ALL-AT-ONCE & ALL-IN-ONE:

illusion of freedom in creative and technological corporations

Since the Dadaists demonstrated that individual freedom could be productive - that is, that production might not require discipline - the question that remained unanswered was how to capitalize on the free individual. The following article states that technological companies, along with the architecture of their corporate buildings, were the ones able to exploit the idea of emancipation through workspaces that provide an illusion of freedom.

Today, the necessary illusion – to use Noam Chomsky’s phrase – is that of freedom. Man exists as part of a vast network of thought, where the fluid exchange of ideas is fostered, where flexibility and communication – not segregation – is the norm. The question, of course, is whether that freedom is real, or just another well-made illusion. Part of the answer can be found in this warehouse (Ouroussoff, 1999).

Although Ouroussoff posed his question regarding the opposition between reality and illusion, the following article focuses its object of study in relation to the first part of the paragraph, according to which "today, the necessary illusion (...) is that of freedom". Therefore, the argument does not intend to examine the existence of a real freedom as opposed to an unreal one, but delve instead on the ways in which illusion of freedom is a category of contemporary reality.

The article centers on the rhetoric and the techno-economic frameworks that enable and legitimize this ‘illusion of freedom’ as a valid, valuable and prestigious architectural resource, specifically in the field of creative and technological corporations. It takes the concepts of ‘all-in-one’ and ‘all-at-once’ as a key for the analysis of the TBWA/Chiat/Day headquarters in Los Angeles, as soon as they reveal a comprehensive building, both spatially and temporally. The second part of the article exposes how the new headquarters of USA’s main technological companies (Google, Amazon, Facebook) suppose an expansion on these concepts.
All-at-once: breaking with modern temporality in the workplace

Founded in 1968, Chiat/Day Advertising became one of the most recognized companies in the 1980s when it produced, in 1984, the ad for Apple Computers that announced the break with the Orwellian future of 1984 (Saval, 2014). Years later, they produced, for the same client, the iconic spot that urged buyers to ‘think different’. By the end of the century, the company had also achieved a certain prestige due to its capacity for innovation in the field of office design, working with architects such as Gaetano Pesce, Rem Koolhaas or Frank Gehry (Anderton, 1998). The permanent headquarters that Gehry designed for the agency (Venice Beach, Los Angeles, 1985-1991) had an enormous impact on an architectural discipline fully immersed in stylistic postmodern. In fact, it was described as Gehry’s “most successful postmodern building to date” (Jencks, 1992:63). The venue, in which the artist Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen also participated, was characterized by a layout that allowed gigantic binoculars to house a meeting room, becoming an entrance portico that expressed – literally – the company’s power of vision (s/a, 1990).

Likewise, in 1995, Jay Chiat – entrepreneur/guru in the field of advertising, and co-founder of the company – launched together with Gaetano Pesce a spatial experiment called ‘virtual office,’ in which no worker had a fixed or permanent personal space. Thus, each morning when arriving, the company’s employees had to approach their lockers and extract their working tools, computers and portable phones, and set up a workplace, either individually or in groups. The organizational strategy of the ‘virtual office’ was designed to free employees from the alienation of relentless routines, sense of spatial property, as well as a potential creative conformism induced by physical immobility in the workplace. Supported by the power of technology, it would allow employees “to work anytime, anywhere” (Anderton, 1998). Hence, the office became a literal spatial-temporal expression of the capitalist mantra that encouraged the abandonment of the ‘comfort zone,’ eliminating precisely the comfort of the table and a permanent schedule, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of its product: ideas.

For the headquarters of Chiat/Day inaugurated in 1998, instead of repeating the binoculars building’s success and looking for the iconicity of architectural form or the prestige of a renowned architect, the new management oriented the project in a line closer to that of the ‘virtual office’; the architecture of the new headquarters, designed by Clive Wilkinson Architects, shows a greater emphasis on the successful business organization criteria of the time, like those in Tom Peters’s Thriving on Chaos or Liberation Management. If Thriving on Chaos theorized on the entrepreneurial capacity to “gain flexibility through the empowerment
of people” and the “use of self-managed teams” (Peters, 1987), the very extensive Liberation Management described the basis of business success in the need for a certain degree of organizational disorder, based on systems that encouraged permanent flexibility or non-hierarchical organizational schemes (Peters, 1992). Chiat/Day Advertising was, precisely, among the companies that introduced both texts as models to imitate.

What postmodern organizational theories offered to corporations was a new type of control that broke with the space-time conventions of modernity (Jemelniak, 2008). So, if in late industrial modernity corporate control and maximization of productivity was exercised according to the division and functional segregation of time – 8 hours of work, 8 hours of play, 8 hours of rest (Webb and Cox, 1891) – in the techno-economic framework of creative economy and of information (where productivity depends to a greater extent on the ability to generate innovative and creative services and ideas) that spatiotemporal segregation disappears to give way to a continuum where self-management of time and multifunctional spaces are positive values for improving productivity and reducing bureaucracy. Thus, in the era of immaterial laborers (Hardt and Negri, 1991) and the creative class (Florida, 2002), freedom to control timetables and empowerment over the physical environment – a privilege restricted to managerial classes in industrial modernity – becomes generalized, democratized, and shaped for corporate benefit (Jemelniak, 2008).

It was exactly this rupture, at the end of the 1960s, the basis for many of the emancipatory principles of the time. Supported by the optimism generated by the (still incipient) technologies, the ‘global village’ and the information revolution (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967) promised to overcome the alienation produced by industrial production systems and announced a new compromise between the spheres of life and work; in Simon Sadler’s words, a vision of a continuous and nonstop world (Sadler, 2013).

Undoubtedly, much of the vocabulary in Peters’ books, especially that in his striking titles (liberation, revolution, chaos, disorganization) is heir to the cultural movements of the late 60s and shows a clear attitude of business management by the end of the century: the entanglement of rhetoric and aesthetics of late-1960s socio-cultural processes within the economic logic of advanced capitalism (Chiapello and Boltanski, 2005). So, if the “brand new world of all-at-once-ness” (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967:63) implied an environment where new technologies were to transform traditional time and space forms, these transformations would end up consolidating three decades later in favor of corporate power.

The architecture of the Chiat/Day headquarters contributed to this ‘all-at-once’ temporality through an interior space where time was
no longer perceived, precisely, because of its isolation from the outside. In the building, the rupture of modern segregated temporality smooths time and space until both become clear and empty containers: “as light is the same throughout the day, one has no sense of the passage of time. (...) It’s a bit like a casino,” said a former employee to The New York Times (Anderton, 1998).

**All-in-one: the tendency to self-containment**

Amid the dotcom technological bubble (a time of clear economic sublimation of the possibilities of a networked and interconnected world) and at the verge of the symbolic turn of the century, Ouroussoff seems to find in the new TBWA/Chiat/Day Advertising’s headquarters a space that turns the features of advanced technological postmodernity explicit; an image clear, powerful and catching enough to replace the well-known paradigm of machinist, functional modernity:

> At the turn of the century, Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford designed comprehensive social programs based on the efficiency of the assembly line, where workers functioned as well-oiled machines, and where their moral lives were carefully regulated. (...) The image of man as an efficient gear in a complex mechanical device no longer makes sense in an era relentlessly bombarded with new information, where life is restless, migratory.
> Today, the necessary illusion (...) is that of freedom (Ouroussoff, 1999).

The project for the TBWA/Chiat/Day headquarters was built in a nondescript warehouse in Playa del Rey, Los Angeles. Without nearly any connection with the outside world, the only way of access is through a candle-shaped-floorplan pavilion that houses a yellow metal staircase connected to the container’s interior by means of an elevated double corridor. This corridor, completely enclosed, with a vaulted ceiling and a white painted interior, works as an extensive threshold that separates – intentionally, theatrically and literally – the outer city from the inner one (Fig. 1).

Once inside, the building presents itself as a huge open-plan space where the roof’s thermal insulation and metallic structure are exposed, and from which air conditioning systems and artificial lighting dangle. The place is spatially and discursively organized by replicating the functional and visual features of a small city: a raised ‘main street’ is located within a matrix of ‘action-office’ cubicles, organized in a series of neighborhoods where there are no enclosed private offices, distributing an open space that is completely visible and perceptible once the elevated access corridor is traversed.

Magnetically grouped along the longitudinal axis that shapes the main street are a series of smaller, delimited or partially enclosed spaces that serve as a functional complement to the workstations in the great
hall: toilets, warehouses, meeting rooms, ‘war rooms,’ etc. A series of artifacts and spaces designed and named to reinforce the mimic of public space follow the same organizational logic: 12 trees accompanied by outdoor furniture forming a central space (Central Park); a basketball court; a thematic bar with surfboards and motifs; a red Datsun car (moved from Gehry’s temporary offices as a monument), as well as some three-story interior houses (Cliff-Dwellings) made out of stacked merchandise containers painted yellow and decorated with iconic pop culture motifs – John Lennon’s eyes, the color flower formed from the first iMac models’ advertising photos, a pirate flag, and so on.

This use of pop imagery as the main theme for interior design not only builds a business image different from that seriousness of traditional American corporate culture, but also calls upon an immediate sense of affinity between employees, the company and its physical space. Thus, the segregation between private life, the college world, and labor is mitigated by the immediacy and the generational proximity represented by decorative motifs.

Likewise, the introduction of amenities (cafeterias, gardens, sports spaces, ping-pong or foosball tables) complements the strictly functional architectural program, building a space that tends towards...
self-sufficiency and self-containment thus diminishing thus the need for contact with the outside world: if the building includes parks, sports areas, and leisure or resting places, it provides the possibility for employees to remain within the workspace at any time of their working day even if they want to access a space with these characteristics. In other words, the project reduces the need to be outside of the work environment.

Enhancing urban connotations – and accepting its qualities as a space for meeting, exchange, or socialization – should not obscure the fact that there is a strong rejection of other features of the city – multi-property, legal regulations, insecurity – that are not beneficial for corporations. Thus, by replicating urban forms, situations and contexts within a controlled space and following a private property regime, the company tries to convey a public condition that is nonexistent (Fig. 2). It supposes, therefore, the construction of an entire world enclosed, “better than the city itself,” which falls in the ambiguity of being, simultaneously, “utopian commune and Orwellian nightmare” (Ouroussoff, 1999). The legend has it that among its employees – freed from their ‘comfort zones,’ empowered to self-manage their time, and immersed in that city-within-the-city – the company was was referred to as ‘Chiat/Day and Night,’ due to the frequent tendency to stretch out working hours (Elliott, 2002).

**All-in-one II: Google, Amazon and Facebook**

Recently, other large North American tech companies – Facebook, Google, or Amazon – have built or plan
to build their headquarters deepening and expanding on complementary architectural programs oriented to self-sufficiency and self-containment already present at TBWA/Chiat/Day. That is, making the ‘illusion of freedom’ a valid architectural tool.

GooglePlex, Google’s corporate campus in Mountain View, California, offers a playful geek version of this programmatic expansion; in its interstitial zones it has sand tracks for playing volleyball, dinosaur bones’ sculptures, or a garden at the visitors center where the icons of its Android operating system have been turned into statues (Fig. 3). In addition, the promotional images of the campus’ expansion – designed by Bjarke Ingels Group and Heatherwick Studio, and currently under construction – strengthen these features through a combination of the ludic, the sporting, and the workspace all under a transparent membrane: interior cycling tracks, food fairs, food trucks, and even – alluding to a certain ease of conciliation – families walking hand in hand with children.2

In the case of Amazon, based in Seattle, Washington, the programmatic mix is explicit in the most representative of its corporate buildings: the Amazon Spheres (NBBJ Architects, 2018). The building, located in an urban campus that has also three skyscrapers and a multifunctional center, and whose envelope is the result of associating three glass spheres, is designed to include “what is typically missing from urban offices – a direct link to nature” (Amazon.com, Inc., 2018a). In the spheres, the company complements the program of its urban campus with a botanical garden of tropical species – mainly
from the Amazon, for the sake of redundancy – where “employees can think and work differently surrounded by plants” (Amazon.com, Inc., 2018a).

Inside, the gastronomic offer includes “a selection of coffee and doughnuts” (Amazon.com, Inc., 2018b) – caffeine and sugar are common stimulants in workplaces – while in the urban campus there is the Amazon Go store, where physical money exchange is eliminated in favor of virtual one, reducing the act of consumption to the simple gesture of reaching a product from an exhibitor (Fig. 4).
Facebook’s headquarters, designed by Frank Gehry in Menlo Park, California (2013-2015) also known as MPK20, employs strategies similar to those of TBWA/Chiat/Day expanding on the urban space replica by means of an organization of workplaces into neighborhoods inside the gigantic open plan container: “we have created a small city under the roof,” pointed Craig Webb, Gehry’s partner (Lee, 2015). Recreational amenities also exist in the new headquarters, which include free food and beverage services, cafeterias, or a park-rooftop with an amphitheater and yoga spaces, as well as eleven site-specific art installations that reinforce the apparent programmatic contingency (Deutsche, 1996) (Fig. 5). In the attempt at self-containment and to reduce the need for absenteeism, Gehry’s building provides an even more complex program, and the building is populated with spaces of convenience that facilitate and free employees from tedious domestic tasks: among others, repair service for vehicles, bicycles, nurseries, and laundries.3

However, these complementary – apparently insubstantial – architectural programs imply a much more complex ideological agenda, where time management replaces spatial organization as the generating idea of architectural form. Through the ‘illusion of freedom’ – which uses the alibi of the ‘playful’, the urban space replica, and the grouping of convenience services to build self-sufficient buildings capable of containing all-in-one and all-at-once – these technological corporations seek to capitalize on the time saved in transport and domestic tasks, as well as on the internal recirculation of economic resources dedicated to these activities.

Moreover, due to their enormous capital availability, these corporations are doing significant investments in the urban development for areas close to their headquarters: Facebook announced in 2017 the construction of Willow Village – designed by OMA – in lands adjacent to their new offices, which would incorporate 1,500 homes, a cultural center, and more than 11,000 square meters of commercial and leisure areas (Facebook, 2017); Amazon, in spite of not developing its own housing projects, continues to increase its political power in Seattle under the threat of paralyzing the development of its urban campus if the Town Council does not agree to a tax reduction – a tax that, precisely, aims to raise money to mitigate the homeless people crisis in the city (Wingfield, 2018); Google, announced in 2017 an agreement with the city of Mountain View to approve the construction of 5,000

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new homes in the vicinity of its new campus, which will be called Alphabet City (Streitfeld, 2018).

**Illusion of freedom**

Before TBWA/Chiat/Day, Google, Facebook or Amazon used the ‘illusion of freedom’ in favor of their own productivity, even before the emphasis on the emancipation of the individual at the end of the 1960s, the American company Bell Labs already used this concept openly as a way to convey their intentions into the built space (Mozingo, 2011). In their 1950 headquarters, they equated the atmosphere of the research buildings with that of the American university campuses, in order to extend college experience of freedom to later work stages. They did it, unlike contemporary corporations, openly recognizing that the freedom offered by their campus was “useful” for the company and the employee, and therefore, it was “partially illusory” (Mozingo, 2011:62). In a less obvious and implicit way, Gehry expressed the illusory character of freedom in the Facebook building when, in a commercial video, he highlighted that what users really liked was the “feeling of freedom” that particular space provided them, not referring at any time to absolute freedom.\(^5\)

In the creative and technological corporate areas, the replicas of urban features, games, amenities, convenience spaces, as well as employees’ empowerment, entrepreneurship and intra-entrepreneurship, have permeated each of the workers’ activities dissolving the space-time boundaries between work, daily life, leisure and transport. Among the four modern functions – work, home, leisure, circulation (CIAM, 1933) – leisure constitutes the programmatic alibi that enables the use of an ‘illusion of freedom’ and its all-encompassing spaces (all-in-one and all-at-once) as an architectural tool that brings value and prestige to corporations. If the modern workday offered eight hours for leisure as a complementary activity, designed to reconcile the alienation between industrial work and life, that same leisure is now a source of exhaustion and alienation. Leisure is no longer the counterpart of work, and the freedom offered by games is not a matter of choice: playing and enjoying yourself at work is an imperative – “work hard, play hard!”\(^6\)

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Notas / Notes

1 The company’s economic problems caused Omnicom Group to acquire Chiat/Day in 1995 and merge it to twa/Chiat/Day.


3 The International Labor Organization (ilo) adopted at the 6th meeting of the International Labor Conference (ilc) the R021, “Utilization of Spare Time Recommendation” (1924). This recommendation was withdrawn at the 92nd edition of the ilc in 2004 (017, 1924, 2004). The 8 hours between work and rest – never entirely devoted to leisure – have a much more complex and tedious content: according to ilo, they also include the following activities: eating and drinking, domestic activities, purchases of goods and services, caring for household members or non-members, educational activities, or organizational, civic or religious activities.

4 Side Walk Labs, a subsidiary of Alphabet (a Google company) is currently immersed in the construction of a smart neighborhood in Toronto, which will be able to collect data on all aspects of life in the neighborhood, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. See https://sidewalktoronto.ca/

5 See “Ascend to a Frank-Gehry-Designed Creative Work Space”. YouTube Video, 3:39, March 10, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOX_B0EgRms


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