A case study of culture and change in a small architecture firm

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A CASE STUDY OF CULTURE AND CHANGE
IN A SMALL ARCHITECTURE FIRM

by

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ABSTRACT

A Case Study of Culture and Change in a Small Architecture Firm

by

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Founded in 1982, Eiphant is a 25-person architecture and interior design firm located in one of America’s most “postmodern” cities (Venturi, Brown and Izenour 1977; Fontana and Preston 1990; Gottschalk 1995; Dickens 1999). In order to design better buildings that respond to as well as support people, organizations, and society, Eiphant is engaged in an organizational change effort to incorporate sociological theories and methods into their design processes and operational activities.

According to organization culture theorist Joanne Martin (2002), few researchers have integrated what is known about organizational change with cultural change. Martin writes, “Our understanding of cultural change, particularly change that is not top down, anticipated, or controlled by management is spotty at best” (2002:347). Applying Martin’s (2002) three-perspective approach and

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1 Eiphant is the pseudonym given to the architecture firm under study.
2 See pages 4 and 5 for an explanation of incorporating sociology into architecture.
Schein's (1992) three-layered model to the study of organizational culture, my case study is a cultural analysis of organizational life and answers the question, “What are the linkages between organizational culture and organizational change within Elphant?” In addition, I wanted to understand what a cultural analysis of Elphant would reveal about the firm’s efforts to create a new architectural-sociology practice model. Specifically, I wanted to learn if Elphant’s culture and structure support its vision, new practice model, and change efforts.

After collecting data through participant observation of firm meetings and activities, unstructured interviews of organizational members, and examination of written corporate documents, my cultural analysis of Elphant reveals that the integration, differentiation, and fragmentation perspectives exist simultaneously within the firm as Martin’s theory (2002) has previously suggested. But in contrast to Martin’s theory, my study reveals that there is a point of cultural convergence within an organizational system. This point is a cultural perspective that is dominated by pre-existing form, yet yielding to actors’ ongoing (re)interpretations of changing meaning systems. Within Elphant, this point of cultural convergence seems to be at a place unfamiliar to its members, yet common to their everydayness. Simmel (1971) outlines a similar notion in his essay, “The Conflict in Modern Culture” where he describes the duality of culture or the bounded contradiction between subject and object: “The idea of culture dwells in the middle of this dualism.”

Also apparent from the study is the idea that Elphant’s ownership body espouses a cooperative culture and views culture through an integration
perspective. Using the processes of "sensebreaking"³ and "sensemaking"⁴ the
owners try to manage member identifications and staff's differentiation and
fragmentation perspectives of culture. The owners' cultural manipulation has
been unsuccessful as most members' perspectives of culture and self have
remained unchanged. Hence, Elphant's attempts to "manage" its culture have
failed leaving me to conclude that organizational culture is not a "thing" to be
managed. Rather, organizational culture is created and changed through
preexisting and on-going social interaction, hard to change definitions of self,
(re)negotiated role expectations, and organizational change processes
influenced by cultural factors that are created by the harmonious, conflicted, and
paradoxical practices of social actors.

Additionally, Elphant's efforts to create a new architectural-sociology practice
model have been impeded by many negative cultural factors. These cultural
factors derive from the organizational structures and processes at Elphant, from
the espoused values and philosophies of firm members, and from the
unconscious, taken-for-granted learning of the group over time.

And finally, while conducting a cultural analysis of an organization is a
complex undertaking, my study has shown that the study of culture is one useful
way for researchers and managers to understand the progress of a planned
change process because it identifies the cultural factors that either help or hinder
formal organizational transformation and it reveals the perspectives through

³ "Sensebreaking" means disrupting a member's sense of self to create a
meaning hole that must be filled.
⁴ "Sensemaking" is the process that fills the member's meaning hole.
which organizational members view culture. These new insights may be then used by actors to re-examine their own awareness of the organization's cultural meaning systems.
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school. Thank you Brian, Brianna, Meghan, Ryan, and Lauren for your support. I love you each with all of my heart.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the first decade of the Pax Augusta, c. 30-20 B.C., Marcus Vitruvius Pollio drew upon classical Roman design and construction methods to write *De Architectura libri decem* (Rowland 1999). Translated as *The Ten Books on Architecture*, Vitruvius' treatise is the first known document to outline the essential elements of architectural education, knowledge, and skill. Since these early writings, wide sweeping changes have occurred in the education, practice, and delivery of architecture. These changes have been the foci of a few research projects conducted by a handful of social scientists (Blau 1984; Cuff 1991; Gutman 1988) and architectural historians (Larson 1977, 1983; Woods 1999): This thesis adds a unique and complementary study to their body of work by reporting on the links between organizational cultural and planned strategic change within a small architecture practice.

Sociological Study of American Architecture Firms

Not much sociological research focuses on the practices of providing professional architectural services. “The entire literature could be read in a day” (Stevens 1998:17). Most of the research conducted on architects, their firms, or
the discipline tends to be outdated, quantitative in nature, and focused on macro level constructs using secondary data thus neglecting to bring forth the "human" element of architecture. For example, Robert Gutman (1988) analyzed U.S. Department of Commerce data, U.S. Census data for 1972 and 1982, and survey data to describe the state of the architecture profession in the mid 1980s. He investigated ten major conditions that form the architect's view of the world and subsequent context for architectural practice: "(1) the expanding demand for architectural services, (2) the changes in the structure of the demand, (3) the oversupply, or potential oversupply, of entrants into the profession, (4) the increased size and complexity of buildings, (5) the consolidation and professionalization of the construction industry, (6) the greater rationality and sophistication of client organizations, (7) the more intense competition between architects and other professions, (8) the greater competition within the profession, (9) the continuing economic difficulties of practice, and (10) changing expectations of architecture among the public" (Gutman 1988:1).

In another study conducted in 1974 and again in 1979, sociologist Judith Blau (1984) surveyed more than 400 principals and staff of 152 Manhattan architecture firms located in New York. Her studies examined "the social underpinnings of design and production activities" (Blau 1984:ix) and her research centered on the varied ways in which an architecture practice is influenced by its social surroundings. Blau's findings, based on regression analysis, indicate that the activities associated with the design process are
embedded in "contradiction and unmanaged conflict between principals and staff."

Magali Sarfatti Larson (1977, 1983) and her team of researchers have conducted both descriptive and historical-theoretical studies wherein they investigated the changing role of architecture throughout history. A more recent historical review of the American architectural profession provides insight on how buildings were created before the architecture profession was formalized and describes the early forms and settings of practice as well as characteristics of architecture training and education (Woods 1999).

Of the few qualitative studies published on architecture firms, Dana Cuff’s ten-year ethnographic study of five large and powerful New York architecture firms is worth noting. Cuff (1991) generated a description of the typical life career of an individual through architecture school, graduation, and work life but she did not fully examine the relationship between firm culture and firm change.

After examining the research literature conducted on architecture firms, organizational culture has not been rigorously researched by sociologists especially in case study format. Moreover, organization culture theorist Joanne Martin believes that few researchers have tried to integrate what is known about organizational change with cultural change. Martin writes, “Our understanding of cultural change, particularly change that is not top down, anticipated, or controlled by management is spotty at best” (2001:347).
Incorporating Sociology into Architecture

As a result of the wide range of quantitative and qualitative research methods used by sociologists, the field now contains a large body of findings relevant to architecture. Some of these topics include organizational development, organizational effectiveness, job satisfaction, emotions and work, organizational culture, strategic organizational change, social-physical environment interaction, and place attachment. Because sociology addresses some of the most important challenging issues of our time, it is an expanding field and one in which its application to architectural design is being studied (Bugni and Smith 2002a).

Sociological theory and methods may be applied to three key areas of architectural design: predesign and programming, design, and post-construction (Bugni and Smith 2002b). During predesign and programming, application may include survey research of the presumed building users and stakeholders. Additionally, neighborhood needs assessment studies and social trend analysis may be conducted to help the architecture team understand the social needs of the community. Census data may be evaluated to create a neighborhood/community profile. Organizational-based analysis may be performed to help the architectural team design spaces that respond to the organization's anticipated growth, culture, and social structure.

During the design phase assistance might focus on analyzing the potential social impact of the proposed design concept. Or, the design concept may be presented to the users and public through focus groups. Feedback (data)
collected during the focus group sessions would be coded, analyzed, and interpreted. Adjustments to the design concept may ensue.

During the post-construction phase assistance could be given in the form of evaluative research in order to understand the effects of the design solution on building users, the organization, and the community.

With regard to social theory, the most underused theory by architects is symbolic interaction. Designers who "adopt the symbolic view see the physical structure of an organization as shaping and maintaining a system of meaning that helps organizational members to define who they are and what they are doing" (Hatch 1997:251). Symbolic interaction may be used to create people-centric architecture by highlighting the links between space and self, space and meaning systems, and space and agency (Smith and Bugni, forthcoming).

**Research Purpose**

My thesis is a qualitative case study of a 25-person architecture and interior design firm located in one of America's most "postmodern" cities. The firm, which is called Eiphant, was founded in 1982 and is presently engaged in an organizational change effort to incorporate sociological theories and methods into their design processes and organizational activities. Organizational culture and change, as related to the application of sociology to design, have not been rigorously researched. They are, however, important areas of study and theory generation not only for architectural practitioners, but also for organization and cultural theorists. Therefore, the primary purpose of this research study is to
document and interpret the evolving relationship between organizational change and organizational culture within Eiphant. A secondary purpose of the research is to offer architectural practitioners an analytical framework from which they may examine change and culture within their own firms.

Research Significance

The research is significant to sociology in at least two ways. First, the study contributes methodologically to the area of organizational culture (which is a subfield within sociology) by using three cultural perspectives in one study. If a researcher uses all three perspectives in a single study, "the three perspectives offer a wider range of insights than is available from any single viewpoint (Martin 2002:121). Second, the research challenges the popular single-perspective theories of culture wherein the researcher takes a specific position on three dimensions: orientation to consensus, relation among manifestations, and orientation to ambiguity (Martin 2002:95). As supported in Simmel's treatment of culture, culture may not easily be reduced to a singular nature. Rather, culture is dualistic and characterized by a paradoxical moment when object and subject are conjoined through tension that is (re)created by movement and rigidity, opportunity and constraint, and structure and agency. Or as Simmel (1971:375) himself said in his essay on form versus life process:

...whenever life produces certain forms in which it expresses and realizes itself: works of art, religions, sciences, technologies, laws, and innumerable others. These forms encompass the flow of life and provide it with content and form, room for play and for order. But although these forms arise out of the life process,
because of their unique constellation they do not share the restless rhythm of life, its ascent and descent, its constant renewal, its incessant divisions and reunifications. These forms are cages for the creative life which, in the final analysis, there is no space left. They acquire fixed identities, a logic and lawfulness of their own; this new rigidity inevitably plays them at a distance from the spiritual dynamic which created them and which makes them independent.

In this chapter, I provided the reader with a brief introduction to the study. The remaining chapters include a review of key related literature, an explanation of the research design and methods, descriptive analyses of the findings, interpretation of data, and concluding comments.
The American architecture firm, as a formal organizational typology, emerged in the mid-1850s after the establishment of the New York Society of Architects, an association that was renamed The American Institute of Architects (AIA) in February 1857 (Cuff 1991). Prior to the 1850s, small and simple buildings were predicated on derivative stylization and built by carpenters, housewrights or master builders, and dilettante designers (Elliott 2003) most of whom were trained abroad and “closely tied to the Parisian Ecole des Beaux-Arts” (Cuff 1991:2). Architectural education became available in the United States in 1865 after MIT established the first school of architecture (Cuff 1991). Thirty-two years later, a legal definition of “architect” and the legal requirements concerning the use of the title or the provisions of architectural services were developed. In that year, Illinois became the first state to ratify an architectural licensing law. By the mid 1900s, all 50 states had adopted licensing laws formally legitimizing architecture as a profession.

Architecture firm management philosophies have been characterized as strong idea firms, strong service firms, and strong delivery firms (Maister 1993). Strong idea firms are organized around a few “star” designers and specialize in
the design of singular or Iconic buildings. Strong service firms are organized to deliver excellent client service and promote collaborative client-driven design processes. Strong delivery firms are organized around rational and efficient work processes where design proceeds in assembly line-like fashion. Hochberg (1997) argues that firm structures generally reflect one of the following concepts: project team structure, studio structure, departmental structure, project manager structure, or hybrid structure. Moreover, firm structures are reflective of the value sets displayed by firm leaders and are either practice-centered or business-centered (Hochberg 1997).

Practice-centered professionals, who see their calling as “a way of life,” typically have as their goal the opportunity to serve others and produce examples of their discipline. Their bottom line is qualitative: How do we feel about what we are doing? How did the project come out? Business-centered professionals, who practice their calling as “a means of livelihood,” more likely have as their personal objective a quantitative bottom line, which is more focused on the tangible rewards of their efforts: How did they do? (Hochberg 1997:4)

Firm sizes vary from the sole-proprietor, such as the Charlotte-based firm of AB Architecture, to the large 25-office international corporation comprised of 1,700 employees such as Gensler. In 2002, AIA estimated a total of 16,500 architecture firms across the country with sole practitioners comprising almost a third of firms. About 66% of the firms had 2 to 49 employees, 2% of firms had 50 to 99 employees, and 2% of firms had 100 or more employees, respectively.
Organizational Culture Defined

Studies on organizational culture have been conducted since the 1940s (Alvesson 2002), but it was not until the early 1980s that the study of organizational culture became a major research focus of scholars, practitioners, and managers (Deal & Kennedy 1982; Ouchi 1981; and Peters and Waterman 1982). These early organizational culture studies focused on creating strong cultures through enhanced organizational effectiveness and drew upon the previously published works of anthropologists and sociologists including Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman’s, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966).

According to Mary Jo Hatch (1997), the study of organizational culture is a complex field employing competing academic disciplines and paradigmatic frameworks such as phenomenology, symbolic interaction, semiotics, structural functional sociology, anthropology, and cognitive psychology. Scholars (e.g., Jaques 1951; Pettigrew 1979; Louis 1983; Martin 2002; Schein 1992; Van Maanen 1985; Trice and Beyer 1993) vehemently debate whether culture is something that organizations are or something that organizations have. Scholars who employ a quantitative sociological foundation believe organizations have cultures and tend to operationalize “it” as a “thing” or research variable. Conversely, scholars who employ a qualitative anthropological foundation believe organizations are cultures and tend to study the organization’s meaning systems, rather than its “culture.” Researchers who use an etic approach to research
generally rely upon quantitative methods whereas researchers who use an emic approach generally immerse themselves within the cultural fabric of the organization recording interactions and meanings through a participant-observer, native view vantage point (Malinowski [1922] 1961:25). There is no consensus within the field of organizational culture studies on how best to research the topic and even less agreement on its definition. However, Hatch (1997) reviewed a long list of published definitions of organizational culture and noted that in a majority of cases, culture is taken for granted by its members and is treated as an enduring set of values, beliefs, and accumulated shared assumptions and traditions, characterized by the harmonious, conflicted, and paradoxical practices of its members.

Three Cultural Perspectives

After completing a metaanalysis of organizational culture studies, Martin (2002) identified three primary theoretical perspectives typically used by organizational culture researchers when studying organizational culture: the integration, differentiation, and fragmentation viewpoints. Most empirical studies of cultures in organizations adopt one of these three theoretical perspectives; however, Martin advocates using all three perspectives simultaneously when studying organizational culture.

The integration perspective is perhaps the most common view of culture and relies on the "culture as glue" metaphor. Using this perspective, culture is a binding mechanism which creates organizational wide consensus. "The idea here
is that organizations are integrated and controlled through informal, non-structural means - shared values, beliefs, understandings, and norms" (Alvesson 2002:32). Conflict and ambiguity are excluded in favor of organizational homogeneity and harmony (Martin 2002). For example, in Ouchi's classic integration study of Japanese business cultures (1981), he described "Theory Z" cultures as having a shared understanding of the future strategic direction of the organization, having authentic concern for the well-being of employees, using shared values rather than formal rules to guide member action, extending the organizational value system to family members, and using a consensual decision-making model. A year later, Deal and Kennedy (1982) researched the power of organizational culture on its members' performances and concluded that business success is related directly to the creation of a strong culture. Supporting the integration model, Deal and Kennedy argue that successful organizations are bound by a shared organizational vision, that there is genuine concern for members, that rituals and practices support the organizational philosophy and are tools to build a common identity among members, that information rules and expectations are widely understood by members, and that harmonious social integration among members is important to the organization. These efforts lead to stability while eliminating ambiguities from day-to-day organizational activities. Edgar Schein, another integration theorist and pioneer in the field of organizational culture, believes that assumptions and beliefs form the core of an organization's culture. Schein (1992) views organizational culture as a unitary state and suggests that culture exists on three levels progressing from
visible to invisible: artifacts, espoused values, and shared underlying assumptions. The first level is the easiest to see and includes the organizational structures and processes or what the observer witnesses, hears, and feels as she walks around the organization. Visual clues include material objects such as architecture, interior design, manners, para-language, and speech. The second level includes the organization's strategies, goals, philosophies, vision statement, values, core purpose, and mission. The third level is the most different to understand because it is the unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of the actors. These assumptions are learned by being shared among actors over the history of the organization.

The differentiation perspective views culture through a subculture framework where subcultures can reinforce, conflict with, or exist independent of one another (Martin 2002). In contrast to Schein and other integration theorists, many scholars believe organizational culture is comprised of numerous smaller subcultures. Two organization theorists, John Van Maanen and Stephen Barley (1985:38) define subculture as: "...a subset of an organization's members who interact regularly with one another, identify themselves as a distinct group within the organization, share a set of problems commonly defined to be the problems for all, and routinely take action on the basis of collective understandings unique to the group."

When viewing organizational culture from a subculture framework rather than the unitary framework offered by the integration perspective, two of the most important questions to ask are, "How do subcultures differ from one another and
how and why do subcultures form?" The literature contains two frameworks to address these questions. Researchers Caren Siehl and Joanne Martin (1984) believe that subcultures "develop in relation to the dominate culture and become either enhancing subcultures that support the dominate culture, become countercultures that oppose and attempt to replace the dominant culture, or become orthogonal subcultures that develop their own set of values and work independent but alongside the dominant organizational culture."

Another typological framework offered by Ed Young (1989), describes subcultures forming on the bases of "work affiliations." Work group subcultures form when organizational members interact routinely at work with specific people (e.g., project teams, departmental units such as drafting, accounting, or marketing). Studies of group dynamics show that when individuals interact regularly, overtime cohesive subcultures may form (Hatch 1997).

In summary, the literature on differentiation suggests that organizational subcultures form in response to "value alignments" (Siehl and Martin 1984), "work related efficiencies" (Hatch 1997; Young 1989), "repetitive interpersonal interaction" (Hatch 1997), and “interpersonal attractiveness” (Van Maanen and Barley 1985). “At the organizational level, we are faced with untangling how all of the subcultures relate to each other and discovering how they fit together to form the larger organizational culture” (Hatch 1997:227).

The fragmentation perspective views culture as embedded in ambiguity rather than clarity. Fragmentation studies “move beyond the clear consistencies of an integration perspective and the clear inconsistencies of a differentiation view”
(Martin 2002:104-105). When the fragmentation perspective is used to guide a study, ambiguity is taken as a natural component of organizational culture rather than a troublesome one (Martin 2002). Fragmentation studies call attention to the paradoxes and multiple views of reality by examining contradictory meanings, ironies, and creative tensions among actors. For example, in Meyerson's study of social workers (1994), contradictions were noted in the varied tasks associated with the occupation as well as the multiple occupations associated with social work tasks.

A Triangulated Cultural Perspective

As already stated, Martin (2002) advocates using a three-perspective theory of culture in a single cultural study by applying integration, differentiation, and fragmentation perspectives simultaneously. The advantages of using a three-tiered approach to cultural research are many. Whereas single perspective studies oversimplify the complexity of organizational culture and often provide an incomplete or lopsided view of a culture, a three-perspective study generates a multi-voiced narrative describing a broader range of cultural insights (Martin 2002). Additionally, a three-perspective view of culture encourages the researcher to use a subjective and emic vantage point giving organizational actors the opportunity to speak for themselves. Another advantage of a three-perspective approach to studying cultures is that the approach helps the researcher understand cultural change (Martin 2002:142). Martin admits that most researchers and study participants identify with one perspective more
naturally than the others and she refers to this tendency as the researcher or participant's "home" perspective (Martin 2002:121). She argues that research conducted from "non-home" perspectives can generate unique insights (Martin 2002:121). Martin encourages the researcher to reveal his or her home perspective when writing about cultures. (I reveal my home perspective on page 45.)
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Introduction

My research project is a long-term case study that began informally in the spring of 1997 when I was hired by Elphant as their marketing director. At that time, I was asked by a principal of Elphant to critique the firm’s marketing efforts by observing the firm’s operational activities and by interviewing the firm’s staff. For two months, I studied the ways in which the firm secured its work, delivered its work, and promoted its work. I documented my findings and conclusions in an oral report given to management. It was through these early observations of firm practices that I became interested in the relationship between organizational change and organizational culture. My curiosity about the firm’s change-culture/culture-change relationship led me to conduct this thesis study.

My research focuses on “subjective, emic (insider), context-specific knowledge, based on a breadth of cultural manifestations and a depth of understanding” (Martin 2002). My research is grounded in self-reflexivity wherein I discuss my own relationship with the data being collected. My conclusions are developed a posteriori through data gathering, data focusing, and data analyzing (Lofland and Lofland 1995:1).
The research presented in this thesis began on July 7, 2004 and ended on November 12, 2004. Before I began the study, I reexamined the interview notes and personal journal entries that I made during the time period between March 1997 and July 2004. Also, I gathered and reviewed the firm’s printed corporate collateral and archival data such as its vision statement, strategic plan, listing of core values, mission statement, core purpose statement, meeting minutes, and historical overview of the firm.

Several initial questions guided my research process. What methods does the firm use to redefine what it means to practice architecture? What strategies does the firm use to force/help the organizational members redefine who they are in relation to the organization’s new practice model of architectural sociology? What practices does the firm use to bridge the estranged worlds of architecture and sociology within the firm? Militant force? Consensus building? Neither? Other? How do the members of the firm respond to the change effort? How does the culture of the firm relate to the change effort? How do the firm’s processes and practices manage members’ organizational and professional identifications? Are internal subcultures or groups created in response to the change effort? If subcultures exist within the firm’s organizational culture, how and why are these subcultures formed? If subcultures do not exist, how do the organizational members create meaning and attachment to one unified culture? Can multiple subcultures or cliques (Dalton 1959) coexist harmoniously within the firm’s culture? Does the firm have diverse or homogeneous subcultures? What meanings do actors attach to various subcultures? How do actors use and
interpret symbols to create and maintain their subcultures? How is power related to cultural meaning systems?

Firm Under Study

The firm for my case study is a 25-person architecture and interior design organization located in a metropolitan area of southwestern United States. Eight women and 17 men work at the firm and the average length of employment at the firm is 7.25 years. Seventeen of the 25 employees have a bachelor’s degree and eight are licensed design professionals.

According to the firm’s historical documents written by an owner of the firm, the firm was founded initially as a partnership in 1982 by a father-son team. By 1985, the firm grew to approximately six employees and conducted work primarily in the private sector, establishing a niche as a technically proficient architecture firm. In 1986, the firm converted its partnership to a corporation and over the next few years, the firm continued to enjoy success by venturing into the public sector when it designed the local Veterans Memorial Cemetery in 1987.

From 1988 to 1992 the firm increased in size from six to 15 staff and designed several large public projects including a correctional center and a large government building. In addition, the firm received the commission to create a master plan for a community college campus. In 1992, the firm designed its first public library for a rural community. With the need to understand the make-up of the community, the firm devised a process where the citizens of the community were invited into the design process through a series of public meetings and
charrettes. This inclusive process was successful and is the basis for the way the firm practices today. In 1995, the firm hired its first trained and licensed interior designer.

The firm continued to grow and reached approximately 20 people by 1996, when the firm moved to its present office building. By 1999 the firm had grown to a staff of 30 and added two additional stockholders. In 2000, the firm received a commission to design the corporate office for one of the most prestigious advertising and public relations firms in the region. This project provided a significant advance for the firm because it was one of the first projects where the firm was able to incorporate the culture and brand of an organization into the design of the physical space. In 2002, the firm sold stock to three new shareholders, bringing the total number of owners to seven. In addition, this year brought a renewed focus on the firm’s vision to become a cross-disciplinary design firm where social and architectural theories are merged with sound environmental practices. A major turning point was reached in 2003 because the firm conducted its first series of layoffs. These layoffs were referred to as “cultural layoffs” and signified the forced departure of employees who did not support the firm’s vision.

Research Site

The firm is located within a 4,200 square foot award winning build-to-suit office space. The firm’s dominate design feature is its “townsquare,” a large open

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1 A “cultural layoff” is a firing of an employee who does not “fit into” the culture of the firm, as defined by the ownership body.
space situated in the middle of the office. Similar to the organizing element of small town America, the concept of the town square creates a flexible working space where firm celebrations, gatherings, and important meetings may be held. The firm’s people-absent rendered works, building photographs, and models hang on the grey walls in large plexi-glass frames. “Whenever possible, it seems the photographers vacate the buildings and surrounds to present the building as a pristine objet d’art, uncontaminated by users, clients, and inhabitants” (Stevens 1998:14). The townsquare is flanked by employees sitting in what some staffers call “Dilbert-style Cages” and others call “Collaborative Pods.” The firm’s staff can hear the conversations taking place in the town square capturing the polyphonic nature (Marcus and Fisher 1986:71) of everyday dialogue. With the exception of the two majority shareholders who occupy a semi-private wing near the front of the office, other shareholders, project managers, designers, researchers, drafters, and marketing staff are evenly interspersed throughout the office setting.

Research Participants

I invited every member of Elephant to participate in the study; however, only 16 of the firm’s 25 members volunteered for the study. The staff who did not participate in the study offered reasons such as, “I have nothing to contribute,” or “I have not been here long enough to know anything about the culture of the firm.” Of the 16 volunteer participants, seven volunteers are owners. Three women and 13 men comprise the sample. Eight participants are licensed design
professionals, seven are architect interns, and one is an administrator. The mean age of the sample is 41 years old and the mean years of service to the firm is ten years. To protect the identities of participants, I have excluded from my narrative any biographical information about them such as their ages or job titles. All names used within the study are pseudonyms.

Self-Reflexivity and Relationship to Participants

To the members of Elephant, I am an insider or as Adler and Adler (1987) would describe, I am a "complete-member researcher" and as Gold (1958) would describe, I am a "complete participant." This mode of research participation is one where the researcher is fully immersed in the group under study. "One must immerse oneself in everyday reality - feel it, touch it, hear it, and see it - in order to understand it" (Kotarba and Fontana 1984:6). Being a known insider presents research advantages. One advantage is the strong level of trust that I have already developed with members of the group. Another advantage is that I have lived cultural experience and member status in the group which scholars such as Denzin (1997) and Ellis and Flaherty (1992) applaud. Culture is often revealed by organizational members to outsiders who have gained insider status in the group and who are able to penetrate the "inner circles" where "group secrets" are often shared (Schein 1992:13). Firm members have labeled me a "change agent" meaning that I have been instrumental in incorporating sociological theory and methods into the firm's design processes. My research will reveal how being an insider and change agent has impacted the participants and interpretations of
data. I will include a detailed and open discussion about my relationship with the members of Elephant.

**Data Collection**

I collected data through a systematic process of conducting unstructured interviews with insiders, observing formal firm meetings and informal activities, and reviewing the firm's written documentation and physical artifacts.

Each of the 16 study volunteers met with me for a two to four hour unstructured interview. "Unstructured interviewing can provide a greater breadth of data than the other types, given its qualitative nature" (Fontana and Frey 2000:646). I did not tape or video record the interviews but I did take notes during each interview. "The people being interviewed usually expect interviewers to be taking notes. In fact, a failure to do so may communicate lack of seriousness or inattention" (Lofland and Lofland 1995:163). Most of the interviews were conducted away from the office either at coffee shops or restaurants early in the morning before work or during lunch. Follow-up interviews were conducted with five of the study participants. As Lofland and Lofland (1995) suggest, before each interview I created a list of questions outlining the type of data necessary to inform my research. At the beginning of each interview, I thanked the participants for volunteering for the study and reminded them that their identity would be protected through the use of fictitious names. I gave each volunteer the opportunity to choose his or her pseudonym for the study. I gave each participant an overview of the study, provided an overview of the theoretical
models being used in the study (Martin 2002; Schein 1992), as well as a
definition of organizational culture (Hatch 1997). After this initial familiarization
period, I asked each participant to share with me his or her feelings about the
firm’s vision, its leadership, its values, and its cultural practices. The interviews
proceeded from this point and resembled the style of talking between friends
where personal and “deep” stories about the firm were exchanged between the
participant and me. My goal was understanding: I sought to take the role of the
participants and attempted to understand their viewpoints (Fontana and Frey
2002) through empathic inquiry. The interviews concluded after I provided a
summary of the key points and asked permission to meet again for a follow-up
interview if necessary.

Researchers usually combine in-depth interviews with other forms of
naturalistic research “as a way to check out theories they have formulated
through naturalistic observation, to verify independently (or triangulate)
knowledge they have gained through participation as members of particular
cultural settings, or to explore multiple meanings or perspectives on some
actions, events, or settings” (Johnson 2001:104). Bernard (1995) argues that
participant observation is critical to cultural analysis to determine if the interview
data are consistent with human behavior. As a full-time employee of Elephant
since 1997, I have had numerous opportunities to observe and document the
firm’s practices and activities. However, for the purpose of this study, my
fieldnotes and impressions are based on approximately 320 hours of observation
collected between July 7, 2004 and November 12, 2004. I observed staff
meetings, project management meetings, project team meetings, visioning meetings, branding meetings, impromptu social interaction (such as gatherings in the kitchen), and parties. While observing the members of Elephant, I paid particular attention to actors' words and actions because these are the primary data sources of naturalistic research (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Observation thus consisted of “gathering impressions of the surrounding world through all of my relevant human faculties” (Adler and Adler 1994:378). As Geer (1964) and Liebow (1993) have found, the researcher is participant because she is entering the symbolic life world of others and she must see, feel, and hear the social world as the study's participants do. The researcher is observer because she must reflect, analyze, probe, and clarify.

Examination of corporate records provides a third data collection method. I studied the firm's written documentation including their firm profile, advertisements, website, published papers, mission statement, vision statement, value statement, meeting minutes, employee manual, email correspondences, and statements of qualifications. Written documentation is part of what some scholars call “material culture,” and represents the formal aspects of the culture or what the firm wants to explicitly convey about itself.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data collection and analysis are an interactive and emergent process and "making it all come together" can be a difficult task. I have used a combination of Schein's (1992) three-level framework and Martin's (2002) matrix
framework to record, sort, and developed themes from the study data. Martin (2002:125) suggests, “When such a study is summarized in a series of matrices, theoretical assumptions become easier to see because the patterns of interpretations, across manifestations, are made evident” (Martin 2002:127). As Martin suggests, and supplemented with Schein’s approach, I created a cultural matrix by listing the three broad categories of “Material Culture,” “Abstract Culture,” and “Practices/Habits/Patterns” across the top of the matrix as column headings. Material culture is reflected through artifacts or the items one sees, feels, and hears as she hangs around the firm under study (Schein 1992). Data at this level of analysis were collected primarily though participant observation. Abstract culture refers to the norms, desires, values, beliefs, strategies, goals, philosophies, ethics, and vision of the firm under study (Schein 1992). Data at this level were collected through in-depth interviews, group observation, participant observation, and examination of corporate documents. Practices/habits/patterns are those tacit assumptions and routines that have been shared and taken for granted by the group (Schein 1992). Data collection at this level included participant observation and in-depth interviews with firm insiders. Along the left hand vertical axis of the matrix I listed various content themes that relate to the case study such as, “Applying Sociology to the Design Process,” “Collaboration,” “Caring About Employees,” “Views on Vision,” and “Project Teams,” and “Leadership.” I repeated this exercise for each of the three cultural perspectives used during the study: integration, differentiation, and fragmentation, respectively.
Writing Style

I had just returned from an interview when one of the study participants stopped me and asked, “How will you tell the story?” Puzzled I replied, “What do you mean?” “Well, you work here so who will you write for?” Interestingly, Ed had just asked me “The Question” that Denzin and others routinely debate: the question of representation. “The writer, as author, is always present in the text: All texts are personal statements” (Geertz 1988). “Well, I will write for the data using a combination of voices, including my own,” I said to Ed. The case should “tell its own story” (Carter 1993; Coles 1989). “The best known exemplars of alternative styles of writing about cultures are multivocal accounts that capture the multiple, conflicting views of multiple authors and various disagreeing cultural members” (Martin 2002:293). I continued to talk with Ed about my hope to take the draft and final report back to the volunteers who were apart of the study “not so much to verify the findings independently (as in Whyte’s member’s test of validity) but to gain their impressions and feedback on what has been written about them” (Johnson 2001:116). Study volunteers can contribute to data validation by participating in the “member checking” process (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

To support the self-reflexive nature of complete-participant cultural research, my writing style includes my own voice similar to what VanMaanen (1988) describes as a “confessional tale.” A confessional tale describes the field experience of the author alongside the description of the culture and case under study.
**Human Subjects Protocol**

As required by UNLV, I submitted a human subject’s review package to UNLV’s Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) on June 10, 2004. Under expedited review, OPRS approved my research protocol package on July 7, 2004. As outlined in the research protocol, employee participation in my research is completely voluntary. An employee’s decision to participate will have no effect on his or her job security or any benefits he or she receives now or in the future. Identity of the research participants shall remain confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Each volunteer signed an Informed Consent Form. The Informed Consent Form provides the name of the research project, the purpose of the research, the researcher’s name, department and university affiliation (i.e., Sociology and UNLV), an invitation to the subject for voluntary participation in the study, notice that the respondent may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, the benefits of the study, how study findings will be disseminated (i.e., thesis), assurance of anonymity of individual responses, and confidentiality of results except as the dissemination of results described above, and contact people and offices with email addresses and phone numbers if subjects have any questions about the research. The signed informed consent forms are being stored in a locked cabinet at my home office.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

“Well, I haven’t been here on time in a while but I see things haven’t changed,” Par said. Par had a personal situation that made it difficult for him to arrive at the office by 8:00 a.m. “It’s like a ghost town around here in the early morning,” I replied. “In the late afternoon, too,” Par added. Par and I were talking in the firm’s kitchen pouring ourselves a cup of coffee. I always enjoy talking to Par. He is a “matter-of-fact and tell-it-like-it-is” person with a mantra of brute honesty. Par has worked at Elphant for many years and most people at the firm enjoy being around him. Par has a great sense of humor and he is the person who knows how humor can relieve tension. And lately, there’s been plenty of tension at Elphant. Maybe tension explains why only three or four of the firm’s 25 employees arrive to work on time?

Par and the other employees at Elphant enjoy an autonomous work schedule by being able to work-at-home while caring for their children or nursing an injury or illness, by working at remote locations such as coffee shops or cabins, or by arriving later than 8:00 a.m. to begin their work day. “Since 1988, we’ve been trying to create a different type of organization,” said one of the firm’s principals during his interview with me. “We want to create a culture where people love to come to work and a place that has freedom and opportunity for professional and
personal growth.” Others in the firm lament that some people in the company have “taken advantage” of the company’s collegial nature by “coming and going” as they please without regard for others. “I think we need to get more structured in our processes and get back to running a business like a bona fide business,” said one shareholder. “We are a joke,” said one employee. “We are a culture of hypocrisy,” said another.

These two opening paragraphs illustrate the complexity of a cultural case study. A cultural analysis of an organization may well uncover ambiguity, confusion, passion, conviction, conflict, consensus, shared language, fractured meanings, paradox, and power struggles to name just a few manifestations. The sometimes found multiplicitous nature of culture calls for a multi-perspective mode of inquiry and analysis. “A cultural observer is interested in the surfaces of these cultural manifestations because details can be informative, but he or she also seeks in-depth understanding of the patterns of meanings that link these manifestations together, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in conflict between groups, and sometimes in webs of ambiguity, paradox, and contradiction” (Martin 2002:119). As previously stated, Martin’s (2002) three-perspective framework of integration, differentiation, and fragmentation plus Schein’s (1992) three-level model of artifacts, values, and basic assumptions serve as the organizing apparatus in my research study and my analysis is organized vis-à-vis the blending of these two schemes. Moreover, this chapter includes the actors’ words collected during the interviews, observations made by me during several
staff and project meetings, follow-up conversations with the participants, and
descriptions of cultural artifacts, espoused values, and shared assumptions.

**Integration Perspective**

Recall that Martin (2002:344) describes the integration perspective as one
where culture is held together by consensus and clarity. Conflict and ambiguity
are rarely considered to be relevant parts of the culture under study. Artifacts are
all the things a person "sees, hears, and feels" when she is studying a group
(Schein 1992:17). As part of my study of Elephant, I defined artifacts to be part of
the firm's material culture or, "the visible products of the group such as the
architecture of its physical environment, its language, its technology and
products, its artistic creations, and its style as embodied in clothing, manners of
address, emotional displays, myths and stories told about the organization,
published lists of values, observable rituals and ceremonies" (Schein 1992:17).
Artifacts also include the "visible behavior of the group" and the organization's
processes (Schein 1992:17).

"Today we are more than a traditional architecture practice. Our firm has
challenged the delivery of architecture, expanding our service offerings to include
the cross-disciplinary substantive areas of sociology, environmental
sustainability, organizational development, and research," the president of the
firm said during his interview with me. "We have devoted many corporate
resources to the development of our new practice model," he continued. For
example, the firm employs a graduate student who is working toward her Ph.D. in
sociology and the firm meets as a collective approximately eight hours a month to discuss its vision and future desired state. Additionally, Elephant hired a public relations firm to “completely revamp” its image. “If we want to be successful in our shift to become a new architecture firm, we may need to drop the word architect from our name,” the founder told me. To launch the firm’s new image, a few owners worked together to write a narrative describing the firm’s new practice model. Not only is the narrative an important element of the firm’s new marketing message, but also it is a key dominant cultural artifact used to support the firm’s integrated cultural perspective.

Imagine...a firm that cares as much about your project as you do. A firm that understands and cares about your organization’s success and the well being of your employees...

Imagine...A firm committed to research...A firm with a "people-centric" design process and an ethic of environmental responsibility...

Imagine...A firm with limitless passion and dedication to client service...A firm that continually grows and shares its knowledge...

Imagine...A firm with an inclusive community based approach...A firm that works with you collaboratively to find the best solutions, and where the journey is as important as the destination...

Imagine...A firm in which social and architectural theories are merged...A firm that provides planning, architecture, interior design, community based design, facilitation, sustainability consulting, research, survey design and analysis, and organizational development under one roof... Imagine... A firm comprised of community leaders...A firm of innovators and visionaries...

Engage your imagination.
Another dominant cultural artifact is the firm's vision statement which is shown below. Elephant's vision statement clearly supports cultural integration by proclaiming social action of collaboration, consensus, and clarity:

Elphant is a firm comprised of an interconnected community of leaders. Members of our organization share their gifts and spirits with others while continually building and sharing knowledge. We engage the minds, hearts, and hands of our people equally.

We are a community of citizens with responsibilities as well as rights. This community is something we all belong to, while in turn, belongs to no individual. We understand that profits are the lifeblood of our business - but we know that life consist of more than keeping the blood flowing - otherwise life would not be worth living.

Our clients and consultants are members of our community and work with us as partners. Clients welcome us into their organizations as valuable counselors, advisors, and friends. The work we do for our clients will engage us as well as our clients. We challenge them to reach for more and they in turn challenge us to offer more.

Our clients are comprised of organizations that share our values and are leaders in their fields. We not only design spaces for them but also places where they can live and grow. We make meaningful contributions to their success.

We believe in research as a fundamental foundation for providing value to our clients. It is through this research that we help our clients become all that they wish to be. Our clients are better for what we have done for them.

Our work is grounded in sustainability. The places we create encourage and demonstrate environmental, social, and organizational sustainability. We assist in shifting cultural and social behavior to respect the
environment and help our clients to be sustainable as organizations.

In addition to Elephant's vision statement, the firm's core purpose, core values, and mission statement make up the firm's espoused ideology and the firm proudly displays these belief statements on a wall in their town square to share with visitors and staff. The firm's core purpose is, "To enrich life." Its core values are "collaboration, caring/sharing/helping, honesty/integrity/trust, commitment, contribution, creativity/innovation, play, sustainability/social and environmental conscience, and knowledge/learning/research." Its mission statement is, "Through a cross-disciplinary approach, we use our skills, knowledge, and energy to assist in the success of organizations and society through contributing to the built environment."

As stated by one of the firm's principals, "Collectively our purpose, values, mission, and vision are bound together through collaboration and serve as our unique organizational compass: our road map." "We all need to be on the same bus driving the same direction," one owner said. Another owner added, "It doesn't matter if we are driving to New York or Chicago, as long as we go together." Since 1997, the owners of Elephant have been trying to craft a "shared" vision for their firm and one that celebrates consensus, clarity, and common language. "We need to share definitions of important words such as community, care, and communication," one principal said.

The firm's process of creating a firm-wide body of concepts to guide social behaviors within their organizational system has unfolded with the owners "going offsite to work with a consultant." With the consultant's help the "leadership body"
crafts the vision statement. The ownership group then returns to the firm and makes firm-wide "presentations" of the vision statement and related doctrines to the staff. This procedure has occurred approximately four times during the past five years. The owners leave the firm and return to the firm with a new and improved vision statement. Members of the firm are then asked to comment on the "shared vision" and to eventually "make a choice" to "buy into the firm vision or not."

"Today our staff meeting is all about our firm's vision," Anthony said. "We want to get your feedback about our vision statement and we want the meeting to be an open discussion," he continued. "I will facilitate the meeting, but I don't want to dominate the meeting," he said. Anthony has a tendency to dominant meetings for two reasons. First, he is one of the owners of Elphant and his position gives him the authority to lead and facilitate meetings. And second, he admits that he is passionate about the idea of architectural sociology and he is willing to "do whatever it takes to develop a new practice model for Elphant." The meeting began at 3:00 p.m. and ended at 5:00 p.m. and the majority of the comments were made by two of the owners. In total, Antillo spoke for 45 minutes and Anthony spoke for 36 minutes. The two principals dominated the meeting and the other 20 employees in attendance (two of whom were owners) had a difficult time finding opportunities to add to the discussion. During the meeting, an employee whispered to me, "God, Antillo and Anthony are such conversation hogs. I don't think they even know we are here." Antillo and Anthony's tendency to dominate firm discussions reveals the extent of their power within the
organization. In fact, these two principals have absolute control of power within the firm.

From the viewpoint of the owner-leadership body, who are a group of six males and one female, "We are trying to create a sense of shared understanding here. As a firm, we are changing and moving to a new place and employees have the choice to go with us or not. We are not forcing anyone to do anything. They have a choice: Do they fit in or not? Do they accept the vision or not? Do they want to be collaborative or not?" During my interviews with the seven owners, most of them spoke about creating a "shared sense of purpose and working cooperatively to reach the vision." While the degree to which each owner "buys into the vision" varies, the majority of owners are clearly grounded in an integration perspective and work to diminish the presence of conflict, confusion, and fragmentation within the firm.

The smells of lemon chicken and fried rice filled the dimly lit Chinese restaurant as Robert and I talked over a two-hour lunch about Elphant's vision and culture. I asked Robert to share with me his thoughts about Elphant's vision. "The genesis of our vision is Antillo. He is one of our leaders and it's his original idea. But I think it is becoming a shared vision. The one word that sums up our vision is care." Antillo talks about collaboration and how our personal alignment with the vision is key." For Antillo, cultural integration is a state of "Being." A leader has power over the direction a culture takes because his or her values have influence over the group (Schein 1992).
consensus are the important cultural characteristics espoused by "Antillo's vision."

Antillo is one of the firm’s principals. I have worked with Antillo for more than seven years, and during this time period I have had numerous conversations with him. We have talked about architecture, about leadership, and about our favorite books.

Antillo is away from the office several hours a week so it took me a few days to coordinate an interview date with him. I finally met with him on a Tuesday morning at Starbucks. He was already sitting at a two-person table in the cafe’s corner when I arrived. As usual, he was dressed casually in his black "architecture attire." I was dreading this interview. In my previous interactions with Antillo, he seemed to always have a "personal and private agenda." During the interview, I hoped to have the chance to probe and inquire but Antillo rarely gives a person the chance to do so. I began the interview by asking Antillo to share his personal perspective with me on the "state of affairs" at his firm. "I think we are at a crossroads as an organization. We are either going to continue to change and become a new type of architecture firm or we will stay where we are and continue to be a me-too firm. We might even decline and die." Antillo continued to describe the culture of the firm using words such as, "caring," "shared beliefs," "let it be," "lifelong learning," "faith," and "confidence." "Our culture needs to be an enabler to reach full human potential - to help us contribute, learn, and grow. If we want to move forward as a group, we need to follow a shared belief structure instead of a rational strategic plan. Some people
in the firm think we need to have a strategic plan to tell us what to do and how to act. I don’t think so. I think we need shared values, shared purpose, and a shared understanding of the vision.” Elephant’s written mission statement, vision statement, core purpose, and core values are the firm’s cultural glue. Organizational members are encouraged to “live the vision.” Members are asked to “walk the talk” and act in accordance with the firm's core values of “collaboration, caring/sharing/helping, honesty/integrity/trust, commitment, contribution, creativity/innovation, play, sustainability/social and environmental conscience, and knowledge/learning/research.”

The firm uses specific practices and processes to help align individual and organization values, as well as individual and organizational visions of the future. For example, the firm meets on the last Friday of every month from 3:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. for their monthly “staff meeting.” These meetings are held in the firm’s “town center,” and are led my one of the firm’s owners. The meetings provide opportunities for open dialogue to build firm-wide understanding of the vision. Meeting topics range from full scale debates of words used in the vision such as, "collaboration" to “the differences between the acts of discussion and dialogue.” The staff meetings are poorly attended by the ownership group but regularly attended by most of the staff members. “When Antillo leads the staff meetings, we feel like we are being lectured to,” said an employee. Others feel that some of the meetings are fun and informative and some feel like they are sitting in a classroom waiting for the bell to ring.
Another way in which the firm uses specific practices and processes to help align individual and organization values, as well as individual and organizational visions of the future is through the use of “employee reviews.” Owners of Elphant conduct “employee reviews” on a bi-annual schedule, in June and again in December. The purpose of the review is to provide a formal opportunity for owners and employees to talk about employee performance and to “check in” on “other issues.” The two-hour reviews are generally open-ended discussions where views of Elphant’s future can be exchanged.

Differentiation Perspective

After reading excerpts of Elphant’s “Firm Profile” and “family-like” messages on their website, and observing the collaborative and open layout of their office setting, one would expect the culture of the firm to be dominated by consensus, teamwork, and cooperation. However, in each of the 16 interviews, owners and employees alike spoke of “subgroups or subcultures” that have formed in response to the firm’s “visioning” or change process. The study participants identified the subgroups as, “Complete Buy-in” of the vision, “Blind Compliance” with the vision, “Ambivalence” about the vision, and “Rejection” of the vision. One staff member described the greatest tension between the groups identified as “Rejection” and “Buy-in” with the rejection group winning the firm’s culture war until recently. “We had cultural layoffs last year and we cut out the silent cancer,” said one of the firm’s owners. “And other people who did not fit in with us culturally left the firm,” the owner continued. Those employees who were either
fired or quit were members of the “Rejection” subculture so the power of that subgroup has been reduced significantly. Several study participants voiced their concern about the “cultural layoffs.” Par remarked openly, “Some of the people who were let go were our best project managers.” The owners countered Par by saying that the employees who were fired were “cultural trouble makers.” The leadership body clearly rejects the tension that is often present when the differentiation perspective permeates the firm’s culture.

Generally, members of Elphant who have middle management positions on the organizational chart display (play) differentiation perspectives. The role of a middle manager at Elphant is to be creative, be a risk taker, be a source of innovation, and be willing to challenge the status quo. These expectations create a subculture wherein members critique and challenge the leadership body. Members of this group are often in conflict with the vision of the firm. This group of members is referred to as the “Rejection” group. Also it is important to note that two of the seven owners fit into this group as well. However, the owners do not openly espouse their affiliation with the “Rejection” group. Rather, their rejection of the vision is covert and “underground.” During his interview with me, Anthony said, “Sometimes during our shareholders meeting, I feel like two people are giving me lip service about their support of the vision. Deep down, I don’t think they support what we are doing here. One is all about making money and the other is all about design. Neither of these two people seems to care about the impacts of architecture on people.” “I feel like I’m always in advocacy mode,” he continued.
Anthony is one of the owners of Elphant. He and I enjoyed a pastry at a local coffee shop while we talked about the future of his firm and his feelings toward some of the subcultures within the firm. "Why do some people say they buy into our vision, yet their behavior and actions don't support their words? These people are sometimes very covert, telling you one thing and doing another," Anthony said. "Well, you must know that communication often gets distorted, even watered-down, as it moves up the chain of command," I replied. The most obvious problem in upward communication is the hierarchy. Staff is unlikely to share information if it will be harmful to themselves or to members of their inner circle (Hall 1999). Hence, staff may not voice their "true feelings" toward the idea of merging sociology and architecture, which is at the heart of the firm's vision. Instead, the people who reject the idea may do so through their actions and behaviors, rather than through their voices. "Can you give me an example of what you are talking about?" I asked Anthony. He replied with the following statement.

Well, we recently won a new contract to help a public client craft a new community-based planning model and we will rely on sociological research methods to help design the new planning model. When one of our firm's architects learned that we had been awarded a contract that requires the application of sociology, I was told that he said, "That's fine. You can do sociology all day long. But I never will." This architect is one who has verbally espoused his support of the vision yet ideologically I believe he rejects it.

My observations of staff and project meetings indicate a strong presence of conflict within the firm. Firm members often engage in personal attacks against one another. At the core of these arguments, differences between philosophical
approaches to business and design are often aired. Additionally, employees were quick to describe conflict between staff and owners and employees’ stories included “finger pointing” and “conflict in what people say and actually do.”

Two interviews were especially negative and both participants voiced their concerns with the firm’s visioning process. The first interview was with Gibraltar who has worked at Elphant for many years. When asked recently by an owner of the firm to write a personal vision statement (as part of the departmental “review” process) she responded with the following written statement:

Where do I start? I’m not fond of vision statements. Not because I don’t understand the concept of “vision,” or because I’m trying to get out of doing my ‘homework,’ but because, to me, a written statement is just something on a piece of paper that can be easily crumpled and thrown away. Meaningless. To me. Vision is carried in the heart and in the mind and that’s why I’m not going to try here to write one.

The second interview was with Bill, a participant who is outspoken and critical of the firm’s visioning process. Bill believes that there is an “ideological rift” within the firm’s culture. “This rift is impeding our ability to move forward as an organization. I shutdown during our office meetings because I’m tired of all the talk,” he said. He also told me that he ignores or “tunes out” the owners when they discuss the vision. Bill’s actions have created a situation of interpersonal conflict between him and the owners. “My conversations with the principals are always strained. I don’t think they appreciate my perspective on what’s going on around here,” he added.
Fragmentation Perspective

During my interview with Myrtle, she portrayed Elephant as a “Culture of Secrecy” on a “slow boat to China.” Myrtle described the “Culture of Secrecy,” as “owners holding on to secrets about the firm.” Moreover, she said “Owners say that we are an open door company, but they hide a lot from the employees.” The owners make the employees “guess” about certain things such as “who they have put on notice.” The firm’s core purpose is “to enrich life,” yet “Anthony says he doesn’t want to help people here. He doesn’t want to be a mentor,” Myrtle continued. How can you be a leader of the company and not want to mentor others I wondered “secretly” to myself? At Elephant, an employee is “put on notice” when he or she openly challenges the vision of the firm or the actions of the leadership body. If an employee questions the “integrity” of the leaders or the validity of the vision, he or she will be asked to leave the firm. To firm insiders, these actions are called, “Cultural Layoffs.” “We have cultural layoffs to strengthen our firm’s culture,” one owner said. But, according to several employees, “The layoffs don’t help us, they hurt us by creating new conflict and confusion” “I don’t agree with the owners about who should be laid off. We are getting rid of some of our best thinkers and keeping cruisers,” Par said.

I interviewed Sepreh during lunch at a cafe. During our conversation, she described the culture of the firm as one of “confusion.” “We are trying so many new things, such as using sociology to make design better, that we don’t know what we are doing. We are going in too many directions.” Other participants voiced concern about “adding sociology as a service offering” because very few
of the firm members understand how to accomplish this. "The problem I see," one owner said, "is that we are not adding sociology as a service offering. We are applying a sociological perspective to design. There is a difference." Getting the firm members to understand this direction has created confusion and fragmentation among members. And, the conflict over how best to apply a sociological perspective to design has created an uncertain picture of the future for the firm that some members described as "too ambiguous."

Seattle eagerly volunteered to an interview with me, and even provided me with a written statement. "Here Valerie, read this and tell me what you think," Seattle said as he handed me a sheet of paper entitled, "Thoughts on Vision."

Seattle's narrative states that he does not fully understand the vision yet he feels that Elephant's vision is missing something.

I recall my first exposure to Elephant's vision. I remember how 'far-out' it seemed. That's a good thing, a wonderful thing. I had just left a place where the word 'vision' seemed foreign and unwanted. I am very excited by the Elephant vision; however, I can't tell you that I fully understand it. I think, in a nutshell, that this may be the problem that I have with it.

Seattle’s narrative is a cultural artifact reflecting the presence of fragmentation within the firm. There is a lack of clarity within Elephant: Many members are "aware" of the vision, but they do not clearly understand it.

Study participants who hold lower positions display (play) fragmentation perspectives. Lower participants are those employees who the firm calls "worker bees." Owners and middle managers delegate work to these members and they are expected to perform their tasks "in a vacuum." In other words, lower
participants rarely see the big picture or how their work correlates with the entire project. These members are often confused or apathetic about the future of the firm and its vision.

**Bringing All Three Perspectives Together**

An actor's interpretation of the everydayness of social interaction is filtered through his or her own private world view. During the study, participants offered their interpretation and understanding of the firm's vision and culture through a singular lens, akin to a "cultural home perspective." Some members naturally supported integration viewpoints; others were grounded in differentiation or fragmentation perspectives, respectively. Only one study participant was able to apply multiple perspectives to the topic of vision and culture. Therefore, analyzing Elphant through a triangulated culture framework helped me determine the home perspective through which members of the group view culture and change. Moreover, the methodology helped to reveal my own "home perspective," and allowed me to "open up" to alternative ways of viewing the same phenomenon. Already a full participant member of Elphant, I began the study believing that Elphant’s culture was characterized by clarity, consensus, and shared language. However, throughout the study I became increasingly aware of alternative cultural views and rather than going "native," I "distanced" myself from my own perspective in order to absorb more fully the perspectives of others.
Elephant's owners and key senior employees espouse their support of the vision and its related core values, especially the idea of applying a sociological perspective to design. "Sociology makes architecture better and provides a manner in which to reposition our firm in the marketplace," one owner said. "Our culture is collaborative yet it continues to change as we change and grow as people. It's kind of like riding a bike. Once we become comfortable with our new direction [applying sociology to design], we will be on autopilot and we will all be moving forward together," another owner remarked. Thus, this group's home perspective is the integration perspective.

Unlike the owners of Elephant, members of middle management voiced their concerns about the vision. "The vision sounds great in theory, but how are we to implement it when we can't even get a set of drawings out the door?" asked one participant. "That's fine if you all want to become sociologists, but I never will. I'm an architect," quipped one designer. Members of middle management appear to hold the differentiation perspective as their home perspective.

"The vision does not apply to me because I am a draftsman," David said. Another member added, "I hate sitting in staff meetings when we discuss the vision, because I have no idea what we are talking about." "Our vision is set in gold, yet it feels like it is a moving target," added an insider. "The owners espouse that we are one big happy family, but I don't see them walking the talk." The lower participants, such as drafters, administrative support, and nontechnical staff view culture through the fragmentation perspective.
This chapter included the actors' words collected during the interviews, observations made by me during several staff and project meetings, follow-up conversations with the participants, and descriptions of cultural artifacts, espoused values, and shared assumptions. The next chapter provides the reader with my interpretations and conclusions regarding these data.
Applying Martin’s (2002) theoretical approach and Schein’s (1992) three-layered matrix, I designed this case study to answer the question, “What are the linkages between organizational culture and organizational change within Elephant?” In addition, I wanted to understand what a cultural analysis of Elephant would reveal about the firm’s efforts to create a new architectural-sociology practice model. Specifically, I wanted to learn if Elephant’s culture and structure support their vision, new practice model, and change efforts.

In this final chapter, I discuss my interpretations of the data by organizing my conclusions into five main sections: Cultural Factors Impacting Elephant’s Change Efforts, Creating a New Architectural-Sociology Practice Model Through Culture and Structure, Changing Member Identifications Through Sensebreaking and Sensemaking, Research Limitations, and Concluding Comments.

Cultural Factors Impacting Elephant’s Change Efforts

My analysis and interpretation of data reveal that there are many cultural factors that contribute to or militate against successful change within Elephant. Previous empirical research conducted by organizational researchers and
practitioners has uncovered critical cultural factors that help or hinder organizational change. Some of these factors include items such as having a clear vision, purpose, and goals, having a strong internal communication network, having clear roles, structures, and work processes, and having effective rewards, benefits, and incentives for employees. My cultural analysis of Elephant has led to the identification of twelve interrelated cultural factors that have a significant impact on Elephant's change process. These factors include Word-Deed Misalignment Among Principals, "Loosey-Goosey" Structure, Schedule Sponges, Avoidance, Under Emphasis of Core Competencies, Domain Defending Decision-Making, Lack of Mutual Respect, Complacency, Inconsistent and Unclear Sanctions, Secretive Communication Network, Entrepreneurial Spirit, and Articulated Vision, Purpose, Values, and Mission. The first ten factors have a negative influence on Elephant's change process and the last two factors have a positive influence. The following subsections describe the meaning and significance of these factors.

Word-Deed Misalignment Among Principals

Participants question the "Behavioral Integrity" of the principals or "perceived pattern of alignment between an actor's words and deeds" (Simmons 2002:19). This misalignment is a cultural factor because it highlights the conflict between espoused values and shared perceptions, which are the second and third levels of Schein’s model (1992:17). In other words, while Elephant has clearly espoused values, there is a clear disconnect between these values (the rules they say they live by) and their enacted values (the acts they actually perform).
All of the participants said that owners say one thing and do another. One participant describes this factor as a “Culture of Hypocrisy” and another participant said, “The principals don’t walk the talk.” Participants questioned the owners’ genuine attachment to the firm’s values creating a worker mantra akin to, “The owners don’t live by our values, so why should we?” For example, one owner publicly berates the employees of Elephant for not being “committed” to the firm and for not being “available.” Yet, this owner leaves town on personal business regularly without letting the receptionist and office manager know of his whereabouts.

The word-deed misalignment among principals hinders Elephant’s change process because it undermines the value of the vision and creates negative patterns of behaviors that become shared assumptions among staff over time. These shared assumptions become the source of cultural action within the firm that impedes the firm’s ability to fully implement its new practice model.

“Loosey-Goosey” Structure

One participant described the organizational structure of Elephant as “Loosey-Goosey.” Often times, firms that are under organized lack consistent communication systems, policies, and operational procedures. This is a cultural factor at Elephant because members have come to accept this condition as an acceptable pattern. Initially, Elephant’s founder wanted to create an organizational structure where members could have flexibility, could be empowered to make decisions, could interact with one another in a casual setting, and could be proud of their individual contributions to the firm. However, over time, the loose
structure of Elphant has contributed to ineffective work strategies, long hours for employees, employee abuse of their freedoms, communication breakdowns, inconsistent role definitions, losses in project revenues, and a general feeling of organizational confusion.

Elphant’s loose structure and pattern of disorganization have impeded its change process. Project teams are almost always in flux and members are unclear about who is “doing what” and who is following-up on key issues. Design teams often complain that “drawings are inconsistent” and that the firm needs to enforce the use of “architectural standards” and “financial controls.” Employees frequently waste time researching ideas when other employees may have knowledge of the subject matter. Also, there appears to be no clear strategy for actually blending sociology with architecture on projects. The approach seems to be lackadaisical or as one employee said, “Trial by fire” and another said, “Our structure to incorporate sociology is virtually nonexistent.” A more structured environment would facilitate the change process within Elphant and contribute to a culture of consistent and clear positive behavior.

Schedule Sponges

A firm with a loose structure is usually one in which project deadlines are ignored, missed, or not important until a crisis is reached. At Elphant, designers believe that they must design until the design concept is “perfect.” These designers often work “off the clock” ignoring their project schedule and deadlines. This pattern creates a “Culture of Work Spurts,” meaning the firm vacillates between being easygoing and carefree, to one that is chaotic and fast-paced.
During the times of crisis urgency, many of the routine and perfunctory activities of the firm are “put on hold.” Or as one insider said, “We can’t make progress towards our vision and goals because we are constantly in react mode trying to pick up the pieces after missing a project deadline.” Missing deadlines at Elephant seems to be a cultural norm, especially internal and self-imposed deadlines relating to the new practice model. Even though the firm spends valuable time in group meetings discussing "the vision," they have made little progress in incorporating sociology into the design process. During one of the many meetings that I observed, one of the firm’s project managers whispered to me, “God, not again. We’ve been talking about this stuff for five years and we’ve done nothing. When are we going to start doing something?” This insider was not voicing his objection to the vision per se, but rather he had become frustrated with the firm’s inability to make progress toward its vision.

Avoidance

Avoidance is the tendency to divert blame or skirt accountability of one’s actions. This cultural norm is apparent at both the management and staff levels of Elephant. Antillo, a leader and key decision-maker at the firm, often avoids confrontation by “making himself unavailable” to his co-workers. One participant said that Antillo “has no idea what’s going on in the firm because he is never here.” This cultural factor has had a negative impact on Elephant’s change efforts because “some employees are allowed to do whatever they want, without being held accountable for their actions.” These employees often appear unaffected by their mistakes and look to management to solve their problems. Another
avoidance issue at Elphant is that the employees who disagree with the vision have learned over time to "keep their mouths shut." These employees know that if they disagree openly with the "integration" cultural perspective espoused by the principals, they will be asked to leave the firm.

Under-emphasis of Core Competencies

Under-emphasis of core competencies refers to the extent to which organizational members spend their time on perfecting the routine, technical, or standard elements of their career fields. While architecture and interior design are the "official" core competencies of Elphant, several participants said that the firm does not devote adequate resources toward the necessary routine activities associated with, "getting a project out the door." Instead, the firm spends too much time on unproven service offerings (sociological research) or on (re)inventing the design process to add sociology. Most participants felt that the firm needed to spend more time analyzing and perfecting their traditional design process and less time "talking" about a new ("unproven") practice model. This internal debate causes conflict within the firm and hinders the firm’s ability to implement its new architectural-sociology practice model. Subcultures form because of the differing assumptions associated with the firm’s service offerings. Whereas the principals believe that the firm should be highly experimental in its approach to the new service model, most employees feel that the firm needs to (re)focus its energy on the traditional and technical elements of architecture and interior design.
Domain Defending Decision-Making

Important decision-making within an organization is usually made near or at the top of the hierarchy therefore those who have power within an organization often have decision-making rights. Decision-making is a cultural factor affecting change because decisions are often based on ideologies and values (Beyer 1981) and the power some individuals have over others often creates cultural patterns of interaction and norms of oppressive behavior. Within Elphant, one owner exercises extensive control over the decision-making process yet other owners want to share in the process. One participant described decision-making at Elphant as a "tug-of-war" between a few "self-absorbed principals." "We overthink decisions to death," one employee told me during my interview with him. "We have open discussions about decisions that need to be made and then decisions are made by one owner anyway," he continued. One of the problems with decision-making in Elphant is that some of the decisions made by the principals are made to defend their "turf" or integration perspective of culture. This is an issue because members see these actions as being contradictory to the firm's core values of collaboration, honesty, integrity, and trust.

Lack of Mutual Respect

A lack of mutual respect exists within an organization when either groups or individuals do not appreciate or value one another's contributions to the firm. Of all the cultural factors having a negative impact on Elphant's change effort, this factor appears to be the most significant. Lack of respect is a cultural factor because respect stems from one's values and underlying assumptions and is
often visible through artifacts. For example, the principals of Elphant believe that “the employees here don’t get it [the vision and new practice model].” On the other hand, the employees believe that “the principals don’t mentor us.” One participant told me that he is frustrated with one of the principals because “he expects us to be able to spew what’s in his brain and if we can’t, he labels us as his problem children.” Another participant said, “One owner refuses to mentor anyone.” A lack of respect is apparent at the “artifact” level of cultural analysis. For example, important emails often go unanswered among Elphant employees, members arrive late to work and late to meetings, principals skip monthly staff meetings, employees are rarely thanked for their contributions to the firm, and members whose cultural perspectives differ from the principals are often isolated or asked to leave the firm. This cultural factor has a negative influence on Elphant’s change process because members are often dealing with interpersonal conflict. Also, actions derived from a lack of respect cause members to “stop caring” about the firm’s vision and these members reduce their work efforts to a bare minimum. Additionally, a lack of respect creates a culture of mistrust. Lower participants describe a situation where they are waiting for the principals to “live the vision” and the principals describe a situation where they are waiting for the employees “to become committed to the vision.” This “wait and see” cultural attitude slows the change process and at times brings it to a complete stop.

Complacency

Complacency refers to the extent to which members are satisfied with the current organizational and operational conditions within a firm. It may also refer
to the extent to which members are apathetic to the innovations or planned transformations within the organization. Complacency appears to be a cultural factor at Elphant because employees are comfortable living with problems that have existed for an extended period of time. The accumulated and shared learning of the group has created a culture of “people going through the motions.” Moreover, those who are viewed as “change agents” (someone who rejects complacency), are identified and ridiculed for “moving too fast without thinking things through.” Cultural conflict exists within Elphant between members of the group who resist change and members of the group who thrive on change. One participant described the conflict as, “Thrilal vs. Survival.”

Inconsistent and Unclear Sanctions

A cultural factor of inconsistent and unclear sanctions impedes change within Elphant because actors are confused by the patterns of rewards and punishments that exist there. This confusion creates appearances of nepotism, or favoritism shown to a few by those in power. For example, some employees are allowed to “come and go as they please,” while an employee such as the receptionist is required to arrive by 8:00 a.m. and remain until 5:00 p.m. Some employees are rewarded by being offered tuition reimbursement for their schooling and others must pay for their education themselves. The principals ignore the negative impact of this cultural factor. In fact, one owner has said many times, “We reward dynamos, not cruisers and losers.” A system of consistent and clear sanctions would help Elphant in its change efforts because

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members would then know how their behaviors are hooked to a shared understanding of rewards and punishments.

Secretive Communication Network

Strong communication systems are one of the key aspects of organizational life and members use patterns of shared language to reinforce cultural messages. In any organization, having a strong communication system is vital to the successful implementation of a change effort. "Communication is most important in organizations and organizational systems that must deal with uncertainty, that are complex, and that have a technology that does not permit easy routinization. The more an organization is people and idea oriented, the more important communication becomes (Hall 1999:167). Research participants indicated that Elephant has a weak communication system and that communication between principals and employees is "secretive." This finding is a cultural factor because the firm espouses an open and free-flowing communication system where employees and principals alike should feel comfortable sharing information and knowledge with one another. In reality, there is a disconnect between this espoused value and the accumulated and shared assumptions of the organizational members. Principals rarely share information with employees, knowledge is not transmitted effectively between staff and project teams, and efforts to improve the firm's communication network have failed. "I've tried to use technology to help us share information with one another, but unfortunately, our staff never checks their internal webpage. You can't lead a horse to water if he isn't thirsty," one employee said during his interview with me.
Entrepreneurial Spirit

Entrepreneurial spirit is usually seen as a positive cultural factor within an organization. Having a strong entrepreneurial spirit is necessary if Elephant wants to be successful in the adoption of their new architectural-sociology practice model. Entrepreneurship is a shared value among the principals of Elephant. The principals are eager to develop a new organizational form to support their idea of humanistic design. They are willing to penetrate new markets such as consulting and research. The principals’ entrepreneurial spirit is a positive cultural factor because scholars claim that innovation and risk-taking are key attributes of effective organizational change efforts.

Articulated Vision, Purpose, Values, and Mission

The integration cultural perspective espoused by the principals of Elephant is grounded in a shared understanding of the firm’s vision, purpose, values, and mission. For cultural theorists who support the integration perspective of cooperation and consensus, having a well-articulated vision is important to an organizational change effort. Elephant has devoted many resources to the development and understanding of their vision, purpose, values, and mission. This cultural factor has had a positive impact on Elephant’s change effort because staff is aware of the desired future state of the company.

Taken together, these twelve cultural factors provide me with a better understanding of how culture and change are hooked together within Elephant. Elephant’s management may now use this information to reevaluate their change process in order to create a more effective transformation outcome.
Creating a New Architectural-Sociology Practice Model

Through Culture and Structure

Study participants at Elephant have been exposed to the owners' in-depth knowledge regarding the firm’s vision and its notion of blending architecture with sociology into a new architectural practice model. Participants are familiar with the espoused principles and philosophies of the company as well as the actual practice of architecture sociology within the firm. Participants are also knowledgeable about the concept of “organization culture” and most define culture as, “the way we do things around here.” Participants have been exposed to the idea of architectural-sociology through the firm’s visioning process, formal staff meetings, project meetings, and informal discussions with co-workers and principals. Participants are well aware of the owners’ strong desire to create a more tightly knit organization - one with a collaborative culture supported by a collegial organizational structure.

Elephant’s principals are the energy and voice behind the new practice model. The seven owners meet bi-weekly to discuss the progress (lack of progress) being made by the firm. They strategize about ways to create a more integrated culture within the firm. One way in which the principals try to control the culture of the firm is by changing its structure. The principals modified the staff make-up of their firm by using what they call, “cultural layoffs” or “removing the cancer” from the firm. The impact of a cultural layoff is a partial restructuring of the firm’s resources. Project teams and staff roles are renegotiated to accommodate the change in personnel.
Participant support of the firm's new practice model and levels of understanding vary. The owners of the firm, those members who are “in charge” of making strategic decisions for the firm, strongly support the change effort. Middle managers, especially the architects whose identities were linked to “design,” rejected the idea of creating a new practice model. Lower participants were either ambivalent about the change effort or confused by it.

Therefore, the analyses of these data indicate that structure contributes to staff’s interpretation of role expectancies. For example, members of Elephant are situated within the firm’s status hierarchy and apply the “appropriate” home perspective to cultural manifestations and change as dictated by their role. The interactions among these members vacillate between working cooperatively to achieve a shared vision, making sense of on-going conflict, and clarifying confusion while performing daily tasks to maintain cultural stability and cultural perturbation simultaneously.

Changing Member Identifications Through Sensebreaking and Sensemaking

Michael Pratt (2000) recently conducted an ethnography of Amway distributors to document the organizational processes and practices used by the organization to manage members’ identifications. My analyses and interpretations of Elephant’s member identification process draws heavily upon Pratt’s research. While researchers (O’Reilly 1989; Deal and Kennedy 1982) have praised business organizations for creating strong integrated cultures that
promote strong attachments in their members, other researchers (Kunda 1992; Hochschild 1983) have shown that there is a drawback to managing the hearts and minds of employees and that is fear and rejection of change. Attempts to transform others may not always be accepted as positive. As reported by Pratt (2000:457), in their review of identity-transforming organizations, Greil and Rudy (1984) suggested that attempts to transform the identity of members usually fail and that the majority of such attempts result in members leaving the organization or forming a countermovement within the organization that rejects the change efforts of those in power. Consistent with the aforementioned scholars’ findings, my study of Elphant has revealed that the firm’s change effort has created a culture of positive (integrated), negative (differentiated), and ambivalent (fragmented) member identifications. These identifications seem to reflect each member’s sense of self.

The foundational work about self has revealed that the self is an evolving state by which one comes to define himself or herself as an object among other social objects. The self is constructed as we participate in a cognitive, symbolic, and physical world. The individual seeks to understand self via his reflexive world of meanings created through mental processes, social interactions, and shared symbols (Smith and Bugni 2002).

Self construct is an active part of Elphant’s cultural practices and processes to help align individual and organization values, as well as individual and organizational visions of the future. The owners’ integration cultural perspective involves the processes of “sensebreaking” and “sensemaking.”
Sensebreaking at Elphant

Pratt (2000) has defined sensebreaking as a fundamental questioning of who one is when one's sense of self is challenged by others. Sensebreaking "involves the destruction or breaking down of meaning" (Pratt 2000:464) and is similar to dissonance reduction described by Festinger (1957) or "unfreezing" as described by Lewin (1958) and Schein (1987). Moreover and as noted by Pratt (2000) in his ethnographic study of Amway, the main purpose of sensebreaking is to disrupt an individual's sense of self and to create a meaning hole that must be filled by a new meaning. Elphant engages in sensebreaking by requiring its staff to write personal vision statements and then judge whether the statements are "in alignment with the firm's vision statement and integrated culture." Additionally, the firm holds "sensebreaking" meetings they call vision meetings or staff meetings, once or twice a month. During these meetings, staff and owners gather to discuss the firm's vision which calls for a sociological-based form of architectural design. I have been a complete participant in 30 meetings and see the firm engaging in sensebreaking so that it can begin the process of sensemaking.

Where sensebreaking practices are successful at Elphant, staff members emerge from the process with new, redefined, or solidified identities - identifies "supportive of" or "in alignment" with the firm's integration view of culture. However, when sensebreaking practices are unsuccessful at Elphant, staff members emerge from the process with unchanged identities and self-organize into subcultures characterized by compliance, withdrawal, or rejection.
Sensemaking at Elphant

I draw upon the excellent work of Starbuck and Milliken (1988), Weick (1995), and Pratt (2000) to explain the concept of sensemaking. "Sensemaking is the attribution of meaning to some target (e.g., events or other social stimuli) via the placement of this target into one's mental framework" (Pratt 2000:463). At Elphant, the target - the vision which is the "desired future state of the firm" - takes center stage at all times and is the filtering system through which all organizational actions are taken (e.g., celebrations, meetings, decisions, practices, processes, strategies, and rituals).

When both sensebreaking and sensemaking practices are "successful," positive identification with Elphant is created. These staff members fully support and "live" the vision through their language and through their actions. Of the 25 staff members at Elphant, the complete buy-in group has about six members - four owners and two senior managers. My research indicates that organizational members view culture through their position on the firm's status hierarchy or take on the cultural perspective that has come to be expected of their organizational role. For example, an owner's role at Elphant is to provide stability for the organization, eliminate worry and confusion for the employees, and promote a "team" atmosphere. Consequently, each of the owners of Elphant clearly espouses an integration perspective for to expose (publicly) any other perspective would be personal sabotage resulting in perhaps this person being the next victim of a "cultural layoff."
When either sensebreaking or sensemaking practices fail, members withdraw or become compliant with the organization. The majority of staff members identify themselves with either the withdrawal or compliance group, although those "good soldiers" interviewed were reluctant to place themselves into the compliant category.

When both sensebreaking and sensemaking practices fail, members reject the firm's vision and form a negative identification with Elphant. The members in this category are often the members who are fired or part of the "cultural layoffs." Additionally, some staff members "choose" to leave the firm and others "choose" to stay. Those staff members who "choose" to stay give three reasons for their decisions: 1) Some need a paycheck. 2) Some said, "This place is better than most other places out there." 3) "We can do what we want here. There are few rules."

Limitations of the Research

I want to note several limitations relative to the design, execution, and implementation of the case study. First, I limited the study to volunteer participants as guided by the ethical requirements of UNLV's Office for the Protection of Research Subjects. This selection method excluded nine employees. These excluded employees may have added additional important data for my consideration.

Second, during the research project, I was a key employee at Elphant and one who was eager to blend sociology with design. I did not hide my enthusiasm
for the firm's vision from my co-workers and I am uncertain about the influence my enthusiasm had over the study participants. However, I do believe that each volunteer participated truthfully and fully during the study. I believe the data collected to be valid.

Third, the application of the research findings may not be generalizable because the research reflects an in-depth discovery of one firm's culture. The study is a snapshot of the actors' understanding of organizational culture at a particular point in time. Moreover, the study is interpreted through my own sensibilities and current intellectual understanding of research protocol.

Concluding Comments

The cultural analysis of Elephant reveals that the integration, differentiation, and fragmentation perspectives exist simultaneously within the firm as Martin's theory (2002) has previously suggested. But in contrast to Martin's theory, my study reveals that there is a point of cultural convergence within an organizational system. This point is a cultural perspective that is dominated by pre-existing form, yet yielding to actors' ongoing (re)interpretations of changing meaning systems. Within Elephant, this point of cultural convergence seems to be a place unfamiliar to its members, yet common to their everydayness. Simmel (1971) outlines a similar notion in his essay, "The Conflict in Modern Culture" where he describes the duality of culture or the bounded contradiction between subject and object: "The idea of culture dwells in the middle of this dualism."
Also apparent from the study is the idea that Elphant’s ownership body espouses a cooperative culture and views culture through an integration perspective. Using the processes of “sensebreaking” and “sensemaking,” the owners try to manage member identifications and staff’s differentiation and fragmentation perspectives of culture. The owners’ cultural manipulation has been unsuccessful as most members’ perspectives of culture and self have remained unchanged. Hence, Elphant’s attempts to “manage” its culture have failed leaving me to conclude that organizational culture is not a “thing” to be managed. Rather, organizational culture is created and changed through preexisting and on-going social interaction, hard to change definitions of self, (re)negotiated role expectations, and organizational change processes influenced by cultural factors that are created by the harmonious, conflicted, and paradoxical practices of social actors.

Additionally, Elphant’s efforts to create a new architectural-sociology practice model have been impeded by ten negative cultural factors. These cultural factors derive from the organizational structures and processes at Elphant, from the espoused values and philosophies of the firm, and from the unconscious, taken-for-granted learning of the group over time.

And finally, while conducting a cultural analysis of an organization is a complex undertaking, my study has shown that the study of culture is one useful way for researchers and managers to understand the progress of a planned change process because it identifies the cultural factors that either help or hinder formal organizational transformation and it reveals the perspectives through
which organizational members view culture. These new insights may be then used by actors to re-examine their own awareness of the organization's cultural meaning systems.
APPENDIX

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Department of Sociology

INFORMED CONSENT

TITLE OF STUDY: A Case Study of Culture and Change in a Small Architecture Firm

INVESTIGATOR: Valerie L. Bugni
M.A. Candidate

COMMITTEE CHAIR: Ronald W. Smith, Ph.D.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 0406-1276

Purpose of the Study:
You are invited to participate in a research study. The study involves using unstructured interviews, focus group sessions, and participant observation to collect data on the topic of organizational change and culture within the architecture firm wherein you are an employee.

Participants:
You are being asked to participate in the study because you are an employee of the firm under study. ("Elephant" is the pseudonym given to the architecture firm under study.)

Procedures:
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

• Provide demographic data such as your educational background, job title, and years of service to the firm.
• Meet with the researcher for a one-hour interview to share your views relating to the firm's organizational change efforts and culture.
• Participate in a small focus group session where the researcher will guide an open discussion of the firm's change efforts.
• Permit the researcher to observe various meetings and activities that occur at the firm.
**Benefits of Participation:**
By participating in this research study, you will help the employees of “Elephant” understand the impacts of change on your firm’s culture. You may also gain an increased understanding of the various connections between organizational change and culture within your firm.

**Risks of Participation:**
There are risks involved in all research studies. You may experience some hesitancy in answering questions, possibly because they address areas in which you are not familiar or because you believe that your answers will impact the security of your employment. You are encouraged to discuss these matters with the researcher. The researcher will assure you that your answers to questions will not be directly discussed with others and your identity will be protected at all times.

**Cost /Compensation:**
There will be no financial costs to you to participate in this study. The study will take approximately 1-3 hours of your time. You will not be compensated by the researcher for your time.

**Contact Information:**
If you have any questions about the study, please contact the Chair of the researcher’s graduate committee, Dr. Ronald Smith at (702) 895-3322. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, you may contact the UNLV Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at (702) 895-2794.

**Voluntary Participation:**
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relationship with “Elephant” and the researcher. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or at any time during the research study.

**Confidentiality:**
All information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential through the use of fictitious names and locations. No reference will be made in written or oral material that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at the researcher's office for at least three years after completion of the study. After the storage period, the information gathered will be destroyed.
**Participant Consent:**
I have read the information provided and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

________________________________________  __________
Signature of Participant                  Date

______________________________
Participant Name (please print)
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Thesis Title:
“A Case Study of Culture and Change in a Small Architecture Firm”

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