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# The meaning of workplace misuses : when Activity-Based Flexible Office doesn't work

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**Abstract.** The Activity-Based Flexible Office (AFO) is a type of office layout that is increasingly being used by organizations. The non-allocation of workstations makes AFOs a particularly interesting layout model from a financial management point of view. However, AFOs and their rules of use are sometimes the subject of negative feedback: the rules are not respected. In this paper, we try to propose a new perspective for understanding these "misuses", using Canguilhem's concept of the norms-milieu and Béguin's concept of the professional world.

**Keywords:** Activity-based Flexible Offices, Norms- milieu, Workspace, Professional World, Collective dynamics

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Activity-based flexible offices: an office model with rules

Flex-Offices, Activity-Based Flexible Offices (AFOs) or Activity-Based Workplaces (ABWs) are offices without assigned workstations that offer a variety of workspaces [1]. These office models come with a set of usage rules, the most important of which is the non-allocation of workstations, and therefore the sharing of some or all workspaces. This sharing is accompanied by other rules of use and behavior. Here are some of the most common rules: the clean-desk rule, which means leaving the desk surface empty and clean for the next user [2,3,4], the obligation to vacate a workstation when planning to be absent for more than two hours [2,4,5], the existence of more or less strict rules regarding the noise generated by communication (discussions, telephone, ringing...) [2,5], but also the encouragement to move from one room to another according to the tasks to be performed and therefore to change workstations regularly [2,6]. The rules also have an impact on the organization of work, as they go beyond the use of space.

“Good working practices” [4] are often promoted before employees move to new premises. AFO is seen as a way of working that requires employees to work more independently, to choose where and with whom they work, and for managers to

evaluate performance rather than presence [5]. However, these rules of use and work are not always adhered to, and studies of these workplaces reveal “failures”, particularly in the implementation of rules that are not followed.

### 1.2 Appropriating workspaces or rules?

In the literature, there is a disparity in the appropriation of workplaces in AFOs, particularly in terms of compliance. Studies show "resistance" practices, such as the continuous occupation of a workstation through body markings by prolonged presence or material markings [3,6]. Conversely, there is a tendency to abandon spaces [7]. Clean desk policies are also difficult to comply with, as are noise regulations [2]. These behaviors are often described in negative terms, with vocabulary such as “hijacking” [6], “non-compliance” [7] or “misuse” [2]. This raises the question of whether these situations are really failures at all. In these studies, we understand that it is the rules that are in trouble, not the workspace itself. Workspace appropriation such as “nesting behaviors” [2] can be understood as resistance to rules, but what else do they reveal?

## 2 A different view of the “misuse” of the flexible office

### 2.1 Problem statement

The reasons that lead to situations of “misuse” have been documented, more from the point of view of the relationship between the individual and the workplace. However, we'd like to take a different approach and add a complementary perspective. We believe that the collective dimension of work should be taken more into account in the use of AFOs. In other words, how does the collective organize itself in relation to its own norms in order to transform and stabilize an unallocated space so as to be able to "inhabit" it? In this article, we try to explain how behaviors such as "hijacking", "misuse" and "non-compliance" can be a sign of vitality in the organization and, in particular, in the collective at work. In the productive and social context of work, AFO environments are particularly interesting for observing and understanding what is essential for workers. Therefore, we try to link elements concerning the workers, the rules of use and the collective groupings to show how the AFO becomes an environment inhabited by new norms, from a standardized and anonymous space.

### 2.2 Research context

This text is based on data collected in an architectural design company located in premises in Paris, some of which are AFOs. One year after moving into its new premises (in December 2018), feedback on these spaces was requested in order to better understand the impact of AFOs on workers' activities. From February to July 2020, a study was therefore carried out on location preferences and their activity-related motivations.

### 2.3 Methodology

Two observation periods were conducted, one in February 2020 before the French lockdown following the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and a second after the first lockdown in July 2020. For both observation periods, the occupancy of each flex office space was systematically recorded twice a day for a whole week. In addition, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using an analysis grid. An analysis of company data (workforce, history, etc.) and cross-checking with observations and interviews enabled us to create a map of workspace occupancy by business line. Data on the types of workplace occupation behavior could be distinguished by occupation.

## 3 Results

The results show that the occupation of workspaces does not, or hardly, correspond to their prescribed use. Occupational groupings were observed regardless of the initial space prescription. 66% of workers stay in the same open space and do not change their workstation. Of these, 27% occupy the same workstation every day. We can therefore say that the use of space in the AFO does not correspond to what was initially expected. However, we also note that these new uses (as opposed to misuses) of workspaces are more compatible with the work of their occupants. Furthermore, we make an observation similar to Babapour [8], who distinguishes three phases in the appropriation of AFOs: a phase of first encounter, then exploration, followed by a stable phase. We propose another, hopefully complementary, view of these three phases in terms of the way in which space is occupied. Thus, we propose (i) an occupation of space according to criteria, (ii) followed by the investment of space through settlement tactics, and finally (iii) a collective stabilization by transforming the norms of the environment into a milieu. On this last point, thanks to Canguilhem's concept of the milieu, a situation that may appear to be a failure of the AFO in terms of use can be seen as a symptom of living collectives (in the plural).

### 3.1 Three “ways” of working with space

There are therefore three ways of occupying space, depending on the intention behind the occupation and the way in which it is carried out.

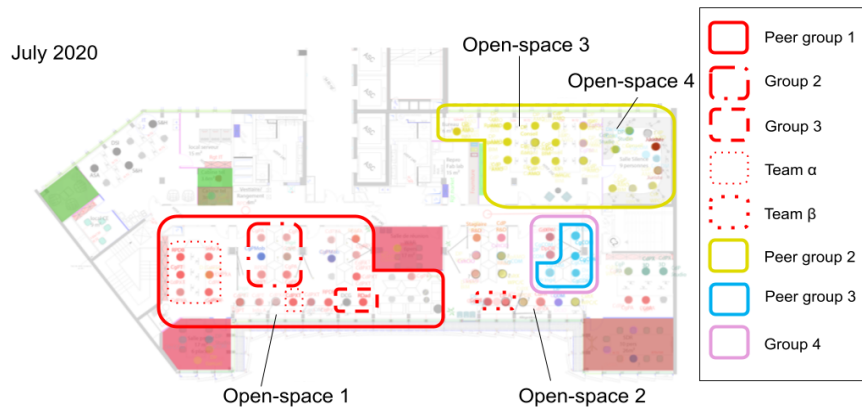
**Occupying space.** The first way is to occupy a workstation. This involves choosing a workstation at which to sit. This act, which seems simple at first sight, is based on installation criteria motivated by individual preferences, but also by the activity. The individual criteria relate to the physical environment, brightness, temperature and noise, but we are particularly interested in the criteria related to the work activity. Our interviews revealed 18 installation criteria that guide the occupation of a workspace. Among the most recurrent criteria, we can mention: being close to one's team (business unit or project team); having access to work tools; finding one's "marks", "reference points" and "habits"; being close to a person of affinity or trust (social resource); working in a more "practical" way; being close to a decision-maker. The occupation of a position is therefore linked to the working conditions sought by employees, both in

the search for comfort (individual criteria) and in the search for efficiency in carrying out work (easier access to work tools, to information through the presence of team members). By seeking proximity to colleagues, whether for the social and affective aspect or the informative and decision-making aspect, the choice of workstation is often linked to the presence of others. In our view, individual criteria are less decisive than the need for alterity, which plays a role in getting the job done.

**Investing space.** The second way is to invest in a space. This is a tactic of investing a larger or smaller area, consisting of one or more workstations, or even an entire open space. These tactics are often carried out in groups of at least two people. They are implemented fairly quickly in the first few weeks after the move, by means of physical and material markings. The continuous presence of the same people in a given position or space on a daily basis seems to us to be the most representative of space investment. This can be seen as a misuse of flex office space. In fact, these spaces should not be territorialized. However, in a context of shared workspaces and work tools (such as second screens), competition for access to resources is developing. In order to secure access to resources, workers are organizing themselves into groups to take over one or more workstations on a long-term basis. These resources are not only material. One of the reasons given for taking over a space is the need to rediscover a spatial and social configuration already familiar from the past. The possibility of rediscovering a specific set of people and working practices is part of the desired configuration.

**Collective stabilization.** The third way is to collectively stabilize an invested space. Stabilization consists in the transformation of the rules, norms of use and working conditions of an entire space by a group of people. These groups may or may not be made up of members of the same profession. The analysis of the groupings over the two observation periods in February and June 2020 revealed one constant: peer groupings (see Figure 1). Peer groups 1, 2 and 3 remained unchanged before and after the lockdown period for at least two years (2019 and 2020). The maintenance and stability over time, despite the lockdown periods between the two observation periods, could testify to transformed norms, different from the initial rules. Open spaces 1 and 3 are subject to more specific transformed norms. For open space 1, for example, the prescribed rules are as follows: keep the noise level low so as not to disturb other colleagues; change workstations according to assignment; keep desk surfaces clean; use the telephone outside the open space; do not leave personal belongings in the workspace. This open space environment is occupied by architectural designers. The transformed rules or norms are: being able to talk out loud; being able to stay in the same room or workstation every day; being able to leave files on designated desks; leaving posters on the walls; being able to chat and make phone calls at the workstation; being able to hold impromptu meetings in the open space; leaving personal belongings behind. In this way, transformed norms are conducive to the practices of the design profession, which require a high level of communication both between team members and with clients or service providers on the phone. The collective stabilization of a workspace thus makes it possible to transform the rules of use and practices of a space according to the needs of the activity. Collective spatial association through groupings

makes this transformation of norms possible and ensures practices conducive to satisfactory conditions for carrying out work.



**Fig. 1.** Groups identified during the second observation period in July 2020.

### 3.2 Transforming the norms of the environment, making the milieu a real place: the symptom of living collectives

In Canguilhem's [9] work on the milieu of the living, the conceptual pair milieu-norm of life is relevant to our discussion of the subject's transformations of the environment. For Canguilhem, "the organism, the living being, is not thrown into an environment to which it must conform" (our translation). The nature of the living being is not to submit to an environment, but "to enact norms, the construction of which must always be understood as the conquest and appropriation of an external space, which is thus transformed"[9]. Moreover, in his view, "the environments in which living beings find themselves are shaped by them, centered on them"[9], which makes Man in particular "a creator of geographical configurations". Man is thus in a creative, pragmatic relationship with the spatial environment, transforming a space into a place by giving it functions, meaning and means of action. In the milieu-norms couple, norms are rules that serve as references for the subject. These references, a set of rules and therefore norms of life, are what enable the subject to maintain a state of health.

AFOs are based on the principle of moving workers between different spaces according to the characteristics of the tasks they have to perform. However, there is a tendency for workers to remain in the same place or open space. Lautier [10], in a text entitled "Prescribed space, real place" (our translation), explains that just as we describe the distance between prescribed work and real work, there is a distance between the space designed and the space experienced [11] and practiced by users. The observation of this gap between prescribed space and actual place in the way AFO spaces are used

may initially be perceived as a failure. However, we believe that the observed discrepancy and the stabilization of "real places" show a completely different aspect of collectives through the spontaneous gathering of peers in fixed, stable places.

These places, milieus resulting from a transformation of norms induced by the stable grouping of peers, allow workers to carry out their work according to: values; ways of thinking; ways of doing and acting; resources for action associated with artifacts; all related to an object. These five elements make up the concept of the professional world [12]: "a set of conceptual, axiological and praxical backgrounds that form a system with the object of action" (our translation). These real places, milieus created by the transformation of norms and induced by stable peer groups, are therefore the spatial result of the professional world. The fact that entire spaces are used differently, or at least mobilized differently, from the initial rules, thanks to the will of a collective in the sense of a gathering, shows the vitality of these collectives. The collective reappropriation of spaces shows an "affirmation of the presence of life and vitality in the human order"[12] and within a *professional world* that guarantees working conditions conducive to performance and work.

#### 4 Conclusion

Studies on the appropriation of activity-based flexible offices (AFOs) point to failures of use, where the organization's prescriptions for use are not followed. We note, however, that this symptom, perceived as negative, can be seen as an indication of living collectives organizing themselves and transforming standardized spaces into places of work and living. What may be perceived as a misuse of AFOs, where stability and "sedentarism" are observed more than movement, actually highlights collectives that share a common professional world and collectively maintain a framework conducive to health. What is observed in the gap is not the reflection of a failure, but of a spontaneous transformation of the environment into the form most conducive to life at work, i.e. the one that achieves the desired objectives while preserving the health of the workers.

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