

Roberta Gironi

## Flipped space: The inverse relationship between home and work

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### Abstract

The lockdown has imposed a systemic shift online of fundamental activities, such as work, education and interpersonal communication. In particular, remote working has shown advantages in reducing office management costs and has stimulated a rethinking in the relationship between home and work. In this scenario, we want to reflect on two possible aspects: one relating to the reinterpretation of the offices from the perspective of the flipped workspace, deriving from the didactic model of the flipped classroom in the school sector; the other related to the reconfiguration of homes, which acquire a public-private dimension with interchange-filter areas.

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### Keywords

Work-home relationship — Hybridization — Flipped workspace



**Fig. 1**

Margeaux Walter Studio, *Secret Baby*, Photography, (from «The New York Times», april 2020).

The lockdown has overturned the relationship between the workplace and the home, emptying public spaces and transferring new functions to private ones, in a more synchronic perspective<sup>1</sup>. The relationship between the offices, the “factories of the new millennium”, and the homes becomes more fluid, revealing new organizational possibilities. As noted by the Observatory on Remote Working of the Polytechnic University of Milan, the experience of remote working imposed by the pandemic is pushing many companies to consider remote working as a preferable organizational option, to be introduced in a structural way<sup>2</sup>. Workers also enjoyed working at home, but pointed out a necessary rethinking of private work spaces<sup>3</sup> and suffered from traceability stress<sup>4</sup>. All this opens up new scenarios. The office, like the factory in the industrial era, has in fact attracted and allocated housing demand in cities<sup>5</sup>, but today remote working and technology allow millions of commuters to be freed from the obligation to travel daily along congested main road arteries. Thanks to a good web connection, one can opt for extra-urban housing choices<sup>6</sup>, in more secluded, liveable and less expensive contexts. The petrol crisis of the 1970s<sup>7</sup> had already forced millions of people to change their habits of life and therefore also of work. However, today the combination of the impact of the health crisis and the possibilities offered by technology makes it possible to structurally introduce a new organizational model, more performing in terms of sustainable development and quality of life<sup>8</sup>.

The topic is not entirely new: in the last 20 years, digital work has compromised the *static nature* of the workplace – maintaining a reminiscence of the teaching of *bürolandschaft*<sup>9</sup> – in the name of breaking down separation barriers, implementing aspects of flexibility and establishing new balances

**Fig. 2**

SelgasCano, «Mercado de Ribeira», Coworking SecondHome-Lisbon, (photo by Iwan-Baan, 2016).

**Fig. 3**

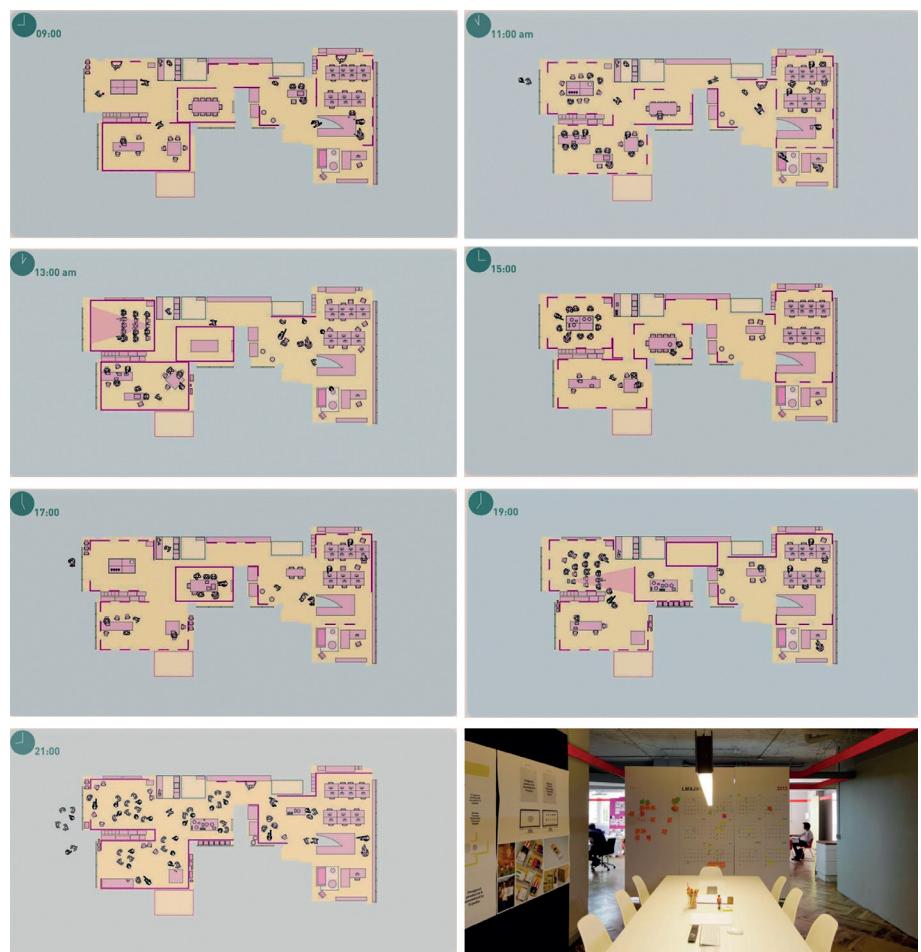
Google Zurich, Camenzind Evolution, Hurlmann Areal, 2008.

between physical space and digital dematerialization. The possibilities offered by the web and the very short time in which remote working has been imposed on a global level, due to the health crisis, are nowadays completely new.

It has thus become evident that the office can no longer be configured as the *workplace* but as a *working environment*, in a broad vision of the production environment that also involves the social, emotional, as well as productive sphere, as in the case of coworking spaces which sometimes satisfy public purposes. The Betahaus project in Barcelona or the coworking facilities designed by Selgascano for the Second Home company, such as Oasi in Los Angeles or the Mercado da Ribeira in Lisbon are indicative of this change. In a few days, the global organizational model had to reinvent itself due to the virus, moving towards a new scheme – the *flipped workspace* – according to which the real work of the individual is carried out at home, while the company headquarters, the old office, becomes a relational hub, a place for feedback and meetings, for cultural and professional growth, for the use of services, and for team building. The overturning of the perspective applied to the offices refers to the turning point that already occurred at the beginning of the millennium in relation to the *flipped classroom*<sup>10</sup> that overturned the concept and use of the school building, starting from a revision of the learning methods and its transposition in spatial terms, with the abandonment of the desk as the reference measurement for design purposes. The classroom is converted into a broader projection, into an organic architectural matrix that involves the entire building, encouraging an approach aimed at comparison and exchange even between distinct classrooms. The space is enriched with nuances and diversified environments are outlined (educational, individual, explorative, informal spaces, the agora and group areas) where furniture plays a fundamental role of definition in a new perspective linked to values of connectivity, sharing and modularity, as well as *networking pedagogy* (Tosi 2016).

The “flipped” approach appears in offices as a spatial reformulation whose corollary lies in the overcoming of the fixed position assigned to the individual, towards a new work environment conceived as open and multifunctional, as it is mainly dedicated to the activities of team confrontation, coordination, brainstorming or formal meetings with the client, and the actual work is done remotely from home. In this new model, the actual results and outputs, definitively prevail over the value of physical presence.

The office, no longer organised around the desk, as its characterizing element, assumes the value of a nomadic place for meeting and aggregation, a space *aimed at relationships* capable of satisfying different needs, not neces-

**Fig. 4**

Carlos Arroyo, «Unstable Office», Madrid, 2013.

sarily for the benefit of a single company but of a network of users.

The overcoming of the twentieth-century office is radical, so much that according to Carlo Ratti<sup>11</sup> we will move «from the workplace to the landscape of work». The office environment is characterized by attributes such as *public*, *privileged* and *private*, identifying respectively: fertile points of exchange; close contact areas, such as meeting rooms and individual work spaces; and customized perimeters for individual work.

Going far beyond pure working activity, areas are available for relaxation, sport, assistance, cultural and scientific study, for welfare services: real recreational spaces for human resources, where the worker is immersed in a fluid and stimulating system.

After the various compressions and decompressions that workplaces have recorded over time – from the Taylorist office, the open space, to the rational models of the modern movement, with personal cubicles, passing through the free arrangement with flexible furniture – we now come to the current “liquid” condition of the space, thus highlighting a further gap<sup>12</sup>. The case of Google<sup>13</sup> is in this sense representative because it has created a configuration based on the emotional and psychological factor, playing on the evocative scenarios of a *domestic* dimension and alternating different types of settings from the most structured to the informal ones for free use.

In this perspective, a reduction of the individual workspace in the offices of the future can be assumed. This might be obtained, if necessary, with mobile partitions, in favour of collaboration areas. As it happened in schools, where the *flipping* innovation has led to a regeneration of all spaces, conceived in terms of possible learning spaces (from the corridor as a place for informal exchange to workshop spaces for shared learning), also the work

**Fig. 5**

Riken Yamamoto, «Jian Wai SoHo», Beijing, China, 2004.

environment starts to undertake a path of spatial redefinition based on the recognition of different working styles (communication, concentration, contemplation, collaboration) which lead to propose environments articulated according to different purposes (brainstorming, presentation, focus, relaxation, socializing, etc).

In this sense, the modularity plays a fundamental reconfiguration role, allowing the common spaces to be converted, expanded or compressed into temporary workstations (for example, the smart canteen transforms the canteen into work spaces, huddle rooms become places for meetings, videocalls and brainstorming), as in the case of the *Unstable Office* project by Carlos Arroyo.

The possibility of remote connection and the flexibility of the spaces therefore allow a strong resizing of the overall surfaces necessary for the exclusive use of individual companies, with consequent savings, opening up to dynamic and shared solutions that mainly satisfy time, representation and coordination needs.

Like the office, homes are also called upon to play a different role. The new ways of working remotely require a dimensional expansion and a reconfiguration of the home. Starting already with the condominiums, arrangements and functions has changed: «The building as a system, with its intermediate and annexed spaces, becomes the ‘buffer’ absorber of new uses and functions, subtracted and introjected from the city, which can’t be satisfied by the house alone» (Tucci 2020). Furthermore, in the house «the theme of the need to move from the traditional two-dimensional ‘entrance threshold’ to an area that acts as a ‘filter-zone’, an interface for exchanges between exterior and interior, as places to be controlled and protected, today and perhaps even tomorrow» is established. The home entrance is ‘ritualized’, with gestures and actions that now take on a renewed value of respect and protection of health, as well as becoming a potentially suitable place to be transformed into a work environment when necessary.

In this sense, the research by Studio Riken Yamamoto on an intimate rela-

tionship between home and work space is interesting, as it makes the latter a natural extension of the house. The SoHo proposal (Small Office-Home Office) conceives an environment to be used as a work, study, teaching area in direct contact with the distribution corridor of the rest of the accommodations in the building. It therefore appears as a multipurpose room that also becomes a filter between the public and private dimensions, both spatial and social, renouncing separation also through the choice of a transparent closing partition.

The web has opened a public space-time window within the private dimension that is a prelude to its hybridization: homes are reconfigured with multipurpose spaces (private and public), which are divisible and adaptable. Environments that allow teaching and working activities carried out remotely. Realities demarcated by mobile partitions, panels, backgrounds: solutions that preserve the privacy of the home from the inexorable eye of the PC camera. Spaces that can be redefined throughout the day are established, passing from a clear private vocation to the interaction towards the outside, in a total immersion of the home in the network, within an entirely digital and interactive perspective.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> «There are two ways to plan activities in the centre of a city. In the first, a crowd of people gathered together does different things at the same time; in the other, they are grouped to do one thing at a time» (Sennett 2018).

<sup>2</sup> In the last 6 months, the Observatory recorded a change of address by 62% of public administrations which introduced remote working.

<sup>3</sup> In the Piepoli Institute's survey for Designtech (4 May 2020) 63% of Italians think that «it will be necessary to reorganize private spaces».

<sup>4</sup> «Today, monitoring atomized and remote work is easier than when it was concentrated in a single building. By keeping the staff at home, superiors can disrupt the community» (Sparrow 2020).

<sup>5</sup> From the theories on decentralization and delocalization of the early 2000s, the economic crisis has given a countertrend impetus and cities have once again become the fertile ground for productive activities, especially of intangible assets (Ragonese 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Stefano Boeri foresees a future decentralization of the population towards «the small Alpine and Apennine villages where greater social distancing occurs».

<sup>7</sup> «Suddenly, the American work culture, centered on the use of the private car, seemed unsustainable. That same year, Jack Nilles, along with other scholars, published the essay The telecommunications-transportation trade-off, in which he stated that the traffic problem was only a communication means problem» (Newport 2020).

<sup>8</sup> «Workers, and therefore their consumption, could leave the now-too-expensive metropolises and revitalize places which are off the beaten track» (Newport 2020).

<sup>9</sup> In 1958, the brothers Eberhard and Wolfgang Schnelle proposed an innovative solution for offices, starting from the removal of the repetitive distribution of desks to introduce a more organic system based on the insertion of free furniture and vegetation: the *bürolandschaft*, or “office landscape”.

<sup>10</sup> The origin can be traced in 2006 with the experimentation of video lessons by two teachers, Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams, in order to reach also the students absent from classes.

<sup>11</sup> *Ricerca Copernico. Il nuovo paesaggio del lavoro* in collaboration with Copernico co-working, BNP and Arper.

<sup>12</sup> See the edition of the a + t magazine dedicated to the transformation of the workplace: Workforce, a better place to work, (2014), "a + t", nos. 43-44.

<sup>13</sup> For example, the Google Campus in London or the Google headquarters in Zurich, just to name a few.

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