-LESS

The Future of Office Work

Volume 2: Re-Wiring Work
“Nomadic disconnections provide similar stories of emotional capitalism—the desk exists merely to help us think through underlying infrastructures.”

-Paul Dourish, Professor of Informatics, UC Irvine

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**FIG 1.** Los Angeles has been historically cited as a preeminent city for creating urban imaginaries; it has allowed for the synchronization of geographies and types of work to be considered in material, virtual, and emotional ways.

This cityLAB-UCLA and Gensler Los Angeles publication, volume two of three, builds upon year one’s historical research on the conditions of knowledge-based office work in downtown Los Angeles and specifically seeks to reveal new opportunities for critical urban and architectural design. Situating downtown Los Angeles’s emergence as a site for knowledge-based work that has, for decades, been continuously positioned as a preeminent location for work in the city, this research expands upon the historical context of office work in downtown Los Angeles. During an era of urban resurgence in the city, the research in year two aimed to identify resistance and constraints that have prohibited new forms of innovation and design opportunities for an increasingly mobile knowledge worker. In particular, initial questions guiding the research interrogated three scalar divides: desk designs and technologies, the building, and the city. These scalar orders correlate with characteristics of increasingly mobile work and with geographic specificity. Los Angeles has been considered both America’s last industrial, railroad city and its first post-industrial, automobile-centered city, yet change in office design in Downtown has been stunted by various attempts to situate its primacy by mimicking other North American downtowns. Unlike most American downtowns, where industry was pushed to the periphery, downtown Los Angeles’s built and organizational identity is still frequently defined by its industrial fabric buffering a cluster of office towers historically rooted in a financial district. However, such juxtapositions among use-based zones, such as industrial or commercial as well as loosely defined districts such as the Arts District or Manufacturing District in downtown represent a disconnect between the spatial and temporal conditions of work and the geographic definitions of work. As such, the trajectory of downtown Los Angeles’s future potentially charts the future of other North American downtowns. If downtown Los Angeles represents one site for work in the city among many, what unique characteristics does Los Angeles’s downtown hold, and are there particular kinds of spatial logics associated with downtown work in particular? Might existing urban amenities or outdated districts hold potential for aligning the trajectory of knowledge work with projections for downtown Los Angeles?

1 For the purposes of this research, downtown Los Angeles is defined by the diverse geography bounded by the 101 Freeway to the North, the LA River to the East, the 110 Freeway to the West, and the 10 Freeway to the South.

FIG 2. Informatics Professor Paul Dourish offers a reminder that the world of digital connection is only supported by material objects that we often carry around in our pockets or briefcases. While more connected than ever, there is still a reliance on material objects, such as the USB stick, to transfer information between computers. Image source: Paul Dourish.
The notion of ‘office work’ has been historically structured around three distinct scales: the desk, the building, and the city. The desk, as a metaphor for an interior spatial organization and system of productivity, has witnessed perpetual change due to technology, efficiency, and communication that have continued to challenge the way one considers and defines a work ‘environment.’ Alongside advancements in technology, innovations at the scale of the desk have rapidly evolved, making available new patterns of work in the city and allowing for workers’ lives to be entirely re-structured. However, with instantaneous forms of communication and rapid flows of information, the physical dimensions that have historically bounded each worker, such as the cubicle, building floor plate, and city district, have become increasingly difficult to characterize. Systems of standardization and productivity have slowly encroached upon all aspects of workers’ lives, such that old binary oppositions of home and office, public and private, downtown and suburb, interior architecture and building design, now fail to describe the current world of work, rendering the ideological and bases of scalar distinctions of the desk, the building, and the city inadequate. Thus, this research positions the hybrid nomadic worker—a worker that both requires mobility and some version of a home base—as the most challenging to consider and account for both in architecture and urban design. This dynamic workforce challenges the way we think about office design and office culture.

FIG 3. Dourish suggests that innovators should be skeptical about narratives of change and transformational stories, since stories about the future of work will always be embedded in past models of work.

Image source: www.computerhistory.org/revolution/memory-storage/8/326
PANELISTS AND MODERATOR FOR DESK-LESS WORKSHOP:

Julian Bleecker, Co-Founder, Near Future Laboratory
Gervais Tompkin, Design Strategy Studio Director, Gensler San Francisco
Jen Stein, Design Researcher, Mobile and Environmental Media Lab, USC School of Cinematic Arts

Gervais Tompkin, Design Strategy Studio Director, Gensler San Francisco

Paul Dourish, Professor of Informatics, UC Irvine

John Underkoffler, Chief Scientist, Oblong Industries

Gary Bradski, Founder, Industrial Perception, OpenCV

Tracy Brower, Director of Performance Environments, Herman Miller

Shuian Bertrand, Principal Industrial Designer, Coalesse
Taking cues from models of interdisciplinarity, our method of analysis sought to blur established boundaries between different types of expertise to provoke a new discourse on the city. Throughout the year, prominent experts at each scale of focus were invited to present ideas in a workshop format, from researchers engaged in academia, to industrial designers, engineers, architects and planners. The workshops were organized around each scale of office design and research—the desk, building, and city—so as to illuminate the gaps and barriers to innovation. Each workshop was titled “Desk (Building, City, respectively)-Less,” as merely a way to further examine the complexities and challenges that the nomadic worker represents in terms of location, physical environment, and sense of place within the city. In an effort to focus the breadth of expertise, the panelists were asked to consider the following questions in their presentations:

1. What is the most interesting, current site of innovation at the scale of the (desk, building, or city) that would contribute to new formative work experiences?

2. What is the greatest drag (restrictions, limitations, obstacles) on those developments?

3. What unique opportunities might downtown Los Angeles, as one possible site for work among many, enable or restrict in this effort?

FIG 4. By using micro-blogging techniques to trace the daily routines of nomadic workers, provided Industrial Designer Shujan Bertrand found that sites that were commonly considered transitional or common spaces were actually sites where work was taking place.

Image source: https://360.steelcase.com/articles/reports-from-the-nomadic-fringe/
DEFINING WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENTS

Two panels of the first workshop explored the continued effects that digital technologies have on the spatial, temporal, and cultural conditions of work. Since technological innovations have, perhaps most rapidly and most profoundly, continuously transformed the ways in which specific locations of knowledge work in urban centers come to be, the turn to desk-scale innovations is foundational. Specifically highlighting the sharp divide between material and physical environments and those construed more virtually, the panelists revealed new perceptions of space and boundaries of workplace environments through media and communication theories and technological experimentation. In the 60s, media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s offered the term “Invisible Environment” as a tool to perceptually shift an understanding of how daily routines and everyday lives are structured. The “Invisible Environment,” to McLuhan, served as a counter-environment that was intended to change the way one perceives environments as physical entities, by revealing other webs of media, communication, and circulation as environments in their own right. Specific to the workplace, the ubiquity of technology has continued to challenge the ways in which corporeal and material characterizations of work have been able to encompass all aspects of work environments. Thus, bodily and material signifiers have come to represent and stand-in for otherwise unfamiliar virtual environments, often complicating the workers’ spatial and temporal definitions of work. Thus, the first workshop was distinguished by two components; the first focused on technologies of work, and the second on an environment of work, although they are inextricably linked.

“Every new technology creates a new environment just as a motor car does, as the railway did, or as radio and airplanes do -- any new technology changes the whole human environment, and envelops and includes the old environments.”


FIG. 5 Image of designed mobile desks courtesy of Shujan Bertrand.
The panelists from the first workshop were wide ranging in their expertise—from anthropology, to industrial design, to computer science. Their research interests broadly considered the implications of rapid technological advancements in the workplace, aligning the material and spatial considerations of virtual, physical, and spatial environments of work. Paul Dourish, Professor of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine, for example, presented research that interrogates the organization of workers' spatial lives through physical signifiers. "Trash" on a "desktop," for example, evokes a sense of rudimentary symbolism, but serves to remind the worker of the historical infrastructures underlying work through its signification. To use another analogy, the use of the term "file," defined materially as a folder or box for holding and ordering papers, has an affect on the landscape as an emotional signifier with which to organize a spatial life of work. Therefore, to Dourish, the workplace affectively enrolls the "file" as a symbol of emotional labor, not physical labor, and renders it a form of emotional capitalism. Perhaps it is this emotional capitalism that allows us to think differently about the construction of a 'place' of work, since the connection to physical location is left up to the author. "Place," according to Dourish, is predicated upon difference and distinction and on the individual characterizations that make one place different from another. Thus, the connection to particular programs and physical environments—the office, the home, or the cafe—are defined by the worker themselves. The desk, the file, and the cloud, for instance, are untethered terms left up to an individual author to assert a narrative about place.
John Underkoffler, the Chief Scientist at Oblong Industries, as well as Gary Bradski, a Robotics and Computer Scientist, call for similar connections between virtual and physical environments. Underkoffler, for example, expanded upon Paul Dourish’s examples by situating the computer as a symbolic metaphor alongside the pixel—a term intended to represent the most reductive sense of ‘stuff.’ He asks, “What does it mean to fill life with pixels?” Such a radical question, to Underkoffler, illuminates the physical limitations of our devices, suggesting that the design of computational devices illuminates a gap in design thinking, where such devices are often designed with specific tasks in mind and with an indifference to physical locale. Underkoffler argues that, in order to bridge such gaps between physical and virtual environments, designers of computational systems devices should think architecturally; that is, with reference to a sense of physicality and context that would necessarily require a type of habitation, and might rely on the body itself, such as the hand to teach, understand, and create. Bradski concurred, arguing for a new way of thinking about virtual communication and augmentation, rearticulating the way in which augmented or virtual realities might be pushed under the domain of ‘augmented physicality.’

“To bridge such gaps between physical and virtual environments, designers of computational systems devices should think architecturally.”

John Underkoffler, Chief Scientist, Oblong Industries
FIG 7. “Boundaries” of work are often defined by invisibilities such as the internet
Image source: studioincite.com/makingwifi/wp-content/internet%20access.jpg

RECOGNIZING BEHAVIORS AND PATTERNS OF WORK

The second panel of the Desk-Less workshop focused on ways to illuminate new geographies and spatial understandings of work by using technology to study patterns, behaviors, and locations of work. Much like Paul Dourish’s call for narrative connections to place, Jen Stein, a Design Researcher in Interactive Media at the University of Southern California, tests the use of narrative as a tool to bridge daily activities of workers with the performance of the building itself. Stein’s project, P.U.C.K. (Place-based, Ubiquitous, Connected and Kinetic Experiences for Interactive Architecture), uses technology to link workers to a “character” on a mobile device that can be recognized by screens on the walls of an office. With P.U.C.K., Stein attempts to ascribe the building with a sense of agency, allowing it to monitor, learn, and rearrange activities within the office itself. Thus, architecture is activated through ambient storytelling, since the digital infrastructures recognize people and their interactions as they spend time in the building, and it attempts to foster new interactions and experiences within. This interest in extracting information from workers’ work patterns as a way to inform design decisions was also echoed by Tracy Brower, the Director of Performance Environments at Herman Miller. As a sociologist, Brower’s work builds upon a long history of research at Herman Miller that tries to better understand how people value and utilize their work spaces. This information, Brower argues, allows for increased worker efficiency, and for a reduction of friction between the workers and their environments. Sensors, for example, when placed under chairs and desks, reduce such friction by directly informing how furniture can be customized to the worker. Data, for Brower, allows Herman Miller to carry on a tradition of learning from client needs, allowing their designers to better understand how people best utilize work space.

“My workplace is not just where I am supposed to turn up 9:00-5:00. It is also a place I’m supposed to like on Facebook.”
-Paul Dourish, Professor of Informatics, UC Irvine
While narratives of work by Jen Stein and Tracy Brower capture the spatial and temporal characteristics of work within the building, the connection to the office building as the sole site of work often distances the geographic specificity of such work. By mobilizing theorizations of place as called out in the first panel—the call for architectural thinking, physicality, and narratives of place—the interior of the office building represents only one possible site among many in the city for examining a workers' daily routine. As the historical investigation from the first year of this study has uncovered, technology has made it possible for the office building to be only one side among many for work. However, the office building has been historically cited as the preeminent location for work, which is reflected in the ways that design opportunities for thinking about the boundaries of work have been constricted. Shujan Bertrand, an Industrial Designer at Coalesse, for example, studies mobile workers that specifically push the boundaries of destination-oriented work in daily life. Residual spaces, for example, between ‘destinations’ of work—between the home and the office, or the café and the airport—demonstrate a spatial collapse in our consideration of design possibilities. Bertrand tracked the daily emotional and physical demands of workers, and concluded that the transitional spaces—between home and office—are in fact intersections that are often overlooked by designers, and highlights the spaces that are in fact produced by destinations. This analysis harkens back to geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s distinctions between spaces and places, arguing that spaces reveal a sense of movement, while places are pauses or stops along the way to a destination. Tuan argues that “each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.” To align Tuan’s argument with Bertrand’s analysis, a bus stop—a space commonly understood as a programmatic void—might hold equal design potential as a site for work, more readily able to be identified as a design opportunity for urban designers and architects.
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Fig 9. Google’s Manhattan Headquarters offers a model for unifying two disparate types of office buildings and cultures of work within a dense downtown setting.
Image Source: http://www.neowin.net/images/uploaded/old-port-authority-cp2.jpg
"We don’t need any more traditional office buildings." - Carl Muhlstein, Managing Director of Jones Lang LaSalle

DEFINING THE BUILT BOUNDARIES OF WORK

Building-Less: Hybrid Nomads in the Workplace was the second of a three-part series of interdisciplinary conversations about the evolving boundaries of building-scale innovations for increasingly untethered work—between academia and practice, design and speculation, and between flexibility and reuse. The territory in workers’ lives once claimed by the office building has invaded the café, the airport, the park, and the home—all broadening conceptions of work from infrastructure to atmosphere. These changes have rendered the ideological separations of the desk, the building, and the city inadequate. While office buildings in downtown Los Angeles were born during the era of generic industrial influences and typified Taylorist floor plans, speculation would posit that the generic office building has become increasingly obsolete due to rapid changes in mobility, pace, and timing of knowledge-based work and has been slow to inform new architectural and urban practices. While the site of innovation has been most recently claimed by interior experimentations of branding collaboration, flexibility, and hybrid programming for an increasingly mobile worker, office work in Los Angeles continues to be sheltered by multiple versions of the mono-functional office building in a variety of settings across the city. Any obsolescence of the generic office building would necessitate innovation and experimentation with new and existing office buildings—tearing down, reconfiguring, or expanding with new programs that would rely on architects, engineers, and developers to engage in such change.
Old binary oppositions of home and office, public and private lives, downtown and suburb work, prompted a reconsideration of the generic office building in the second workshop. The latter has become increasingly obsolete due to such rapid changes in mobility and pace of knowledge-based work. Specific to Los Angeles, the office building itself has been located in a variety of settings—from the office parks and low-rise industrial buildings of the San Fernando and San Gabriel Valleys, to the landscape of logistics that is the Port of Los Angeles, to the autotopia of Century City, to the creative office spaces of the Westside, and to work-live spaces in a re-imagined downtown. The Building-Less Panel extended a discussion about geographic specificity and office designs, through the lenses of real estate, architecture, and engineering.
Instead of illuminating alternative sites of work in the city apart from office buildings, commercial real estate broker Carl Muhlstein of Jones Lang LaSalle, argued that architects should in fact be building more office buildings, yet differently. With a portfolio of nearly six million square feet of real estate in the Los Angeles metropolitan region, Muhlstein suggested that a nation-wide attention to creative industries is also emerging in Los Angeles. Specifically, building activity in Los Angeles most recently has been focused on the center of Los Angeles, as a region previously overlooked (such as the region of Venice/ Fairfax, where new construction activity is underway). However, the call to build more office buildings downtown—a site in the city that continues to prioritize mixed-use and institutional investment over commercial development—might indicate a need to look more specifically at the types of office buildings needed downtown. Muhlstein argued that, ‘We don’t need any more traditional office buildings,’ suggesting that the creative industry represents a new network of offices emblematic of flexibility, openness, and collaboration. While the need for flexibility and collaborative spaces is most apparent in creative and entertainment industries, he argues that similar characteristics have also been adopted by more traditional types of knowledge-based work, such as financial or legal offices.
DEBATING THE PERFORMATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF BUILDINGS

While open floor plans and spaces for collaboration under the guise of creative offices promote a new kind of interior image, the exact conditions of work do not specifically inform the spatial configurations of the building’s shell, nor its structure. Looking back to the historical development of offices in North America, the open floor plate has continued to be rebranded under new economies of work. Moreover, clusters of collaborative workers, since the 1950s, have been reinforced as an irreducible unit of creative work. While open floor plates and collaboration may promote a new type of branded identity, the questions for designers lay in the spatial specificity of the work itself, and the ways in which they directly inform architecture. Can a reorganization of labor alone foster creative work? If so, and if creativity is universally accessible, is the framework of creativity rendered void? With a dispersal of creative offices around the city, comes the need to look more specifically at the differences between types of creative work and non-creative in greater detail. The specific conditions of work that differentiate creative office from non-creative may be linked to homogenous areas particular to a certain kind of work, or predicated upon existing amenities in the city. For example, what makes a potential boom of creative office developments in El Segundo more attractive than downtown? Perhaps its geographic characteristics, lack of rigorous district control, or imposed Central Business District logic are what promote such freedoms.

FIG 11. Fortmeyer argues that buildings need to better respond to environmental conditions. Instead of having people adapt to their workspace, ARUP’s efforts have been geared toward designs that adapt to the way people work, as seen here in the kinetic façade of Arup and Cannon Design’s CJ Cheil-Jedang Research and Development Center in Seoul, South Korea. Image courtesy Russell Fortmeyer.

“The reason why people are working at home more and looking for alternative space, is because they are looking for spaces that adapt to the way they like to work.” Russell Fortmeyer
Senior Sustainability Consultant, Arup
The paradox of geographic specificity and homogenizing theories of creativity may reveal a polarity in design thinking. On one hand, speculative office designs have been conceived of as neutral with flexible and open floor plans, and adapted by customization without regard to site specificity. On the other hand, particular sites in the city have directly informed particular types of work. Architect Jerome Chang, for example, presented his work on growing demands for co-working office spaces for individuals and small companies across the country. Rooted in Los Angeles, Chang’s design and development office for co-working, BLANKSPACES, provides a community of entrepreneurs and freelancers with all necessary services for office work in several areas in the city. While “blank” in the sense that no office desk or floor plan is indicative of a single time or time of work, the offices are able to utilize vacant shells that were once mono-functional. Although co-working does not depend upon a singular zone or homogeneous district of work since such neutral spaces are easily adaptable, the demand for such offices is predicated upon an existing demographic of like-minded workers looking for such space. This attempt to re-brand space and traditional office buildings became a theme of the building-scale panel. Tyler Stonebreaker, for example, conceives of his real estate and design office, Creative Spaces, as a new form of practice that bridges real estate specifically to creative industries. Concerned with a thriving creative class and focus on individuals, Stonebreaker argues for a third space of work for companies to locate themselves—like Shujan Bertand—between work and the home, in an effort to engage the particularities of a certain geography. The economic misalignments of industry and knowledge-work in downtown Los Angeles, for Stonebreaker, represent a possibility for adaptive re-use, and an opportunity to foster new types of work. The remnants of maker spaces, such as vacant industrial buildings in the Arts District, may allow for flexible work options to emerge more quickly.
Conceiving of the city as a lab for an innovative economy, Senior Sustainability Consultant at Arup Los Angeles, Russell Fortmeyer, argues that people’s behaviors and locations in the city are the most complicated and challenging factors to deal with in office design. Arup uses technology to help create smarter building environments that are able to adjust themselves to the conditions of use, such as dynamic, kinetic facades, as well as air and light comfort controls that tune themselves to the occupants. Fortmeyer used Arup’s new satellite office in downtown as a prime example of new forms of reconfigurability and flexibility. For ARUP, the desk itself was conceived as the object with most transformative power for the office, changing throughout the day for various client meetings and varying kinds of work. Claiming that Arup’s ‘offices are used as desks,’ the ideology of an office itself as a mobile object may allow for building envelopes to be considered neutral, but with potential to be branded by a particular type of use (temporary, co-working, satellite, etc), and arranged in pockets throughout the city.

FIG 13 & 14. Russell Fortmeyer described recent studies conducted by ARUP in the UK and in San Francisco, suggesting that interior designs are commonly thought to be the most influential to positive work experiences and productivity but in fact the location within the city and the people one is working with are more influential, indicating a need for a scalar change in design thinking. This is personified by their Arup’s new satellite office in Downtown Los Angeles, designed by Zago Architecture.

Images courtesy Arup.
DEFINING THE CONDITIONS OF DOWNTOWN WORK

City-Less: Hybrid Nomads in the Workplace was the third of a three-part series of interdisciplinary conversations about the evolving boundaries of city-scale innovations for increasingly untethered work—between academia and practice, virtual and physical networks, mono-centric and poly-centric theory, and fixed and nomadic work. As both America’s first automobile-centered city and its last industrial, railroad city, the trajectory of Los Angeles’s future as a site for knowledge-based work potentially charts the future of other American downtowns. Knowledge-based work particular to Los Angeles has long been sheltered by multiple versions of the mono-functional office building situated within many different settings—from the office parks and low-rise industrial buildings of the San Fernando and San Gabriel Valleys, to the landscape of logistics that is the Port of Los Angeles, to the autotopia of Century City, to the creative offices spaces of the Westside, and to work-live spaces in a re-imagined downtown. Despite visions of a revived downtown that have sought to inspire strategies to overcome those challenges, most of them have focused on re-positioning downtown as the city’s central business district and the region’s preeminent location for office space. As metropolitan growth in Los Angeles has challenged traditional visions about what a centralized site of knowledge-based work might look like, Los Angeles’s polycentric urban form, in addition to the broader trends toward the urbanization of suburban conditions, prompted a reconsideration of downtown’s unique potential against the backdrop of other locations for work in the city.
Moving from desk-scale innovations to building-scale innovations, the third and final workshop revealed a divide in thinking about locations of work. Some panelists argued that office work or even desk work is linked to particular locations in the city, while others argued that it need not be. Despite visions of a revived downtown, Los Angeles regularly focuses on repositioning its downtown as the city’s central district for work and the region’s preeminent location for business. However, just as growth in Los Angeles has challenged traditional visions of what a centralized site of knowledge-based work might look like, Los Angeles’s polycentric urban form initially prompted the City-Less workshop to reconsider downtown’s unique potential against the backdrop of other locations for work in the city. Since the 1950s, the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) of Los Angeles has assigned the Bunker Hill region as the financial core of downtown, and, by extension, the city. The Bunker Hill Redevelopment Project of 1955, for example, included a massive slum clearance project that razed homes, upzoned the entire neighborhood, leveled the topography, clearing the way for future commercial skyscraper development among the other industrial use-based zones. Despite such radical transformation, former Deputy Chief of Operations for the CRA, Don Spivack, noted that the outmoded zoning and building regulations in downtown continue to restrict development and to contradict and undermine downtown’s ability to attract new forms of and locations for knowledge work. In addition to creating new design and density incentives to embrace a mono-centric core, he suggests that the city move toward performance-based zones rather than use-based zones. Performance zones would allow for different uses to co-locate, establishing neighborhood compatibility, other standards that developments must meet. The city could also develop new or modified zones for industrial live-work, for example.

One of the most notable developments of office work in downtown, the live-work loft conversions of historic office spaces in the early 2000s under the Adaptive Re-Use Ordinance, illuminated the potentials for work to be regenerated in different zones and in different configurations in the city. Spivack argues that new zones in the city could be created for ‘industrial work’ wherein any substitution of traditional office space is necessarily predicated upon social interactions, which are essential when developments are not location-specific.
Although many companies with distinguishably isolated work cultures and highly controlled structures of corporate management have been situated in the suburbs, they need not be. Louise Mozingo, a Professor of Landscape Architecture, Environmental Planning, and Urban Design at the University of California, Berkeley, explained that, with the continued rise of corporate campuses and offices parks, the suburb has allowed corporations and developers in surrounding regions to expand and contract in response to company size, to evade rigid strongholds of metropolitan zoning regulations, to “capture” their employees without peripheral urban distractors, and to offer customized mixtures of live, work, and play. Though such flexibilities are undoubtedly difficult to integrate into the current high-rise areas of downtown Los Angeles, Mozingo suggests that development in domains of densification and diversification may foster a signature of urban work specific to downtown among other sites in the city.

“We need to look at re-capturing underutilized space that is in the public domain.” - Don Spivack, Former Deputy Chief of Operations for the LA Community Redevelopment Agency
Offering several examples for Los Angeles to learn from one being Google headquarters in Manhattan, and another being Arlington, Virginia’s downtown, where the exchange between the suburb and urban center is rapid. The downtown is alive both at night and during the day. What might a Downtown Los Angeles look like that allowed for the possibilities of private, corporate entities to remain organizationally compact and insular, while reaping the benefits of a diverse urban center? How and where might downtown allow for such expandability and corporate growth, while allowing for isolated corporate entities to integrate into larger metropolitan realities?

“There is still a tenacious hold on the ideal of suburban living.” - Louise Mozingo, Professor and Chair of the Dept. of Landscape Architecture, Environmental Planning, and Urban Design, UC Berkeley
INDIVIDUALITY VS. MOBILITY

The return to the scale of the individual offered a way to think about urban mobility particular to the contemporary worker as a means to collapse the spatial and unclear boundaries between work, play, and office in the city. Jennifer Miller, an Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the University of Southern California, challenged the panel to consider workers unbounded by permanent statuses of work (such as the transitory Post-Doctoral worker), who may be in states of transition, in temporary positions, or even working virtually. As a solution for maximum individuality at all scales of work, mobility designer Dan Sturges presented a way to think about the fusion of automobility with the office building itself that would allow for a transformed conception of home, transportation, and work. By downsizing the current scale of automobile and tailoring it to the scale of individual, the mixing of vehicles (as desks) with architecture may illuminate new modes of collaborative work spaces (huddling), maximum flexibility and mobility, and new temporary, event-like architectural possibilities for work.
Throughout the course of the three workshops, the geographic and spatial definitions of work fueled debates about particular types, scales, or temporalities of work. However, at the macro scale of the city, patterns of work reinforced by mobile technology and open building floor plans have been disconnected from, and often run counter to, efforts to situate downtown Los Angeles as unique among the broader spatial logics of work of the city. First, efforts to situate downtown within a city with multiple work centers have contradicted efforts to promote downtown as the premier site of work; second, boosters of mono-centric forms of work downtown have failed to recognize and integrate the large, existing industrial fabric unique to downtown; and third, the historically defined districts in downtown have an unclear relationship to knowledge work, and may in fact constrict efforts to grow or develop downtown’s base for work more broadly. Recent efforts have begun to redevelop and transform districts outside of Bunker Hill into mixed use sites of work, such as the Arts District and Fashion Districts by offering open offices and flexible interiors. Interest in these districts may in fact suggest that downtown Los Angeles is unspecific to its defined geographies of work, or that the characterizations of zones in downtown (through building design, regulations and development incentives) and needs to be realigned with contemporary work conditions.

FIG 20. This heat map shows the major employment clusters found throughout the city of Los Angeles as of 2012; Image Source: http://lablong2012.net/employment-heatmaps-los-angeles/
INCOMPLETE POLYCENTRISM

A second way that Los Angeles portrays its spatial organization of work is by multiple nodes or clusters. Trumped by what Dorothy Parker characterized as “Seventy-two suburbs in search of a city”—not with a traditional single center, but with a premiere downtown among multiple neighborhood centers—most nodes, including Downtown, have remained only partially configured. Such a model was figured in Cal Hamilton’s 1970 ‘clusters concept’ for the Los Angeles Comprehensive Plan, and in the mat-like metropolitan urbanism posited by UCLA geographer Ed Soja. Despite a suggestion that downtown is emerging as the chief locus in the region for professional services, entertainment and dining, new housing, and hosts visitors and tourists, culture, sports, and progressive design, it remains incomplete. In the early 1990s, Genevieve Giuliano and Kenneth Small identified twenty-nine existing employment centers along with three emerging ones in Los Angeles. Although downtown may not represent a perfect central business district and may not account for the majority of employment, it has twice as many employees as the next largest center in Giuliano’s census. In addition, the new office centers appear to be heterogeneous rather than homogenous. Many nodes attempt to mimic the proposed variety of downtown, while undermining efforts to complement one another. Downtown Los Angeles can develop a double strategy: first, downtown can become different rather than similar to other centers of the city; and second, it can reinforce its relatively greater intensity as one of many centers.

FIG 21. Christaller’s Central Place Theory
Image Source: http://blogs.ethz.ch/prespecific/files/2013/06/ christaller-1024x903.gif
The third way in which downtown portrays itself as spatially distinct is through its districts. The Fashion District, Financial District, Arts District, and Manufacturing District, for example, each connote specific building types and identities that reflect a culture, type, and scale of work, yet their relationship to knowledge work, is unclear. Although the districts are largely symbolic boundaries (see fig. 15 for legal zones), they have continued to be the site for economic development. Don Spivack and others call for updating this identity-geography and redevelopment projects, co-working spaces, and other forms of contemporary work that have begun to make use of these specific districts in new ways. Still, the future efficacy of organizing the city based on work types remains inconclusive. Since the current identities of the districts do not fit a model of specialized knowledge-based work, a number of scenarios may transpire. The potential for districts to be re-configured by characteristics of work remains possible, and holds advantages for acknowledging the variety of scales, times, and spatial demands of work. Therefore, several questions for future design thinking can be raised:

Does downtown represent a disconnect between the organization of the city and conditions of work itself, whereby work is blind to geographic space?

Can knowledge work overcome a model of centrality and urban iconicity?
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CONCLUSIONS

DISJUNCTIONS AND MISALIGNMENTS

Although agents of transformation at each scale of investigation (desk, building, city) were bounded by specific research objectives and expertise, innovation was frequently constricted by disciplinary divides, such that new opportunities for development and engagement were offered by completely different realms and scales of practice. Thus, the effects of disciplinarity appeared to result in hyper specific or ahistorical design propositions, such as technologies lacking urban or architectural integration, or re-branded organizational strategies. In the center of the scalar trio of desk, building, city, strategies to re-conceptualize conventional office buildings as unique to downtown Los Angeles faced the most challenges, as designs were articulated as radical changes despite broader historical research suggesting that they are not. To clarify these terms, the conclusions highlight key findings and implications for further development based on the panel presentations.
Literal desk configurations—from group clusters to mobile hot-desks—have been pitched as new innovations in design, yet historical precedents suggest that they are not necessarily innovative. Though no radical shifts have been made in terms of desk configurations, new technological capabilities continue to gradually transpose the complexities of desks.

According to technologists and engineers, many communication devices and digital technologies do not correspond to the ways in which people actually communicate or interact in person. Innovators suggest that they may benefit from design thinking in material or physical terms—from architecture to urban design.

Age-old material signifiers of work places have come to signify virtual spaces for work (e.g.: desktop or cloud) and may represent a constriction of design thinking, since they are predicated upon physical entities and cognitive structures of work that contradict efforts to include new terms and locations of work, such as the café or bus stop.
BUILDING

• Smart technologies hold an ability to inscribe buildings with a sense of agency, which may hold new promises for generating new forms of work and for bridging the gap between desk and building innovations.

• Increased attention toward mobility and flexibility has produced a wide range of worker-types, each demanding different options for work in the building itself, from spaces for individual work to spaces for group collaboration. Thus, the building plan has absorbed such flexible forms of mobile work from the city.

• Most new office developments have re-packaged conventional office buildings with a series of new forms, such as exposed brick work and industrial aesthetics, higher ceilings, flexible work hours, or collaborative spaces, yet few promote a changed order, structure, or organization of the building itself.
• Satellite office and secondary spaces for work in downtown may not represent a radical change in locating work, but signify an evolutionary process that challenges theories of downtowns as central sites of work.

• New forms of office work lead the way to organizational changes in the city. Google, for example, has prompted cities to adapt their site plans as continuous floors of work—from the home, to the bus stop, to the office.

• The logic of Los Angeles’s downtown districts have an unclear relationship to knowledge-work and range dramatically, from coherent (Financial District) to opaque (Seafood District). Moreover, local planners have argued that single use-based zones of downtown are outdated, which require a new organizational strategy based on the reformations of work.

• Transitory, collaborative workspaces in downtown Los Angeles produce opportunities for urban growth and now act as catalysts for network-based urban development.
Scenario A would reject knowledge-work alone as an organizational tool, and instead may mix industrial work with business work, entertainment with manufacturing work, or legal work with art work.

While the current spatial geography of downtown does not align with knowledge-based work, the district-oriented model holds a potential for reconfiguration and regeneration. Instead of organizing districts based on performance-based attributes of work types that may change over time, an alignment of districts based on characteristics of work may produce more malleable, yet accurate reflections on organizing work. This potentiality would require the implementation and organization of knowledge work to be both hybrid and hyper specialized. Work within the city would be defined by time, space, type, or scales of work within the city—from floor to floor, building to building, as well as district to district. This model may reject knowledge-work alone as an organizational tool, and instead may mix industrial work with business work, entertainment with manufacturing work, or legal work with art work. Evidence of such development comes from a speculative tradition and recent trends to re-brand office spaces and geographies based on specific attributes of office design or industries of work, such as Jones Lang LaSalle’s industry-driven geography of creative offices. Thus, the glut of empty office towers in downtown may in fact put pressure on creating new models of work in downtown that would necessarily be leveraged by historical knowledge about office design and analyses of contemporary mobile workers who might challenge these regimes. How would one actually develop a spatial logic of work? Might the current districts in downtown be able to foster a specific type of work?
SCENARIO B: SPATIAL LOGICS DO NOT MATTER

At the other end of the identity-district continuum, contrary to efforts that carefully define and cluster work by like-characteristics, contemporary mobile work may in fact represent a rejection of organizational control. Los Angeles’s downtown demonstrates the potential for reconfiguration, where the particular geographic logics are unspecific to work. This model suggests that workers locate themselves nearest to urban amenities—parking space availability, or public transportation, but may first look to spaces of privacy or isolation. Evidence of this scenario is visible in design trends that include the maximum array of working options in office designs, where workers and companies can work flexibly in individual offices, collaborative spaces, at home, or in cafes. Contrary to most urban downtowns, the 20th century emergence of Los Angeles’s downtown confirmed that a downtown could thrive while seeming to rule out the serendipity that was often held up as an urban ideal. Theorizations of placelessness through the effects of time-space compression, by the likes of David Harvey and Marc Auge may illuminate the potential of this model for thinking about the future of office work. This opportunity may allow for mass customization of neutral shells of work to be branded and reconfigured by the workers themselves. Driven by technology, a mass production of customizable parts or zones, then, may be able to be located in many sites in the city—attached and detached to various existing amenities—and offer the most flexibility.

FIG 25 - Employment Density Downtown Los Angeles ACS 2010 5 year Employed Civilian Population 16 Years And Over

Scenario B may allow for mass customization of neutral shells of work to be branded and reconfigured by the workers themselves.
NEXT STEPS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In order to consider the possibilities outlined by each scenario, research models that blur the lines between the desk, the building, and the city, hold the most promise for making comprehensive projections about the future nature of work. The greatest interaction among all three scales was evident in companies investing in total urban projects, or in universities where interdisciplinary research is able to overcome such divides. One example of this is the Google campus model—a model in total control over all aspects of work, which one may now interpret as a representation of a city within a city. By considering corporate campuses as cities themselves, provocative projections about the future of work in the city of Los Angeles might first depend on an act of overcoming the lines of desk, building, and city as a means to generate critical stances on and historical knowledge about what is actually forward thinking and what is not.

While the historical research in year one focused on charting the evolution of work activity as it relates to the evolution of office buildings in Los Angeles, year two has focused on developing methods for analyzing and locating sites for future innovation in downtown. The third year will be devoted to testing the scenarios developed by this research and to speculating on how these visions may help redefine and reorganize the urban and architectural visions of work in downtown. The challenges of interdisciplinarity and limitations to scalar-thinking that have been illuminated in year two are also indicative of the gaps between design practices and academia, which this research investigation specifically seeks to overcome. The collaborative efforts between cityLAB UCLA and Gensler Los Angeles is a deliberate attempt to put forth intellectual propositions about the city, situating downtown Los Angeles as both a diverse and fertile ground upon which to work, but also as a site for testing the boundaries of research and urban explorations.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


