Strategic Organization Special Issue: Strategy and Aesthetics

Call for Papers (Deadline: December 1st, 2026)

Guest Editors:

René Wiedner, Warwick Business School (rene.wiedner@wbs.ac.uk)

Jennifer Whyte, University of Sydney (jennifer.whyte@sydney.edu.au)

Saku Mantere, McGill University (saku.mantere@mcgill.ca)

Robin Holt, University of Bristol (robin.holt@bristol.ac.uk)

Marie-Léandre Gomez, ESSEC Business School (gomez@essec.edu)

There is broad recognition that organizational life cannot be fully understood or managed through rationalist frameworks (Taylor and Hansen, 2005). Scholars across the social sciences, including human geography and cultural theory, have long acknowledged how sensory experience, emotion, affect and embodied practice shape organization (Clough and Halley, 2007; Parisi, 2013). Strategy studies are also beginning to understand how strategically significant phenomena –organizational routines, capabilities and identity, investment allocation and judgment, leadership, environmental adaptation– refuse to be confined to, and by, rational, logically structured analyses. There is an aesthetic aspect to all strategy –it is as much vision as it reason; as much inspiration as analysis (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel, 2008); as much seduction as rationalizing with the dual poetry of iconic imageries and numbers (Kornberger and Clegg, 2011): emotions, feelings, intuitions, desires and instincts can all have strategically significant influence; the symbolic (Meyer et al., 2024) and material dimensions of organising (Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004), alongside questions of purpose and structure across multiple human practices and fields (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011), are all factors for which a successful strategic design must take account; the discursive, ecological and commercial forces to which organizations are adapting continually (e.g., lifestyle consumerism; global and digitized distribution networks or grids) are encountered in aesthetic terms.

Organization theory is responding to this realization across multiple converging developments (Linstead and Höpfl, 2000): the rise of design thinking and innovation discourse that foregrounds creative and experiential dimensions of value creation (Elsbach and Stigliani, 2018); growing attention to materiality and the physical environments in which work unfolds (Gagliardi, 1990; Rafaeli and Pratt, 2013); and post-representational approaches that emphasize how knowing and organizing occur through sensory engagement rather than abstract cognition (Strati, 1999, 2019; Taylor and Ladkin, 2009). From studies of

organizational atmospheres and architectural spaces to analyses of craft work, branding practices, and the aesthetics of routine organizational artifacts (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012), this scholarship has illuminated how aesthetic dimensions permeate organizational phenomena that were previously understood primarily through functional or instrumental lenses.

Despite this flourishing interest, explicit engagement with aesthetics in relation to strategy and strategic management has, for the most part, remained surprisingly limited. Aesthetically-minded scholars have examined topics adjacent to strategy, such as organizational identity, sensemaking, and innovation (Dalpiaz et al., 2016; Ravasi and Phillips, 2011), with the strategic imperative toward creativity (Reckwitz, 2017), or with questions of strategic fit and evolution (such as discerning and following industry recipes (Spender, 1989), and seeking heuristic alignment with, or accommodation of, their broader setting (i.e., adaptation or ecological fit grounded in assumptions that life is a mimetic process of environmental conformity or deviance) (Ansoff, 1990; Chia and Holt, 2023). However, they have rarely focused explicitly on these being aesthetic considerations and experiences which are shaping the emergence and execution of organizational strategies. Conversely, mainstream strategy research has largely maintained its traditional emphasis on analytical frameworks, resource configurations, and performance metrics, with aesthetic dimensions remaining largely implicit or unexamined. Contributing to this mutual neglect may be an underlying assumption that strategy and aesthetics are, to some degree, incompatible: strategy is typically associated with rational planning and directing, while aesthetic experiences are commonly viewed as detached from practical concerns.

This special issue is dedicated to addressing this oversight, and to explicitly investigating the aesthetic aspects of strategic theory and practice. Strategy, we suggest, is grounded in aesthetics in a number of ways that merit further exploration. We invite papers that investigate topics related to strategy and aesthetics, such as (but not limited to):

The aesthetic qualities of strategy work: combining creative expression with analytical rigor; the coexistence of, and interplay between, poetics and reason (Rumelt, 2012; Whittington, 2004). Aesthetically-infused experiences such as awe (Williams & Shepherd, 2025) hold interest in helping to understand how strategic organizations resist the disenchantment of strategy work through over-rationalization (Weber, 1946).

Studies of strategy confronting cultural landscapes encouraging the production consumption of styles rather than goods, posing complex strategic identity choices across audiences with different stylistic preferences and evaluation criteria (Cattani et al., 2021).

How the strategic organization of affective forces is often caught in a fundamental ambiguity between instrumental organization and unmanageable reorganization of experience (Ashcraft, 2017; Beyes and De Cock, 2017).

Examinations of analogue and digital strategic devices and how these contribute to the performance of strategic styles. For example, studies of strategy work and strategizing (Whittington, 2003), whether formally in the boardroom (see e.g., the role of PowerPoint (Kaplan, 2011; Knight et al., 2018) or in informal organizing and strategizing contexts outside it, and online (e.g. through smartphones and the video conference) (Whyte et al., 2023).

Investigations of the strategic appropriation of artistic activity. As noted by Andreas Reckwitz (2017), the avant-garde and other artistic fringe movements that appear to be diametrically opposed to corporate strategy have been selectively used by organizations seeking to constantly reinvent themselves to maximize profitability or simply survive in a market that values novelty and rarity. To tap into creativity, strategy workshops may deliberately draw from artistic practices and generate atmospheres that unsettle (Barry and Meisiek, 2010; Holt and Wiedner, 2024), as opposed to attempting to achieve harmony.

Studies of organizational design and the formation of capabilities and identities that can be structured to elicit strategically significant commitments amongst stakeholders, and which extend to critical engagement with the instrumentality of these structures (Berlant, 2011; Endrissat and Islam, 2022). From the classic "M-form" crafted by a very visible corporate hand (Freeland, 1996), to the fluid heuristic alignments of agile organizations, strategic theory has been interested in shapes, and the context of their alignments (vertical / horizontal etc.) with other such shapes: both deliberate and emergent (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). The aesthetic simplicity and elegance of verbalized or visualized projections in terms of neat, coherent, symmetrical organizational representations, mission statements and purpose declarations is both expected and seductive, despite such forms often bearing limited resemblance with reality (Liedtka, 2008; Mantere and Sillince, 2007).

Inquiries of processual forming and formation. As process studies invoke vitalist and new materialist philosophy, they vaunt a life of fluxing, processual force above that of fixed entities: a metaphysics of substance yields to one of flow (Chia and MacKay, 2007; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Is the organization as a form even a possibility? If not, then to whom are strategists answerable?

Engagements with the raw material of strategy: in*form*ation. As Ciborra (2004) reminded us, information and data are intimate with appearance: they have a certain form, and as they in-form organization, they shape it. Moreover, strategy draws on knowledge that is not only semantically and symbolically codified into numbers and text but appears in different aesthetic forms drawing on different senses (Ewenstein and Whyte, 2007). Strategy is not only argued; it is felt. It has a pre- and para-linguistic dimension. Like music (and art more generally), to be effective, strategy must *resonate*. Aesthetic judgments are shaped by aesthetic regimes that legitimize certain expressions and not others (Rancière, 2009). The prevalence of certain models in strategy documents, for example, is testimony to such a regime: imagine framing profit with anything other than an upward slanting plotted line, left to right?

Connecting strategy and temporality: through aesthetics, strategy (viscerally) connects with pasts and futures, forming them as narrative plots that are crafted to elicit specific feelings of progression, symbolic and communal attachments, and identities. The future cannot exist in any other space than the imaginative, and strategy essentially deals with the *shape* of things to come. Strategic time is fundamentally aesthetic (Barker, 2012). Clock and calendrical time are parsed into discrete, even, rhythmic representations that ground planning activity, the coordination of routines, the scheduling of commitments, and measurement and review of progress. Experiences of time are framed through strategically significant patterns such as the merger (or fragmentation) of future expectations, or the sedimentation of, and challenges to, organizational memory. Moreover, the temporal context is settled through local, regional or national histories which all organizational strategies can use as resources (Carloni et al., 2024), albeit ones that often have an unruly and multiple character.

Timeline and submission instructions

Original manuscript submission Deadline: December 01, 2026 (no extensions granted)

Initial decision communication: April 2027

Revise & resubmit deadline: August 2027

Conditional acceptance decision communication: December 2027

Iterations on conditional acceptances (with editors only): March-April 2028

Unconditional acceptance communication: May 2028

Publication: Nov 2028 issue

All submissions should be uploaded to the Manuscript Central/ScholarOne website: https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/so between **October 31st and December 1st, 2026**. Once you have created your account (if you do not already have one) and you are ready to submit your paper, you will need to choose this particular Special Issue from the dropdown menu that is provided for the type of submission. Contributions should follow the directions for manuscript submission described on the SO webpage: https://journals.sagepub.com/home/soq. For queries about submissions, contact SO!'s editorial office at strategic.organization@mgt.tum.de. For questions regarding the content of this special issue, contact one of the guest editors.

References

Ansoff HI (1990) *Strategic Management*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ashcraft KL (2017) 'Submission' to the rule of excellence: Ordinary affect and precarious resistance in the labor of organization and management studies. *Organization* 24(1): 36–58.

Barker TS (2012) *Time and the Digital: Connecting Technology, Aesthetics, and a Process Philosophy of Time*. UPNE.

Barry D and Meisiek S (2010) Seeing More and Seeing Differently: Sensemaking, Mindfulness, and the Workarts. *Organization Studies* 31(11): 1505–1530.

Berlant L (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press Books.

Beyes T and De Cock C (2017) Adorno's grey, Taussig's blue: Colour, organization and critical affect. *Organization* 24(1): 59–78.

Carloni E, Arnaboldi M, Lorenzini E, et al. (2024) Corporate museums and performance measurement systems. *Museum Management and Curatorship* 39(5): 647–665.

Cattani G, Ferriani S, Godart F, et al. (eds.) (2021) *Aesthetics and Style in Strategy*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Chia R and Holt R (2023) Strategy, Intentionality and Success: Four Logics for Explaining Strategic Action. *Organization Theory* 4(3): 26317877231186436.

Chia R and MacKay B (2007) Post-processual challenges for the emerging strategy-as-practice perspective: Discovering strategy in the logic of practice. *Human Relations* 60(1): 217–242.

Ciborra C (2004) Encountering information systems as a phenomenon. In: Avgerou C, Ciborra C, and Land F (eds.) *The Social Study of Information and Communication Technology: Innovation, Actors, and Contexts*. Oxford University Press.

Clough PT and Halley J (2007) *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Duke University Press.

Dalpiaz E, Rindova V and Ravasi D (2016) Combining Logics to Transform Organizational Agency: Blending Industry and Art at Alessi. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 61(3): 347–392.

Elsbach KD and Stigliani I (2018) Design Thinking and Organizational Culture: A Review and Framework for Future Research. *Journal of Management* 44(6): 2274–2306.

Endrissat N and Islam G (2022) Hackathons as Affective Circuits: Technology, organizationality and affect. *Organization Studies* 43(7): 1019–1047.

Ewenstein B and Whyte J (2007) Beyond Words: Aesthetic Knowledge and Knowing in Organizations. *Organization Studies* 28(5): 689–708.

Fligstein N and McAdam D (2011) Toward a General Theory of Strategic Action Fields. *Sociological Theory* 29(1): 1–26.

Freeland RF (1996) The Myth of the M-Form? Governance, Consent, and Organizational Change. *American Journal of Sociology* 102(2). The University of Chicago Press: 483–526.

Gagliardi P. (1990) *Symbols and Artifacts: Views of the Corporate Landscape.* London: Routledge.

Holt R and Wiedner R (2024) Flipping Sensemaking on its Head: From common sense to sensus communis. *Organization Studies* 45(9): 1253–1275.

Kaplan S (2011) Strategy and PowerPoint: An Inquiry into the Epistemic Culture and Machinery of Strategy Making. *Organization Science* 22(2): 320–346.

Kornberger M. and Clegg S. (2011) Strategy as Performative Practice: The Case of Sidney 2030. *Strategic Organization* 9(2) 136–162

Knight E, Paroutis S and Heracleous L (2018) The power of PowerPoint: A visual perspective on meaning making in strategy. *Strategic Management Journal* 39(3): 894–921.

Liedtka J (2008) Strategy as a "little back dress." In: Mintzberg H, Ahlstrand B, and Lampel J (eds.) *Strategy Bites Back: Strategy in Far More, and Less Than You Ever Imagined: It Is A Lot More, And Less, Than You Ever Imagined*. Harlow: Financial Times, pp. 22–25.

Linstead S, and Höpfl H-J (2000). Aesthetics and organization. London: Sage.

Mantere S and Sillince JA (2007) Strategic intent as a rhetorical device. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 23(4). Elsevier: 406–423.

Meyer RE, Leixnering S, Kornberger M, et al. (2024) Ernst Cassirer and the Symbolic Foundation of Institutions. *Journal of Management Studies* 61(8): 3824–3842.

Mintzberg, H., & Waters, J. A. (1985). Of strategies, deliberate and emergent. *Strategic Management Journal*, 6(3), 257-272.

Mintzberg H, Ahlstrand B, and Lampel J (eds.) (2008) *Strategy Bites Back: Strategy in Far More, and Less Than You Ever Imagined: It Is A Lot More, And Less, Than You Ever Imagined*. Harlow: Financial Times.

Parisi L (2013) *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, and Space*. MIT Press.

Rafaeli A and Pratt MG (2013) *Artifacts and Organizations: Beyond Mere Symbolism*. Psychology Press.

Rafaeli A and Vilnai-Yavetz I (2004) Emotion as a Connection of Physical Artifacts and Organizations. *Organization Science* 15(6): 671–686.

Rancière J (2009) *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*. Polity.

Ravasi D and Phillips N (2011) Strategies of alignment Organizational identity management and strategic change at Bang & Olufsen. *Strategic Organization* 9(2): 103–135.

Reckwitz A (2017) *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New* (trans. S Black). Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Rumelt R (2012) *Good Strategy Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters*. London: Profile Books.

Spender J-C (1989) *Industry Recipes: An Enquiry into the Nature and Sources of Managerial Judgement*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Stigliani I and Ravasi D (2012) Organizing Thoughts and Connecting Brains: Material Practices and the Transition from Individual to Group-Level Prospective Sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal* 55(5): 1232–1259.

Strati A (1999) *Organization and Aesthetics*. Book, Whole. London: SAGE.

Strati A (2019) *Organizational Theory and Aesthetic Philosophies*. New York ; London: Routledge.

Taylor SS and Hansen H (2005) Finding Form: Looking at the Field of Organizational Aesthetics. *Journal of Management Studies* 42(6): 1211–1231.

Taylor SS and Ladkin D (2009) Understanding Arts-Based Methods in Managerial Development. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 8(1). Academy of Management: 55–69.

Tsoukas H and Chia R (2002) On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change. *Organization Science* 13(5): 567–582.

Weber, Max (1946). Science as a Vocation. In Gerth, H. H.; Mills, C. Wright (eds.). *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Translated by Gerth, H. H.; Mills, C. Wright. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 129–156.

Whittington R (2003) The Work of Strategizing and Organizing: For a Practice Perspective. *Strategic Organization* 1(1): 117–125.

Whittington R (2004) *What Is Strategy and Does It Matter?* London: Cengage Learning.

Whyte J, Comi A and Mosca L (2023) Simultaneously Here and There: Situating online organizing in our embodied material practices. *Organization Theory* 4(4): 26317877231217311.

Williams, T. A., & Shepherd, D. A. (2025) Awe-driven venturing: Identifying and pursuing transformational opportunities. *Academy of Management Review*, forthcoming.