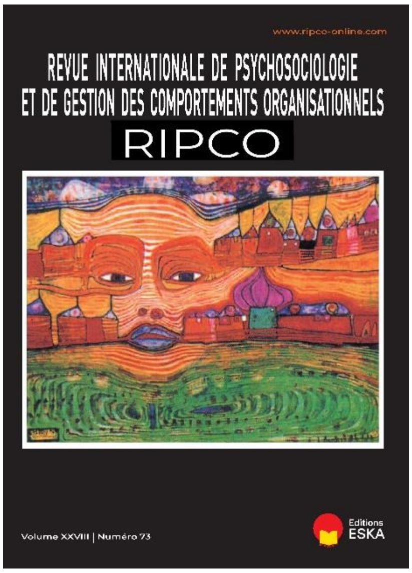

The struggle for space: A study of the behavior of top managers to maintain their spatial privilege

Delphine MINCHELLA

Sébastien BOURDIN

EM Normandie Business School, Métis Lab

dminchella@em-normandie.fr

sbourdin@em-normandie.fr

Summary

Abstract

This article describes how the top managers of a large banking group behaved when confronted with the execution of a major spatial development project at the time of their settlement into new headquarters, and how it affected the whole business project established around it. Through a multidisciplinary literature review combining social geography, philosophy, and management sciences, and by mobilizing a methodology including numerous organizational archival documents and interviews with the project's key actors, the authors unveil the reasons for their symbolic privileges: their personal place within this new space prevailed, even over the business project that they were supposed to support. From these observations, we put forward the idea that the concept of place—in the sense of one's personal space within an organization's space—should be further investigated as it appears to be an essential part of organizational life.

Keywords: Space, symbolic privilege, location, place, headquarters, spatial justice

Introduction

For a long time, in the management sciences, the social and human perspectives of space were dismissed, and the building that housed a company was considered only as a neutral shell, with no possible impact on the activities and social relationships that took place there (Baldry, Bain, & Taylor, 1998; Minchella & Sorreda, 2020). Space was only a question of perceiving "pure matter" without considering other possible dimensions, particularly symbolic ones (Dale & Burrell, 2005; 2008), no doubt to avoid being confronted with the daunting impossibility of grasping what space is in its entirety (Lefebvre, 1974).

However, in the last twenty years, management science studies on the symbolic dimensions of space have been increasing (Beyes & Holt, 2020). Among the approaches to space developed in organizational theory are those that conceive of space as a site of contestation (Spicer & Taylor, 2007), a kind of receptacle for the power and resistance of the individuals who use it. In this framework, space is conceived of as a symbol that must be defended because it is attached to it. In social geography, several studies mobilizing theories of spatial justice have highlighted how individuals can fight to obtain or maintain a privileged place in a given territory (notably via a Marxist approach; Harvey, 1996) or denounce an absence of justice in the distribution of resources in space (Harvey, 1996; Soja, 2009; Gervais-Lambony & Dufaux, 2009; Bret, 2009). However, these theories of spatial justice have not yet been mobilized by management science researchers to understand how individuals in an organization can mobilize the symbolic dimension of space to maintain their privileges.

In this context, our paper aims to highlight how individuals use organizational space as an object of power. More specifically, we seek to demonstrate how top managers defend their status through space—what we call *spatial privilege*—and remain attached to the traditional symbolism of top management (Coşar et al., 2020). In this framework, we consider space as a project—what Henri Lefebvre calls "conceived space" (1974)—that is, a space at the moment of its conception, when it is only an idealized projection of how management envisages the work flow within it, the interactions of employees with each other, in short, organizational life. Furthermore, we take into account the importance of each individual's sense of place in this organizational space. Taking up the theories of spatial justice, we consider that the place occupied in an organization is indicative of the symbolic norms and values that individuals assign to it and, consequently, can constitute a privileged place of contestation, a form of "struggle for places" to maintain one's spatial privilege.[1]

In this article, we seek to demonstrate that (i) spatial symbolism is so strong in the imagination of employees that they seek to defend their place, and from this point of view, we wish to show that space is a political and managerial concept; (ii) top management, which to all appearances, wish to instigate changes within the organization, uses its hierarchical power in order to arrogate to itself a position revealing a form of defense of a privilege of a symbolic order (spatial privilege); (iii) the place occupied in the company (in the sense of the individual's personal location in the head office) generates contestations which are linked to the place occupied (in the sense of the hierarchy of the organization) by individuals, and these contestations are indicative of the search for greater spatial justice within the organization. To highlight this, our work proposes a deeper exploration of the notion of place (in the sense of personal location) that an organization attributes to each of its members within its space by mobilizing, in particular, the work of social geography. The latter are useful because they make it possible to highlight the importance of the place occupied in organizational life.

To do so, we use a case study of an international French investment and financial services bank, a company we have been following for twenty-five years and whose top management wanted to make major changes to its new headquarters. More precisely, we analyze the way in which top managers, in the context of their installation on new premises, resisted the execution of this project in order to secure for themselves a place of choice, even if this meant undermining the managerial strategy of the organization they were supposed to be leading.

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[1] We are using the title of the following book: Michel Lussault. (2009). *De la lutte des classes à la lutte des places* (pp. 221-p). Paris: Grasset.

The first part of this text is devoted to a multidisciplinary literature review that combines philosophy, social geography, and management sciences to clarify the concepts we discuss. Then, we present our case study and the original methodology we developed to collect and code our data. Finally, we present our results, the limitations we faced, and our recommendations for future research.

1. The symbolic value of space and the search for spatial justice

In this section, we explore how the literature attempts to understand how managers of an organization intend to convey managerial and organizational intentions when it comes to defining a new space (e.g., the construction of a new building or the reorganization of a building). Then, we will discuss how individuals react to this spatial (re)organization and how the *struggle for space* that we analyze can be explained in terms of theories surrounding the concept of spatial justice developed in social and critical geography.

1.1. Space as an idealized projection

In essence, a new space is always ideal first and foremost (Lefebvre, 1974): the very principle of architectural design is based on the drawing up of plans that will be submitted to the clients, and when the latter validates a project, one moves on from paper to a model to better imagine the way in which the future construction will fit into the already existing landscape (Lautier, 1999; Lefebvre, 1974). Admittedly, this three-dimensional projection can be similar, but it can never replace the final rendering, just as a road map does not replace the road it intends to reproduce (Lussault, 2007). It will always remain a visual representation and an ideal. Nor will this representation provide any guarantee as to how this space will ultimately be inhabited and experienced by its occupants, since their spatial practices are not so easily dominated (Lefebvre, 1974).

According to François Lautier (1999), company spaces are designed according to the directives of the decision-makers, in that they translate their managerial and organizational intentions materially with varying degrees of clarity. From this point of view, company spaces can therefore be considered an idealized projection. At the time of their commissioning, these spaces offer a kind of snapshot of a particular era, which provides information about the ways in which work and life are articulated there, as well as about the culture of the organization. Moreover, the architecture of a building also provides information about the company it houses, as suggested by the concept of "speaking architecture," developed by the eighteenth-century neoclassical architect Nicolas Ledoux (Bert & al., 2010).

As two architectural scholars, Berg and Kreiner (1992), point out, company headquarters are particularly evocative in this respect. The authors point out that the different headquarters of an organization mark the major periods in its history, and indeed, photographic representations of these headquarters are frequently used to illustrate company anniversary brochures, with these old buildings becoming "sacred places," symbols of the organization's origins and old ways of working.

According to Berg and Kreiner (1992), the construction of a new headquarters is in itself a potent signal to employees that a new era is emerging. Spatial arrangements, if treated as symbolic artifacts, thus inform the occupants of the premises. However, the more subtle the message, the more difficult it is to convey through spatial symbols alone, and the researchers provide the example of a Copenhagen-based company, CPS Kemi, a specialist in environmentally friendly products, that wanted something for its new headquarters that would express its interest in and respect for the environment; however, no "institutionalized symbolic code" (p. 62) seemed capable of conveying this message. Thus, the decision-makers were forced to accompany the reveal of the new headquarters with verbal communication—describing and commenting on the new building—to ensure that the message was adequately conveyed.

From another perspective, but still in the register of spatial symbols of organizational spaces, Rosen et al. (1992) explored the dialectical relationship between work processes and arrangements in a bureaucratic organization. Referring to disciplinary space as Michel Foucault (1975) understands it, the authors point out that it is not a particular section of space that will matter, but rather the fact that the space is squared by well-defined lines, measures, and intervals, which are of primary importance for bureaucratic organizations. To illustrate this, the authors highlight the spatial distributions and artifacts to which managers are entitled in an unnamed US financial organization (p. 76). An executive vice president can have up to 85m² for his personal office, three pieces of art ranging from $75 to $350 each, and a green plant. The assistant vice president is not entitled to a private office, but instead is provided with 30m² of open plan workspace; this space allocation then falls to just over 9m² for a junior office worker. Thus, in this example, the space occupied and the artifacts that furnish it symbolically reflect the importance of each person's function in a clearly defined and understood way. This same idea can be found in the work of several researchers (Doxtator, 1992; Zhang & Spicer, 2014; Maślikowska & Gibbert, 2019), who also address the symbolic meaning that organizations and employees attribute to workspaces. However, the emphasis on the ideal dimension of space should not overshadow its material nature, which is also important, as space is truly a "materialisation of social relations" (Lautier, 1999, p. 4), and the symbols we have discussed often have a material embodiment. Thus, space is, in essence, a hybrid, both material and ideal, with both dimensions intertwined.

1.2. The place occupied in the space as a symbolic value

No one experiences the space that surrounds him as disconnected from his own existence (Lussault, 2007; Lefebvre, 1974). On the contrary, by integrating and regularly frequenting a space, humans will seek to appropriate it through territorialization behavior (Taskin, 2012; Donis & Taskin, 2017) because they will attach to it a real affective charge, a symbolic value (Fischer & Vischer, 1998; Calvard, 2015). The feeling of possession of a territory can be expressed in different ways: by the presence of a materiality specific to the person who wants to mark his territory or by showing certain types of behavior, such as resisting the introduction of a novelty (Brown et al., 2005; Delaisse et al., 2021). Furthermore, the work of Altman (1975), or even more recently Donis and Taskin (2017), has shown that territoriality has an effect on the sense of belonging that an individual may feel in relation to the organization for which he or she works.

Recalling the physical principle that two objects cannot occupy the same place (Lussault, 2007), we understand that, in an organizational space, it is necessary to proceed to a negotiation to order the spatial substance (Lussault, 2007) by attributing to each person a place, which will necessarily be embedded in a game of relating to and distancing from other objects (Lussault, 2007). Michel Lussault (2017) also speaks of interspatiality to designate ways of acting with others in space, that is, the fact of choosing the right distance at which to place oneself in relation to others. Consequently, people's places are neither meaningless nor value-free, and logically, it is those places that benefit from a more favorable positioning than others that are most fiercely desired (Lautier, 1999; Agnew & Duncan, 2014). Thus, it is within this spatial constraint that individuals' positions will greatly participate in the construction and maintenance of their organizational identities. These individuals attribute a symbolic charge to the place they occupy in the space (Soja, 2009).

All of the places thus attributed or negotiated result in a legible space—"generator of consciousness" (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 213)—which will at the same time signal the social status of each person, but also reflect more obscure negotiations because "on the one hand, the space is intended to be homogeneous, open to reasonable, authorized or ordered actions; on the other hand, it is loaded with prohibitions, occult qualities, favours and disfavours, for individuals, and for their groups" (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 222).

Sainsaulieu (1977) highlights the idea that identity at work varies according to "the conditions of access to power in work interactions" (Alter & Laville, 2010, p. 1). Consequently, individuals whose competences are highly valued within the structure will have the means "to assert their differences, to negotiate their alliances and their social recognition" (Sainsaulieu, 1977, p. 436). Competence is one of the sources of power in the organization (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977), and these powers of negotiation and assertion of personal differences will lead to a more valued place in the configuration of the organizational space (Lussault, 2007). Thus, the status of individuals in the hierarchy is manifested in space (Fischer & Vischer, 1998; Lautier, 1999). However, if the place they occupy does not seem fair to them, individuals will seek to [2] that may involve contestation. This is what David Harvey (1996) explains through his Marxist approach to spatial justice. According to Harvey, not all individuals have the same resources and ability to assert their rightful place.

1.3. In search of spatial justice

According to Harvey (1973), justice "must essentially be thought of as a principle (or set of principles) for resolving conflicting claims" (p. 97). He does not exclude that justice is an instrument, a mechanism in the process of awareness of the exploited within conflicts and struggles. In this sense, the moral principles of spatial justice "à la Harvey" can be found in Marxist theory. In the Marxist concept of exploitation, we find the idea of appropriation by the owners of the means of production of the surplus value produced by the workers in the form of rent, profit, or interest.[2] According to Brennetot (2011), since the 1990s, a more critical current of social geography, inspired by the ideas of Harvey and Lefebvre, has revisited the notion of spatial justice to denounce the geographical excesses of liberalism and the discrimination suffered by certain minorities. Applied to the study of the appropriation of space in organizations, the Marxist approach to spatial justice developed by Harvey is of interest. Due to the symbolic value they attribute to the place they occupy in organizational space, individuals may seek to claim a place, to maintain their place, or to have a different place if they feel they are victims of injustice with regard to their place in the organization. In a way, the defense and theorizations of the "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1968), of "territorial justice," of the "right to space," of the "right to land" in peasant and rural struggles, or of the "right to housing," wherever they may be, are claims for justice to be won through and for space (Legroux, 2022). From this point of view, the right to a place in organizational space does not escape this search for spatial justice.

In this article, we consider spatial justice as an analytical framework that makes space—understood as a physical, social, and mental production—a central category for understanding (in)justice and the possible spatial privileges that certain individuals in the organization, especially top managers, arrogate to themselves. In its broadest sense, spatial (in)justice refers to an intentional and

[2] Note that in Karl Marx, the appropriation of this surplus is not described as unjust per se. However, terms such as "theft," "embezzlement," or "aggression" are used.

targeted focus on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice (Gervais-Lambony & Dufaux, 2009). As a starting point, it implies fair and equitable distribution, in space, of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them. In our case study, the distribution of offices is far from random and often reflects the hierarchy of the organization (Taylor & Spicer, 2007; Beyes & Holt, 2020). In their article, Donis et al. (2017) explain how middle managers forced to adopt shared offices will counter this by leaving personal items to reclaim spaces. In this example, the middle managers felt that their assigned place in the organization (and the form of that assigned place, shared offices) was unfair and that, given the symbolic value they attributed to their place, they needed to reestablish some form of justice, or at least challenge the assigned place (in this case, by leaving personal objects behind).

Spatial (in)justice can be seen as both an outcome and a process (Bret, 2009). It is relatively easy to discover examples of spatial injustice in a descriptive way, but it is much more difficult to identify and understand the underlying processes that produce unjust geographies. These unjust geographies can be sources of tension and even struggle. As Michaud (2011) points out, these tensions are inextricable from the sociomaterial reality of organizations. Therefore, studying the sociomateriality of tensions allows us to highlight how individuals seek to occupy a place in an organization.

2. A case study as an empirical basis for our research

In this article, we seek to identify the processes by which a struggle for a position is organized within a company. From this point of view, our case study shows how top managers sought to maintain their spatial privilege and retain a prominent position in the creation of their organization's new headquarters, which was intended to "break the verticality" and "create group homogeneity."

2.1. Presentation of the case study

In order to highlight how individuals defend their symbolic privileges and try to preserve their personal place, we opted for the study of an emblematic case (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) that retraces nineteen years of existence of a head

office (twenty-five years starting from the 1989 design project). The long period of time is necessary (Lefebvre, 1974) in order to identify major movements of spatiality but also, and above all, to demonstrate scientific rigor as suggested by researchers in the framework of case studies (Larsson, 1993; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994, 2013, 2014).
This case is emblematic because the head office discussed here represents a major trend that marked the architecture of multinational groups in the mid-1990s: vertical towers of several dozen floors in a district dedicated to business, where the imposing character of the buildings must reflect the economic power of the company they house. It is also emblematic because the 1980s and 1990s marked the resumption of the construction of large head offices in La Défense (for example, the Pascal and Voltaire towers). This case study is all the more emblematic because it takes place during a period of history (the 1990s) when "there [was] also an ostentatious dimension for the management and especially for the 'political' tertiary sector (banking, press, ministries, etc.)" (Lautier, 1999, p. 105). In the context of the empirical field studied in this article, it is interesting to observe that this highly symbolic character of headquarters is quickly verified in the historical archives of this large company, both for the commemorative leaflets and for the quasisacred aspect of their very first agency (which is now a listed monument in the city of Paris).

The organization on which our research is based is an international bank established in France in 1864. It was nationalized after the Second World War and was privatized again in 1987. In the same year, with this new freedom of action, the CEO decided to launch several major modernization projects, starting with a project for a new head office that would show the rest of the world the power of this bank but also provide it with a real *management tool*. An audit was then launched to evaluate the workspaces of the support services, and it was found that they were scattered over nine main locations and about fifty smaller sites in Paris and the suburbs. The audit also notes a lack of harmony in the way these spaces are managed, which, added to the physical distance, slows cooperation between the different units. "The mobility of services is slowed down. Finally, the audit points out that employees have very little visibility of the activities of their colleagues who do not share the same premises, and that their meetings lack flexibility and fluidity." As the CEO stated in retrospect during a filmed internal interview: "I believe that we did not waste our time by grouping everything together because we had nine sites, with the Finance Department three kilometers from the Large Companies Department, and we paid each other formal visits, which was completely stupid!"

As a result, the group decided to bring together its 5,500 support services employees in the same building on the same site. A special committee—the "New Headquarters Committee"—composed of the group's main directors and chaired by the CEO was set up to define the group's main needs, both in terms of internal and external architecture, as well as on an organizational and managerial level.

Two years later, the bank obtained authorization to buy land in the La Défense business district on the condition that, in return, it undertook the development of part of its headquarters in Val de Fontenay, located in the Paris suburbs. At the same time, the New Headquarters Committee sent the "Future Headquarters Programme" (dated September 1989, 109 pages) to the architects responding to their call for tenders. The ambition to turn the building into a management tool is explicitly stated: thanks to this new building, it is a question of "creating a certain group homogeneity" so that employees collaborate in a more transversal manner, and that they move away from "classic individual formalist work" (p. 72). In the report "Company Project" published internally in 1989, it is clearly established that "[t]he desire of the directors to have, with the new headquarters, a tool that, beyond functional and technical considerations, is a management instrument at the service of the new culture of the [bank] (in bold in the text). It must also prove to be an effective management tool in the service of the modernization of human relations and work organization. In particular, it will promote horizontal communication at work and the sociability of staff in all their activities".

In 1995, when the new headquarters—in the twin towers—were opened, the 870m² ground floor was equipped with several shops and agencies, as well as a showroom to allow users to meet regularly. In addition, a weekly internal publication informs us about the activities that were regularly organized there (e.g., exhibitions, concerts, conferences, and tastings). Today, these two towers are still in use, and were completed in 2008 by a third building. They now accommodate around 10,000 employees.

2.2. Data collection

The question of the manifestations of spatial privilege—and more broadly the way in which each person's place was distributed in the new headquarters—emerged during the first author's doctoral research, specifically from 2011 onwards during informal exploratory interviews with the five archivists of this organization. The data were collected through different strategies using an inductive and qualitative approach. The first step involved a double exploration of the bank's archives. Thus, essential documents were compiled, such as the minutes of the headquarters meetings, architectural files, the organization of departmental moves, internal publications, and memos. Then, we individually and exploratory interviewed a group of fourteen former bank employees who had experienced the setup in these towers. This enabled us to trace in detail the history of the first years of life in these towers.

The second step was to interview the key players in the project and the settlement in the towers. Having heard about this research, an employee who was still working, whom we will call Patrick, came forward because he had been in charge of macrozoning in the towers and was willing to talk about it. This gave rise to two interviews conducted in April 2012 for a total of 2.5 hours, which were recorded and transcribed. In addition, in 2016, thanks to the assistance of the company's archivists, the first author met with the right-hand man of the then CEO on this file (Jean-René) and has maintained regular correspondence with him to date, which has resulted in further significant data collection. Then, the first author was put in touch with a former Human Resource manager (Marc, June 22), who also knew about the installation of his department in the towers and remembered macrozoning from his time in that position. Finally, in January 2016, the first author had the opportunity to have lunch with the CEO, who was no longer active (this interview could not be recorded). The collection and transcription of these various sources allow us to reliably retrace the history of the installation in the towers, while limiting the risks of sense-making caused by such a temporal gap on the part of the actors interviewed.

2.3. Data coding

All of the data collected pertaining to the strategic sense of bringing central services together on a single site, the place of each, and macrozoning (whether interviews or archival documents) were coded to identify different categories and, thus, to trace the concepts as follows.

First-order code (verbatim)	Second-order code	Theoretical coding
"Each office will have local control of its comfort equipment: lighting, heating, cooling." (Architectural file for the towers, 1999)	Ensuring **equity** of comfort in employees' offices	
"The offices must be organized on the elementary module of 1.35 x 4.80m." (Architectural file for the towers, 1999)	**Harmonization of** workstations with a minimum surface for all	**Space justice**
"The idea is to manage the space with a greater [. . .] standardization of people [emphasis in voice], and of things and spaces." (Michel, former employee who experienced the settlement in the towers)	Ensure spatial **coherence**, understandable to all	
"[. . .] there are a few baronies, as in all big companies, who have not completely given up the idea of being close to the big boss, of having their own premises and outbuildings" (Michel)	Search for **proximity to the** presidency / general management	
"In the Development Department, there are high-level managers who participate in the company's strategy, and they will never fit into the same areas as the Technical Department, where it is acceptable to stack people differently." (Patrick, in charge of macrozoning in the towers)	**More space through greater organizational influence**	**Spatial privilege**
"In La Défense, the noble functions, in Val de Fontenay, the less noble functions. In La Défense, the operational people, so the business people, and on the other side, the functional people, the support people." (Patrick)	**Distancing** the "less powerful" from the rest	

"I remember the 'passive' tower and the 'active' tower!" (Marc, former HRD manager)	**Denouncing** the manifestations of space privilege **through humor**	**Resistance to manifestations of space privilege**

3. Results: The struggle for space privilege

3.1. Geography, space, and place as markers of prestige

The first obstacle to bringing the central services together on the same site was the condition imposed by DATAR to develop a branch in Val de Fontenay to acquire land in La Défense. An agreement had to be made. For the CEO, it came down to the fact that he had "unraveled certain operations a little, and above all, regrouped our headquarters in La Défense and the more technical department in the East." Patrick goes into more detail: "'Who goes to the East and who goes to the West?' There is already a tug-of-war between the departments. It's quite obvious that all the bosses want to be in the West, but that they don't see any problem with their troops being sent to the East. This is still the case today." Then he summarized, "In La Défense, the noble functions, in Val de Fontenay, the less noble functions. In La Défense, the operational people, i.e., the business people, and on the other side, the functional people, the support people" and "[the upper strata of the company] will even take advantage of the fact that, in any case, these people live in the East (i.e., in cities that are less bourgeois than the West of Paris).

Even if moving to La Défense seemed practical for the departments considered "noble" (because of the supposed proximity of their homes), the president nevertheless came up against an initial wave of opposition from directors who did not want to leave the heart of Paris: "It was quite a difficult decision to come to La Défense. I spent a lot of time convincing the executive committee to adhere to my project because I left Paris: 'Ah! We're going to lose our soul! We're going to move away from our competitors from the Banque de France!'" (recorded interview, 2010). Here, we find the idea of seeking material privilege by being as close as possible to the center of the capital.

Inside the newly built towers of La Défense, for middle-management employees, personal workstations did not follow any preestablished rules, as was the case when the departments were spread over fifty or so addresses. In 2011, Michel, a manager who experienced the move to the towers, told us:

> Some people [in the new headquarters] were entitled to two windows, others to three. It's no longer the case that people used to say to me: It's not at all the time when I was told: 'You've passed the exam to be a manager so now your desk can have drawers on the right and on the left.' So, a double row of drawers, well. . . it wasn't written anywhere, but very quickly, just before I left for the US, so at the end of 1995 [a few months after the services were set up in the new towers], some people were saying 'I've got the same grade as whats-his-name, and he's got the right to three windows, and I've got only two, and I've got the same grade as him!'

Here again, we see the expression of a search for material privilege. We can also see here the persistence of the bureaucratic spirit, which holds that the higher an individual is in the hierarchy, the better his or her personal working space ought to be. This system, which was obviously no longer followed in the spatial distribution of departments in the new headquarters, seems to make sense to employees, at least when their rank allows them to claim a certain level of comfort. This example shows how individuals seek to reproduce the organizational hierarchy through the spatial organization of the headquarters. The occupants here expressed a desire for a kind of "spatial justice," which must accurately reflect who each person is in the hierarchical structure.

3.2. A special place for yourself

Nevertheless, it was necessary to choose which tower would house which directorate. At the time of the move to the new headquarters, it seemed to be accepted that not all directorates were alike; indeed, that they were not all the same, as the CEO pointed out when he spoke of the move to the new headquarters in 2010: "We have people working with private clients, based on a more or less sustained relationship through a network of branches, and people working in the markets, with higher risk conditions and very different remuneration conditions." He then admitted halfheartedly that "this has created tensions." It was during this interview, immediately after mentioning these tensions between departments, that the employee mentioned the presence of a state within the state, which the CEO refuted while admitting that one of these departments plays a particularly essential role for the group: “Oh! The state within the state! Everyone is the state within the state! Yes, well, it attracts quite a lot of attention because it is a bit of a tugboat for the group [. . .]. Well, these populations coexist; the corporate spirit has not disappeared.” For some departments, it is essential to be as close as possible to the general management. As Rémi pointed out, “[. . .] there are a few baronies, as in all large companies, which have not completely abandoned the idea of not being far from the big boss, of having their own premises and their own outbuildings.” Patrick was more explicit on this issue and stressed that depending on the prestige of the department, the space allocated will vary: “In the Development Department, there are high-level executives who participate in the company’s strategy, and they will never fit into the same areas as the Technical Department, where it is acceptable to stack people differently.” The space allocated is not fixed but varies according to the ability of the departments to gain more square meters:

> Then, in the tower of this large company, the large department which is starting to grow in strength is the International Department, the International Markets Department, which is typically a department which wants space, so it pushes the others out, and it will win its case, because they are the ones who earn the most money (in any case, at this point, afterward they will show that they can lose a lot of money too!) and they’re going to densify, densify, densify, to the point where they’re going to put us at the limit of the regulations, on certain points. (Patrick)

From an architectural point of view, the new headquarters would take the form of twin towers joined by a common base with a single entrance to symbolize the unity of the group. It was therefore necessary to establish which tower would house which department. The president chose to establish his office at the top of Tower X. At the same time, the bank commissioned firms to determine the best locations for each of them in line with their professional needs. According to Patrick, “There were major organizational studies carried out to see which major departments worked with whom and how relations were made, who they had the opportunity to see most often, in order to group together the people who worked together," but their recommendations were not followed. Instead, Patrick was tasked with meeting with the top managers and explicitly asking them where they wanted to have their offices: "The top layers of the company all want[ed] to be with the Good Lord." Thus, the most influential managers were in the same tower as the president.

3.3. When spatial reorganization generates injustice

Following this logic of spatial distribution by influence in the organization, the result of macrozoning leads to a result that contradicts the group's business plan:

> So, once the big decisions were taken, a big joke quickly spread: that at [La Défense], there were the "Credit Tower" and the "Debit Tower," that is to say, the tower of people who earned money, and the tower of people who spent it. And that's the truth, because commercial functions were systematically put—and this, I find, is both a psychological error and a management error, with a totally binary vision of things—all the operational departments, that's to say, those of a commercial nature (all the people who make money for the group), were grouped together (and this has changed since then) in [Tower] X, and in Tower Y, we put only functional support: accounting, development, etc. Even if there is a certain nobility of function, the final conclusion is that we have business on one side and functional on the other. (Patrick)

In this example, we see once again a blatant manifestation of the privilege that hierarchical status confers on the space of the organization, even if it means openly contradicting the primary meaning of this emblematic construction: favoring interdepartmental collaboration, group homogeneity, and greater horizontality. Instead, the space materially translates the internal power issues, the preponderance of certain departments over others, by opposing them spatially: the "Debit Tower" and the "Credit Tower" and, others, the "Assets Tower" and the "Liabilities Tower" (Marc). When asked eighteen years after the emergence of these "Debit" and "Credit" towers, Raphaelle, head of communication for the Real

Estate Department, confided that even though she was not familiar with this expression (she was not an employee of the bank at the time), she nevertheless recognized that, at the time of her 2013 interview, the same mechanisms were still at work in these spaces: “So I think that Tower A is what was making money, and Tower C the others! That said, it’s still a bit like that; it’s the way the organization is. . . In A, you have a lot of investment banking activities, and in C, the functional management. That’s how it works today.”

As for the president—the one who led the new headquarters project, as well as his successor—his influence on the spatial substance (Lussault, 2007) of the towers extended far beyond his personal spaces, and not being able to accede to his requests in this respect proved to be a major problem:

> One day, with the architects, we presented the [new] president with the models of the lift shafts with three or four competing projects, and the only element that the president retained was the position of the interior lift buttons, which he thought was too low! So, a crisis meeting—the buttons are too low, so one of the designers inevitably puts forward the idea that this is in line with the new regulations for the disabled, but the project manager replies that it is not possible to say that to the president. If it’s too low, we have to find a solution. So, we commissioned people to carry out studies to find a solution. This went on for a fortnight, three weeks. . .until the next meeting. Some people wanted to play with the light; others said that the buttons had to go up despite the disability regulations; it went round and round until we had to tell the president that there was no solution, which was a mortification for the project director.

Among the people interviewed who had worked in these towers in their first years of operation, the influence of the president on the choice of decoration of the collective spaces sometimes gave rise to comments that were critical, to say the least: “These must be very high quality paintings, done by eminent painters, but these sort of big gray, white pictures! There were even many people who asked questions, who wondered why we had put this in and not something else” (Rémi, retired former manager, interviewed in 2011). Others have gone so far as to show resistance, and this is how Michel evoked a hanging statue chosen by the president to symbolize the spirit of the group:

> Michel: “That’s where the thing is, the sculpture there, which is called ‘the coil.’”
>
> First author: “The coil?”
>
> Michel: “It’s the modern sculpture.”

3.4. Controlling collective spaces: A decisive issue

However, the need for control of collective spaces was expressed not only at the level of individuals but also at the level of bodies. In the architectural project drawn up by the New Headquarters Committee in 1989, there was talk about building a sports hall with showers and changing rooms that would house traditional equipment, as well as gym classes. However, the question of the management of this future hall was so conflictual that the project itself was aborted:

> It was indeed planned to build a sports hall, and the necessary space had been integrated into the building program in the basements [. . .]. As soon as a social work is created, the works council takes over its management—by right. When the company restaurants were created, the management negotiated hard to maintain control of the company restaurants (because they wanted to give direction in the architectural choices, the rhythm of the restaurants, the choice of service providers, etc.). They did not want the works council to be in charge. The management finally succeeded in making sure that the works council handed over the management of the restaurants to the management with compensation. A few months later, work began on the future of the sports hall, and the management said, ‘In any case, we’ll take care of it. It’s out of the question to leave it to the works council,’ but the works council was very upset, so the management ended up saying, ‘If that’s the way it is, we’re not going to build a sports hall, but the works council won’t take it over!’ So the project was aborted, the planned space was immediately recovered as storage space, and there was never a sports hall. . .

In the same spirit, the possible place to be given to the unions in the new headquarters towers gave rise to tenuous negotiations. The president would have liked to see their premises located in another part of the group to avoid “picketing“ in this new emblematic headquarters. However, the unions eventually obtained the right to reside there, but in a place that was, to say the least, symbolic. Jean-René, the president’s right-hand man reported that “[r]elations with [the unions] were very tense at the time [. . .]. However their request to be located in the towers was legitimate after all. . . But let’s face it, they didn’t get the best locations: in the car parks.” The unions were thus placed in the basements of the towers.

4. Discussion

Our study highlights and discusses two organizational phenomena that we find interesting but not well documented empirically in the literature: (i) manifestations of spatial privilege in an organization that are materially visible and that are imposed at the expense of the organization itself and (ii) the salience and meaning of one’s geographical place in an organization. Our study of the manifestation of these spatial privileges reveals the complexity in the struggle for these privileges. First, this complexity translates into struggles for privilege, both material (having an office in one tower rather than another, having an office at the top of the tower, having as many windows as possible, or having the largest office possible) and relational or ideal (being as close as possible to power, that is, to management, as possible). Second, there is also complexity within the power relations that are part of the organizational structure itself, with individuals who, due to their hierarchical positions, are more able to impose their point of view on the spatial organization of offices, with services or organizations that are either sidelined (e.g., trade unions in the basement) or prioritized. Third, the complexity is also linked to the strategies of a struggle put in place to obtain spatial privilege, for example, by using consultancy firms to determine the best locations, or by ironing out macrozoning policies (e.g., the debit and credit towers). The analysis of our interviews shows that individuals sometimes mobilize one form of privilege rather than another (e.g., material, relational/ideal, or hierarchical) or sometimes mobilize several to achieve their ends.

Thus, our case study demonstrates how space presents itself as a resource of power (Donis & Taskin, 2017) because its configuration, its substance (Lussault, 2007), and the way it is administered reflect a relationship of domination (Bain & Taylor, 2000). In recent research, Donis and Taskin (2017) present examples of individuals who have resisted their organization's plan to make them work in depersonalized offices (e.g., flex offices) by reappropriating these spaces through territorial marking, both material and ideal. The case study presented in our article goes even further because it shows how a major architectural project—the essential support for the group's new managerial and organizational philosophy—was undermined by the very people who originated the project and who were therefore supposed to carry it forward. Each of these top managers fought individually to secure a place of choice (i.e., as close as possible to the presidency of the group; relational/ideal privilege). This article illustrates the way in which power stakes are translated into the spatiality of the organization by freezing in materiality the influence of each person (material privilege), its attractiveness, and its repulsive character (support functions, trade unions) as well as by rendering the space as not easily reformable. The lack of spatial justice in organizations has generated demands. From this point of view, our study aligns with the work of Harvey (1996) and, more recently, Gervais-Lambony and Dufaux (2009), who highlighted how a lack of equitably distributed resources in a space can generate struggles. As our study shows, everything can be read in space because it is fundamentally political: "Socio-political contradictions are spatially realized. Consequently, the contradictions of space make the contradictions of social relations effective. In other words, the contradictions of space 'express' the conflicts of socio-political interests and forces; but these conflicts only have effect and take place *in* space, by becoming "contradictions *of* space" (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 421).

Our case study finally highlights the little power—at least visible power—that the dominated have in the face of the spatial privileges of others. Faced with such spatial injustice, only their denunciations—under the guise of humor—show that they are neither blind nor fooled by what is at work in the emergence of the credit and debit towers, or with the territorialization of the president overflowing into common spaces without any consideration for the tastes of those who will work there on a daily basis. The dominated can give rise to a "counter-space" (Lefebvre, 1974), but this will be much less obvious to the outside observer, as it is more ideal and underground. This counter-space will then be of the order of lived space.

Finally, our study shows that the question of spatial privilege is part of a specific historical context. In the 1990s, the *dream* of a top manager—particularly in the banking sector and in the Defense area – was to occupy the best place and to make it as "ostentatious" as possible. According to Lautier (1999), "to maintain, defend, and extend the territory under his control, this logic was in fact the only one that made consensus within the company" (p. 53). Again, according to the same author, "it seems normal, for example, that a senior manager who is regularly absent four-fifths of the time should have an office corresponding to his grade, even if, next to him, draughtsmen work permanently in a space whose narrowness hinders their activity" (p. 56). As our analysis shows, this was a struggle for proximity, materiality, and metrics. The ostentatious place occupied explicitly revealed power relations and a hierarchy in the organization. Our study shows that these relationships with materiality have changed even if the spatial symbol and the search for privilege are still very important. Indeed, today, the trend seems to be toward a flattening of the hierarchy to bring managers and their teams closer together. However, the literature also shows that even in the case of flex offices, where no one has their own office but uses one during the day depending on availability, managers often try to stand out spatially by reclaiming a space of their own (Donis & Taskin, 2017), thus using a power of position that is once again translated into spatial privilege.

5. Conclusion

The objective of our paper was to study the behavior of top managers in maintaining their spatial privilege. To do so, we used a case study of a bank. When its new headquarters opened in 1995, it was the largest bank headquarters in Europe. The New Headquarters Committee wanted to use the new building to affirm the prestige of the group and to provide a management tool that would facilitate communication between departments. Our results, however, show that the objective of bringing departments together to work less vertically did not succeed. In contrast, the macrozoning policy aimed to prioritize the personal offices of the most influential directors, thereby distinguishing the existence of the "Debit Tower" and the "Credit Tower." An analysis of internal documents in the archives shows that this policy ran counter to the strategic studies that aimed to place the directorates according to their professional needs. More broadly, this case highlights the many difficulties organizations face in relation to their spaces, which they are constantly thinking about and reforming in search of the optimal configuration.

These conclusions illustrate two major spatial phenomena: on the one hand, the sense of place of each individual in the organizational space, where the influence that an individual possesses can be deciphered through the proximity that he or she maintains with the center of power; on the other hand, the importance that this place has for the individuals justifies the struggle to maintain it, even against the managerial strategy of their own group. We also show that the materiality of space *says* something about the organization that inhabits it rather than what the institutional discourse says. In the same spirit as eighteenth-century *Architecture Parlante,* but this time for the interior of the place, the negotiations that take place between the walls reveal elements of the culture that prevail there.

The data in our case are old, but we believe that the phenomena they describe are still relevant today. First, history offers us a multitude of examples, particularly under the Old Regime, where the place occupied by individuals in relation to power was the subject of lengthy negotiations and legitimations, and that it instantly informed the status of those who occupied it (Lussault, 2007). It was also the expression of favors and therefore reflected privilege. On the scale of the head office in our case, even if the names of the "Debit" and "Credit" towers seem to have been lost over the years and in the many moves that followed, we know that at least until 2013, the distinction between these towers as housing those that "bring in money" and those that "cost money" was maintained. Finally, it is worth noting that in 2018, the current president of the group chose to relocate his offices from the top of one of the towers to the center of the other—in the heart of the support services—to (un)show his proximity to all the services. This recent decision illustrates the power and meaning of location in organizational space and is worth exploring in future research.

One limitation of our article concerns the time lag between the 1995 installation and the start of our data collection in 2011, which increases the risk of sense-making (Weick, 1995). However, this point is irrefutable: Would it have been possible to collect such statements calling into question the most influential managers because of their resistance to the company project in order to maintain their personal position, as close as possible to the presidency? In particular, in a company such as this one, the culture of secrecy and the sense of hierarchy remain two important issues. In this respect, future research could analyze how organizational culture influences the possibility and level of resistance among employees and their search for greater spatial justice. From a comparative and ethnographic perspective, the study of the weight of national culture for resistance to change could be a fruitful avenue for research. Finally, among the new questions linked to the struggle for space, it could be interesting to analyze how, in response to the increasing depersonalization of offices linked to the advent of the flex office (Minchella, 2021), individuals in the organization organize themselves to retain a place of choice.