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Dreaming of a better office: architecture and labour

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ABSTRACT

Taking up the MeCCSA 2021 conference theme 'Dreaming of another place', this article investigates the dream of, and path toward, a better, more humane, and more dignified office. Driven by Harry Braverman's assertions regarding the centrality of control over the labour process to the continued success of capitalism (*Labor and Monopoly Capital,* 1974), this article situates the office as a place and space defined by the necessities of global capital. Looking forward to a better place, this article suggests a regime of vertically integrated unionisation of those involved in the creation and use of office spaces (designers, architects, builders and office occupants) as a way to insert the needs and wants of all workers in a process previously held by capital. By uniting the voices, creativity and interests of all working people involved in the creation of office spaces, perpetual issues such as lack of personal privacy, minimal daylight, limited natural air and cramped, noisy conditions can be addressed at their source, and the dream of a better office brought to fruition.

KEYWORDS

Office Design, Capitalism, Labour Process Theory, Architecture, Labour

Dreaming of a better office

2020 and 2021 witnessed a substantial rise in interest and analysis of commercial office spaces, in their design, their use, and their potential futures. Many critics have predicted an imminent demise of office spaces. Others have suggested that the future office will look and feel radically different from the office of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This apparent eagerness to critique the present and look forward to the future of commercial offices, however, seems not to be matched by an equal willingness to examine the historical roots of such spaces.

'Dreaming of a better office', and the paper from which it emerged, are rooted in doctoral work at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, exploring the relationship between commercial office interiors and the process of doing labour. This research questions the canonical history of office architecture, complicating a remarkably standard narrative through investigation of how capitalist labour processes and economic necessities have moulded forms of conventional office interiors. Stemming from the observation that despite technological innovations and workforce changes the predominant office design is one of the open-plan, this doctoral research seeks to answer why such a layout has remained dominant, despite a consistent dislike of such designs by workers and quantitative indications of their relative inefficiency. More broadly, this doctoral work seeks to answer three overarching questions: What is the history of commercial office interiors? Why are these spaces so miserable? And what can be done to make them better?

MECCSA's 2021 conference theme, 'dreaming of a better place' presented a unique framework for elaboration of this research on commercial offices – bringing to the fore how historical and current misery in these spaces has developed, what the dream of a better office future might look like, and how this dream might be made real.

This article begins with a summation of office historiography, before introducing the concept of Labor Process Theory and the insights which this socio-political framework can provide on the development of commercial office interiors. In line with the 'dreaming of a better place' conference theme, this article concludes with analysis of how society can collectively move toward the realisation of a better, more humane, more enjoyable office future.

The history of the office

Absent robust understandings and utilisations of the historical realities and developments in and within commercial offices spaces, many present conversations regarding the future of these spaces appear less-than-substantial. A working knowledge of the history of the office, its physical developments, and ideological changes has the potential to form a solid foundation on which more robust explorations of the future of these spaces can be based.

The office as a unique and concrete entity is largely thought to have evolved at the turn of the twentieth century (Duffy 1997, 19). As the scale of business grew, so too did the volume of accompanying paperwork (Chandler 1999, 77-8). With more paperwork came more workers, and thus a need for a space in which these individuals could toil. Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Administration building is a frequently used as an exemplar of this style of office design (Robertson 2021, 46). The Larkin building featured large spaces filled with rows of identical workers, sitting in identical chairs which were cantilevered from, and permanently connected to, matching desks (Quinan 1987, 62; Saval 2014, 66-7; Liming 2020, 30-3). The atmosphere of the Larkin could best be described as quasi-industrial; custom built metal chairs and desks situated within a cavernous main hall, adorned with key motivational words (Quinan 1987).[1]

In many ways the Larkin Building and Larkin Company operations appear to have been early forerunners of contemporary mega-offices such as the Googleplex and Amazon's Seattle head-quarters. Within the Larkin space the company provided a canteen at which all employees, including the president, dined, an employee lounge, 'betterment' classes, sophisticated air conditioning and purification systems, and even a miniaturised Buffalo Public Library (Quinan 1987, 79-84). The comfort and respect of such amenities, however, may have in part been contradicted by the functionality and appearance of the physical interior and furniture. While aesthetically pleasing, Frank Lloyd Wright's primarily metal office chairs display few features designed for comfort, and one particular three-legged example became notorious for its insta-bility, even leading almost to the point of inciting worker revolt (Quinan 1987, 62).

From Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin building, offices, alongside the scope of capitalism, continued to grow, frequently ever upward, with office spaces occupying the majority of buildings such as the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Plaza (Duffy 1997, 22-3; Haigh 2012, 89; Saval 2014, 36). Constricted by available technology, these spaces were fairly narrow and uniform, until, many office histories suggest, the middle of the century when, spurred on by the German *Bürolandschaft* [Open Office] ideology, offices became wider, deeper, less regimented, and more modern (Saval 2014, 132; Caruso St John Architects and Mozas 2017, 18). This Mid-Century era of office design is frequently represented by buildings such as Mies van der Rohe's Seagram building, Gordon Bundhsaft's Lever House, and Eero Saarinen's Bell

1 'Intelligence', 'Enthusiasm', 'Control', 'Economy', and 'Industry' among others.

Labs, General Motors, and John Deere headquarters (Haigh 2020, 56). These iconic spaces, humanised by the addition of softer furnishings and lighting, more sophisticated heating and cooling systems, and the presence of home-touches such as potted plants are argued to have been designed both for maximal productivity and better retention of top employee talent (Forty 1989, 143).

However, much like the frequently unseen and un-spoken of negative implications of the Larkin's design, the "softness" within these mid-century office spaces may be viewed as a double-edged sword; such designs facilitated a depression of white-collar salaries,[2] and may have provided 'cover' for the continued application by management of prescriptive and controlling work ideologies and patterns (Forty 1989, 143).

The next waypoint in many histories of the office is Herman Miller's Action Office. Created by Robert Propst in 1964, Action Office was a modular furniture system designed to facilitate evolution of the workplace and enable more streamlined working practices (Propst 1968). Action Office comprises interlocking, modifiable panels of differing heights and matching accessories, allowing employees, or office managers, to construct and reconstruct private workstations without the need to employ specialist decorators or construction crews (Kaufmann-Buhler 2013, 36-7; Saval 2014, 208-214; Caruso St John Architects and Mozas 2017, 60).

Many histories of Action Office, Herman Miller, and the office more broadly convey a standard series of events following the release of the second iteration of Action Office, Action Office II (AO II). This narrative suggests that despite many well-intentions of Propst and the Herman Miller team, as the concept of the modular office with moveable partitions became popularised, it likewise was altered by market forces, leading the Action Office concept to evolve into one of the best known, and perhaps least liked office designs - the cubicle (Duffy 1997, 58-60; Haigh 2012, 270). A familiar cacophony of grey, cubicles took the forms of Action Office, and removed any vestiges of flexibility, permanently dividing up office spaces, standardising what many argue was intended to be a customisable and fluid system (Saval 2014, 242-9; Kaufmann-Buhler 2013).

The canon of office history suggests that as more aspects of white-collar work became increasingly driven by technology, this work also became more creative, necessitating more face-to-face contact and different office designs (Duffy 1997). In contrast to the divisions put in place by cubicle dividers, the new technology-driven office of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries were comprised of wide-open spaces, with few divisions between discrete desk areas. The openness of turn-of-the-century office interiors was intended to foster teamwork and the development of new ways of working to go alongside new technologies and technical methods of undertaking white collar work (Duffy 1997, 50-1).

Despite its brief existence and a proliferation of employee complaints, Gaetano Pesce's New York Chiat/Day headquarters are an oft-referenced exemplar of 1990's and early 2000's interior office design. One wall of the office space featured floor-to-ceiling with pillows, another filled with protruding LED lights. Desks appeared to be constructed from found materials and doorknobs were coated with dripping red wax. Replete with blindingly chaotic colours and off-the-wall forms (including an open mouth technology check-out centre), Chiat/Day's 1994 office space also did away with employee privacy and assigned spaces.

The twenty-first century has seen the rise of office 'hotelling', utilisation of office spaces without

2 Indeed, as Adrian Forty highlights in *Objects of Desire* during this time salaries for blue-collar jobs frequently exceeded white-collar office work (Forty 1989, 140).

assigned or permanent personal spaces. Offices designed around a ‘hotelling’ or ‘hot desking’ model feature offices with interchangeable, de-personalised desk spaces. Within ‘hotelling’ offices it is expected that employees will store all personal affects in lockers and move between desks as needed on a daily or even hourly basis (McGregor 2015).

From the Larkin through to contemporary hotelling spaces, this history portrays the development of office interiors as directed and progressive; with successive designs building upon one another and steadily and simultaneously becoming more comfortable, more humane, and more productive. In this historiography designs are motivated by changes in technology, and service new ways of doing work forming in response to new technologies.

Historiographical inferences

While it is remarkably standardised and helpfully concise, there are many elements of the oft-repeated history of the office which are in need of close, critical analysis. Above all else, the historiography’s assertion that historical office designs succeeded in improving working standards, conditions, and productivity, remain to be fully unpacked, particularly as these claims frequently do not appear to be significantly substantiated or evidenced. Despite such issues, the standardised history of office interiors allows for a sufficient cultivation of understanding regarding the forms and transformations of office architecture and design, while at the same time exposing an intriguing dialectic.

First, the condensed history of the commercial office seems to hint at the remarkable similarity of the office spaces it discusses. From Frank Lloyd Wright’s Larkin Building to the Googleplex, despite changing building materials and workplace technologies, many of the sites frequently discussed in the historiography feature wide-open, exposed spaces complete with identical rows of desks, with little auditory or visual privacy afforded to most workers. Absent from the history are significant signs of change or alteration, or movement toward another base layout.

Additionally, and in contrast to the stasis of the designs themselves, the rationales behind office layouts seem to have morphed and altered with time. From the Larkin’s necessity for smooth movement of paperwork from one worker to the next, to the requirement of open spaces for communication between co-workers and execution of teamwork in Eero Saarinen’s buildings, the rationale for the open office seems to have changed according to prevalent ideas about what work is, and how it should be done.

Together, these two trans-historical observations mean the existence of a relatively static physical office design being presented both historically and in the present under a revolving door of rationales and reasonings. This juxtaposition, and a lack of forthright discussion regarding its implications, suggest that forces yet-to-be explored may be at play both in terms of the stunted change present in physical architecture and design, and in the need to re-present and re-sell such a design under different, and frequently contradictory frameworks and rationales.

It’s capitalism

Doctoral research into the labour process suggests that one such force influencing the shape and tenor of interior office designs may be the operations of business and labour within and under a capitalist economy. As the office as a discrete category of space arguably arose from structural changes within the capitalist system, and as almost all offices today operate within or in relation to capitalist economies (Braverman 1974, 12-3), capitalism itself proves a pivotal touchstone and reference point for the study of the office. As offices are not simply sites within which work transpires, but are places designed and built for the undertaking of work and

extraction of labour, exploration of how management under capitalism interferes materially in the labour process remain crucial.

Exploration and investigation of the labor processes within offices and their relationship to design can be built upon a field of study which will here be referred to as Labor Process Theory. Labor Process Theory is a Marxist strain of socio-political thought which argues that capitalist control over the circumstances and practices of labor is a necessary part of the contemporary capitalist system.

Labor Process Theory posits that when companies began paying employees by the hour, day, or week instead of per piece of work completed, a crisis was created within capitalism (Braverman 1974). This crisis meant companies could no longer be assured they were getting more value out of their workers than what they were paying each individual laborer (Braverman 1974). Because under wage labor conditions workers are paid regardless of how much work is achieved, company management necessitated a mechanism which would ensure that workers were completing at least enough work to cover the cost of their wages, and ideally enough work to generate profit for the company (Braverman 1974). Labor process theorists suggest that such a mechanism is control by capitalists and company management over the way work itself is done – over the process of doing labor (Braverman 1974, Edwards 1979). By controlling *how* work is done, companies could be assured that a base line of productivity and profit was achieved (Braverman 1974, Edwards 1979).

Control over the labor process can take many forms – it can manifest as a detailed set of instructions, overly specific ways of doing tasks, greater managerial, or enforced company norms.[3] Control over the labor process might also be understood vis-à-vis architecture and design; through the creation, maintenance and propagation of physical workspaces, such as offices, which encourage continual managerial oversight both of employees and of particular work tasks. While the former has been well explored in Marxist, sociological, and economic literature, the later remains relatively untheorised and unexplored.

Application of labour process theory to the architecture and design of office spaces raises the possibility that the particulars of office designs are not only linked to specific work tasks, or the vague nature of work in any given time period but are being driven by more fundamental underlying needs of the capitalist social and economic system. The open office may exist and persist not because technology workers must communicate constantly, and in person, nor because this design is the most cost-efficient way of situating workers, but instead because the open office design enables management to observe and dictate exactly how work is done. The fundamental capitalist need for control over labor, the labor process, and laborers may lie behind the hundred plus year history of remarkably similar office interior design. Further, this overarching need may explain the physical and visual similarities behind and between otherwise radically different workspaces – why both offices and factories alike are largely composed of wide open, observable spaces with limited natural light and fresh air, and limited to no personal auditory of visual privacy.

Continued existence of inhumane offices

A fundamental need for managerial control may explain the initial appearance of the open

3 Nontangible elements of control are well-covered by Richard Edwards in *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (1979), Michael Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (1979), Andrew Friedman's *Industry and Labour: Class Struggle at Work and Monopoly Capitalism* (1977) and Harley Shaiken's *Work Transformed: Automation and Labor in the Computer Age* (1986).

office, during the turn-of-the-century era when this category of work and workspace was still coalescing. While many architects and designers have set off with significant ambitions to revolutionise and even humanise office spaces, these attempts have frequently resulted in an intensification of many of the worst aspects of offices.

Robert Propst's attempts to modularise and personalise office interiors through the Action Office ended up birthing the cubicle (Saval 2014). Propst's introduction of modularity and flexible, non-permanent walls at least open doors, if not paved the way for the less-than-wall partitions of the cubicle to become common place. Many of the selling points of the Action Office system, the ease at which individual offices could be reconfigured, the potential financial savings of a DIY office system, and the durability of the materials, would be seized upon by Herman Miller competitors in the creation of their own similar systems. It did not take long for these business-friendly elements of Action Office to become divorced from the more expensive and, from the perspective of management, less necessary human touches such as colour and personalised configuration. Beyond the example of Action Office, the introduction of Bürolandschaft brought open-plans to highly paid white-collar workers, and Gaetano Pesce and Chiat/Day's attempts to modernise workflows and processes arguably led to the rise of hotelling and diminution of persistent personal space.

The office's relatively brief history is dotted with examples of well-meaning designers and architects setting off to solve the issues of the office, only for the legacies of their designs to be perhaps even more dehumanising than the originals. The application of Labor Process analysis to the realm of office design suggests that such interventions have failed because they are treating a symptom, rather than a disease. Attempts to better the office through design alone attempt to ameliorate the material circumstances caused by large-scale needs and mechanisations of capitalism without addressing or acknowledging capitalism itself. And in so doing, the architects and designers of office spaces seem to find themselves fighting against what can only be described as a behemoth without the ideological, political, or social support needed to do so successfully.

Towards a better office

The potential inevitability of the open office and more fundamental issues regarding the necessity of managerial control over labour could be understood as gloomy and demotivating – a locked system in which all those who work, and all those who design places of work are trapped. However, recognising the capitalistic roots of demoralising and dehumanising office design may equip those who design, study and work within these spaces with powerful tools to reimagine, reinterpret, and reshape offices moving forward. In this sense, the centrality of the Labour Process, and of Labour Process Theory to commercial office interiors cannot be overstated, as these ideological tools and frameworks provide the scaffolding from which the dream of a better office can be made real. Such tools can be divided into three roughly organised categories of action and resistance.

Abolish capitalism

First and foremost, the potential close connection between many of the worst and most dehumanising elements of office design and any operation or need under capitalism signals that office designs may be fundamentally changed by replacing capitalism. Progress toward a social and economic system which eschews a fundamental need to use, abuse and exploit the majority of the population in order to build wealth and comfort for the 1% may also mean progress toward radically different office designs. Collectively working toward a social and economic system which allows, and in fact encourages, respect of the individual human worker should

in turn support the design and creation of office spaces built around the needs and wants of the individuals using these spaces, rather than those of the individuals profiting from their use.

Unionisation

Wholesale revolution should not be seen as the only systematic step which can be taken toward the improvement of interior office architecture and design. If it is accepted that the roots of inhumane office designs lie within capitalism, pushback against poor office design can be organised through the same methods which are used to fight other ills under capitalism – specifically, unionisation. Unions, broadly speaking, return power to working people. Collective organisation allows for the creation of a bigger, stronger voice for labour when face-to-face with management or directly in conversation with capitalists.

With regard to office spaces, unions can begin appropriating power and control away from corporate developers, foremen, owners and managers, and towards workers themselves. With specific regard to office design, unionisation has the potential to take several forms. Unionisation in the sector primarily might take the form of office workers organising and fighting for offices with individual and persistent private spaces, for access to natural light and air, for personalised climate controls, and for desks and chairs that are comfortable and easy to use.

As has been previously raised within this article, however, offices are not only a final site of labour. These spaces are also part of the labour processes of builders and architects. This means that in addition to the demands of office workers unions upon office spaces, builders unions too might organise to encourage or demand spaces which are built using safe materials, built to realistic timeframes, and built using highly-skilled and well-paid labour. Further, architects' unions might demand that they be permitted to design interesting and beautiful and creative office spaces, and that they be encouraged to take their time on designs, ensuring the creation of the best spaces possible.

Beyond organisation of trades independently, office workers, office builders, and office designers might organise to support each other's demands, creating a bigger workforce from which to bargain and influence design, construction and use of office spaces. Such cooperation between independently organised and operated unions within a single trade sector can be understood and encapsulated as the possibility of vertically-integrated unionisation - of a deliberate coordination of all those involved with office spaces; an office ecosystem in which the architects, interior designers, builders and office occupants are first, all unionised, and second, working in unison with each other, engaged in continuous dialogue about what designs, materials and techniques not only make for the best end building, but also for the most humane and enjoyable work experience at every stage.

Reframe the problem

In addition to concrete and economic strides which can be made in pursuit of a better office, a broader theoretical reframing of the problem of inhumane and manager-centric office designs also has potential to contribute to progress. By reframing the problem of office design away from physical, particular designs, and instead toward the broader political circumstances surrounding the design process, important strides can be made toward the dream of a better office.

Such a reframing first requires, as Peggy Deamer poignantly argues in *Architecture and Labor* (2020), for those within the architectural profession to recognise that architects serve as 'wage labour for the capitalist' (2020, 24) – that architectural work does not, and cannot, escape from

the pressures and machinations of capitalism. All dehumanising offices exist in part because an architect designed them. Such inhumane designs cannot continue to be built, designed, or redesigned if architects and interior designers refuse to be involved in these projects. 'Work that one does not believe in can't get done if we refuse to do it: refuse to design prisons, refuse to design detention centres, refuse to design border walls' (Deamer 2020, 68) and refuse to design dehumanising offices. As Deamer concludes, 'Just refuse to do work you do not believe in' (2020, 68).

Refusal to participate in socially and morally unacceptable designs is, then, a crucial first step toward a more ethical architecture and a more ethical ethos surrounding office spaces. This refusal is, at its core, a politicisation of the architectural profession; 'An ethical architecture profession…cannot avoid taking political positions' (Deamer 2020, 100). An ethical architecture must take a stand not just against specific design details of specific office buildings, but against the entire system from which such designs are birthed and replicated. Reframing the problem of office interiors requires recognising the role which architecture plays at all stages of the labour process, and specifically the labour impacts of office buildings, of the conditions which architects are damning office workers, including, frequently, other architects to because of their designs.

Current realities of a better office

For many, the dream of a better office may seem to remain just a dream, with the promise of more personal space and privacy unrealisable under and irreconcilable with capitalism. However, the existence of buildings and spaces which contain many more humane office features, while not perfect examples of a dream office, remain waypoints to which designers and scholars can turn for physical inspiration and critical, socio-political analysis.

In Sweden, where architects are unionised and where office workers councils are consulted in the design of workspaces, attention can be turned to the SAS building (van Meel 2000). SAS provided most individual workers with a standardised office, complete with doors that shut, windows that opened and furniture that could be moved at will (Duffy 1997, 13-4). Office cells were connected by broad promenades which stretched the length of the building, letting in additional light (Duffy 1997, 38-9). Such spatial features stand in remarkable contrast with many offices within the United States and United Kingdom, where privacy, space, and natural light remain scarce commodities for non-executive workers.

Inspiration can also be found in Germany, where once again office workers are well represented throughout the building design process, and where until recently worker protections vis-à-vis environmental factors such as distance to windows and access to natural light and air were quite strong. The Edding headquarters well illustrate the potential fruits of this employee-centric consultative process. Similar to SAS, all employees received a private office in Edding's 1990 building, complete with opening windows and natural light (Duffy 1997, 123-9). Private spaces are directly abutted with shared working spaces, mostly in the open, but including some walled-in conference areas (Duffy 1997, 123-9). Further, all the offices at Edding are the same size, providing parity within the company and allowing for very easy and efficient reallocation of spaces (Duffy 1997, 123-9).

While still containing faults, and still immersed within a global capitalist economy, the physical structures of Edding and SAS illustrate the potential impact of greater worker participation and control over design of office spaces. These spaces, as well as the systems and processes behind them provide proof that unionisation and pushback against unrestrained capitalism can work

regarding the improvement of office architecture.

Conclusion

Beginning with a summary of the development and evolution of office interior design, this article has laid out the convergence and impact which examination of the Labor Process offers study of the built office environment. Stemming from this relationship, it has suggested that commercial office interiors look and feel the way they do for a very particular reason; that office spaces are not simply precision tools for the execution of specific work tasks, they are also crucial infrastructure in the execution and reproduction of capitalism. Further, this article has outlined three primary ways in which progress can be made toward the dream of a better office: through the abolition of capitalism, through worker unionisation, and through a reframing of the 'problems' of interior office design as political, rather than physical. This article concluded with brief discussion of contemporary office spaces which embody the promise of a better office, shaped under differing socio-economic norms and relations.

While the short-term outlook for office spaces may remain grim for those who must inhabit these spaces day in and day out, filled with forced home-working, increasingly viable computer spyware, and looming forced transitions to fully open-plan spaces, understanding the sociological, political, and economic roots of this bleak future offers the glimmer of a better office future.

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