CHAPTER 8

CHAIR

MARIA LAURA TORALDO
AND JEANNE MENGIS

It's early evening when I arrive in Locarno for a meeting with a film producer. As I enter the central square of Piazza Grande, I suddenly have to stand still. In front of me, thousands of empty chairs in yellow and black (Figure 8.1). They all glare at the large white screen in front of them illuminated by the declining sun. Last night, and as I will be again in a few hours, I was sitting on one of these chairs as I was watching, together with 7,000 other people, a film under the open, starry sky. How different now, no queuing, no thousand voices melting together into a bustling sound when waiting for the film to start. Now, the thousands of empty chairs fill the large square with a sense of emptiness and occupation at the same time. The chairs seem to be waiting for the masses to sit on them again in a few hours as their sheer number anticipates that there is something big yet to come. Further in the back of the square, the chairs' bulky occupation is evident as many of them have been stacked to make space for the public square to be used, at least in part, for the ordinary urban life. As I oversee once more Piazza Grande, it strikes me how the chairs' plastic materiality and precise spatial arrangement strangely contrast, but also remind me of last night's magic of the square, of which each festival goer glowingly tells me about.

Chairs surround us and we expect to find them in the different spaces we inhabit (Highmore, 2011; Bergamasco and Croci, 2012). At work, we spend around 70 per cent of our time sitting. As such, chairs are an instance of the ordinary, an infrastructural technology supporting us in our relational activities with other artefacts and human beings (Highmore, 2011). Despite or because of their ubiquity, chairs go mostly unnoticed, are an ingrained artefact of our lives (Cranz, 1998) and interactions, inherently part of our everyday organizational practices, but rarely attracting the attention of organizational scholars.

In view of our sedentary (office) lives (in developed economies at least), chairs come to matter. They are said to be responsible not only for health problems (e.g., back pain,

FIGURE 8.1 Empty chairs in Piazza Grande, Locarno

(Photo by the author)

cardiovascular disease), but also for how we orient to work and how we interact, for example shaping the dynamics of collaboration among people seated in the same room (Davis et al., 2011). Chairs participate, for example, in indicating employees' status in the office hierarchy, in maintaining power differences and acquired ranks during meetings (Cranz, 1998). At the same time, their aesthetic and symbolic features are equally of importance as chairs are carriers of meaning, contributing to the identification with a place and with their design, surfaces, and materiality provoking an emotional response (Elsbach and Bechky, 2007).

The history of this 'piece of furniture with a back, and usually four legs, on which one person sits' (Cranz, 1998: 7) goes back nearly five thousand years and has taken on a variety of forms, usages, materials, and technologies used for its production (Rybczynski, 2016). Already the ancient Greeks had the Klismos chair and kings throughout centuries were seated on thrones. Chairs became more popular with 'the golden age of sitting' in Louis XV's France (Rybczynski, 2016: 6). Americans of the eighteenth century (and some still today) relaxed on their verandas on rocking chairs and, in the nineteenth century, the Viennese sipped their coffee on bentwood chairs (the most famous being the Thonet chair) (Rybczynski, 2016).

With the increase of commerce, the first 'seated professions' came about. As the financial ledgers of bookkeepers were long, castors were attached to chairs. The modern office chair gradually developed since the industrial revolution; a swivel chair with a height-adjustable seat and a vertical, slightly springy backrest to support the spine (Rybczynski, 2016). Yet, not only functionality, but also design considerations significantly shaped the evolution of the chair. Wegner's 'Round Chair', Saarinen's 'Tulip' chair, Jacobsen's 'Egg', and Eames' office chair are some of the most iconic chair designs of the

last century whose choice of materials, forms, and the extent of technology used, has influenced the social imaginary associated to their function, the sense of comfort and beauty (MoMA Learning, 2018).

The chair is thus not only a physical object with the role of 'seating a person' (MoMA Learning, 2018) and making one comfortable. It also has a complex history of use, of handcraft, of design, and even of artistic representation. In this chapter we trace some of these material and discursive relations. We suggest the chair's agency is only partly given by its specific materiality and by the craft that gave it its diverse forms and features (Rybczynski, 2016). Its agency is also shaped by the manifold artistic, historic, design, and architectural contexts in which it has been placed. For instance, chairs have played a central role in shaping the public's sensibility and taste. A good example being the iconic Hans Wegner's 'Round Chair, later known as simply 'The Chair' because it was regarded by many as the Platonic form of the chair. Designed in 1949, 'The Chair' has been celebrated for its minimalist design; as Wegner declared, it is the 'reduction to the simplest elements of four legs, a seat, and a combined top rail and armrest' (Hollingsworth, 2008: 105), and yet despite being an apparently simple object it is open to infinite ways of interpretation.

In this chapter we touch upon a few of these, to then show how the invisible labour of chairs comes to matter in organizing, in particular, first how chairs configure our relationship with space and second, how they come to represent and reaffirm social roles and positions. These agencies of the chair ensue from a process of ongoing reconfigurations of meanings, relations, and material conditions that are built into chairs and their relations. We want to reflect on how chairs enable and shape organizations and organizational life, what possibilities for (inter)actions are made possible by this object, and how its historical appearance has informed the physical and social dimension of our daily life. Such a reflection may deepen our understanding of the wider structures of relationships that are created by our interactions with mundane objects (Courpasson, 2017), for example by shaping work environments, defining hierarchy and status, providing legitimation, and shaping interaction and communication.

The Longing for Presence by Visualizing Absence: The Empty Chair(s) and Its Role in Space Configuration

In our opening description of the observation at Locarno Festival's Piazza Grande, chairs disclose much about absence and presence and their relationalities. The material presence of the thousands of chairs is such that they fill and occupy the space of the square, providing a more tangible sense of the square's vastness and, at the same time, pushing out the people habitually using the square as they can hardly pass through it or use it as a market space. At the same time, the empty chairs also create a material expectation that they are there to be seated upon and thus point to the absence of an awaited audience. In their state of being empty, chairs convey a sense of expectation that

somebody will come (and be seated) or a sense of the failed expectation that the person or masses awaited to come will not show up. The presence of the chairs and the people's absence thus create a sense of occupied emptiness.

The chair has this quality of communicating absence/presence, expectation/actualization, visibility/invisibility (Cranz, 1998; De Dampierre, 2006) not only because of its materiality with the chair taking space, but also by not being taken. It gains this quality also through its translations and presentations in the arts. We will provide three related examples. The first is the famous illustration of Dickens' library 'The Empty Chair' by Luke Fildes (see Figure 8.2), published in the weekly newspaper *The Graphic* for its Christmas edition in 1870, the year Dickens died. The representation of Dickens' study and everyday surroundings—his personal possessions such as the shelved books, the desk space with the window view—provide a sense of the lifeworld in which Dickens wrote his stories. Yet while the engraving allows us to imagine how the famous author engaged in reading and writing, enjoying the silence and gazing outside, the presence of the empty chair at the centre of the author's personal study also poignantly expresses a sense of absence and void. Dickens, loved for his Christmas stories, was no longer here to write this year's festive tale (Miller, 1997).

Eighteen years after Dickens' death, Van Gogh painted two empty chairs, one called 'Vincent's Chair with his Pipe', the other 'Gauguin's Chair' (Figure 8.3). While the first is painted in light colours of blue and orange, showing a simple straw chair with—on it—a pipe, a handkerchief, and tobacco, the other is more exotic and a night-time scene. Van Gogh described the latter in a letter as Gauguin's 'wooden armchair, brown and dark red, the seat of greenish straw, and in place of the absent person, a lighted candle in a candlestick and some modern novels' (Van Gogh, 1978: Letter 626a, 10/11 February
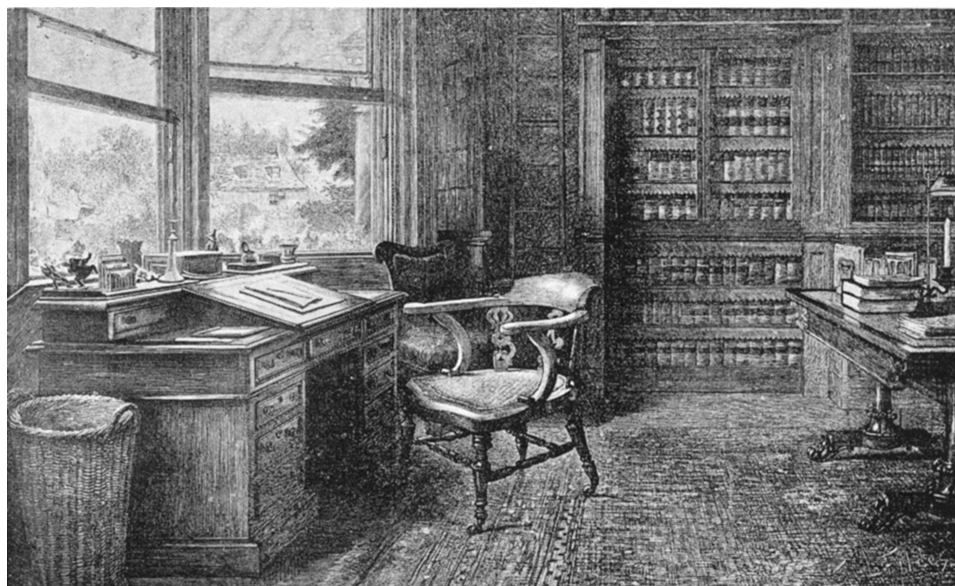

FIGURE 8.2 'The Empty Chair' by Sir Samuel Luke Fildes

(Collection: The Free Library of Philadelphia)

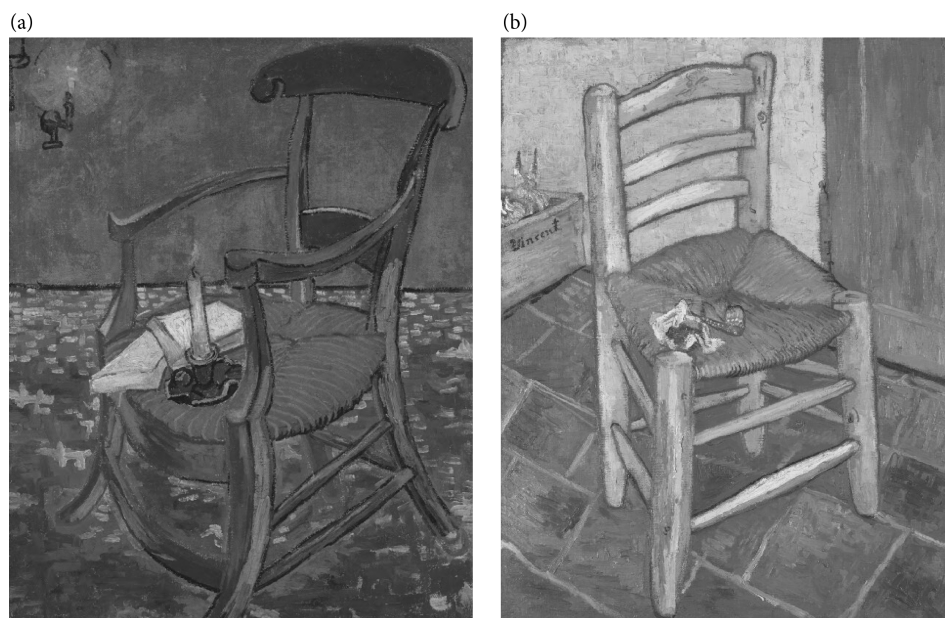(a)   (b)

FIGURE 8.3 'Gauguin's Chair' (a) and 'Vincent's Chair with his Pipe' (b) by Vincent van Gogh

1890). The two empty chairs not only express the artists' very different persona and position in painting, they again presence absence and express a disenthralled expectation. Van Gogh had long waited for Gauguin to come and visit him in his new home in Arles. When Gauguin finally arrived, Van Gogh made the two paintings during the rather turbulent and painful time when the two painters worked next to each other and which ended with Van Gogh mutilating his ear. Van Gogh's letter makes it clear that Gauguin's empty chair directly refers to the absence of the artist, the lost friendship, and the felt void, which leaves Van Gogh only with his pipe, a direct reference to Dickens who advised it as a cure for melancholy (Ochsner, 2016).

A final relation of the chair's quality of absence/presence, visibility/invisibility, expectation/actualization can be found in Ionesco's 1952 absurdist play *The Chairs*. There, the empty chair is multiplied just as in the case of the Locarno Festival. The empty chairs are waiting to accommodate a series of invisible guests desperately awaited by an old couple to finally provide their lives with a sense of meaning and importance. The chairs' number contrasts with the solitude of the couple, with their banal, repetitive dialogue underscoring themes of absence and eternally disenthralled expectations (leading to the couple's suicide at the end of the play) (Tolpin, 1968).

In organizational contexts, empty chairs build on these material and relationally acquired qualities of absence/presence, visibility/invisibility, expectation/actualization. We find empty chairs in the lobby of company entrances and banks, in large, open-plan offices, in university auditoriums. While the occupation of such chairs seems the most natural expression of their purpose, their vacancy takes on multiple meanings as chairs play out their quality of absence and presence differently depending on how they are related to organizational space and work practices. For instance, in open-plan offices, a

chair that is not occupied makes easily visible that a colleague is absent, which becomes an emblematic form of direct social control. As Mumby and Stohl (1991) show, absence from the office becomes associated with a set of values that denote poor commitment and loyalty, despite the fact that their absence does not equate with lower productivity. This is what they define as a 'signified absence', where 'presence/absence is not merely a question of showing up for work or not' (Mumby and Stohl, 1991: 324), but performs multiple functions such as defining deviant behaviours, exerting workforce control, or influencing relationships among colleagues. Here, chairs become an ineludible object whose emptiness exposes employees to gaze and group control.

Absence also comes under scrutiny in Davis et al.'s (2011) investigation of the emergence of the open-plan office, focusing on how facilities, services, and material layout influence organizational outcome. 'Hot-desking', for example, where employees have no dedicated desks, but use those vacant that day, played an important part not only in implementing flexible work arrangements but also in changing workers' reactions to, and interactions with, their workspace (Davis et al., 2011: 194; Millward et al., 2007). One of the most significant changes is a reduction of psychological and architectural privacy, associated with the lack of walls, the use of partitions, and the placement of seating close to each other. At the same time, the empty chair, no longer belonging to any particular employee, does not allow for judgements about individual work commitment, but can be a comment on organizational efficiency. Similarly, in the case of teleworking, working away from the office is socially legitimized as offices are designed to optimize space. In these contexts, the lack of the empty chair does not allow for assessing employees' commitment, although absence has certainly implications on who remains in the office—i.e., those occupying chairs in the workplace (Golden, 2007). In this context, chairs' quality of absence/presence visually marks the physical space and influences collective behaviours in the workplace, meanings, and relationalities. This suggests that the chair acts in concert with the changing practices of work and new spatial configurations of offices. The chair thereby affects not only the material place, but also prompts readjustments in how employees think and identify with their organization (Millward et al., 2007) and how they enact their surroundings (e.g. Halford, 2004; Davis et al., 2011; Tuncer and Licoppe, 2018). Although the chair has multiple discursive and material relations that define its qualities of absence/presence, visibility/invisibility, and expectation/actualization, it remains open to heterogeneous interpretations by workers or managers.

Chairs' Elevating Power: Their Role in Representing and Reaffirming Social Roles and Positions

Guided by the opening illustration, we would like to turn our attention to how the chair configures relations with social status and position. At Piazza Grande, chairs are deliberately the same for all, whether or not the seated person is an invited film star, a

jury member, a sponsor, a politician, or a member of the general public. Chairs are unnumbered and made of the same black and yellow plastic, thus providing equal access, comfort, and even risk. The latter was jokingly taken up by a local fan organization of the Festival, which created a T-shirt representing the festival chair with the text 'so beautiful, so dangerous', thus hinting not only to a famous local advertisement, but also to the problem that some chairs had broken in the past, having suffered too much from the weather. For the Festival, this seating practice was important, expressing notions of openness, democracy, and encounter. At the same time, the Festival had to include a minimal hierarchy in the seating practice first by creating a VIP rank area close to the screen where it could seat guests of honour and by creating a possibility for the general audience to buy seat reservations in order to avoid sitting for long hours on the plastic chairs and waiting for the evening screenings to start.

In this the organizers are succumbing to a time-worn role of chairs: to position the seater off the ground and thereby lend them a higher position, a material expression of uprightness, and metaphorically a sense of integrity, authority, and power, reserved for institutionalized roles and influential groups in a society (Cranz, 1998). Chairs—or certain chairs—have long stood for an invisible mystical presence which human beings venerate and perceive as present during communal celebrations, or for symbolizing hieratic or royal power. An example of this are some mosaics from Ravenna from the sixth century (see Figure 8.4). Here the chair is a symbol of majesty, holiness, and glorification. The iconography of Christ enthroned and surrounded by angels or saints was recurrent across Byzantine and medieval representations, in which chairs and thrones take on similar meanings of an elevated figure and holy supremacy. Similarly, the empty

FIGURE 8.4 Christ enthroned amid four angels, Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy
(Printed with permission of The Archdiocese of Ravenna-Cervia)

throne is one of the most common images of Orthodox Christianity, originating from a pre-Christian iconography (see Figure 8.5). While Greeks or Etruscans used the empty seat as a symbol of an invisible god who was taking part at collective celebrations, in Christianity it is used as a symbol of preparation for the descent of the Holy Spirit. In these representations, the chair discloses much about the representation of social roles, of positions and about an invisible or absent authority ('A Reader's Guide to Orthodox Icons', 2017).

Representations of Byzantine arts—which inherited previous iconographic schemes from more ancient cultures—sharply express, through the empty throne, this sense of authority. At the same time, the chair is also a shaping apparatus that prescribes certain ways of believing and expressing devotion towards official and legitimate authority. Worshippers found in the empty throne a familiar image which through a language of symbols and signs was instructive and explanatory. In other words, the chair is a substitute for a person's institutionalized power acting as a delegate of a recognized authority.

A beautiful illustration of this comes from Charlie Chaplin's parodist movie *The Great Dictator* (1940). During the meeting between Hynkel and Napaloni—fictitious names for the Italian Fascist and German Nazi dictators—the chair offers practical affordances for imposing and resisting positions of power. As Napaloni enters the room through the wrong door, he approaches Hynkel from behind saluting him with an energetic pat on the back, which pushes his counterpart from the chair. This gesture not only underlines

FIGURE 8.5 The empty throne, Arian Baptistery, Ravenna

(Printed with permission of The Archdiocese of Ravenna-Cervia)

his strength and boldness, it is also meant to dislocate Hynkel from his position. The entire scene is organized around power relations, which are particularly displayed through the practice of sitting. Napaloni is seated on a purposefully low chair, so that he is forced to look up to Hynkel and positioning him as inferior. Clearly he is uncomfortable with the assigned seat—and role—complaining: 'I must be a-growing! What do they give me? A baby stool?' Napaloni concludes that 'This is not for me. I like it better upstairs', stands up and takes a seat on the table, now assuming a position of superiority.

From a linguistic perspective, the way the word 'chair' seems to be employed in several expressions and terminology across different languages reflects social positions and roles. Take the phrase 'Chairman of the Board' or similarly, the Latin expression *Ex cathedra*. In both the word chair designates the highest-ranking person in an authoritative group or full authority on a topic, thereby enforcing hierarchy and official position (e.g., a person in charge of a meeting or an organization). The word chair originated from the Greek word καθέδρα (kathédra) and was originally used to identify 'the seat or office of one in authority, as the seat of a bishop, a judge or a professor, or the presiding officer of a meeting or assembly', hence, 'The office itself' (Whitney, 1894). The definition also extended to define situations in which a person fulfils a specific role, such as holding a university chair, to indicate the most senior academic office or position in a faculty.

A further use of the word chair designates a connection with worth and skilfulness. For example, within an orchestra, a chair designates the main player in a family of instruments. In this guise, chairs metaphorically refer to skilfulness, expertise, and responsibility. Discursive frames—which include terminology and textual representations more broadly—thus reproduce existing socio-cultural ideas, relationships, and position and participate in the dynamics of social legitimation of roles and their institutionalization.

Moving within organizational contexts, we also find that 'the form of the chair expresses high status; it separates and elaborates the separation, providing distinction' (Cranz, 1998: 34). For instance, within workspace arrangements, social relations are mediated by spatial configuration (Halford, 2004). Some recent illustrations of contemporary office configuration are telling of how chairs are crucial to redefine conventions, positions and social codes to adopt at work. Iconic contemporary workplaces, such as Silicon Valley corporations and other sharing economy companies are increasingly substituting traditional ergonomic chairs with more aesthetically captivating and leisure-like style sitting solutions: sofas, recliners, poufs, futon chairs, and ottomans as well as more dynamic bar stools, benches, and swivel chairs. One instance is Google's new Zurich office with egg-shaped and lounging meeting rooms, a slide and a pole to drop from one floor to the next, physio ball chairs, inflatable chairs and colourful beanbags (Schwär, 2018). Here chairs are not simply intended for occupation. In fact, chairs are not assigned to anyone in particular but are open to alternative uses and experimentation (e.g., relaxing on an inflatable chair or making phone calls). If traditional office chair design allowed for limited room for motion and expected employees to symbolically connect chairs' occupation with position and status within the company, now chairs are orchestrated to encourage casual encounters and unexpected conversations, communicating values of

openness and equal opportunities. Chairs' designs are therefore a key component for transforming office spaces into more ludic and creative settings, where workplace interactions seem to encourage a playful-like atmosphere—but it is a sort of obedient kind of play where the fun, colourful features across the Google offices and games seem reminiscent of a docile childhood (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011).

Here and in several other contemporary offices we can see at play what Halford (2004) defined as the 'politics of seating', which entailed choices about organizational status and hierarchy. And, of course such an ordering and controlling function is also performed by the use of chairs. As such chairs perform effects in organizing space and in representing and reaffirming social roles and positions.

In conclusion, our analysis was able to unveil that many seating practices, which are ordinarily taken for granted, are instead socialized and learned across societies. Chairs occupation (and position) are paradigmatic of roles, meanings, and positions that this mundane object covers for different cultures in different ages.

References

'A Reader's Guide to Orthodox Icons'. 2017. *Hetoimasia. The Throne of Preparation*. 27 June. https://iconreader.wordpress.com/2013/06/27/hetoimasia-the-throne-of-preparation/ [Accessed September 2017].

Bergamasco, Porzia and Valentina Croci. 2012. *Sedie*. I libri di Artdossier. Florence: Giunti Editore.

Chaplin, Charlie. 1940. *The Great Dictator*. Charles Chaplin Productions.

Courpasson, David. 2017. 'The Politics of Everyday'. *Organization Studies*, 38(6), 843–59.

Cranz, Galen. 1998. *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body and Design*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Davis, Matthew C., Desmond J. Leach, and Chris W. Clegg. 2011. 'The Physical Environment of the Office: Contemporary and Emerging Issues'. *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 26, 193–237.

De Dampierre, Florence. 2006. *Chairs: A History*. New York: Abrams.

Elsbach, Kimberly D. and Beth A. Bechky. 2007. 'It's More Than a Desk: Working Smarter through Leveraged Office Design'. *California Management Review*, 49(2), 80–101.

Fleming, Peter and Andrew Sturdy. 2011. '"Being Yourself" in the Electronic Sweatshop: New Forms of Normative Control'. *Human Relations*, 64(2), 177–200.

Golden, Timothy. 2007. 'Co-Workers Who Telework and the Impact on Those in the Office: Understanding the Implications of Virtual Work for Co-Worker Satisfaction and Turnover Intentions'. *Human Relations*, 60(11), 1641–67.

Halford, Susan. 2004. 'Towards a Sociology of Organizational Space'. *Sociological Research Online*, 9(1), 1–16.

Highmore, Ben. 2011. *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hollingsworth, Amdrew. 2008. *Danish Modern*. Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs Smith.

Ionesco, Eugene. 1952. *Les Chaises*. Paris: Gallimard.

Miller, Andrew H. 1997. 'The Specters of Dickens's Study'. *Narrative*, 5(3), 322–41.

Millward, Lynne J., S. Alexander Haslam, and Tom Postmes. 2007. 'Putting Employees in Their Place: The Impact of Hot Desking on Organizational and Team Identification'. *Organization Science*, 18(4), 547–59.

MoMA Learning. 2018. 'Chairs'. https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/design/chairs [Accessed 20 February 2018].

Mumby, Dennis K. and Cynthia Stohl. 1991. 'Power and Discourse in Organization Studies: Absence and the Dialectic of Control'. *Discourse & Society*, 2(3), 313–32.

Ochsner, Jeffrey K. 2016. 'Meditations on the Empty Chair: The Form of Mourning and Reverie'. *American Imago*, 73(2), 131–63.

Rybczynski, Witold. 2016. *Now I Sit Me Down: From Klismos to Plastic Chair—A Natural History*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Schwär, H. 2018. 'Google has an Office in Switzerland where Employees Take Meetings in Gondolas, Slide between Floors, and Are Summoned to Coffee by the "Heidi" Theme Song'. *Business Insider*, 26 January. http://www.businessinsider.com/google-zurich-headquarters-tour-2018-1?IR=T [Accessed 26 October 2017].

Tolpin, Marian. 1968. 'Eugene Ionesco's "The Chairs" and the Theater of the Absurd'. *American Imago*, 25(2), 119–39.

Tuncer, Sylvaine and Christian Licoppe. 2018. 'Open Door Environments as Interactional Resources to Initiate Unscheduled Encounters in Office Organizations'. *Culture and Organization*, 24(1), 11–30.

Van Gogh, Vincent. 1978. *Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*. New York Graphic Society.

Whitney, W. D. (ed.). 1894. *Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia*. Vol. 1, part 4. New York: The Century Company.