

Report 1:
**The City as an Inspiration for the
Office of the Future**

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	Introduction	p.4
1.	Office space	p.4
2.	The Ministry as an office space	p.6
3.	The city	p.6
4.	The city as inspiration for the Rijnstraat office	p.8
	Literature	p.9

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The City as an Inspiration for the Office of the Future

If you examine different city centres, you can find a bustling network of activities. People move around, do their shopping, gather together in a square or drink a coffee together on a terrace. However, because of individualisation and digitalisation, cities have changed during the last century. People can meet each other through the internet instead of in public spaces and asking the way is no longer necessarily because you can find directions on your mobile phone. People who are in public spaces form clusters of groups of individuals without any relationship to other groups or individuals¹. But still, the city is a place where people come together and with the current trends, like for example the new farmers markets and an aversion to digital life, more and more people are rediscovering the city as a meeting place.

For office spaces this swing towards digitalisation is also noticeable. The layout of office space is changing and, according to Frank Duffy, modern offices use the network of the city. People no longer work in one office building from nine to five but also work in Cafeterias, restaurants and hotel lobbies at the times that suit them..²

This report is about office spaces and how office space can connect to the city. The findings of this report are going to be used for a redesign of the building at the Rijnstraat in The Hague for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment. The Rijnstraat ministry is located in a very central position in the city centre. Therefore it is interesting to see if there are possibilities to connect the office building with the network of the city. How can the spaces from the city connect to the new office of the ministry and how can this be an inspiration of the office for the future?

1. Office space

In the last century major changes were made in the design of office spaces and in the working culture. A century ago the layout of office spaces was very different to the layout of contemporary office spaces. In Frank Duffy's article about office space, he acknowledged three main phases in the history of office design.³ He labels the first phase *the Taylorist Office* which started in America in the 20th century. The Taylorist Office was driven by economic growth and new ideas about centralised management in companies. Efficiency was one of the keywords of the Taylorist Office concept, introduced an effective system with a top-down approach. In the new system, employees no longer work individually but became part of the production line, doing only a small part of the work and then pass it on to the next employee in the chain. Office buildings were designed for this chain system and emphasised the hierarchy differences in companies with big open-plan spaces often lit by artificial lighting. For a long time, the Taylorist model was the standard model in America. Moving workers from private offices to open work spaces saved the company money because fewer square meters per worker were required. This resulted in the typical images of big spaces with neatly arranged rows of tables and workers. The movie *The Apartment* is a perfect example of this office

¹ Acconci 1990.

² Duffy 2007.

³ Duffy 2007.

culture, where one scene shows an office worker who is being promoted. He picks up his belongings and moves from a desk in the big open workspace to his own office space with his own window!⁴



Figure 1. A Taylorist Office. Still from the movie 'The Apartment'. A big open workspace with only artificial lightning from the ceiling.

In 1960 a new model was developed which represented a deviation from the American model. By experimenting with the Bürolandschaft (office-landscape), a new typology was started.⁵ In this new typology higher environmental standards, for example daylight for every office space, were combined with an open-plan layout. The new typology was based on social democratic principles with rooms of the same size for all the employees. The *Social Democratic office* was furnished with domestic-style furniture and the spaces were naturally lighted and ventilated. Not long after the emergence of the new typology, the principles of the Social Democratic office became the standard for office buildings.

The last phase was called the *networked office*. With the rise of the personal computer and the Internet, it was no longer necessarily for employees to work just in one office building. Companies explored the options of globalisation with the result that companies could work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The design of office space thus became very difficult because there was no longer a configuration of fixed groups and activities could also take place outside the building. In the networked office, employees work in a virtual interconnected way. *Around The World; Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger*⁶ is the eponymous song from the electric band Daft Punk, and for me describes this new phase in office culture. With all the new technology and with the knowledge that companies can now work around the clock, employees could work fast, produce quicker and cheaper and always be connected with their company.

Along with the three phases the design of offices has changed. There are several reasons to redesign an office space. Often the redesign is driven by financial factors or the desire to give a new identity to a company.⁷ The change in office layout had big influences on employees. It is very difficult to make a new design and reorganize office space in such way that it please everybody in the office. Some workers, for example, want quiet spaces, others want more social contact and ask for informal work spaces. Some people ask for flexible working hours, other are more comfortable with set working hours. In a quasi-field experiment set up by James McElroy and Paula Morrow, they tried to examine the reactions of employees after the redesign of their office space. At first they look at the question of why the office has been redesigned. The reason usually tended to be financial. This is a Taylorist approach, redesigning an office space saves money because most of the time it means less square meters per employee. Another reason to redesign an office space is to change the physical environment of the office. Such a physical environment consists of three elements: the *physical*

⁴ Wilder 1960.

⁵ Duffy 2007.

⁶ Bangalter 2007.

⁷ McElroy 2010.

structure, the *physical stimuli* and the *symbolic artefacts*.⁸ The first element, the *physical structure*, is about the design, physical location and physical layout of the workspace. How are the desks arranged and where is the office located? The *physical stimuli* is about the things that happen within the workspace, for example, the telephones calls and reports that need to be read. The last element, the *symbolic artefacts*, is about the aesthetics of the office, for example the colour scheme and the furniture style. With these three elements it is possible to change the representation of an organisation's culture, make organisational changes within the company and/or to communicate the culture of the office to employees.

According to the article by McElroy the fact that a company deals with different generations of employees makes the redesigning of it a difficult task. There are major differences between the Baby Boomers (born before 1965), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1977) and Millennials (born after 1977).⁹ The Baby Boomers for example are less open to change than the Millennials.

Sofia Borges recognized the idea of the networked office in the city. In the introduction to the book *Workspace* she asked the question where do people work best?¹⁰ Is it at a quiet desk, in a bustling café or at home? The contemporary office space is connected with the city.¹¹ In the report from *Stichting Innovatie & Arbeid* teleworking constitutes the *new world of work*¹² (*Het nieuwe werken*). Teleworking means working from home or somewhere else while being connected with the employer by telephone or the internet.¹³ Working inside or outside the office does not require anything more than a good internet connection.

2. The Ministry as an office space

In the networked office there is no longer the need for a company to have one office building. For the design of Rijnstraat building in The Hague this is different. The employees at the ministry do work in an interconnected way and are able to work at home or elsewhere in the city but a building is needed for employees to meet and work together. Apart from having meeting rooms and work spaces important offices, for example for the ministers, are also housed in the main building. The ministry office is different to a usual office building. Where most companies –due to the cheap land price or a good connections with the highways- are clustered on the periphery of the city, the ministry buildings are clustered in the centre of the city of The Hague to provide a good connection with the Dutch parliament (Tweede Kamer). The building of the Rijnstraat ministry is in a very prominent spot between the railway station and the shopping and entertainment area. Therefore the relationship with the public space and the building is very important.

3. The city

In the networked office the working activities are spread out over the city. People work at cafeterias, in hotel lobbies or at home.¹⁴ If one puts these activities on a map of the city one can get an insight into the network of activities of companies. One can also identify the company type. Where office buildings of a conventional type (Taylorist or Social Democratic) are more limited to one building, the activities of the networked offices spread out all over the city. Employees of the networked office who are still working in an office building use the building different than an office with a Taylorist or Social Democratic approach. The office of the networked office is no longer a stable building type but became a multiuse place.

⁸ McElroy 2010: 612.

⁹ McElroy 2010: 616.

¹⁰ Borges 2013: 3.

¹¹ Duffy 2007.

¹² Stichting Innovatie & Arbeid 2014.

¹³ www.rijksoverheid.nl

¹⁴ Duffy 2007.

People in the digital age do not talk and barely communicate with each other, even if they are in the same room. According to Vito Acconci, the same thing happens in public spaces. In his essay *Public Space in a Private Time*, he mentions a public square where small dots of people merge into small islands. None of the islands of dots communicate to each other. “the space is public, but the people don’t function as a public.”¹⁵ Although the text of Acconci was written in the nineties, it still applies to present public spaces. In “times changed, and time went away”¹⁶ Acconci points out that in the modern age people want to do more things in less time. Time for meeting people, *public time*, is no longer available. *Harder, better, faster, stronger*.¹⁷

According to Acconci the solution is to make a public space public again. To design a gathering point, you create a space where people do meet each other and where people as a public. The result is that the clusters of people, the islands of dots merge together.

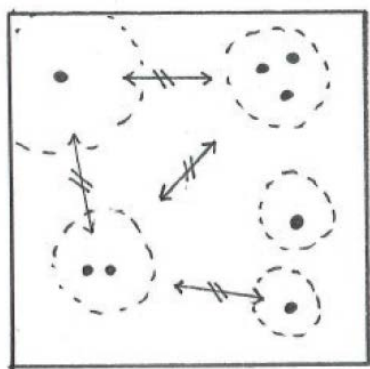


Figure 2: Public space without a gathering point.

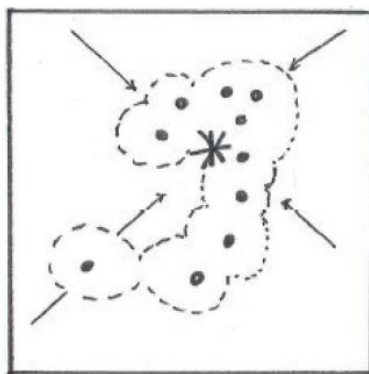


Figure 3 Public space with a gathering point.

Fig 2 and 3: public space according to Vito Acconci.¹⁸ In figure 2 a public square where small dots of people merge into small islands. None of the islands of dots communicate to each other. In figure 3 a public space with a gathering point. The people, the islands of dots are attracted to the gathering point. The result is that the clusters of people, the islands of dots merge together. Diagrams made by author.

How can the disconnection in the public space be reconnected again? The findings from an investigation carried out by Jan Gehl, where he looks at public space and life between buildings in a city, concludes three kinds of activities in the city.¹⁹ The first activity is the *necessary activities*. Activities that you have to do, such as going to work or school, shopping or waiting for a bus. The main goal of this activity is to get from A to B, most of the time in the shortest time it can be done. The second activities are the *optional activities*. To go for a walk during lunch breaks or sitting and sunbathing are examples of such activities. For the optional activities, the external conditions plays a big part. When the weather is bad, fewer people take a walk during lunch breaks than when the weather is very nice and sunny. The third activity is less influenced by external conditions. The *Social Activities* are based on meeting others in public spaces.

Projecting these findings to an office building, you can imagine that these three activities also take place in office spaces. The necessary activities in offices are walking to the printer or get a file from the storage, the optional activities are the walks during the lunch breaks inside or outside the building and the social activities that take place when you have a chat with one of your colleagues. The big difference is the place where the activity takes place. In the city all three activities can take place at the same time in the same place. For example in a public square people can sunbathe, chat and pass each other by at the same time. In office buildings mixing these activities is sometimes not

¹⁵ Acconci 1990: 78.

¹⁶ Acconci 1990: 77.

¹⁷ Phrase from the eponymous song from the electric band Daft Punk.

¹⁸ Acconci 1990.

¹⁹ Gehl, 2011.

desirable. You can imagine when working at a desk reading a report that it is disturbing when lots of people pass by or if people have a long chat in front of you.

In his essay *Collective Space, Social Use*, Herman Hertzberger talks about public spaces in the city and publicly used building.²⁰ He explains that in public buildings the relationship between buildings and streets often disappears. Public and private, inside and outside are, according to Hertzberger, relative concepts in such places.²¹ He also recognized the need for a gathering point for the public (in his case a building, a space) and that such gathering point changes from churches and Stoas to shopping malls. He quotes Manuel de Sola-Morales who claims that this collective space is “*neither public nor private but much more and at the same time less than public space*”.²² For Hertzberger it is important that a building connects with the city. Buildings where lots of people gather together, function as tiny cities and are to be designed as such.²³ The building structure consists of streets and squares with a division in public and private spaces. Although the ideas of Hertzberger hark back to the idea created in the sixties about a makeable society and are a bit outdated, it is still interesting to investigate how Hertzberger accomplished his ideas.

4. The city as inspiration for the Rijnstraat office.

The office building is no longer a stable building type. Luckily the design brief of the new ministry in the Rijnstraat requires a building where employees can work and meet. The location of the Rijnstraat building is in the center of The Hague between the Railway station and the city center. Although the area has great potential, the passage in the present building is uninteresting and the area around the building is very anonymously designed. The city has to again reconnect with the building. I think that this connection can be made by designing a public space around or under the Rijnstraat building. The lobby or entrance of the building can be a gathering point for the public space, so that the square becomes a place to be rather than a place to pass through. For the office spaces in the building, the city can be an inspiration for layout and design. Formal and informal spaces can be made to make use of streets and squares.

²⁰ Hertzberger 2002.

²¹ Hertzberger 2002: 93.

²² Hertzberger 2002: 94

²³ Hertzberger 2002: 95-96.

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