

Leadership Excellence and Gender in Organizations

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Sexism made material: Gendered assumptions in office design

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Abstract:

This paper examines the gendered division of office work through the second half of the 20th century through an analysis of office furniture. I argue that sexism was not only socially reproduced through organizational culture, but also made material through the design of furniture. While executive furniture was generally designed for a large male body, secretarial furniture was typically designed for a petite female body. Further, this reproduction of men's and women's bodies in the design of offices was not an accident, but rather was a standard approach tied to the use of human factors in industrial design, which relied on average male and female bodies as the basis for design standards. Using architecture, design, and business periodicals, trade catalogs, advertisements, and archival research, this paper examines how sexism was historically materialized in office furniture design. The long life of office furniture means that even today, organizations use decades old furniture that reproduce this material sexism which was encoded in its design. Contemporary American offices thus contain the echo of these gendered assumptions that were built into the office and continue to communicate messages of belonging to some and exclusion to others.