



Office Archaeology

Anthropological and archaeological aspects of architecture and office work from a cultural and scientific perspective

Preamble

A short glance at the various aspects of observation is useful for an introductory exploration of the field of research. Afterwards, the attempt can be made to link the individual tendencies according to central themes. This can only be seen as a tenuous attempt at an analytical approach, since an extensive empirical research segment, which is required for a well-founded analysis, could not be completed for this study. For this reason, archaeological methodology was applied to observe the field of research, since it is based on source material that is constantly subject to rudimentary, selective mechanisms. This approach makes it possible to present one interpretation of reality based on the exposure and analysis of individual layers. At the same time, this implies that other conclusions are considered possible. However, Much more is achieved than the proclamation of one truth when said approach or the aspects discussed succeed in engaging the reader's interest in the subject.

The Architecture Aspect

Architecture, which the Greeks considered the mother of all arts, and which was also rated one of the free arts during the Renaissance, satisfies the everyday need for a place to live, which is defined as one of the sozialen Totalphänomenen (total social phenomena) according to Marcel Mauss. The creation of architectures was established to address both living and working needs according to our understanding of Central European living space today. Its primary function with regard to a working environment lies in guaranteeing independence from the weather and organizing work procedures in a meaningful spatial program. Additionally, we tend to link secondary meanings to things and actions in our communication process-ridden, constitutionalized world. This aspect of immateriality has existed within the materiality of construction from the very beginning. One only has to think of "buildings" such as Stonehenge or the ancient Egyptian pyramids – the primary function is open to debate in one case. In the other case, the primary function as a tomb is clearly upstaged by the building's secondary function as a means of distinction and representation. The creation of architecture is a complex project in general terms – a bundle of demands, so to speak.

The Work Aspect

Diligence on the job has achieved a certain social recognition as a secondary virtue, especially in the German-speaking world. So, doesn't it make sense to stylize a work place and load it down with additional meanings? A short glance at the cultural history of office work makes the rapid transformation this field underwent in the course of – let us say – 120 years clear: from the workbench-like alignment of lecterns in the writing room or office cells lined up like a string of pearls with a "civil servant's track" running in between, to large open-space offices characterized by equal amounts of monitoring and distraction. Other examples include workflow-optimized work spaces with a PC and communications terminal with their adjustable

wall panels that can be set to suit any work group configuration whose efficiency is symbolized by the figures a cost-benefit calculation and the temporarily stationary sales representative who rolls his mobile office caddy to a non-personalized work space and logs into his virtual office via a network connection. Every case also reflects society's esteem for office employees in its organization. Society's system of values undergoes a continuous transformation over time. The spectrum includes the criminal mastermind behind a desk in a public administration office and the investment banker, equipped with symbols of mobility such as a laptop and a mobile phone, although the latter only enjoyed a brief boom during the "new economy" months. What remains is a value system in which status defined by professional success, which is generally documented by the corresponding earnings, results in social recognition.

The Archaeology Aspect

Historically oriented cultural studies use different methods and types of sources to analyze and reconstruct historical processes. Archaeological methods are mainly based on the analysis of the remains of a culture's objects. A difference should be made between discoveries, the circumstances of the discovery and their contexts. The latter are particularly important since they allow conclusions on the former contexts of function and meaning – it is possible to unearth deeper meanings and patterns of action. Traces of use or indications of secondary uses also give interesting insights. Archaeology also avails itself of a number of generally natural science-based supplementary sciences that will remain unmentioned in this context. Archaeology has become very specialized in its attention to different time frames in cultural history: it covers prehistory and early history as well as classical archaeology, the Middle Ages and the Modern Era and industrial archaeology. Hence office archaeology can be seen as a sub-discipline of industrial archaeology that focuses on social science questions.

The Anthropology Aspect

Anthropology studies man's tribal history and ancestry as well as our development and ontogeny. Even if certain transportation options appear effective for the masses and worth striving for in our automobile age, or even seem to exclude all other possibilities (even to buy the unavoidable pack of cigarettes at a kiosk) they have not yet led us to give up our innate biped habits. Now, even the "office homo sapiens" seems to be falling back into habits that were considered a thing of the past – due to the seemingly definitive course of cultural evolution and social development. It is obvious that a boy is hidden in every man and that a territorial being lies hidden in every man. This fencing off of territory is expressed in every aspect of life: how else can the survival of a hunting fence in the middle of suburban terraced housing be explained, or the tendency to prefer the parking space close to our home, under the street light for the family car – within the field of vision of the living room window, if

possible. Social interaction is, not least of all, and exciting interplay of nearness and narrowness. Identity as being one's self is the basis for identification (along with an occupation, a group, a conviction, etc.) and requires fencing off from strangers.

The Anthropological and Archaeological Workplace Analysis

Normally the cultural historical analytical view only notices a phenomenon when it is threatened with extinction. In a priori terms, this doesn't seem to be case nor does it seem desirable for work as a field of research – although this case is more of a confirmation of the rule than the exception, since the world of work is undergoing rapid change. Almost all known and common patterns are being questioned and statements – such as the goal of full employment – are increasingly articulated in a conjunctive tense in political rhetoric. Although the creation of life employment accounts suggests different time budgets in which gainful employment times are quantifiable, one glance at real living shows that the borders between working hours and leisure hours are becoming increasingly blurred. In spite of the fact that even consumer habit researchers do not assume that longer opening hours will automatically lead to an increase in turnover, they hope that greater flexibility will lead to a heightening of the “shopping experience.” The logical consequence of this removal of barriers not only affects the patterns of interaction of the acting and reacting persons, it is also manifested in the world of objects. The spectrum ranges from specially designed home office furniture that can be integrated in a private living space to the “living room conversion” of office furnishings. The specific culture of things in the office world reaches beyond the primary objective – making work possible – to a secondary functional level that emphatically addresses the desire for representation and identification. Similar aspects can also be registered in the field of more refined office architecture as a logical consequence. However, the described mechanisms of distinction aren't contemporary phenomena. After all, clerks in the 19th century had the possibility of ascribing rank by either sitting or not sitting, or with backrests of differing heights. These were manifestations made with objects that amounted to a code understood by all.

It is undoubtedly impossible to lump – or clump – all office employees together. On one hand, office work is seen as a mass culture phenomena, on the other, an analytical view of the office homo sapiens shows that he can choose his field of work more or less freely and also have a major influence on his (architectural) surroundings. While the first group is directed to accept the given conditions, the latter group can invent their working surroundings themselves. But the ingenuity of those who have to accept the given conditions shouldn't be underestimated. They also discover means and ways of removing the sense of foreignness from their workspace. A casual examination of everyday work shows that the variety of systems of order is at least as large as the fantasy of order avoidance: in the form of the office employee, the primeval hunter and collector seems to continue with his

mischief, completely unconcerned with the evolution of technology and the innumerable time and self-management seminars that are available. Even now with office communication networks, which were initially praised for being paper-free, you find more or less neatly stacked mountains of files on surfaces that were originally defined as work surfaces by ergonomics experts and architects. Precisely measured work surfaces at the ideal height become a playground for cuddly toys and a biotope for coffee mugs. The description of the behavioral patterns surrounding the consumption of hot beverages alone would fill pages and offer highly interesting insights on the meaning of informal and non-verbal workspace communication. Nothing is more cleansing, except for the pleasure of cleaning your ears with Q-tips than the heartfelt tossing of a stack of files into a wastebasket. The walls and moats that develop from unrelated processes during individual bureaucratic battles – located on window sills and die tables – only seem threatened by window cleaners who periodically maraud through the building with the merciless intention of cleaning in officially scheduled intervals. This tendency to create barriers is manifested in a thoroughly useful form of territorial behavior in the earliest phases of evolution, which was of elementary importance in defining the border between one's own and someone else's. Thus the foreignness of stone gray of office surroundings is countered with different patterns of action that make the personal appropriation of the workplace possible. Catalysts are created this way that trigger identification with the workplace and with the job itself that also generate long-term revenue. Hence the office is at the same a surface for representation and a communication platform for everyday social interaction along with its primary function as a workplace.

The newest research completed in America shows that the home office user satisfaction with their workplace is definitely not higher than that of normal office employees. On the contrary, the clear separation – also physical spatial separation – of work, leisure and sleeping segments is an advantage for family surroundings. Cheers to those who belong to the species of “inventors,” who can go to work and invent their own workplace even at an architectural level. The users of “the unit work surfaces” do indeed seem to have a great will to design and competence. This is the case with both the reflection of company philosophy basics (e.g. transparency, clarity, precision in a law firm) and the work methodology requirements (e.g. increasing each others level of information at a company's headquarters) within the architecturally designed space. The unconventional approach that was taken in finding forms naturally lead to polarization among the users: as time passes and the forces of personnel fluctuation take effect, an open space office with a roughly 20 meter-long desk with space for almost as many workplaces will be occupied by a clientele of employees that will not only accept this work situation, but will also identify its particularly pleasing and useful aspects. Naturally the single workspace is subject to increased visual monitoring in this situation, since the bordering space between neighbors is especially low. However, if this is coupled with business

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management that is sensitized in terms of corporate sociological conditions – as is the case here – the “mass” seated on the ultra-long (community) desk signalizes social awareness and readiness to speak, making the table both a desk and a workbench for the soul. After all, the state of a desk also allows for conclusions about the prevailing work situation: A desk loaded with files shouldn't only be interpreted doesn't only indicate that this is a notorious collector's workspace, it could also be a signal for the employee's permanent sense of being overburdened, which could probably be alleviated by changing work processes or responsibilities. Synopsis

However, by rule, office work remains a mass phenomenon that is met with mass prefabrication today. The respective approaches to solutions depend on the corresponding level of research and the fashion currents. At the moment, the combined offices developed in Scandinavia in which a jointly used central area complements the close quarters of individual workplaces are fashionable. These spaces contain technical work tools such that can also be used by other employees (e.g. photo copier, fax machine) as well as facilities such as a kitchenette for coffee making, which lead to a (desired) increase in informal communication between colleagues who occupy individual offices when used as a community. Additionally, aspects that have nothing to do with the actual task should be taken into consideration when designing office architecture. The degree to which fire hazard protection or escape route guidelines influence the spatial freedom of architectural design should not be underestimated and they have a considerable influence on the materials that can be used. Another remarkable aspect is the field of acoustics, after all the goal is to make communication possible, but also to reduce the range of sound waves to the point in which working next to each other is possible as well as working with each other. This has even more validity in a time in which constant accessibility has become a sign of quality and status and in which polyphony has received an entirely new meaning: namely simultaneous accessibility via fixed network and mobile phones. This leads to completely absurd communication systems. It turns a car into a personal mobile office, or an ICE train compartment featuring a PC connection into an open space office, it also makes every sidewalk café a forum that is suitable for the discussion of internal company matters. The surrounding crowds of people thus become acoustic insulation and also become accomplices because they are forced to hear what is being said. The field of acoustic spatial design that makes targeted communication possible while reducing background noise is increasingly important in a time defined by the collection and circulation of information and in which verbal communication is relied on more frequently.

After all, the expansion of work into the virtual space is a sign of the current times. The organization of the immediate workspace is meant first. The work surface the

PC rests on becomes a communication platform and work archive at the same time. Then comes the networking of workplaces among each other, which gives an insight into the field of communications architecture whose importance can be underestimated in architecture for work today by offering communication via email and Internet access. The population's reading competence is being subject to an elementary change. Although there is no threat of extinction for readers at the moment, the habits in terms of handling and using texts – and consequently information architecture – are changing. Today's globalizing world especially needs to develop systems of symbols that are unmistakable, since communication isn't what “goes out,” it is what “arrives.” The highly specialized tele-coaching market has developed in the consulting field that offers additional advisory consulting competence via phone conversations or an Internet chat can be received just in time, so to speak. The possible ramifications of this development for architectural design, if and when it takes hold can only be speculated on at this point.

In any case, the facts and interesting elements in the field of office archaeology, which was only sketched out roughly here, show that it is a truly broad field. This isn't surprising since work has taken up a considerable amount of our time since we were chased out of paradise. What remains is the hope that in the era of CAD technology, architecture will not be merely understood as the reading of scores of grounds plans in accordance with DIN-standards. Instead, it should be a UNIT: it should be the creativity of multidimensional spatial design taking the factors of light, color, sound, smell and surface into consideration – created by people and most of all, for (working) people. A wonderful discussion could be started on whether being is defined by its knowledge or if knowledge defines being. What can be feared is that the necessity for truly human workplace environment design will be recognized less frequently in a time when having a workplace is considered a luxury by most. After all, the army of qualified persons who would like to become employees is a widely available and consequently willing resource.

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Berlin, 2003*

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