

Social-symbolic work of Italian architectural studio leaders during their idea journeys

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Creative industries—including architecture, film, television, radio, publishing, music, performing arts, and fine arts—produce goods and services with cultural, artistic, or entertainment value (Caves, 2000; Hennekam & Bennett, 2017). However, these industries differ significantly in their cultures and practices at sectoral, sub-sectoral, and geographic levels (Conor et al., 2015). To gain insight into the practices of specific creative industries, it is essential to look beyond individual organizations and consider multiple firms within the same sector and same geographic area. This study aims to explore the creative processes and practices in a particular sector and geographic context - architectural firms in Italy. We choose Italy as our geographic context, given the country's long tradition of creative industries and architecture, also reflected in the high-quality firms and architectural education programs offered contemporarily.

Architecture is a fast growing, competitive professional field within the creative industries (Jones & Livne-Trandach, 2008). The work performed in architectural firms involves various creative and routine activities (Cohendet & Simon, 2016; Sonenshein, 2016). For example, constructing an auditorium requires aesthetic taste as well as the preparation of cost estimates and building permits. Prior research has explored the tensions and processes involved in reconciling this creative side of

architectural practice with its tedious and bureaucratic sides (Ahuja et al., 2017; Bruns & Long Lingo_2024). In this study, we move beyond this dualism and consider the creative and routine aspects as a duality (Sonenshein, 2016) of creativity. In line with previous research on the subject, we also consider creativity as a social process (Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017) rather than a personality trait. Creation is thus a process starting with idea generation and ending with implementing said idea. The creators in architectural firms, i.e. the architects, employ reflexive and purposeful efforts to shape social-symbolic objects during this idea journey.

Social-symbolic work

Social-symbolic work refers to the efforts of actors and networks to shape social-symbolic objects, which are a combination of discursive, relational, and material elements that constitute a meaningful pattern (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Social-symbolic work embraces the enactment of various practices, heterogenous forms of agency, and coherence in the aims and the actors involved. There are several different forms of social-symbolic work at play in organizational contexts. Our study aims to explore these forms of social-symbolic work as they manifest at each stage of the idea journey, highlighting their discursive, relational, and material dimensions. The discursive dimension pertains to the text and talk involved in social-symbolic work. The relational dimension involves the effort expended by people in “establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, or terminating interpersonal relations” (Zelizer, 2012: 149). The material dimension draws on the physical aspects such as tools, objects, natural environment etc. that are involved in the social-symbolic work (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). In this study, we examine the discursive, relational, and material dimensions at play during the idea journey of the creators in Italian architectural firms i.e. architectural studio leaders. See Figure 1 for a summary of the concept of social-symbolic work.

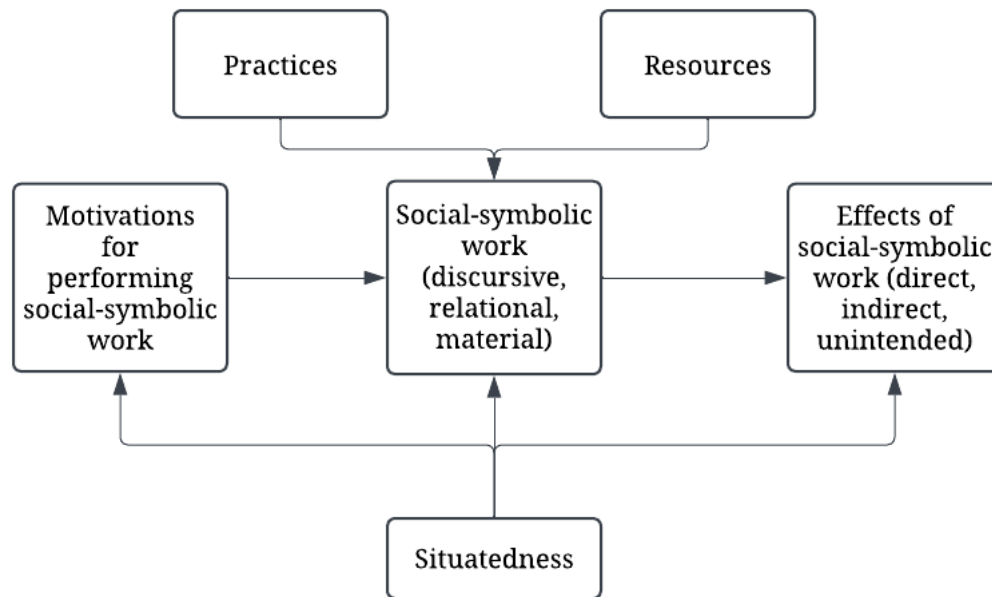


Figure 1. The concept of social-symbolic work. *Adapted from Lawrence & Philips, 2019*

Idea journey

Perry-Smith and Mannucci (2017) outline four phases in the idea journey. The first phase, idea generation, involves creating and selecting a single, novel idea. Creators develop ideas by drawing from their social environment. For example, an architect designing a private residence may take inspiration from the surrounding landscape and the client's lifestyle. The process may begin with simple sketches that capture the client's desire for open, tranquil spaces, incorporating natural light and materials to create a harmonious environment. The second phase, idea elaboration, focuses on evaluating, refining, and enhancing the idea's potential. During this stage, uncertainties and risks are assessed, and feedback is gathered to improve and expand the concept. Architects collaborate with engineers, contractors, and clients to finalize the design.

The third phase, idea championing, entails actively promoting the idea to key decision-makers, such as customers, to gain approval or face rejection. Persuasion plays a crucial role, as creators seek endorsement and resources. For instance, proposing to build a home on a steep terrain requires convincing the client and local authorities of the structural integrity and safety of the unconventional design. The architect's reputation and expertise significantly impact this stage. The final phase, idea implementation, consists of two subphases: production, where the idea is transformed into a tangible product, service, or process; and impact, when the idea gains acceptance, recognition, and usage within the field. An architect might carefully select materials and craftsmanship to bring an idea into life in the production subphase. Then, during the impact subphase, the idea is accepted, recognized, and used by the stakeholders. An example of the latter is when a client moves into their completed residence and experiences the intended atmosphere, thus acknowledging the success of the design. See Figure 2 for a summary of the idea journey.

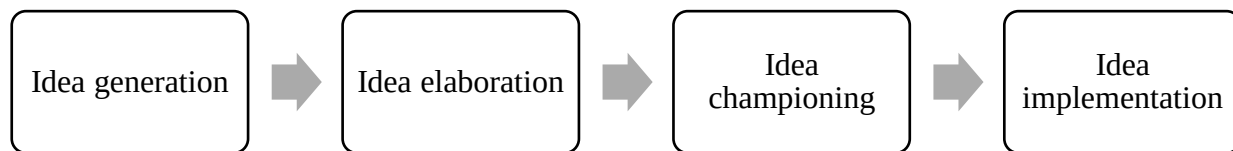


Figure 2. The concept of idea journey. *Adapted from Perry-Smith & Mannucci (2017)*

A shared vision among the studio leaders and other stakeholders (employees, clients etc.) is essential for a successful idea journey. It facilitates the effective communication, interpretation, and eventual acceptance of creative ideas. Previous research has looked into how architectural firm professionals transform or maintain their identity and how it affects collaboration and positional power (Ahuja, 2023). This study examines a particular subset of architectural professionals, namely studio leaders, strive to achieve this shared vision. This involves, among other things, exploring how boundaries are established between roles and responsibilities, how tasks are allocated, how decisions

are made, how information is structured, and how leadership is managed. Hence our research questions are:

RQ1: How do architectural studio leaders make decisions that balance creativity, practicality, and stakeholder interests?

RQ2: How are roles and responsibilities defined within architectural studios to promote creativity?

As suggested by Brown et al. (2010), these aspects can be investigated by examining how studio leaders talk about their everyday work life. Our proposed study is qualitative and abductive. The small-d, micro-level focus we intend to embrace in this study is suited to understand how the studio leaders discursively articulate their roles, responsibilities, and decision-making (Caza et al., 2018).

Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews with studio leaders across Italy. Initially, we conducted interviews with 19 studio leaders (8 females, 11 males) as part of a pilot study. This sample included freelancers, owners of architectural studios, and studio managers in Italy. We read the transcripts in the original language (Italian) and English. The translated transcripts gave a general sense of the involved narrative and reading the original transcripts ensured that the language-specific meanings (e.g.: expressions) were not lost in translation. To ensure constant comparison and resultant theoretical saturation, we conducted more semi-structured interviews as part of the main study. These interviews were conducted with the help of a topic guide (Balachandran Nair, 2023), which was iteratively developed based on the analysis findings of the pilot study and literature review. The analysis followed the steps on grounded theorizing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) presented by Gioia and colleagues (2013). The analysis was conducted on the Italian language transcripts. English copies of transcripts

were reserved for cross-checking findings during consensus coding and discussions amongst the members of the research team.

Next steps

To increase the trustworthiness of the study, we will be performing data triangulation with observations and archival data. We will conduct participant observations in architectural studios. Observations will be conducted both while the studio leaders are performing regular work activities (creative-routine dualities) as well as when they are dealing with contingencies. Field notes will be written immediately after each episode of observation. Furthermore, archival data such as the minutes of previous meetings, project briefs, client correspondence, internal memos, reports, and internal communications will be collected and analyzed, after obtaining permission from the relevant gatekeepers.

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