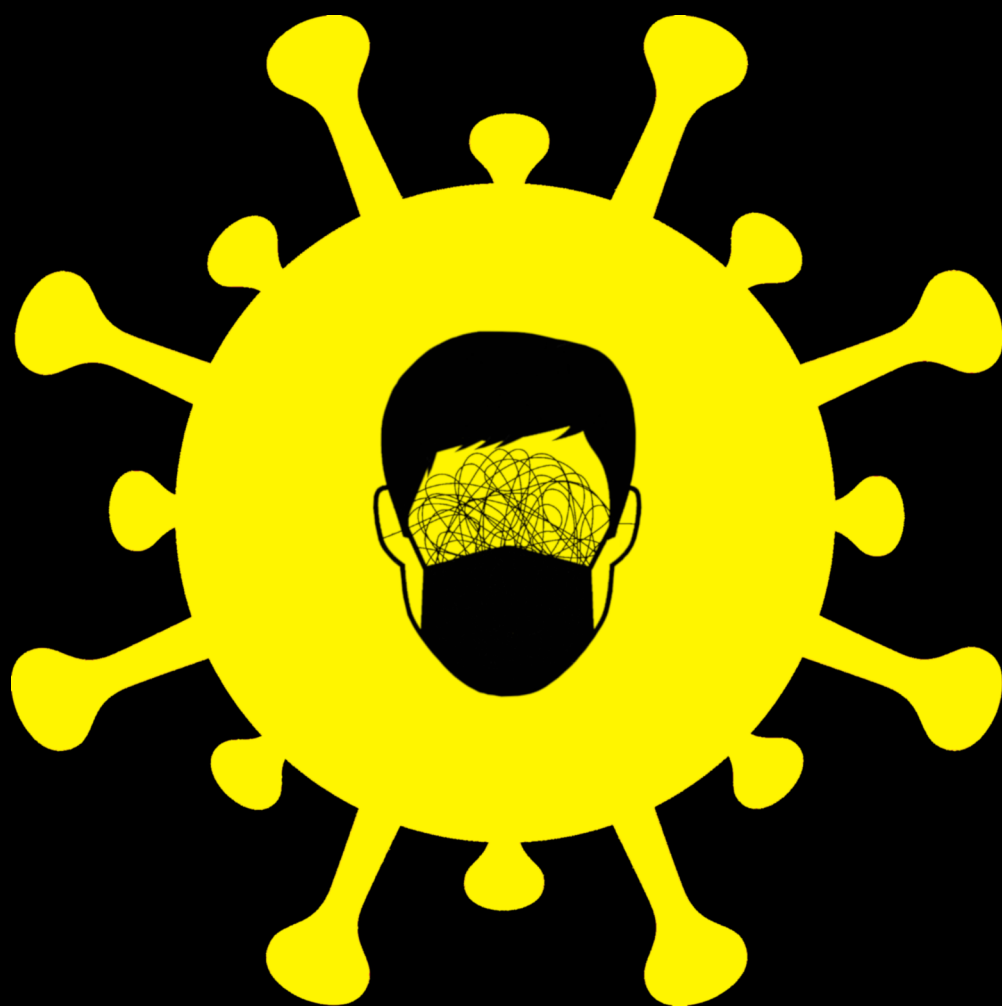


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Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections on a Post-Covid World



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The office is dead, long live the office: The coronavirus pandemic and the future of office spaces

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Abstract:

Over the course of the coronavirus crisis, substantially increased attention has been paid to the space of the commercial office. Much of this renewed attention has focused on potential futures of offices, suggesting that as the pandemic subsides, home-working will remain and companies will rapidly shed physical assets in city centres.

This article explores how the demise of the physical space of the office as a discrete category may have been overstated, and how the foundational role office spaces play vis-à-vis white-collar work may continue into the post-Covid world.

Starting with a brief history of the designed space of this office, this article explores three concepts neglected by many in their attempts to forecast office futures: 1) the historic resiliency of office spaces in the face of technological and social change, 2) the immense diversity of commercial office spaces and office workers, and 3) the role of physical office space in the capitalist labour process.

Keywords: COVID-19, Architecture, Office Spaces, home-working

A brief history of the office

The office as a unique and concrete entity is largely thought to have developed at the turn of the twentieth century (Duffy 1997: 19). As railways and emerging industry increased the scale on which business was conducted, the amount of paperwork produced by businesses also increased. With increased paperwork came a need for more clerical workers, as well as a need for space in which these new employees could work (Chandler 1999: 77–8).

Frank Lloyd Wright's 1904 Larkin Administration building is frequently used as an exemplar of the early turn-of-the-century office (Robertson 2021: 46). Built around a four-story atrium, the Larkin Administration building featured wide open working spaces filled with rows of identical workers toiling at identical desks fitted with identical cantilevered and non-adjustable chairs, all designed by Wright himself (Quinan 1987: 62; Saval 2014: 66–7; Liming 2020: 30–3).

As capitalism continued to grow, so did the amount of offices—frequently ever upward—with office spaces occupying the majority of space in landmark buildings such as the Empire State Building, Chrysler Building, and RCA Building in Rockefeller Plaza (Duffy 1997: 22–3; Haigh 2012: 89; Saval 2014: 36). Many histories of office spaces posit that the offices within such buildings remained relatively narrow and uniform until the middle of the twentieth century when new technologies including more reliable air-conditioning and elevators allowed for the creation deeper spaces within taller buildings (Saval 2014: 132; Caruso St John Architects and Mozas 2017: 18).

Inspired by the German *Burolandschaft* ideology of the late 1950s, many companies began removing private offices and instituting a more modern look for their expanded open office floor plans (Forty 1989: 143). This new era of office spaces, full of modern design and the comforts of home, is well represented by iconic mid-century headquarters such as Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram Building, Gordon Bundhsaft’s Lever House, and Eero Saarinen’s designs for Bell labs, General Motors, IBM, and John Deere (Haigh 2020: 56).

The next waypoint in many histories of the office is Herman Miller’s Action Office. Created initially by George Nelson and Robert Propst in 1964, Action Office was a modular furniture system designed to streamline working practices and facilitate continuous evolution of the workplace (Propst 1968). Featuring colourful and moveable partitions available in differing heights, as well as interchangeable desk and storage options, Action Office is thought to be the first modular office furniture system (Kaufmann-Buhler 2013: 36–7; Saval 2014: 208–214; Caruso St John Architects and Mozas 2017: 60).

Much of office historiography states that despite the well-intentions of Propst and his team, as a more profit-friendly second iteration of Action Office became popularised, it evolved into perhaps the best known—but most disliked office design—the cubicle (Duffy 1997: 58–60; Haigh 2012: 270). In contrast to the bright colours of Action Office, the generic cubicle was frequently a tone of grey or beige. As opposed to the customizable elements of the Action Office, cubicles necessitated a standardised and frequently unmovable form.

Office histories are quick to point out that the inhumanity of the cubicle was in some ways balanced by the appearance of worker-friendly spaces in Northern Europe such as Herman Hertzberger’s 1972 Centraal Beheer offices, Niels Torp’s 1987 SAS building, and Hans Struhk & Partners’ 1990 building for pen manufacturer Edding. Such spaces, composed of private cellularized offices, are linked in much of the literature to specific national norms of privacy and space or the cultures of specific corporations (van Meel 2000).

Many pieces of literature on the office continue on to suggest that as white-collar work became more technologically minded in the 1980s and 90s, it became more creative, required more face-to-face contact, and thus required different office designs (Duffy 1997: 105). These spaces, exemplified by the blindingly colourful and chaotic New York Chait/Day headquarters (Duffy 1997: 192–7), were supposedly designed to break down conventional work patterns and encourage constant worker collaboration through flexible, fully open, plans. Much like the amenity-filled headquarters of today’s tech giants, such offices removed any remaining vestiges of partition dividers such as cubicles, in favour of long communal tables with minimal privacy or room for personalization.

Over the past decade the concept of office ‘hotelling’ has risen in popularity, with commentators suggesting the design is poised to take over from more traditional preceding open offices (McGregor, 2015). Sharing many of the same architectural features as open offices, ‘hotelling’ spaces sever the relationship between individuals and their spaces. Instead of assigned desks, ‘hotelling’ offices feature discrete areas for different types of work. As workers shift tasks, so too should they move between different areas, supposedly facilitating greater task efficiency and encouraging further diverse communication between co-workers (Duffy 1997: 81).

Notwithstanding the co-presence of substantial amenity offerings such as cactus gardens, massage chairs, nap pods, jungle biospheres and juice bars, ‘hotelling’ setups can now be found in the flagship offices of leading technology companies (Wainwright 2016).

The office – not quite dead yet?

Despite the longevity and evolution of office spaces, pundits, journalists, and academics alike appeared quick to predict the permanent demise of communal commercial offices after initial coronavirus stay-at-home orders proliferated at the start of 2020.

Articles published in many of the world’s leading outlets refer to a number of factors to make their case, including worker preference, productivity, cost of physical space, widespread availability of telecommuting technologies, and fundamental changes to the nature of work itself.

However, in their rush to proclaim the death of the office, such articles and editorials overlook three key components which provide context and depth to an understanding of the office and its potential futures: the history of the office, the diversity of office spaces and office users, and the role which office spaces play within the wider capitalist system. Investigation and application of these three elements suggest that the office may have a much more robust future than initially forecast.

Importance of office history

Recent articles and editorials suggesting the demise of the communal commercial office tend to position contemporary debates regarding these spaces as a-historical, severing the office of the early twenty-first century from its over 100-year history. This has the effect of making the current crisis seem unique, when in fact the office has faced, and overcome, many similar challenges in the past.

As the brief history of the office included in this article suggests, as a category of space the commercial office has flourished amidst significant social disruption, including two World Wars, the Spanish Flu pandemic, and social reorganisation in the 1960s and 70s. Office spaces have adapted to a torrent of new technologies beginning with the typewriter and telegraph, and continuing through the internet and smartphone. Contextualised within historical evolution in the face of disruption, the threat posed to office spaces by the coronavirus crisis is neither without precedent nor insurmountable.

When the history of office spaces is utilised, it is frequently abstracted, exemplified by a 2020 *Economist* article ‘Is the Office Finished?’. While the *Economist* editorial team briefly discusses the birth of office spaces, the *evolution* of these same spaces over the hundred-plus year history of the office goes unmentioned and unexplored (“Is the Office Finished?” 2020). This rhetorical device frames the challenges Covid-19 poses to the office as unique and requiring substantial modification, if not complete elimination, of the space of the office as it has previously been known.

Threats to the continued use of office spaces are not alone in peppering the history of the office – claims of the imminent death of these spaces have also proliferated throughout history in response to both crisis and innovation. The introduction of each successive office technology has instigated suggestions that the shackles linking workers to their desks will be broken (Haigh 2020: 76–7). Despite such predictions being made with increasing frequency and fervour at the tail end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, the vast majority of white-collar workers still occupied communal office spaces at the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

The history of the office illustrates precisely how resilient commercial office spaces have been, and may currently be, in the face of changing circumstances. As these histories are ignored by sensationalised contemporary predictions of the future demise of office spaces, a sense of inevitability

regarding the demise of office spaces has been written into the dialogue on the future of the office, when in fact this trajectory may be contradicted and corrected by knowledge of the office's past.

The need for representative sampling

In addition to locating contemporary challenges to office spaces apart from historical patterns and developments, literature on the post-Covid future of the office also displays a tendency toward using relatively narrow samples of offices to generalise the future of all office spaces.

Many 'death of the office' predictions appear to derive conclusions about the future of the broad category of 'offices' based on the statements and actions of large, industry leading corporations in the highly developed world staffed by predominantly white, male, well-educated and highly paid workers.

In attempting to answer the question 'Has the Pandemic Transformed the Office Forever?', *New Yorker* staff journalist John Seabrook relies exclusively on the opinions of Microsoft executives and a case study of R/GA, 'a global advertising and marketing agency' (Seabrook, 2021) which was formerly headquartered in downtown San Francisco. In this article, two elite companies are used as stand-ins to represent the entirety of office spaces and experiences. Seabrook is not alone in examining only a narrow slice of industry; the BBC is also guilty of the same practice, framing discussion of the future of all office spaces based solely around the desires and planned actions of international banking giant Barclays ("Barclays: We want our people back in the office" 2020).

Although many 'death of the office' articles highlight that workers such as bankers, lawyers and computer programmers have been granted the flexibility to continue working outside of office spaces during the pandemic, the literature does not extend to other employees of the same companies, many of whom have had divergent experiences of the pandemic-era office. Even within the firms and businesses most frequently cited in office-demise articles, some categories of employees have been compelled to continue working within centralised office spaces throughout the pandemic. Engineers who maintain hardware, contracted employees without extended benefits packages, staff requiring the use of specialised equipment or centralised data, janitorial staff cleaning and sanitising surfaces, and guards securing premises have all continued to inhabit office spaces over the course of 2020 and 2021.

While industries such as law, technology and finance are heavily represented in recent literature, other industries heavily reliant upon office spaces and office workers, such as call centres and small businesses are infrequently, if ever, mentioned (Poleg 2021). Many of these alternative office sites have seen constant use of communal spaces throughout the pandemic. Receptionists at doctor's offices, emergency call responders, factory administrators, among many others, have been required to continue in-person work throughout the crisis.

Case studies used to suggest the death of the office in the British and American press also focus on limited geographic areas. Despite articles predicting the demise of the office *everywhere*, little is made of the continued use of office spaces throughout the pandemic by lower paid workers in the global south. Countries where offices have remained in operation due to better pandemic management, such as Australia, New Zealand, China, and Taiwan also remain infrequently discussed. The continued use of offices in both these scenarios suggests, contrary to the assertions of death of the office editorials, that life and use remains, and may continue to remain in commercial office spaces.

In extrapolating the future of all offices based on an unrepresentative sample of offices, literature predicting the demise of office spaces has painted a lopsided and arguably inaccurate version of the future which ignores and further diminishes the experiences of many lower-paid office workers and more proletarian office interiors.

The crucial role of the office in the labour process

Perhaps the most overlooked and simultaneously most important factor regarding the future of office spaces is the role which the physical office plays within the capitalist labour process, and the control office spaces exert over those working within them.

Despite the large body of literature on office futures, those writing on the office across the fields of journalism, architecture, design, management, psychology, and facilities management, among others, infrequently investigate the office as a space revolving around labour, rather than a place where work tasks happen to occur. The side-lining of labour and work in analysis of office spaces results in the underlying purpose of the office, extraction of labour, becoming obscured. This, in turn, eases the way for predictions of a future without offices.

Disinterest or refusal to engage with underlying rationales for the existence of the office does not mean that these purposes do not exist or persist. Offices, like factories, coalesced to cluster labouring workers under a single roof to facilitate the monitoring and control of labour (Edwards 1979: 14). Office spaces enable management to observe what their employees are doing, while also presenting tangible means for employers to exert control over *how* workers are getting their work done, allowing for intervention in the labour process itself (Braverman 1974 pt. 4).

The importance of capitalism in the history, evaluation, and future of office spaces cannot be overstated. The commercial office exists as both an explicit product and powerful conduit of capitalism. Within this framework, the office exists to generate profit through the extraction of labour from workers (Braverman 1974 pt. 1). The physical space of the office itself thus serves a key role in the labour process, in how work is undertaken in a capitalist system (Braverman 1974 pt. 1). Because offices occupy this central role, the space of the office cannot evaporate until its function under capitalism is replaced.

As several commentators on future offices point out, the technology to replace the role of the office, to observe the behaviours, and control the actions of white-collar workers remotely is developing (Haigh 2020: 103). Such control technology, however, does not yet appear to be fully formed. Absence of alternative methods of control suggests that the central position of the physical office within the labour process remains fixed, rendering the office safe from obsolescence for the foreseeable future.

The office is dead! Long live the office!

This article has suggested that indications of the demise of the office may be less than accurate. Minimization of three important concepts with relation to office spaces: their complete histories, their diversity, and the role which office spaces play in the larger capitalist process all suggest potential futures for commercial office spaces.

When integrated into analysis of current office spaces and applied to potential futures of these spaces the elements highlighted within this article indicate that the office may continue as a discrete and well-used category of space for some time to come. A complete view of office history illuminates how office spaces have weathered similar momentous social interruptions and revolutionary technologies. A more global, diverse, and representative sample of office work during the pandemic suggests that even during the zenith of the crisis the office was relied on. Implementation of labour process analysis suggests continued reliance on physical office spaces is, at least in part, due to the fundamental role of the office in the operations of capitalism.

These three factors, combined with the pervasivity of global monopoly capitalism, suggest that the future should see continued use of some office spaces, and mandatory office working for some

employees. In all likelihood offices serving lower-paid workers in less-competitive labour markets, like call centres, will persist, with employees of these enterprises being forced to continue working from the office full time. Here spaces will continue to facilitate management's surveillance and control of workers, fulfilling the space's intended and necessary role within the late-capitalist economy.

However, this is not to say that the design of specific offices, and the individual experience of these spaces, will not be altered by the Covid-19 pandemic. All three factors discussed in this article suggest that some employees, particularly highly paid workers such as software developers, will be allowed, and perhaps even compelled, to work from home several days a week. History suggests that the offices of many such employees will undergo aesthetic and functional changes. With reduced continual occupancy, these offices make prime candidates for full conversion to 'hotelling' spaces, with a further reduction of personal space for individual employees.

It is important to emphasise that although the history of the office, and its role within capitalist society suggests what the future of these spaces *might be*, such futures remain hypothetical. While historical trends and socio-political factors may suggest the trajectory of the office trending in one way or another, these trends can, with hard work, activism, and organising, be overcome. The post-pandemic future of the office, as with all futures, lies in our collective hands to shape, mould, and form.

Coda – Post Covid

Since this article was first presented as a paper in April 2021, the pandemic has begun to ease, particularly in the United States and Western Europe, and post-Covid trends have begun to crystallise.

The predictions initially made seem to be proven correct, with blue-chip companies such as Apple and Google revisiting early pandemic support of home-working and compelling office attendance at least three days a week ("Apple employees rally against office working plan" 2021; "Google rejigs remote working as it reopens offices" 2021). Although neither Apple nor Google represent the office experience of the average white-collar worker, and thus their actions should not be taken as predictors of an entire office-ecosystem, the fact that these industry leaders, staffed with remarkably well-paid employees would go against the wishes of their workers to force a return to the office signals that at very least the draw and allure of the office as workplace for managers and capitalists remains as strong as ever.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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