H. George Frederickson
University of Kansas

Can Bureaucracy Be Beautiful?

Public administration has long been understood to be both a science and an art. In its artful aspects, public administration can also, in fact, be beautiful. At their very best, public organizations and processes have forms, designs, experiences, and languages which are beautiful and compelling. It is this beauty and its potential which draws us to public work. And, there is very great beauty in ideas of high and noble purpose and in the organizations and processes we build to achieve those ideas.

Introduction

It has long been understood that public administration is both science and art; indeed, for many years the masthead of the Public Administration Review read “PAR: The Journal of the American Society for Public Administration, to Advance the Science, Processes and Art of Public Administration.” Although the science and processes of public administration have dominated the field, there is nevertheless a considerable treatment of public administration as art (Goodsell and Murray 1995; Lynn 1996; Egger 1959; Holzer, Morris, and Ludwin 1979; Kroll 1965; McCurdy 1973, 1987; McDaniel 1978; Marini 1992; Tead 1951; Waldo 1956, 1968). This literature describes the artful qualities of good management and the usefulness of organizational and management perspectives taken from literature and art. While I agree with this literature, this essay makes a bolder and more fundamental argument—that bureaucracy is a form of beauty and that organization and the work of organizations, including what is described as administration or management, can be beautiful. This claim is made first by describing organization and management as aesthetic phenomena. This is followed by the claim that these aesthetic phenomena are a search for the beauty of bureaucracy. Finally, the implications of the aesthetics and beauty of bureaucracy are sketched.

The Aesthetic Qualities of Organization and Administration

Form

Art in all its traditional manifestations—painting, sculpture, music, literature, poetry, architecture—exhibits one consistent characteristic—form. So it is with organization. Form is universal. In the practices of organization and management and in its study, form is often mistaken for hierarchy. It is form that is universal to art and organization, not hierarchy. Form has many meanings. We speak of someone being in good form. The human body has form. Marriage is a form of relationship between two persons. A club or organization is said to have been formed. Ice forms on a pond and dew on a tree. Form can be described as a process or an action which shapes something, and form can also refer to that shape. With particular reference to organization, it could be said that form describes the shape or structure of the organization and that forming is close to organizing or managing.

Form in art ranges from fixed and rigid, as in a stone building or a Henry Moore sculpture, to dynamic and malleable, as in a particular rendering of a Mozart concerto. So it is in organization and work. One of the earliest distinctions in organization theory is between the formal and informal organization, the former being or appearing to be fixed or rigid, the latter seeming to be flexible and changeable.

At an elemental level, it is generally understood that form in art is drawn from nature. Forms in nature, such as the bee’s cell in a honeycomb, with its precision and order, or the helix structure of DNA, serve as a touchstone for form in art because artists “have sensed it: they have found it instinctively … the elementary forms which men have instinctively given to their works of art are the same as the elementary forms which exist in nature” (Read 1952). The
universality of form in organization might also be described as a sensed or human instinct to establish and maintain human relations and collectivities based on perceptions of form in nature.

It should not be assumed that form in either art or organizations means linear, rectilinear, or regular. Form is often curvilinear, spherical, spiral, tubular, conical, asymmetrical, or even irregularly contorted. It is important to note that unlike form in art or organizations, form in nature very often obeys understood mathematical laws (Thompson 1942).

To this point, it has been claimed that form is basic to both art and organization; that the word form has many meanings but tends to be used in much the same way in art and organization; that form can be rigid or flexible in both art and organization; that form in art and organization can take virtually any linear or curvilinear shape; and that form in art and organization is often drawn from nature. Form is fundamental to the aesthetic and is equally evident in art and organization.

Design

Art is a human creation and is, at least at this point, to be distinguished from the beauty which may be found in nature. The subject of artistic and organizational beauty comes later. Organization, like art, is also a human creation. As human creations, there are two very important distinctions between art and organization. First, art is often singular and solitary—the author at work, the composer at the piano. Organization is, by definition at least, the relations between two persons, and most often these days is described as “complex organization” or “bureaucracy.” In simple form we see the two come together in the string quartet, individual artists in a simple organization playing music together. In a more complex form, the performance of a symphony is the wedding of many individual artists, each agreeing to obey shared rules and understandings and to follow the tempo and feeling of the maestro—in short, to be an organization.

The second important distinction between art and organization as human creations is the matter of instrumentality. Art is often created for its own sake. Art may make a point, convey beauty, or impart feelings. While some art is instrumental, much of it is not. Organizations, particularly large or complex organizations, are always instrumental—to pay dividends, to make products, to protect, to provide services, to educate, to solve problems. Even with these two distinctions, the design aspects of art and organization are essentially similar.

In organizational study, the creative process of building, shaping, adapting, and changing the form or structure of an organization has come to be known, oddly enough, as “design science” (Shangraw and Crow 1989). This no-mencclature may impart some academic cachet, but a more apt description of this singularly creative aspect of organizational design and administration should be the art of organizational design.

Doubtless the single most influential voice in design science is Herbert Simon. In his Sciences of the Artificial (1969), he argues that so-called man-made disciplines such as engineering, medicine, architecture, and management are inherently different from the natural sciences, but they are expected to use the same logical and empirical approaches. He suggests an approach based less on laboratory and field testing of hypotheses, which characterizes the natural sciences, and more on the logic of systems theory and the notion of rationality (in fact, bounded rationality) or goal-oriented behavior. An extensive knowledge of systems behavior would presumably result in the systems designers being able to adjust or redesign the system to achieve a preferred state. This process is iterative, experimental, and inherently artful—blending science and art. Certainly major organizational innovations of a structural sort, such as the assembly line, the hollow corporation, and just-in-time inventory are evidence of the effectiveness of so-called design science or a science of the artificial. It can be argued, however, that such innovations were as much art as science. For example, the evolution of jazz involved an understanding of the “systems” or forms of classical, folk, and other kinds of music and the adaptation of those forms through an iterative process of experimentation until a new form was achieved. It is clear that both the organizational innovations described above and the evolution of jazz involved purposely changing form to bring about different results. Such adaptations of form are evidently characteristic of both art and organization.

It may seem that form in art is inherently changeable and that form in organization is not. In fact, we know that organizational form is more plastic than is commonly understood. Put another way, designed organizational changes, either as art or science, seem to work. Large-scale public organizations such as nation-states tend to use either the presidential form of checks and balances or the parliamentary form of unity of powers. The evidence indicates that each form of nation-state has tended to adapt some design characteristics from the other form, and the two forms have become less distinct and have begun to resemble each other (Lijphart 1992). In the 1950s and 1960s, government in American cities was either the mayor form (sometimes called the strong mayor form) or the council-manager form (sometimes called the city manager form), with the country about equally divided between the two forms. In a legal or statutory sense, almost all American cities have retained these forms. However, by the 1990s most mayor-form cities had adopted key features of council-manager form city government, and most council-man-
larger cities had adopted key features of mayor-form local government (Frederickson 1999). The two forms of American local government are now more like each other than they are different or distinct. Cities have tended to copy one another in these structural adaptations in much the same way as artists copy one another as new innovations or movements come along. The diffusion of innovation is as artistic as it is scientific (Rogers 1964).

Bureaucracy is no exception. Hierarchy is still the norm, but modern-day hierarchy hardly resembles the rigid boxes and lines associated with the early era of scientific management. The matrix form is widely used and understood and openly accounts for the problem of ambiguity of having more than one boss (Baber 1983). Loosely coupled systems describe highly segmented organizations with most power and authority lodged in the segments and only a minimal and rather flat hierarchy (Cohen and March 1974). Policy specialists working for different jurisdictions in a region (nation-states in the Mediterranean region or cities in a metropolitan area) fashion laterally linked policy agreements that bind the region together (Haas 1998; Frederickson 1999). Management in some public organizations is changing from the direct management of service delivery to contract negotiation with private or nonprofit service organizations and the oversight of those contracts (Kettl 1993). The number of single-purpose jurisdictions, such as airport authorities and economic development districts, is increasing (Burns 1994). All of this suggests that organizations are not as fixed and rigid as the conventional wisdom holds and that the processes of change and adaptation are essentially artful or artistic.

Experience

An organization is the sharing of common experiences and the development of shared meaning regarding those experiences. John Dewey (1934) described art as exactly that—experience. “An engraver, painter, or writer is in the process of completing at every stage of his work. He must at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to the whole to come. . . . The series of doings in the rhythm of experience give variety and movement; they save the work from monotony and useless repetitions. . . . An object is peculiarly and dominantly aesthetic, when the factors that determine anything which can be called an experience are lifted high above the threshold of perception and are made manifest for their own sake” (56–57). Not all, or even many, organizational experiences will rise to the level of Dewey’s expectations of art as experience. Still, his primary point is that art is derived from experience, and shared experience is the key element in our understanding of organization.

The Language of Organization

It is the art of language that forms the foundation upon which our modern understanding of organizations rests. “Organizing is like a grammar in the sense that it is a systematic account of some rules and conventions by which sets of interlocked behaviors are assembled to form social processes that are intelligible to actors. It is also a grammar in the sense that it consists of rules . . . that summarize the recent experience of the people who are organized” (Weick 1999, 3–4).

When organizational events and conversations mean different things to different people, they are equivocal and the focal point for possible change. When, on the other hand, there is general agreement regarding the interpretation of organizational events or conversations, things are said to make sense. Organizations, then, “are not entirely rational in the sense of being consciously directed toward the achievement of a previously determined end” (Harmon and Mayer 1986, 349). There are, instead, systems of collective sense making. Following Cohen and March (1974), in this artful language or organization, plans are symbols that send messages to the environment about what the organization might do; they are advertisements to attract investors or appeal to stakeholders; they test the commitment of persons regarding the organization’s purposes; and they are excuses for action. The organizational plan, then, is less a statement of goals or a rational, goal-oriented approach than it is an artistic grammar of possibilities. In this modern grammar, the organization is best understood as a system of shared meanings rather than an organization chart, a hierarchy, or a building (Hood and Jackson 1991).

In this grammar of organization, the logic of rationality (particularly linear rationality) is turned on its head and made circular with the now-classic description of the organization as a garbage can. “An organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work” (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972, 2). To top it off, this lucid description of organizational means and ends, problems and solutions, and decision-makers is said to occur in the decision soup. It is difficult to imagine a more artful or literary grammar by which to account for collective behavior in organizations.

Two standards in the world of art, the story and the metaphor, are increasingly common means by which to describe, explain, and account for organizations and for the human behavior in them. It is the story which best explains how systems of shared meanings and the processes of sense making develop and evolve. In the best research
on legislative–administrative relations (or the politics–administration dichotomy), Steven Maynard-Moody and Marissa Kelly (1995) discovered six basic scripts to explain how officials in the executive branches of government respond to elected officials in the legislative branches. These scripts are based on telling and retelling stories in the bureaucracy about legislative–administrative interactions. They explain the different ways bureaucrats respond to political meddling, to elected officials’ efforts to control other elected officials, to why “good” elected officials get bureaucratic help and “bad” ones do not, and to the bureaucratic consequences of whistleblowing. “[T]hese stories depict an organizational culture that reflects the deep internalization of the rationalized bureaucracy. The telling and retelling of organizational stories is a vital aspect of organizational sense making. . .” (89).

Another closely connected perspective is the literature on administrative ritual. Rituals take many forms, including explicit rites such as new employee orientations, ribbon cutting, ground breaking, or wreath laying; back-region rituals such as the office party and the coffee break; front-region rituals such as parades with marching bands; and management rituals such as annual performance evaluations, program evaluations, benchmarking, and organizational performance or outcomes measurement. Charles T. Goodsell suggests that “In view of the often contrived, distinctive, regularized, and symbolic nature of human behavior, it is inconceivable that administration would ever be completely without role playing, stylization, and staging. The issue is not whether administration should be ritualistic, but how” (1989, 165).

The metaphor is another art-like approach to understanding organizations. Metaphors from physics are popular these days, especially theories of chaos which describe highly complex physical systems changing in multiple directions at the same time and appearing to have little order (Prigogone and Stengers 1984; Gleick 1987; Overman 1987). The neutrino is a particle with zero mass and zero electrical charge which physicists want to exist because if it does exist, “[I]t solves a lot of problems. Their research logic, however, is somewhat like observing people dancing in the streets of Boston and concluding that the Red Sox have won the World Series” (Behn 1992, 411). The neutrino is a kind of proverb, not unlike the language of management proverbs developed by Peters and Waterman (1982) such as “a bias for action,” “close to the customer,” and “hands-on, value-driven.” Robert Behn (1992) describes this as the art of creating reality. In this art, “Public managers create reality. That is their job. They are charged with the task of creating a new, better reality—whether that is a cleaner environment, safer streets, or healthier citizens. In creating such new realities, they need concepts that will help them develop strategies, motivate people, resolve conflicts, and do all the other things necessary to produce this new reality” (418).

To this point, the claims set forth are that organization and work are an aesthetic; that form is fundamental to all art and organization; that form in organization is created and changes by an art of design; that organization of experience is often artistic or art-like; and that behavior in organizations can best be described as a system of shared meanings and processes of sense making guided by an artistic grammar and the art of stories, rituals, and metaphors. We turn now to the more difficult claim—that bureaucracy can be beautiful.

**The Search for the Beauty of Bureaucracy**

Can bureaucracy be beautiful? If the claims of this essay are accepted, then the answer must be *yes*. Beauty is, of course, subjective. In this subjectivity, could there be a kind of shared meaning among those in an organization and a kind of sense making that causes them to feel favorably toward their organizational fellows and toward their organization? Could this shared meaning be a kind of beauty? Yes, if one agrees that order itself appeals to the imagination. And yes, if precision, harmony, routine, and ritual appeal to the imagination. It is this aspect of organizational life which is quite like the rhythm of music, the balance of form in architecture, the formation in ballet. There is a beauty to predictability, as in the natural passage of time from day to night, from season to season. Some aspects of organizational life take on this predictability, and many in the organization expect and even welcome this order. Indeed, the recent declining strength of other institutions such as the family, the church, and the neighborhood may have caused us to rely increasingly on the organizational aspects of our lives to satisfy some of our needs for the beauty of order (Hochschild 1997). There is the further possibility that the present popularity of downsizing, with its accompanying negative effects on job security, have so reduced the order, predictability, and routine of organizational life (not to mention the long-standing reciprocal assumption that in return for good work the employee will enjoy fair pay and security) as to make it bleak and ugly.

Consider the much-criticized hierarchy and the reasons for its persistence. Public organizations must balance competing imperatives—order, fairness, the fixing of responsibility, and leadership. Hierarchy, in its rich variety of forms, can provide that balance (Jaques 1990). When hierarchy is out of balance, often in the direction of too great an emphasis on order, it becomes static and out of touch with its changing context. When hierarchy is in balance, combining enough order to engender trust and predictability, enough fairness to include workers in important decisions and to give them the required security to ensure their
loyalty, enough fixing of responsibility to satisfy political leaders, and enough leadership to imagine the future, could it not be said that all of those who are a part of that hierarchy have created something beautiful? If the organization or institution housing that hierarchy is achieving a high and honorable purpose, and if all of those in the hierarchy feel professionally, intellectually, and emotionally engaged, a part of something bigger and more important than could ever be achieved by just a few people, could it not be said that they have created something beautiful?

At least at some level, we are able to select our occupations and professions. Through this process of self-selection we may gravitate toward work which matches our instincts, capabilities, and imagination—our own subjective search for beauty. In this way our occupations or professions can at least approximate our subjective views and feelings. Certainly those who practice accounting are likely to judge organizational beauty differently than do those who teach. To the accountant the nicely summed balance sheet is beautiful, and to the teacher the sometimes noisy moment of student understanding is beautiful.

However highly we might value the organizational arts of order, predictability, experience, and shared meaning, such values hardly exhaust the imagination or the full range of aesthetic expression. For many with a different temperament and a different imagination, the beauty of order will appear severe, constraining, lacking in spontaneity, and smothering. Many must create and can find beauty only in the adventure of change. And in the larger sense, a static organization will soon be out of touch with its dynamic environment. Therefore, the effective organization must count not only on the routines, rituals, and patterns that nurture predictability, but also on a lively capacity to adapt. Modern theories of organization such as contingency theory account for the interaction between institutional instincts toward stability and contextual pressures toward change. The metaphors of modern organization, such as “reinventing government,” are also powerful tools for those who would lead the processes of change and adaptation (Osborn and Gaebler 1992).

Another important indication of the search for beauty in bureaucracy is the house in which the organization lives. There is an instinct to make that house beautiful, although the beauty of organizational houses is highly subjective. Charles T. Goodsell has made the most interesting and profound study of public and governmental organizational houses. The Social Meaning of Civic Space: Studying Political Authority Through Architecture (1988) is a classic consideration of contrasting instincts toward democratic government as represented by the buildings which house the authority of government. He focuses on city council chambers and describes a most interesting series of ideas about government that such chambers reflect. In

Bureaucracy’s House in the Polis: Seeking an Appropriate Presence (1992), Goodsell focuses on the exterior facades of buildings and shows that these facades are not unlike the faces of people: “[F]riendly, hostile, open, expressive, bland, closed. Some buildings confirm our worst expectations of bureaucracy: colonies of isolated drones, each behind his or her little window, meticulously following orders and processing paper” (396). Some buildings and council chambers are quite clearly occupied by the public sector in that they convey high-level meaning, a deeply imprinted identification with government, connecting us to our history and “help[ing] us reaffirm our public identity by connecting us to our Western roots and perhaps even our national character” (Goodsell 1992, 407).

It is claimed here that organizations are, or can be, beautiful. They are beautiful to the extent that order, predictability, and stability are essential to collective social functioning. But beauty requires balance, and too much organizational order and stability calls for the beauty of change. Because beauty is subjective, one has at least some choice of the occupation or organization which holds the prospects for beauty. When there is extensive self-identity with an organization, it can be said that these positive human feelings approximate beauty. And when there is alienation—negative human feelings—between individuals and their organizations, it is the opposite of beauty. Beauty in the organizational sense, then, is based on experience. Finally, we build houses for our organizations, seeking to represent both our collective purposes and the beauty of those purposes.

The Implications of Bureaucracy as Beautiful

The claim that bureaucracy can be beautiful has at least the following implications. First, an understanding of organizations and work as aesthetic requires some grounding in the humanities. This suggests a rapprochement between the so-called organizational and administrative sciences and the humanities (Zald 1996). It is increasingly evident that stories, narratives, scripts, and rhetoric shape organizational culture. And it is equally evident that an understanding of organizational culture and behavior can be advanced using the tools of the humanities. There is little doubt that the tools of quantitative analysis and the logic of scientific inquiry dominate the education and preparation of those who would manage and lead organizations. Such prospective leaders would be equally well served and perhaps better served if they had the tools of history, narrative and rhetoric (Lynn 1995).

Perhaps it is best to make this point with metaphor. In 1949 and again in 1994, in two separate disasters but under similar conditions, crews engaged in wildland
firefighting were killed when they were overrun by exploding fires. In each case they were within sight of safe areas. In each case those who died failed to drop their heavy firefighting tools and lost valuable distance they could have covered more quickly if they had been lighter. Karl Weick (1996) asked why the firefighters kept their tools even in the face of disaster. He found that this phenomenon is not unique to firefighters.

“The reluctance to drop one’s tools when threat intensifies is not just a problem for firefighters. Navy seamen sometimes refuse orders to remove their heavy steel-toed shoes when they are forced to abandon a sinking ship, and they drown or punch holes in life rafts as a result. Fighter pilots in disabled aircraft sometimes refuse orders to eject, preferring instead the ‘cocoon of oxygen’ still present in the cockpit. Karl Wallenda, the world-renowned high-wire artist, fell to his death still clutching his balance pole, when his hands could have grabbed the wire below him” (Weick 1996).

The unwillingness to drop one’s tools is a metaphor for the challenges faced by modern organizations. The environment of modern organizations is changing rapidly and is increasingly complex. By holding on to their heavy tools, are those in organizations unable to reach a preferred state even though they can see or imagine it? Is the “law of the instrument” or the allegory “when one has a hammer, everything looks like a nail” so powerful that everyday organizational dramas can become tragedies?

The lighter tools that we need are an understanding of the nature of relationships in organizations; a capacity to use abstract concepts to explain or account for organizational purposes or behavior; to build bridges between abstract concepts and concrete observations and information; and a capacity to articulate values that matter. These tools are often found in the humanities and are directly connected to the notion that an organization is aesthetic and a search for beauty.

Second, the analytical tools of the social sciences help us know how organizations operate and how public managers function. But to know public organizations and their management is not to understand them. Understanding requires perspective, experience, judgment, and the capacity to imagine. These qualities have less to do with analytical skills and more to do with philosophy, language, art, and reason. The best education for public managers will be filled with these subjects. The best public administrators will understand their work as a search for the effective management of democratic self-government; at those moments when that search is realized, they will see and understand the beauty of bureaucracy.

Third, the beauty of order is beguiling: it is understood, familiar, comfortable. The beauty of change is less well understood, although there are powerful concepts such as the learning organization and the participative organization that have strong aesthetic qualities. Some of the rhetoric of organizational change is compelling, such as reinventing government or reengineering the corporation. Still, the capacity to achieve organizational change is weaker than the tendencies of organizations to resist change. If there is balance in beauty, then this picture is somewhat out of balance. This suggests a greater emphasis on change and particularly on the aesthetics of change. It is likely that the most beautiful moments in organizational life occur when there is a breakthrough, when those in the organization have been stretched and tested—in short, when the organization has achieved a significant change.

Finally, there is, as George Santayana (1896) described a hundred years ago, great beauty in the power of ideas of high purpose. People are attracted to the ennobling task and understand that such tasks require complex organizations to achieve them. Democracy and justice are compelling ideas, and many people wish to be associated with those organizations and institutions that provide for democracy and justice. Public institutions and organizations have the highest of purposes, the people’s purposes. The job of public administration is to make the organized achievement of these purposes beautiful.

References

tics. Forthcoming.


