**CfP**

**Workshop: Perspectives on Uses and Users in the History of Office Buildings (30 November - 1 December 2023)**

In 1984, the German literature scholar Hannes Schwenger wrote that “it cannot take long before the first museum on offices opens its doors – probably before the turn of the millennium”. Schwenger drew a parallel with 19th-century factory complexes, which were (by the mid-1980s) gradually becoming museum-worthy due to the ongoing deindustrialization in Western countries. “Over the course of the 20th century,” Schwenger continued, “large offices have appeared alongside factories as the ‘other side’ of the modern world of work – and in them, too, one can discover a piece of cultural history worth documenting”. Even though the prediction concerning the heritage dimension of the modern office has not proven accurate, Schwenger’s observations remain relevant for their emphasis on the *historicity* of both office buildings and office work. At first sight, the modern office appears as a relatively static phenomenon, characterised by seemingly indestructible concepts such as open plan layouts and managerial efficiency. Yet, these concepts themselves were embedded in broader “office cultures”, whose essence evolved throughout time and space.

At the two-day workshop *Perspectives on Uses and Users in the History of Office Buildings*, which will take place at the Belval campus of the University of Luxembourg (Esch-sur-Alzette) on 30 November and 1 December 2023, we aim to deconstruct the managerial and architectural determinants of the 20th-century office building. The analytical focus lies on the dialectic relationshipbetween *planning* and *usage*. Concretely, we seek to investigate how clients, architects, and interior designers *interacted* with users of office buildings, and how they subsequently modified their conceptions (or failed to do so). Conversely, we are interested in the bottom-up perspective: how did office workers voice their opinion on the buildings in which they were housed?

Our perspective on the dialectics between design/planning and usage makes a connection between two current research strands. On the one hand, a growing interest in the history of office buildings and “the architecture of bureaucracy” has recently led to a number of works in which the “space cultures” of the office have been thoroughly conceptualised (e.g. Agarez, Floré & Devos 2022, Petermann & Baumeister 2022, Kaufmann-Buhler 2021, Robertson 2021 and Bernasconi & Nellen eds 2019). On the other hand, research on “experimental media archaeology” has pointed at the need to include users’ experiences and perspectives in historical analyses of technological artefacts such as consumer appliances (Fickers & Van den Oever 2022). Office buildings and their interiors could effectively be considered as technological artefacts in their own right: Delphine Gardey (2008) has for instance described the office as a “technical-organisational complex” determined by both managerial and architectural ideas and ideologies. Inspiring, in this context, is Dirk van Laak’s observation (2008) that “infrastructures” (e.g. architecture) are often conceived to exert control and power, but that these aims are not always achieved due to unforeseen deviations in usage.

In sum, the historical everyday experience of work and life in the office building, *and* its intimate relation to both architectural form and managerial principles, are what we aim to explore at our workshop.

Concrete research questions might include:

* Which analytical methods can be used to investigate historical uses and users of office buildings? What can (architectural) historians learn from other disciplines (anthropology, sociology,…)?
* How did architects and office planners alter pre-war, Taylorism-influenced ideologies of efficiency in the period between 1945 and the proliferation of the office landscape model?
* How did normative concepts (e.g. managerial and architectural notions such as “efficiency”, “comfort”, “luxury”, “hierarchy”, “democracy” and “standing”) evolve as a result of user feedback?
* How did users resist norms or deviate from them, and how did they voice their opinions? Which roles did gender and class play? Which conflicts could ensue in this context?
* Did the notion of planning, so central to the mindset of modernist architects, lose influence over the course of the 1960s and 1970s due to criticisms of technocratic thinking (cfr. Fontenot 2021)?
* Did ideas originating in the environmental movement of the 1960s influence office design and usage (e.g. the idea that workers should be provided with a view on a “natural” landscape)?
* How did expert knowledge on user experiences travel across disciplines and countries, and how did experts create authority in the first place?

For our workshop, we welcome proposals for 20-minute presentations. A 500-word abstract and a brief cv should be sent to jens.vandemaele@uni.lu by 20 April 2023 at the latest. Selected presenters must send their final full paper (7000-8000 words) to the organisers by 10 November at the latest, in order to enable fruitful discussions. All presentations will take place on-site and will be in English. We intend to publish a selection of presented papers in a theme issue of an academic journal (title choice pending) over the course of 2024-2025. Travel and accommodation costs will be partially covered by the organisers.

Schedule:

* March 2023: Launch CfP
* 20 April 2023: Deadline for abstract submission
* 30 April 2023: Results of CfP communicated to the contributors
* 10 November 2023: Deadline for full paper submission
* 30 November – 1 December 2023: Workshop
* 2014-2015: Publication of a theme issue

The conference *Perspectives on Uses and Users in the History of Office Buildings* is organised by the BUREU team at the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH, University of Luxembourg) and the Research Group Modernity and Society 1800-2000 (MoSa, University of Leuven). BUREU is a transnational research project funded by the FNR (Luxembourg) and The Research Foundation – Flanders (Belgium). Its team members investigate the design choices that were made in relation to the interiors of EU office buildings in Luxembourg and Brussels, and this for the period between the early 1950s and the early 2000s. More concretely, BUREU seeks to analyse which managerial ideas were at the root of these office interior designs (for more information, please visit <https://www.c2dh.uni.lu/thinkering/bureu-new-transnational-research-project-crossing-border-between-architectural-history>).

For any questions on the workshop, please contact Dr. Jens van de Maele: [jens.vandemaele@uni.lu](mailto:jens.vandemaele@uni.lu)

*Literature references:*

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Van Laak 2008. Dirk van Laak, ‘Infrastrukturen und Macht’, in François Duceppe-Lamarre and Jens Ivo Engels eds, *Umwelt und Herrschaft in der Geschichte*. München: Oldenbourg, 2008, pp. 106-114.