

## Women, Work and the Office

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# De Toekomst van het (samen) werken

Advies over de  
kantoorportefeuille van de  
rijksoverheid

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## Women, Work and the Office

**Dr. Amy Thomas, TU Delft**

Providing a future-proof workplace means ensuring a healthy and sustainable work environment for all. Today women report more stress, health problems and promotional barriers at work. It is widely known that this 'leaky pipeline' stems from a range of social/cultural factors but to what extent has the workplace—a physical, designed environment—influenced inequality? The offices we inhabit may appear to embody a gender neutral mentality, but when we look back at the history of the office we see that its norms and standards were formed decades ago, when things weren't so equal or straightforward.

### Women and white collar work

Women came to dominate the office as clerks and typists at the beginning of the twentieth century due to the rise in educated women, the growing demand for clerical labour, and the loss of male clerks during WWI. Women were viewed as ideal candidates for this work since they commanded low wages and had no prospects of promotion, thanks to discriminatory legislation such as the marriage bar which legally prohibited women from working once married (legally abolished in the Netherlands in 1957 but culturally existent for much longer).



> afbeelding 16  
Head office typists room,  
New Zealand Railways,  
1959

## Open Floor vs. Closed Door

At the same time, the nature of office work was reconfigured according to the principles of scientific management, placing women in large factory-like layouts where they could be watched by managers. As management theories and architectural techniques changed through the twentieth century, the shape of the office transformed, but this gendered spatial division between female clerks and mostly male managers—what sociologist Daphne Spain referred to as ‘open floor’ vs. ‘closed door’—continued to exist, not only visualising women’s lower status, but reinforcing it by restricting women’s access to power and knowledge.

## Work vs. Home

The office spatialised the distinction between thinking and doing, casting the female as a manual rather than cerebral worker, as bodily rather than intellectual. The reproductive characteristics of a woman’s body enabled a secondary opposition to emerge, between work and home. As Dolores Hayden argued so compellingly in 1980, the success of the suburbs in post-war America was predicated on the gendered division of labour between these two sites; the home was ‘a spur for male paid labor, and a container for unpaid female labor,’ taking on a complimentary role in working men’s lives and a problematic relationship in working women’s lives.<sup>1</sup> The corollary was that the white collar workplace only made room for a limited definition of a female office worker: a single woman – either not-yet-married, spinster or widow. (She should be productive, not reproductive.) Of course, she was further discerned by both race and class thanks to discriminatory hiring policies which initially made clerical work inaccessible for women of colour and differently-abled women. The success of the ‘new office’ was predicated on a universal system of norms that carried through from building, to desk, to worker.

## Softening the work environment

By the mid-twentieth century, the strict orthogonal of scientific management was challenged by the new school of Human Relations which argued that efficiency in the workplace was not simply a product of local environmental factors (light, furniture, rest periods etc) but rather, recognised the importance of the environment as creating the psychological, cultural and social dimensions of work. The new open-plan office was predicated on a new design-management theory that promised to overthrow the old hierarchies and rigid systems of scientific management: *Burolandschaft* (office landscaping). Devised by the Quickborner Team (established by the Schnelle Brothers in Germany in the late 1950s) *Burolandschaft* used communication as a guiding principle. Quickborner organized desks in working groups divided by plants and furniture, placing all workers—including managers—in a large open space. It encouraged the mixing of managers

1. Hayden, “What Would a Non-Sexist City Be like?: Speculations on Housing, Urban Design, and Human Work,” *SIGNS, Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1980, 172.

with all strata of the organization, as well as the personalisation of workplaces and general softening of the workplace environment. Yet, despite despite such claims, Burolandschaft used the organizing potential of the universal open plan in much the same top-down way that scientific management had. Drawing on cybernetic systems analysis, the goal of Burolandschaft to maximize productivity through spatial arrangement; working groups were modules in a wider system. In spite of its friendly, domestic, aesthetic, the approach had very little to do with the psychological freedom of its employees. For women, such transformations had little impact on their status in the workplace or the distinction of gender roles and workplace stereotypes. In fact, it was arguably the inherent flexibility within such arrangements that enabled organizations to mould them to their existing management practices, rather than encouraging new more egalitarian strategies.

### **Womens' Work, Womens's Rights**

Labour movements gave workers rights in organisational decision making, with legislation passed in Germany (1976), The Netherlands (1979), Sweden (1977) and Italy (1975), enabling employee representatives to sit on company boards. With these rights employees lobbied against the office landscape, on the basis that noise levels, temperature changes, and the lack of space, natural light, air, and access to a view was harming their health. In response, some countries developed detailed regulations in workplace design leading to an increase in space standards per employee. It was within this context, with the backing of the women's liberation movement, that female secretarial workers began to take action and organize against bad working conditions and structural pay gaps, demanding access to childcare and better working environments. Despite their efforts, women continued to be under paid and underrepresented in managerial classes until the turn of the century.

### **The Flexible Workplace**

The emotional life of the worker took centre stage in management literature at the end of the century. In parallel with the increase of women in management positions following the spread of equal opportunities legislation, softer 'feminised' approaches to management came to dominate. Sometimes referred to as the 'female advantage perspective' or 'feminine management', the new management theories grounded in the psychology of sex differences claimed that typically female traits like empathy, nurturance, and attention towards goals like cohesiveness and stability, were more effective tools than traditionally masculine traits like self-interest and control.

In line with these management approaches, concepts like facilitation and responsiveness entered into the design of workplaces in the 1980s and 1990s as these theories came to dominate corporate culture. This extended to the work

floor, which gave a combination of social work spaces and more generic open plan arrangements of 'hot' desks, to cultivate more collaborative work cultures. Although such strategies were on the surface underpinned by 'feminised' managerial approaches that prioritised collectivity and care, in reality, the new office was predicated upon an economic structure that undermined such notions. In the age of globalization and information technology, the office was conceived as a system capable of constant change, accommodating the frequent 'churn' of personnel in an increasingly volatile economy. As companies sought to become more agile, hot-desking and distributed work models offered design solutions for endlessly fluctuating personnel numbers. Despite making it to the top, women continued to struggle with the work/home conflict as care responsibilities remained with women rather than men.

## **The Office of the Future**

On the face of it, the design distinctions between job role and gender are almost obliterated, as office buildings have become increasingly part of a "distributed" office paradigm with remote work, where work looks more like home and home looks more like work. Yet it is in these conditions that the female body needs to be more precisely located: long-hours working culture, the lack of childcare and breast-pumping facilities and new forms of "presenteeism" with the hybrid office continue to allude to a body that is split between paid and unpaid labour, a fragmented self that is under-catered for in the workplace. Likewise, the continued harassment of women, proves that workplaces are still not safe spaces for all. Even in its new forms, the office accommodates the standard worker who continues to be the white heterosexual male.

# Colofon

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