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A Commons Lobby

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ABSTRACT

The social context of mobile work has dissolved the physical dominance of the workstation. The city, once anchored and animated by the clockwork activity of the downtown office, today absorbs this mobile workforce within coffee shops, parks, and public spaces, haphazardly blurring distinctions between spaces of leisure and spaces of production. The contemporary office has the opportunity to redraw important boundaries between these spaces through an expanded civic-corporate threshold. As the most visible threshold between the office desk and the city street, the lobby is uniquely positioned to leverage social forms of work as a generator of architectural form. An increasingly mobile workforce places more, not less, importance on the context and urban implications of production. **Commons Lobby leverages the social nature of the mobile workforce to reclaim the office as an urban hub and position the lobby as a laboratory for the contemporary workplace.**
Twitter headquarters, San Francisco. Image: Reuters.
This thesis was not possible without:  
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This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father.
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The determinate context of a single building comprises all technological, economic, juridical, and psychological forces that drive production in the city. And the conflictedly over-determined claims and demands placed on a building by its patrons, by its architects, and by the city, are both figured and repressed in its very form.¹

— K. Michael Hays
I. WORK
THE NATURE OF WORK IS CHANGING

The social context of mobile work has dissolved the physical dominance of the workstation. The city, once anchored and animated by the clockwork activity of the downtown office, today absorbs this mobile workforce within coffee shops, parks, and public spaces, blurring distinctions between spaces of leisure and spaces of production. Ironically, as less work is physically conducted within an office, the desire to work in an office setting has increased. Rejecting the notion that the city should haphazardly absorb all work conducted outside of the office, one has to wonder: what does the office of the future look like?

Collective

Compartmentalized

Dissolved

The Omnipresent Office

Newfound mobility means all spaces are potential workspaces.
73% of office workers believe they could focus most effectively in an office setting.

38% of office workstations are typically occupied at any given time.

Source: 2013 US Workplace Survey,

225 ft² PER PERSON  
176 ft² PER PERSON  
100 ft² PER 5 PEOPLE

*Projected. Source: Corenet Global
ANCHORED WORK

The anchored work environment is one in which employees are assigned a desk, cubicle, or office and remained anchored there until they move on to a new assignment. Plans of anchored work space generally run a spectrum between more cellular, and more open (bürolandschaft). The social impacts of these plan-types should not be underestimated: cellular workspace supports highly independent, insulated work environments that place focus at a premium over a social atmosphere of collaboration. Conversely, the open floor plan denies any sense of privacy in favor of constant interaction in the hopes of increasing competition or teamwork.

Liberated Plan
The “Great Room” in Frank Lloyd Wright’s Johnson Wax Headquarters pioneered the open office floor plan, revealing new social possibilities within an anchored workplace.
OFFICE PLAN TYPES

**Corridor**
Cells

**Mixed Floor**
Cells and Open Floor

**Mixed Floor**
Cells and Open Floor

**Bürolandschaft**
Open
Sociologists have only recently begun to examine how mobile work is impacting the so-called “thirdspace,” which describes a reliable gathering space outside of the home (first) and the office (second). Some businesses, like the cafe chain Panera, have based an entire economic model around absorbing “thirdspace” business conducted via laptop or phone. The inconveniences or stima that used to be associated with working in public (noisiness, unpredictability, expense), have been superseeded by a clear demand to work in social settings.

Ephemeral Desks
On off-peak hours, a tacit agreement between cafe owners and “thirdspace” workers takes effect: as long as workers tip well, they’re welcome. But if business picks up, they have to make room for new customers.
Commons Lobby

- Public
- Open
- Collective
- Exposed

- Private
- Compartmentalized
- Individual
- Insulated
MOBILE WORK

The promise of mobile work, the freedom to work anywhere at any time, has territorial implications for the office environment in two distinct ways: on the one hand, the office retains a traditional role of anchored work space, with a clear binary between mobile production (ie. thirddspace), where workers interact with outside constituents, and internal production (workstation). Another potential is the internalization of amenities within the office itself, transforming the office into a miniature simulacra of the city itself. Complete with exclusive childcare, food, retail, and more, the office creates an exclusive city within the city, limiting relationships with the outside world.5

Global Office

The virtual infrastructure of the contemporary office liberates the physical necessity of the employee. But at what cost?
**Activity Paths**

- Internal activity
- External activity

**Typical Office Activity**

**Urban Resources**

- Cafe
- Hospitality
- Retail
- Childcare
- Recreation

**Spheres of Interaction**

**Singular**
Office internal interactions.

**Limited**
Chiefly internal interactions punctuated by external trips for needs or resources.

**Complex**
Constant available interaction between diverse internal and external people and activities.
OWNERSHIP AND THE WORKPLACE

In “The Theology of Tabula Rasa”, Pier Vittorio Aureli writes of mobile populations in Hannes Meyer’s Coop Zimmer: “the minimal dwelling of the Co-op Zimmer is not only driven by necessity, but is also the outcome of a deliberate form of life chosen by the inhabitant. This in turn questions the very principle of contemporary forms of life: the idea of the house as private property.” Like the mobile inhabitants of Coop Zimmer, thirdspace workers find community within an ephemeral production environment, happy to relinquish the comforts of office ownership. The contemporary office must address the ephemeral workplace while conveying a sense of employee ownership.

Ephemeral Existence

The objects that lightly occupy Coop Zimmer’s spartan rooms highlight the ephemeral qualities of the residents. The tech worker, in moving from thirdspace to thirdspace, takes ownership through virtual customization: websites, apps, etc.
Corbusier’s plan for La Tourette (1957) places the cells for monks oriented externally, connecting solitude with nature. The internal courtyard fills a vital social role, the manifestation of the communal desires of a solitary existence. The radical binary is what makes each part so effective.

**The Monastic Office**

The individual office functions socially much like a monastic cell. Relieved from constant supervision or the natural impulse to interact with others, the occupant is able to focus purely on the task in front of them, developing individual thought without the anxiety of constant outside evaluation. Alternatively, it provides a consequence-free space for procrastination or plain boredom.
II. THE CITY
THE BACKBONE OF THE CITY

The office once served as a bedrock of the city, anchoring the formation of the grid and providing the architectural backdrop for social gathering. Later, offices took on an iconic status, asserting themselves into the collective memories of cities as much as any cultural institution or persona. Their presence in the city was as much a revenue-generating public relations move as it was a storage for executive employees. After World War II, skyscrapers could not accommodate the rapidly shifting structure of corporate management. Driven by a desire for the pastoral and a distaste for ethnic and economic complexities of the city, corporations engaged in a voluntary exodus from the city.

Formal Background (1890 - present)

From their conception, office buildings have constituted the economic backbone of the city while also serving as an architectural background to cultural and recreational events.

Icon City (1920 - present)
Rem Koolhaas
Delirious New York (1978)

The homogenizing reality of early skyscrapers pushed a new breed of iconic office building that operate formally and programmatically at the scale of the city.
As ‘form ever follows function,’ the facade reflected an inner logic communicating and engaging with both pedestrians (through fenestration) and the city (through stratification).

Through the development of the superblock and the incorporation of diverse, pedestrian-friendly programs, Rockefeller Center became a landmark and cultural icon.
AN ICON IN THE CITY

The proliferation of the corporate icon has long been divorced from the spatial needs of the corporation itself. Ambitious corporate form is in fact about establishing an elusive iconicity, a permanent association of the brand within the collective consciousness of the city itself. Success is rare: the contemporary nature of the icon is problematic in that it “lacks that which is inherent to the political locus, namely the strength of civic memory...”8

Occasionally, however, corporate buildings transcend branding to assert themselves as inextricably linked to the city itself, and are able to alchemically produce what culture could not: an architecture so enduring that the city cannot be envisioned without it.

Identity Shell:
Transamerica Pyramid.
William Pereira, 1974. Where towers once embodied the identity of a company, they are now a representational shell of their former occupants.
Collective Form:
Meanwhile, the form became part of the city’s collective image of itself.
PASTORAL CAPITALISM

A post World War II economic boom, coupled with a dominance of pastoral taste and corporate restructuring, catalyzed creation of the corporate enclave, an architecture that relinquishes any urban or programmatic links to the city in favor of a developing a secure micro-city within a city. The proliferation of highways and the popularity of Frank Lloyd Wright’s proposal for Broadacre City (1932) additionally fueled a drive towards the pastoral and a cultural fixation with the rugged individual.

As corporate campuses have developed within high tech firms, it has taken on increasingly domestic features, including places to eat, sleep, and exercise.

Archipelago (1950 - present)
Oswald Mathias Ungers
Berlin as a Green Archipelago (1977)

The archipelago was introduced as a radical strategy of preservation through the surrender of a totalized vision for the city.

City Within a City (2010 - present)
Ludwig Hilberseimer
Satellite City (1925)

As a technique, the urban enclave can be a tool for programmatic and economic liberation through formal suppression. In liberating the interior, the city is often alienated.
John Deere Headquarters (1964)
Eero Saarinen
Moline, Illinois

The John Deere Headquarters typifies pastoral capitalism at its peak, fully hidden from even the surrounding suburbs and a full 150 miles from the nearest major city (Chicago).

Apple Headquarters (2016)
Norman Foster
Cupertino, CA

Apple’s headquarters epitomize the insular architecture of contemporary technology office: the green buffer and circular form emphasize exclusivity and insularity.
THE DOMESTIC COMFORTS OF AN URBAN SIMULACRUM

As tech companies compete for talent with a vast array of on-campus amenities, the workplace develops parallel signs of urbanization and domestication. By providing in-house exercise, food, recreation, and retail, companies like Google are attempting to simulate an urban environment through domestic comforts within an office. By recreating a false sense of the city, Google also creates a false sense of public space, exacerbated by the lack of any uncontrolled factors. The company, by limiting access to these “public” spaces, regulates social interactions and keeps employees working longer hours.  

Home-Office
The office acquires increasingly domestic traits, and visa versa.
**Sleep**

Sleep Pod. Google Campus, Mountain View, CA. Image: Business Insider.

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**Recreation**


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**Transportation**


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**Hospitality**

Facebook Cafeteria. Facebook headquarters, Menlo Park, CA. Image: Reuters.

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**Service**


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**Public Space**

II. THE CITY

THE CASE FOR A LOBBY URBANISM

Lobbies typically serve as a publically occupiable control point, welcoming visitors while restricting their activity, aiming to impress without inviting anyone to stay. It is a spatial type perpetually at odds with itself. At the threshold between corporate amenity-islands and the omnipresent thirdspace, lobbies are neither public nor corporate, a socio-spatial entity without specific definition. Lacking specificity, lobbies are ripe for reinvention. When envisioned as more than a territorial marker, lobbies can take on a life of their own, a building within a building.
The exclusivity of the high-tech campus creates a void within the city, a parallel urbanism devoid of the economic and social conflicts that create genuine public spaces.
II. THE CITY

CORPORATE GROSSFORM

Transcending the single-block massing of office parks implicates a morphological role for the office in the city that incorporates formal, programmatic, economic, and cultural ambitions into a concentrated node. Based on OM Ungers’ concept of Grossform, the office of the future must contain “the maximum freedom for individual elements to be uniquely defined within a larger scheme that holds these individual elements in place.” The literal definition of largeness implicated in Grossform is in fact measured not by physical scale but by impact outside of itself. The primary threshold between urban and architectural, operating between the iconicity of the form and the program of the interior, allows the office to transcend itself.

Point to Line

The office shifts from a point to line organization, relying less on a vertical stratification than on varying conditions along an edge. The office is transformed from a centralized condition to a decentralized threshold.
Grossform Aggregations

Grossforms forge alternate relationships to the city without challenging the organizational advantages of the grid.
THE LOBBY: A SOCIO-SPATIAL TYPE

The lobby, acting as an expanded threshold between civic and corporate worlds, can reframe dissolved boundaries surrounding contemporary production while acting as a formal and programmatic catalyst in the city. Thirdspace workers, caught between a need for productivity and a desire for a public setting, find common ground within the humming activity of the lobby. Companies, looking for ways to cohere groups of constantly mobile workers, use the lobby as casual meeting space, offering chances at genuinely spontaneous interactions. The city, seeking to focus nebulous corporate zones, see the lobby as an event-space where corporate interests partner with civic activity.

Controlled Passage
Zoning by occupation creates insular communities that rarely allow interaction outside of a given field. This is a common problem in the city.

Mall
Zoning by occupation creates insular communities that rarely allow interaction outside of a given field. This is a common problem in the city.

Hybrid
Zoning by occupation creates insular communities that rarely allow interaction outside of a given field. This is a common problem in the city.
Social Magnet:
In this scene from *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), the lobby is featured as the spatial chameleon enabling the characters and events to unfold.

An Exploded Interiority:
John Portman’s Hyatt Regency in San Francisco (1973) explodes the lobby into a variety of moving pieces that swirl around a cafe, restaurant, and visitor check-in.
THE LOBBY: A BRIDGING THRESHOLD

In “The Bridge and the Door,” (1909), Georg Simmel writes that “the bridge encourages the eye to inter-relate parts of the landscape just as in practical reality it encourages bodies to relate with one another. The mere dynamics of the movement - in the reality of which the “purpose of the bridge exhausts itself - has become something concrete and enduring.”

The lobby, as a socio-spatial type, connects with the city through visual and physical means. Within the civic-corporate threshold, in the space between the street and the office, architecture inserts itself as a means of establishing empathy between corporate actors and a civic network.

 Transparent Attraction
Dinkeloo and Roche’s Ford Foundation Center (1968) displays a public park behind a massive curtain wall, attracting public visitors to a park within a building.
The Palace Hotel in San Francisco (1896) featured an internalized carriage drop-off, allowing residents to enjoy arrivals and departures as theatrical events.

Eero Saarinen’s GM Technical Center (1949) features highly stylized lobby to express a high-tech message to all visitors.
III. COMMONS LOBBY
ESSENTIALIZED OFFICE, PROGRAMMED LOBBY

The prioritization of public work-space over private offices introduces a radically social model for working. In order to achieve this, two aspects of the traditional office building must be changed: one, the ratio of public access lobby to private office space must be even. The alteration of this ratio, in reaction to the nature of the mobile workforce, places equal importance on casual forms of work as a new social model for production.

In order to differentiate the pure office environment from the open plan of the lobby, the office is reduced to its most essential elements: individual offices and small meeting spaces. The binary of office to lobby liberates the lobby to be a truly public space.
**LOBBY: OFFICE F.A.R. RATIO**

Highrise: **1:25**
Midrise: **1:8**
Bar and Plinth: **1:1**

**THE ESSENTIALIZED OFFICE**

Typical Office Bar: 50’ Width
Essentialized Office: 16’6” Width
SITE: MISSION BAY

Mission Bay, like the suburbs of Silicon Valley, suffers from overzealous zoning and mediocre buildings, culminating in a territorial segregation of housing and commerce. On off-business hours, acres of corporate buildings are deserted, a ghost town of mirrored glass.

A Commons Lobby addresses this condition by heavily programming an urban-scaled lobby into the corporate zone, creating a focal point for off-hour activity. The site is located between a linear park and a light rail line running towards downtown, creating connections within the district and to the city as a whole. The lobby is positioned as an urban node.
**Dead Zones:**
The clear division of residential (north) and commercial (south) development creates urban “dead zones,” where activity only takes

**Occupation Segregation:**
Zoning by occupation creates insular communities that rarely allow interaction outside of a given field. This is a common problem in the tech industry.

**Node on an Urban Loop:**
Commons Lobby links the green space that buffers zones from one another and links them to the light rail, creating an occupational and urban node along a transport line.
**PROGRAMMATIC DISTRIBUTION**

*600,000 ft² Total*

- 250,000 ft² Office
- 250,000 ft² Lobby
- 250,000 ft² Parking

*Office Ratio*

- 90% Office
- 10% Public
- 576 Individ. Offices

*Lobby Ratio*

- 50% Office
- 50% Public

*Public Program Distribution*

- 44,000 ft² Education
- 32,000 ft² Performance
- 100,000 ft² Retail + Cafe
- 17,000 ft² Gym
- 44,000 ft² Childcare

**Programmatic Distribution**

Lobby square footage competes with the office.

**Sectional Inputs**

Civic and constituents fuel lobby activity.

**Object-Program**

Specific programs skewers the lobby work-field.
Event-Forms:
Visually porous cylinders contain public events while attracting visitors with dramatic form.

Raised Plaza:
The ground floor cylinders deny a frontality, positioning the building as a raised public plaza instead of a business center.
A Sign of Work in the City
Essentialized office space flattens office space onto the city, creating dramatic views while encouraging individual work.

Compartmentalized Islands:
The cylinders, separated at the ground level, merge above the lobby as islands of compartmentalized support space.

Public Lobby:
A vast open floor plan punctuated by specific program encourages fluid interaction between the public and workers.

Porous Massing:
Cylinders containing public events and circulation routes allow public occupation in and around the building.
Commons Lobby
A Sign of Work for the City:
At the scale of the city, the offices look flattened to a graphic, while the lobby retains depth, a container of civic
+3-4 Conference, Classrooms

+2 Lobby
Public/Corporate Workspace:
Open floorplan supports social forms of work organized by specific cylinders of supported program.
Commons Lobby
+5-13 Offices

+5 Hospitality Deck
Public/Corporate Workspace:
Open floorplan supports social forms of work organized by specific cylinders of supported program.
+5-13
Offices are organized to accommodate focused work.

+3
The cylinders merge at the 3rd level to contain larger, organized program such as a gym, classrooms, meeting rooms, and reading rooms.

+2
The lobby is an urban-scaled burolandschaft containing social and work-specific seating. The cylinders puncture the floor to foster connections between floors and contain specific performance.

Ground Level
The porous ground level supports crowds and activity to draw the public into what would normally be prohibited corporate space.
Transverse Section A

Longitudinal Section
Left:
The sidewalk stitches the block around the cylinders.

Right:
Third-floor meeting rooms are visible to the rest of the lobby but veiled behind a densely fritted glass.

Below:
Meeting rooms hover above the open floor plan of the lobby, allowing visible connections between social work zones to more private meeting areas.
ON THE GRANULARITY OF THE WORKPLACE

AP: Work moved out of the city and it mutated. Over time, it turned into what we’re now seeing in Google, which is a socialization of the workplace… and then you bring that back to the city, back where it started and try to inject that new mode of work that was incubated in the suburbs back in the city. I think that’s a neat kind of trajectory to set up your project. And I’ve been through [Mission Bay]; it’s strangely suburban, strangely like an office park. Which is interesting because that’s another way the suburbs has mutated and come back into the city—

SB: Imported the fabric as well as the typologies—

AP: I prefer your way, which is to not pull the literal types of the office park back in the city but actually to rethink the work that’s now taking place out there in the context of the city. One of the things that’s interesting about that mutation of work that isn’t revealed in the architecture is the granularity, the breakdown of the corporate hierarchy. When Google talks about buildings they project a moral autonomy against the hierarchies of traditional work. Which were manifest in the burolandschaft that you’re working against. My question is how does the granularity of work, that you’ve established up here [in the office slabs], which characterizes the suburban mutation of work, play out in these lower levels? I’m not quite sure what this figuration means, these circles of more or less equal size, within the new context of this work. And I think I’m wondering why it’s not more granular?

That work, that new mutation of work, other than in the cells at the top and the fact that you have some bigger spaces, to me is not represented in the formal moves of the circles at least not their scale and their regularity throughout the plan.

THE LOBBY AS A PASSAGE

LL: If you look at the history of office culture, the last most interesting evolution of the office was in fact the burolandschaft, that has in a way been taken over by the coffee house. The problem here is that you have separated [individual offices] from [the burolandshaft], so in order to have communion, you have to take an elevator. Whereas in the burolandschaft, [individual offices] were lined up against the open floor plan for easy access. I find the lonely cells in the sky really ridiculous, and that they ought to be brought in
closer to proximity to [the lobby] to really function. So I look for the next version of the burolandshaft which is some mixture of the city and office work and that I don’t think you have achieved yet but I think you’re in the right direction.

**CL:** I also think the [office slabs] are problematic, and want to expand on what Lars is saying in terms of the connection to the city and to the urban grain. Earlier, I spoke about the airport but I didn’t say it should be an airport building. Where I think the project could really address some of issues that Lars raised is that instead of the circles being the ground plan, your lobby should be the ground plan. In that sense you begin to about the office space not as a lobby but as a passage. This would turn an entire urban block into a passage. And in which furniture, and its arrangement, create that granularity that Albert mentioned. So one could drift in and out of that passage, that office space, and brings that connection to parcel-block urbanism.

**SB:** One of the underlying conceits of the project, and the reason why I wanted to keep the office slabs, is that in a burolandshaft there isn’t a choice about whether you want to work in an open social environment versus a more private workplace. You’re in the open, watched or watching, all the time. What I tried to articulate through the discreet separation of work types is the idea that the choice of where to work is more important than the articulation of one workstation. Which is what I mean by saying the contexts of work is more important that the physical presence of the workstation. So that’s why they’re so separated and so different. Although I agree that there could be other ways of drawing relationships between the two; it’s been problematic.

**SW:** I think the doggedness of the two slabs speaks to the significance of needing a sign of the office in the city. If you removed them and just had a big ship, it could be a mall, or anything else. So you are trying to say that the office must have a presence in the city. In this way, Albert hit the nail on the head by noting that the office is omnipresent and it can be collective but it is granular, the scale of which is difficult to address at the scale of the city. From where I’m sitting, the biggest tension is trying to resolve the impact of a very real, very big proposition on the city while engaging and defining an enormous lobby as a space of granularity.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


