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## Chapter 6

# (Re)creating the inhabited workspace: rematerialization practices of remote work

### 6.1 Introduction

The notions of work and space are implicitly linked in everyday language. From a lexical point of view, by using the expressions "going to work" or even "going to the office", we make the place of activity a symbolic space. Combining container and content, the activity of work is associated with the place "office", a term which itself designates an individual space within a whole (the employer's premises). This association between "work" and a specific place comes from the industrial revolution: the worker went "to work" by physically going to the factory. Since the 1980s, the possibility of working "remotely" has gradually emerged, first via fax or telephone, then thanks to digital tools and, recently, to collaborative platforms. The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 has accelerated this trend, as a large part of the working population has started to work remotely. "Work" itself can be seen as a space, which explains why remote workers sometimes need to perceive and design "their" workspace (putting on shoes at home, walking around the neighborhood to "make

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the commute"). While some of the literature agrees on the immaterial character of telework, the worker's body is necessarily inscribed in a physical space, whatever it may be.

So how can we (re)create telework spaces? The research question that animates this chapter questions the experiences of remote work. It allows us to focus on the material and physical dimension of a mediated activity in a context that has been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Through the metaphor of the inhabited workspace, this chapter intends to better understand the practices of (re)creating the various workspaces deployed by remote workers. To do so, it draws on an exploratory qualitative study conducted in Montreal with thirteen people who were already working remotely before the Covid-19 pandemic. After developing the concepts of remote work, space and materialization, we will explain our methodological approach in more detail. Then we will present the inhabited spaces and the practices that aim to recreate these workspaces outside the organization. Finally, we will discuss the possible consequences of this rematerialization of work in spaces that were not originally designed for it.

## 6.2 "Going to work": from work as a place to work from anywhere

As the term *telework*, first coined by journalist Jack Schiff in the *Washington Post* in 1972, shows, the notion of work is still strongly linked to the materiality of physical space. The term *telecommuting*, chosen by the researcher Jack Nilles, is interesting since *commuting* refers to the journey between the workplace and home (Nilles *et al.* 1976). The concept of "telecommuting" remains strongly attached to the idea of the commute between the city center "office" (since it is mainly a service industry job) and the "home" (which one imagines to be in a suburban residential area). According to Nilles, it was no longer a question of bringing the worker to work, but of bringing the work to the worker thanks to technological tools (at the time, via the telephone, and especially the fax).

In France, since the 1980s, "teleworking" or "working from home" (Mauri 1980) has been promoted by the public authorities as a way to reorganize the territory (Craipeau and Carré 1996). Once again, the notion of work is associated with the physical place: the private space of the home. Today, the expression *home office* is used to designate this form of working. Therefore, the progressive implementation of remote work via ICTs historically constitutes the opposite movement of that which, during the industrial revolution, brought workers together in factories around the production tool (Taskin 2006).

We are thus witnessing a fundamental break in the spatio-temporal framework of work, a framework that was previously structured around the notions of space and time (Taskin 2006). With information and communication technologies, workflows can be freed from the location of the employee: from the “deterritorialization” of the organization comes that of the individual at work (Craipeau and Carré 1996). Choudhury *et al.* (2019) have recently proposed a distinction between the traditional *Working From Home* (WFH) and *Working From Anywhere* (WFA). While 'Work From Home' (WFH) implies temporal flexibility, 'Work From Anywhere' (WFA) refers to both temporal and geographic flexibility. This distinction invites us to think of work independently of the material space in which it takes place. In the same vein, the term "*location independent*" has appeared to designate people who can work in any physical space. The expression has been notably endorsed by *The Economist* magazine, which predicted that by 2035, more than one billion people could be *location independent* (Mishcon de Reya 2019). Paradoxically, this term emphasizes the material space of work (*location*) while referring to a person who seeks to escape it.

### **6.3. Space, materiality and remote work**

Over the past fifteen years or so, the literature in the field of organizational studies has taken a 'spatial turn', focusing on how organizational spaces (material and non-material) are constituted and transformed through everyday practices (Clegg and Kornberger 2006; Taylor and Spicer 2007). Strongly inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre (1974, p. 332), the study of organizational spaces focuses on the dialectical relationship between (i) the spatial conceptions constructed by those who order the - space (conceived space), (ii) the spatial acts and sensory perceptions that accompany them (perceived space), and (iii) the images and symbols with which individuals give their environment (experienced space). From this perspective, "space is a dialectical relationship between [what is] perceived, conceived, and experienced" (Raoul 2017, p. 130).

Since the second half of the 2000s, the stream of sociomaterial practices (influenced in particular by Bruno Latour and Wanda Orlikowski) has also tried to go beyond the dichotomy between the social and the material by focusing on organizational practices (Beyes and Steyaert 2012; Vásquez 2016). These practices are constituted - by social and spatial dynamics, but also participate in the very production of the latter (De Vaujany and Mitev 2013). Thus, part of the literature focuses on the (re)materialization of work in new ways of working, including in remote work configurations. Not only does the digital inherently have a very material aspect

(Leonardi 2010), but the body of the working person is anchored in a physical space (Tyler and Cohen 2010).

For environmental psychology, individuals create meaning with space in their everyday interactions (De Vaujany and Mitev 2013). Space is a component of this environment and the individual provides the unit (Gustafson 2006, p. 221). Thus, workplaces and their associated technical artifacts have material properties that constrain or facilitate actors' actions (Orlikowski and Scott 2013). From then on, examining the material practices of space of individuals in the different physical locations from which they work remotely allows us to better understand their experiences of space, their relationship to work and its identity dimension.

Justine Humphry uses the term 'configuration' to refer to the stabilization activity carried out by workers in their daily work, including a range of spatial practices such as customization, decoration and overall 'tinkering' to make a technology work according to a planned action or an existing pattern of activity. Configuration differs from 'connection' in its emphasis on spatial adjustments and the ability to create an environment conducive to work interactions and practices (Humphry 2014, pp. 194-195). With the *affordances* of communication technologies, the home can thus act as an economic site of production (Luckman 2019).

Although equated with 'immaterial' work (Gorz 2001), the findings for home-based teleworkers (WFH) apply to remote workers who practice in other locations (WFA). The example of digital nomads is illuminating: these individuals who move around while working, abandoning the idea of a fixed home (Nash 2018), paradoxically find themselves confronted with the material need to (re)constitute workspaces wherever they stop (Bonneau and Enel 2018). Unlike home-based workers who seek to avoid moving, they use ICT to be mobile while working.

Remote work therefore covers a variety of experiences and trajectories. However, *remote workers* have one thing in common: the blurring of the boundaries between personal and professional life (Thompson 2019). A boundary that seeks to materialize in the various inhabited spaces, since digital nomadism is part of a post-industrial movement in which the material means of carrying out work are the responsibility of the workers themselves (Humphry 2014, p. 201).

#### 6.4. Understanding the (re)creation of workspaces

To understand and account for the (re)creation of workspaces in remote work contexts, we favored an exploratory qualitative approach. Data collection was carried out through thirteen semi-directed interviews with people working partially or

totally remotely before the pandemic, and claiming Montreal, Quebec, as their "homeport". These interviews were conducted between May and September 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 crisis. This was a period characterized by the rapid and massive shift to home-based telecommuting on a global scale. Although this context is not the core of our research, it has marked the research process and the testimonies obtained. Given the health situation, the meetings, which lasted an average of one and a half hours, were conducted via the Zoom platform (except for Jeanne<sup>1</sup>, who was met at her home). The people recruited had all already been working remotely before the pandemic crisis. As a result, although some of them had experienced the transition to 100% remote working with the pandemic, all of them were ostensibly rather favorable to it.

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1. All participants were given a pseudonym to preserve their anonymity.

	Pseudonym	Age	Profession	Type of remote worker	Other
#1	Jeanne	32 years old	Analyst (Private Sector)	Employee working partially remotely before the pandemic (one or two days a week)	Colleague of Rémi (#2). Married to an <i>location independent</i> worker and aspiring to be one too
#2	Rémi	25 years old	Computer Forensics Specialist (Private Sector)	Employee working partially remotely (occasionally before the pandemic, which increased to 100% in March 2020)	Colleague of Jeanne (#1), son of Jean-François (#5). Was telecommuting more often in his previous job
#3	Rosa	34 years old	Journalist (Private Sector)	Employee, working partially remotely before the pandemic (on an occasional basis)	Has been self-employed and head of a media company. Has frequented many third places (cafés, coworking spaces) and considers herself as a nomad worker
#4	Marc	32 years old	Project Manager (Public Sector)	Employee, working partially remotely before the pandemic (teleworking at home one or two days per month before the pandemic)	Has burnt out. Has a child on the way.

**Table 6.1.** *Employees in a "classic" organization working partially remotely*

The thirteen interviewees are distributed in four different contexts of collaborative telework (see Tables 6.1, 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4): four are employees in a "traditional" organization and work remotely part-time; the others work remotely full-time and are, depending on the case, employees (3), company managers (3) or "self-employed"/freelancers (3).

Participants range in age from 25 to 56, with the majority in their thirties. There are eight men and five women. The vast majority live with a partner, are married or in a union. About a third have children. They work in knowledge-based jobs that can be

carried out remotely via digital technologies (project manager, journalist, manager, entrepreneur, translator, etc.).

	Pseudonym	Age	Profession	Type of remote worker	Other
#5	Jean-François	55 years old	Product Manager (Private Sector)	Full remote worker in a "traditional" company	Father of Rémi (#2). Mobile worker for thirty years. Has an office in the basement of his home
#6	Audrey	33 years old	Accounting System Consultant (Private Sector)	Employee of an officeless company	Colleague of Stéphane (#7). Has been a digital nomad in Latin America for several months, chose this company for the possibility to travel, but today aspires to reconvert (after our meeting, left the company and resumed her studies)
#7	Stéphane	45 years old	Director of Professional Services (Private Sector)	Employee of an officeless company	Audrey's colleague (#6). Has been working remotely for over fifteen years. After being mobile for years, has an office at home

**Table 6.2.** Full-time remote employees



	Pseudonym	Age	Profession	Type of remote worker	Other
#8	Charbel	34 years old	Creative Director (Private Sector)	Founder and manager of a marketing design agency	Works from home. The company is officeless
#9	Arthur	56 years old	Regional Director (Private Sector)	Founder and CEO	Set up his company, created twenty-three years ago in France, (most of the employees are in France). Came in Montreal with a developer and they were working together in a coworking space before the pandemic
#10	Rahul	32 years old	Aerospace Engineer (Private Sector)	Company manager	English speaking entrepreneur. Has founded two companies before this one. Since the pandemic, his company has gone bankrupt, and he is now looking for a salaried job

**Table 6.3.** *Participants who are business owners and work full-time remotely*

Three core themes emerge from the analyse carried out according to a bottom-up method (Beaugrand 1988): they revolve around physical spaces within the home, virtual spaces and time management.

### 6.5. Analyzing the types of inhabited workspaces

We identified three types of workspaces "inhabited" by workers, in other words "lived" by individuals (Olive and Morgenstern 2004; Ourednik 2010). Our analysis shows that remote workers first inhabit the **various physical spaces** within their homes (e.g., dedicated room, office in other rooms, intra-home mobility) by (re)creating these spaces to make them "habitable" for work. Secondly, it appears that the

experience of space can also be lived **virtually**, through the digital tools made available by the organization. Since the workers' bodies are anchored in a physical place, virtual workspaces offer a hybrid experience. Finally, our analysis highlights the importance of **inhabited space-time** as such, since space and time together form the container of human activity: while time is always used in relation to a given space, space, on the other hand, is always practiced in relation to certain times of the day (Melbin 2017).

	Pseudonym	Age	Profession	Type of remote worker	Other
#11	Kathleen	26 years old	Translator	Self-employed	Has just returned from several years of travel (as a <i>digital nomad</i> ) because of Covid-19. Lives alone in the apartment she just bought in Montreal
#12	Marie-Pier	35 years old	Business Coach	Self-employed	Considers herself as a <i>location independent</i> worker. Changes country frequently with her husband (except during the pandemic)
#13	Sami	30 years old	<i>Social media manager</i>	Part-time employed worker and self-employed at the same time	These working arrangements allow him to have the freedom to work from anywhere. Currently lives with his parents

**Table 6.4.** *Self-employed participants*

### 6.5.1. *Living in different physical spaces*

While all the respondents worked remotely before the pandemic, only four of them had a dedicated room to work from home (#5, #6, #7, #8). Marie-Pier, who claims to be *location independent* and "100% mobile" in her work, also tries to set up a room dedicated to work, even though she changes apartments several times a year:

"Whenever possible – it depends on the configuration of the apartments – I favor using a specific room to work in so that I can "close the door" on my work day." (Marie-Pier #12)

Others, who were occasionally working remotely, also felt the need to "close the door" on work once they went 100% remote during the spring 2020 lockdown. To do this, work had to "take the place" of other activities. For example, Rémi has converted the room he and his partner used to use for video games into an office and thinks that "it can be distracting sometimes because there are disruptions". Marc, a public sector employee, teleworked before the pandemic occasionally, one or two days a month. In the company, he had an individual closed office, but at home, there was no dedicated place to work. His habit was rather to work "from the kitchen table, because it was comfortable":

"Sometimes it was at the dining room table, but that was a little rarer, because the dining room table squeaks... And although the kitchen counter was smaller, it had the advantage of not squeaking." (Mark #4)

At the beginning of the pandemic, he got his laptop, files, base and two monitors back and moved them into the vacant room in his apartment, adjusting them so that he could work standing up.

If there is no extra room available, part of a room can do the trick. Sami, at 30, still lives with his parents and set up a "small office" in his bedroom when he switched to 100% teleworking. Previously, he worked in the office of the agency that employs him part-time and carried out his freelance activity from his sofa. Both of his parents are also self-employed, so he is used to sharing the sofa with them, whether to work or relax. For the members of this family, it is natural that work takes its place in the home, which is far from obvious for others.

Rosa, a journalist, was mobile for her work when she was a freelancer and says she can work from anywhere, with a preference for places with "a bit of traffic anyway", such as cafes:

"I never liked working in an office, within four walls, it's not my thing. I need to get some fresh air, go for a little walk, maybe come back... that's part of the job." (Rosa #3)

Being forced to work from home during the pandemic with her spouse and their baby required some adjustments:

"It's quite an art. We changed the configuration of the apartment at the beginning of the pandemic because it was not at all adapted to what we do. So, in the middle of the room, we put the dining room table, the big wooden table and that's where we work most of the time, on absolutely uncomfortable Ikea chairs, so our backs are killing us." (Rosa #3)

According to the respondents, (re)creating a space dedicated to work requires territorial negotiation with other members of the household. Some even mention sharing space with pets (#3, #5). During lockdown, Rahul spent so much time working next to his spouse that he now considers her his "work community":

"She is not my colleague, but she is my coworker." (Rahul #10)

The entrepreneur has a desk in his bedroom, but often prefers to work at the dining room table, which is better exposed to daylight. When he finishes work, he puts his computer and files aside so that he can have dinner on the same table:

"I mean, obviously neither of us feel like having dinner on top of our laptops." (Rahul #10)



Figure 6.1. Jeanne's "office" (#1), delimited by the barrier of objects and plants

While for Rahul, the end of workday materializes in the action of closing the computer and removing the dedicated objects (pens, notebooks), for others, like

Jeanne, the separation of the spheres of life is embodied by moving to one side of the table or the other. To delineate the space between the "work corner" and the "non-work corner", she has put up a "barrier" of objects in the middle of the table, with a computer screen installed in the "office corner" (see Figure 6.1). The most important thing for her is to have "a space" where no one gets behind her and where she feels "safe":

"I chose a little corner in the big room to feel protected, so that no one can really approach me regularly, I would say. If my husband walks past me, let's say as he walks through this room, I'm not in the middle of the room. It's in a corner, so he's going to be separate from a specific place, from my space." (Jeanne #1)

Although she would like "a really good chair," she says she finds her work area pleasant. Her husband, who is self-employed, has an enclosed office in the apartment. It is important to her that they are not both "in the same room".

For respondents who worked 100% remotely before the pandemic, it is more a matter of (re)negotiating the territory of each person's work in the living space than of creating a work space as such. Audrey, an employee of an officeless company, is used to working from home, but the crisis has changed her habits because her partner usually works "in the office":

"The only thing that has changed for me is that now I'm not alone in the house working remotely. [...] That's not great, of course, because we're both trying to figure out how to work around one another. We both have confidential calls to make, so it's not always easy". (Audrey #6)

The distribution of workplaces in the shared living space is rarely egalitarian and reflects household priorities. Arthur, a company manager, asked his employees about the quality of their work environments during the pandemic. He said he was surprised to get such good results in perceived comfort, compared to what he observed in video conferencing:

"My technical director [...] I was surprised by his answer because he says he is well set up... But then when I saw him on Zoom, he is on a little school desk! He told me "My wife and daughters have turned the office into a sewing room or something, and all my appeals have failed! "(laughs) I asked, "Can't you just kick them out? He tells me, "No, that's not possible." So, his office is being occupied, and he's happy, but when you see him on Zoom like that [...]" (Arthur #9)

For others, certain rooms are perceived as non-working areas to be preserved, such as the bedroom or the dining room:

"What is very important for me is that I don't work in the dining room, for example. I don't work in my bedroom. Because that's it, I find it healthy, not to work and sleep in the same space, not to work and eat in the same space." (Charbel #8)

Having a place dedicated to work does not prevent one from working in other places at home. Charbel, for example, likes to change places to find his creativity:

"Most of the time when I really want to be very focused [...] I feel safe and secure in my office. Now, when I have a task to do and I'm lacking a bit of creativity [...] that's when I need to change my space a little bit, change my environment. So, I might take my laptop and, if the weather is nice, go out in the garden." (Charbel #8)

The entrepreneur and head of a marketing design agency has a dedicated office room with a large corner desk, two monitors and a bookcase in the basement of his house. However, he prefers to work outside when the weather permits, or with a view outside:

"I think I need space inside. That's what I need, I need space, basically! And so, when I'm not looking at the screen, I'm doing everything I can to not look at a wall. It feels a bit weird to me, so I never adhered to that." (Charbel #8)

Most of the respondents include symbols in their workspace that are relevant to this domain (pencils and notebooks for Audrey and Rahul; binders for Sami). Others go further. Charbel chose a minimalist, uncluttered decoration and a wall painted black, because he associates this color with the imagination and values of his agency. For him, the next step would be to install "an empty bookcase behind him, with no books but just a shelf on top", to represent his ambition to go paperless, a choice motivated by an ecological commitment. Some people choose to install the opposite symbols in their workspace, those representing non-work, relaxation, and leisure, to motivate themselves. Marie-Pier likes to set up a meditation area next to her desk. Audrey's "zone" includes her desk, plants and "old lamps", but most importantly a "hammock in the room, with cushions with *Relax* written on them" (see Figure 6.2):

"It reminds me that I made the choice, then I remember the benefits of this type of job – there you go [...] Sometimes it's harder, it's less

jovial, but I made the choice to enjoy being in my hammock when I need a break." (Audrey #6)



*Figure 6.2. The hammock in Audrey's office (#6)*

More than its intrinsic characteristics, it is the experience of the space and its symbolism that seem to be a source of satisfaction. The search for brightness is often mentioned (#7, #8, #10), as well as comfort (#10, #13) or access to "good coffee" (#10, #11). Note that most said they were mobile within their homes, each moving according to the experience they felt they needed. Kathleen, a "vagabond translator" by her own definition, practiced digital nomadism for several years before returning to Montreal during the pandemic, where she has just bought an apartment. During her years of travel, she worked from "cafes, coworking spaces, Airbnbs". With public spaces closed during the lockdown, she replicates intense intra-home mobility:

"Sometimes I'll work on my little terrace [...] Similarly, at the dining table, from the sofa, at a desk as well [...] so I like to get up, and I go and reposition myself on a screen when I feel like my mind is going to sleep a little bit, I get up and I go and work in another corner of the room (laughs)." (Kathleen #11)

Several respondents report having furniture associated with certain work activities. For example, Rosa said she often takes her calls on the same couch, or Audrey goes to "think" in a dedicated chair:

"When I'm going to have like something where I have to rack my brains, when I have to really be focused and talk to no one [...] inhabit my thoughts for a long time, I'll settle into a big chair!" (Audrey #6)

If the physical place does not remind us of work, this reminder can be through emotions, and in particular the feeling of discomfort that refers to "work":

"Sometimes I have stuff to get me to work, that's psychological, but I have to be uncomfortable. It's very weird, it's that it's maybe a little bit distorting my body to start working [...] If I'm too good, I don't do it." (Rosa #3)

### **6.5.2. *Living in virtual spaces***

The question of sensoriality associated with work has been addressed via certain - virtual platforms, which aim to emulate the experience of working in virtual space. Thus, the "office-less" company where Audrey and Stéphane work has adopted a software that graphically reproduces a physical office, a "place" according to Stéphane, where each person is represented by an avatar in his or her individual office:

"For example, I can go and knock on a colleague's door, the person will hear the knock, and then they will accept or not accept that I enter their office, if I enter, then our cameras turn on, we see each other face to face, we can talk face to face, we can share our screen. So, it's really nice because it gives the impression that people are there. (Audrey #6)

Audrey and Stéphane both say they very much appreciate this tool, which helps to break the isolation and the "tendency to forget that we are alone at home" (Stéphane). They mention the virtual office with a vocabulary that appeals to the sensoriality, and even the physicality, of colleagues:

"If I like the colleagues that are around me, I feel like my day is more fun, more beautiful. If they're people I just get along with, nothing more, I don't really care, but I feel their presence! Even if they're not there, I think it's a nice way to imitate reality." (Audrey #6)



When the company does not provide such platforms – which are often cited by 100% teleworking organizations – other digital tools can be used as "offices". For Rosa, it is "the famous Slack". She is constantly connected to it, indicates her presence "at work" with the green "online" button and says she is stimulated by "the sense of urgency" conveyed by this tool. At Marc's national community-based volunteer organization, employees post their work availability via the calendar tool in the Microsoft Teams application. A small light – green, orange or red – indicates the person's availability, or how long they've been away online. Before the pandemic, Marc used to indicate his unavailability in the company with a cardboard sign on the door of his individual office, saying "please do not disturb under any circumstances". Now that he is fully telecommuting, he says he suffers from multiple requests from his colleagues that are deemed irrelevant. As a result, he has made his unavailability visible in the virtual workspace, emulating the physical sign he used to use in the physical space:

"I sometimes book my day so that I can be "red" and show that I'm not available. [...] I've also created a meeting with myself, where I can log in at any time of the day or night, my status changes to 'call', and I don't get any more notifications." (Mark #4)

Some respondents said that they do not inhabit the virtual space in the same way as the physical space. Rosa says she is "more present" online than in person, the written word being her preferred means of expression. Spaces are not inhabited in the same way either when they are interrelated. For example, Sami says he likes to work from his bed, but never does so when he is in a videoconference for fear of being judged. The virtual realm as a 'workspace' can also be used to segment work and non-work time. Audrey states that she uses different internet browsers in the personal and professional domains:

"That way I'm always logged into the right accounts. If I'm at work, I know I have no business going on Facebook, it's going to ask me for a password. Whereas if I'm in my personal time browser, it's already going to be open. [...] Same thing for my Gmail, it's not open, so I have to do some steps. It seems that it helps me disciplining myself!" (Audrey #6)

### **6.5.3. *Living in time as space***

While some remote workers, like Rémi, follow the same working hours as in the office, the majority of respondents have defined slightly different working time zones for remote work. Jeanne, his colleague, respects the company's schedule (8:30

a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) when she teleworks from Montreal, but takes advantage of the time zone difference when she visits her family in France to do something else in the morning. Marc says he works fewer hours remotely because he is more productive and less interrupted. Rahul, who is more efficient in the evening, works several times a week between 10pm and midnight, when his girlfriend goes to sleep. As for Stéphane, he organizes himself according to the periods most favorable to his own performance, while conceding that teleworking requires an "entrepreneurial side":

"It's counter-intuitive to say, "I'm going to work from 9 to 5", because there are times of the day when I'll be fine, and others when I won't... I personally know that at 8 o'clock in the evening I have a boost of energy and my ideas are clearer. [...] I'm able to work from 8pm to 10pm and probably be more productive than I would be for six hours during the day. You can adapt to your personal performance cycle."  
(Stephen #7)

Being able to work from other spaces-times is a frequent demand of remote workers, especially digital nomads. Marie-Pier chose this lifestyle to escape the famous "9 to 5" and manage her time freely. Nevertheless, the respondents all say they have difficulty defining the space-time boundaries of their work:

"The ease with which people can go on their mobile phones is a game changer. Whether people have a virtual or physical office, it's a challenge to say to themselves, 'I'm done, nothing's going to happen after 6 p.m. today. [...] There have been times in my life when I've worked non-stop, it depends on your personality, I worked in the evening, on weekends, and then after that I tried to keep it within a limited framework. (Stephen #7)

Sometimes the boundary is materially embodied, like Jean-François who, despite having an office in the basement of his house, felt the need to symbolize work times by wearing a hat, as a "reminder to himself", but also to make his children understand not to disturb him:

"Sometimes they would see that it was supertime and they would still see me with my hat on [...] and then my daughter would say, 'Can we talk to you now? Have you finished working?' "Sorry, I forgot my hat!  
(Jean-François #5)

The experience of space inhabited by work is hybrid: the remote worker creates objects related to the space-time dedicated to work, which are superimposed on the

reality of physical space. Through their practices, individuals try to redefine the contours of space.

## **6.6. Practices of (re)creating inhabited work spaces**

The material arrangements (Callon and Law 1995) put in place by the respondents allow us to reflect on the degrees of materiality of remote work (Cooren 2015): it is anchored in physical, virtual spaces, or in objects related to the space-time of work. The interviews illustrate ways of making the recreated workspace habitable. These practices are grouped into three main axes derived from a construction metaphor:

- The first axis refers to the "architect" worker, who seeks to emulate the preconceived idea of what a workspace should be through the (re)creation of his workspace;
- the second refers to the "bricklayer" worker, whose practices rather consist in (re)constructing the boundaries between work and non-work;
- the third refers to the personalization of the space, in its identical dimension, operated by the "decorator" worker.

### **6.6.1 "Drawing the plan": the worker-architect and workplace emulation**

The dematerialization/rematerialization of remote work raises questions about the form of work. The concept of "translation", in the geometrical sense of the term, makes it possible to evoke this setting in motion of work and its reincarnation by a change of form in another space (working from home, for example). This translation could be the geometric translation of the notion of 'extensification', i.e., the distribution or export of work across different spaces, scales and time periods (Jarvis and Pratt 2006).

This spillover of work can be "experienced both in terms of the nature of the work (a temporal spillover) and the place of work (spatial spillover)" (Jarvis and Pratt 2006, p. 33, cited in Luckman, 2019). Having an office is the most obvious representation of the materialization of work within the home, but also of its delineation. Having a room dedicated to work gives a sense of working 'from home', but not 'at home' (Luckman, 2019). This is particularly the case when the room is located on another floor, as for Stéphane who "goes upstairs to work", or Charbel and Jean-François who, for their part, go downstairs to the basement. Thus, the physical and mental boundaries offered by the existence of a dedicated office provide a sense of being more professional, especially vis-à-vis video conferencing clients (Luckman 2019).

Whether the workspace is physically 'invisible' or is at the center of the home (as in Audrey's case), its continuous accessibility is likely to lead to difficulties in disconnecting from work.

For the worker-architect, configuring the workspace involves technological elements (Humphry 2014), such as a good internet connection, but also through material elements of comfort associated with work or performance (coffee for Rahul and Kathleen; ergonomic cushions for Rosa or Audrey; light for Stéphane or Charbel; plants for Jeanne or Jean-François). The worker-architect reproduces their idea of a workplace, often inspired by the aesthetics of start-ups or coworking spaces (Moriset 2017).

In the same way that coworking plays on the imaginary of rupture by breaking down the traditional codes of work - spatial, temporal, organizational or symbolic according to Gabay-Mariani (2017) -, some teleworkers define their workspace by the very negation of this activity. For Audrey, teleworking only consists in "not" going to the office, but the (re)creation of her space resembles that of a modern company: uncluttered desk, notebooks, pens, plants. In Marie-Pier's case, the presence of objects symbolizing the negation of the representation of work within the space dedicated to it (a cushion with the injunction *Relax*, a hammock) testifies to the material setting up of resourcing activities, which are ultimately aimed at increasing performance at work. This materialization of productivity tools can, in part, be seen as an "entrepreneurship of the self" (Cukier 2017). While personal development in the workplace may be one of the ways in which employees' subjectivity is mobilized, self-employed workers, like Marie-Pier, adopt a discourse that is intertwined with - the object of their work and their own subjectivity.

While the worker-architect does not reproduce the aestheticism of the work as such, this emulation takes place via sensitivity. According to Rosa, work must necessarily be carried out in an uncomfortable posture since it is associated with the idea of suffering (recalling the Latin etymology of "work", *tripalium*, an instrument of torture). In Kathleen's case, the spaces from which she carries out her activity do not resemble traditional work spaces. Her example illustrates the tension between the spheres of leisure and work among digital nomads (Thompson 2019) recalling the concept of "devotional leisure", with work-based identity giving way to leisure-based identity (Blackshaw 2018). In this case, the space is organized in such a way as to invisibilize the work that takes place in it.

### **6.6.2 "Laying the bricks": the worker-bricklayer and boundary-building**

In the quest for work-life balance, having a dedicated office and fixed hours is the most obvious demarcation. However, there are other practices that can help redefine the boundaries between work and non-work. The "barrier of objects" erected on Jeanne's dining table to delimit the work area is a good example of the material embodiment of these boundaries. They involve not only control by the worker, but also negotiation and understanding by other household members about each other's spatial availability and rights within the home (Luckman 2019). The boundary can also be symbolically materialized in an object, such as the hat worn by Jean-François when he works, or the hammock that reminds Audrey of non-work. For his part, Charbel associates certain music with certain tasks or times of the day, the symbolic dimension of media allowing him to (re)create a framework for work and to delimit work and leisure at home (Bengtsson 2006).

Despite these strategies, defining the boundaries between work and non-work remains complex for most respondents. In particular, it is the people who say that they do not have precise temporal work boundaries (like Stéphane) or who remain constantly connected to online collaboration tools (like Jean-François) who feel the most blurring between life domains. On the other hand, not having a dedicated office does not systematically pose a problem: Jeanne certainly works on part of a table delimited by plants and objects, but she disconnects completely after her working hours. The difficulty in building boundaries thus seems to stem from the interweaving of physical, virtual and temporal spaces. It is not enough to materialize a work space (a dedicated place); it must also be delimited in time and disconnected from virtual workspaces. The worker-bricklayer is therefore faced with a threefold task of constructing boundaries.

However, with the possibility of working 24 hours a day, the freedom to work anywhere is achieved as long as one is constantly reachable (Luckman 2019), as "the dominant utopian image is no longer freedom from work, but freedom to work" (Gregg 2008, p. 290). This "freedom to work" is rooted in professional identity: Rosa has a strong identification with her profession as a journalist, which she sees as a "life mission". While she easily conceives the notion of "work" independently of associated places and can physically work anywhere, she says she finds it difficult to disconnect from virtual spaces, as she is "the voice" of those who "don't have the chance" to express themselves there (notably the LGBT+ community with whom she is very involved). The building of boundaries (or the lack of them, in Rosa's case) thus has an identity dimension, as well as a space identity as such.

### **6.6.3 "Choosing the wallpaper": the worker-decorator and identification with the space**

The worker-decorator configures his or her workspace to make it habitable (with plants, light, etc.) but also according to his or her personality. In traditional office work, the personalization and delimitation of the workspace are achieved through physical markers of self-affirmation, such as photographs, or the design of the office décor. Elsbach (2003) emphasizes the connection between the concept of "self at work" and what the individual defines as his or her identity through the workspace. For the majority of remote workers, work identity and identification with space are strongly affected. The expression "my space" is recurrent among the interviewees. When this space is not clearly delimited, it is the practice of this same space that covers an identity dimension: defining herself as a "vagabond translator", Kathleen replicates her mobile lifestyle within her home.

We can see the value of examining the identity dimension of work settings created for their own sake, when no one sees them (Bengtsson 2006, p. 123), as well as the professional identity they make visible in the reconstructed workspaces. Although Jeanne does not have a dedicated office, she is proud of her object barrier and sent a photograph of it to her colleagues, which enabled her to win the "best desk award". Charbel materializes his ecological and paperless commitment through the choice of an empty bookcase, which will inevitably arouse the curiosity of whoever he is speaking to by video conference. The furniture thus participates in the deliberate presentation of oneself to others.

Remote work, through its interweaving of physical space (the worker's body in a space) and virtual space (linked to colleagues by videoconference), has also a performative dimension. When the physical space is not personalized in accordance with the individual's work identity, the person risks being perceived as less professional. The example of Arthur, who says he is surprised to see his technical director set up with a school desk, or Sami, who does not do his calls from his bed (although he likes to work there), show the identity dimension inherent in the creation of remote work spaces.

### **6.7 Inhabiting the different workspaces: a "meta-work" for which the individual is solely responsible?**

This research shows that (re)creating an inhabitable workspace requires a combination of three boundaries: material, of course, but also temporal and virtual disconnection. These boundaries are characterized by their ephemeral and constantly renegotiated nature. While the interviewees had all created a certain work

framework before the pandemic (material, virtual and/or temporal), they all had to renegotiate it during the health crisis. The previous boundaries were disrupted by the sharing of territory with other members of the household in telework, the presence of children and relatives, as well as by the impossibility of mobility associated with the lockdown and public health measures. Virtual boundaries, rules and rituals of online presence were also challenged. Our analyses reveal a common thread among all our participants: the work of configuring and rematerializing work falls to them. While working "from anywhere" is technically possible, it must nevertheless be anchored somewhere. Yet, this meta-work of (re)creating workspaces is the responsibility of remote workers – WFH or WFA (Bonneau and Enel 2018).

Our study also shows that the roles of architect, bricklayer and decorator follow one another, or even overlap and combine in a circular fashion. Through the metaphor of the inhabited spaces of work, it is possible to understand how the boundaries between spheres of life are created. In contrast to real work, they are created individually, not collectively (Bengtsson 2006), and involve a certain amount of self-management. Even if the company provides the work equipment, the configuration to make the space "habitable" for work is the responsibility of the individual and involves additional financial costs (dedicated room, furniture, quiet space), but also personal costs (negotiation with relatives, organization).

Beyond the material and financial support that could be offered by work organizations, the articulation and management of areas of existence rests solely on the shoulders of the worker. A responsibility which, in the face of the promise of autonomy and freedom of remote work, is a source of ambivalence and likely to generate stress (Lancry 2007). Remote work can thus expose workers to certain psychosocial risks and to imbalances between areas of life, the harmful effects of which on workers' health are well known. Still, the responsibility for preventing these risks cannot be assumed by those who may be victims of them.

However, this chapter does not claim to be exhaustive. It presents a point of view situated in an organizational perspective. The interviews conducted with these individuals constitute an exploratory process that should be further investigated in order to evaluate the evolution of these practices. In this context, it would be interesting to diversify the profiles of the respondents, in terms of their socio-occupational category, the longevity of their experience of remote work and their geographical and territorial roots. Moreover, as this study was conducted at the end of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, i.e., in a specific context strongly marked by the sanitary and economic situation, it will be important to compare it with other work carried out in this context and afterwards, to appreciate its scope. Finally, the metaphor of the inhabited spaces of work seems to us to be particularly relevant in

view of the increase and probable continuation of remote work. I could serve as a basis for analyzing the psychosocial risks potentially associated with the (re)materialization of work.

## 6.8. References

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