Gendering the Material Culture of Our University Offices

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Gendering the Material Culture of Our University Offices

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Our offices are galleries for the presentation of ourselves to others. Gender, status, interests, power, and professionalism are some of the aspects of self that we may knowingly or unknowingly express through our office decor. Using qualitative data we focus here on gender related aspects of the material presentation of self in university work environments.

Our depth interviews, supplemented by photographs and video records, focused on how professors organize their offices, as well as meanings of special objects, intended and unintended personal representations, changes made in office decor over time, any explicit themes in office decoration, perceived statements of self, discrepancies from ideal office environments, work and non-work activities that occur in the office, and the division of time and activities between home, office, and any “third places” where work might also be undertaken.

The most prominent gender-related difference involved the way in which women (and one minority group man) carve out space in a world that is not traditionally their own. For women this involved symbolically establishing a presence in a profession that has traditionally been more a “man’s world”. For most this involved creating personal statements of identity, caring, authority, and professionalism, with private spaces within the office for more personal expressions of interests. There was an emphasis in these offices on coherent spaces that represent the life of the female occupant while pleasing the self. For the men in the study organization tended to be more haphazard, functional, cluttered, and less coherent. There tended to be more male emphasis on putting visitors to the office at ease and facilitating work flow. We did find in the case of one of our male subjects that there was evidence of carving out an ethnic space in an Anglo world, which was very similar to the office organization of the women in the study.

In all women’s offices we saw plants, something rare in men’s offices. Music was also used differently. For men music was an background feature of the office and was often used functionally, especially by one man whose white noise machine buffered him from others nearby. For the women in the study music was more expressive of mood or a reflection of a particular task being performed. Men also were less likely to display family photos in their offices.

Not all of our gender-based expectations were supported. We expected the female subjects to have more personal mementos in their offices, but this was not the case. Although each of the women’s offices was personally expressive, most of the men’s offices also contained personal and family mementos. Nor did we find gender differences in explicit status-claiming objects. We did however find more “been there, done that” objects and collections among men.

Thus men and women do create different office environments. While men tended to reify women tended to vivify their offices. That is, for men the office was more likely an
assemblage of dead things, whereas for women offices had more evidence of life and
growth. To overstate only a bit, men’s offices were mechanical while women’s were
organic. We will be pursuing these differences next in non-university offices.