

Globalised Desk-top Skirmishes? Reporting from the colonies¹

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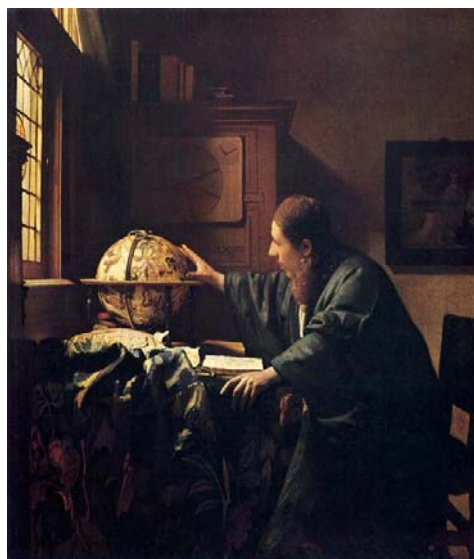
Figure1: Design office, Auckland 2010. Photo: Jeffery Chen

Let's start with something *under* the desk. This image intrigues me because, at first, I thought it showed a woman's desk on the right and a man's on the left. On closer examination, I concluded from the shoes next to the boots that the left desk also belonged to a woman. That seemed so obvious that I wondered what made me think it was a man's. Probably the boots: though they're now worn by both genders, some corner of my brain must still associate them with male New Zealand builders and farmers. Perhaps the handbag could give me a clue? But gender attributes are not as reliable as they once were, at least in Auckland in 2010: men, particularly in design offices, do carry handbags, as long as they aren't too "girly". Having a good laugh about how easy it is to be fooled by clichés, I went on to add a caption to the image ... and realised that it had originally been filed in `\Design Studios_AUT\Photos\Male\all males_design ...` Regarding aspects of gender, this image, in all its ambiguity, turned out to be an even better introduction to this chapter than anticipated.

For the ambiguity of observational patterns, figures of thought and categories are an important concern when interpreting "intercultural, [end page 211] gender-specific" aspects in Auckland's contribution to "My Desk Is My Castle". Do metaphors, for instance, gain or lose efficacy as they travel across cultures, and does "castle" have similar connotations in the Rhine valley, Fukuoka and Auckland? Commonalities and differences in the use of desktops in different countries are affected by globalising processes, which also lead to an increasing internationalisation in education and research. Thus, not only were the research participants, the desk owners, from different countries and cultures – so were the researchers. Just as there are global and local ways of relating, of knowing, and of organising space, which are oriented by different metaphors – so research follows local and global ways of knowing. The figures of thought that are typical of a particular way of knowing influence how tentative distinctions between people, objects and space may solidify into categories. And these, in turn, influence what we see. In the following pages, I will explore the local conditions surrounding the photos taken by the student researchers, relate them to two theories that take an active view of the creation of identity and space, reflect on the limits and potentials of the Auckland part of the project, and suggest some interesting questions to be explored in the future.

KISD's invitation to participate in the research offered students and teachers in *Unit4: Exhibition and Scenic Spaces* a great opportunity to explore some specifically local issues and see how they fit into global frameworks.² The research briefing presumed that the office desk is "a personal field of action [that] marks territories and provides information on both the status of its occupiers and their private preferences and desires" (Brandes & Erlhoff, 2009). Both a material and symbolic object, the desk 'says' something about the aspirations, functions and necessities of an organisation. In use, it is criss-crossed by boundaries between the private and public, and becomes, over time, an archive of its occupant's "factual and emotional memory" (ibid.), a register of working and living styles. These styles are influenced by economic conditions, ethnicity and gender. Thus, the study started from the assumptions that "desks substantially differ from country to country" (ibid.); that specific cultures have "an enormous impact" (ibid.) on organisation and arrangement of objects on a desk; and that differences are significantly inflected by gender expectations. So far, so good. However, there's a hitch in the case of cities like Auckland, if they are to be taken as the "specific culture in which the ... office work is located" (ibid.). [end page 212]

While in many ways a Western city, with Western values, customs and protocols, Auckland has become New Zealand's most globalised city.³ It has many distinct ethnic migrant communities and, above all, a Māori *Tangata Whenua* (Indigenous) population whose overlaps with, and distinctions from, hegemonic New Zealand culture are not easily identified and interpreted, even by locals. Geographically, Tamaki Makaurau/Auckland is located on Te Ika-A-Maui, the North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Had the British Crown not sent Captain William Hobson in 1839 to sign a Treaty with Māori in 1840; and had that Treaty not been repeatedly broken by settler governments and courts, then the desks here (if there were any) might look and feel differently.⁴ Further, the visual evidence collated for the project has some gaps that result from the very trajectory Auckland has taken, which can possibly only be recognised from a local perspective.⁵



The Astronomer - Johannes Vermeer (1668)
Louvre, Paris. Image: Wikimedia

The desk, this seemingly "trivial thing",⁶ is a terrain often moulded by territorial tugs-of-war between conflicting expectations. The students' photos present us with visible traces of the desk owners' actions and with the sedimented life histories of people, objects and cultures. Individuals' arrangements of their desks may endorse or contest the larger context's spatial logics. To explore these empirical data beyond simple contrast and comparison, I will use two conceptual frameworks. The first is Henri Lefebvre's notion of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), which organisational experts have drawn on to explain people's experiences and deployment of spatial arrangements. The second is Judith Butler's notion of performativity (Butler, 1988, 1990).

Feminist scholars of organisations have used it to make sense of gendered workplaces. They have examined, for instance, how women refer to and repeat spatial repertoires that they believe they have been assigned by society. But they have also looked at ways in which women subvert these repertoires in the use of their offices. Both theorists can be used productively to explore the cultural and gender issues the images collected by AUT students raise.

Desk-top politics and the production of space

Lefebvre conceived of the production of space as a conceptual triad of *spatial practices* (perceived space), *representations of space* (conceptualised space) and *representational space* (lived space). They help elucidate the strategies and tactics by which users deploy objects on their desk – on the territory of their castle, as it were. Space, for Lefebvre, is not an inert and passive container waiting to be filled. [end page 213] Rather, a society's space is secreted through its members' *spatial practices*, in their relationships and interactions under local conditions (Lefebvre, 1991, 33, 38, 40). This occurs in desk users' everyday activities, in their use and distribution of space and their movement through it: the location of their offices, time spent there, neighbourly interactions with other users, office equipment and rules of use, and finally their desk and the objects they keep on it.⁷ On another level, space is created in the sphere of production of goods or services through *representations of space*, which conceptually order spatial relationships – with reference to knowledge, signs, codes or concepts. This occurs in office management and organisational development, but also in design and planning. Finally, *representational space* is “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’, but also of some artists”. It is a passively experienced space, which “the imagination seeks to change and appropriate”, overlaying physical space and “making symbolic use of its objects”. On the whole, lived spaces “tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs” (ibid, 39). In the images collected for this research, we are looking predominantly for the first and third parts of this triad: for the ways in which desks users actively engage with space, and for the ways in which they appropriate it in their imagination and through a different or even deviant use of material space and objects.

As the castle metaphor in this book's title suggests, there is a principal conflict over office territories. It involves, for instance, users' efforts to establish control over their minimal territory at work, in analogy to the idea that “a man's house is his castle”, which granted citizens the inviolability of their dwelling in the 17th and 18th centuries in England and France.⁸ Then and now, resistance is about decreasing managerial control to increase one's own power. What else does the metaphor transfer to the local research site? One aspect, namely the strong sense of individualism and paternalism it commonly implies, makes it sit awkwardly in some terrains in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

An historical connection with the castle metaphor exists in New Zealand through its settler society. On the Indigenous side, the *castle* would have been a *pā*, a fortification as rigorously defended as a castle, but not an individualistic enterprise – there are also arguments regarding male and female power relationships within. If the metaphor breaks down in Aotearoa, however, this is fortunate for our purposes. [end page 214] For the breakdown raises questions regarding the number of people inside, or the degree of inclusion or exclusion of others. My desk may well be my castle – but there are worlds on my desk! And if the idea of *desk-as-castle* evokes associations of safety and rootedness, these also point to aggression. There is trouble lurking in the moat.⁹

Thus, when Melissa Tyler and Laurie Cohen researched “Spaces That Matter” as crucial factors of women's lived experiences at work, they found three recurring themes: “spatial constraint, invasion and spillage”, and what they called “a ‘bounded appropriation’ of space” by women, in “gendered, embodied ways” (Tyler & Cohen, 2010, 191). Samantha Warren, in “Hot Nesting? A Visual Exploration of Personalised Workspaces in a ‘Hot-Desk’ Office Environment”, found that

most employees are unhappy when they are denied their own territory (Nathan and Doyle cited in Warren, 2006, 128). Her research confirmed that “personalising and colonising space” is an important aspect of the politics of space in offices, and that employees treat their desks as their “territories” and try to “grab territory back” in hot-desk environments (ibid, 140).

From one point of view, Lefebvre’s *representational space*, which is produced and dominated by planners and designers, is passively experienced by users. From another, it is imaginatively changed and appropriated by them. People both adapt to whatever sign systems are already materialised in the spaces they use (Lefebvre, 1991, 17), and they change them through their own actions. In this context, Butler’s notion of *performativity* is relevant. Performativity, the *stylised repetition of acts* (Butler, 1990, 140), constitutes gender or ethnic identity; the social codes available for citation being supplied by an “exterior space”. Established conventions are important, for without reference to “prior and authoritative set[s] of practices, a performative action cannot succeed” (Butler, 1996, 206). In the office environment, spatial arrangements, desk configurations and personal or professional accoutrements provide material for the elaboration of gender and ethnic differences.¹⁰ However, citation also implies the possibility of failure to cite properly, each time. This possibility of failure, in the interstices between repetitions, and the re-assignment of values prise open spaces for freedom and change.¹¹ There is, I suggest, an affinity between Butler’s notion of performativity and Lefebvre’s triad of spatial practice, spatial planning and spatial imagination. [end page 215] All three elements of the triad partake in the social production of space: the second seeks to establish rules for the available repertoire, while the first and third shuttle between acceptance, resistance and play.¹² Since the materialised results of space planning frequently prove too dominant and permanent to allow for immediate change, office employees’ politics of space typically involve the tactical deployment of mobile objects across the territories more or less under their control.¹³

For example, many employees in Warren’s study of ‘hot-nesting’ in an English web-design department (*Dept. X*) recounted with “a tinge of nostalgic sadness” how they had covered their desks in their previous office with personal things, until they had to move repeatedly. “Hot-desking. I can’t stand it You see I’m loathe to put anything up now cos I’ll have to take it all down again.” (Warren 2006, 141) This correlation between the degree of personalisation and time of occupancy also emerged in students’ documentation of the desks in the Auckland *Call Centre*.¹⁴ The longer the duration of employment, the more the ratio between personal and professional items on a desk shifts towards the personal. Employees who “had been with [the] company more than two years had large amounts of personal items. This customising of the desk is due to the feeling of security and comfort” developed over time (Students of *Unit4: Exhibition and Scenic Spaces*, 2010). Observing different hot-desking patterns in different groups within *Dept. X*, Warren makes another interesting observation, which may lead beyond the idea of *desk-as-castle* as an individual stronghold: the ‘putting up’ of personal items may not express “individual territorial control” so much as “the degree of permanence” occupants feel in a place and “the extent to which they [feel] a sense of ‘belonging’ – given that personalisation appeared to be a group norm – within the community of designers at least” (Warren 2006, 142).

The Auckland offices documented by students were usually ruled by less fiery corporate conventions regarding the display of objects. This does not necessarily say something about Aotearoa/New Zealand in general, though: knowingly or not, students chose sites that were accessible to them through the worlds they come from. AUT’s student population is not representative of the larger Auckland population,¹⁵ and this is reflected in the data they collected. Thus, the students who took the initiative to organise the research sites for the *banks and insurance* sector were Chinese; consequently, most images were taken [end page 216] in a Chinese-owned and -operated office. Not surprisingly, their analysis of the images they collected also seems to be informed by broadly Asian world views.

While there are some differences between the four sectors,¹⁶ a distinction between 'public' and 'private' areas of the office seems to be observable in all, with personal displays often tactically 'hidden' behind corners, computer screens or upstands. In the *Call Centre*, performativity in Lyotard's sense (as a form of extreme capitalist efficiency) was an important issue. Shortly before our research visit, the screens separating individual desks had been lowered to make the monitoring of performance easier. As long as the objects displayed behind those screens did not distract employees from their work, however, the objects were of no concern. Consequently, personalisation of space here was quite intense. This was helped by the fact that the allocation of space per employee was, consistent with general New Zealand spatial practice, comparatively generous. In the Chinese-owned *Insurance* office, where a majority of employees seem to have been Chinese, the colour red recurred in most men's and women's personal objects on display, such as good luck charms.¹⁷

Thus, the production and politics of space in Auckland offices are criss-crossed by characteristics of culture, gender and business sector to such an extent that none of the categories remain stable for long. As Butler points out, one can only take up tools and possibilities where they lie, and "the very 'taking up' is enabled by the tool lying there" (Butler 1990, 145). Private and public territories seem to supply different tools to take up, and different ones, at that, for men and women, White and Coloured, rich and poor, and so on.

Home and World

In the office, the interface between Lyotard's and Butler's performativity is a tense field, stretched between often conflicting expectations of self and other, between home and world, or between one's own and what belongs to others. This back and forth movement of loyalties is also observable in the Auckland project, where students' observations and reflections coincided with an impression that people use personal objects to bring "their 'non-work selves' into the work environment to make it more 'homely'" (Warren 2006, 132). Family photos, greeting cards, or gifted mugs allude to a home outside [end page 217] the office, to a place free from outside control, which one shares with loved ones and visiting friends. More surprisingly in Warren's account, however, 'home' and the 'familiar' can also refer to communal spaces at work: in the designers' group of *Dept. X*, personalising desk space was a shared cultural practice. To outsiders, the "design community had an identity through their prolific displays of personal objects" (ibid, 139).¹⁸ The desks here had almost taken on a sociality-building role, in which they create a common world by enduring as objects.¹⁹ This is an aspect most studies of the work environment neglect because they focus on the binary between the individual and the organisation, and thus overlook the life of small communities. In Warren's sample, a man said that he liked making his space his own and, in that, "*community is important*", and part of "*being in a community [is] having all your familiar items and all the little things around you*" (Warren 2006, 138). In a shared work environment, objects not only serve to create personal narratives and aid self-presentation to others. They may even be "more important to the creation of a group identity and a sense of permanence, belonging and stability" (138). Personalisation helps employees to balance their work and non-work selves, but also to create a work-related identity that includes one's workgroup, and even the larger organisation at some levels (143). The *desk-as-castle* thus mediates multiple connections and disjunctures between home and world. There are many in the castle, but the castle is not all-inclusive: gender and ethnicity can, and often do, form lines of disjuncture.

As a gay woman of colour, Sarah Ahmed describes how some spaces are *White*: inhabited and controlled by White people, they display codes of Whiteness that make non-White bodies seem invisible or out of place (Ahmed 2006, 135, 141). Entering them can be like "walking into a sea of whiteness" (ibid, 133). Similar experience might have led Rangi,²⁰ one of two self-identified Māori desk occupants, to hide what students categorised as a "Māori carving" almost completely behind

paper trays and folders in a corner.²¹ Would one not expect to find many such objects in a country where the Indigenous population is a constitutional partner in the Nation? The students (none of whom were Māori) who documented the desk in an *Administration* office, nevertheless listed the carving amongst the “most unusual objects”: “Fly swat, Māori carvings, bird food, baby car seat” (Students of *Unit4: Exhibition and Scenic Spaces*, 2010).²²

Chinese insurance offices in Auckland are, in a sense, Diasporic [end page 218] spaces, partially shaped by the histories of the objects displayed by employees. From a cursory visual inspection, it appears that the desks in this sample more abundantly display non-work-related objects, many of which make direct reference to China, or Asia more broadly. These objects have “their own horizons: worlds from which they emerge”. Thus, they can lead us to “different worlds” (Ahmed 2006, 147). Objects form connecting lines to spaces that are “lost homes”, particularly in Diasporic communities (ibid, 149-150). More than nostalgic reminders, they keep the past alive and make impressions on the present – co-creating with the objects of the present a hybrid place which can become a home (ibid, 150). What does it mean, then, when Rangī places his Māori carving in the far corner of his desk? Is it a gift from a student or her parents, which he doesn’t particularly like but doesn’t want to throw away, either? We don’t know but, certainly, its performative efficacy is very limited and private in its hidden place.



Administration: Rangī’s desk at Onehunga High School.
Photo: Katie Scott

When I considered the students’ images, I felt that aspects of Māori desk use were missing and asked Benita Simati, the assistant tutor in *Unit4* in 2010, to take some photos at Te Ara Poutama, AUT’s Faculty of Māori Development, and OPA, the Office of Pasifika Advancement. Initially, I phoned Kingi, a Māori colleague, and asked him if he could point us to two desks of men and women respectively, which demonstrated the restrained and ‘out-there’ extremes of a range of politics of display. He immediately pointed to two women and thought he himself could be considered to be at the restrained end of the scale. Regarding an ‘out-there’ man, though, he was at a bit of a loss. When I said that, [end page 219] surely, there must be at least one, he replied: “Oh no, not us [men]! Not publicly!”



Administration: AUT Te Ara Poutama, Ella's desk. Photo: Benita Kumar Simati



Administration: AUT Te Ara Poutama, Ella's desk (detail). Photo: Benita Kumar Simati

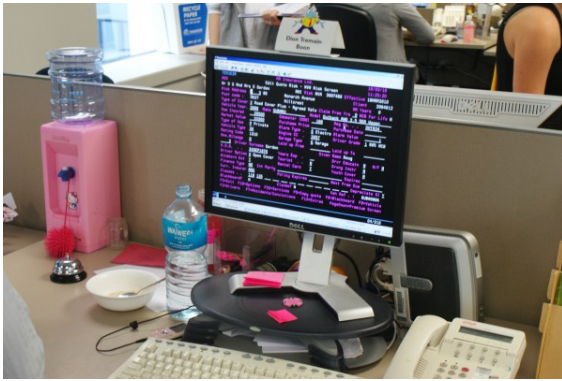


Administration: AUT OPA (Office of Pasifika Advancement), John's desk. Photo: Benita Kumar Simati

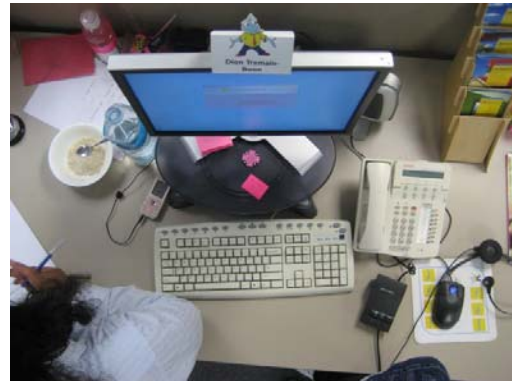
The perceived or real expectations of professionalism in the office of Māori men conform, from my perspective, with those in any office moulded by modern capitalist principles. These expectations were first directed at European men, as a consequence of the very compact between State and *pater familias* that first gave rise to the metaphor of the *home-as-castle*. [end page 220]

History and the visible

Perception and interpretations are organised by the conceptual repertoires available to people in any given time and place. In their solidified form, such repertoires are common sense, or even clichés: a stock of signs that are (at least provisionally) beyond question (Zerilli 2008, 41). In the extreme, they are easily recognisable caricatures of what it means to be, for instance, a man or a woman at a particular place and time. These pre-judices, which derive from our culture's stated and unstated attitudes, help us get on with life without constantly having to work out from scratch what we see. There is no way of escaping them. In fact, if we find a way of becoming aware of our pre-judices and biases, they can help us understand the relationship between the familiar and the strange. One possible way of encountering our own prejudice is precisely when things aren't as we would expect them to be. The question is, how will we register that they are different? For often, our repertoires will not allow us to recognise what seem to be, at least statistically, blips.



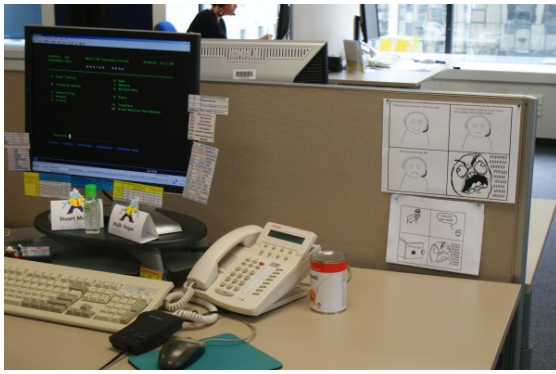
Dion's desk, *Call Centre*
Photo: Briana Mellsoop



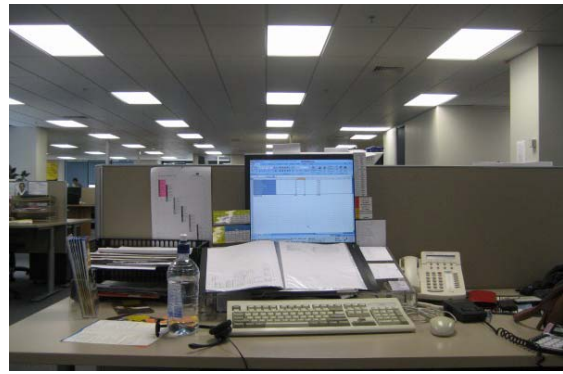
Dion's desk, *Call Centre*
Photo: Briana Mellsoop

At the *Call Centre*, Dion's desk could be simply be taken as an unusual variation on male patterns of using objects at work. There are indications, though, that Dion may not fit the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1993, 27).²³ Like other metropolises, Auckland is home to many who do not fit neatly into gender categories: there are well-established gay and lesbian communities, and gender dynamics from non-Western societies, such as Māori Whakawahine and Samoan Fa'afafine,²⁴ make the situation even more complex (see Towle & Morgan 2002, 490). [end page 221] Drag/camp as a style has also become popular beyond the gay communities – so, there is no way of telling Dion's gender or sexual orientation. The students noted his "most unusual" pink water cooler and recorded his comment about what he would miss most: "All of my pink stuff." (Students of *Unit4: Exhibition and Scenic Spaces*, 2010) The problematic of inclusion and/or exclusion inherent in any categorisation manifests here as "gender trouble" (Butler 1990).²⁵ Something is different – but how can we name it and where will it count?

The spaces and desks that we can see in the photos taken by the student researchers are not just 'there', neutral and given. Space is always actively produced within specific local and global politics of space. "Activity in space is restricted by that space; space 'decides' what actually may occur, but even this 'decision' has limits placed upon it." (Lefebvre 1991, 143) So does interpretation. "[T]he 'availability' of objects is an effect of actions, which are not necessarily perceivable on the surface of the object." (Ahmed 2006, 38) Nevertheless, some meaning is inscribed in the forms of objects, as traces of their use. [end page 222]



Man or woman? (1), Call Centre¹



Man or woman? (2), Call Centre



Man or woman? (3), Call Centre



Man or woman? (4), Call Centre



Man or woman? (5), Design Office



Man or woman? (6), Design Office



Man or woman? (7), Design Office



Man or woman? (8), Design Office

The role of research: How to report from the colonies?

In 2006, Warren remarked that very few studies had been carried out which “explore personalization in the workplace ... as a function of territory and ownership” (Warren 2006, 128). Since then, Sandra Brunia and Anca Hartjes-Gosselink have written about “Personalization in non-territorial offices” (Brunia & Hartjes-Gosselink 2009) and found that, while personalisation is a relevant factor in the implementation of “non-territorial office design”, it is still not well researched and that management tends to avoid subjects “labelled as ‘soft’ issues” (ibid, 169). Alfons van Marrewijk (van Marrewijk 2009) suspects that the lack of attendance to the interdependence of spatial design and culture may be partially due to “researchers’ inexperience with studying spatial arrangement” (ibid, 291). He holds that more empirical studies of spatial settings are needed.²⁶ [end page 223]

“My Desk Is My Castle” adds a new, multi-national and cross-cultural dimension to existing research. It also adds a substantial collection of images to a hitherto mainly text-based discussion. What the project cannot provide, given its time and budget constraints, are in-depth, fine-grained and time-based accounts of what happens in or on each country, each office, each desk.²⁷ The challenge for future projects is to develop methodologies, and relationships between different types of data, that permit maximum openness to local idiosyncrasies, while still allowing statements to be made with some confidence.²⁸

Despite all the differences, there seems to be one overwhelmingly common theme: in Auckland, too, people engage in their territorial struggles in the constant negotiation of the relationship between private and public. An indication of this is the observation that the display of personal objects appears to increase with the duration of employment and with the status of the desk owner. The display seems indeed to express “the degree to which the occupant felt they belonged to their space and the affiliation they felt with their community” (Warren 2006, 143). This would seem to be confirmed in the connection students made between the unusually friendly atmosphere and the vibrant display of objects in the Chinese office – quite apart from general Chinese cultural traits.²⁹ Given that the display of objects may, however, also indicate a claim more than an accepted fact, the desk as part of the work space remains contested terrain. Thoughtfully considered, work spaces and events provide valuable opportunities to bring about change that leads to greater inclusion (Mitchell et al. 2010, 306). “To change life (...) we must first change space.” (Lefebvre 1991, 190)

Conclusion

As globalisation connects desks and their owners around the world, and as global office protocols not only spread but are also inflected by local practices, new fields for research emerge that call for new approaches and new ways of understanding.³⁰ “My Desk Is My Castle” has made a start in this direction. Its overall findings allow the formulation of (tentative) statements, which will invite comments and begin a conversation. Further, it generates new questions, such as: How will the histories of objects in this book, their current position and their provenance, relate to your situation as a reader? How do some aspects [end page 224] change in the transition from their original home (Wittgenstein, 1958) to the location where you read? How can one take account of non-visible elements in the use of desks, and can a mode of “feeling-understanding-knowing” be accessed?³¹ What are the best processes for bringing together and enhancing different types of local and global knowledge?

All these questions concern research in internationalised networks generally. But some are the specific domain of designers. Designers’ sensibilities, beyond the textual frame, place them in a good position to look more intimately and materially at local situations and their epistemological ‘foundations’. Given their own position on the margins of mainstream research, designers may be less inclined to assume that Western scientific categories will “fit them all”.

Perhaps we come closer to an attunement to the needs of intercultural research projects if we regard them as attempts to negotiate several language-games at once, rather than as means of establishing certainty (Wittgenstein 1958, 1969). Surely, ongoing conversation (Rorty 1980, 1991) and constant translation (Benjamin 1969) are then as important as contrast and comparison. Quite possibly, the travel of a metaphor into another language game recharges its efficacy, as established connotations are loosened and new ones accrete; but this cannot be taken as a given. Close and extended collaboration between participants from various cultures will help collectively to forge new figures of thought, categories and methods that can more adequately grasp their subject. In the process, a greater understanding of the specific positions of all researchers, and of the principal situatedness of knowledge, is likely to grow.

International research projects with a focus on gender and interculturality are well positioned to identify issues in need of revision, in order to move “Beyond the White Male Canon” (Woodward 1995). Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis propose “a dialogue between people from different positionings as the only way to ‘approximate truth’” (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis 2002, 319). The best insights into intercultural spatial practices will be gained by the non-hierarchical combination of the imagination and critical approaches from both the margins and the centre. [end page 225]

Notes

¹ I gratefully acknowledge Nadine Adrian’s answers to my questions and her generous comments during the drafting of this chapter. Nadine was KISD’s research assistant on the ground in Auckland, who worked directly with the students on the collation of data. My thanks also to Kaori Satake, Claudia Gallur, Lynne Giddings, Benita Simati, Fleur Palmer, Elise Cox and Ross Jenner for their support.

A fuller version of this paper, including the theoretical arguments underpinning it, can be downloaded at <http://aut.academia.edu/TinaEngelsSchwarzpaul>.

² *Unit4* is one of nine thematic streams in the Bachelor of Design (Spatial Design) at the School of Art and Design, AUT University. My thanks to Nadine Adrian (KISD’s research assistant on the ground in Auckland), Kaori Satake, Claudia Gallur, Lynne Giddings, Benita Simati, Fleur Palmer, Elise Cox and Ross Jenner for their support.

³ In 2006, 37% of the city’s population was born overseas.

⁴ The concept of a *desk-as-castle* might then be completely meaningless. Even thirty years ago, the results of this study would have been significantly different: employees in banks, administration, design offices, and whatever the equivalent of a call centre was then, were – in their overwhelming majority – Middle Class, White men.

⁵ It is neither representative of the Auckland population, nor even of its office population: In the last census, the Auckland region was home to over 150 ethnicities, and only 18.9% of the population surveyed identified as Asian. In the same census, 11.1% of Auckland’s population identified as Māori, 56.5% as European (of which 87% identified as New Zealand European), and 14.4% as Pacific (Auckland Council 2009).

⁶ Karl Marx about commodities: “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.” (1867)

⁷ See Mitchell, Wood, & Witherspoon (2010, 297), Spicer & Taylor (2006) and Taylor & Spicer (2007).

⁸ Originally, “The house of everyone is his castle” – this right that goes back to 1604 in England (Semaynes Case, 77 ER 194).

⁹ The AUT Ethics Committee duly anticipated trouble: in the ethics application, which I was obliged to lodge on the students’ behalf, researchers and participants’ risk factors are assessed. Should there be any “physical, social, psychological, or safety risks” researchers are exposed to (for instance, when interviewing participants in private homes!), a “Researcher Safety protocol” has to be designed. The same expectation of trouble placed tight limits around the collection of data: participants had to be approached and informed well in advance of data collection; their supervisors could not be involved in their selection in any way; a consent form had to be signed on a separate occasion, before photos could be taken; the amount of questions was limited; application had to be made weeks before the research commenced. ... To add to the data collection a further level to ascertain the student researchers’ own positioning (such as age, gender,

ethnicity, citizenship, residency in Aotearoa/New Zealand, etc.) seemed like an impossible task in the shortness of time available.

¹⁰ When identities stabilise in the process, though, ritualised performative practices not only draw on, but also cover over the “constitutive conventions by which [they were] mobilized” (Butler, 1996, 206).

¹¹ Following Derrida, this failure is imminent in the interstitial moments between iterations (Butler, 2010, 152). Zerilli (2008) puts forward the importance of the “faculty of presentation (imagination) and the creation of figures of the newly thinkable rather than the faculty *of* concepts (understanding) and the ability to subsume particulars under rules” (43). There is also the possibility of re-articulating existing norms – by citing or imitating them while giving them different values (see Butler, 1993, 27-8).

¹² See Taylor & Spicer (2007, 335).

¹³ According to Brunia and Hartjes-Gosselink, personalisation seems to be correlated with resistance to others’ control of territory: in the non-territorial office surveyed in Holland, “[e]mployees that liked the office concept and were satisfied about the arrangements and (the design of the) spaces, tended to personalize less, if they personalized at all. People that were unsatisfied and complained about the office concept and the space, tended to personalize much more”. (2009, 176) In the new KPN Corporate Headquarters researched by Alfons van Marrewijk (2009), employees were told in a brochure not to leave personal belongings on their desks since, if a photo is left on a desk together with work papers, “another colleague will not take a seat. Therefore, clean desk have to be adopted by all of the company” (290).

¹⁴ It may well be present in the other sectors, too. However, only students studying the *Call Centre* took an explicit note of this observation. [end page 226]

¹⁵ See note 4 above.

¹⁶ The *Design Offices* were perhaps most obviously influenced by such considerations.

¹⁷ To the KISD research assistant, the desks in this office appeared even a little frivolous, like “playgrounds” (in: Students of *Unit4: Exhibition and Scenic Spaces*, 2010). The atmosphere was described as unusually friendly by the students, particularly in comparison with the “Kiwi” insurance office, where four desks were documented.

¹⁸ This varies from the situation documented in Auckland design offices, where “very few photographs are shown publicly” – only on two desks each for women and men (Students of *Unit4: Exhibition and Scenic Spaces*, 2010).

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt attributes this role to tables: they gather, that is, relate and simultaneously separate people and create a “common world” (1958, 52). It is presented in “the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects ... for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. ... Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.” (57)

²⁰ Not his real name. Most names have been altered.

²¹ Accordingly, it was subsequently classified by the KISD research assistant as a “Speciality”. The carving is so hidden that I was unable to find it in the photos without help.

²² The carving would have been better placed in the list “Art, Fun, Memories”. Given that “māori” means “normal, ordinary” (Māori as an ethnic category denotes the people who are normally in Aotearoa, as opposed to the arriving settlers), this is a strange but ‘normal’ twist in Aotearoa.

²³ Butler uses the term “heterosexual matrix” to “designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalized” (1990, 151).

²⁴ Whakawahine would be “‘transsexuals’ under Western cultural concepts” (Lomax, 2007, 83) and Fa’afafine are, in Western terms, boys raised as girls (Farran, 2010).

²⁵ The research brief asked for a distinction between male and female participants and did not prompt information regarding sexual orientation, which could make a difference regarding the categorisation of gender. The students noted that “two sales consultants ... had a pink theme to desks, friends and family photos and many personal items e.g. books, food, magazines. This is a reflection of their duration and also their relationships to their colleagues. Both have friends and get along with colleges inside and outside work environment, now they feel confident in their jobs they feel free to use their desk to express themselves and liven up [the] office.” (Students of *Unit4: Exhibition and Scenic Spaces*, 2010)

²⁶ Brunia and Hartjes-Gosselink also recommend further research: “Since this is one case study, further research is recommended. ... one could wonder where the findings are the same or differ in other

organizations, contexts and cultures. Future research could focus on this." (2009, 169, 180)

²⁷ In New Zealand, it is impossible to postulate a national characteristic that applies to everyone. Whereas "Hofstede (2008) characterizes the Dutch culture as highly individualistic, which means that the society should have 'individualistic attitudes and relatively loose bonds with others' and that privacy is considered the cultural norm." (Brunia & Hartjes-Gosselink, 2009, 179)

²⁸ Deconstructing the category of "woman", after all, does not make it useless (Butler accepts its strategic use, for instance). However, rendering the concept unstable makes it amenable to uses that do not reify its referents and open the concept to the possibility of change and transformation (Butler, 1993, 29, 221) [end page 227]

²⁹ Some students were surprised to find that Asian men were proud of their families and displayed a large amount of evidence, whereas Asian women were reluctant to do so. Perhaps the only way to make sense of these shifting constellations is not to concentrate on the analysis of categories but to place emphasis "*on the opposition*" between terms and on how it may produce subjection of one of them (Delphy cited in Disch, 2008, 51).

³⁰ Their central concerns move beyond antagonisms such as "quantitative *versus* qualitative" or "fine-grained *versus* coarse-grained": both can be useful, in complementary fashion. Subjected to the complexities of new research situations, it seems to me, many well-rehearsed oppositions lose their punch and give way to modes of understanding that do not hinge on such antagonisms.

³¹ See Conquergood (2002, 149). Also, how does translation between textual and other modes work here: how can we adequately write about the perfumes and songs that people use to demarcate their territories? [end page 228]