Reflection: “The creative insight”

For some time now creativity is seen as of great importance for nations, organisations in order to remain competitive and to achieve sustainable growth, it even effect the wellbeing of people. All organisations are then deploying strategies to create an environment that supports creativity, right? When we look at the practical and theoretical implications of creativity within the corporate real estate, it gets very little attention. This thesis adopted the interactive approach of organisational creativity to start the exploration of the interaction between the workspace and creative behaviour of the knowledge worker. The goal was to expand theory from ‘as-if’ knowledge to a more elaborative view on the relation between the physical environment and creativity. The main research question was “How does the workspace interact with the creative behaviour of knowledge workers?”

To answer the research question two studies were conducted. (1) The focus shifted from exploring creative behaviour within the workplace (2) to exploring elements of the workspace that could have a positive relation on this behaviour.

Based on literature on socio-psychological and organisational research of creativity, qualitative interviews were set up to explore creativity at the workplace. It showed that people require creativity at work, not just in the common view of creating a piece of art, but creative thinking. It entails the ability to come up with new and useful ideas (to solve problems). Two concepts emerged though the process of coding: (1) roaming and (2) creative place. Roaming is used as an analogy for the behaviour that participants reported during the creative process. During the preparation phase they needed both virtual and actual connection with relevant ‘nodes’ within their social network. But little notion was given on how the physical environment was experienced. Two other concepts was closer related to the physical environment that is perceived to support them during the creative endeavours.

The first study showed that knowledge workers have needs, regarding the creative process, that they actively seek to be supplied. This insight brought the theoretical framework to the ‘person-environment’ fit theory. This theory comes from research on stress and explains the connection between the individual and the environment as the fit between the supplies that the environment has to offer and the needs or values that the person has. A misfit results in coping behaviour, resulting in energy misspent which otherwise could be used for the task at
hand. It effects both well-being and performance. Further literature research showed that individuals are able to place values on the physical environment, more explicitly on the workspace. The needs founded in the first study can be placed in the instrumental/functional -and psychological/symbolic value.

The second study indicated that ‘nature’ and ‘complexity’ are possibly related to restorative and stimulating needs of knowledge workers in order to be creative. It implies that details within the workspace do not only have an aesthetic value but actually help to manage the cognitive processes of individuals.

Furthermore it has been indicated that creativity in itself can placed as value on the workspace. The concept relates to self-identity. Individuals seek reflections of the self in order to stabilise it. The workspace as a symbol has been recognised by some and only few found evidence that employees put symbolic value on the physical work environment by reflecting their own identity. Those that perceive creativity to be part of their identity seek thus for cues within the workspace that help to confirm their creativity. Certain elements might thus be beneficial for creative behaviour without it directly influencing. It is possible that through the process of affect creative performance is positively influenced.

This research has implications for practice. It shows that creativity is not just part of nature, i.e. personality trait, but can actually be ‘nurtured’ by the environment. It places creativity as an active process between knowledge workers and the workspace. Although more research is needed it shows that workplace-strategies that focus on mere productivity and efficiency might not be the most effective for creative behaviour. A possible mixture of complex spaces that helps the experience of flow and spaces that give individuals sense of enclosure, with natural elements to let the mind wander might be helpful for organisation to create a better flow of ideas.
Reflection on methodology

This research used a qualitative approach as the interaction between individual, its creativity and the physical surrounding is complex. Finding out how the physical environment influences the perceiver depends on ‘reality’ that is subjective in nature. It is ‘created’ by an interaction between the individual and its – social - world (Yazan, 2015). Two different methods were used. For the first part open interviews were used to explore creativity.

Creativity as a subject, showed that the open interviews were indeed beneficial to let the interviewees speak freely and explore their own experiences during the creative endeavours. Where normally the significant part of the literature study is done beforehand of the research, I had to use literature to get a better understanding of the needs that came out of the interviews. It helped to build up my theory in this sense.

The second step of my research was to further test this theory. The goal was to see which elements are positively related to the values which were identified, e.g. Is stimulation positive related to different texture/materials within the workspace. This was done by a survey, which measures the perceives support, and by the use of self-made photos of the space in which they were residing at that moment. Two important problems arose during the use of this method that caused the photos to be less usable (or in some cases unusable) for further analysis.

The first one is letting participants make their own photographs. There was too much variance in the perception of what the current space was or at least what the photo showed. It might be necessary to have a short instruction or example of what a good or bad photo would be. In my case I had to discard some pictures since they only showed the desk and the chair with barely any view on what the space looks like.
A second issue that emerged was caused by the selection of the sample. Limited by time and choice I had to use four organisations that were available. Since this method measures the use of different spaces over a period of time, participants that were often at the same place have an impact on the amount of photos that could be used. If possible, getting acquainted with the workplace might be helpful to decide whether this place and the people are really relevant for the study.

A final tip regarding the use of the second study is to use a network to get someone inside the organisation to be your spokesman or ‘champion’ of your study. In my case, I did an internship in which they did not directly gave me the necessary data but gave relevant connection to get the chance to gather the data. Another option is to try and find connections within your own network. The reason why this connection is best explained by a small example. I used to have a job as a telemarketer and at that job the distinction was made between “Calling Cold” and “Calling Warm”. When calling possible customers it was a lot easier to sell something to them when they already had a product, hence calling warm. Doing research at the workplace is not easy as people tend to be territorial and fear change. Together with clear intentions and instructions, a spokesman helps to sell your research to those you need.
**Implications for the management of Corporate Real Estate**

**The first step towards leveraging creative capital**

Decisions about office space have for a long time been driven by cost. This thesis started with the potential added value of creativity. Is it argued that it is crucial for organisations to survive in a highly competitive market. Furthermore, it is believed to be connected to the wellbeing of employees. Creativity is thus of importance for both organisations and individuals as it concerns the generation of novel and useful ideas. It even becomes the dominant factor within the workplace (Jan van Ree, 2002). How can this factor be managed within corporate real estate?

This thesis identified two issues regarding the implication of creativity within the work environment. The ‘productivity paradigm’ and the ‘cut and paste strategy’. The first one concerns a more abstract view on what generates value for companies and increases its competitive advantage. This paradigm is also reflected in corporate real estate strategies. Whether creativity should be concerned as separate output within business processes or not is not within the scope of this thesis.

The ‘cut and paste-strategy’ has been identified as a problem that hinders the alignment of the workplace design with real estate decisions and the overall corporate strategy. Such strategies reflect a lack of understanding of the complex interaction between behaviour and place, and what creativity is. The theoretical findings of this research could be seen as a first step to understand how the workplace could be used to support or leverage creative capital helping managers to extent their view on what creativity at the workplace means. The following part places the concept of ‘creative fitness’ within the CRE-context by looking at real estate strategies and decision-making.
Linking creative fitness with real estate strategies

This research contributes to the added value – approach of office space (de Vries, de Jonge, & van der Voordt, 2008; Lindholm & Leväinen, 2006; S. E. Roulac, 2001). Back in the 90’s the concept of added value started to show in the academic field (Jensen, Sarasoa, Van der Voordt, & Coenen, 2013; S. E. Roulac, 2001). It broadened the view of corporate real estate from a cost driven perspective to an asset that can be used to achieve other strategic goals. Lindholm and Leväinen further explored this approach (2006). They came up with seven real estate strategies, based on previous research and interviews, that add value for shareholders through profitability- and revenue growth (fig. 12).

Based on the corporate strategies several real estate strategies could be chosen. It is evident that which strategies to choose or the weight of them depends on organisation and its goals. An organisation that seeks new talent might focus on promotion and/or the satisfaction of employees, while another wishes to be flexible as the organisation is growing rapidly.

![Maximise wealth of shareholders](image)

Figure 1 The model of Lindholm & Leväinen shows how seven real estate strategies help to maximise the wealth of shareholders. Creative fitness concerns both employee satisfaction and innovation (modified version of Lindhlm & Leväinen’s model (Lindholm & Leväinen, 2006))

The introduction of this thesis explained how the need for creativity comes from both individual and organisation. When employees are able to express their creativity or ventilate their ideas and feel supported they are happier to go to work (Florida, 2005). Organisations require innovation to stay competitive. Innovation requires creativity and organisational creativity starts at the individual. In this regard creativity does not need to have a separate strategy. Instead this research could be placed within the strategies of “increase innovations” and “increase employee satisfaction”.

![Image of real estate strategies](image)
Creativity could be considered as the fuel for innovation. The latter concerns the implementation of the creative output. New and useful ideas need to be implemented before one could speak of innovation. Often something is perceived as an innovation once it is ‘socially accepted’. It depends on the social context. Besides the social component in which the individual acts with others in their network, an environment is needed that supports creative thinking. As such a workplace that supports creativity “exerts a positive influence on human beings engaged in creative work aiming to produce new knowledge …” (Hemlin et al., 2008, p. 197). This view aligns with Vischer’s notion of ‘environmental comfort’ in which knowledge workers need environmental support for their tasks (2008b).

The values identified which concerns ‘creative fitness’, can’t be really seen as the normal activities on activities such as Tabak’s taxonomy of activities: Behind the computer, writing, reading, on the phone, archiving, in a meeting, informal talk, presenting, lunch, toilet visit, coffee break and other break (in (Appel-Meulenbroek, Appel-Meulenbroek, Groenen, & Janssen, 2011, p. 124)). Creative thinking happens within and between these activities. It is both an conscious as an unconscious process. According to Haynes, the CRE-manager should take the behavioural component of people also into account (2007). The physical environment can help manage the cognitive functioning of the user during the creative process. These underlying supportive elements are indirectly valued by those that are within the creative process as beneficial.

The output of the creative thinking together with interaction leads to novel and useful ideas. To what extent it effects the output was not researched but it plausible to assume that
support increases the ‘flow of ideas’ and thus innovation. Furthermore, creative fitness possibly effects the satisfaction of employee. If the situation asks the employee to be creative, the workplace could either inhibit it or support it. As such, satisfaction is reached when supply meets the demand. A sense of support for creative endeavours leads to ‘context satisfaction’ (J. N. Choi, 2004b). Where the output of the creative process or innovation directly is effected by the functional values, it is indirectly influenced by the psychological or symbolic values (see model on p. 61).

Especially the psychological concept ‘sense of belonging’ seems to be of importance for the satisfaction. The workplace in this regard does not support creativity as a process but more as an image or direct reflection of what is perceived to creative or not. Kao advocates that companies explicitly assess the degree to which their places reflect their values and the priority of creativity in the company (S. Roulac, 2009). Young professionals tend to regard work also as a form of self-expression (van Meel & Vos, 2001). Indeed employees seems to assign symbolic values to the physical workplace and some places are perceived to be more creative than others. This link with the physical environment is a complex one. Although further research needs to be conducted, results of this study indicate that a ‘creative place’ does not necessarily means more creativity. Better said, it depends on the symbolic values the knowledge worker has. If the workspace fits with his values then he feels comfortable or supported in creative thinking. A misfit would inhibit creativity. The concept of creative fitness and its values thus influence both employee satisfaction and innovation.

But it is possibly in conflict with the strategy to increase productivity (of employees). Creativity is difficult to grasp for individuals, they’re not always consciously in control. The process could happen in a split second, a day or even weeks and it often happens between routine work. As such it makes it even difficult for managers to control. In fact it is this ‘mode of control’ that is used to manage productivity but inhibits creativity. Although they might be considered as mutual exclusive, in the physical environment there are most likely overlapping elements. Of course productivity is of significant importance. An environment that constantly stimulates creativity might neglect the added value of productivity. Therefore CRE-manager should understand both values in order to make a decision that balances both in such a way that it suits the organisation the most.

Implementing creative fitness into decision-making
CREM needs more detailed information on the actual effect on performance of the organization at an operational level to convince general management in the same way as other supporting departments do (e.g. logistics); with hard, undeniable data on financial benefits (Appel-Meulenbroek & Feijts, 2007). Very few are trying to measure intangible elements of performance, yet recognize how helpful it could be to have such measures (Lindholm & Leväinen, 2006).

It is difficult to place a metric on the added value of creativity compared to, for example, cost reduction strategies. Even with this type of strategy the causal-effect link is not always clear. With creativity it is even more difficult as it can be considered as a user’s value and subjective in nature. Placing creativity in the field of organisational goals is therefore difficult. One could think of metrics such as ‘novel and useful ideas per square metre’, ‘novel and useful ideas per employee’ or ‘novel and useful ideas per business unit’. But I think that such an approach is not only difficult but also counter effective. It is difficult to proof whether changes within the physical environment are the cause of the change in these metrics. Instead the focus should be on how creativity can be supported. A tool should be designed that assesses the perceived support for their functional and symbolic values. A possible KPI would then be:

*Employees’ opinion on how well the workplace supports their creativity*
Figure fourteen shows how this tool could be used to help decision-making regarding the KPI. But what is the design of this tool? The operationalisation of the values, related to creative fitness can be found in phase two of this thesis and could be seen as the first step to a tool to measure creative fitness. It has three components, of which two are based on a survey and one based on the components of the workspace, such as colours, view of nature etc.

The research design could possibly be further designed into a tool (fig.15). But it would also be viable if more research is done to test and develop more items relating to these values. Especially creative self-identity is of interest. Further research might explain which decisions could be made to attract different types of employees.

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1 The design, results and discussion can be found at p. 62-69. The components can be found in the appendix.
The cultural component of creative fitness

Although this thesis focused on the physical component of the workplace, it also has implications for the cultural aspect. Creative behaviour could be seen as the outcome of the interaction between the individual traits, physical setting and culture. A recent study showed that creativity is influenced the most by the individual component, then culture and finally the physical environment (Dul et al., 2011). Creativity may find its origins in the individual but both physical and cultural aspects can enhance the creative performance through perceived support. Environmental psychology tells us that all three have an influence on creative behaviour. Many studies indicate that certain organisational values such as freedom, challenge, sufficient resources, encouragement are of significant importance for the perceived support for creativity (Teresa M Amabile et al., 1996). This implies that the CRE-manager should cooperate with other management to implement the strategy to support creativity. HR, executive management and business unit leaders should be included in the decision-making process to align design with actual use. If cultural values of the workplace do not match with the cultural values that are perceived to be supportive, a mismatch occurs. The positive effect of the workspace is then mitigated by the negative effects of the cultural values. To create an environment which supports creativity, strategies and decision-making should incorporate all three components. Only then real creative fitness can be achieved.

Figure 5 The three elements that should be aligned in order to come to a creative fitness of the workplace