A Tale of Two Hammers: Workplace as a Tool for Organization-Craft

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Embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a predisposition…to amplify one sense or skill or attitude more loudly than another…. This is perhaps most simply expressed in the old adage that to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail…. We may extend the truism: To a man with a pencil everything looks like a list. To a man with a camera, everything looks like an image. To a man with a computer everything looks like data. And to a man with a spreadsheet, everything looks like a number. —Neil Postman

There is the flawed view that when accumulating stuff gets us into trouble, technology will see us through, even though it’s the extractive abusive attributes of technology — especially when coupled with the numbers-driven, unemotional, results-oriented left brain intelligence — that got us into the fix to begin with. And there is the flawed view that relies on the invisible hand of the market to be an honest broker, even though we know the market can be very dishonest. Does a pack of cigarettes reflect its true cost? —Ray Anderson

Greetings tribe, it is such an honor to be here. I am the founder of Pilot Projects Design Collective, a hands-on, exploratory, iterative, impact-obsessed, systems-thinking design incubator based in New York City.

At Pilot Projects we like to explore radical and practical ideas, like creating a plan for NYC to partner with a tropical rainforest community to supply the new wood planks for the Brooklyn Bridge Boardwalk, while permanently protecting 200,000 acres of threatened rainforest.

We’ve been twisting NYC’s arm to improve the functionality, accessibility and lovability of public drinking fountains to help stem the city’s 1.25 billion-plastic-bottle-per-year “drinking problem” while also supporting New York’s wonderful watershed and water infrastructure.

We are proposing ways to clean streets of abandoned bicycles while putting youth to work doing something exciting, rewarding and meaningful in their neighborhoods.

And we are working with organizations that want to improve their culture, and their bottom line, through the improvement of the space that they work in every day and call home.

“The workplace” is one of the main things that brings us here together, so I don’t need to stress the “importance” of workplace, or the “opportunity” of workplace - which is a nice change!
But what if something serious has gone wrong in workplace practice and discourse? To better understand this question I want to ask another: How would our lives be different if our organizations (our own and our clients) thought about the workplace like craftsmen thought of their tools?

I want to frame this as an “insider” or leadership question to our own industry. I certainly do not have all the answers, but I have a story and I have some seeds to plant for our conversation to follow, which is what this event is really all about.

I was fortunate to grow up doing a lot of three things from a very young age: drawing things, building things, and camping in wild and remote places. Architecture found me in this cauldron. It came naturally; pulled me in with its mix of creative problem-solving, technical challenges, visible history and diverse communication opportunities and demands. In 1989 I enrolled in the University of Toronto, School of Architecture, and before I finished my first year I was designing real projects and figuring out how to actually build them. As these projects grew in scale and complexity over the years I was in school, they necessarily involved more and more people with diverse skills and knowledge. Many of these people, who were mostly not academics, became mentors to me. This further fueled my reverence for the hands-on challenges of bringing a vision into the real world… Respect for the coordination required, the planning, foresight, skill, knowledge and trust! So many people and things that all had to work together! So much to know! So much that could go wrong — and yet such a feeling of accomplishment when things went right. That first dinner party, overnight or workday in a newly completed building; and knowing this new thing would be around for generations to enjoy…

After many small built projects, backpacking around the world, and working for several architecture firms, I began teaching architecture, and I found this just as exhilarating. The complexity and challenge of making real things and traveling to remote places to see history, technology and culture first-hand became a core part of my curriculum. I was asked to be the director of the first year program at the University of Kentucky College of Architecture, still having so much to learn! The more diligently I applied myself to this learning, however, the more I found that, despite the good intentions of most architects and educators, there was something missing from our collective understanding of how architecture worked in the real world. I began secretly calling this missing link “the infrastructure of culture” because it was becoming more and more clear to me that the “structure” of shared values, language, habits and knowledge was channeling people’s behavior much more powerfully than a building ever could on its own. This flew in the face of most traditional architectural dogma.

So, as much as I loved building, which was a lot, I decided I needed to go back to school to look into this. I ended up at MIT. There I continued to build things even as I wrote a theoretical thesis on “culture versus technology in pursuit of design.” In this incredible academic environment I became interested in subcultures and organizations, and how space influenced these. It happened that one of my wonderful professors at MIT was a man named Frank Duffy. We seemed to see eye-to-eye and two years after I arrived at MIT, I found myself showing up for a new job in New York City at DEGW ¹ — the long-time Mecca of “workplace strategy” that Frank had founded in 1973.

¹ DEGW was long recognized as the leader and industry standard for workplace design and strategy. In spite of its business model that focused (in this author’s view) too heavily on quantitative solutions, it had a parallel but undervalued legacy of craftsmanship in its consulting practice. Small teams of consultants took considerable pride...
I plunged headfirst into this exciting new world of workplace and design strategy. At DEGW we were helping client organizations that boasted thousands of people, billions of dollars and big audacious goals like national security, life-saving drug development, higher education and academic research, financial system growth, international journalism and the protection of cultural and historic treasures from around the world. We were helping these organizations figure out how to use architecture and design to better accomplish these objectives.

Or so I thought. Within a very short time I began to notice things were not as they seemed. Despite our evangelism on “improvement” to organizations, I found that data and numbers were often taking priority over knowledge and experience. The result was not pretty —beautiful photos, graphs and diagrams to the contrary. I spent the ensuing years working through this problem of “data versus knowledge” in real time and space with many wonderful organizational leaders, managers and teams. This experience, paired with my earlier history, is the foundation of what I want to share today.

To state the problem as clearly as I can: workplace strategy has left a large and treacherous crater in its wake. It has empowered the technocrat and belittled the craftsman in organizations. Workplace Strategy consulting has built a value-proposition on what is easiest to measure in the short term, and largely excludes what is difficult to measure but most important to long-term thinking and organizational performance. In doing so, workplace strategy has often created or perpetuated imbalanced systems of knowledge and power. These dysfunctional environments do not address how organizations actually work, or should work, for long-term success.

I need to now also put “facilities management” on the hot seat. Workplace strategy is really a kind of mirror image to or “doppelganger” of facilities management. Which came first? They created each other and rely on similar strategies, research and rhetoric, so both are equally entangled in the questions and ideas I want to present.

Now back to our question: How would our lives be different if organizations thought about the workplace like craftsmen thought of their tools?

To help think about this question in more depth I want to explore a metaphor: Workplace as hammer (“hammer” will be my avatar for “tool”) And I want to look at two characters: The “craftsman” and the “technocrat.” Connecting these characters and the metaphor will help us see the impacts and potentials of workplace strategy in a new light.

The Metaphor: Workplace as Hammer

To see if we can collectively agree that this metaphor works, let’s quickly run through three definitions: organization, workplace, and tool.

1. An organization is a group of people working together towards a common goal.
2. A workplace is an environment intentionally created for people to work together (co-labor-ate) to further the common goals of their organization.

in the quality of their work. Perhaps poetically, the business was recently acquired and absorbed by mega-firm AECOM. The DEGW brand no longer exists, and has been renamed “Strategy Plus.”
3. A tool is a thing intentionally created to amplify the power of people, directed towards a particular goal.

Therefore, a workplace is a tool designed to amplify the power of people working together in an organization.

This seems so simple, but it is so often forgotten in many organizations’ drive towards cost-center efficiency. But now let’s dig a little deeper and look at tools through the eyes of our “craftsman” and “technocrat” characters in a real context…

Craftsmen and Technocrats

Picture this: A young man in a well-cut suit walks onto a building site, brushes the sawdust off his jacket, looks up at a group of workmen pounding away on the framing of a complex rafter system. He puts his hands on his hips and calls up to them: “Gentlemen! It looks to me like you are spending too much money on those hammers!”

The hammering stops...silence....

“I said, IT LOOKS LIKE YOU’VE BEEN SPENDING TOO MUCH MONEY ON THOSE HAMMERS!”

What happens next?

Let’s put aside the more realistic responses and imagine a more polite one. “Excuse me, sir,” one of the men calls down, “who are you, that you know so much about hammers?”

At this point in our parable, only proof of experience would allow the conversation to go any further. If, for example, it turned out that our mystery suit-man was a world-renowned nail pounder just returned from a championship match in Texas, then perhaps a real conversation would ensue. But if he is a consultant sent by corporate who has rarely hammered a nail, I venture to say he would be shut up fairly quickly.

Many of us here today have been both that young man looking up, and those men looking down from the roof. These are our two main characters: the “craftsmen” and the “technocrat.”

A craftsman is someone who is committed to doing work well for its own sake. A craftsman has a sense of value and affection for the process and quality of the work that integrates utility, narrative and aesthetic.

In The Drama of Leadership,² the author Patricia Pitcher describes the technocrat as “someone who emphasizes the technical conceptions of a problem to the detriment of their social and human consequences.” While a technocrat may be dedicated or lazy, brilliant or average, she says, “what counts is the attachment to studies and rules, written and unwritten.”

Let me give you an example of embodying the technocrat. During one of my very first workplace strategy engagements after moving to New York, I was leading a long series of “leadership interviews.” The client was a large broadcasting company and the interviewees were executives

² Patricia Pitcher, Artists Craftsmen and Technocrats: The Dreams, Realities and Illusions of Leadership, 1997; (current print edition of the book is titled: The Drama of Leadership)
from all departments across several media platforms and administrative functions. My third out of twenty-five interviews was with a world-renowned journalist and documentary film producer whose work I had grown up watching. Before I had said a word, he sat down, gave me a hard look, slapped his hand on the table and said, “So... you’re here to tell me why I should be happy about having less space to do my job.”

I was stunned. I wanted to say “no,” but I knew the truth was “yes.” That is basically what our firm had been hired to do. What did I know about making documentary films? What could I possibly tell him about his tools?! Nothing.

I am happy to say that rather than stick to the script, a serious conversation took place, a conversation that changed not only the approach to this project, but my perspective and my career. (This conversation was the birthplace of the “Sandbox” workplace design tool that has now been used in dozens of organizations. More about that later.)

Craftsmen know that only experience provides a true understanding of the value of a tool. Craftsmen exist in a dense ecosystem of practices, culture, mentorship, tradition and technologies. The craftsman’s world is about relationships between people and all of these other things, so there are few easy answers. “It depends” is an answer a craftsman might give. To know is to do, and to do is to know. Doing things better and more accurately assessing the relative value of practices and tools are all part of the long process of mastery. There is no “work-around” or shortcut. You can’t get mastery out of a book or a six-step program. There is no app for it. No device or digital model. And you simply can’t remove one part of the system—a tool, say—and assess it in isolation. A craftsman thrives on experience-based intuition that integrates precision and practice with values like community, pride and trust.

How should we “evaluate” our tools? Who is the right person to do this? What are the criteria? A craftsman will see these hammers from very different perspective than a technocrat and typically seek to invest in tools for long term outcomes.

A technocrat, on the other hand, is motivated by the certainty of measurement, quantitative analysis and control. The more difficult it is to break something down into discrete parts or data, the less relevant this thing becomes to the technocrat.

How many times in our industry have we heard: “You can’t manage what you can’t measure.” Or more insidious: “We really can’t measure the impact of workplace on performance, so we are sticking to efficiency.”
An icon of this kind of thinking in the workplace strategy world is the **Time Utilization Study**, an activity used to measure workplace “utilization rates” as a metric of “workplace efficiency.”

Given my own extensive experience with the T.U.S. I can say with authority that this study provides very predictable data: “desks and offices are in use only about 35% of the time!” (A few months ago I chaired a Workplace and technology conference and, amazingly, numerous presentations used the 35% utilization rate as an important piece of rhetoric.) Even if these numbers are accurate, which we can debate, what do they actually mean? A technocrat tends to have a simple answer: “The numbers are bad, and we can improve them!”

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A typical “Time/Space Utilization Study” used in workplace strategy. Results invariably show similar data: Workplace “utilization” is low and can thus be quantitatively improved. Impacts of this “improvement” are often ignored or deferred to additional “Change Management” services.

Ask a craftsman, and you will get another answer altogether, because a craftsman knows that context is all-important in interpreting data: Perhaps 35% utilization is about right for achieving the goals of the organization. Perhaps the notion of “utilization rate” based on whether someone is sitting in a seat or not, reveals a misunderstanding of workplace “utilization.” More importantly, what other factors are involved? What are the net financial implications relative to productivity, morale and retention of staff? Only an (internal) craftsman is really capable of answering this question, and most would find it dangerous to even ask it without a context of trust.

For our crew of carpenters this context would include much more than a linear equation dividing the number of nails driven per day divided by the average daily cost of the hammer. It would include things like: how a hammer “feels” in the individual hand, how long will likely last, where it was made, what happens in that rare event where the hammer is needed to stop a life threatening fall off of a roof.

The truth is, from “outside” the problem we simply cannot know what this kind of workplace data means to the life of a particular organization.
Workplace as Hammer – Reprise

No matter what our definition of efficiency is, we cannot increase the efficiency of the workplace if the effectiveness of the organization suffers as a result of our efficiencies. This would be a contradiction in terms, after all. It would be like saying “We have increased the efficiency of hammers on this job site... We’re not sure yet what the impact is on crew performance, but we do know that our ‘hammer metrics’ are better than ever. We have reduced the hammer-cost per workman this year from $20 to $5.”

It should be obvious that the only way to understand if we have increased the “efficiency of hammers” (the wrong question to begin with) would be to embed ourselves with the crew over a long period of time, probably at least 5 years, watch them work, learn their language, skills, gossip and stories, and then make an assessment. Very few consultants are willing to do this. So they should not be trusted. **And they should not want to be trusted** in this way. A good consultant will cultivate trust in order to **facilitate** the internal conversations necessary to solve complex problems from the inside. (See Edgar Schein’s epic *Process Consultation Revisited*, 1998)

As I mentioned previously, the interview I was supposedly “leading” with the documentary filmmaker was more than an awakening for me. It was also the genesis of the Sandbox tool that I developed while consulting at DEGW. The tool was designed to bring people together (physically!) to share their knowledge about the work they do, and to make decisions, compromises and negotiations — in the presence of one another and in the face of real, visible constraints, like a specific floor area budgeted to the team. It is amazing how **quickly** and **well** these craftsmen were able to solve workplace challenges when given the right tools, and when managers were treated like trusted adults rather than children.

The Sandbox is now the backbone of all of our workplace consulting: bringing craftsmen literally “to the table” to see the problem clearly, talk it through with the design team, and then co-create a solution.

*The Sandbox is a tool to bring knowledgable craftsmen together around a complex workplace challenge*
**The workplace is a tool for extending the power and performance of an organization.** That is its sole reason for being. Talk to any craftsman for more than a minute and they will start talking about their tools. Tools are an extension of who we are and what we do. Tools are both practical and symbolic. They extend our capabilities, they tell a story, and they change everything about the way we work.

How does a craftsman view and evaluate their tools? To a craftsman a tool is:

- Important (not treated lightly, or delegated to inexperienced members)
- Valuable (it has multiple types of value, and multiple ways to determine value)
- Personal (identity-forming)
- Narrative (community-forming)
- “Sharpenable” (i.e. rarely disposable)
- A long-term investment
- Educational (one learns from and through the tool, and teaches others)
- Experience-centric (not theoretical)
- Mysterious (not always rational; good tools have many "other" functions)

To treat the workplace like a craftsman treats their tools we will connect the purpose of our work with the tools that help us do it. We can recognize that evaluation of the workplace is both complex and important, and rely more heavily on the people with the greatest depth of knowledge and hands-on experience. (Rarely the CFO, hopefully the CEO, and most likely select members of the senior management team.)

This iconic tool catalogue presents a narrative, a history, and a sense of real, visible-but-complex value for each tool. Monetary cost is contextualized by the expectation of long-term performance. [www.garrettwade.com](http://www.garrettwade.com)

Experience, trust, value, meaning, narrative. These words may sound like the sales-pitch for a 401K but they are the values of the craftsman and the foundation for building a strong, long-lasting organization. And these values can be powerfully demonstrated in the way we design, build and sustain a workplace.

**In the workplace, what if my hammer is:**

- A place for distraction-free concentration?
- Space to display my stuff — things that communicate a journey through my professional life, experience and history in the organization?
• A place for intimate personal conversations with fellow employees, to make them feel comfortable, special and trusted?
• Space that is well-used and well-tested — rich with apparent history that can be passed on to the next generation of leaders?
• Space / tools that fellow craftsmen can see and appreciate as “the best for the job”?
• Space that can be adapted slowly over time to reduce waste, energy and material consumption?

The ever-popular “workplace of the future” circa 1939: collaborative, open plan desking, glass partitions.

What would the impact be if we imagined our workplace could last for 70 years with minor adaptations?

What can we do about it? Some practical pointers:

Today’s business context may not particularly hospitable to a craftsmanship mentality. But every organization has people who do their job with excellence, based on their experience, personal commitment, knowledge and values. This fact can be used to reframe the business case for investment or reprioritization (not divestment) in workplace resources and design.

• Find, support and empower the best craftsmen. They need our support.
• Elevate proven knowledge and experience above data.
• Find ways to put workplace decisions into the hands of the best craftsmen by giving them the tools and information needed to understand the problem as clearly as possible.
• Pair organizational “artists” with craftsmen to get visionary but reliable workplace results.

Scary right? Haven’t we all heard:

• “Those people can’t be trusted!”
• “They don’t really know what they need!”
• “They’ll ask for the world!”

This is mostly a myth we’ve created and perpetuated to protect ourselves. And to the extent that it is true, it is a function of broken organizational trust and relationships. Let’s remember, these people who “can’t be trusted” are running our organizations, in effect paying our salaries, hiring and firing staff, controlling most of the resources, and generating the profits. If we can’t trust them, we had better look for a new client or new employer. This does not mean that it will be easy to have this conversation with them. There may be difficult personalities, inability to read
drawings, or a distrust of management. They may be spatially challenged and even entrenched in legacy ways of doing things.

Facilities / RE costs in most organizations are proportionally minimal at >8%, but have high leverage.

These are real challenges, to be sure. However, it is the workplace strategy consultant or facility manager’s job to make sure this conversation real and effective. To learn from organizational craftsmen, we will have to make transparent the constraints of the workplace as a tool for organizational success. And to be trusted we must become more like craftsmen, ensuring that experience and context rule over data in our own decisions. Organizational effectiveness, sustainability and organic joyful work will only result when the workplace is subject to thoughtful, wise experienced organizational leaders who are connected to the organizational vision and live in the midst of people and the day-to-day work.
Appendix: A craftsmanship perspective on some of “Today’s Top Facilities Issues”

Cost control
Facility managers are very often asked to view facilities as an independent “cost center”. This is the root of most problems in facility management and workplace strategy. Facility managers must fight to contextualize their work in the organization as a whole, creating compelling connections between the value of the workplace, and the success, sustainability and profitability of the organization as a whole. Only within this context can the issue of facilities or real estate costs be properly understood and acted upon.

Aging building stock
This is not a new phenomenon! What is new, however, is a mentality that defaults to a short-term view. This short-term view is perpetually incentivized to “defer” maintenance and upgrades in order to show quarterly cost reductions… In this model the organization does not stop to “sharpen the saw” as the late Steven Covey advised in his Seven Habits of Effective People.

[A recent example of this was a NYC client who owned a 150,000 sf building in Manhattan purpose-built for them in 1970. As we began creating new master plan for their facilities expansion the effort was blindsided by the fact that 30 years of deferred maintenance had put their building millions of dollars “in deficit.” Previous to this they had proudly shown their books that displayed an” efficiency” in annual per-person facilities cost! Until this reckoning they had seen little connection between the realities of short and long term workplace investment.]

Sustainability
Sustainability starts by understanding the long term impacts of our consumption. A short term or simplistic view will always obscure this. We can reducing disposability by increasing long term adaptability of the workplace. Facilities managers can help by empowering team/department decision making and increasing responsibility for space use and minor modifications. Reducing centralized command and control and increasing ownership of workplace to the teams and individuals, can extend to energy use. Teams can be independently metered and pay energy bills from departmental budgets. This can become a point of pride and a metric that is part of a business model. This kind of awareness and accountability can help build a culture of caring about the cause, in addition to the necessary corporate standards and policies. For sustainability to take root it must be an authentic part of identity, culture and business process.

Complex building systems
Yes systems are becoming more complex. It is the job of facilities managers to make them transparent and understandable where appropriate. This is a teaching job (more than just a management job). This is where choosing the right technologies can have a dramatic impact. The “right” technologies may mean more or less technology, or moving backwards or forward in terms of latest gadgets and software. No doubt things like metering and dashboards can have a significant impact on this area, but keep in mind that certain individuals “owning” the problem can be much better solution than diffusing it electronically and expecting everyone to care.
Postscript

...Technophiles...gaze on technology as a lover does on his beloved, seeing it as without blemish and entertaining no apprehension for the future. They are therefore dangerous and are to be approached cautiously... The Technophiles must speak for themselves, and do so all over the place. My defense is that a dissenting voice is sometimes needed to moderate the din made by the enthusiastic multitude...For it is inescapable that every culture must negotiate with technology, whether it does so intelligently or not. A bargain is struck in which technology giveth and technology taketh away. The wise know this well, and are rarely impressed by dramatic technological changes, and never overjoyed.


Bibliography: