

Workplace Redesign: Spaces of Work and the Transformation of Industrial Modernity in Central Europe, 1848–1945

Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Prague, 1–2 December 2017

In recent years, historians have called attention to the significance that space has had in labour history and the history of work. Space is more than a geographic entity in which physical objects, such as houses, farms, factories, and office buildings, are located. In a historical perspective, space also entails the specific places where people worked and spent much of their time. It was on the fields, in workshops, and on shop floors that labour relations were formed, social inequalities and power structures emerged, and labour and social conflicts played out. Some people had to fight for spaces of work, whereas others had them forced upon them; some tried to change such spaces to meet their expectations, whereas others conformed to them; some came to identify with these spaces, whereas others tried to avoid them. One thing is for certain, however: in modern industrial society it is nearly impossible to ignore spaces of work.

Historians also agree that experts played a key role in creating places for work because they possessed the necessary knowledge. Their proposals, projects, and plans defined spaces of work, delimited their boundaries, and defined their inner order. Whereas until the late nineteenth century, it was mainly construction managers and engineers who influenced the form and appearance of places of work, immediately before World War I academically trained architects began to demand the liberation of work buildings from the yoke of historicism and technicist visions. This paradigm shift is embodied in the buildings of architects such as Walter Gropius, Adolf Meyer, and Albert Kahn, whose careers culminated in the interwar period. The work of these architects corresponded with new scientific management theories such as Taylorism and Fordism, which placed great emphasis on spatial organization. The principles of modern architecture and the new economy of space soon expanded beyond the realm of industrial buildings.

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Although the 1920s and 1930s are considered to be a turning point in history that opened up a new era of industrial modernity, this workshop attempts to focus more on historical continuity in this period. The interwar period is understood not just as the start of a new era, but also as a time when long-term trends culminated. Thus, the goal of the workshop is not only to analyse the extent to which modern architecture contributed to transforming spaces of work, but it also attempts to examine development models, patterns, and trajectories that appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, some of which were eventually applied in practice. The workshop seeks to gather papers that examine the various places of work that coexisted over the course of a one-hundred-year span of time. Whether the focus is on farms, households, artisan workshops, manufactories, factories, or offices, the central question is how can these spaces be studied historically. What sources and which analytical tools can make these spaces accessible to historians? How can their transformations be captured? This workshop aims to spark discussion about the spatial aspects of work and look at labour history through the lens of space.

First, the workshop will deal with the typology of spaces of work in Central Europe between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Does geography play a role in any differences that appear? What types of spaces of work existed? How did they change over time? Were they connected with the city, the countryside, or someplace in between? Did they draw from the industrial model of the division of labour? Were they determined by work itself, or did work determine them?

Second, the workshop focuses on the relationship of historical actors towards spaces of work. What language did historical actors use to describe their spaces of work? How did they perceive and experience spaces of work? How did they imagine and appropriate spaces of work?

Third, the workshop poses the question of whether spaces of work generated conflicts, inequalities, power structures, exclusion, or disrespect. Did such conflicts have economic, ethnic, social, or gender aspects to them?

Fourth, the workshop is interested in how these spaces of work were constructed. What role did experts—for example, construction specialists, technicians, engineers, and architects—and their knowledge play? Did experts advance their own visions of space or did they take into account the demands of property owners, industrialists, entrepreneurs, and public and state officials?



Paper proposals should revolve around one of the following topics or should lie at the intersection of two or more of them:

1. The transformation of the space and places where work was performed in industrial modernity
2. Visions, imaginations, perceptions, and experiences of space and its appropriation
3. Conflicts, inequalities, and power structures generated by spaces of work
4. The construction of space and knowledge: experts, entrepreneurs, and public and state officials

The workshop will be held at the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (www.mua.cas.cz) in Prague from 1 to 2 December 2017.

The organizers plan to publish an edited volume of selected papers.

Thanks to generous funding from the Czech Academy of Sciences, the organizers will cover accommodation and travel costs for workshop participants.

Please send an abstract of your paper (200–400 words) and a short CV by 31 July 2017 to Zdeněk Nebřenský (znebrensky@gmail.com). Accepted papers will be announced by the end of August 2017.

Timeline

Submission of paper proposals: 31 July 2017

Announcement of accepted papers: 31 August 2017

Workshop dates: 1–2 December 2017

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