

# NEW OFFICE

REFLECTION PAPER

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## **Project description**

Over the past hundred years, advancements in technology have determined the way we work and interact. Diving into history, one can find an evolution of the spatial organization of office buildings driven by these technological developments. This graduation project, called NEW Office, tries to find a solution for the current changes affecting the future evolution of the work environment.

With its 37 million square meters of office space, New York City can be seen as the business capital of the world. This makes the City one of the best case studies to investigate how the current office space typology needs to change to be ready for the next evolution to come. Considering the trends of current changes in the workplace, an alteration in the approach takes place. One can conclude that the contrast between working and everyday life is decreasing, resulting in a workplace that proceeds towards a more informal setting. Estimating the start of this shift by considering the history of the workplace, the change is predicted to be happening within the coming thirty years. This graduation project tries to find an answer to how the workplace will evolve, considering the question: "How can a change in office environment create value for Northeast Midtown?". Hereby, a future what-if scenario is used to make the project more explicit, so "what if... office buildings contain 80 percent less work by 2050?"

One can assume that the noticed shift in the workplace is already happening due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of this virus forced people all over the world to work from home abruptly. Researching the consequences of this "work from home" situation shows that, in comparison to working at the office, a less productive, more distracted, and more isolated environment has come to place. One may claim that the cause of this happened by the unexpected and unsolicited change of the work environment. Since the COVID-19 pandemic also brought new perspectives towards the future of work. Due to the obligated "work from home" situation, meetings are being organized online, daily travel time reduces, and the flexibility of working hours increases. People can spend more time with their family and loved ones while being "at work".

NEW Office is a two-hundred-eighty meter tall tower that is located on the block between 47th and 48th Street and Lexington Avenue and Third Avenue (see figure 1). The building offers more than hundred-and-twenty-thousand square meters of adaptable space that consists of office space, living units and their related amenities. With adaptability as the key concept of the design,

changes to the program can happen independently to its structure, period, and context. Hereby, this hybrid mixed-use project has the opportunity to adjust to the changing demands in society, whereas the program gradually shifts from a collective work environment to an individual and community-based residential tower within thirty years of time.

## **1. Relationship between research and design**

Research and design are two aspects that are in close relation to each other, especially in the field of architecture. In this profession, design cannot be named without naming research. Both aspects encourage each other during the entire process. At first, research is used to create a starting point for the design. In this phase, information or so-called "hard data" about the site, program, and the user is gathered to generate an overview of the project. Due to the anticipation of this data, conclusions have been drawn to initiate the first steps towards the design. By formulating design goals, a first set of "rules" is determined to lead the rest of the design. During the design process, this set of "rules" becomes more refined and converts into a guiding theme, which represents the main theme throughout the design. A comprehensive guiding theme consists of a sophisticated act of research and act of designing. Both disciplines should alternate each other to strengthen the outcome of the project. The endless switch between research and design stimulates the reflective way of looking at the project. By distancing yourself from the project to face it in an abstract way, deliberated decisions can be made according to the guiding theme. However, when it comes to time management, taking distance from the project becomes harder. The pressure forces us to trust our instincts instead of making well-argumentative decisions.

Taking the design process into consideration, one can state that both research and design are closely connected. The relevance or relationship between the disciplines is comparable with a dialogue. Its ongoing alternation and constant responds to one another makes the design thought-out. The interchange of research and design aims to create more refined design solutions, whereas this sophisticates the process to strive for a well argumentative and comprehensive design.

## **2. Relationship between graduation topic, studio topic, and master track**

The studio of Complex Projects is known for its investigation of areas around the world that are currently changing or are expecting to change as part of the process of globalization.

Figure 1. NEW Office (own ill.)



The location for this year's graduation project is Midtown, New York City, an area known as one of the largest business districts in the world, including famous landmarks, such as the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, and Rockefeller Center. Complex Projects selected Midtown as it is currently undergoing big changes. For over three hundred years, lower Manhattan has been the City's focal point of business, but a shift of economic relevance occurred in the 1930s. The development of a new business district in Midtown started to change Manhattan. New offices, better conditions, and a more inclusive area caused a large shift of businesses towards Midtown. Nowadays, these office buildings have reached the end of their lifespan, and companies are on the move again. This time to new urban development along the Hudson River, called Hudson Yards. An area that attracts many businesses with its state-of-the-art architecture, its highly-populated area, public amenities, a mixture of functions, big floor slabs, and many more. This development causes a second shift of the City's focal point. The graduation topic reacts to this current shift by designing a building that creates value for Midtown while taking the new demands of working into account. This graduation project uses the results of research to explore the relationship between architecture and ways of working. It aims to design a new typology office building for 2050.

Concerning the master track of Architecture, Complex Projects addresses a mixture of problem-solving ways of thinking with heuristic ways of doing research and design. The method of Complex Projects aims to see the same project from many perspectives. The complexity of these parameters converges into a new definition of design that activates a strong, critical, and analytical approach towards the design process. Not every conclusion might be academically supported, but the steps that are taken need to be clear and referable to the research that is done. An approach that is not only in line with the master track of Architecture but also with the position of the Delft University of Technology towards the importance of well-founded research.

### **3. Research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the graduation studio**

The graduation studio of Complex Projects uses a research-based method to approach the design process. During the MSc 3 semester, all types of research were used to investigate New York City. The first knowledge was collected in a group and focusses on quantitative research: a method in which data is gathered without creating value assessments or judgments – often associated with objectivity<sup>1</sup>. An important element of this quantitative research

was the gathering of statistics that originates from the NYC Open Data, a worldwide accessible database that includes empirical data published by the New York City Government. The collected statistics provided an objective base for further research, which was visualized afterward by making use of a variety of methods, like mapping, sketching, making diagrams, and photographing. This multitude of available analytical methods showed the diversity of dealing with the collected data. Supportive of this quantitative research method is the analysis of New York by the representation of Midtown shown in a 1 : 1000 scale foam model. The combination of this physical model and the gathered data appeared to be a suitable method for getting to know New York City in an objective way.

The next step was to interpret the gathered data individually. By making use of the qualitative research approach, the focus changed from an objective perspective into a more subjective one, in which the classification of facts becomes contested and based on individual interests conducted at the researched location<sup>1</sup>. Within this second phase of the research process, the opportunity was given to develop a personal fascination, and further explore related topics. For my fascination, more research was needed about the history of the Financial District in Midtown, to understand its character in relation to its function. By using data that was gathered during the quantitative phase of the process, the interpretation of this data led to the collection of "soft data". In addition to this, research into the evolution of office typologies was necessary to support the narrative. However, this information was not gathered during the group research, so a step back into the quantitative method was needed to collect more hard data about the evolution of office space. Hereafter, the hard data could be interpreted again. The analysis of the characteristics of office space typologies in relation to advancements in technology followed (see figure 2 - 7). By the use of this subjective approach, another level of information could be gathered which focused more on the human aspect of the built environment.

After Presentation 2 (P2), a shift happened from the designers' point of view: the top-down approach of the MSc 3 semester changed into more of a bottom-up approach towards the actual design. More specific research needed to be done before I was able to define the final floor plans, sections, facades, and details. From this point on, design through making became of importance. By producing an "army of alternatives", progress was made towards a more comprehensive design. The combination of these alternatives with products like drawings, models, and renders,

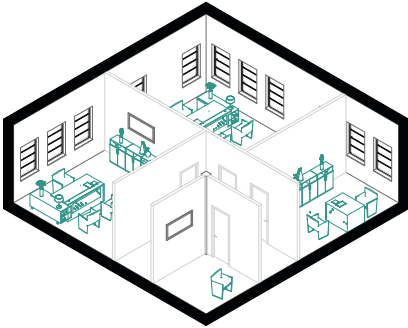


Figure 2. Traditional Office (own ill.)

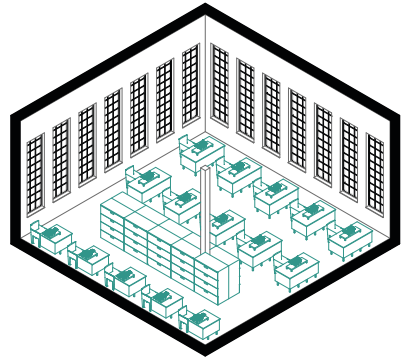


Figure 3. Open Plan Office (own ill.)

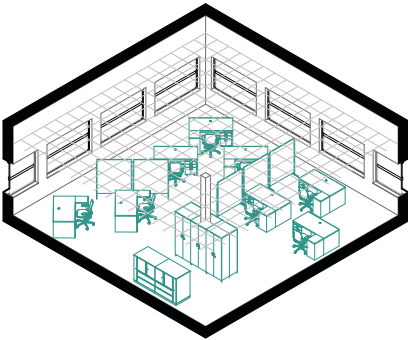


Figure 4. Office-landscape (own ill.)

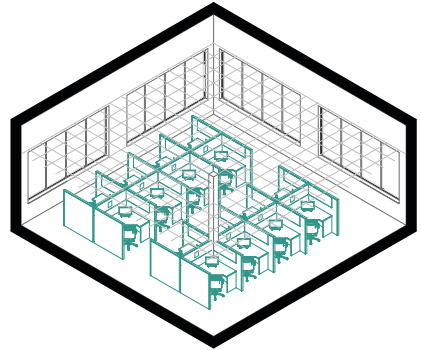


Figure 5. Cubicles (own ill.)

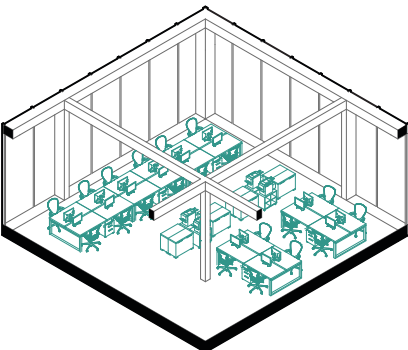


Figure 6. Casual Office (own ill.)

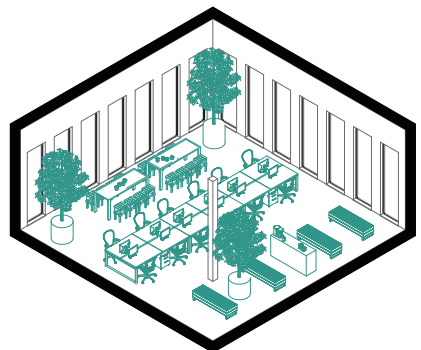


Figure 7. Virtual Office (own ill.)

helped to visualize the underlying meaning of design decisions. In this way, thoughts could be compared, communicated, and reflected on according to the guiding theme. By showing these alternatives clearly and systematically, the design enhances a more in-depth relationship with the research that is done.

#### **4. Relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional, and scientific framework**

New York as the business capital of the world is the ultimate location to research the evolution of office space and its continuation towards the future. However, New York is not the only city worldwide that has to deal with the changing demands in ways of working. The relevance of this project is the fact that this topic is of global importance and applicable to other urban cities. An example can be found in New Zealand, where Andrew Barnes, director of Perpetual Guardian, was noticing a high level of stress by his staff. Barnes decided to search for a method to improve the work environment for his staff. With an eight-week trial that involved all his staff members, Barnes investigated the productivity, motivation, and output of his employees by offering them a paid day off each week. So, his staff worked 30 hours but got paid for 38 hours<sup>2</sup>. The results of his experiment were surprising: within eight weeks the stress-level of his staff decreased by 27 percent and the work-life balance increased with 45 percent<sup>3</sup>. So, one can state that by working four days per week instead of five days, people are getting happier. Barnes himself calls it "having the best of both worlds", where the experiment shows the benefits for both employers and employees<sup>4</sup>.

The results of this experiment got the attention of the worldwide press. The Microsoft Office in Japan tried the same experiment with the four-day workweek and got an even larger increase in productivity (40 percent)<sup>5</sup>. At the beginning of this year (2020), the prime minister of Finland even spoke about wanting her entire country on a four-day workweek<sup>6</sup>. Summarizing this change, and considering the COVID-19 pandemic, there can be concluded that a shift is about to happen within the work environment. As current developments show, this seems to happen sooner than expected.

Taking these changes into account NEW Office challenges the global evolution of working for the coming decades. The project shows how the work and living environment coexist in one building and how it can adapt to transformation over time. In this way, the building provides a platform to research the changes needed to existing office typologies. It explores the design of a "work from

home" environment as a purpose in contrast to the forced way we are imposed by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **5. Ethical issues and dilemmas**

The concept of this graduation project is based on a future scenario that has emerged from the research that is done throughout the year. Multiple sources show that the boundary between work life and social life is becoming more and more diffuse. The future scenario takes into account that this shift will amplify toward the future. However, the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic fully changed the evolution of work. From one day to the next, people were forced to work from home. Workers all over the world had to adjust their daily routine. Travel time is reduced, meetings are being organized online, and the flexibility of working hours are increasing. And while being "at work", people are able to spend more time with their family and loved ones. But, working from home also led to more distraction, less productivity, and an isolated feeling. One can ask themselves what is necessary to evolve workspace answering to future demands, without giving in on social, health, productive, and livable matter. The COVID-19 pandemic is currently teaching us to be more social and connected than ever, so will working from home be our future?

## **Bibliography**

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