Understanding power within project work: the neglected role of material and embodied registers

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In this paper, we seek to contribute to debates into new modalities of power within project-based organizations (PBOs), and specifically architectural practices. Using a targeted ethnography, we explore specific episodes within the workflow of an architectural practice. Here, we explore how imperatives for creativity and collaboration are reconciled alongside those for control and authority through specific relations of power. In contrast with other critical accounts of power in PBOs, we explicitly examine the influence of embodied and material registers of practice. This approach draws inspiration from studies across the social sciences, not least those of architectural practice, which have revealed how embodied and material practices shape organizational life. Our research reveals that despite an overt attempt to play down hierarchical modes of organization, management control and authority is still apparent, albeit it in a form that is highly embodied and intertwined with material relations. Thus, power is not manifest in social relations *per se*, but plays out across embodied and material registers, from the layout and use of office space to the actions and emotions of individuals within a meeting. The research importantly reveals that power in architectural practices, and other PBOs, is likely multiple: 'hierarchy' enables decisions to be made, responsibility to be apportioned and disputes to be settled, while 'heterarchy' encourages creativity, co-learning, motivation and communication. Thus, the paper argues that if we can understand power in PBO in more nuanced and positive terms, then we can better understand how work is done and through what techniques. This could lead to deeper theoretical insights into project-based forms of organizing, not least architectural practice.

Keywords: Architecture, ethnography, heterarchy, hierarchy, power.

Introduction

The projectification of work (Lundin and Söderholm, 1998) is frequently celebrated as encouraging a more flexible, democratic and creative approach to working life than traditional functionally divided, bureaucratic organizations (cf. Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994; Lundin and Midler, 1998). Such claims essentially revolve around the benefits of more 'heterarchical' forms of organization in project-based organizations (PBOs), wherein control is manifest horizontality through collective communication with peers rather than through vertical, rigid, centralized lines of authority. In other words, project working promises to counter some of the negative effects of relations of power in hierarchical organizations, such as inflexibility, low innovation, poor communication and poor job

motivation, by creating small teams of individuals motivating each other, collaborating in setting objectives to achieve common aims, uninhibited by overly centralized control and rigidly defined roles and boundaries (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994; Pinto, 1996; Lundin and Midler, 1998). While the progressive promises of project work would seem intuitive, they have, however, increasingly been challenged by various 'critical' project studies that have drawn upon Critical Management Studies (CMS) perspectives (cf. Fournier and Grey, 2000) to reveal how PBOs exhibit and maintain, more potent even pernicious, though less perceptible, relations of power. Significantly, these critical studies have highlighted 'informal' relations of power that are galvanized within seemingly heterarchical, project-based, organizations, including notions of identity (Andersson and Wicklegren, 2009), norms of good

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work (Styhre, 2011) and flexible work cultures (Sage *et al.*, 2010).

In this paper, we aim to contribute, and extend these critical debates around power and projects, by focusing on how power in PBOs is influenced by a range of material and embodied practices. In contrast to previous research on power in PBOs (Lovell, 1993; Newcombe, 1996; Pinto, 1996; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006), our focus is on practices that are non-verbal or rather non-language orientated in character. We will argue here that such practices provide a particular apposite conduit to maintain a balance of creativity and control in PBOs. We are also mindful that many of the recent 'critical' studies of projects, (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009) focus on the negative consequences of power for individuals working within PBOs, that is, (the often unknowing) colonization of individual will by management and the pernicious consequences of this process for, *inter alia*, work–life balance, job satisfaction and equality. The negative consequences of power are, however, only part of the analytics of power. As will be explained below, power can also be defined positively, or rather productively—essential for productive, happy and motivated individuals and PBOs. Power can be especially positive within heterarchical organizations, conceivably PBOs, where the possibility of co-ordinating individual wills, and their accounts of the ends and means of a project are constantly deconstructed and negotiated among a wide group of agents perhaps without the imposed will of a formally 'superior' actor. Nevertheless, as Clegg *et al.* (2006) explain, positive power is often forged at the expense of others:

> power may be positive and may serve collective goals, but only if one is incorporated within its remit. If one is other to power, if one is the object of its exercise by those who are its subjects, then its authority to do what it wants with one's life chances might seem rather less than legitimate. (p. 195)

Across this paper, the positive/negative nature of power is understood as an empirical rather than epistemological matter. Power, that is in simplest terms the empirically apparent (positive or negative) organization of individual wills (Foucault, 1975, 1980; Clegg *et al.*, 2006), is elaborated in this paper through the specific socio-material relations that produce 'asymmetries, durability, inertia, extension and domination' (Latour, 2005, p. 85) and indeed create individual wills. While the argument developed here follows Foucault's famous insistence that power and knowledge are inextricably linked (Foucault, 1975, 1980), it

departs from Foucault in rejecting the notion that power is wholly reducible to the representational 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1980, p. 93) we have about the world. Rather power, and indeed knowledge, can also operate in a more visceral manner across our bodies and the things they relate to (Connolly, 2002; Massumi, 2002; Latour, 2005; Law, 2006; Thrift, 2008; Pink, 2009). Indeed, as will be illustrated, socio-material relations produce individual and collective, wills, such that 'Action is borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated' (Latour, 2005, p. 46). And moreover the socio-material relations that create power effects may be far from singular even within a single organization (Law, 1994), hence individual will (and identity) may also be multiple, even non-coherent (Law, 2006).

We will address the operation of power in PBOs through an ethnographic study of an architectural design office, located in London, UK (hereafter named 'TOPDESIGN'). The architectural profession, and indeed the creative or cultural industries more generally, have in recent years received increasing attention as a setting through which to explore relations of power (Cohen *et al.*, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2010). Simultaneously, recent ethnographic studies of architectural practices have highlighted the importance of material objects (Luck, 2007; Ewenstein and Whyte, 2009; Yaneva, 2009b; Tryggestad *et al.*, 2010). However, thus far, these two strands of research about architectural work have developed in parallel: studies of power have focused almost exclusively on verbal, or discursive, practices (Cohen *et al.*, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2010), while studies of material practices (Ewenstein and Whyte, 2009; Yaneva, 2009a, 2009b; Tryggestad *et al.*, 2010) have not explicitly focused on relations of power, but rather on knowledge and inventiveness.

Yaneva (2009a), suggests that 'a building cannot be defined by what it is and what it means, but only by *what it does*: what kinds of disputes *it provokes* and how *it resists to* attempts of transformation in different periods of time according to the variable geometry of different human and non-human actors' (p. 199; original emphasis). Such empirical sensitivity to the minutiae of socio-material relations in architectural work (see also Luck, 2007; Ewenstein and Whyte, 2009; Tryggestad *et al.*, 2010) contrasts markedly to Brown *et al.*'s (2010) analysis of power in an architectural practice. Brown *et al.* (2010) profess that 'language is a primary medium through which power is expressed and shaped' (p. 532) and hence they adopt a vocabulary of discourse, power, creativity and identity as explanations of architectural work. While for Yaneva (2009b), when discussing architecture, we should 'avoid passage through vague notions of society, culture, imagination, creativity, which do not explain

anything but need explanation' (p. 28). This paper develops this 'pragmatist' research agenda (cf. Yaneva, 2009a, 2009b) further and asks, how then can we explain power effects (e.g. asymmetries, domination, seduction) within architectural practices, and by extension PBOs—through what socio-material relations might power effects be enacted. In so doing, the argument presented here is not that language is trivial to power; rather it is just one medium involved in relations of power (and the production of knowledge/creativity). And moreover, given the importance of material (and embodied) registers in knowledge-sharing/transformation in architectural practice (Luck, 2007; Ewenstein and Whyte, 2009; Yaneva, 2009a, 2009b; Tryggestad *et al.*, 2010) and the recognized imbrication of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1980), it is particularly apposite to develop an understanding of how power can circulate through non-language-orientated mediums within PBOs through the study of architectural practices.

What perhaps binds together almost all studies of architectural or design practices is a lack of concern for their status as PBOs: authors have instead tended to focus on their position within the creative industries (Cohen *et al.*, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2010) or similarly as purveyors of innovation (Ewenstein and Whyte, 2009; Yaneva, 2009a, 2009b). Conceivably, this is because almost all architects stress their creativity as part of their identity, while the mundane 'projectness' of their work (i.e. meeting cost/quality/time targets) is repressed (Brown *et al.*, 2010). However, as studies of power in projects (Lovell, 1993; Newcombe, 1996; Pinto, 1996; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006) have revealed, the 'projectness' of organizations often imbues a specific set of tensions related to power related to the need to balance imperatives for creativity and collaboration alongside those for control and authority.

Architects often work together in small design teams, frequently working with other disciplines, including structural engineers, model-makers, planners and lawyers, as well as construction contractors to carry out a design service to fairly fixed time, cost and quality targets. Architectural practices, including TOP-DESIGN, frequently emphasize the heterarchical nature of their working practices—sometimes even explicitly defining the creative and collaborative culture of their project teams against the perceived rigidity and formality of corporate bureaucracies and hierarchies. However, architectural practices must encourage collaboration and creativity, while adhering to strict project targets imposed by the client and/or construction contractor. This creates an inevitable tension between the creative and more prosaic organizational aspects of architectural practice (Cohen *et al.*,

2005; Brown *et al.*, 2010). Hence architectural practices provide a good setting to examine how such tensions between the creative, post-bureaucratic promises of project work and the need for formal control and monitoring are being resolved in practice, especially across material and embodied registers.

This paper addresses these themes across four sections. First, we will briefly examine why mainstream studies of the analysis of power in PBOs are rare. Secondly, we will turn towards more 'critical' studies of power and PBOs (including those of architecture) and question why these studies have tended to downplay the role of material artefacts and embodied practices as conduits of power. Third, we will describe the research setting and methods employed within this paper. Fourth, we will present three ethnographic accounts related to the operation of power in TOPDE-SIGN across material and embodied registers. By way of conclusion, we will discuss how the data gathered from TOPDESIGN can develop academic debates about the role of material and embodied practices in PBOs.

Project management and power

Despite a small number of exceptions (Lovell, 1993; Newcombe, 1996; Pinto, 1996), the operation of power within projects received little scholarly attention until the fairly recent interest in project organizations by CMS (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Marshall, 2006; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009). Notwithstanding its enduring centrality to studies of organizations (Macgregor, 1960; Herzberg, 1966; Knights and Roberts, 1982; Hofstede, 1984; Pfeffer, 1993; Maslow, 1998; Clegg *et al.*, 2006), power continues to remain a substantially less prominent object of analysis than other concepts within project management journals (Lovell, 1993), such as 'success', 'failure', 'value' and 'risk'. There are numerous possible explanations for this tendency, not least the tendency to view power in negative terms as Machiavellian, self-interested and, backstabbing...perhaps a project should, or can, expunge itself of power and politics by becoming more technically rational and efficient, and in the process create a unitary purpose (Clegg *et al.*, 2006, p. 3). Moreover, the pervasive interest in the analytics of power by those interested in developing critiques of modern management and organization, as in CMS, inadvertently seems to support this negative reading of the operation and consequences of power. However, as Clegg *et al.* (2006) explain, the effects of power can be positive or negative, and moreover it should rather be understood as the main contributor, not threat to, rational and efficient (project) management and organization: 'Power is inscribed in the core

of organizational achievement. If it were not, there would be nothing to remark on because, whether for good or evil, the social relations that constitute organization, the collecting together and coordinating of individual wills, endeavours, and energies, would not occur' (p. 3). In other words, power, that is the co-ordination through some, or many, relational techniques (e.g. morality, expertise, tradition, charisma, class, deception, diversion, physical force or reward) of individual wills into a collective purpose, is essential, or 'immanent' to all organization (Clegg *et al.*, 2006), not least project organization.

The negative image of power might explain the reluctance of project management researchers to engage with the concept, after all who wants to be seen to be openly encouraging the submission of individual will. Moreover, viewed in Clegg *et al.*'s (2006, p. 3) terms, all project management research implicitly involves an analysis of power. For some, this broadening of power might imply that power is everything and therefore nothing, everywhere and therefore nowhere, and thus of little utility to (project) practitioners in getting things done (cf. Marshall, 2006, p. 207). However, this critique of an *immanent* view of power depends on the effect of power being understood abstractly, beyond lived socio-material relations. Yet, power effects are never mobilized abstractly; they are always contextually situated. For example, the socio-material relations that organize prisoners (threats of confinement) are not the same as between soldiers (official ranks), doctors and patients (expertise) or call-centre workers (surveillance, incentives): 'power requires and is specific to a particular organisational context' (Clegg *et al.*, 2006). If we are to properly understand power, we must make explicit the specific socio-material relations, including organizational practices, through which it is expressed. In the context of project management, this practice-based approach involves asking questions about the specific ways in which individuals' wills are co-ordinated within PBOs, and perhaps, better still, also conducting observational studies of how individuals interact in real-time to achieve, or attempt to achieve, tasks together.

Unfortunately the small number of 'mainstream' studies of power and projects have lacked practice-based perspectives and as a result tended to obscure the relevance of the analytics of power to practitioners and perhaps other researchers. Lovell (1993), for example, theorizes the general application of power, and especially the potential value of techniques such as trust, participation, empowerment and motivation in gaining the support of colleagues to become 'powerful'. While Lovell's (1993) sentiment that individual power 'depends to a large extent on the willingness of others to accept it' (p. 77) is correct, it is difficult to diagnose how such consent might be practiced in abstract terms. A similar shortage of empirical detail about the practices that effect power is apparent in other 'mainstream' studies (Newcombe, 1996; Pinto, 1996).

Critical studies of power and projects: embodied and material practices

Critical approaches to the analysis of power have only relatively recently been applied to PBOs (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006, 2007; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009). Unlike 'mainstream' studies of power and PBOs (Lovell, 1993; Newcombe, 1996; Pinto, 1996), these approaches are related to practice-based studies of PBOs (e.g. Bresnen, 2009), wherein 'actions, decisions and behaviors are understood as being embedded in and continuously reshaped by local patterns of power relations and communicative inter-subjective interaction in real time' (Cicmil *et al.*, 2006, p. 676). Critical approaches are characterized by a denaturalizing, non-performative (or non-managerially performative) and reflexive approach to management research (Fournier and Grey, 2000; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006). Styhre (2011), for example, describes in empirical detail how norms of good work and credibility, policed by peer surveillance, provide an informal mechanism of control on construction projects, somewhat independent of bureaucratic formal control processes. Clegg and Courpasson (2004) empirically document the careers of project managers internalizing bureaucratic formal monitoring techniques of project management as part of their professional reputation, creating new forms of 'remote control' for themselves and their colleagues (p. 545). These critically orientated studies offer contrasting views of the PBO contexts within which formal rules, and informal norms, might offer modes of control, but they share a common interest in reflexively denaturalizing the specific techniques of power through which individual wills are co-ordinated by managerial performativity within PBOs. The interaction between bureaucratic forms of control, and the need to ensure creativity, innovation and motivation, is an important, probably daily, concern for most project practitioners. This is particularly salient in the case of architectural design practices, where any sidelining of the creative process is likely to lead to the erosion of the architect's identity (Cohen *et al.*, 2005), or rather perhaps the idealized identity (Brown *et al.*, 2010). Brown *et al.* (2010) show how architectural creativity is not separate to relations of power; rather it is a conduit of power: the creative professional is discursively constructed as an ideal who can escape bureaucratic control; importantly this discourse of professionalism is (even explicitly) specified by senior architects to their juniors.

It is noticeable that most critical studies of power within PBOs (Hodgson, 2002; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006, 2007; Marshall, 2006), and architectural practice (Cohen *et al.*, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2010), have tended to focus upon the verbal, or discursive, registers of power, rather than embodied and/or material manifestations (Sage *et al.*, 2010; Whyte and Lobo, 2010). Styhre (2011) describes how poor quality craftsmanship can undermine professional status creating peer pressure, yet we learn little about the building materials or facial gestures, that are presumably involved in definitions of 'poor' or 'good' work. Likewise, Brown *et al.* (2010) describe how 'silent hierarchies' and 'invisible walls' are maintained in their study of architectural practice, however we know nothing of the layout of their studied architectural office, the movements and expressions of people within it or the objects, movements and expressions involved in the design process. Rather such embodied and material registers appear rather passive to the power of language within the practice. It is important that embodied and material practices are considered in practice-based accounts of power in PBOs, not least architectural practices. In the case of embodied practices, a plethora of studies, from Taylor's time-motion studies onwards, have illustrated how bodies are a critical mechanism to effect, and bear witness to, the co-ordination, or rather subordination, of individuals wills in organizations (see Clegg *et al.*, 2006, pp. 39–93). More recently, a growing number of organizational studies (Ball, 2005; Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Flores-Pereira *et al.*, 2008; Harquail and King, 2010) have examined how non-verbal, emotionally charged behaviour such as facial and hand gestures, eye contact, bodily contact, dress are equally important conduits of social interaction, and by extension domination, seduction, authority, coercion, manipulation in organizations. These non-verbal practices evidence and effect relations of power, offering a glimpse of conscious and non-conscious interactions that shape the social organization of work. Moreover project-based work often necessitates increasing attention to non-verbal, or affective (emotionally charged non-verbal interactions)— behaviours. Thrift (2008, p. 244), for example, sums up two drivers for what he terms 'the affective corporation' that also typify PBOs related to the need to (i) generate trust in fluid organizations where formal lines of authority are less appropriate and (ii) an emphasis on fostering creativity in contemporary organizations through interactions related to emotional engagement. Hence aspects of the fluidity and creativity, or in other words heterarchy, that seemingly typify PBOs actually may actually place more emphasis on non-verbal emotionally charged interactions, or what Thrift (2008) terms 'affective', modes of organization, and by extension power.

The significance of material practices to an analysis of power in PBOs is twofold. First, objects, including technologies like project reporting systems are not merely passive 'intermediaries'; they often fail to do what people ask or expect of them, and indeed when they do behave as we might like, this often involves the enrolment of other unruly technologies with perhaps further unintended consequences (cf. Latour, 2005). In other words, objects continually make a difference to our socialized relations, thoughts and actions; they are more than obedient 'tools'. Secondly, objects equally do not determine our lives. By focusing on their influence on social relations, and by extension power, we can also avoid exaggerated claims about the potential for objects, such as technological systems, to bring about revolutionary changes in the nature of project management (Harty, 2005). Both of these points have important ramifications for practitioners interested in understanding how to get things done in projects. Recent practice-based studies of power and organizations contain numerous examples of how power in organizations is some way materially constituted, from performance monitoring systems in call-centres (Winiecki, 2009), knowledge management technologies in law firms (Brivot, 2011), the office architecture of utility providers (Dale and Burrell, 2008) to the use of ICT in design firms (Whyte and Lobo, 2010).

For analytical clarity, embodied and material practices can be conceptually differentiated, as in the above review of extant studies, but within the ethnographic accounts presented in this paper, they will be discussed together. After all, to fully appreciate the interaction between people and things, we should consider people as corporeal rather than cerebral entities (Dale and Burrell, 2008). Indeed, our facial or hand gestures are modified by materials such as make-up, glasses, dress, desks or the machines we use at work, while objects frequently take into account, or supplement, the potential of human bodies. By focusing on these interactions between people and things, we seek in this paper to develop fresh insights into new modalities of power within PBOs. With these theoretical imperatives in mind, we will now turn towards the research setting of this study.

Research context and method

TOPDESIGN is a large UK architectural practice. The firm is located in a single office in London. The architects working in TOPDESIGN undertake a variety of design projects from small-scale residential developments to large commercial projects. The organization

primarily works on projects within the UK, particularly in London and the Southeast of England. This firm was selected as a case-study for several reasons. Importantly, unlike many architectural practices, very few formal messages are given by TOPDESIGN as to how the practice organizes its power relations. For example, some architectural practices contain vision statements on their websites, and in marketing material, relating to their heterarchy organization, while other practices place an emphasis on the creativity of 'signature' architects or describe quite formal organizational structures. It appeared that TOPDESIGN was a good candidate to observe power-in-action, in that there was no explicitly codified consensus on how power was being organized, in essence, no corporate mantra on, for example 'people and power' that might obscure, or at least, complicate an ethnographic study. Moreover, this architectural practice was large enough and concentrated in one location so as to readily enable us to observe a large variety of different social interactions over a fairly short period of time. The architectural practice was also prepared to provide a level of access that was broadly appropriate for a small-scale ethnographic study.

The research approach deployed in this study is in keeping with what Alvesson and Deetz (2000) refer to in the context of CMS, as 'targeted ethnography'. Targeted ethnographies differ from 'classic' ethnographies in that instead of a fieldworker spending several months in the field to provide a holistic understanding of a culture, they target significant episodes within an organizational culture to examine specific conceptual themes. Pink *et al.* (2010) suggest that short-term ethnographic interventions are particularly well-suited to industrial applications, wherein 'project timescales are limited by industry deadlines and/or budgets' (p. 649). Moreover research resources are often justified on the basis of delivering insights into specific conceptual issues, with a practical import, rather than providing the holistic cultural analysis as developed within classic ethnographies.

During our research study, a single fieldworker observed a series of project design review during the summer of 2010 and also shadowed one of the founding partners. The first author alone conducted the ethnography to ensure consistency of analysis, build relationships and minimize the disturbance to TOPDESIGN. This fieldworker interviewed several practitioners, including structural engineers and model-makers, to understand how they made sense of their work and the spaces they inhabit. These interviews were not simply another mode of collection, but were treated as part of the analysis process, functioning as 'ethnographic' interviews, providing an opportunity to reflect upon the theoretical insights generated by observations of design review meetings (cf. Spradley, 1979). More

generally, following the ethnographic practice (cf. Pink *et al.*, 2010; Watson, 2011), the analysis of data began in the field, rather than through the discrete period of data collection and analysis, through the organizing of fieldnotes across relevant theoretical themes related to the expression of power (as summarized in the review of literature above) and reflection on these themes in collaboration with informants in informal conversation and interviews.

In this study, we were broadly interested on how control and creativity are reconciled within TOPDESIGN through specific relations of power. Hence, we chose to primarily target observations of project review meetings where senior and junior architects met to review, amend and approve on-going design work. These observations then informed unstructured 'ethnographic' interviews where practitioners in TOPDESIGN could collaborate with the fieldworker in the analysis of particular ethnographic encounters. Indeed, ethnographic techniques uniquely offer a beneficial degree of reflexivity about the theories of researchers (cf. Clifford and Marcus, 1986): permitting practitioners to collaboratively inform 'our' theories within the analysis process (Pink *et al.*, 2010; Watson, 2011), instead of a more traditional model of research where scholars speak *about* and *for* their research subjects. In addition ethnographies enable researchers to be more self-reflexive about the positionality of their own observation, ideas and theories—admitting that research takes a view from somewhere (O'Reilly, 2005):

> Even your choice of topic is influenced by your own personal biography, by funding bodies (who are themselves influenced by internal and national politics), your academic institutions, your academic and personal biography. Who you gain access to and the type of access you gain are affected by your age, gender, class, personality and nationality. Your interpretations are affected by all of the above, plus your foreshadowed problems, your theoretical orientation, your academic training. (O'Reilly, 2005, p. 222)

In keeping with the self-reflexive position of ethnographic research, it is important to acknowledge the social context of this study. Notably, within our study, our approach was heavily influenced by the fieldworker's social relationship with Peter, one of the founding partners of TOPDESIGN. No doubt this relationship itself was influenced by the fieldworker's personality, appearance and background and his relative legibility, even acceptability, to Peter. He was incredibly useful in arranging access within TOPDESIGN and provided excellent engagement with the conceptual themes of the study; however he tended to organize access around his own diary. Hence, it was often difficult, simple because

of time, to speak to employees without Peter's presence; especially, given that the resources required for the study were limited both financially and geographically (the researcher was based at some distance from London). The focus on Peter, an outwardly 'powerful' actor, is not, however, necessarily a problem for this study. The aim of this study is not to map all power relations across TOPDESIGN, or indeed address the issue of who has and does not hold power (a notion which itself reinforces a sovereign rather than immanent view of power—Clegg *et al.*, 2006, p. 248), but rather as already explained, the aim of this paper is to examine the more theoretical question of whether, and how, objects and embodied practices might play a role in the immanent projection of power, as positioned within debates around the professed transformation of power within PBOs and the significance of materiality to architectural work. This theoretical question can be examined empirically by, in part, observing and interacting with Peter, as he interacts with colleagues, and thus encountering the expressions of power that accompany these interactions. We do not claim that these insights are representative of all PBOs, or even TOPDESIGN, but they do illustrate the viability and value of an approach to the study of power in PBOs that considers power relations across material and embodied, not simply discursive registers.

It is also important to note that Peter asked for minimal explanation as for the presence of the fieldworker as an observer with TOPDESIGN. The researcher simply suggested to Peter that he was interested in understanding the design process as a social interaction. In turn, Peter simply told attendees in meetings that the researcher wanted to know how they worked and how they got things done together. In the remaining empirical discussion in this paper, we will continue this self-reflexive approach by adopting a first-person voice that acknowledges the positionality of the insights gathered (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; O'Reilly, 2005).

Dwelling and working in heterarchical space

The design and use of the TOPDESIGN office building outwardly reproduced many heterarchical ideals of work (e.g. high degrees of flexibility, collaboration, creativity) that for many should and do typify PBOs. As I entered the ground floor, I was struck, for example, that it was replete with building models. As Peter, the founding partner of TOPDESIGN, later explained to me, this was part of a city-wide exhibition of architecture and, therefore, the entire ground floor was open to the public. Peter explained that the ground floor had been designed as a highly flexible and welcoming, open-space for the public rather than

a corporate vestibule to screen unwanted visitors. Despite this level of openness, there was little security creating a barrier between the ground and first floor. Indeed a spiral staircase, placed prominently in the middle of the ground floor, seemed to invite, not discourage, me to walk upstairs. The TOPDESIGN office building also contained no information about the work of the organization contained within. While this absence can be read in rather less egalitarian terms as a cloak, maintaining a powerful barrier of understanding between those inside and outside TOPDESIGN, the absence of a visual corporate brand prevailed across the office building. There were no artistic renditions of TOPDESIGN buildings hanging in corridors, no poster displays, no logos, and no corporate slogans. This rather non-corporate atmosphere within the office building also offered a rather egalitarian space for creativity, where architects could operate with scarce attention to the 'TOPDESIGN' brand. This egalitarian mood continued in the non-hierarchical lay-out of office furniture and equipment. For example, Peter, the founding partner of TOPDESIGN, sat at a standard size desk at one end of a long open-plan office on the second floor. Peter worked with the same computer and architectural pens as all the other architects. Peter's personal assistant sat at another desk behind a bookcase facing him. I struggled to identify any obvious physical markers of seniority within this outwardly heterarchical office space. Perhaps the only notable example of hierarchical division in the office layout was the use of a single, large top floor meeting room for all board meetings (where the senior partners met weekly).

The absence of signs within the TOPDESIGN office space also precluded me from gleaning any obvious functional demarcations of space. It was impossible to know where 'accounts', 'legal' or the structural engineers were located within the office without asking someone. This approach to functional boundaries seems to parallel the promise of PBOs as cross-disciplinary and highly flexible. Indeed, there were small movable 'pod' desks located within each bank of desks, allowing co-workers to quickly rotate their chairs and set up informal meeting to quickly discuss design issues on projects, without having to book office space. On numerous occasions I witnessed architects, modellers and engineers meeting informally in this way. Peter also explained how the office had been designed with a high degree of flexibility for expansion; for example, lintels had been prepositioned within walls to allow future windows, similarly the windows overlooking the car park could be adapted into doors for an expanded building. The latter option would become a reality as TOPDESIGN had decided to expand their office in response to their success in

winning design projects and the need to accommodate the requirements of specific technical specialists, in particular their growing in-house architectural modelling team. The materiality of the TOPDESIGN office, and the agenda of Peter in creating this design, seemed to resonate with the post-bureaucratic ideals of power in PBOs, in terms of encouraging a more democratic, flexible, empowered, collaborative, creative and egalitarian approach to work. However, I remained sceptical of any notion that power was somehow absent within this organization. After all, as Clegg *et al.* (2006) suggest, without power there can be no organization. To understand how this organization gets work done, and whether new, perhaps more egalitarian, forms of 'project-based' power were being cultivated, I observed a series of design review meetings.

Embodied power in action

These design review meetings were critical within the cycle of project work of TOPDESIGN. They enabled the 10 partners of TOPDESIGN to review the design work of the 200 more junior architects. The meetings were usually attended by one partner—in my ethnography, Peter attended all the meetings I witnessed—and two or three junior architects. I was immediately struck by the lack of time junior architects seemed to spend discussing their designs within design review meetings. Given the collaborative atmosphere of the TOPDESIGN office, and Peter's desire to uphold these sentiments, I had expected the meetings to be a very egalitarian event, where the junior architects felt empowered to explain their designs and even question some of the assumptions of previous TOPDESIGN approaches. Instead the meetings were dominated by Peter with rather minimal involvement from the more junior architects involved. However, Peter did not dominate the meetings by speaking loudly over the junior architects; rather Peter actually spoke very softly, quietly, often pausing for thought, though with an articulate clarity. He would often intersperse into his views on design historical or cultural references. I recall one example where he explained the poor design of contemporary housing in the UK, by singing the theme music to the American television series, *Weeds*: 'There's a green one and a pink one. And a blue one and a yellow one. And they're all made out of ticky-tacky. And they all look just the same …'. The junior architects, by contrast, tended to speak in hesitant and hurried bursts, often referring to technical details about the contract, building materials, or client specifications. Their voices were frequently lost in the rhythm of paused reflections and clipped consonants that pervaded Peter's voice.

I found Peter's voice engaging, in a rather pensive, reflective, almost mesmeric way. Unlike most of the junior architects, Peter would often also draw upon design plans in the meetings. He seemed to acquire an embodied feel for a design by drawing. As his pen moved across the design, the junior architects would sit and watch silently, waiting to see how their designs could be challenged, adapted, revised or even abandoned (Figure 1).

When challenged by Peter, the junior architects would respond often with quite defensive, apologetic remarks or technical information about their designs or the clients requirements. Peter appeared much more emotionally upbeat about the design process; he seemed to explicitly enjoy his work. Peter would frequently offer jokes about design, hinting at the fun or frivolity of design work, in a manner that contrasted with the earnest attention to detail of the junior architects. For example, in one meeting about an extension to the TOPDESIGN office, I recorded the following exchange:

> Peter: What is this table for in the model workshop?
> Junior Architect: This table … this table is for …
> Peter: If they feel faint and need a bacon sandwich or something?
> Junior Architect: I'll tell you what it is. The story of this table is that the current set–up is that you have machines on the ground floor and then assembly and computers on the first floor. Of course they don't need the whole of the first floor. You have one bay which is actually the 3D group. So here you have desks.

This tension between differing vocal patterns, emotions, and actions (e.g. drawing) in the meeting, seemed to reinforce, not simply reflect, relations of

Figure 1 Design review meeting at TOPDESIGN

power within the organization. Peter's slow, studied, occasionally light-hearted, reflections, intermixed with drawing, provided a tangible reminder of his seniority and experience: he did not have time to extensively prepare for the design meetings; he did not need to be well versed in the technical details about a design, current building codes, or a contract or tender, but rather Peter offered an embodied, or tacit, knowledge, based on decades of enjoyable success, of finding the balance between what architecture can do aesthetically, culturally, emotionally, commercially and functionally. The junior architects in the review meetings would almost never challenge aspects of the design that Peter felt were inappropriate or badly conceived. I was surprised at the level of submissiveness within these meetings. After all, these events seemed rather at odds with the egalitarian atmosphere that seemed to be actively promoted by Peter elsewhere within TOPDESIGN. The experience of power effects induced through learning that I witnessed at TOPDESIGN can be elucidated through the comparison to that which occurs within many universities. In my experience, both as a student and teacher, learning tends to be demarcated by contexts that produce either strongly dominating power effects (e. g. formal lectures) where extant knowledge is simply relayed or a much more collaborative, and fluid, set of power relations (e.g. group work within a seminar class) associated with the transformation of extant knowledge. The power effects that became evident within the design meetings seemed to fit neither of these rather polarized contexts of knowledge-sharing/transformation, rather knowledge was simultaneously being shared *and* transformed: the knowledge of the junior architects was transformed, just as knowledge of the process of that transformation was being shared (cf. Brown *et al.*, 2010).

It is important to note, however, that I observed no recognizable bravado, machismo or heroism from Peter within the design meeting, as other authors have observed in studies of powerfully charismatic corporate leaders (Law, 1994; Fletcher and Watson, 2007), rather there was a curiously submissive power dynamic that seemed to hinge upon non-verbal, emotionally charged, even non-conscious, interactions, or what Thrift (2008) terms 'affect'. Perhaps, we might categorize the 'affective' quality of the meeting as a mesmeric charisma: a benignly, even seductive, though powerfully commanding, mood seemed to pervade the design review meetings I attended. To better understand and contextualize the embodied and material, power dynamics within these design review meetings, and my observations about the TOPDESIGN office, I conducted an interview with Peter. This interview illustrates some significant, yet subtle, relations of power at work within TOPDESIGN and perhaps other PBOs.

'It's our show': materiality, embodiment and power

I conducted my interview with Peter towards the end of my time at TOPDESIGN. This interview can be categorized as an ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1979), in the sense that it was informed by my participant observations at TOPDESIGN. I did not have a template of questions to ask Peter, but rather sought to broaden and deepen (and not simply validate) my understanding of power within TOPDESIGN. I began the interview by recalling my thoughts on the design review meetings I had experienced. I asked Peter whether, or how, he sought to encourage the junior architects to participate in these meetings. Peter *began* his reply by stating that ultimately 'it's *our* show … it's *our* responsibility' (emphasis added). The 'our' in this sentence clearly refers to the TOPDESIGN partners and their work in making sure that the outcomes of the design process are as good as possible for their clients. He offers further explication on the purpose of design review meetings:

> But we do rely on these conversations to—you know because otherwise with … [so many architects working here] we couldn't possibly draw everything ourselves, we absolutely need teams to go away and work things up and then bring things back and of course part of that process is that you're giving up a little bit of what it is you do to them and that's why they will work here, because they know that they've got room for manoeuvre.

Peter's reply indicates a much more pragmatic, even hierarchical, attitude towards work and the asymmetrical relations of power that enable successful design projects in TOPDESIGN, than the heterarchical nature of the office space might seem to suggest. In the above extract, Peter seems almost reluctant to delegate work to others, recognizing it as a pragmatic necessity, given the success of TOPDESIGN, rather than part of any essential organizational mission towards a post-bureaucratic ideal of work. Peter seems to view empowerment almost negatively in this reply in terms of a sense of loss of himself and by extension his control. It is worth noting, given my observations about the highly embodied nature of Peter's power in the design review meeting that he also speaks about delegation of work in quite corporeal terms—a loss of part of himself.

As the interview progresses, Peter starts to talk about the challenges posed by junior architects that do not fit with the ethos of TOPDESIGN:

> they are caught up in style and you know everyone is looking at the latest magazines and they want to do— oh that's a fantastic housing scheme in Spain, I really

love that, isn't that wonderful, we can do that in Milton Keynes. You can't, you know you have to understand and accept the limitations of the thing that you are doing. As long as you can understand that, then you can make something of it, because you make things out of limitations.

In this response, Peter identifies a quite explicitly place-based ethos of design, where vernacular knowledge is more prominent than current design trends or iconic buildings. Peter is keen to instil this ethos, even brand, of place, into the architects in TOPDESIGN. Indeed inattention to the limitations, or nuances, of local context framed many of the criticisms that Peter had within the design review meetings. Peter recalls the experience of a meeting with one architect:

The plans will be impeccable, the dimensions for all the rooms, door swings, stairs, how things arrive, quality of daylight, you know the fact, the soil pipes, the structure, you know all the practical things will be really well understood, but what she won't understand is the characteristic of an English village.

This place-based ethos is far from easily compatible with a heterarchical ethos in TOPDESIGN. Indeed, as Peter explains, place-based design invites some fairly inflexible restrictions on the design process: 'it's just it's all about place making and responding to things that we understand intuitively like hierarchy and legibility and so on'.

I then asked Peter about the TOPDESIGN office, and how it shaped the work of those at TOPDESIGN. I began by asking Peter about the design and use of meeting space within the large open-plan areas of the building:

You know we didn't want them to be far from a place to sit and talk and there would almost be a place to do it, but that place should be not behind closed doors and so that if possible a conversation about design that's going on can then be shared also by people who aren't in the meeting, because they are sitting in the computer …

I knew that the TOPDESIGN building was designed by Peter and his partners and therefore that he would be able to offer an insight into the intention behind its design. In this answer, Peter reinforced my view, expressed in the early section of this paper, that the open-plan office space was intended to promote social interactions across the organization, enabling creativity, collaboration and flexibility, or in other words many of the heterarchical ideals of work in PBOs. I then ask Peter about the organization of functions within the office. Peter explains that

You can end up on any floor unless you are John [the other founding partner] and myself. We are the only people who are still sitting where we first sat seven years ago, because there hasn't ever been a reason to move us, but the teams are always changing and we do that rather deliberately, so that it's not built up around a prevailing hierarchy. So another partner doesn't have his patch as it were.

In his reply, Peter again notes a very conscious effort on the two founding partners to encourage social interactions, to break up any burgeoning silo-mentality within the organization, and enable the kind of highly flexible and adaptable working practices that for many typify PBOs (cf. Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994; Lundin and Midler, 1998). Peter explicitly emphasizes his caution about instilling hierarchical lines of authority within the organization. Nevertheless, the immutability of Peter and John's location within the office perhaps seems to suggest some immunity for the founding partners from their drive towards heterarchy. Later in the interview, Peter continues to explain the use of the office space:

If someone is shown round the office, they probably could work out where John and I sit, but we don't have—you know everyone has got the same chairs when you sit round the table, everyone has got the same chairs. If we need more chairs, we either bring them from somewhere else or we bring stools in, there is no overt hierarchy whatsoever … We've never had our own rooms or anything. So nobody has any advantage spatially or object wise over anyone else, so there is no express seniority.

Peter explains that this heterarchical, rather egalitarian, impetus is designed to encourage confidence in his junior architects so that everyone working at TOPDESIGN feels able to add maximum value to design projects:

The intention is everyone sits down at the table and they are equal, you know we hate it if people are over quiet at a meeting and we want them to—because it's in our interest that we get the benefit of their ideas, but it's also very, very much in our interest that they grow in confidence and develop as people, which through work you do.

However, Peter admits that this heterarchical view of the organizations is necessarily partial, and that relations of power remain a necessary and an unavoidable part of TOPDESIGN:

I'd be kidding if I said that there's equality in the office, because we're all paid differently, you know

there's different levels of decision making process, but the intention is that there's no obvious hierarchy.

Discussion

The TOPDESIGN ethnography reveals a number of unique ways in which way, power flows within PBOs. In contrast to many critical project studies (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006), TOPDESIGN adheres in practice, not simply rhetoric, to many of the heterarchical, and by extension post-bureaucratic, ideals of the organization as outlined by Clegg *et al*. (2006) whereby:

> Heterarchy means the separation of powers; it builds sovereignty into practice rather than the precedent of domination. It sets up, at best, internal systems for the exercise of voice, the calling to account, and the checking of power, and encourages coevolutionary, learning and innovation, and is committed to pluralism. In diversity it sees strength rather than division.

Peter makes it clear that the design of the TOPDESIGN office is actively promoting a strongly collaborative and less explicitly hierarchical, formal and functionally divided mode of work. The way office space was actually used during my visit repeats Peter's intention. Peter explains that this way of working enhances the exchanges of creativity between colleagues within projects. These ideals are not simply socially or discursively operationalized (e.g. in mission statements or training workshops), but rather they are materially manifest in office designs and embodied patterns of use. Clearly, the example of TOPDESIGN is rather unique in that the organization deliberately created its own space in a very direct manner, however all PBOs work in environments that are not completely accidental and passive, but rather have been shaped by and themselves shape social action. The materiality of our working environments holds a significant influence over social relations of power, this point is clearly not lost on architects who are routinely thinking about place-making, such as Peter, but is perhaps overlooked in discussions of the project organization. As Dale and Burrell (2008) put it:

> We need to take seriously the interwoven nature of materiality, social relations and organisation. The coffee machine, the computer, the lift and so on are mundane features of organisational life that bring the body to particular points in space and organise them there, although their relation to social processes are routinely obscured. (p. 230)

It is perhaps more important in PBOs, than other organizations, that the influence of material and embodied practices on social relations is taken into account both by researchers and practitioners. After all, PBOs rely upon the cultivation of a highly flexible and creative workforce. As Peter observed, project work may be poorly served by overly formalized working environments, or ill-thought out open-plan offices, that cannot adapt quickly to different project demands or encourage informal, yet creative, conversations and collaborations.

Nevertheless, despite Peter's insistence on downplaying hierarchical modes of organization, TOPDESIGN is still pervaded by subtle yet potently hierarchical social processes. The design review meetings that I witnessed illustrate the necessity within PBOs to counter-balance creativity and collaboration with control and authority. However, management control within TOPDESIGN is a rather subtle affair, perhaps in keeping with the generally heterarchical ideals of the organization. Instead of primarily practising control over impersonal and formal bureaucratic checks (e.g. project monitoring forms); Peter has developed a style of control and leadership, which is highly embodied and materially manifest. His voice, actions and feelings are co-ordinated in a display of power, as he posed questions, tells jokes, drops esoteric cultural references, and engages and challenges the junior architects with the movement of his pen. This exhibition of control cultivates, and references, exactly the kind of 'affective' corporation that Thrift (2008) tacitly associated with PBOs. Peter does not rely upon verbal confrontation or reflective conversation (Brown *et al*., 2010, p. 539), or even sheer technical expertise, to exert control over the design projects; rather in design review meetings he invites a mood of calm, cerebral, yet light-hearted, deliberation, on the quality of the design. Across material and embodied, as well as verbal, registers, Peter exhibits to the junior architects his ideal of the architect (cf. Brown *et al*., 2010): thoughts develop with each pen stroke—creativity embodied in a specific act of drawing and engagement with material forms (cf. Ewenstein and Whyte, 2009; Yaneva, 2009a, 2009b)—rather than the architect whose work is delineated by abstract (often verbally presented) fashions, client briefs and technical possibilities. If we had not undertaken an ethnographic study of this design practice, it would have been extremely difficult to tease out these subtle performances of power.

Concluding comments

Various critical project studies (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Sage *et al*., 2010) have argued that power effects within PBOs are perniciously 'crypto' bureaucratic: increased flexibility and empowerment will lead to the reassertion of rigid, formal

hierarchies of control, as, for example, bureaucratic control processes become internalized as part of an employees' identity (see Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Andersson and Wicklegren, 2009). In this scenario, as project workers are given more responsibility and control, somewhat paradoxically project workers' lives become even more dominated by an 'iron triangle' of project targets. As Clegg and Courpasson (2004) argue, the PBO, therefore creates a form of remote rather than direct control, perhaps through seemingly invisible bureaucratic audits (Sage *et al.*, 2010), which is no less potent than more direct, and explicit, forms of control. These critical studies suggest that power is a rather negative force within PBOs, undermining work-life balance, producing poor job satisfaction and creating increasing levels of anxiety and stress, and ultimately reducing project efficiency and efficacy (see Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009). However, our study of TOPDESIGN reveals few of these negative sentiments about power, not least because TOPDESIGN does not easily fit within such neat dichotomies of formal and informal control; TOPDESIGN displays a mix of heterarchical and hierarchical organization, formal and informal modes of control (cf. Brown *et al.*, 2010). Unlike the highly discursive control processes observed in other studies of PBOs (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006, 2007; Cicmil *et al.*, 2009) and architectural practices (Cohen *et al.*, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2010), neither of these forms of control appear predominately language orientated, and thus amenable to translation within bureaucratic practices of power. Indeed, while architects at TOPDE-SIGN recognize the need to complete bureaucratic reports about their work (e.g. to map changes in design), rather little of this bureaucracy is evident within perhaps the most important episodes of 'control' within their work—the design review meeting with the most senior architect in the organization.

Our limited ethnographic encounter with TOPDE-SIGN offers at least four tentative lessons in understanding power relations both in architectural practices, as well as PBOs more generally. First, power is not simply manifest in social relations *per se*, and in particular verbal (and written) interactions, rather it often operates across embodied and material registers from the layout and use of office space to the actions and emotions of individuals within a meeting. Indeed, if knowledge work is mediated by objects, especially perhaps within architectural practices (Luck, 2007; Ewenstein and Whyte, 2009; Yaneva, 2009a, 2009b; Tryggestad *et al.*, 2010) and if knowledge and power are interwoven (Foucault, 1975, 1980; Clegg *et al.*, 2006), then power must operate across embodied and material registers (cf. Law, 1994; Connolly, 2002; Massumi, 2002; Latour, 2005; Dale and Burrell,

2008; Thrift, 2008). Secondly, as Thrift (2008) suggests, these material and embodied registers are particularly important within modern organizations, like PBOs, where there is a pressing need to carefully balance control and authority alongside creativity and collaboration. This case study appears to lend some credence to Thrift's (2008) thesis. Cumbersome bureaucratic processes, and the rigid hierarchies they often imbue in organizations appear (to Peter) too restrictive in ensuring control at the expense of creativity, compared with subtle affective (material and embodied) techniques. Similarly, mission statements about collaboration appear equally too trite in encouraging creative exchange when contrasted to inventive office design.

Third, power can be understood in more positive, or rather neutral, terms. Power is crucial to the ability to organize, for work to be co-ordinated and should not be reduced to (and thus avoided as) a Machiavellian quest (Clegg *et al.*, 2006). If we understand power in an organization in less pejorative terms, we can understand more about how work is done and through what techniques. Fourth, power is multiple. TOPDESIGN is neither a pure hierarchy or heterarchy, it is rather both, simultaneously (cf. Law, 1994). And moreover, it is both because both forms of organization, or rather relations of power, serve different productive purposes within TOPDESIGN: heterarchy encourages creativity, co-learning, motivation and communication, while hierarchy enables decisions to be made, responsibility to be taken and disputes to be settled quickly (see Clegg *et al.*, 2006, pp. 135–140). To Peter, these two modalities of power appear necessary and contingent within TOPDESIGN. Brown *et al.* (2010) suggest that tensions between hierarchical (control, authority) and heterarchical imperatives (creative, collaborative) within architectural practice are reconciled in a form of 'creative power' wherein the 'future perfect ideal of what being a creative professional will be … tantalizingly embodied in the figure of the senior Architect' (p. 541). While this study provides tentative evidence of such an ideal (e.g. in Peter's design review meetings), it offers less confirmation that the fractured professional identity of architects is being understood and reconciled through a unified ideal of the Self (as in Brown *et al.*, 2010). Rather, by attending to material and embodied registers of power, we can glimpse how an individual's identity can persist in a more multiple manner (cf. Czarniawska, 1997; Alvesson *et al.*, 2008): architects in TOPDESGIN navigated highly differentiated embodied and material (and affective) practices on a daily basis, and their modalities of power effects, thus enacting multiple, even contradictory, subjectivities (e.g. as a learner, creator, technician and manager).

It has only been possible to empirically examine these four points because of the ethnographic approach

towards the study of power as employed within this paper. However, thus far, relatively few studies of *power* in PBOs, have adopted an ethnographic approach (for an exception see Green, 2006). Similarly, few studies of power in architectural practice have adopted an ethnographic approach, instead the dominant data gathering technique has been interviews (Cohen *et al.*, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2010). If we are to adequately understand the imperative to balance creativity and collaboration alongside control and authority in PBOs, and the specific material and embodied, as well as verbal, techniques through which power is being reworked in PBOs, such ethnographic approaches are essential. However, in making this leap, we must abandon recourse to both ideal types of organization such as 'hierarchy', 'bureaucracy' and 'heterarchy' and 'post-bureaucracy', as well as ideal types of the Self, such as 'the professional', 'the creative', 'the manager' and the 'the junior' as explanatory resources to account for power effects in PBOs. Instead, we should seek to understand how these entities emerge as the effects of socio-material practices, such as dwelling in offices or drawing (Latour, 2005). Or, as Latour (2005) puts it 'Every competence, deep down in the silence of your interiority, has first to come from the outside, to be slowly sunk in and deposited into some well-constructed cellar whose doors have then to be carefully sealed. None of this is a given' (p. 213). Hence, despite Yaneva's (2009b, p. 199) suggestion to the contrary, we see nothing inherently untenable about a socio-material approach to architectural practice that can also be attendant to identity politics, if framed along these lines. Given the professed 'projectification of society' (Lundin and Söderholm, 1998), and the optimistic claims made about the democratic, post-bureaucratic nature of this transition (cf. Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994; Lundin and Midler, 1998), further empirically detailed explanation of how power, and by extension identity and knowledge, is being reworked across social *and* material registers within PBOs is required. This work can, in essence, help us understand what a PBO might be and do, providing a sound empirical basis for normative discussion on the design of future PBOs. This paper has offered a tentative step in this direction.

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