40 years, which works out as 9,400 days or 75,000 hours. Unfortunately, this does not apply to approximately 30,000 people every year who become unable to work due to a burnout or stress symptoms. These people most likely experience their work or organisation as something ugly. So, knowing that aesthetic experiences away from our work make our lives enjoyable, why do we have so little regard for the aesthetic side to our working lives?

Why does organisational design (and change), contrary to various other design disciplines where functional value and aesthetic value are considered equally important, let functional value prevail so heavily over aesthetic value?

Organisational design arose as a design discipline during the Industrial Revolution, but was dominated by the perspective of the Good imposed by the scientific management mindset. With the emergence of the fields of quality management and performance management, and the development of organisational and business studies, we discovered the perspective of the True.

'We have long neglected the aesthetic context of organizational behavior,' stated Guillén (Guillén, 1997) in response to the disproportionate and one-sided focus on scientific management, drawing attention to the Beauty in organisations. Here in The Netherlands, too, calls for a change in how we organise people are becoming louder, as shown by the advent of the so-called Rhineland model that

has brought an approach that is focused on cooperation, consensus, and social justice, creating more human-centred organisations. Over ten years ago, Professor Mathieu Weggeman already said the following: '*Love play, coincidence, beauty. We are tired of quality, measuring, durability, and commissions. After the True and the Good, we are now in need of the Beautiful.*'

This book will describe what the perspective of the Beautiful in organisations entails and how to approach work and organisations from an aesthetic perspective. The idea is to complement the realms of the Good and the True to create what can basically be described as a *perfect perspective* on organisations. The *sublime* is considered a form of the Beautiful. In 1753, Hogarth published his famous book *The Analysis of Beauty*, in which he documented studies of the sublime form of things such as table legs, corsets, and human faces. One of his studies is shown on the cover of this book and as the background image behind the text of this introduction. And throughout this book, you will find examples from Hogarth's book that will, as you read, guide you towards ultimate beauty, of organisations in this case.

This book follows on from my doctoral research into aesthetic experiences at work and in organisations. After training as a product designer at Eindhoven's Design Academy and ultimately ending up in the field of organisational science, with forays into educational science and business administration, there were several questions that remained unanswered for me for years. Would it be possible for us to, by analogy with doing the right things in the right way (efficiency x effectiveness), also do beautiful things in a beautiful way (production beauty + beauty production)? Do workers have aesthetic experiences on a daily basis, and if so, what makes them experience beauty (and ugliness)? And the key question: how can we make organisations more beautiful?

This book will provide answers that will hopefully help you bring out the beauty in your organisation or that of others. It has been split up into four parts. Chapter 1 will go into how to find the aesthetic lens, describing the perspective of the Beautiful. The second chapter will describe the aesthetic lens in organisations, answering the questions of what sparks the experience of beauty in someone's work and organisation, and what effect it has on employees and the organisation.

Chapter 3 will provide tools to help you get started with the aesthetic lens, covering the subject of *design thinking* in organisations and offering eight operationalised design principles for beautiful organisations. The book will close with *eleven beautiful practices*, i.e. brief profiles of eleven organisations where the Beautiful has materialised through the application of the aesthetic lens.

Bunnik, The Netherlands, spring 2020
STEVEN DE GROOT

1

Finding the aesthetic lens

'We have long neglected the aesthetic context of organizational behavior.'

Guillén, 1997

1.1 The Good, the True, and the Beautiful

In his theory of forms, Plato stated that although objects in the everyday physical world can be perceived, recognised, and continue to be perceived and recognised, they are still constantly subject to change. Besides this sensorily perceptible world, there is, according to Plato, a higher, invisible reality, the world of forms. All material things in the sensorily perceptible world have a non-physical ideal form or idea in that higher world. This is how Plato arrived at the trichotomy of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

The True concerns mainly *cognition* (the ability to acquire knowledge), analysis and synthesis as part of logic. The Good, in turn, is about an *ethical or moral judgement* and objective. For centuries, people were told to live honestly and virtuously, i.e. basically according to the rules of logic. The Beautiful, finally, encompasses *emotion*, the *affective*, the *aesthetic*, i.e. when something, someone, or the perception of something or someone is likable, pleasing or gratifying.

Thomas Aquinas claimed that the Beautiful is a form of the Good, albeit viewed from a different angle (reason). The Good is aspired to, leading to the satisfaction of desires. Cognition is added to the Beautiful.
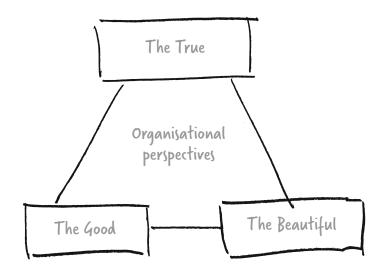

Figure 1 **Three organisational perspectives.**

All three perspectives aspire to a higher and more transcendental reality. And all three rest on a certain logic, which is attained through reasonable action. Given the clear link to the thinking on organisations, I will in Section 1.2 consider the various perspectives in the context of the historical development of organisations. Before that, though, I will briefly go into the Good and the True organisation in some detail.

THE GOOD ORGANISATION

The Good is a concept that we know from the age of guilds and crafts. Craftsmanship meant quality, primarily in terms of the *result*, the *output*. Although organisations barely existed in that age, there was an apprenticeship system that saw youngsters associated with masters to learn a trade, thus passing skills and a secure source of income on from generation to generation. Good organisations – groups of skilled people – delivered what customers wanted.

In this context, 'good' refers to a moral or aesthetic judgement, which instantly raises the question of 'good for whom and good according to whom?' 'Good' as in profitable? Or 'good' in terms of durability or employment practices? We will see below that as the function of organisations changed, the definition of the Good also changed, as did the group of stakeholders in the good.

THE TRUE ORGANISATION

The invention of electricity and machines paved the way for mass production, which led to the birth of the factory. In factories, humans were set to work on conveyor belts and assembly lines, as mere cogs in a greater production system that was all about standardisation and output maximisation. The advent of larger, 'traditional' organisations created a need for knowledge on how to set up and manage this kind of organisation. The first generation of organisational science and business studies brought us Taylorism and the scientific management movement, and with that the perspective of the True, the perspective of economic efficiency. Taylor was a major advocate of scientific analysis of workflow processes and the organisation of labour to maximise efficiency and productivity. The main focus within this approach was on how to achieve efficiency and excellence, as well as on identifying best practices. The perspective of the True, which has a distinct *engineering* side to it, places great emphasis on the process and the conditions, the *throughput*, and then especially their *efficiency*, with humans as a *production resource*.

What followed was a *more modernist perspective* on organisations, which built on the ideas of the *traditional organisation* and considered the organisation as a *system*. The well-known idea of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts is typical of this modernist perspective. Many ingredients of present-day management practices, such as benchmarks, lean management, and the use of performance indicators,

stems from ideas on traditional and modernist organisations.

Perspectives, *frames*, or *paradigms*, such as those of the True and the Good, are patterns of perceptions and thinking that serve to define a situation, organise information, and determine what is important. The frame is the perspective within which we perceive the world or, in our case, organisations. A frame is not reality, but rather a possibility to consider an organisation in a certain, consistent way. Gareth Morgan's *Images of organizations* (1986) provides examples of frames for the approach to organisations, presenting images of organisations from different perspectives and describing them as machines, organisms, as a brain, a culture, as a political organisation, and as a state of flux.

Our *frames* are generally subconscious lenses, often highly dominant, and they have a strong bearing on our thinking and actions.[2] Although they sometimes cause us to be *blind* to the *frames* of others, there is also a positive side to them. *Frames* enable us to function effectively. Without these mental models, we are unable to engage in conversation, work on a computer, or book a flight. They shield us from the chaos around us by creating order and discriminating. That being said, they also stand in the way of change.

The overriding aim of this book is to find and gradually shape the perspective of the *Beautiful* in organisations and to combine it with the perspectives of the True and the Good. Before I go into this in detail in Section 1.4, I will contextualise these latter two perspectives in the development of organisations, with a view to assessing whether there is even room for the perspective of the Beautiful.

1.2 The changing function of organisations

L abour, as well as the organisation of labour, has changed drastically through the ages, from manual labour and factory work to predominately brainwork. Along these same lines, organisations have changed from guilds and factories into knowledge organisations.

Figure 2 captures this development of organisations in a chart. Changing market needs led to new performance criteria.

As organisations evolved, the thinking on organisations also evolved. The *traditional organisation* with its rational, scientific management practices (the organisation as a machine) made way for the *modernist* and more system-based approach to organisations (the organisation as a system) to cope with increasing complexity.

Factory work and far-reaching industrialisation has given us a lot. Quite literally, as mass production led to a lot of products and a lot of variation. Growing competition furthermore meant that many products suddenly became affordable for more people. But this

The efficient organisation (from 1940)

Market needs:
price

Performance criterion:
efficiency

The quality organisation (from 1970)

Market needs:
price
quality

Performance criterion:
efficiency
quality

The flexible organisation (from 1980)

Market needs:
price
quality
choice/
delivery time

Performance criterion:
efficiency
quality
flexibility/
speed

The innovative organisation (from 1990)

Market needs:
price
quality
choice/
delivery time
uniqueness

Performance criterion:
efficiency
quality
flexibility/
speed
innovation

The aesthetic organisation (from 2000)

Market needs:
price
quality
choice/
delivery time
uniqueness
responsible

Performance criterion:
efficiency
quality
flexibility/
speed
innovation
beauty

Figure 2 **Market needs, performance criteria and idealised enterprises (based on Bolwijn and Kumpe, 1998)**

mass element did go at the expense of something else. The one-sided focus on growth and profit caused organisations to lose sight of customers, the environment, and perhaps even the well-being of their own employees. Meanwhile, numerous organisations have accepted that the Good, i.e. their morals or ethics, needs a rethink. Partly on the back of Weick's social constructionism, organisations have started to contemplate the role of the social process that leads to the construction or production of common real-

ities. Contrary to the perspective of the True, which rests on the foundations of positivism, organisations acknowledged that realities are also created between people, between employees, resulting in human problems. *Scientific management* is no longer believed capable of solving the problems created by human behaviour in organisations. The *symbolic-interpretative perspective* – followed by the *postmodern perspective* on organisations (the organisation as an organism) – brought increased focus on such aspects as corporate social responsibility (CSR) and *investors in people* (IiP). Examples of organisations that invest in their environment are TPG with its *world food programme* and Heineken with its aids programme for the local population in countries where they brew and bottle their lager. Companies like these have made the switch to a more *value-driven* organisation, within a multiple stakeholder perspective in particular: *economic value* for shareholders and management, *socio-economic value* for employees, and *cultural value* for society.

But not all organisations are adapting to the new labour force and postmodern worker. Too many employees still work the daily grind in a system of *scientific management* that rules their organisations, the mindset of the Good and the True. Many get zero job satisfaction and soon end up getting sick. They literally feel like a human resource for revenue and profit maximisation. Organisations bogged down in the perspective of the True that fail to rethink the Good will ultimately alienate themselves from their workers if they do not adapt to their workers' needs.

In the early 21st century, numerous organisational scientists[3] attempted to define the modern organisation, using such terms as complex adaptive systems, fractals, flow and rhythm, responsive organisations, self-organisation, design thinking, sensitive and meaningful, appreciative, life-affirming, holistic, and value creation. Others[4] suggested literally new, differentiated functions of organisations or combinations thereof, such as physical, sociological, and ideological functions. The pursuit of growth and profit has pushed values such as equality, trust, and respect into the background. In the age of knowledge-intensive work, it seems as if the role of the employee – which was so crucial during the age of manual work – is in need of reinventing.

'Working on beauty as a next step in working on corporate social responsibility (CSR). Working on a human-centred approach means to incorporate care for people into everything you do.' – *Rabobank*

'This organisation is harmful to your health.'

A better definition would be *postmodern organisations*, as *postmodernism* acknowledges that knowledge and different realities are also developed using methods of identification, intuition, and aesthetics. A defining feature of knowledge-intensive work is the personal instead of standardised performance of work. The quality of brainwork is – like in the age of skills-based manual work – dependent on the person. Humans have re-entered the frame! Another noteworthy point is that, parallel to the development of organisations, the world of architecture saw a shift from a modernist to a postmodern approach. The modernist high-rise buildings that popped up everywhere in the 1920s were ultimately seen as valueless, hard, oppressive, and impersonal, sparking calls for more valuable, soft, liberating, and personal architecture in the 1970s, which gave us postmodern low-rise buildings. Employees in organisations had exactly the same needs!

'For us, a focus on beauty is part of being a good employer' – Randstad

Considering all these properties or characterisations, we can conclude that the *function* of organisations no longer extends solely to ensuring maximum output for customers (effectiveness) in the most efficient way possible (throughput) in return for maximum profits. Postmodern organisations have an additional function, which is to be good employers and meet the *needs* of (post)modern workers. Human values are important again, and not only within organisations, but also on the interface between market and organisations, such as in developing services and technology.

'You are entering a beautiful organisation. In this organisation, employees experience pride, job satisfaction, ownership, and flow.'

The aforementioned developments in organisations show that the age of the True and the Good is over, or at least in need of a rethink. There is clearly a need for a different perspective, a different frame. A quality-driven and subjectivist perspective with regard for human values and emotions, for interpretation and commitment. What I am talking about here is the need for the perspective of the Beautiful, with beauty or aesthetics as the new quality indicator.

Adding this perspective will complete the line-up of perspectives on organisations. Looking at design disciplines such as architecture and product design, where both functional and aesthetic value are pursued, we could say that these

About Steven de Groot, PhD

STEVEN DE GROOT (1967, The Netherlands) attended Design Academy Eindhoven, studied educational sciences and business administration, and obtained a doctorate from Eindhoven University of Technology for his research, under the supervision of Professor Mathieu Weggeman and Professor Joan van Aken, into the aesthetic experience in work and organisations.

Steven is Professor of Innovative Entrepreneurship at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences. His research focus is on organisational innovation, strategy and design thinking in organisations. He is also interested in artistic interventions in organisations and organisational aesthetics as a driver for change and performance management. Earlier in his career, he worked as an organisational design and development consultant for (knowledge-intensive) organisations such as multinational companies and public sector organisations in the Netherlands and abroad (Asia and Europe). Steven has also worked at LEI (Wageningen University) and IVA (Tilburg University), where he did research into (learning) networks, (system) innovation, and organisational development.

He has authored dozens of articles and various books on organisational science, professionals, and knowledge-intensive organisations, and he is regularly engaged to speak and give guest lectures and master classes at universities worldwide.

He considers it his mission to make organisations more beautiful, which he works to accomplish through his consulting practices, www.kultifa.nl and www.combeau.org.

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Organisations have long been dominated by the perspectives of the Good (quality) and the True (efficiency). The perspective of the Beautiful, an aesthetic lens on organisations, has largely been ignored or forgotten. The Beautiful includes stimuli in organisations that trigger aesthetic experiences through the presence or attribution of coherence, congruence, contact, completion, and curiosity in organisations. As the function of organisations changes, they become increasingly human-centred, which also creates space for the aesthetic value of organisations. Based on (doctoral) research at thirty organisations across the Netherlands, including Rabobank, Randstad, and FlevoHospital, theories from aesthetics, and real-life experiences with design thinking at organisations, Steven de Groot presents eight design principles for the advancement of beauty in organisations. This book contains twenty practical beauty-elevating interventions for organisations that management consultants and managers can get started with right away.

In the final chapter, De Groot showcases eleven organisations and companies that are already displaying some level of aesthetic value. The appendices include a tool that lets organisations assess their performance in the domain of the Beautiful.

STEVEN DE GROOT, PhD is Professor of Innovative Entrepreneurship at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. His research focus is on organisational innovation, strategy and entrepreneurship, and artistic interventions and design thinking in organisations.

'In this book, Steven de Groot shifts the focus to a positive, as yet largely neglected feature of organisations: their ability to create opportunities for people to experience beauty. Beauty that can be experienced in work processes, in an organisation's products and services, and in how collaboration between people is organised'
— MATHIEU WEGGEMAN (Professor of Organisational Science and Innovation Management at Eindhoven University of Technology)

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