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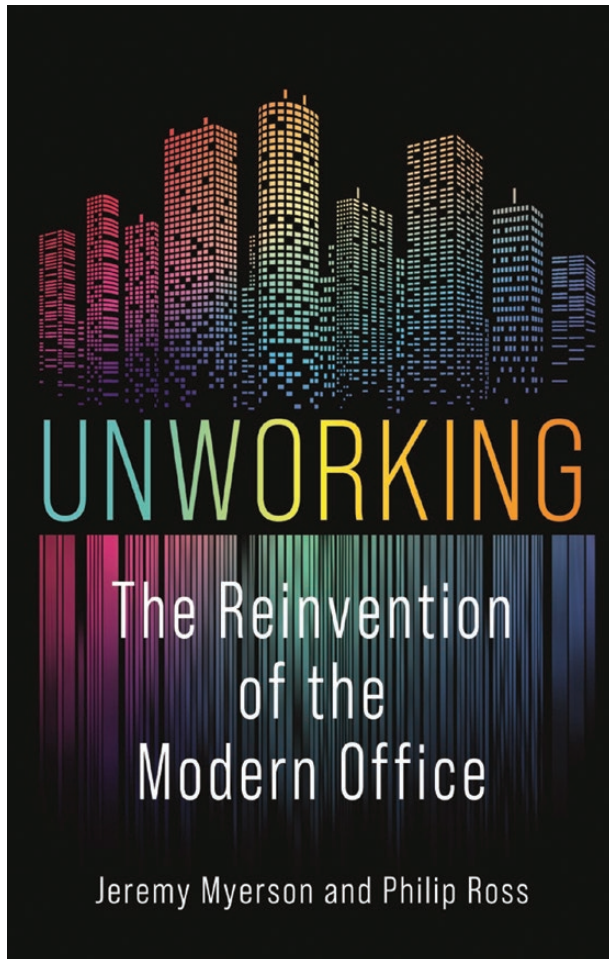
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Book Review



Unworking: The Reinvention of the Modern Office

Jeremy Myerson and Philip Ross, *University of Chicago Press*, 2022, 240 pp., 35 b&w illus., cloth, \$22.50, ISBN: 978-1-78914-668-4.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been no shortage of articles, podcasts, and reports on the future of work and the workplace. The acceleration of remote and hybrid working over the last three years

has called into question the conventions of where, when, and how we work, and in particular, the extent to which the office building—an invention of the last century—remains essential and relevant today. Jeremy Myerson and Philip Ross's new book, *Unworking: The Reinvention of the Modern Office*, emerges from within this conversation, responding to an urgency to rethink the office in the wake of a number of dramatic societal events and crises. According to the authors, the digital revolution, 2008 financial crisis, climate crisis, and the recent pandemic have reframed the way we work, demanding a reconceptualization of the workplace. 'Unworking,' they argue, is a term that captures the process by which we 'unravel how we work...unbundle the assumptions that are baked into the modern office, and...unlearn the habits, management styles and workplace cultures that have traditionally defined our behaviour at work.' (p. 203). As such, the term connotes a reimagining of the role of design, management theory, and technology in the contemporary workplace.

The book is structured into three parts: 'The Journey to Now,' which offers a light history of the modern office; 'What comes next,' which lays out key areas of change, ranging from 'Experience' and 'Organisation,' to 'Urbanism,' 'Technology,' 'Designing,' and 'Wellbeing'; and the concluding part, 'Reinvention,' which sketches out possible approaches to 'unworking' based on this analysis. This structure is implemented in service of the book's core narrative, which is essentially that the progress of the modern office is hampered by a longstanding historical metaphor of the office as an efficient machine for working in (drawing on the Corbusian aphorism of the home as a 'machine for living'), derived from the theories of scientific management which shaped office interiors at the start of the twentieth century. As a result of this legacy, the book claims that the contemporary office too often overlooks softer, employee-centered concepts like experience, mobility, and well-being. As the authors argue, 'office planning and design used to be primarily about what people do at work; today, it's all about what they *feel* about work.' (p. 9). And whereas 'the office used to be an extension of the factory floor, functional

and utilitarian; now it is being recast as the sentient workplace.’ (p. 10). Furthermore, the book aims to show how new agile work structures, increased flexibility, and a demand for higher quality workplaces to attract talent, require a better approach to design.

Written in a lively and accessible manner, *Unworking* offers a popular introduction to the history and future of the office, though the latter dramatically outweighs the former, with just three of fifteen chapters dedicated to the historical context. Yet what it gains in approachability, it loses in criticality and precision. For one thing, the brief historical narrative is selective at best, overemphasizing the legacy of the (North American) “Taylorist” office, whereby scientific management theories promoted maximum efficiency through standardization and organizational hierarchy. In effect, Taylorism reconfigured office work (predominantly clerical work) as an industrial process, and with it reconfigured the office as a white collar factory. The authors argue that this was the basis for the adoption of modernism as the dominant “style” of offices thereafter, emphasizing efficiency above all else. However, in this argument the authors substantially underplay the impact of the post-war European social democratic movements, (where, in fact, many of the authors’ ideas about well-being and connectivity were foregrounded). This leads to confused timelines. For example, the authors claim that Sick Building Syndrome, a phenomenon emerging in the 1980s, was caused by scientific management techniques and was a catalyst for ‘loosening’ the office (p. 30) when in reality much more had happened in between to heighten employees’ awareness of their workplace environments, such as the workers’ movements and subsequent increase in legislation demanding employee participation in the 1970s, not to mention the influence of the Human Relations movement.¹

Even if we accept the central argument that the contemporary office of today is held back by the legacies of the industrialized office, it is difficult to see how *Unworking* offers a more optimistic alternative. Despite criticizing the technocratic approach of scientific management (the “org chart” and time and motion studies are recurring villains), much of the book is overly concerned with the possibilities of digital data collection in the office to track and monitor employee productivity. This, it argues, is one of the main innovations of the future—the data driven office, which will become the central driver for behavior, culture, use, and change in the office. The authors show how digital technology, through mobile phone apps and imbedded sensors in office furniture, can be used to track

occupancy, predictively adapt environmental conditions, and mold experience. In one of the many dystopian passages on this topic, the book claims that through such technologies ‘Performance can now be quantified, the top performing players can be compared to the lower-performing. How many emails are sent each day, how many hours are spent in meetings, the extent of a professional network – all these things can be measured. Overlay this with occupancy data – what time an employee turns up, where they choose to work, how much coffee they drink – and you have a complete picture of performance of both people and space.’ (p. 110). All this will be visualized on ‘dashboards’ that ‘will make recommendations that can shape change and present visualizations of who is emailing whom, and who is being invited to meetings and video conferences.’ (p. 110).

In this regard, the book takes a largely uncritical view on data, privacy, and technology, claiming that ‘we believe [employees] will succumb to greater observation... Generation Z may even embrace this lack of privacy.’ (p. 110). Whereas technologies like facial recognition software and apps are positioned as a way to improve employee freedom, through the ‘consumer-driven’ ‘gamified’ workplace, the financial gains are not lost on the authors: ‘real-time real estate (or RETRE) ...will begin a transformation of corporate property as data and analytics provide insight into effectiveness, cost and performance – not just of physical assets but of the people that occupy the space’ (p. 110). What makes this dehumanizing premise doubly unsettling is the way that overtly human and ethical concerns, such as well-being and environmentalism, are then superficially introduced as justifications: smart buildings are more sustainable; whilst giving people the freedom to work whenever and wherever they like (if monitored digitally) promotes a better quality of life.

Where the book does confront employee well-being, the suggestions offer cure rather than prevention. Yoga centers, cry rooms, and biophilia—a term developed in the 1980s arguing that exposure to nature (read: plants) can improve our health—are suggested. This continues the limited conception of occupational health that emerged in the 1980s which bifurcated the “hard” physical environment (light, heat, sound, air nexus) from the “soft” psycho-social environment. Where the first might be the responsibility of the employer, the second becomes the responsibility of the employee: seeing therapist or doing yoga is suggested in lieu of improved work culture and better human resources policies. There is no mention of important structural improvements and innovations

that might help empower employees, like more secure contracts, parental and care leave, or a shorter working week. Here, it is women and minority groups who stand to benefit the most, but there is little to no exploration of how workplaces might consider well-being and inclusivity as intertwined. cursory references to better social practices in “diversity” in the book focus only on neurodiversity (and the provision of quiet spaces with muted lighting), and not the highly gendered practices, nor persistent racial discrimination and ableism that underpin the design of the modern office. Likewise, the chapter on demographics looks at age range and the various generational perspectives, not the wide range of individuals that might occupy an office, including those that make it function, such as maintenance and catering staff, administrative and service personnel. Nowhere does the book attempt to address how organizations can improve the experiences of traditionally marginalized communities through the design of the workplace.

Initially these omissions and misjudgments seem naïve rather than irresponsible. There are many parts of the book that aim to emphasize issues like equality and health but miss the mark. For example, the book’s concept of well-being is based on the notion that people are happy to collapse the distance between work and home, both temporally and spatially. Workplaces should be everywhere, accessible all the time, at home, even in bed. But the reality is that this is not possible or even desirable for many workers who have other needs and responsibilities outside of work. Similarly, the book claims that working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic brought about a “levelling out” of the workforce, thanks to the elimination of spatial signs of power, such as senior board rooms: ‘digital equality was achieved for the first time’ (p. 103). Yet, as many studies showed, the pandemic often exposed and enhanced existing inequalities, such as declining productivity related to gender due to uneven care and home responsibilities.² In addition, the book brings back dated concepts lacking criticality. Many things are proclaimed “dead,” including: the cable, the desk, distance, and the central business district (CBD). But the alternatives are not so innovative either, such as “smart districts,” essentially mixed-use suburban business hubs, dressed up as “tactical urbanism,” a radical concept that has nothing to do with providing iconic offices for multinational conglomerates.

Overall, *Unworking*, presents a thorough overview of contemporary debates on office design from within the sector. Its contribution to knowledge on the history of office design, however, is limited. The book uses history for operative means, relying too heavily on scientific

management and too little on European social democratic movements, to make an argument that we are at a historical turning point, moving away from the office as machine, toward the office as a responsive, human-centered environment. In fact, if the authors had looked more closely at the last six decades, they might have found a more compelling historical basis for their claims, building on the rich knowledge of environmental psychology, organizational sociology, worker-led reform, and environmentalism that emerged at a similar moment of crisis in the 1970s. Here the story would have been one of continuity, rather than rupture, but more powerful and critical in its insights for the future.

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Notes

- 1 For more detailed appraisals of the history of the office, see: Jennifer Kaufmann-Buhler, *Open Plan: A Design History of the American Office* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020); Francis Duffy and Les Hutton, *Architectural Knowledge: The Idea of a Profession* (London: E & FN Spon, 1998); Juriaan van Meel, *The European Office: Office Design and National Context* (010 Publishers, 2000); Amy Thomas, ‘The Political Economy of Flexibility: Deregulation and the Transformation of Corporate Space in the Post-War City of London,’ in Kenny Cupers, Helena Mattsson and Catharina Gabriellsson (eds.), *Neoliberalism: An Architectural Project* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2019); Amy Thomas, ‘Architectural Consulting in the Knowledge Economy: DEGW and the ORBIT Report,’ *The Journal of Architecture* 24, no. 7 (October 3, 2019): 1020–44.
- 2 Abbi Hobbs, ‘The Impact of Remote and Flexible Working Arrangements,’ (29 April, 2021), <https://post.parliament.uk/the-impact-of-remote-and-flexible-working-arrangements/>; accessed 17 February 2023. Herminia Ibarra, Julia Gillard, and Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, ‘Why WFH Isn’t Necessarily Good for Women,’ *Harvard Business Review*, (16 July, 2020), <https://hbr.org/2020/07/why-wfh-isnt-necessarily-good-for-women>, accessed 17 February 2023. Joanna Partridge, ‘Switch to More Home Working after Covid ‘Will Make Gender Inequality Worse,’ *The Observer*, (19 June, 2021), sec. Business, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jun/19/switch-to-more-home-working-after-covid-will-make-gender-inequality-worse>, accessed 17 February 2023. Monica Sharma, ‘Female Staff Report Lower Happiness and

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[business/2021/08/28/why-women-need-the-office?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18151738051&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gclid=Cj0KCQiA6LyfBhC3ARIsAG4gkF8NnYRELA1gr9uAV0cLsMU9qjlxwu3CjE0KW-eVkiPUV6nZAtcfm38aArj-rEALw_wcB&gclsrc=aw.ds](https://www.economist.com/business/2021/08/28/why-women-need-the-office?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18151738051&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gclid=Cj0KCQiA6LyfBhC3ARIsAG4gkF8NnYRELA1gr9uAV0cLsMU9qjlxwu3CjE0KW-eVkiPUV6nZAtcfm38aArj-rEALw_wcB&gclsrc=aw.ds), accessed 17 February, 2023. 'Women Perceived as Less Productive While WFH: Report,' *The Statesman* (blog), (11 March, 2021), <https://www.thestatesman.com/lifestyle/women-perceived-less-productive-wfh-report-1502956742.html>, accessed 17 February 2023.