Explaining Greenwashing as a result of dysfunctional organizing

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Project title Explaining Greenwashing as a result of dysfunctional organisations
Number of pages 39,9 - 95.882 marks (max. 96.000)

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Due date 28/05/2025

Abstract

Greenwashing is often theorized as a deliberate strategy by companies to maintain legitimacy and public trust while avoiding meaningful sustainability action. This thesis challenges that assumption by presenting an ethnographic case study of a large construction company in Colombia where greenwashing occurred not as an intentional act, but as a natural consequence of dysfunctional organizational structures. Over a nine-month period, empirical material was collected through participant observation, shadowing, interviews, informal conversations, and analysis of internal documents and promotional materials. Using a radical humanist paradigm of sociology, grounded theory, and the conceptual lenses of functional stupidity and critical sensemaking, the study explores how greenwashing can emerge from institutionalising cognitive immobilization e.g. by enforced hierarchy. This suggests that greenwashing may not always be the result of deceitful actors, but rather a symptom of systemic dysfunction within organizational cultures.

The thesis contributes to existing literature by expanding the theoretical understanding of greenwashing by providing a processual account of agency-centered. It adds empirical depth to theories of functional stupidity and critical sensemaking, and calls for examining the organizational processes that enable symbolic sustainability without substance. This re-framing has implications for both researchers and practitioners seeking to address sustainability failures in complex institutions.

Keywords: *greenwashing, organizational dysfunction, sustainability, functional stupidity, critical sensemaking, grounded theory*

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1 - Introduction

In the period August 2024 to may 2025 I collaborated with a large company specialised in the design, construction and selling of residential towers in Colombia. For the past 10 years the company has made sustainability a strategic priority to cultivate a sustainable organisation producing sustainable products. These efforts have granted recognition from national and international stakeholders, and created a self-identity of being on the sustainable frontier of the Colombian construction sector.

Through narrative mantras of ‘passionately working to bring innovative and sustainable buildings to clients’ this effort has produced a resilient company which, credited to their sustainable profile, meant a maintained steady growth in a period of regression. Looking beyond communication, the environmental and social performance is not correlating with official images. The organisation neglects employees' well-being e.g. by non-compliance to workers’ rights legislation, and buildings are, and have for long, been operating with legal noncompliance.

The company can therefore be said to mislead stakeholders from their poor sustainability performance by overtly positive communication - so called green-or-blue-washing, depending on environmental or social concerns. I denote the combined phenomena as green-blue-washing (GBW). Generally literature suggests that GBW is deliberate and conscious actions or strategies which top-management encourage and apply. In this case, this explanation seems rather reductive since significant company efforts have been put into cultivating this sustainable profile - payment to certification schemes, targeting staff with sustainable educations and investing in sustainability-evaluating tools.

While non-positive aspects of the company or its activities are not reflected in internal or external communications, it is only partly because these are perceived as a threat to the legitimacy of current operations. More commonly, critical readings of situations are often marginalised, self-or-hierarchically suppressed or displaced due to a cultural optimism, bounded rationality or complex dynamics producing continuous pollution of sensemaking - the story about the sustainable frontier itself produces organisational miasma making poor sustainability performance seem implausible.

This leaves the organisation unable to self-diagnose, and presented criticisms of dominant narratives become subject to narrative sensemaking in order to displace responsibility for poor performances outside of the organisation or defend the current business case and its reputation. While the case company does perform GBW, the phenomena happens as a zemblanity of how certain soft and hard infrastructures of unexamined paradigms, narratives or authoritarianism have shaped and are shaping the organisation.
As the Colombian, and global, society must transition to sustainable ways of operating, it is crucial to begin closing the gap between communication, symbolic actions and actual practices.

2 - Problem formulation

For 9 months I worked with and in a major Colombian company. The company has crafted an identity as a leader of sustainable construction, gaining recognition for their efforts. While their communication promotes an image of commitment to innovation and sustainability, the company consistently fails to meet environmental and social standards, including legal noncompliance and disregard for workers' rights. This disconnect can be categorised as green-blue-washing (GBW), misleading claims spanning both environmental (green) and social (blue) concerns.

In this case, the current literary explanations of GBW have only a limited explanatory potential. Since the visibility and urgency of sustainability have increased significantly, so do corporate claims of sustainable and responsible conduct, often with little correlation to their performance. The aim of this thesis is therefore not just to explain how GBW occurs, but to ask why it happens, even among organizations that genuinely believe they are doing good.

Why do large construction companies with intentions of sustainability perform green-blue-washing?

Understanding why the communication of companies, particularly large companies with ample resources to invest in sustainability, and their communication are gapped is central for understanding how to bring them together since they otherwise erode trust, distort the public's ability to evaluate progress, and ultimately delay sustainable systemic transformation.

3 - Strategy for inquiry

Choosing methods for inquiry
To uncover the central aspect of the research question, understanding *why*, a fitting framework of methodology for inquiry is needed. To determine these I seek out methodologies from the field of ethnography, since they are concerned with understanding local realities.
Using this collection of methods and approaches, I immersed myself in a Colombian case company; engaging as participant observer within the employees' day-to-day and office routines, performing interviews, observing and participating in company events and reviewing documents - aiming for representation of the company from a wide array of perspectives.

My reading of complex social phenomena in the field produced gaps between company communication and sustainability performance. These findings were contextualised by contemporary literature around Corporate Sustainability and GBW.

Does the company perform GBW?
Using a theoretical framework of GBW, it was relevant to determine if, and how, the company performed GBW. Analysing the activities revealed that this was the case, but the explanatory reasons of current literature seemed inadequate. The company was not, as literature suggests, performing GBW as a deliberate deceitful activity.

Through interviews and field interactions it was revealed that staff were often placed in ego-dystonic situations to comply with superiors' demands leading to their mentally detachment. Due to the nature of organisational structures the staff often operated with limited information around sustainability, diminishing their ability to evaluate these situations and the impact of their action. Rather the company sees itself as a sustainable frontrunner and criticisms to this identity are perceived as implausible.

To understand the explanatory power of these emerging themes, I turned to the existing theories Functional Stupidity (FS) and Critical Sense-Making (CSM). These theoretical frameworks provide the basis for answering a central question in the explanation of *why* the company performs GBW;
Is the organisation functionally stupid?
Using a combined theoretical framework of FS and CSM, I analyse the company. This analysis shows how functional stupidity has been institutionalised in discourse, organisational rules and identities, unintentionally embedding actions of GBW in a social world where they cannot be diagnosed.

With this, one answer to the research question's *why* is provided - sometimes companies perform GBW not out of malice, but because organisational dysfunctionality and good intentions can co-construct a distant-from-reality image where actual sustainability performance cannot be self-evaluated.

4 - Methodology

4.1 Sociopolitical positioning and polyphony in data

As a sustainable design engineer, I position myself within the sociological paradigm of radical humanism (Burrel & Morgan, 1979). This means that I perceive social worlds as a subjective phenomena and concern myself with alternatives to current (unsustainable) developments.

This frames how empirically gathered material is treated; instead of looking for objective truth or editing informants to be homogenous, polyphony is embraced and a heterogenous perspective on identity is adopted (Alvesson, 2010). Statements, which at first seem contradictory or mutually exclusive, are simply a process of changing identities in response to the dialectical nature of conversations (Hansen & Dorland, 2016), both unseemingly and obviously as demonstrated by Meath et al. (2024);

> *“It is a great place to work, what can I tell you? In the architecture area, I work happily. - Arq coordinator 2, 25/2 (26:54)*
>
> *“I feel that we need things to improve. We appear happy in those ranks, sorry” Arq coordinator 2, 25/2 (56:54)*

In order to allow for the richness of informants and their accounts to represent itself, and as part of the ethnographic process, grounded theory (GT) (Glaser & Strauss,1967) was used to navigate and guide the research design.

4.2 Grounded theory

Grounded theory (GT), introduced by Glaser & Strauss (1967), bases on an inductive logic, where the empirically gathered material develops theoretical understandings. The central research question - *why* companies engage in greenwashing - was approached inductively, without a predefined hypothesis. GT was selected for its capacity to generate theory from empirical realities (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006), particularly suited for investigating complex, socially constructed organizational phenomena that diverge from existing theoretical frameworks. GT emphasises that meaning is co-constructed between researcher and participant and advocates reflexivity and context-specific theorising. Field notes were maintained throughout as reflective memos, serving as both data and analytical tools that supported theoretical sensitivity and reflexive engagement.

GT produces meaning by 3 stages of coding;

Open coding
data is condensed into descrete parts and coded into concepts

Axial coding
different codes are grouped in to categories to identify relationships

Selective coding
identifying a main theme that integrates other categories into a coherent narrative or framework

Fig. 1 Three stages of coding of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)

These coding stages I've done iteratively through the use of the KJ method (Scupin, 1997), organising empirically gathered material by affinity, generating clusters of meaning. Raw data was physically represented; fieldnotes written onto post-it notes, printed out photos or transcripts, and organised on a whiteboard to allow organic emergence of patterns or themes. Later iterations were done digitally.

Emergent themes informed ongoing data collection, engagement with theory and pre-existing literature, and refinement of the research focus. A sense of theoretical saturation was considered to be reached when successive interactions no longer generated new or dissonant themes to the main emerging insight - that the organisation was either *not aware* of its sustainable shortcomings or aware individuals *lacked agency* to challenge dominant narratives.

Although no formal model was constructed, the research provides a grounded intervention into dominant greenwashing theory, which often assumes strategic misrepresentation with deceitful intent. This study instead highlights how unintentional greenwashing can arise through organizational dynamics, fragmented internal logics, communicative dissonance, and power asymmetries - pointing to new possibilities for intervention.

4.3 Ethnography

I immersed myself in the company as an ethnographic field in the form of an internal collaborator, while performing *action research* (Argyris et al., 1985) in 2 strategic initiatives, centered around sustainability and compliance with upcoming Colombian legislations. Czarniewska (2014) describes ethnography as translation of the unique local language of the context, capturing how real-time sensemaking takes place, into a meaningful object for outsiders, and thus stresses reflexivity and awareness of the ethnographer in shaping the field. Similar suggestions are to be found in Coffey (2018) who suggests researchers' acknowledgement of positionality, subjectivity, and influence on the field and writing.

Thus, it is worth noting two elements which have influenced the field and writing.

1) Language

As a Colombian company, the spoken language was Spanish with few bilingual employees. Initially, meetings were held with a supporting translator, but soon I spoke enough Spanish to carry myself.

To aid in my shortcomings, interviewees have been, during interviews as well as in writing, asked to expand upon transcribed statements and translation is close to word-choices or connotation.

Regardless, cultural differences between me and colombians could have influenced data interpretation

> *“Danes are very literal where Colombians are more exaggerating; sometimes you might take what people say too literally, and miss the cultural element of colombians’ way of talking”* I&S Director, 2/5-25

To complement the interviews, I kept books of fieldnotes to document informal conversations, photos, videos, email chains, text messages, thick descriptions, reflections and observations for the duration of the project.

2) Arriving with agency

As part of my education in sustainability and my affiliation to important strategic initiatives, I was perceived as an expert closely associated with management. I therefore arrived at the field with agency.

This was a double-edged sword. On one hand, it placed me in a position where employees could confide in me the things they wouldn't normally say to their bosses

> *“Im telling you this because you can do something good here and my moral compass feels better*” Sustainable analyst, 18/9

On the other hand, closeness to management, meant that employees would self-censor in my presence;

> *“I'm not going to disagree with [Founder]’s favorite! They literally gave him (me) a fistbump and said ‘good job’ after their meeting*” Sustainable analyst to Auxiliar 2, 1/11-24
>
> *“They are scared that you're going to tell their boss, that’s why they dont answer”* Data specialist 1, 26/2

or use me to promote political interests:

> *“I will help you, but on one condition; that you talk good about me to [Founder], they like you”* Engineer 1, 3/12

I constructed a narrative where I was there to aid the whole company, not a particular group, but that I could not fix a patient without diagnosis - why I required honesty. I stressed that I wouldn't use the results of my work ‘against’ any particular individual, and that participation was anonymous. This narrative worked, sparking employees’ candid confessions in conversations.

Czarniawska (2014) describes two types of output; a descriptive & narrative ethnography. This report uses these to ethnographic outputs, first to present the field and afterwards to contextualise and inquire around the problem statement.

Descriptive Ethnography

Descriptive ethnography aims to provide a detailed description of the setting, its social practices and the cultural norms which guide its participants, in order to provide a coherent representative picture of a social world.

I took on the role of participant observer (Coffey, 2018), embracing the average workday from 8-17 for the period, seated in an office cubicle amongst employees, participating in regular run-of-the-mill meetings, informal conversations in and outside of the office, using the company's tools to perform work tasks and *shadow* (Czarniawska, 2007) actors in the field. To avoid using behaviour as a proxy for culture, I asked follow up questions of *why* a certain task was done a certain way or *how* it relates to their occupation.
These interactions have been recorded when the setting allowed, but have mostly been written down in field-books during or after events, and were supplemented by company-internal-and-public documents such as process documentation, strategy statements, sustainability reports, legal documents, building standards, certification demands or stage-gate deliverables. A list of ethnographic interactions can be seen in appendix 1.

Narrative Ethnography

Narrative ethnography focuses on producing an account of a social setting told through encounters between researcher and field where ambiguity and contradictions are highlighted. To produce such an account a series of structured and semi-structured interviews were performed centered on themes of sustainability, work practices or company communication (Coffey, 2018)

Interviews

Coffey (2018) describes interviews as socially situated, interactional events where interviewer and participant co-construct meanings. Thus ethnographic interviews are rich but partial accounts of social reality, and must be complementary in the ethnographic output to other methods to interpret broader contexts.

Interviews, and the themes around which meansings were co-constructed, are a product of a reflective and dialectical process (Dorland & Hansen, 2016, see figure 2). In this process my subjectivity has affected not only which contradictions were deemed relevant to bring into conversations, but also which contradictions became visible.

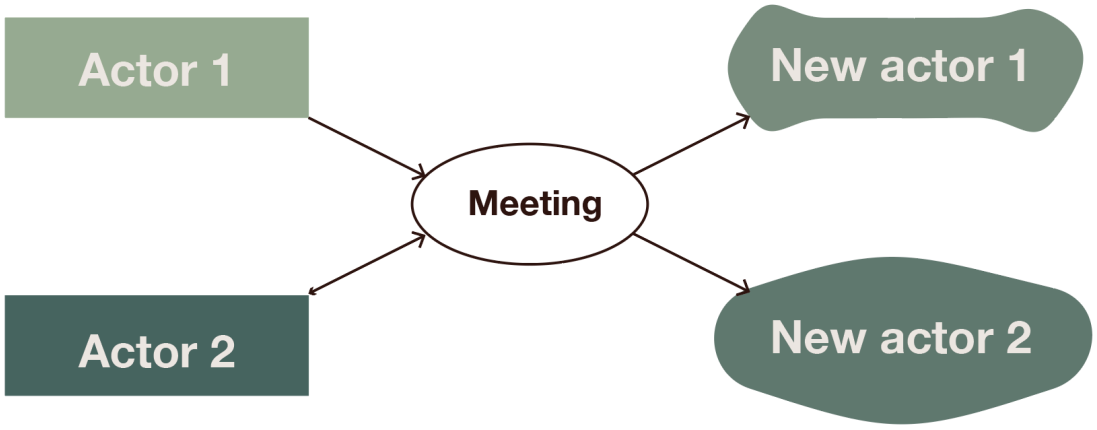
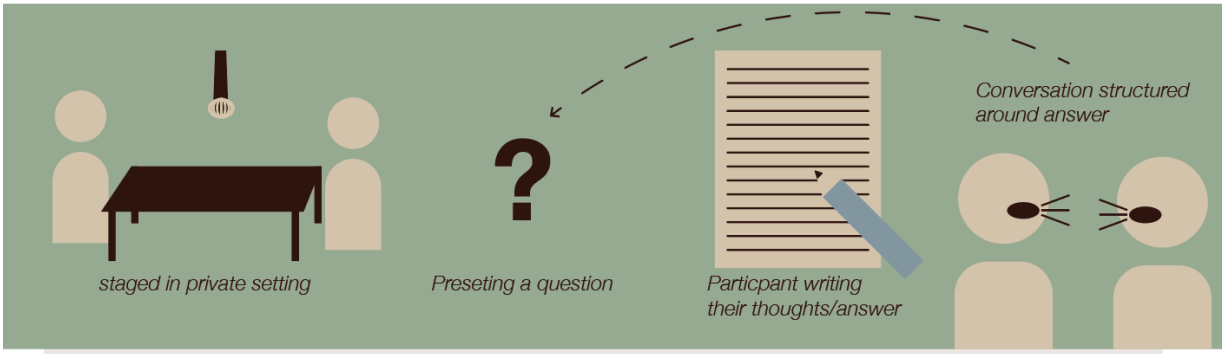


Fig. 2 Conceptual illustration of the dialectical process of interviews, inspired by Van de Ven (1995)

Structured interviews

The structured interview centres around a predetermined list of questions (Coffey, 2018). The strength of the method lies in that potential consistency across multiple sources for data

comparability, on the cost of limiting participants in exploring their own meanings or narratives. To mitigate some of the limitations of structured interviews I adapted an interview guide of Triviñi (2023) who used similar open-ended questions to shed light upon the deeper context of sustainability practices from the interviewee's perspective (ibid, p.8). Furthermore between each question we engaged in a free reflexive dialogue around the answer or organisational life (see figure 3)
I performed a total of 11 structured interviews; 5 directors, 3 managers & 3 'regular' employees, ranging from 20 to 90 minutes. All but one have been recorded and transcribed (appendix 6)



Interview guide

Q1 What is your understanding of sustainability from a business perspective?
Q2 How would you assess the current sustainability practices & mindset of the organisation and of your department?
Q3 Can you provide an example of how sustainability has successfully been embedded in the organisation?
Q4 What initiatives would you propose to create awareness and importance around sustainability?
Q5 What steps would you consider in order to align sustainability efforts with the overall goals and objectives of the organisation?
Q6 Can you describe a time where you had to make a decision not to prioritise sustainability for other priorities, and how did you arrive at that conclusion?
Q7 What is the biggest challenge in your department/work right now, not necessarily related to sustainability?

Fig. 3 Interview format and guide for the structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews, intended to inquire about a certain theme without a fixed line of questioning, were used in moments when I encountered a particularity, ambiguity, situation or contradiction to which I would like a member to provide their readings or reflections. Sometimes semi-structured interviews were staged in a private meeting room, other times as an informal conversation.

4.4 Literature study

To deepen & broaden the inductive insights generated from the gathered empirical material, emerging themes were reflected in contemporary literature (figure 4).

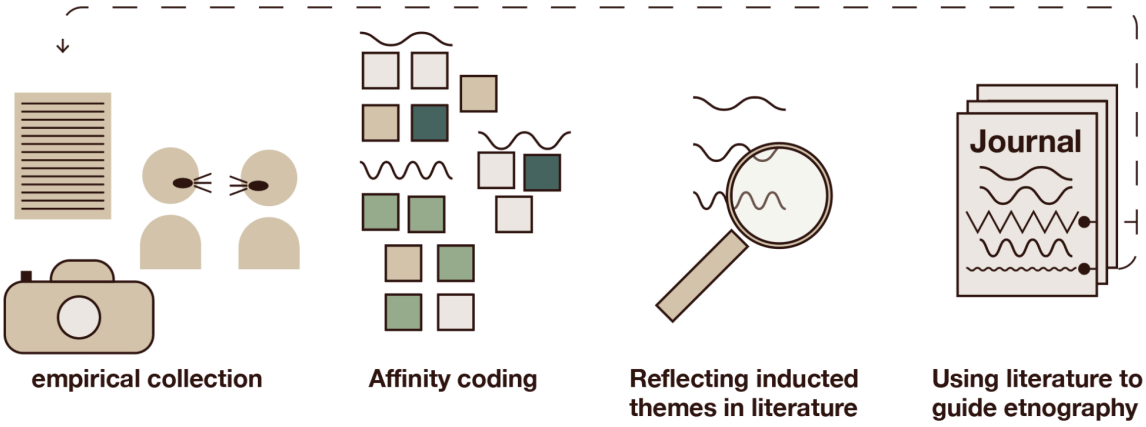
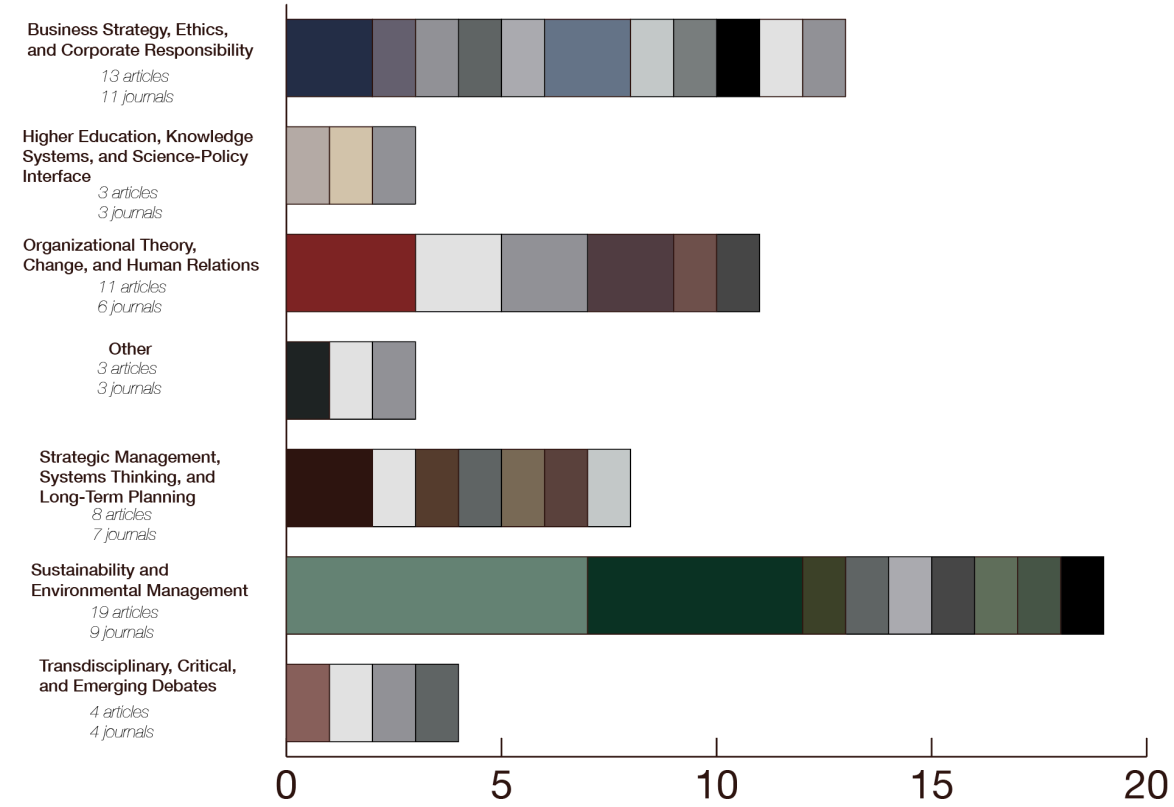


Fig. 4 The iterative process of ethnographic study, analysis and literature

Relevant literature were found by using affinity-generated themes as keywords-strings in Scopus;

[Sustainability, organisations; cultural change]
[Greenwashing, business models, construction]
[Transdisciplinarity, Change, Sustainability]
[Functional stupidity, Sustainability, ethics]

and prioritising writings with high citation amount or new relevant research to form an overview of the literary state of the art around the problemformulation's themes. A total of 62 articles were selected for detailed review, from 43 journals published in the period 2003-2025. The journals can be categorized into 6 profiles (see figure 5).



Business Strategy, Ethics, and Corporate Responsibility

Business Strategy and the Environment, 2024
Business Strategy and the Environment, 2025
International Journal of Project Management, 2017
International Journal of Project Management, 2022
Accounting Forum, 2020
Accounting, auditing and accountability, 2025
California Management Review, 2011
International Journal of Management Reviews, 2016
Journal of Business Ethics, 2018
Journal of Business Models, 2023
Journal of business research, 2025
Journal of Business, Ethics and Society, 2023
Social Responsibility Journal, 2024

Higher Education, Knowledge Systems, and Science-Policy Interface

Digital Scholarship in the Humanities, 2021
Educational Administration: Theory and Practice, 2024
International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education, 2019

Organizational Theory, Change, and Human Relations

Administrative Science, 2017
Human relations, 2010
Human Relations, 2017
Human Relations, 2017
Journal of Management studies, 2012
Journal of Management, 2016
Journal of Organizational Change Management, 2022
Journal of Organizational Change Management, 2023
Organization & Environment, 2008
Organization Environment 2013
Organization Studies, 2003

Other

International Hospitality Review, 2022
Journal of Sport Management, 2021
Oxford University Research Archive, 2015
Univeristy of Michigan, 2010

Strategic Management, Systems Thinking, and Long-Term Planning

Implementation Science, 2013
Journal of Management Reviews, 2014
Long Range Planning, 2010
Long Range Planning, 2020
Open Journal of Business and Management, 2023
Procedia CIRP, 2015
Systems Research and Behavioral Science, 2005
Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 2023

Sustainability and Environmental Management

Ecological Perspectives for Science and Society, 2017
Environmental sciences europe, 2020
International Journal of Sustainable Building Technology and Urban Development, 2017
Journal of Cleaner Production, 2015
Journal of Cleaner Production, 2016
Journal of Cleaner Production, 2017
Journal of Cleaner Production, 2017
Journal of Cleaner Production, 2018
Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences, 2014
Journey of environmental management, 2022
Resources, Conservation & Recycling, 2017
Sustainability Science, 2018
Sustainability, 2019
Sustainability, 2021
Sustainability, 2022
Sustainability, 2022
Sustainability, 2022
Sustainability, 2022
Sustainability, 2025

Transdisciplinary, Critical, and Emerging Debates

Business Environment. Proceedings of the 16th International Conference Liberec Economic Forum, 2023
Global Social Challenges Journal, 2023
Production Planning & Control, 2018
Prometheus, 2022

Fig. 5. Origin of literature; journal and year

5 - Ethnographic description of the company

The following chapter is my ethnographic account of the company. To understand the field of study I present key characteristics of the company, its regulatory and market context, which practices the company employs to deliver the value proposition, how working in the office feels and finally mentalities towards sustainability.

5.1 Key metrics - products, size, location, age

The company has designed, constructed and sold residential building towers in Colombia since its founding by the leading family in 1990. In 2024 the company had, including contractors, a total of 4287 total employees with the main activities, workforce and leadership in Medellin.
Despite a slight recession in the market (Suárez, 2025) the company grew its workforce 21% and its revenue 26,4% between 2023 and 2024 (fig. 6). It managed to increase economic retention by 4 percentage points, almost double the numerical value, although social investments dropped 9 percentage points and the average salary fell by 2,3%.

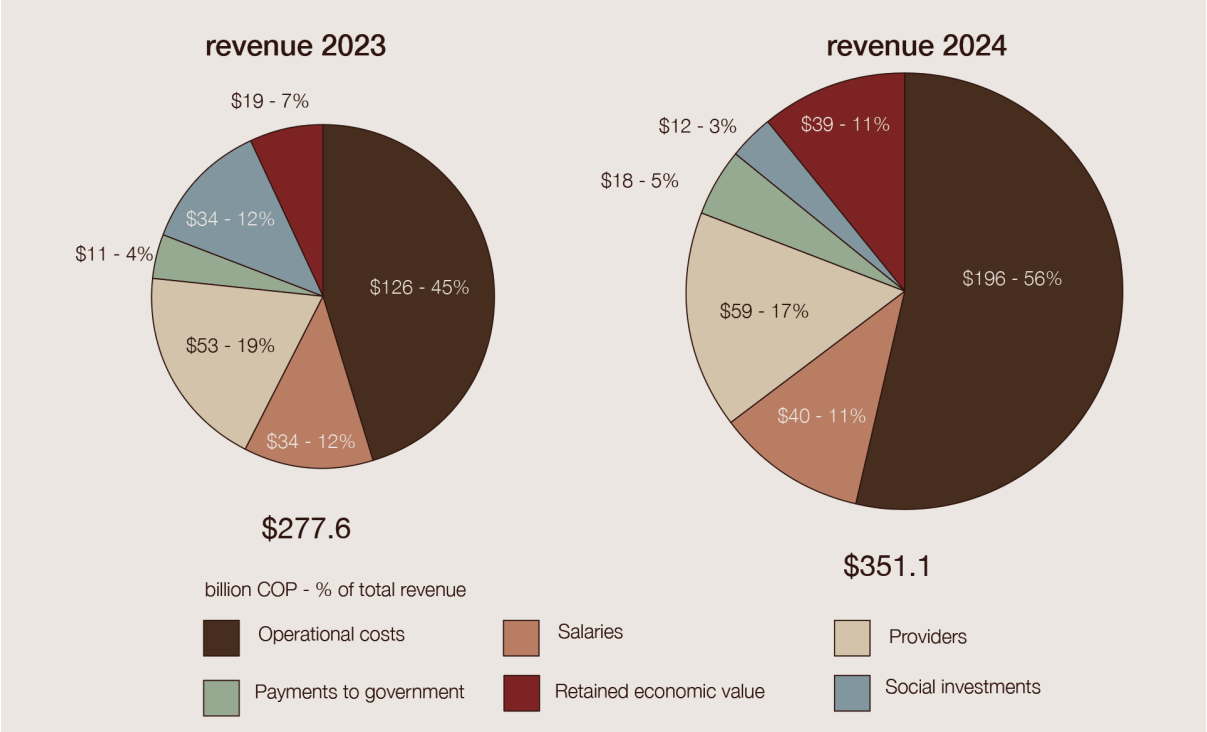


Fig. 6. Revenue distribution of 2023 and 2024 taken from sustainability report of company (Sustainability report, 2025)

The company has embraced sustainability as part of their value proposition (see figure 7), espoused values (Schein, 1984), strategic initiatives and a self-developed Corporate Sustainability Concept (CSC) (see chapter 7).

> *"You will find that we do more [for sustainability], than the average constructor"* - Env Engineer 11/3-25

The company was, in 2019, the first to certify a residential building with the *Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design* (LEED) in Colombia. In 2022 the company was awarded the status of B-corp and received recognition for their sustainability efforts; e.g. by the International Finance Corporation. In later years the company has subscribed to the

Excellence in Design for Greater Efficiencies (EDGE) which has become their main certification.

Fig. 7. Value proposition, company purpose and the SDGs they have incorporated in company communications (adapted from appendix 2)

Up until September 2024 the official strategic goal of the company was “to have 100% sustainable projects”, but it has been changed to the more market-oriented: to “Fulfill 7000 dreams before 2026” (see chapter 5.5).

The legacy of a ‘family company’ is marking the organisation in the form of an informal hierarchy, welcoming employees into the family upon onboarding (Appendix 3) and elevating the family-members or their associated employees.

> *“I never understood why [name] became director, maybe it's because they are a good friend of the higher ups” Lawyer, 13/4-25*

Management, maybe as an extension of the family narrative, requires employees to follow the company instagram profile (person. com. Lawyer, 10/4) or occasionally asks for employees to personally share promotional material on their accounts (person. com. HR manager, 14/4). It's also common practice for management to contact employees outside of working hours e.g. to ask for employees to volunteer (figure 8 below)

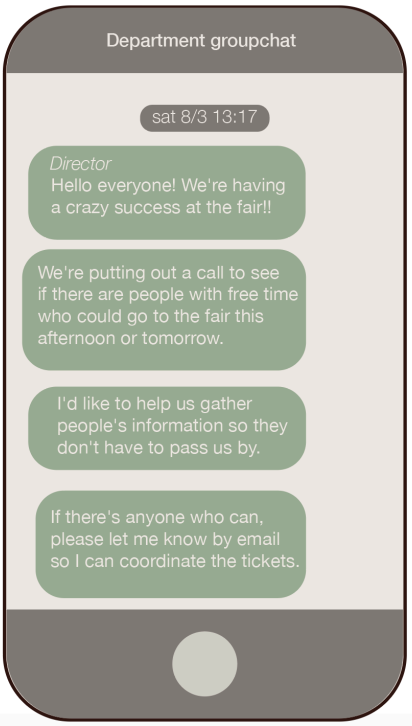


Fig. 8 Illustration of text send by director to the department groupchat saturday 8/3, translated from original language

5.2 Office-life, responsibilities & Work practices

It's important for the ethnographic description to develop an understanding of the staff's lived realities. Therefore I present features of this form of office-life and how work is coordinated and performed.

Office life

The main office is located on 4 floors in Medellín of open office-landscapes, where employees of each department are seated together. The landscape is broken by directors' offices, who have more space and a higher degree of privacy, either from floor-to-ceiling-wall or perpendicular placement to their department (figure 9 below). Non-management staff are seated by desks in personal 'cubicles' with walls on 3 sides and their backs to their coworkers.

Fig. 9 Stylised representation of half of one office-floor

Due to the office's openness and frequent online meetings/calls, the noise level in the office reaches high levels (Figure 10). To cope and maintain focus its common practice of the employees to wear headphones; listening to music, podcast or watch youtube videos.

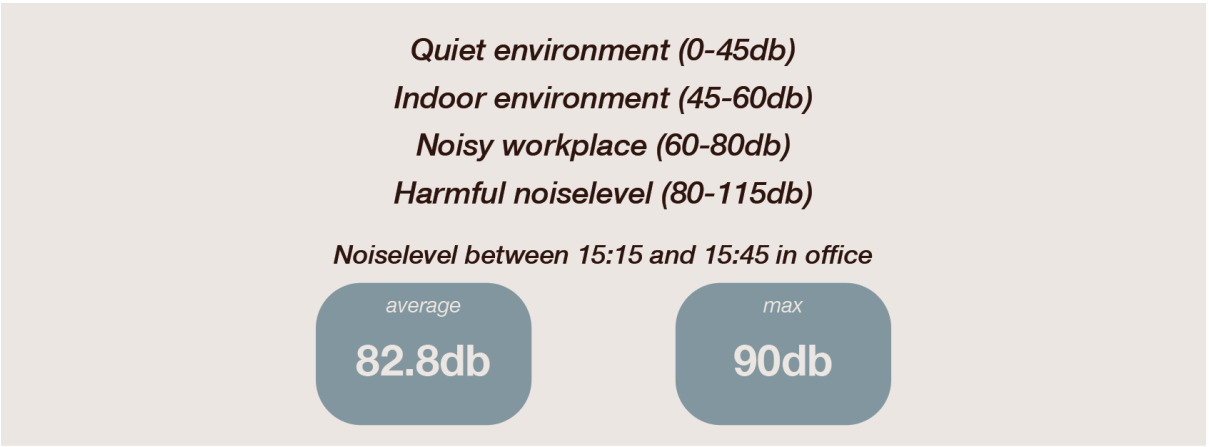


Fig. 10 Sound measurement in office, 21/4 between 15:15 and 15:45

In these isolating conditions, there is low flow of people between the various departments and interaction between coworkers in the same department.

> *"What kills us a little bit is that many people see their place of work as their desk. they just to sit to do what they hired them to do technically for 10 hours a day, we don't talk together" It-specialist 27/2*

This has led to generally monotone and repetitive work days or tasks for the employee (appendix 4).

Responsibilities

The organisation is organised in functional silos with a director of each department above a layered structure - each with clearly defined roles (see figure 11).

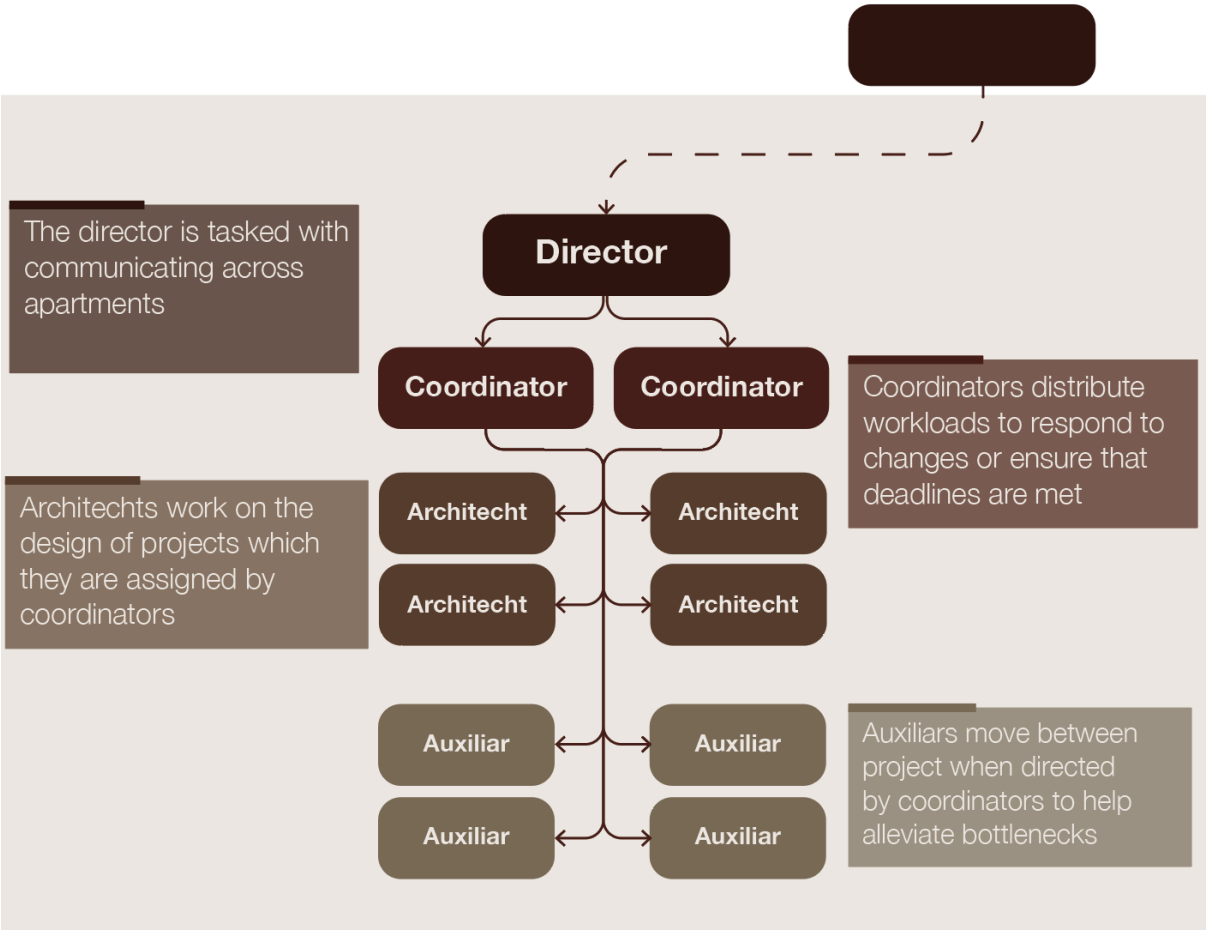


Fig. 11 Example of organisational architecture.

The lowest level employee, the auxiliar, performs changing supporting tasks based on workload or priorities. The architects are responsible for the design of assigned projects - distributing the boring tasks to the auxiliar (pers. com Auxiliar 2, 18/4).

> *"The architects are assigned to their projects. We don't have any assigned projects. We are like a public use for the coordinators" Auxiliar 1, 17/2*

The coordinator is tasked with distributing work to meet deadlines and the director's job is to communicate with directors of other areas in case changes happen.

Work practices

To aid in coordination of the employees across active projects, the company developed a stage-gate inspired model as a Standard Operation Procedure (SOP), which delineates responsibilities and deliverables of the various departments to ensure steady flow and

timeliness (figure 12).

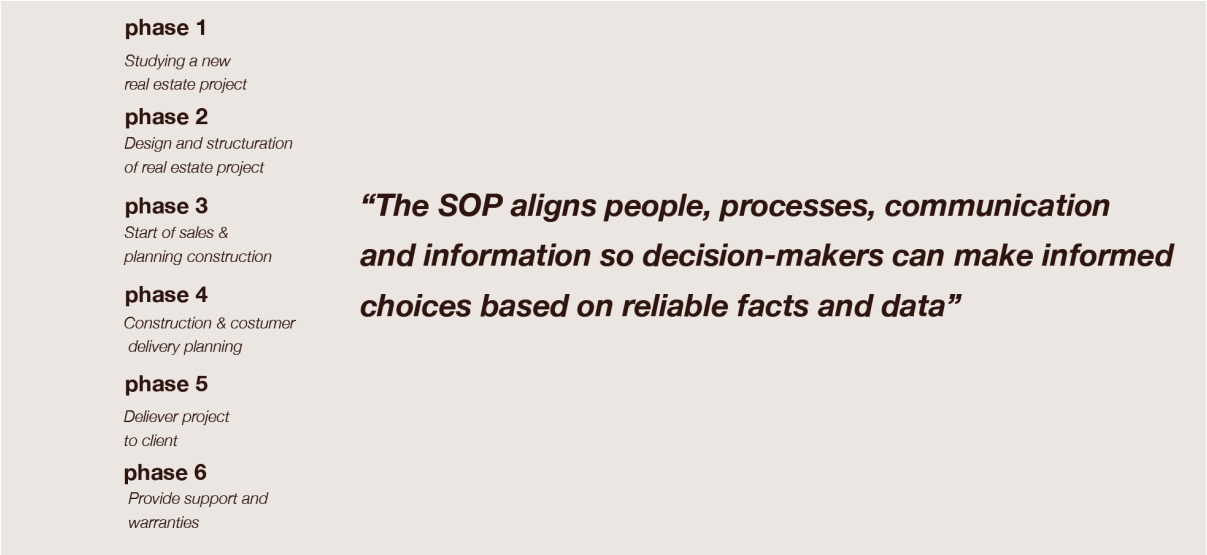


Fig. 12 SOP model - adapted from appendix 5

Despite the fact that the actual activities of the company doesn’t work with the model and its stage-lengths, its deadlines are rigorously enforced (pers. com Arq coordinator 1, 22/4).

The company has integrated the Building Information Modelling method (Ocean, 2024) in the SOP, allowing each department to perform their work on the same project, extracting the information of each other work (Engineer 1, 22/11) all from their individual desk-computers. BIM software allows the company to standardise a large part of their design process, divide labour and provide relevant information to the employees technical task. In this structure architects can’t access cost; structural engineers cannot access thermal properties of materials, and neither have access to sales-numbers or certifications - despite being key performance indicators of the company.

5.3 Legal & regulatory contexts

In 2015 the Colombian construction sector became subject to Resolución 0549 (2015) - defining an upper legal limit for operational water-and-energy-consumptions of buildings - to promote sustainable construction and demand constructor-responsibility for the building’s operational stage.
This has been furthered with exception of certain taxes and financial support for sustainable activities (Ley 1955, 2019; Decreto 2106, 2019), a green taxonomy (Gobierno de Colombia, 2022), stricter legislation of environmental liabilities (Ley 2327, 2023) and upcoming legislation for a carbon neutral construction sector before 2050 (CCCS, 2022 - fig. 13)

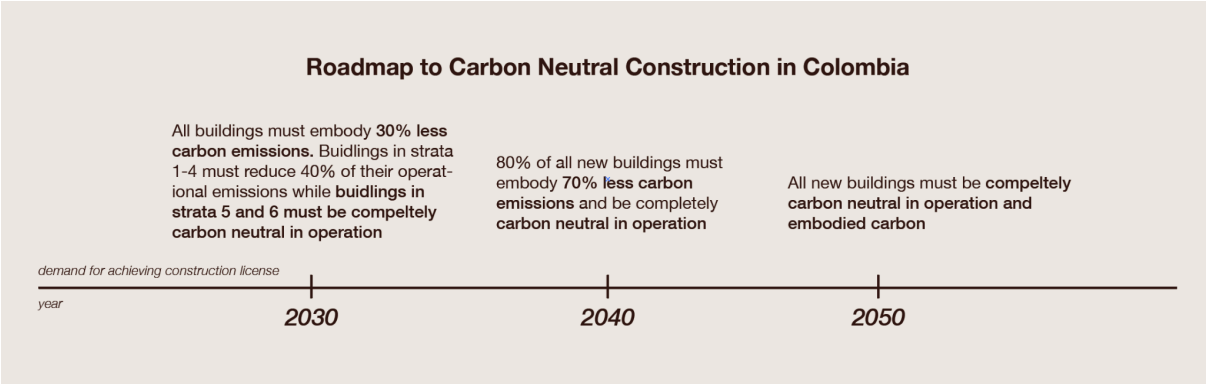


Fig 13. roadmap to carbon neutrality, adapted and translated from CCCS (2022, p.13)

The organisation feels the increasing regulatory demands (I&S Director 28/8-2024), but also that finance institutions have begun using CSR-reporting in risk-evaluation - offering better financing models to more sustainable companies (SiP Director, 2/5). One way for companies to attempt compliance with these legal demands is through international certifications. These have been promoted by the private building association and the certifications providers, as if certifications automatically grant legal compliance (Peleaz et al., 2016). One such certification is EDGE.

EDGE

Excellence in Design for Greater Efficiencies (EDGE) is a 3-leveled certification scheme (figure 14) created by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to *"...respond to the need for a measurable and credible solution to prove the business case for building green and to unlock financial investment."* (EDGE Buildings, 2025).

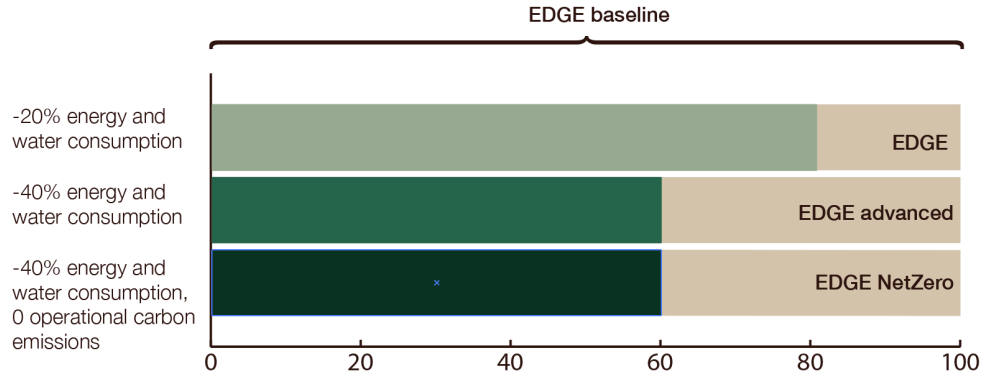


Fig. 14 Comparative consumptions between EDGE baseline and certifications, (EDGE Buildings, 2025)

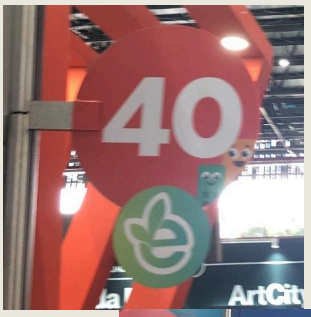
The certification is granted by modelling key building parameters online, until a minimum of 20% of embodied and operational emissions are saved. Following this, an external assessor reviews the model, but there is no evaluation of certificated buildings during operation (Consultant 2, 10/3).

It is communicated and assumed that certified buildings are compliant with resolution 0549 (Pelaez et al., 2016), since EDGE claims that their methodology

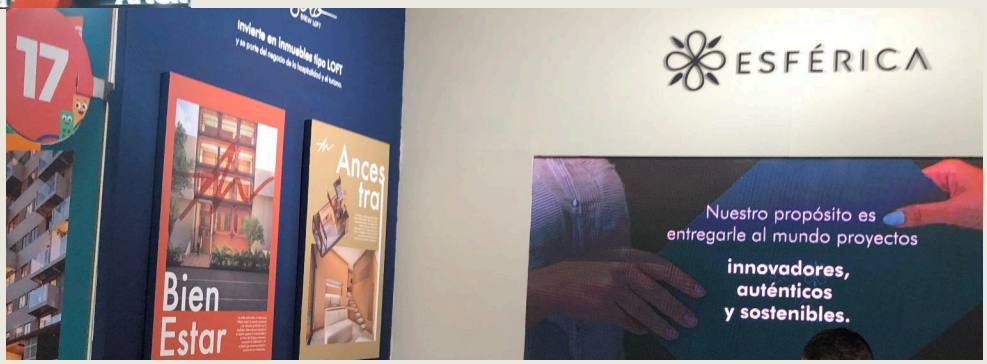
> *"has been customized at the local level through the support of country-based institutions."* - IFC, 2019, p.2

It appears that, while the market provides incentives to become sustainable (better loan rates, tax exemptions, legal compliance), audit-systems are faltering *(see vignette below)*

Observation 8/3 approx 1'o'clock
The Colombian constructors' association, Camacol, hosts a fair where members present more than 400 residential projects (Expo Inmobiliaria, 2025). Camacol has placed a small sign - an 'e' - on certain stands, signalling a certified sustainable constructor.



I interpret that many companies invoke sustainability without this sign, thus without any verification of sustainability claims. Most blatantly Esférica, who claims to "deliver sustainable projects". When asking I&S Director they say "It's very common in Colombia since the audit system is so bad" (10/3)



5.4 Sustainability journey

To respond to changing regulatory and client demands, the company began a 'sustainability journey' in 2015. In this, they used (inter)national certifications in their communication to all stakeholders, as validation of good practice and to position themselves in the market.
In this process, being amongst the first in Colombia to certify with LEED and B-corp, has been woven into the company's fabric of legends.

> *"With Conaltura we built the first LEED-certified project in Colombia, which generated great recognition at the national level. I was not in the company when it happened, but, obviously, it is an iconic fact that we still put in our brochures. And, in the end, it does generate sales "* - Marketing manager, 26/2-2025
>
> "*Today we are proud of that, for how difficult B-crop is to achieve, and for what it means*" A&C Director, 26/2

Image 1. the 'certification wall' in the company's reception - under the headline "A certified path"

This journey is displayed in the office reception with a shelf of certifications (see image 1). It is the first thing employees and visitors notice upon entering the workplace.

5.5 The virus

During the 'sustainable journey' the company was, like most, hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. Personal accounts of the period, ascribes it as a pivotal moment for the company; submitting the existing staff to layoffs, in one department half the staff were let go (Civil engineer, 18/3), and placing economic retention as a top priority.

> *"After COVID we have a kind of 'poor mans' attitude at the top. They really do not want to invest in the company. They want to control more and more and they want to exploit more and more value"* Civil engineer, 18/3

Seemingly this mindset, despite the recent years growth and financial performance above pre-pandemic levels, is still affecting company discourses - being in a crisis "*where every little thing can make the entire thing go upside down"* (pers. com. I&S Director, 3/4-24)

> *"This year we are in crisis, well we are always in crisis, but this year more" Sustainable analyst, 28/10*

Accompanying the sustainable journey, the company's overarching strategic goal was "100% sustainable projects" (Appendix 2), which was reflected on several murals in the office (Image 2).

Image 2 - Example of one company mural promoting sustainability

In September 2024, however, the strategy was revised. A new overarching goal was chosen, reflecting a new company priority: 'client centeredness' (see figure 15 and Appendix 2).

Old strategic goal

We want

100% sustainable

***project* in 2024**

New strategic goal

We want more than

7000 dreams

***fulfilled* before 2026**

Fig. 15 Strategic goal before and after September 2024. Fulfilled dreams implicitly refers to selling apartments.

Following this strategic change, some murals were, in a ritualistic-manner, changed (image 3).

Image 3. Company mural of the new strategic and goal (for translation see appendix 2)

While sustainability still has a large presence in the new strategy, the change in overarching goal was given a symbolic value by staff

> *"Before, the strategic goal was all about sustainable projects. This year it's sell, sell, sell. I feel that the drive towards sustainability has waned a lot." Architect 2, 17/2*

Czerniawska & Sevon (1995) promotes that translations of ideas happen group-internally - we perceive ideas with what we already consider natural. The change in strategic goal thus potentially has its roots in an internalisation of the covid-19 aftermath narrative, and understanding how the organisation has locally translated sustainability becomes a matter of inquiry.

5.6 Sustainability mindset

Through a series of interviews (see appendix 6) the mindset and approach to sustainability has been co-explored. A common theme in these accounts is, that sustainability is part of maintaining the company's legitimacy to operate, mitigate risks of financial or reputational backslash, and that sustainability is a property that the company already 'has'

> *"Sustainability is approached to identify risks and face environmental and social challenges that impact the business negatively or positively." SiP Director, 19/2*
>
> *"Sustainability is the perfect alignment between social, economic and environmental aspects, where all three contributes to efficient projects that generate profits for both company and client" Arq coordinator 1, 21/2*

> *"Sustainability is the methodology that already exists and will determine the development of a company today and in the future" Arq coordinator 2, 25/2*
>
> *"Sustainability is a differentiating element that can be exploited to attract the public and have benefits."* Marketing manager, 26/2

The company has made strategic investment in sustainability; prioritising staff with some educational background in, or personal orientation to, sustainability (SiP Director, 14/12-24). This has worked, with current old and new employees citing the company's strong sustainability dedication as reason for onboarding (Architect 2, 3/4; Interior designer, 20/3).

> *"Sustainability was the reasons I was attracted to working here" - Engineer 1, 30/4*

The directors of the company thus describe lack of sustainability not as a knowledge issue, but as a 'cultural' one.

> *"There is sustainable awareness [in the company] and all architects are 100% oriented towards and implementing the sustainability goals, but more culture is needed" Arq Director, 4/3*

They intent to change this cultural issue through campaigns or new incentivising structures:

Selection of interview with SiP Director 19/2

Me: What initiatives would you propose to further integrate sustainability?

SiP Director: I would propose a system of incentives to follow the different cultural programs that we have; like waste recycling or donating clothes. In these programs people generate that awareness that we want, or that culture of sustainability that we want in the organization.

Me: Do you think that if we take initiatives outside the work situation, it will impact the work situation?

SiP Director: Yes. Yes. Yes. Because they are linked as sustainability guidelines that, yes or yes, have to be fulfilled. Because it's something strategic. We want to change the culture of sustainability. So, it's about changing the mentality of people and applying sustainability issues in their daily lives. I mean, really changing the culture of people, and not just because they are working here and because it's their job to do so. The idea is that that culture is so strong that it comes out of the organization's 7 to 5. We want that when they go home, they tell their children "come, we have to separate, we have to make donations or collect clothes for social causes, or com, let's change the lamps in our house to promote the efficient use of energy" We want that a culture of sustainability develops within our collaborators.

Despite strategics and seemingly well-meaning-and-informed staff, the coherency between espoused and lived values are at times questioned, since sustainability receives little resource-support (pers. com SiP Director 19/2)

> *"I feel that the methodologies* [of sustainability] *fall short for the impact that it could generate. It may be that the company uses it as a marketing speech to says more than what it currently is, but they could be better*" Arq coordinator 2, 25/2
>
> *"I'm going to confess one thing to you. I feel that money is prioritised over sustainability*" Data specialist 1, 24/2

> *“I don't know if I can talk about a sustainable company, when people who don't work with sustainability in their focus”* A&C Director, 26/2

While the company has received many certifications for its great conduct, staff voices that management is not actually dedicated towards sustainability.

> *“When management starts to bring down those political ideas to the lowest levels, they see it as a temporary discourse. On many occasions, what is said, from management, lacks execution”* - It-specialist, 27/2

Combining this image with the ritualistic change in strategy (see chapter 5.5), the company’s motivation for engaging with sustainability is perceived as reputational or insubstantial.

> *“Certification becomes an instrument to go out and get external validation and show it like ‘hey look at me I have my certifications”. They're just trying to get certifications to put them here in the lobby.”* Arq coordinator 1, 21/2

Some even go as far as interpreting the sustainability mindset, practices and strategy of the company as ‘greenwashing’

Interview 17/2:

> *Me: How would you characterise the practices and mindset around sustainability here?*
>
> *Architect 2 (immediately): greenwashing, to be honest, I mean, I think we use sustainability in a very commercial way. It's just how to attract, spending the minimum effort or money.*

It appears that the employees have internalised sustainability as a form of ‘insurance’ for their operations; both that they wish to have less negative impact on the world, but also that there are significant legitimising benefits of the concept. To reflect the produced insights about the company and its sustainability approach, I gathered relevant literature on Corporate Sustainability (CS) and GBW.

6 - Corporate Sustainability and Green-Blue-Washing

6.1 What is Corporate Sustainability

Global societies are dawning upon multidimensional crises rooted in irreversible damages by current unsustainable systems. New demands are placed on organisations, urging them to aid in the divergence from contemporary projections (Sachs et al., 2019)

As a response the concept of Corporate Sustainability (CS) has emerged; a “*leadership and management approach that a corporation adopts so that it can profitably grow and at the same time deliver social, environmental and economic outputs”*. (Kantabutra, 2022, p.5). In CS, social, environmental and economic disciplines work together transdisciplinary, without internal hierarchies (Brandi et al., 2022; Müller et al, 2005), to break away from narrow instrumental ideas of sustainability (Broman & Robèrt, 2015). Thus CS must, in order to contribute to sustainable development, be integrated in company activities (Witjes et al., 2017).

Adams et al. (2016) states accordingly that "*Sustainability-oriented innovation involves making intentional changes to an organization's philosophy and values, as well as to its products, processes or practices to serve the specific purpose of creating and realizing social and environmental value in addition to economic returns" (*p. 180), mirrored by Kiesnere & Baumgartner (2019) who state that without changing underlying business logic companies will not be able to contribute to sustainable development. Brooks et al. (2018) characterises CS as a trait incorporated by companies to maintain legitimacy to operate, adopting CS to grant a pay-off, conform to the market or signal prestige to their environment. One such means is the use of green-certifications (Carlos & Lewis, 2017).

Sroufe (2017) finds that CS *'easier said than done'* (ibid., p.316) since sustainability knowledge is not easily institutionalised into existing practices (Edwards & Tamsin, 2013). Rodrigue et al. (2012) finds no relationship between companies' statements, systems of governance and environmental performance, which Lindahl & Westholm (2014) explains by how short-term instrumental objectives of companies keep sustainability at bay. Abbett & Whisnant (2010) finds that managers' resistance to change by engaging in dynamic conservation of systems from which they reap benefits, while Silvius et al. (2017) point to how time and cost considerations take priority in decision-making. Thakur & Mangla (2018) stress that human factors, rather than operational or technological, are more determining for success management of change for sustainability.
Platje et al. (2019) and Bocken & Geradts (2020) both point to how strong subscriptions to certain paradigms leads to an inability to utilize or learn knowledge - posing a barrier to sustainable development.

Ethical motivation of Corporate Sustainability

Schaltegger & Burritt (2018) define 4 ethical positions of companies for engaging in CS (see figure 16)

Ethical management version of CSR	Underlying ethical position	Examples of sustainability management activities	Business case rationale	Type of business case
Self-seeking behaviour defending the conventional business approach	Utilitarianism: "What is in it for me?" (e.g. Kohlberg (1981)	End-of-pipe measures, philanthropy, etc. Costs incur to protect conventional business case	Sustainability is solely seen as a cost of doing business. The goal is thus to minimise expenses associated with sustainability to maximise short-term profits.	Reactionary protection of conventional business case
Narcissism, self-aggrandisement and seeking for grandiosity	Consequential utilitarianism: "What is in dealing with visible sustainability issues for my corporation's financial success?" (e.g. Friedman, (1970); see also Roberts (2003)	Visible sustainability projects communicated well in advertisements and reporting	Sustainability offers an opportunity to enhance corporate reputation (and thus profits). The goal is thus to create positive reputational effects associated with sustainability to maximise short-term profits.	Reputational business case *of* sustainability
Striving for business performance excellence	Business as a responsible citizen: "What is in it for our corporation's overall success (economically, environmentally, socially)?" (e.g. Porter and Kramer (2011)	Clean production and innovative product development	Sustainability offers opportunities to improve operations and create new business. The goal is thus to improve organisational operations by considering sustainability to optimise long-term success.	Responsible business case *for* sustainability
Developing business with stakeholder participation and collaboration	Pragmatism: "What is in it for our corporation's and society's overall success (economically, environmentally, socially)?" (e.g. Weick (1979); Wicks and Freeman(1998)	Joint development of a project, organisation, standard, etc. which is jointly valued to create a solution to a sustainability problem	Sustainability as an opportunity to enhance societal and environmental well-being including a firm's financial viability. The goal is thus to improve the whole business to create social, environmental and financial benefits by working with stakeholders including the vulnerable.	Collaborative business case *for* sustainability

Fig. 16 Ethical reasonings of management for adopting CSR. From Schaltegger & Burritt (2018) Table 3. p. 254

I focus on the utilitarian positions, the self-seeking or grandeur. These engage in CS to protect current business cases or improve reputations. Thereby there is indication that *some* companies will not engage in CS with the intention of changes in product, processes, values and philosophy - as demanded by Kiesnere & Baumgartner (2019) and Adams et al. (2016).

Pedersen et al. (2024) who studies the effect of certifications on organisations note that occasionally companies use certification schemes to verify their existing practices, with no intent to self-examine or change the organisation.

6.2 Green-Blue-Washing

Companies driven by utilitarian ethics can thus be motivated to communicate sustainability actions to defend their current business case. Demas & Burbano (2011) studied that, amongst other factors, the lax regulatory framework around sustainability allows companies to perform GBW - misleading stakeholders around their actual sustainability performance by obscuring their practices through symbolic manipulation (Usmani et al., 2020). This is supported by Reppmann et al. (2025) who emphasises stakeholder transparency to link CS talk with CS actions.

De Frietas Netto et al. (2020) defines GBW as *"the intersection of two firm behaviours; poor environmental performance and positive communications about environmental performance"* (ibid. p2), and is characterized by intent to maintain unwarranted legitimacy through misleading stakeholders. Greenwashing is here associated with environmental concerns and bluewashing with social. In the context of sustainability; which bridges the boundaries of both, the two are synonymous (ibid.).

Pedersen et al. (2023) state that companies adopt GBW as part of their business model, deliberately disconnecting value propositions from the transformations system, to create a false sense of ethical commitment, reap financial benefits while distracting from real issues or obscuring complicity in harm. These actions of 'disconnecting' business units are made by the company leadership, assumed to have a complete overview of the organisation; Usmani et al. (2020) points to the CEO, while Zhang et al. (2023) to the top-management group.

De freitas Netto et al. (2020) defines 13 sins of GBW:

1. The sin of the hidden trade-off:
a claiming 'greeness' based on a narrow set of attributes neglecting other environmental issues.
eg, branding energy sources as clean while neglecting the biodiversity loss of drilling (Baum, 2012)

2. The sin of no proof:
an environmental claim that can- not be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information
e.g facial tissues which claim recycled content without providing evi- dence (TerraChoice, 2010)

3. The sin of vagueness:
a claim that is poorly defined or too broad
e.g. 'Green' or 'Eco-conscious' being meaningless without elaboration (Baum, 2012)

4. The sin of worshipping false labels
using suggestions or certification-like images to appear like a legitimate green certification
e.g. green jargon such as "eco-safe" and "ecopreferred" (Baum, 2012)

5. The sin of irrelevance:
Truthfull but unimportant claim misguiding environemtally oriented consumers
e.g. a product being'CFC-free' despite the fact that CFCs are banned by law (TerraChoice, 2010)

6. The sin of lesser of two evils
a claim that is true, but distract from greater environmental impacts of the product category
e.g. Organic cigarettes (TerraChoice, 2010)

7. The sin of fibbing
environmental claims that are simply false
e.g. Shell's Tar Sands project despite its unsustainability it was promoted as an investment in tomorrow (Green Business Benchmark,2021)

8. The sin of false hopes
a claim that reinforces a false hope.
e.g. the oil gas industry claiming that ecological modernization of the industry is possible (Scanlan. 2017)

9. The sin of fearmongering
Fabricating insecurity related to not capitalize on a technology
e.g. the oil gas industry using political instability to alter perceptions on the risk of fossil fuels (Scanlan. 2017)

10. The sin of broken promises:
claims promising that activities will produce positive societal outcomes
e.g. the oil gas industry promising the uplifting local communities through fracking despite the opposite being true (Scanlan. 2017)

11. The sin of injustice:
promoting benefits of activites to stakeholders that do are not negatively impacted by the same activity
e.g. Coca-Cola's campaigns about returning water to communities while depleting groundwater resources (War on Want, 2007)

12. The sin of hazardous consequences
greenwashing hides the reality of inequality and distracts from risks or dangers
e.g. Volkswagens advertisement of low emission dieselcars while cheating the testing systems (Loudenslager, 2020)

13. The sin of profits over people and the environment
e.g. the nestlé opposing slavery in cocoa production to avoid costumers (Baker, 2018)

Fig. 17 13 sins of greenwashing from De freitas Netto et al. (2020) with examples for each sin

The Canadian environmental consultancy TerraChoice reported that 95% of products claiming greenness in Canada and the USA committed at least one of the greenwashing sins (ibid., 2010). Contreras-Pacheco & Claasen (2017) studied greenwashing and brought 5

processes of GBW:

Dirty business
belonging to an inherently unsustainable business, but promoting sustainable practices or products that are not representative either for the business or the society.

Ad bluster
diverting attention from sustainable issues, through the use of advertising. It is used to exaggerate achievements or present alternative programs that are not related to the main sustainability concern.

Politial spin
influencing regulations or governments in order to obtain benefits that affect sustainability.

It's the law, stupid!
proclaiming sustainability accomplishments or commitments that are already required by existing laws or regulations

Fuzzy reporting
taking advantage of sustainability reports and their nature of one-way communication channel, in order to twist the truth or project a positive image in terms of CSR corporate practices.
.

Fig. 18 Five firm level greenwashings. Inspired by Contreras-Pacheco & Claasen (2017) figure 2

These are performed through various means e.g. *decoupling* where core operations are protected by symbolically adopting policies (Pedersen et al., 2023.), *means-ends-decoupling* where there is consistency between said and done, but actions have little relevance for organisational core goals or processes (ibid.) or selective disclosure, where only positive data are communicated (Macellari et al., 2021). In this there is a connection between utilitarian ethics (Schaltegger & Burritt, 2018) and GBW.

Delmas & Burbano (2011) separates drivers of greenwashing into stemming from 4 areas; the market, the regulatory context, the organisation itself and lastly the individual members (figure 19 below)

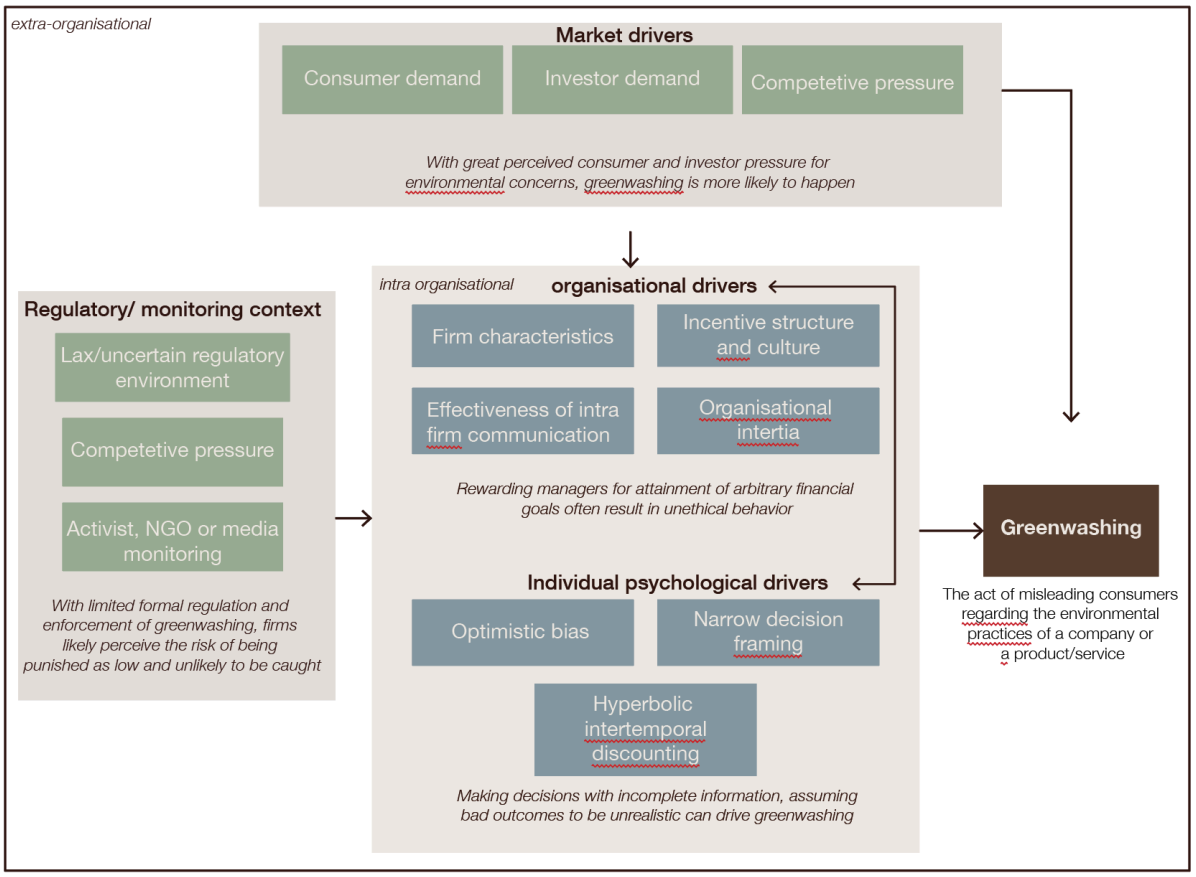


Fig. 19 Drivers of greenwashing. adapted from Delmas & burbano, 2011 figure 2

The GBW concept is rather new, and has not crystallized a stable definition (de Frietas Netto, 2020). Therefore much literature stands outside of one or more organisations and sheds light upon past events (ibid.) or outcome of processes (Contreras-Pacheco & Claasen, 2017) to define the phenomena (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

7 - Does the company perform Green-Blue-Washing?

As presented in 5.6, the company's ethical motivation for incorporating CS resembles a reactionary or reputational protection of their business case (Schaltegger & Burritt, 2018). Similarly, as shown in chapter 5.3, the Colombian regulatory context is relatively lax and the market offers good financial incentives for green companies - conditions with ample risk of firms seizing their opportunity to GBW (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

> *"You can just build whatever you want here; nobody cares" - Sustainable analyst, 18/9*

This 'opportunity' is not passed by Colombian companies. Recent colombian studies show that many utilize selective disclosure or false ecolabeling to perform GBW (Henao-Rodríguez et al., 2025; Talero-Sarmiento et al., 2019) with gaps between symbolic and substantive CS actions (Linares-Rodríguez et al., 2023). Even the company's certifications (EDGE and LEED) have been noted to be used in GBW activities (Peláez et al., 2016), with a substantial number of certified buildings not compliant with resolucion 0549 (2015)

In the following chapter I use the company's communication in comparison with actual sustainable performance of products or the organisation.

7.1 Company sustainability concept

In order for the company to deliver the sustainable aspect of its value propositions, they developed their own Corporate Sustainability Concept (CSC). This local translation of sustainability structures efforts into 7 ambiental or social concerns, which are evaluated through 38 criterias (see table 1).

Concern	**Description (appendix 7)**	*Example of criterias* *(appendix 7 p. 2-3)*
Conservation of water	Protect water sources, prevent pollution and use the resource rationally	*Legal withdrawals from water bodies are respected.* *Minimum projected water savings in building operations (compared to the 2016 ASHRAE baseline): 20%.*
Energy and climate change	Use energy efficiently to reduce our carbon footprint and our impact on climate change	*The carbon footprint of the project's construction is calculated and reported.* *Minimum energy savings during construction: 1%.*
Airquality, health and comfort	Create comfortable and healthy spaces to maximize the well-being they generate for their future residents.	*At least 90% of the regularly occupied spaces in the apartments receive adequate natural lighting based on the activity performed in each space.*
Circularity in the use of resources and materials (later renamed to Circular Economy in 2024)	Use resources rationally, minimizing the waste generated and promoting proper waste separation to maximize its use.	*When the lot has buildings, the possibility of preserving them for use as temporary buildings during construction and/or as a definitive part of the project to be delivered should be evaluated.*
Biodiversity	Promote the conservation and restoration of green areas in projects to promote biodiversity	*The negative impact on biodiversity is minimized during construction*
Urban integration and mobility	Generate projects that integrate with their surroundings by evaluating access to the public transport system and promoting active mobility	*There are at least 4 different uses and services within a radius of 400m and/or 10 different uses and services within a radius of 800m*
Social impact	Strengthen awareness of sustainability among our stakeholders	*The project's sustainability attributes are communicated clearly and transparently to stakeholders.*

table 1. Description and exemplified criterias of the company sustainability concept (see appendix 7)

I will present five examples of GBW; two of greenwashing, two of bluewashing and one example of promoted actions with no relevance for the company's core processes; GBW by *means-end-decoupling* (Pedersen, et al., 2023).

Example 1 - Consumption analysis

I have analysed the operational water and energy consumptions gathered by a Colombian service company from six of the company's certified buildings in the period from when clients moved in (2018) until December 2024. I exemplify one - the remaining can be found in appendix 8.
The project received the 2nd EDGE level (Advanced), since promised and projected consumption was significantly below the EDGE-baseline, and thus presumably also below the legal limit of resolution 0549 (figure 20).

"[Project name] recieved certification in category EDGE Advanced: a category which project with projected savings equal to or above 40% recieve" *- promotional material of the company*

Projected savings of EDGE certification

45%	**42%**	**56%**
Energy savings	*Water savings*	*Less embodied energy in materials*

Fig. 20. predicted savings of project taken from EDGE Buildings (2022) & a statement from the company's promotional materials (appendix 10)

Despite this, from june 2022 until last measurement, the building has been consuming outside of the legal framework, double of the market average (Espinosa et al., 2022) and as much as 400% of the EDGE projections (figure 21).

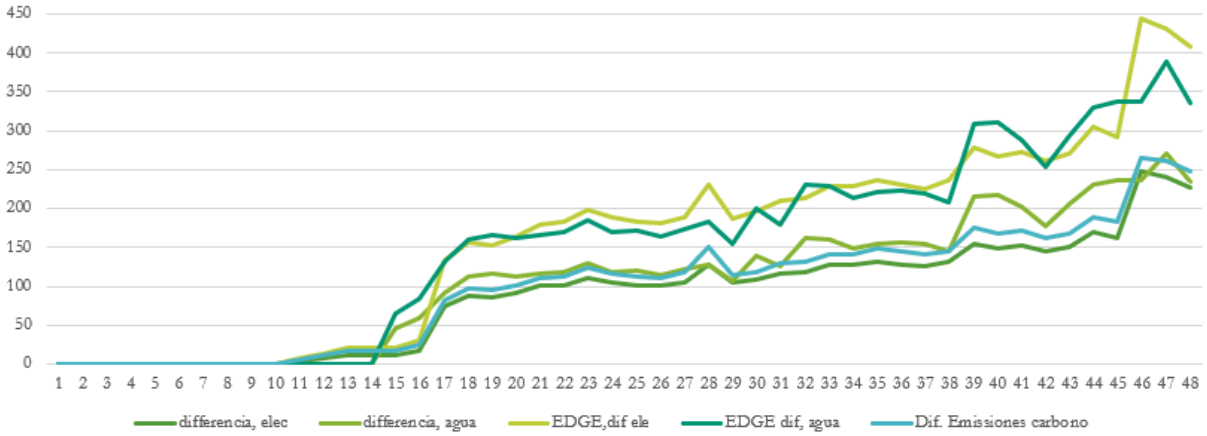


Fig. 21 Consumption of building comparing actual consumptions, legal limits and projections. At times the building consumes 249% energy and 271% water more than legal.

Of the six investigated buildings, all but one consumed too much energy, and all consumed too much water. In April 2025 a new consumption law was enacted (Resolución 0194, 2025), increasing the upper limit. This means that the building now is *less* illegal - only breaching the upper limits of water consumption (figure 22). This does, however, not change the large gap between company' promises and projections or that it was (and is) outside of legal frameworks.

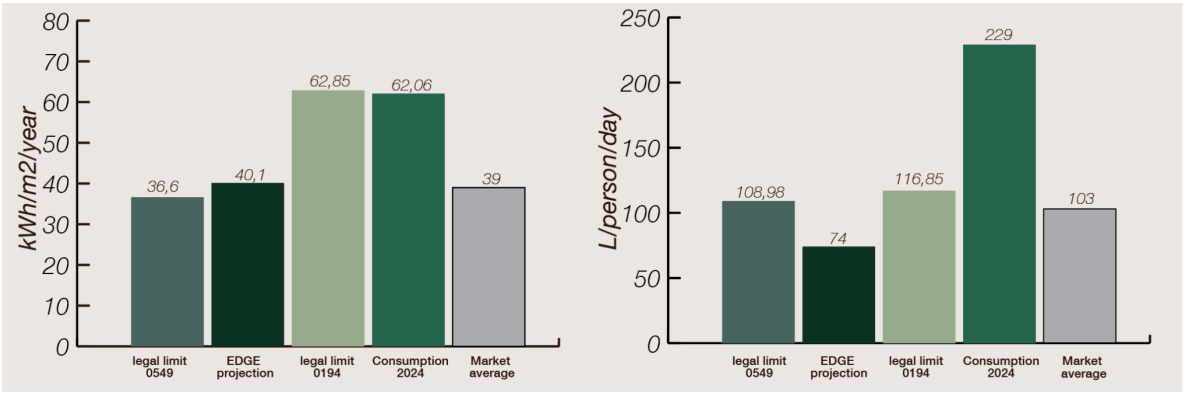


Fig. 22 EDGE projections, actual consumption, market average, former and current legal limits translated into comparative units. Note how the projected consumption would have been noncompliant to resolution 0549.

Example 2 - Incorporated carbon

Certification with EDGE also involves 20% savings of incorporated carbon emissions. Furthermore, achieving a construction licence in 2030 compliance demands 30% less incorporated carbon emissions compared to the national average (CCCS, 2022). To evaluate the company's claimed 'innovative practices' and 'responsible use of resources' from the CSC, a material budget of a planned building was analysed to compare with the national baseline (see figure 23)

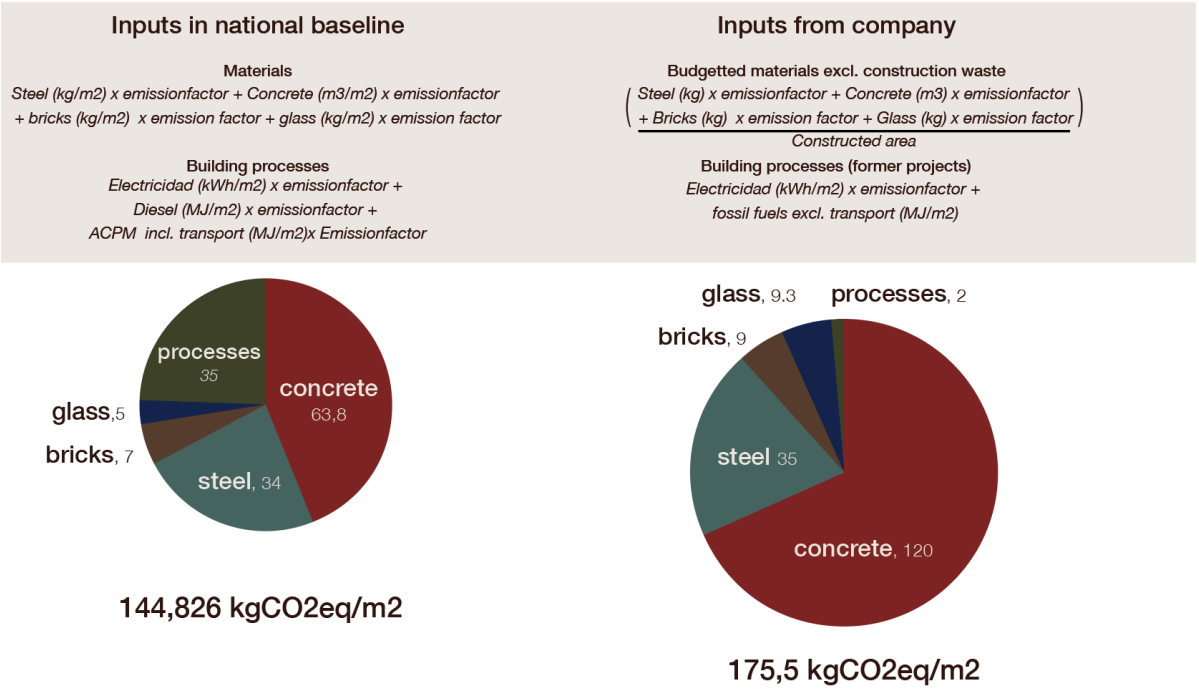


Fig. 23 Comparison between incorporated carbon emissions of national average (CCCS, 2022) and company practices. Company processes are not sufficiently evaluated since the company does not include the fuel of contractors in their calculations (see appendix 9).

Instead of the company's buildings being aligned with or below the national average for embodied carbon, it is about 21% more emission intensive. This discrepancy is caused by a larger use of concrete as well as a less-efficient design-preference of the company, which has become standardised.

> *"I'm not surprised that we use so much more concrete, they really love to use concrete here because its so cheap"* Architect 1, 29/4

> *“The way we design the floor separations just use a lot more concrete than it needs to, but we have not significantly changed our design in the 10 years I've worked here”*
> Civil engineer, 18/3

The gap between communication - *“Efficient use and storage of materials are made during construction”* (appendix 7) - and actual practices around resource efficiency does warrant committing the sin of vagueness - *what* determines efficient use - or irrelevance - *what good is* efficient use of materials in an inefficient design (de Frietas Netto et al., 2020).

Examples 3 - Health hazardous buildings

The CSC has a parameter for ensuring air quality, delineating natural ventilation and thermal comfort as core features of their architectural design (figure 24).

> **"*The design of the homes takes into account thermal comfort and allows for greater use of natural ventilation.*"** - *promotional material of the company*
>
> **"*Inside, the apartments achieve the average thermal comfort conditions for the climate of the area according to ASHRAE 55”* -** *Criteria from CSC*

Fig. 24 Statements from promotional materials and a criteria of the CSC (appendix 10 and 7)

Despite this formal criteria and communicated benefit, neither thermal comfort or natural ventilation are actually evaluated in the design-process, and the documents, which are supposed to provide architects with feedback around these subjects, are not used in architectural iterations.

> *“I make the sustainability plan for SiP Director & I&S Director, but if you look at them they are all the same. I've made these simulations maybe 4 times in the 4 year I’ve worked here” Sustainable analyst, 18/9*

An analysis of a building revealed little-to-no ventilation and very high average indoor temperatures (figure 25)

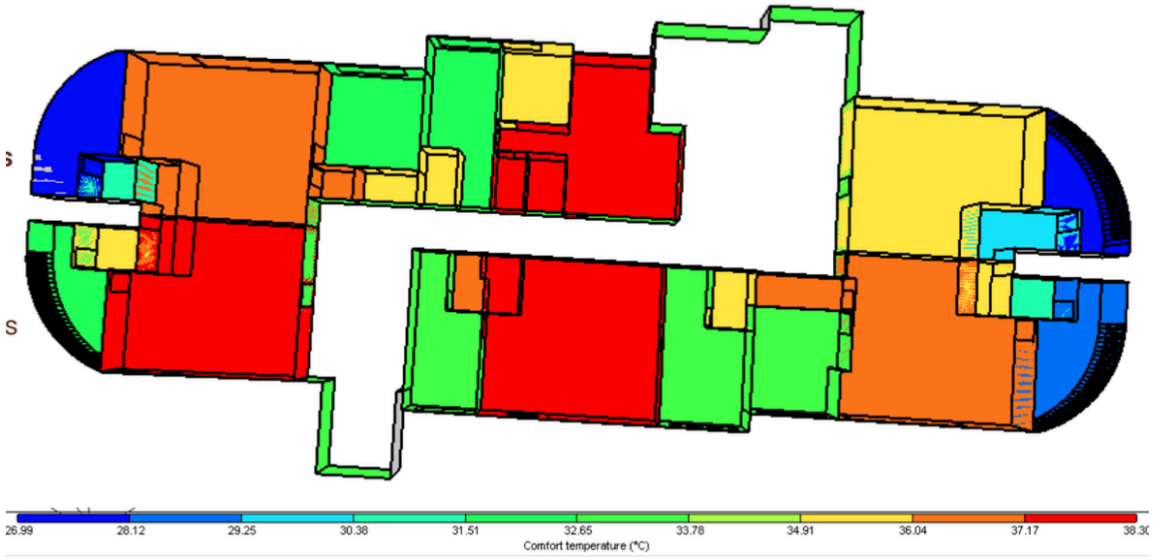


Fig. 25 Results of Energy+ and OPENFlow simulation of company design, taken from Scheel (2025) figure 19 p.25

In another building, the residents have complained about the poor design for natural ventilation, since this has led to issues of high humidity, mold and mushroom-and-pest infestation (ownergroup representative, 16/4).

Despite the directors conviction that the company's buildings are compliant with the CSC (see 5.6, p. 23), the architects are aware of this issue

> *"There are projects that have a heat stroke and that does not seem ethical to me. The design process has to be efficient and prioritize things like regulations or commercial strategies. This leaves bioclimatic aspects very far behind. That's how I feel that the standardization is affecting us."* Arq coordinator 2, 26/3

McRae (2023) show that temperatures in Colombia above 27°C have a direct influence on mortality rates, To et al. (2016) notes that the ability to natural ventilate is the most important design-factor in tropical areas and UNEP & IFC (2024) place natural cooling strategies, e.g. ventilation, as a key parameter of sustainability in tropical areas.

Example 4 - Stress in the workplace

With core values of 'working with passion' (appendix 2), promoting themselves as a 'family' and their B-corp certification, the company would assumedly be a great place to work. This is mirrored in the company's sustainability report, where their 'corporate culture index' in 2024 were a 'superior level' with a value of 87,27 out of 100 (appendix 11). Despite these fine indications, a governmental audit from 2024, performed by a 3rd party, found that 52,9% of company employees are at high risk of suffering from stress (Appendix 4).

Fieldnotes from Thursday 13/2 around 16:30 - written immediately after the event.
It's around 16 o'clock and I am at the sink in the company bathroom washing my hands. One of the auxiliars enters rapidly and wipes a few tears. Upon questioning they state "The power went out in the building just now, so I lost almost all the work that I've made today. I'm so close to crying, because [director] does not understand the issue and wants

results today. I just came here because I don't want them [Coordinators and director] to see me cry" Auxiliar 1

I have experienced people getting ill following a large work deliverable (pers. com. Data specialist 1, 9/4) and an employee confided being in therapy for depression following professional burnout (pers. com. employee, 7/1). Stress, or stress related symptoms, is seemingly common in the company - often shrugged away, without noticing the dissonance between the situation and being a B-corp (pers. com. Engineer 3, 2/4). The external audit also estimates that the company is not compliant with Colombian worker right's legislation (Ley 2191, 2022) e.g. by not ensuring the right of the worker to disconnect (pers com. HR manager, 18/4)

Some employees voice that they don't feel valued (Secretary, 13/3) or describe working in the company as being in a volcano - *"bad, but not as bad as being in hell"* (Architect 1, 25/4). This could also explain the company's turnover rate. In 2024, 29,7% of the employees had been in the organisation less than 1 year (43,16% less than 5) and an estimated 30% had no intention to stay employed (appendix 4 & 11).

> *"There is a rumour in the sector that if you can work here you can work anywhere"* Civil Engineer, 18/3

The more critical readings on the company's work climate was chosen not to be internally disclosed *"as to not damage morale"* (HR manager, 2/4), and some actions have been made contrary to the recommendations of the audit, due to presidential preference (HR manager, 2/4).

Example - 5 decoupled or unsubstantive initiatives

To further the company on its 'sustainable journey', management launched 2 internal campaign-initiatives to improve 'corporate culture' (see chapter 5.6). One of these centered on employees' thrash separation which, through suggestive imagery, interactive games and reprimands, should generate sustainable mindsets (see appendix 12).

> *"If you don't separate well, they 'place the ugly monster' [figure 26], and everyone sees that you are not separating well. Then that culture is generated"* SiP Director, 19/2

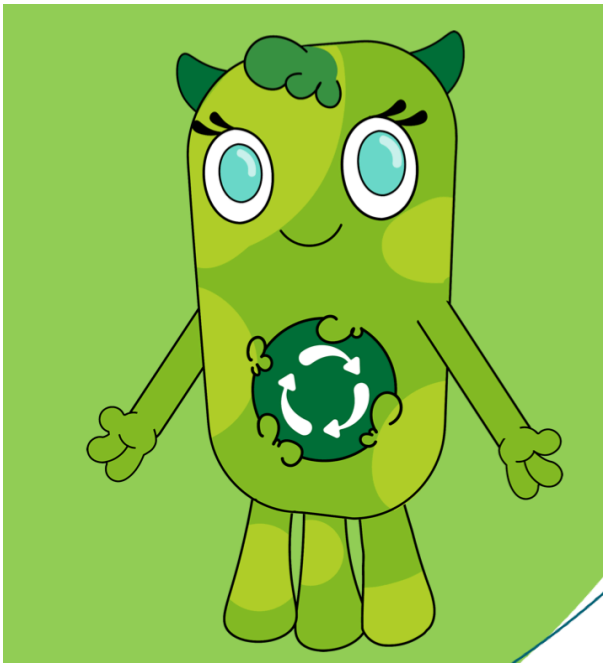


Fig. 26 Monster from the trash campaign (see appendix 12)

Another initiative centered on the cultural coherency of the office and involved a puzzle-coaster, which was distributed in pieces to each employee. Completed, the puzzle displayed imagery of community (image 4)

Image 4. Puzzle-coaster

These programmes are celebrated amongst the management who implemented them (SiP Director 19/2; Analist, 21/2; Appendix 1, 10/3), but are received with varied results:

> *"People don't want a stupid piece of wood, they want to feel valued, listened to and taken seriously. They are treating us like infantiles"* Civil engineer, 18/3

Both of these campaigns carry connotations of *decoupling* (Pedersen et al., 2023), since campaign-actions have little relevance for core goals or processes of the company - very little of the company's environmental impact originates from the amount of paper or plastic placed in the wrong bin and signalling unity through a puzzle does little for the actual work environment.

7.2 Summary of Green-Blue-Washing activities

The presented activities are examples of unaligned sustainability communication and performance. Thus the company can be characterised to commit 4 of the 13 GBW sins (De frietas Netto et al., 2020; see figure 27) through adbluster or fuzzy reporting.

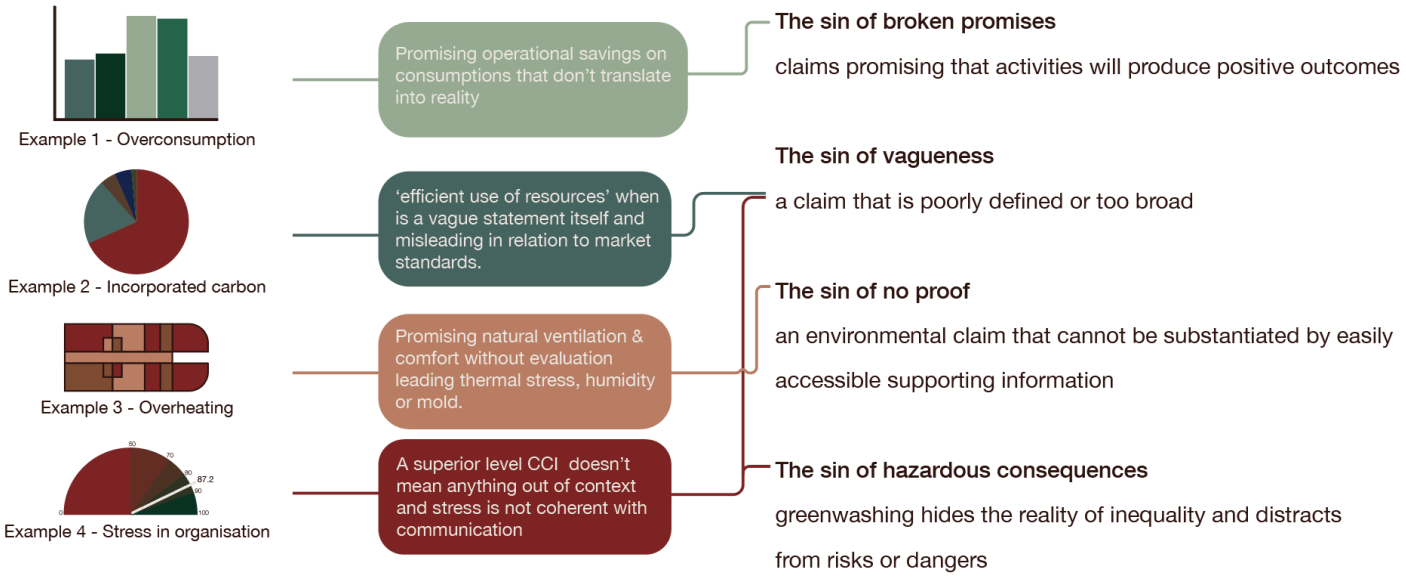


Fig. 27 How the examples of GBW relate to the sins of GBW by de Frietas netto et al. (2020)

The gathered literature, presented in chapter 6, has 2 fundamental assumptions about GBW; 1) it is assumed as a ***deliberate*** misalignment between communicated value proposition and business model (Pedersen et al., 2023; De Frietas Netto et al., 2020; Delmas & Burbano, 2011) which 2) ***originates*** from top-management or a CEO, who is casted as an omnipotent figure maintaining a complete overview of the organisation (Usmani et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023).

The company's actions, e.g. the targeting of onboarding staff with an educational background in sustainability, training in the use of sustainable tools (observation, 13/11-24; Architect 1, 8/4) and management's encouragement to further sustainability (observation, 14/12-24), indicate sustainability as more than an symbolic value. Similarly the staff are dedicated and passionate about sustainability, seeking out resources to self-educate (Architect 2, 9/10-24) and feel affected when confronted with the poor sustainable performance

> *"[the fact that buildings are not legally-compliant] makes me sad because it's not the effect we want to have on the world"* I&S Director, 8/12

GBW appears to happen when good intentions of the company and the values of dedicated individuals are compromised in order to meet financial goals in a timely manner; detaching themselves from their work to avoid ethical questioning.

> *"I'm sorry I helped them greenwash, but I had to survive so I didn't say anything" former employee, 6/5*

It also appears that gaps between communicated and actual performance are not the result of omnipotent management, but rather that the daily operations are considered 'already sustainable'.

> *"They say we´re already certified, we can relax"* I&S Director, 28/8

Since the interconnected complexity of organizational life produces functional results, they are not re-examined.

> *"We are working many people on the same projects at the same time, and things as they are, are working for many. So people do not realize that it is required to change methodology."* Arq coordinator 2, 25/2

Thus it appears that GBW are not deliberate actions or a deceitfully chosen strategy. Instead CS has been applied by well-meaning individuals intending to engage in sustainability, but in meeting a utilitarian ethical motivation (Schaltegger & Burritt, 2019), ends up defending the firms' reputation and business case instead of prompting questioning of it's value-focused philosophy (Kiesnere & Baumgartner, 2019).

As demonstrated in chapter 7.1, example 1, the company's EDGE certifications hold little ground in reality. These results, however, are not surprising for this particular certification. Rodríguez et al. (2021) studied 95 EDGE-certified projects in Colombia (47% of all certified projects in Colombia) and found that 42% failed to meet the legal requirements of Resolución 0549. A similar study by Peleaz et al. (2016) concludes that *...there is no guarantee to meet the standard through a payment of a foreign system"* (ibid., p. 125), and critiques the assumption that international certifications automatically fulfill national requirements, labeling it as greenwashing. Even IFC staff acknowledge this weakness, blaming the calculation model's opaqueness.

> *"EDGE has a lot of good intentions, but because it uses ASHRAE it's not reliable"* IFC Consultant 1, 17/2
>
> *"I've worked for IFC 10 years and I still don't understand how the model works"* IFC Consultant 2, 10/3

This poses some interesting questions - *why* was overconsumption not discovered earlier, when the company had been collecting data since 2018? And *why* has the management continued to endorse and educate staff in the certification?

Analysis of consumption

To the first question, the answer is found in the way in which a director analysed the consumption data, and particularly how their approach is different from what the legal framework delineates (Resolución 0549 & 0194, see figure 28).

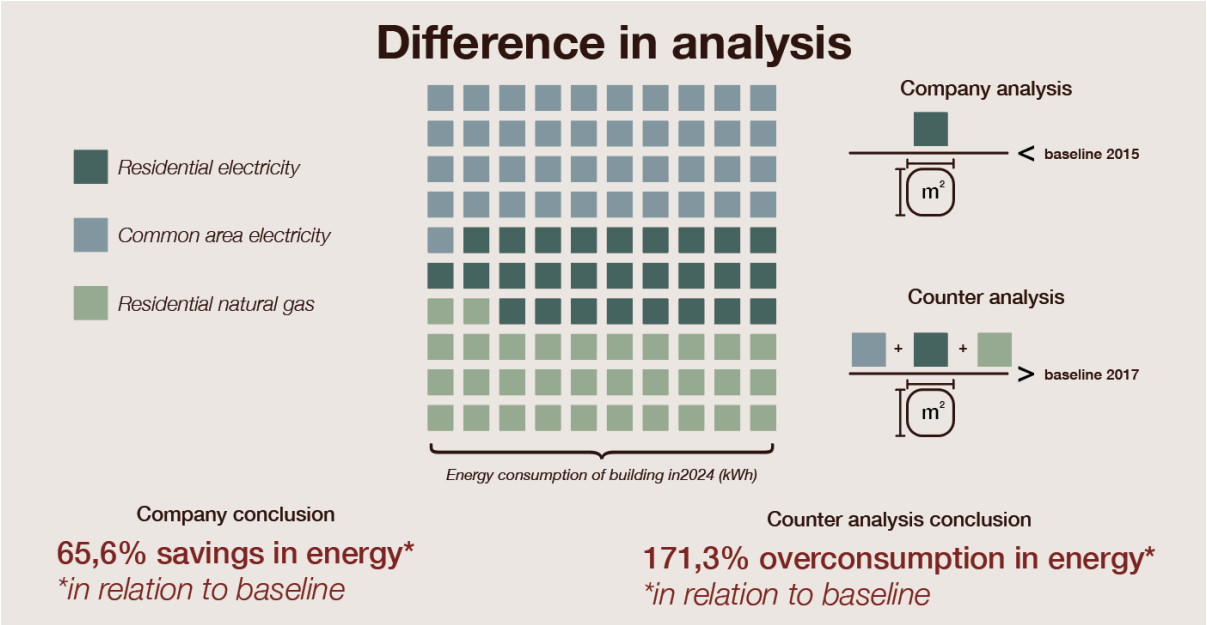


Fig. 28 Comparison between the internal analysis and a counteranalysis.

Why a different methodology of calculation was chosen can be explained by 3 elements:

Responsibility

The company focuses their efforts to reach lower operational consumptions around technological substitution e.g. LED light bulbs or low-pressure faucets (SiP Director, 29/8-24). Thus the analysing director didn't feel responsible for, and thus did not include, other consumptions than the residential (former employee, 6/5).

Semantic misunderstanding

Both sustainability-directors had a semantic understanding of the term 'energy'; meaning electricity (I&S Director, 7/1), which is different from the resolution's definition. The consumption of gas, responsible for 54% of residential energy-use, was therefore not included in the analysis.

Legal & certification adeptness

Both EDGE and resolution 0549 state how calculations may not be made partly - the total consumption must be included in analysis scope (Sustainable analyst, 24/10-24). The above reasons display an unfamiliarity of the director with the legal framework when defining *what* data to analyse. In the analysis itself one more error was committed. The resolution 0549 defines two baselines; for buildings operating before or after 2017. Since the company's projects all began operation after 2018, they are governed by the post-2017 baseline. Despite this, in the analysis consumptions were compared in relation to the pre-2017 baseline, which allows for 33% higher consumptions. The director was either unaware of this or had not internalised it when performing analysis. Retrospectively an analyst admitted that they were aware of these errors, but said nothing out of concerns for self preservation

> *"No it's not right [to do the analysis like that], but if I could not make the certifications, I would not have a job, so I just did what I have to do to get them" Sustainable analyst 1, 23/10*

The director's analyses were accepted since they were coherent with the company narratives; both the fact the buildings were certified (which should mean less consumption) and since resolution 0549 had been delegitimized in the sustainability department. When the results of the counter analysis were presented to the sustainability directors, stories and explanations emerged to maintain current narratives of the company's sustainability performance and displace responsibility (see figure 29).

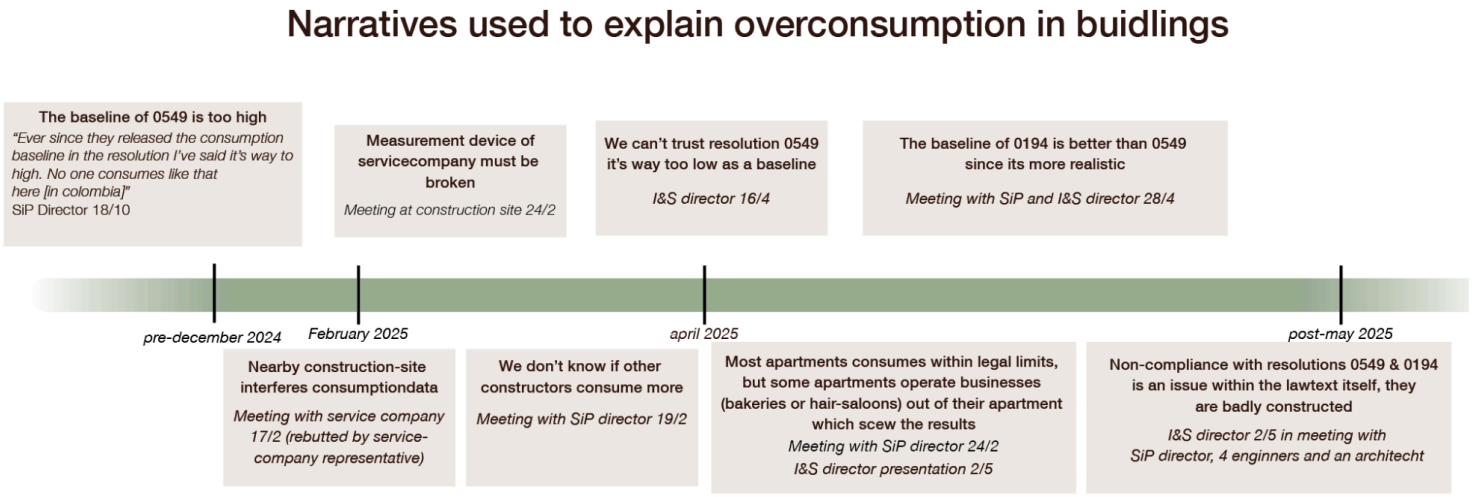


Fig. 29 Narratives used to explain the overconsumption of buildings

Despite presenting how EDGE certifications often do not produce its promised benefits in Colombia (page 38), the directors maintained their trust in the capabilities of the certification.

> *"These numbers look bad, but we do not know if other constructors consume much more. We could still be better than the rest"* SiP Director, 19/2

This conviction in official narratives even warranted compromising the privacy of clients by gaining forced access to the consumption of each apartment (SiP Director, 26/3) - which is sensitive information (pers. com Lawyer, 10/4)

As presented in 5.6, the reasoning behind engaging in CS is largely utilitarian. In this reasoning, the certification has an instrumental role, not in improving the company's impact, but to further its economic performance.

> *"EDGE doesn't have the expected results, but we will continue to use it because it gives financial benefits"* SiP Director, 26/3

When I left the company in May '25 the accepted narratives were 1) most apartments consumed within the legal limits but the overall data was skewed by apartments running commercial size bakeries and 2) that legal non-compliance was due to issues with the law, not with the company.

Delusionality

The narratives proposed by management are perceived with more cynical attitudes by the staff, calling them delusional (pers. com. former employee & Engineer 1, 5/5), a result of management wearing blinders (Engineer 3, 2/4) or avoiding justification.

> *"People here invent stories to avoid facing uncomfortable truths"* Civil engineer, 18/3

It thus seems that GBW happens through compromisation of personal values, bounded rationality, demands for compliance with efficiency-and-financial-goals and misunderstandings, but are not discovered due to delusional subscription to company

narratives. A theoretical understanding of these inductively generated themes can be found in the theories of *Functional Stupidity* (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012) & *Critical Sensemaking* (Mills & Helms Mills, 2004)

8 - Functional stupidity & Critical SenseMaking

Functional Stupidity (FS) (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012) & *Critical Sensemaking* (CSM) (Mills & Helms Mills, 2004) both provide theoretical devices to explain why the company does GBW. Before presenting each in detail, I present how they contribute mutually but distinctively in offering explanations.

FS & CSM shares the assumptions that organisations discipline constraints on thinking through the reinforcement of dominant ideologies, placing a particular critique on managerialism and control, by focusing on power utilisation. Where FS offers a cultural and management perspective of stupidity as a pragmatic response, CSM focuses on how individuals construct meaning in repressive contexts (see table 2).

Dimension	**Functional stupidity (alvesson & Spicer, 2012)**	**Critical sensemaking, (Mills & Helms Mills, 2004; Mills et al., 2023)**
Primary unit of analysis	Organisational culture and management	Individual and interpretation
Analytical focus	**Why** organisations promote non-thinking	**How** meaning are constructed in powerladed contexts
View on cognition	focused on how reasoning is suspended or blocked	Focuses on constructed and constrained reasoning
Views on actors	Views individuals as partially aware in their navigation of meaning systems	Views individuals as complicit in avoiding reflection or critical thinking

Table 2. Complementation and differences between FS & CSM

8.1 Functional Stupidity

FS has its theoretical roots in critical management studies, and is defined as an absence of reflexivity, a refusal to use intellectual capacities in other than myopic ways to avoid responsibility (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012) while allowing for enough functionality to contribute to organisational goals.
In FS, actors are unwilling/unable to mobilise substantive thinking in 3 ways; *lack of reflexive skepticism*, *lack of justification*, *lack of substantive reasoning*

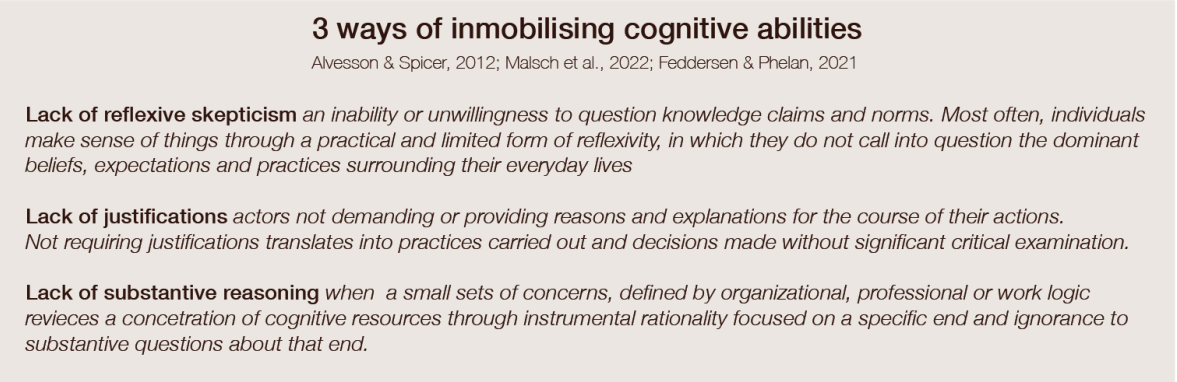


Fig. 30 Three ways of immobilising cognitive abilities (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Malsch et al., 2022; Feddersen & Phelan, 2021)

Alvesson & Spicer (2012) shows that immobilisation of cognitive abilities is promoted and internalised through *stupidity (self) management*; where power is exercised to marginalise doubts or blocking communicative actions which could challenge dominant beliefs (figure 33). This enables decision-making under *bounded rationality* - a rationality constrained by time or knowledge leading to incompleteness in the decision's foundation which appears reasonable or acceptable.
Platje et al. (2019) relates FS to a strong adherence to certain paradigms with a "*lack of openness to new and the belief that simple established solutions will handle new and different types of problems*" (ibid., p.1226).

Fig 31. exercises of power to block communicative action (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012)

Stupidity-based organisations (figure 32) rely on *symbolic manipulation* - a strategic use of language, imagery, and symbols to create meanings and manage the impression of the organization's legitimacy. Srivastava et al. (2024) finds that this cultivates *organisational pride*; which can be used to limit the emergence of dissonant situations and justify unethical actions. Usmani et al. (2020) show how the production of sustainability reports can be symbolic manipulation, when used to craft fantasies with the dual-purpose of gaining (internal and external) stakeholders legitimacy and build well-constructed identities of the employees.

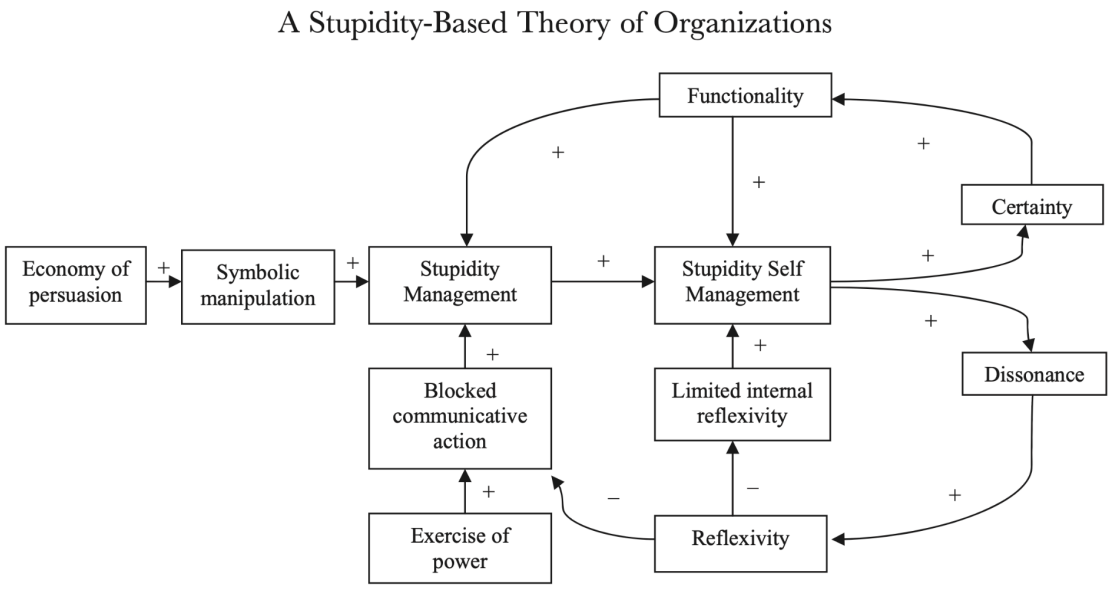


Fig. 32 A stupidity-based theory of organisations, inspired by Alvesson & Spicer (2012) figure 1

Thus FS promotes the re-production of *certainty* in organisational life by covering up tensions and discarding reflection (figure 32). Paulsen (2017) builds upon FS and notes that functional stupidity emerges as a coping mechanism, which individuals can adapt when facing continuous ego-dystonic situations by enforced compliance. Love et al. (2018) & Feddersen & Phelan (2021) both find that employees justify unethical actions by demands of compliance.

The field of critical management studies has been critiqued for its non-considerations of micropolitics or agency, with advocates emphasising a focus on dynamic ideology and why people consent to domination (Contu, 2017). To address this CSM is included in the analytical framework.

8.2 Critical Sense-Making

Critical Sense-Making (CSM; Mills & Helms Mills, 2004) extends Weick's (1995) sensemaking by embedding it in social and structural phenomena to explain individual sensemaking under conditions of ideological constraint or domination. CSM attempts to account for both a structural account of power, where power is embodied in the position of the power-holder, and the post-structural view of power, where power is the alignment of other agents' actions to the power-holder (Mills & Helms Mills, 2004). By asking not only how phenomena are interpreted, but also who or what can shape what 'makes sense', CSM reveals the political nature of sensemaking through 4 elements;

Fig. 33 four constitutive elements of CSM

It is suggested that sensemaking does not happen in a vacuum, but can be distorted by organisational miasma (Karimi-Ghartemani et al., 2021) - produced by the institutions that govern a particular context (Mills et al., 2023), or cultural values of the extra-organisational context. Such institutions operate under material and symbolic conditions, so-called hard-and-soft infrastructures.

Hard infrastructure consists of an organization's **tangible, physical, and technical foundations** that support operations; this includes IT-systems, formal processes/policies or machinery. These are supported by mechanism such as technical standards, investment decisions, regulatory framework and training (Kudozia et al., 2023)

Soft infrastructure refers to an organization's **intangible social and institutional foundations**. This includes culture, norms, relationships, values, and leadership styles; all a combination of human and institutional fabrics which guides actions. These infrastructures are supported and reinforced by mechanisms such as communication, role modelling, training, reward systems and social rituals/routines of organisations. (ibid, 2023)

According to Mills et al. (2023) institutions, and the infrastructures upon which they are founded, are crafted, maintained and created though narrative devices, and thus places a focus on individuals with the agency of authorship (Murray, 2014).

8.3 Analytical process

Using the immobilising of cognitive abilities from FS (figure 30), the empirically gathered material on organisational practices are coded and analysed. Using Paulsens (2017) 'modes of compliance'; *cynicism*, *despair* & *authoritarianism* to guide field inquiry, showed how these play an important part of company discourses and organisational rules. Using the constitutive elements of CSM (figure 33) show how symbolic manipulation and other enacted institutions impact the employees' sense-making abilities by abandoning thinking for a heuristic for action. Institutionalising functional stupidity thereby has led to GBW.

9 - Is the organisation Functionally Stupid?

In chapter 7.2 I show strung-together episodes explaining how and why overconsuming buildings were not discovered earlier, and how events were incorporated into existing narratives. These display the immobilization of cognitive abilities from FS (figure 34)

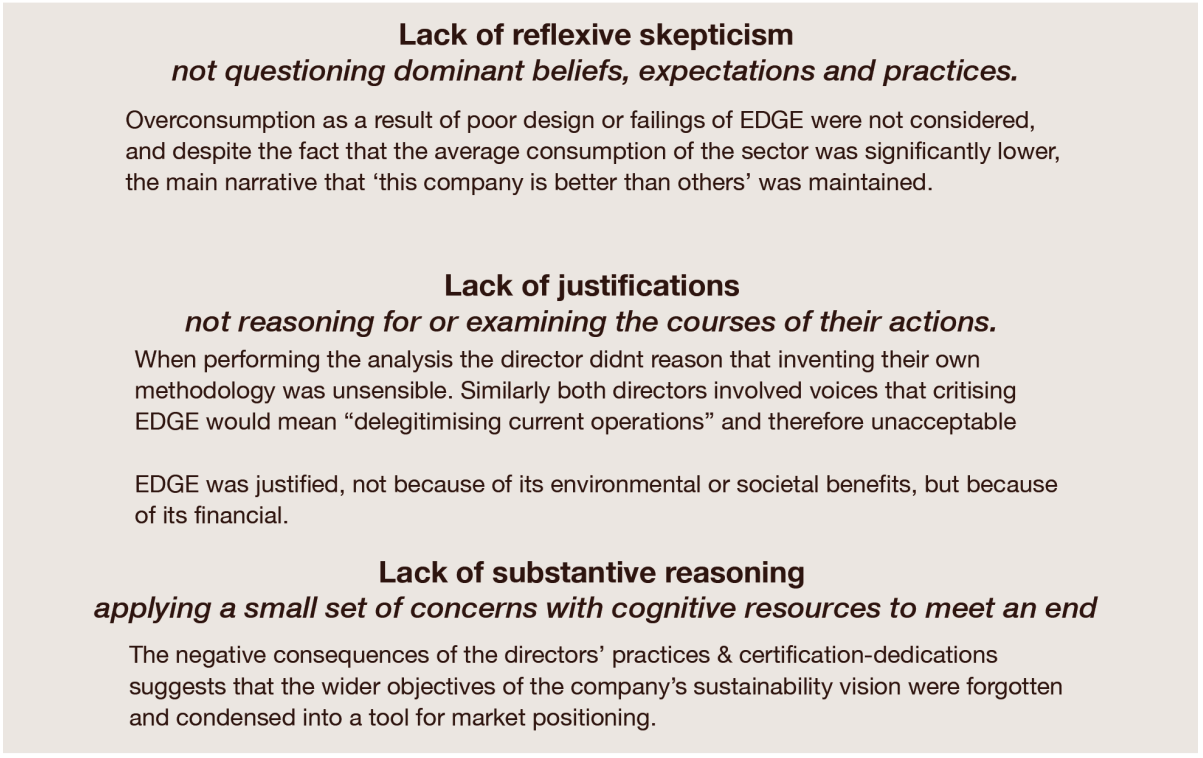


Fig. 34 Cognitive immobilisation in explaining overconsumption

9.1 Immobilisation of cognitive abilities

Going beyond episodic displays, cognitive mobilisation has become a systemic and structural characteristic of the company as result of (self-)stupidity management largely stemming from how leader-identities dominated by managerism have built and maintains an organisational architecture where discipline-keeping works to limit information exchange and keep employees complying.

Lack of reflexivity - ignorant knowledge, high speed and symbolic manipulation to limit holistic views

Ignorant knowledge

A zemblanity of lacking reflexivity is ignorance (Karini-Ghartemani & Khani, 2021). A core feature of modern knowledge is that it is filled with ignorance; ignoring certain knowledge in favor of others (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).
One source of company ignorance is the SOP's centralisation and monopolisation of information (chapter 5.2)

> *“I just enter here in phase 2, so I dont have the full overview of the entire project” Engineer 1, 9/9-24*

While working, employees are not communicating across departments, but receive orders originating somewhere higher in the hierarchy (pers com. Arq coordinator 1, 22/4; Architect 1, 21/3). This means that employees are unable to form a complete picture of the company and their interdependent practices.

> *“I had an idea that things [sustainability performance] were not as good as management said, but I didn't have any data. Nobody actually knows what's going on”* - 13/4, Lawyer

Speed

Furthermore, faster design-cycles are demanded, with 1.5 cycles started and ended pr. month in 2025 (Arq coordinator 1, 22/4), increasing the workloads of employees

> *“We have 3 levels of priorities: urgent, very urgent and on fire. Probably 95% of our time is spent on things that's urgent, so it really just pushes other things in the drawer until they become urgent.”* Architect 2, 17/2

As a result of growing task-amounts, architects or engineers have no time to learn or reflect.

> *“We would love to learn [about sustainability], but when would we have time to do that?”* Arq coordinator 1, 22/4

Thus employees are separated by ‘glass walls’, working under tight and unmoving deadlines, and therefore unable to examine their own and others knowledge claims, assumptions or beliefs. Employees sense a stagnation of their technical skills as part of this.

> *“They don't want to develop the staff here, they want us to be capable of doing our function and then continue to do that forever” Sustainable analyst, 27/10*

Even the office layout isolating each employee in cubicles (see figure 9) works to limit reflexivity since, as Alvesson (2002) points out, “*cultural meanings emerge, are shaped, maintained & changed in specific interactions between people”* (ibid., 171).

Symbolic manipulation

Chulián et al. (2025) shows how organisations use sustainability reporting to construct self-narratives, providing members with acceptable realities to produce organisational stability through *organisational pride*. In the company it is not only the reporting, but the certifications, that are used to construct narratives.

> *“When I had my first day here, I saw the wall in the lobby and I just thought ‘Woaw, I have to work here’”* - Architect 2, 3/4

The stories surrounding the achievement of these certifications have gained a legendary status in the company, playing an important role in understanding the *formative context* (Mills & Helms mill, 2004) of the company.

> *“Initiatives of the sustainability department has made us pioneers and worthy of the awards out there [points to the lobby] - It-specialist, 27/2*

This produces an *organisational pride* which employees use make sense, marginalise doubts and navigate eco-dystonic situations - one employee didn't formerly see a disconnect between the communicated ‘being a great place to work’ and that many of their colleges suffered from stress (Engineer 3, 2/4) - another example can be seen below

Interview with Juapna 25/2

(9 minutes into interview)
"I know that it is a B company because it is a great place to work, and Conaltura is a great place to work. It is a great place to work, what can I tell you? In the architecture area, I work happily."

(44 minutes into interview)
"our design practices does not seem ethical to me"

(56 minutes into interview)
"I feel that we need things to improve. These are very good people and they do the same every day is sad. So, we have to improve. We appear happy in those ranks" Arq coordinator 2, 25/2

Through manipulation by symbolic certifications, the magnified company-image exerts agency on sense-making by making criticisms seem implausible to the employees.

> *If we keep winning awards how can we be bad?* Interior designer, 20/3
>
> *"the results of the [government report] look bad, but I have to know how the results look in relation to other companies in the sector to know how serious I should take them, and if I should be worried"* HR director, 21/4

Soft-and-hard infrastructures which limit reflexivity

The SOP of the company, which works to coordinate workloads and information, is structured to close off inquiry by high workloads and *narrow instrumentalization* as a result of limited information (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). This hard infrastructure means that in the domain of sustainability, employees make sense of the company through its certification schemes and soft infrastructures of *organisational pride* (Srivastava et al., 2024) emerges, weakening the plausibility of critique.

Lack of justification - creating rules of engagement and identities that continue operations

The company has a defined hierarchy with neatly categorised roles and responsibilities, which serves in order to coordinate across business units (chapter 5.2). This definition of roles can be connected to why natural ventilation in example #3 (chapter 7.1) were unaddressed.

> *"I knew this design would have problems but I didn't say anything because I'm not an architect" - Sustainable analyst, 10/9-24*

Even more so, as part of the sustainable company identity, these management sponsored identities (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012) delineates ideological and subject settings where employees should be 'sustainably conscious'

> *"They [the employees] are the representatives of the company inside and outside of work. You don't see a poorly dressed fashion designer because it's not congruent with their identity. It's the same here, you do not work in a sustainable company without sustainable habits"* Analist, 21/4

This identity *stencil* (Alvesson, 2010) of the employee can be displayed through their trash-separation campaign and the 'cultural' goals of this (See figure 35)

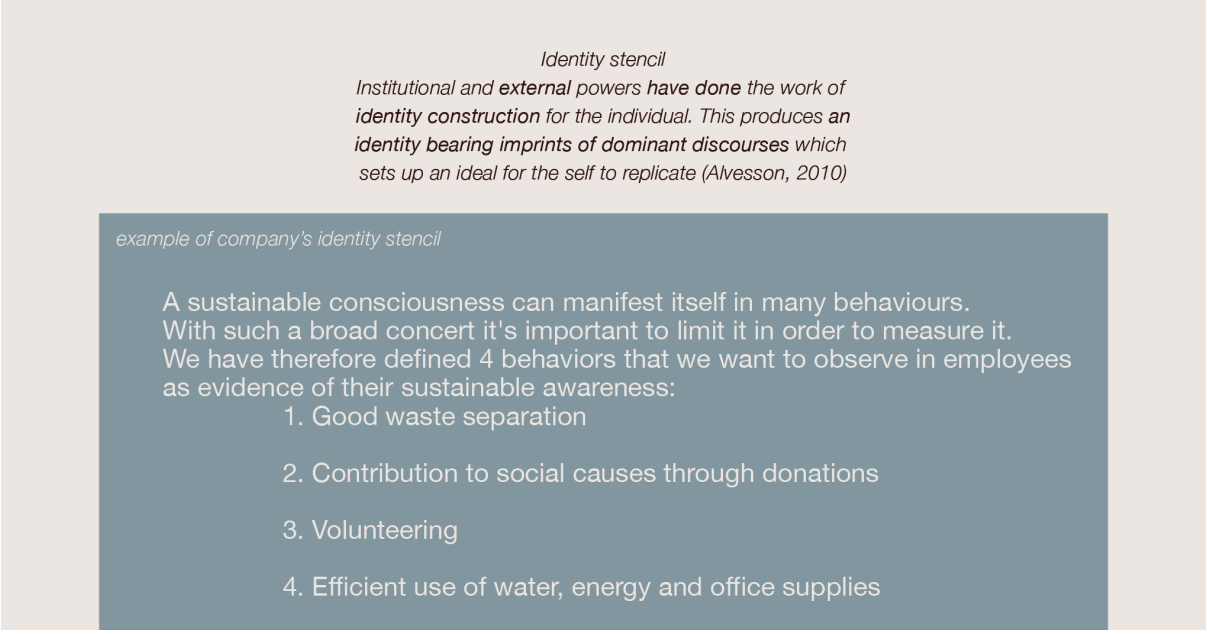


Fig. 35 The definition of a stencil-identity (alvesson 2010) and the translated briefs from the firms' trash-separation campaign (appendix 12).

Enabling management to delineate such goals is the idea that employees should be loyal and compliant to the company line and its directives

> *"Sustainability in the architectural and technical departments is a process that will happen with or without them" I&S Director ,12/1*

This envisioned employee is also self-suppressing their cognitive abilities where "*They don't have to understand why they are doing it, they just need to do it"* (I&S Director, 31/3) or reasonings for courses of actions are neglected by a moldable mindset where "*The reason for 'not doing' is less relevant than 'how can we do it'"* (I&S Director, 2/5).
Company-sponsored identities define relationships between management and employees with the *discourse (Mills & Helms mills, 2004)* that the latter comply with arbitrary goals, placed by the former.

> *"We just do as [Founder] says"* Architect 2, 15/10

The ability to make decisions thereby is in the hands of management - creating slower and slower processes.

> *"Management has become slow, because our mailbox is filled. I can dedicate 30 hours to a project and do it excellently, but with 30 hours to 20 projects, none of them will turn out well"* A&C Director, 26/3

Justifying questions are furtherly limited when managers, as part of their stencil-identity, perceive themselves as above criticisms. Examples of this are directors getting furious when their errors are called out (Lawyer 26/4) or yelling at employees to meet impossible deadlines (Architect 2 15/4). These relations seemingly go from across the company hierarchy - when the directors were unaligned in their activities, one director said that they were *"going to call mum [referencing Founder*]" to fix the situation (pers. com. Director, 4/4).

To avoid management retaliation staff aligns their actions according to the hierarchy's institutions

> *“I always call Founder and CEO by their titles, they are the only ones where I do it because they can fire me just for a wrong look* - Data specialist 1, 9/4

Through the actions of management and hard-infrastructures of the company, sustainability is signalled to be less of a company priority. Where architects receive bonuses for the timely meeting of deadlines or marketing receives commission - Founder gave standing applause to the areas when a project sold particularly fast (observation, 3/3) - the sustainability department got a brief congratulatory email when the company got an ambitious sustainability award (observation, 13/12)

The employees, sensing this prioritisation, seek refuge from ego-dystonic situations by work *alienation* or *authoritarian compliance* (Paulsen, 2017) to avoid connecting their actions to their ‘private’ sense of identity - thus avoiding *sensemaking* (Mills & Helms mill, 2004)

> *“We architects work with the aesthetics of building, but here we just have to sell it's sad really but its the market”* Architect 2, 10/9
>
> *“We want to make the best product for the client, but they actually ask us to make a worse product. To work here you have to detach yourself from your work”* - Architect 1, 25/4

Since being ‘unfit’ in this stencil is sufficient reason to fire existing staff (A&C Director 26/2), justifying questions are simply not part of the *organisational rules* (Mills & Helms mill, 2004)

> ***“****We are the first link in the chain, so if we say “no it's not possible to meet a deadline” the entire company stops working. So it's always Yes or Yes and if not, you are out. The world here is cruel like that”* Arq coordinator 1, 22/4

This identity-stencil can also, partly, explain why the CCI of the organisation maintains a superior level despite the grave results of the audit (appendix 4). Employees are simply not providing honest feedback to the HR departments, since criticisms of their superiors would risk their job security.

> *“No I’m not honest in the HR survey, because if we did HR would go to my boss and say “8 out of 13 of your employees are criticizing you”. Then my boss would start counting heads”* - Engineer 1, 29/4

These soft infrastructures of the organisational rules have institutionalised themselves in the HR-department in the shape of hard-infrastructures - namely the DISC test - doing self-maintenance of the institution. DISC separates human behaviours into 4 types; Dominant, Inspiring, Supporting & Controlling, with the intent to classify people as personality types (DISC Personality Assessment, 2025).

The dominant discourse in the HR department is that managers must abide by two criteria 1) a large familiarity with the technical aspect of their team & 2) their DISC test preferably displays the combination of controlling and dominant behaviours (HR manager, 2/4). Both characteristics can contribute to the emergence of leaders feeling elevated above criticism (Karimi-Ghartemani & Khani, 2021). When screening personnel for the ‘lower’ levels of hierarchy, characteristics such as ‘the likelihood of adapting to our culture’ (HR manager) (in opposition to challenging it) are considered good.

Soft and hard infrastructures which limit justification

The hierarchy of the organisation and the incentive schemes, both hard infrastructures, and soft infrastructure of employees and management identities, ties the employees to

obedience by pressure to conform and discourages asking for justifications or provide upwards feedback.

Lack of substantial reasoning - mentality towards sustainability, onboarding pracsis & standardisation

In the day to day of the organisation it is sensed that the company wants to do the minimum sustainability to maximize costs while gaining the reputational benefits.

> *“It sometimes feels like the attitude is that it's cheaper to not think about sustainability”* - Engineer 1, 13/2

Despite the official intention to *“minimize the bad impacts and maximise the good”* (I&S Director, 2/5), certifications validate current practices, making a substantial reasoning of these implausible. This maintains the conviction that “*our up-front cost will always dominate decisions*” (I&S director, 12/2). This validation, although not based in actual impacts, works to hold considerations of the wider consequences of designs at bay:

> *“Why would we start to do something that we didn't do before?”* - I&S Director, 12/2

Pedersen et al. (2024) notes that when companies get B-certified ‘easily’, it creates *organisational inertia* and does not spark further improvement - this does not limit the certifications’ role in the formative context. This is also felt by employees;

> *“I do not feel that it has affected us or that we have received, as a modern designer, with Conaltura, becoming a B company”* Arq coordinator 2, 25/2

The HR department has noticed that company leaders struggle to handle tough conversations and control their temper in sensitive situations (HR director, 21/4). The director didn't perceive these issues as zemblinities of the manager-stencil, and saw no issue with the practice of screening personality types indicating these behaviours (HR director, 21/4). Below is the abilities of a newly hired director, the best of 13 candidates, which an HR manager presented to me 2/4 - note how anger management is one of their least strong abilities

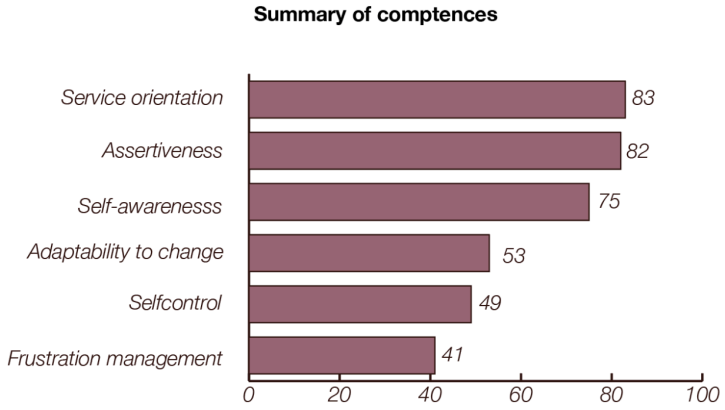


Fig 36. Abilities of new hired director

In the design department, the current design practices are understood to be functioning because the standardised process, product and workflow allow engineers and architects to meet demands of speed.

> *“We are really busy so we need a standardised design process” Architect 2, 10/9*

There is, however, also an understanding that the company's products are unethical or subpar from a sustainability perspective, since the current design practices, a result of its standardisation, cannot address bioclimatic challenges of buildings.

> *"We don't have the freedom in the day to day to address bioclimatic challenges, but the current methodology we have is good for certain things, it makes it possible to deliver buildings fast"* Auxiliar 1, 17/2

The sustainable consequences of the design-practice are thus externalised since the dominant objective, the reliability and speed of the transformation system, is perceived as given.

This objective, coupled with 'verified practices', mean that consequences of de-prioritizing sustainability are not subject to consideration

> *"Sometimes you chose worse impact because it delivers faster, but in some way that ends up being sustainable in the end"* Data specialist 1, 24/2

Soft and hard infrastructures which limit substantial reasoning

As demonstrated the emphasis on financial goals and certification-achieving are hard infrastructures of the company. Having these technical metrics in high regard provides a soft-infrastructure of instrumental rationality (Alveson & Spicer, 2012) where critical thinking is marginalized, since the metrics considered important are good.

10 - Discussion

Literature about GBW assumes its deployment by top management as a deliberate strategy of misleading - going as far as integrating GBW into their business model (Pedersen et al., 2023). This assumption casts company leadership as omnipotent figures, who maintain the complete overview of the organisation, and thereby the responsibility for actions (Usmani et al., 2020). Management are assumed to navigate the GBW phenomena, despite its lack of clear definitions (Pedersen et al., 2023; Lyon & montgomery, 2015), and commit one or more of 13 sins (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020) by applying deceitful behaviours on the spectrum of vagueness to lying. These assumptions demand a homogenous perspective on organisations and culture, and seem ludicrous in comparison to the complex and uncertain GBW definitions - with 13 sins it is seemingly more difficult to avoid GBW than the christian hell. Looking into ideas around business models, we find scholars such as Demil & Lecocq (2010), who see companies as more fragmented - where business models or value propositions are fabricated stories (Magretta, 2002) - similarly Alvesson (2002) notes that thinking of culture as unified, driven by harmony and consensus misunderstands the concept.

In this case, there is no leader or leader-groups deliberately choosing or encouraging GBW. Rather, GBW appears to emerge as an unintended consequence of how high-agency individuals of the company, eager to become sustainable as a result of a zeitgeist, has translated the concept through technocratic change projects (Alveson, 2002). In this the company has constructed a delusional and distant-from-reality ideal.
Abbett & Whisnat (2010) and Czerniawska & Sevon (1995) point to how strategic initiatives, in order to embed themselves, must be 'connectable' in the minds of the translating agents.

In this case the translation of CS-initiatives became translated in a way where GBW happened unintentionally, offering a possible explanation to the lack of correlation between companies' statements and their effect on environmental performance (Rodrigue et al., 2012).
The delusional reality of the company can be said to have emerged through symbolic manipulation, maintained by functional stupidity. Alvesson & Spicer (2012) provides a tool for spurning FS - a diminishing loop where dissonance is levered into reflexivity. Through Critical Sense-Making, I analyse how institutionalised soft-and-hard infrastructures of the company produce paradigmatic blindness, making evidence of poor sustainability performance seem implausible.

The employees' ability to make sense of their world, thus being able to identify a situation as ego-dystonic or dissonant, is distorted. As Mills & Helms Mill (2004) state:

> *"An enacted sense of an organisation is a powerful influence on sensemaking as it removes thinking and provides a heuristic for action."* (p.123)

If dissonance is identified, employees struggle to utilise reflexivity due to organisational rules of the hierarchy. Instead they perceive themselves as forced to reproduce the context with, as presented, growing cynical attitudes towards the company (Paulsen, 2016; Srivastava et al., 2024). I indicate a circular and mutually re-producing relationship between institutionalised FS & GBW - FS and sense-distorting institutions produces organisational miasma (Karimi-Ghartemani et al., 2022), which allows GBW to go unnoticed. These same institutions allow GBW to go unaddressed, with employees seeking refuge in functionally stupid identities. Distorted knowledge objects produced by internal data processes can simply not be trusted, and the company loses the ability to self-diagnose their sustainability performance.

Delmas & Burbano (2011) suggests how bounded rationality and poor interorganizational communication become drivers of GBW. Platje et al. (2019) and Zhang et al. (2023) both voice how paradigmatic blindness can produce faith in current operations and fail to recognize sustainability issues or GBW. This suggests that when understanding GBW, assuming deceitfulness is not always appropriate and does little aid in moving organisations towards sustainable development.

While this finding is based on an in-depth account of a single Colombian organisation, aiding in the empirical foundation of CSM & FS (Paulsen, 2016; Aromaa et al., 2018), the indications of this organisation, with directors educated in europe, management concepts and processes imported from the USA and international certifications, is not without wider relevance.
The organisational structure of the company (presented in chapter 5.2) can be categorised as functionality-oriented (Ulrich et al., 2019) (figure 37). This type of structure is designed for efficiency, control & clear vertical accountability, and has the following strengths and

weaknesses:

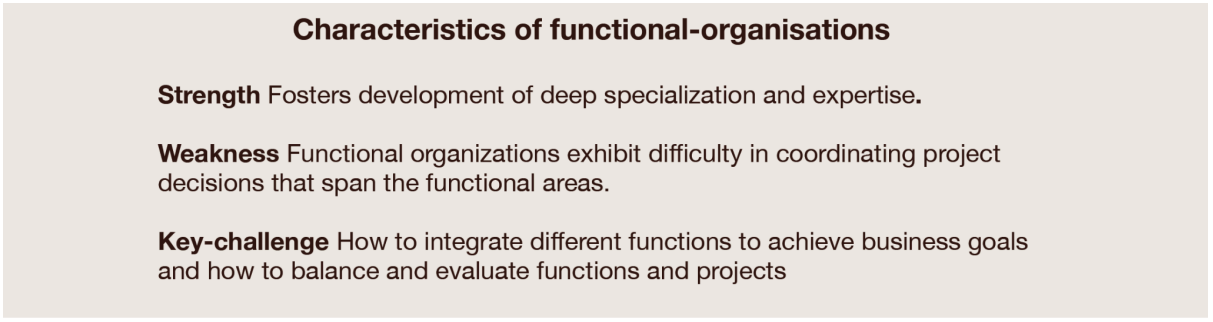


Fig. 37 Strengths and weaknesses of functionally structured organisations, according to Ulrich et al (2019, p.29)

The sustainability challenge is commonly recognised to be a transdisciplinary challenge (Lindahl & Westholm, 2014; Garcia et al., 2016), which hierarchical organisations based on control struggle to engage with (Abbett & Whisnant, 2010). There is thereby indication that, due to key-challenges and weakness of a functionality-oriented structure, organisations similarly structured to that of the case display similar behaviour

11 - Why do large construction companies with intentions of sustainability perform green-blue-washing?

Through the empirical focus of a large construction company in Colombia, I conducted a nine-month ethnographic study to answer the problem formulation. Inductively generated findings were a result of sensitivity to polyphonic identities of individuals in the field. Without my dissensus perspective, the central element of employees' repressed sensemaking in ego-dystonic situations would have been lost. Thus an important methodological insight around studying sustainability is to cast away reductive *a priori* assumptions of the field and its subjects.

In the studied case, sustainability practices were initiated as a response to zeitgeist promoted by deeply passionate advocates with high agency. Sustainability became a business differentiator or source of legitimacy, and over time, an organisational pride internalised by employees. Due to socially embedded institutions of the company, which promotes immobilisation of cognitive abilities, internalization of the sustainable image was unaccompanied by critical reflection or robust evaluation mechanisms. Over time, the sustainable image itself exercised agency and distorted realities in ways that made criticism implausible. By this, sustainability claims and performance unknowingly were detached. Four themes repeat themselves in the empirical material as explanatory for this dynamic reproduction; the work setting, the coordination of functions, the core skillset and the system of information.

The work setting

In the company, the hierarchical organisational structure has led to a sense of fear between layers, resulting in the silencing or self-censoring of critical voices (Paulsen, 2017). Companies to deploy a hierarchical or authoritative structure have been characterised to

struggle with the adaptation of CS (Abbett & Whisnant, 2010) for instance because layered communication becomes opaque (Triviño, 2023).

The coordination of functions

The company's functional separation means that a common language around sustainability does not exist, with many concerns slipping between occupational gaps. This challenge is mirrored by Ulrich et al. (2019). Lindahl & Westholm (2014) characterises that successfully working with sustainability involves a common conceptual framework with a degree of sharing or blending concepts or methods.

The core skillset

In the company, the promotion of *hard* skills (Annunziata et al., 2017) means that paradigmatic blindnesses (Platje et al., 2019) cannot be addressed since various members can not effectively communicate or collaborate. Furthermore, the company's promotion of hard skills in management contribute to maintaining the hierarchical structure (Karimi-Ghartemani et., 2022) while neglecting soft skills hinder ethical decision-making and the fostering of sustainability (Pons et al., 2024)

The system of information

The company's knowledge base is digitally centralised and distributes information based on the immediate technical relevance of the employees task. In this each employee loses the ability to form a complete picture of the organisation and its activities. Such opaqueness of practices abets the connection between CS talk and action (Reppmann et al., 2025), and the system of minute tasks enables standardisation, working to maintain operational inertia (Bocken & Geradts, 2020)

11.1 Conclusion

The key finding is that, contrary to contemporary assumptions, GBW is not necessarily intentional nor deceitful. Instead these findings suggest that the phenomena can emerge as a feature of organisational life; cultures, structures and epistemologies which can be systematically reproduced through processes of functional stupidity.

12 - Intervention

Four typologies

The four mutually supporting themes indicate a need of the company to move from one state to another, and point to 'opposites'. Since an important finding is that companies lose the ability to self-diagnose, I use these themes to construct a sensitizing device to work as a diagnostic tool (See figure 38).

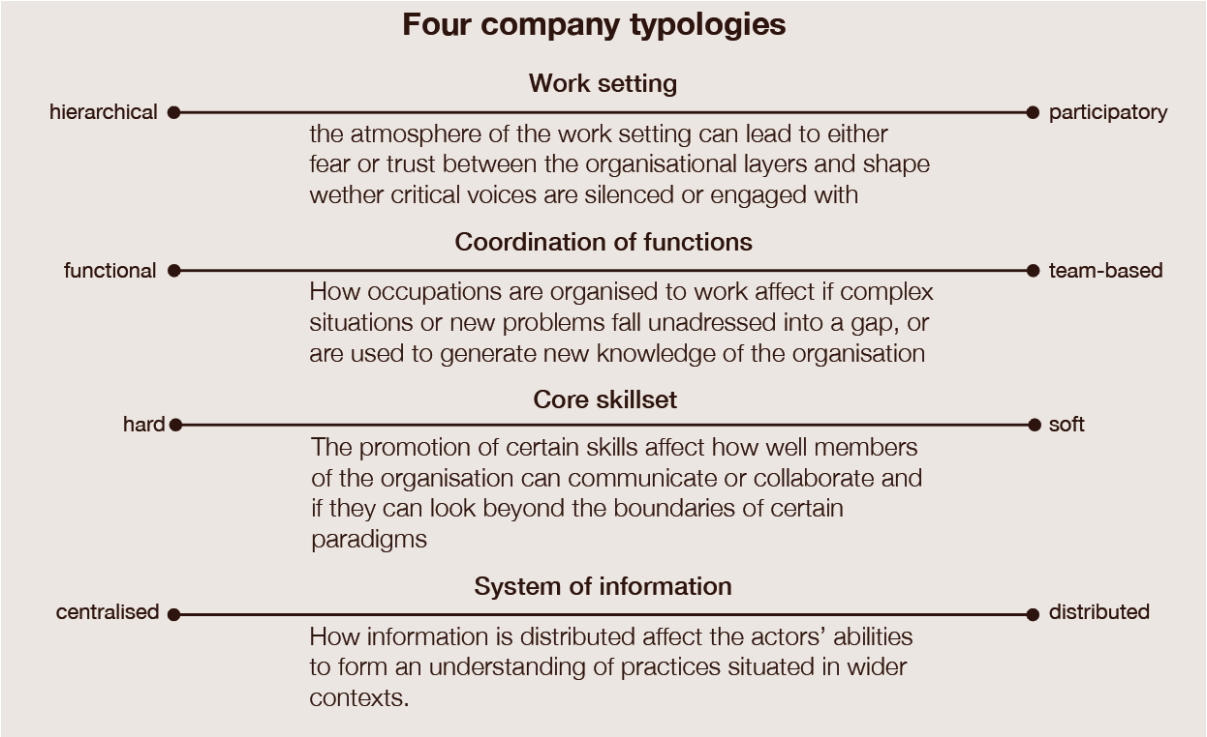


Fig. 38 Four company typologies

Based on the typologies, I designed an intervention with some company's staff - a temporary organisation which would promote and enable mobilisation of cognitive abilities and thereby pointing to how self-reproducing functionally stupid institutions, leading to GBW, can be precluded.

The team's work centered on iteratively re-developing, testing and evaluating the CSC (figure 39). I proposed a framework inspired by Garcia et al., 2016, where a building's performance is evaluated with the CSC parameters (see appendix 13).

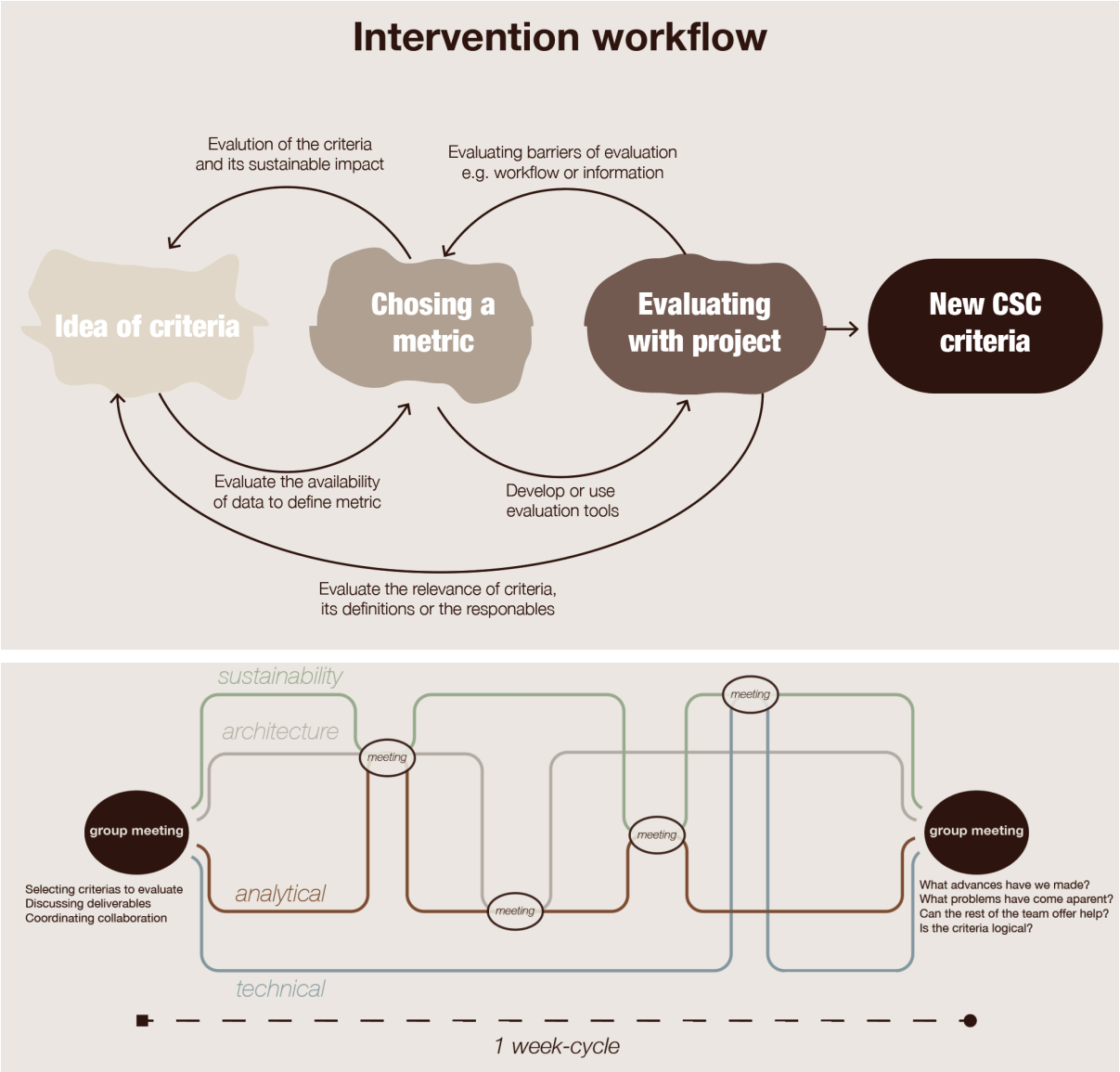


Fig. 39 Iterative process of developing and evaluating in the intervention

The intervention consisted of 6 week-cycles from mid-march to early-may involving 9 group meetings and 15 individual meetings (see figure 39). The participants had been employees between 3 and 14 years, and were chosen by the company (figure 40).

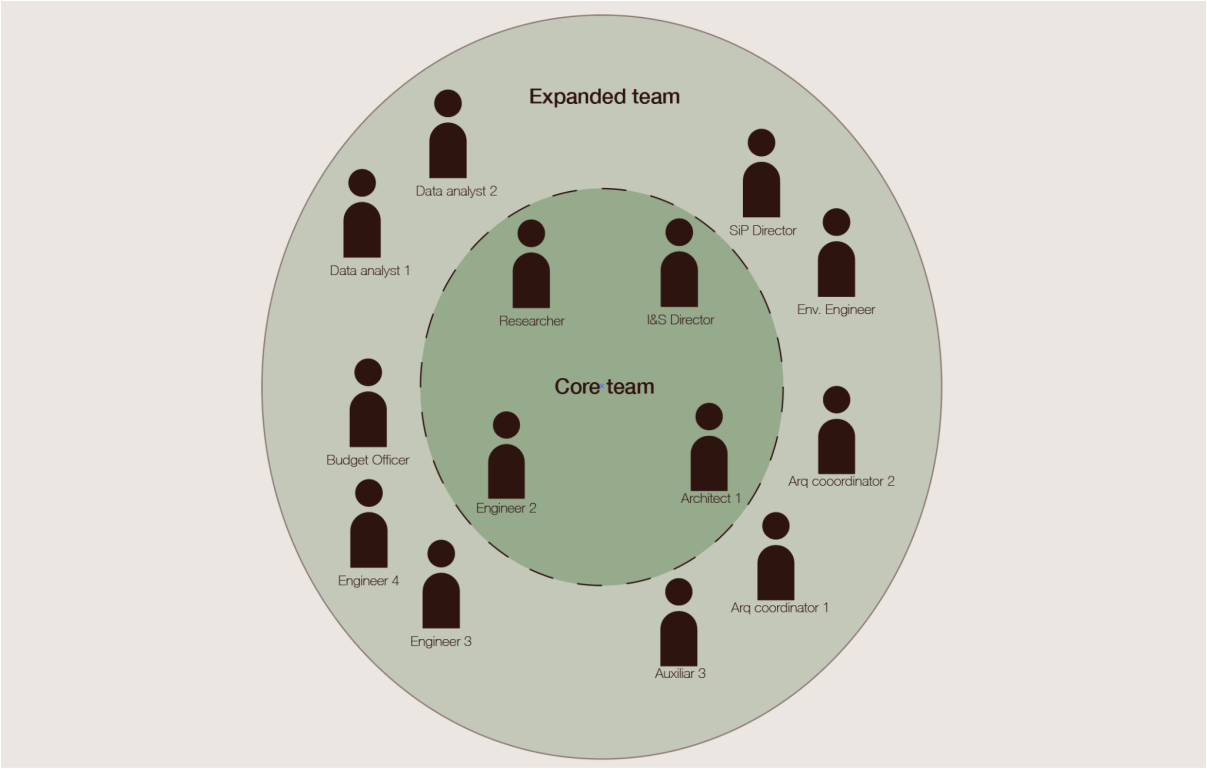


Fig. 40 Participants. The core team was present for all group meetings.

To flatten internal hierarchies I adopted a facilitating or educating, rather than authoritarian, role and by engaging the directors as a project participant, instead of supervising or controlling.

Upon project start, a finished concept was not delivered to the participants as a tool to implement. Instead it was communicated to participants that their expertise were trusted, and that their inputs were not just valued, but crucial to drive the project forward. Since sustainability spans domains, the CSC was employed as a central boundary object (Carlile, 2004), allowing reframing of each actor's understanding into a collective context.

Thus the political nature of boundaries were utilised into questioning organisation-sustaining narratives (Chulián et al., 2025) between the different occupational representatives of the project, e.g. if engineers, architects or procurement were responsible for carbon emissions of the building life cycle. Placing a disciplinary spanning concept in front of the participants meant that work couldn't be delegated and members had to collaborate in addressing dependencies between their occupations. Thus, when facing barriers members had to communicate their situation, providing sufficient knowledge at the boundary to facilitate collaboration, with whom they were dependent. This meant that old skills were applied in new ways e.g. adapting budgets to estimate incorporated carbon emissions and circularity of materials or new skills was acquired e.g. how to plan the optimal orientation of solar panels

In order to enable team-based working, current asymmetries in knowledge had to be addressed so that each member could participate in common-discussions. This was done by establishing common semantics, giving participants access to all information and knowledge and beginning group meetings by having the members present progress as well as steps made in producing knowledge objects.

12.3 Summary of the intervention

During the intervention, participants began behaving in ways divergent to their regular office practices e.g by asking questions about outcomes and reasons for the tasks they were working on. On project termination the participants voiced how the project had prompted reflection

> *"This way of working was really nice. Many times they say do this and you don't get an explanation of why"* Architect 1, 25/4
>
> "*We have self evaluated a lot, something we forget because we're fully occupied by having to run operations"* I&S Director, 29/4

The directors also sensed a change in their own and employees sustainability attitudes.

> *"Now people in other areas are interested in and motivated for sustainability. Getting a common language across departments means that we communicate far more effectively"* I&S Director, 29/4
>
> *"While I still believe in certifications, but this project has made me more critical of EDGE"* SiP Director, 29/4

Maybe more interestingly, participants also were, by the iterative and collaborative process of the project, forced to engage in how other departments worked.

> *"I didn't know architecture did all that - cool"* Engineer 2, 16/3
>
> *"You really opened my eyes to the organisation and [the old] CSC. People had told me it didn't work, but I hadn't internalised it. I didn't know well enough how other areas work"* I&S Director, 29/4

With these results it appears that a vertical displacement towards the right in the typologies (figure 41), by adapting infrastructures, leadership styles and value-philosophies, can remobilise cognitive abilities in organisations.

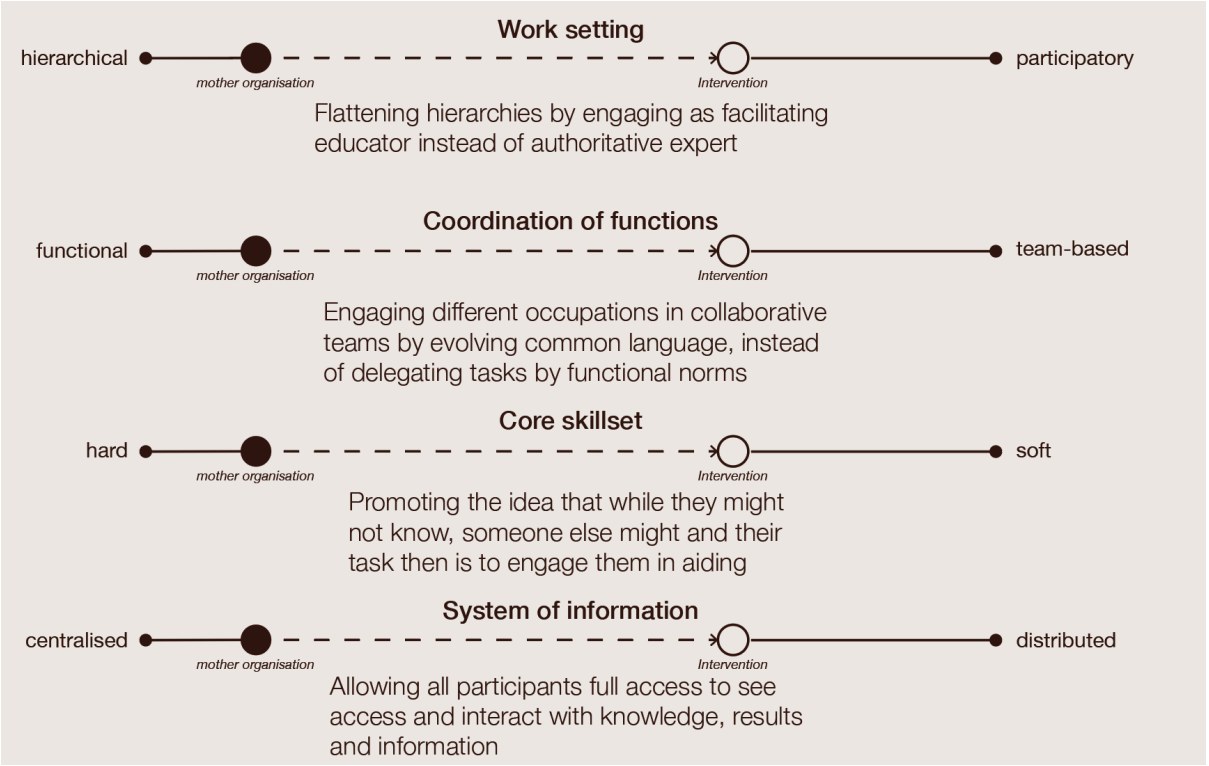


Fig 41. The vertical alignment of intervention in the four typologies

12.4 Reflection of intervention

Six weeks of intervention is not sufficient to change culture or social institutions, but the intervention still shows a possible disruption of self-reproducing GBW dynamics. While it is no guarantee that firms to the right axes do not perform GBW, these are less likely to have sustainability concerns fall between occupational gaps or get stuck to the ‘glass-ceilings’ in hierarchies. Upscaling the intervention across an organisation, although more complex, could supposedly have similar effects.

13 - Reflection of project

While the study was limited to only one case, the rich empirical material opens the door for future research to explore similarities in other companies. However, 9 months of ethnographic field-studies are not easily replicated - neither are the agency which I was granted (chapter 4.3). In this, my developed typologies can aid future researchers by providing sensitivity to similar themes in inquiry around, but not limited to, GBW.

Theoretical Implications

This research has revealed how organisational dynamics can compromise individuals or organisations' good intentions of sustainability. In this case the company, mistakenly, believes that they are doing good, which is why I contribute to existing GBW literature by complicating dominant assumptions - moving beyond the binary of authenticity versus deceit to better understand GBW as a complex systemic phenomenon.

Practical Implications

This thesis shows how the vertical movement from left to right in the four typologies (figure 38) are essential in addressing the issue of GBW. Without flattening hierarchies, organisational introspection and the development of organisations, where learning, doubt and reflexivity to a higher degree are encouraged, sustainability risks becoming a self-referential system, reinforcing its own image without advancing its substance, leading to GBW. While the diagnostic tool is developed for a particular case, and therefore not adequate, its typologies are sufficiently generic and supported by literature to assume that they can prove useful in other contexts.

Abbreviations

SiP Director - Director of sustainability in projects - tasked with the environmental performance of buildings projects and construction sites

I&S Director- Director of sustainability and innovation - tasked with the environmental performance of the company e.g. sustainability reports.

IFC - International Finance Corporation

EDGE - European-originating certification for Excellence in Design for Greater Efficiency

LEED - American-originating certification for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design

B-corp - a certification for businesses meeting high standards of social, environmental, and ethical performance.

SOP - Standard operating procedure

CSM - Critical sensemaking

GBW - Green-Blue-Washing

CS - Corporate sustainability

SDG - sustainable development goals

Arq coordinator 1 - Coordinator of the architectural department

A&C Director - Director of analytics and control

Arq Director - Director of architecture (Arq Director)

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6. Interview guide + transcriptions of interviews
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List of figures

Special thanks to

The case company and amazing colleagues for a great collaboration, shows of trust and a warm embrace.

CAMACOL, IFC and Hill Consulting for interesting dialogues and conversations during the project

My supervisor Per Richard Hansen for a larger than reasonably expected effort in the support and development of this project

My good friend Fredderik for helping me catalogue data and keep a reflective diary

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