

Collapse of the corridor:

The enactment of physical and technological infrastructures and the meaning of work

How do the physical and technological infrastructures that surround work shape and support what we think about the nature of that work? And how are cognitive categories of work reflected in these infrastructures? Restructuring of workspace affects the meaning of work because meaning is created in the nexus between culture and environment (Moore, 2000). In this paper we suggest that the cell offices and wired technologies are adjusted to a individualistic, modernist view of work whilst the office landscape and mobile and wireless technologies support a post-modernist perspective of activities at work. However, our experience is that changes in the office environment do not automatically lead to changes in the ways that people are working.

The office landscape is brought to attention by managers as a tool to reach the goals of an organisation. In addition to being cost effective, the office landscape apparently advocates organisational knowledge sharing and collaboration. Knowledge is increasingly considered an asset that flourishes and develops in the relations between people through practice (Brown and Duguid, 2001). Knowledge sharing has become increasingly important to sustain collective learning, value creation (Carlsen et al., 2004) and thereby increased productivity for the organisations. Whilst the modernist project has been to increase value by breaking tasks into their smallest components, optimizing each part and thereafter assembling one by one in logic sequences (Taylor, 1911), the post-modern project has engaged in breaking down boundaries and barriers between people, work tasks or activities. Work is being deconstructed and reconstructed in novel and multiple ways

In the paper we present empirical material from five action-based research projects (Elden and Levin 1991) carried out in three Norwegian companies working with knowledge work in research and administration. All the studies presented are part of the KUNNE Workplace project.¹ KUNNE Workplace has been involved in the moving processes wherein the organisations (or departments/units within the organisation) presented, move to new localities with a more open office solution. With few exceptions, everybody in this study has moved from individual cell offices to more open solutions, most of them to open landscapes of different size. One of the management's objectives with moving to new premises without walls is to support collaboration and informal knowledge sharing in the organisation. The employees that are to be moved into open landscapes often protest fervently. Their arguments are usually connected to work productivity or efficiency, they claim that the kind of work they perform demand the quietness only the cell office can offer. After the new

¹ The research project KUNNE Workplace¹ is one of the ongoing projects in KUNNE (www.kunne.no); a portfolio of Action Research projects in Norwegian Professional Service Firms.

solution is put to use, the users that we have studied often maintain this position and feel frustrated because they feel they are not able to do their work as well as before. We believe the resistance and the persistent discontent might be seen as connected to the mental categorisation of work as to the physical surroundings because infrastructures are both relational and ecological (Star, 1999).

We utilize anthropological theories on space (Rapoport, 1982), ideology (Hebdige, 1979) and categorization (Douglas, 1966) to try to expand perspectives to the meaning of the physical environment at work. We suggest that the physical boundaries; walls, between cell offices and the corridors (Stone, 1977) represent cognitive boundaries between people, work tasks and extracurricular activities. Our experiences seem to imply that taking down the walls alone are not sufficient to increase organisational learning. Even though the walls are taken down, the cognitive boundaries that they represented do not cease to exist.

Heerwagen et al. (2004) explain that office workers are stressed by cognitive overload in the landscape, and therefore office workers productivity decreases. We will expand this claim and suggest that the office landscape requires a post-modern view of tasks and ownership of space. Whereas the person before was the entity that carried out a set of work tasks, and the tasks came to that persons workspace, the object of work has now been stretched both in time and space (Engeström et al., 2003). Even as people are utilising new technology and work spaces they do not realise their full potential. This may be because value created at work still is seen as an individual feat (Ramirez, 1999). We believe that the individualistic perspective to knowledge, work and productivity needs to be challenged and reflected upon before moving to the open plane. Categories of work are less clear in office landscapes and need to be reconstructed when walls are torn down. We will venture that a scrutiny of categorical work may aid the move into a different office setting where technology may be used to its fullest potential. This paper addresses how this may be facilitated in organizations.