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MEDIA AND MATERIALITIES AT WORK

JOHAN JARLBRINK & CHARLIE JÄRPVALL (EDS.)

DESKBOUND CULTURES

*Media
and Materialities
at Work*

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Introduction

JOHAN JARLBRINK AND CHARLIE JÄRPVALL

Desks are central nodes in our modern society. Office employees spend many of their working hours behind desks, and have done so for a long time. An advert for a furniture manufacturer in Sweden asked in 1949: "Did you know that office workers spend nearly a quarter of their lifetime behind their desks?"[1] Schoolchildren doing homework sit at them, as do authors writing fiction. Countries are governed from desks and corporations are controlled by people sitting behind them. Those of us working from the couch do not escape them, since they are remediated in the graphical user interface on our computers. Most research is the product of desk work, but little scholarly attention has been paid to the desks themselves. At least, not until recently.

British STS researcher John Agar stated in 2003 that the "'bureau' should be put back into studies of 'bureaucracy'."[2] This word was originally created in the mid-18th century out of *bureau* (French for "desk") and *cratie* (a suffix in Greek denoting a kind of government), but it has since taken on a more general and metaphorical meaning. Despite its material base—the desk—research has often treated it as an abstract system. As early as 1815, *The Times* described it as an "invisible" power.[3] The world of bureaucracy, however, is not just the product of formal rules and ideologies, but of typewriters and standardized forms, desks, drawers, and binders—artifacts crucial to decision-making and governing. Instead of treating bureaucracy as an abstract organizational form, Agar encouraged researchers to pay attention to the technologies of data processing and information gathering as the "raw materials of power."[4]

In this book, we propose that desks and desk work are also important objects in studies of homes and household management, literature, television studios, telecommuting, social work, and various other topics. Desks are to be found everywhere in our Western societies and have important functions throughout our lives, not just in the administration of states and private companies. In this book, we present several cases where desks have

practical as well as symbolic functions, and we argue that a *desk perspective* is a productive way to gain new knowledge about a range of areas and contexts. Computer scientist David Levy, tracking the evolution of documents in human life, writes that desks offer "a rich snapshot of modern life, of modern practices and pressures." He continues: "Looking at one is a bit like examining a tidepool. At first it seems static and uninteresting. But once you start to pay attention, you begin to see what a complex ecosystem is present, and how much richly structured and diverse activity is going on right before your eyes."[5]

The aim of this book is to examine changing ideals and practices surrounding desks and desk work in offices, homes, and popular culture. The authors approach the desk both as an ecosystem in itself and as an important part of other ecosystems. Modern office work is often associated with rule-bound decision-making and ideals of rationality. How have such ideas materialized in office furniture? Traditional offices are not the only places where we find desks, of course. They have also been placed in the rooms of young children, and talk-show hosts sit behind them on stage every night. How has desk-based office work influenced the ideas and physical arrangements in contexts outside of traditional offices?

The desire and need to escape the desk seem to be as old as the desk itself. People on the move have had to organize work in other ways, and many of the desks in present-day flexible offices have been replaced by couches and long tables, resembling dinner tables, where employees work side by side. Digital technologies make it possible—in theory at least—to perform traditional desk work tasks at any location with a decent internet connection. In what ways has office work been imagined and organized in settings without proper desks? The authors of the chapters in this book approach these issues in various contexts and from different disciplinary perspectives. They bring different expertise to the table, but have all been encouraged to ask new questions about familiar topics and contexts. What, for example, is the role of the desk in the daily lives of social workers? What difference does it make that most traders on the financial markets have moved from trading floors to desks, where movements and transactions are visible on screens?

STUDYING THE OBJECTS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

"Furniture numbers among the utensils most intimately bound up with man's existence. With it he lives day and night. It assists his work and his rest. It is the close witness of his life, his birth, and his death."[6] The desk is

one of those everyday objects that are right in front of us, but so obvious that we rarely pause to think about them. The last decade has seen a growing interest in such taken-for-granted objects. This has resulted in studies of objects like boxes, elevators, containers, remote controls, bookshelves, pencils, and so on.[7] The aim of this research has been to shine a spotlight on things that normally escape attention. One example is the book series Object Lessons (Bloomsbury), which states that its mission is to analyze "the hidden lives of ordinary things."[8] However, the chapters collected here do not present "object biographies" as such. We are more interested in desks as part of specific organizations and arrangements, the difference they make, and what they make possible, as well as the desires and problems attached to them.

In 2009, when cultural historian Ben Kafka introduced "paperwork" as an academic field of study, he picked up on Agar's idea of putting the bureau back into bureaucracy. He mentioned several pioneering works. First among them was Michael Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* (1979), examining the emergence of documentation and written orders in medieval England. Later additions to the field include Cornelia Vismann's *Akten: Medientechnik und Recht* (2000), as well as Bruno Latour's *La fabrique du droit: Une ethnographie du Conseil d'État* (2002). These three and others directed their attention toward the technologies that made administration as we know it possible.[9] From this perspective, to administrate is to document, read, and circulate files. The desk is where decisions are made, and from where organizations and countries are ruled.

Taken-for-granted technologies often become visible when they cause problems, or when they are replaced by something new. This might explain why researchers have started to investigate paper documents and desks in the age of digital communication. Once, they were indispensable, and they are still in use, but the alternatives are all around us. And yet, one can also argue that desks were visible all along. Authors have written about them for hundreds of years, clerks and secretaries have complained about them, managers and manufacturers have tried to improve them. Not even the attempts to replace desks with supposedly more flexible solutions are new. In fact, the design and spatial arrangement of office desks were at the center of attention in attempts to solve the problem of efficiency in office work during the 20th century. "Administrative restructuring had to begin with the microcosm of the state: the desk of the civil servant," as Cornelia Vismann puts it.[10] New solutions to make office work more effective have often taken the reorganization of office space, and the rearrangement of

desks, as its starting point. From typing pools, to cell offices, *Büroland-shaften*, and Activity-Based Flexible Offices, the desk has been central in the attempts to change how people work. During the early and mid-20th century, ideas and methods of scientific management were used to calculate office tasks in order to rationalize both workers and the office environment. (See Magnus Andersson and Melissa Gregg's chapter for a discussion on the implementation of Taylorism in a domestic setting.) Time standards were introduced to control and regulate even the smallest components of desk work. Harry Braverman—an industrial worker who became a social critic—provides several examples in his *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974). These calculations of the time it took to open and close desk drawers were based on data from some of the largest US companies in 1960:

Open and close	*Minutes*
File drawer, open and close, no selection	.04
Folder, open or close flaps	.04
Desk drawer, open side drawer of standard desk	.014
Open center drawer	.026
Close side	.015
Close center	.027[11]

The introduction of so-called non-territorial offices and hot-desking today is often based on similar calculations. Some of the desks in most offices will always be unoccupied. If desks are shared between staff members, the size of the office can be reduced. Sensors can be used to assign a desk to every staff member present on a specific day: "Sensors distributed in space measure the temperature, light and noise level in different areas of an office, in order for an algorithm to be able to determine an optimal desk for a specific employee, according to their prerecorded preferences."[12] Such measures are intended to rationalize the use of office space, but they might also demolish the final opportunity for the individual to carve out a personal space.[13]

Only seven years after Kafka's 2009 call to study paperwork and desk work, Dutch designer Frans Williegers launched the "Last Writing Desk." The reason for this name was simple: "The desk as we know it is as good as dead." The furniture that was once developed both to support handwriting and as a storage unit had become obsolete. "Since the introduction of 'the new way of working' and the general use of the laptop, the desk with drawers in its current form has become useless."[14] Other developments point in the same direction. As the need (and obligation) to document actions and decisions is extended to non-office workers, such as nurses,

truck drivers, preschool teachers, and construction workers, more and more writing takes place away from desks.[15] Mobile technologies have also meant that many people can work and study wherever they like. New ways of organizing work in flexible offices usually include desks, but there are not as many as in traditional offices. Workers are expected to choose their workplaces depending on their tasks—a desk, a meeting room, or a couch.

Desks are a type of furniture that exists both in people's homes and at their workplaces. Several of the chapters in this book discuss how the desk transcends work and home, professional and domestic life. Instead of representing separate spheres, work and leisure are intertwined in multiple ways. Andersson and Gregg's chapter in this volume shows how ideas about managing factory work inspired Lilian Gilbreth to create a prototype of the Management Desk, an indispensable tool for the modern housewife. Johan Jarlbrink's contribution discusses the long history of doing office work out of office. The authors in focus in Andreas Nyblom's chapter struggle with where to write: at home or in airports. Charlie Järpvall describes how ideals of cleanliness travel over time and between the spheres of work and home.

WHAT IS A DESK?

A desk, as a sub-type of table, could be tentatively described as a table with a sloped or flat surface for writing and reading, typically with several drawers or pigeonholes attached for storing materials. Medieval images depicting the copying of manuscripts show tall chairs behind sloping desks, which were sometimes attached to the chairs. The angle of the desk was quite steep, to support the upright holding of the quill, which differs from the method of holding a modern pen or pencil.[16] According to Mark Bridge, writing furniture was not common in European homes until the 17th century, but before that desks were often found in monasteries, palaces, and churches.[17] From that period onwards, the development of desk designs was part of a general trend toward more specialized tables, such as coffee tables, card tables, toilet tables, and various work tables.[18] Siegfried Giedion argues that the design of modern writing desks has its origins in the English library tables of the mid-18th century. The large flat horizontal surface was originally made to hold large folios.[19] Desk design is thus closely intertwined with materials and practices that vary over time.

In media theorist Walter Seitter's view, a table is "first and foremost an elevated floor, a floor differentiation or a floor terrace."[20] Anders Björkvall, writing from the perspective of social semiotics, states that "a table is

defined by its ability to serve as a surface of varying elevation for human interaction and activities, and for carrying objects."[21] In the view of art historian Torsten Weimarck, tables, including desks and dissection tables, could be seen as knowledge-producing machines, through their capacity to delimit, expose, and present the objects laid out on the surface.[22] According to the influential organization theorist William Leffingwell, who was active during the early 20th century, the modern desk has three primary functions: to provide a support to write on, a surface to lay things on, and as a more or less permanent storage space (for tools, documents, and information).[23] Desks come in many different forms. We have, to name but a few, the bonheur du jour, the computer desk, Wooton desk, secretary desk, roll-top desk, typewriter desk, and the gamer's desk. Its most basic task is usually to support some kind of information processing, but it can be constructed in many different ways.

What is designed as a desk and what is used as a desk is not always the same thing. During recent decades, kitchen tables have been marketed as multifunctional furniture, meant not only for eating dinner but also for studying and doing paperwork brought home from the office. In reality, they have always served multiple functions—sometimes as desks.[24] During the global pandemic in 2020 and 2021, many homeworkers improvised and transformed all kinds of furniture into workstations. A team of Australian researchers interviewed several homeworkers about the solutions they had come up with. One of them was 39-year-old Taro, living in Sydney: "Taro sometimes worked outside in their small backyard (weather and Wi-Fi connection permitting) or upstairs in his bedroom, sitting on the edge of his bed while resting his laptop on their clothes dresser, where the baby's nappy changing mat is usually positioned. 'It's a change table now, but I convert it to office space', he explained."[25] IKEA had already suggested a similar transformations of home furniture in 1980: "Everyone getting a Boj baby-changing table has probably, in their mind, transformed it into a desk."[26] Changing tables, just like ironing boards, are both "elevated floors" and can be used as desks even though they were not built as such.

Other meanings of the word desk document evolution in a different direction, from traditional desks into other forms, such as the reception desk in a hotel, an office building, or a library. Newspapers and govern-mental agencies are often organized around desks in more or less meta-phorical ways. What they share with many office desks is that they accentu-ate the function of being "a central collecting point or focus of intelligence and the production of outcomes from this arrangement."[27]

A desk, in other words, cannot be reduced to its physical design. It can be approached as a carrier of symbolic meaning, but we can also analyze how it is used, what it is imagined to do, what is put in the drawers and on the table top, and how it is positioned in the room. We could examine what people do with desks, what desks do with people, and how desks and users are co-created. Organizational theorists Gibson Burrell and Karen Dale argue that the desk "is never an object without an assemblage, of both human and non-human actants. It is a focal mediating presence: materially, ideationally, and socially."[28] Desks are the meeting point of humans, furniture, and stuff (papers, pens, computers), a place to exercise power, to disseminate information, or to put fresh flowers.

Rather than limiting the analysis to the *beings* of desks, it is also important to examine the *doings* of desks. In this book, several of the chapters analyze the role of the desk within different professions and practices: in social work (Elizabeth Martinell Barfoed and Teres Hjärpe), comedy performance (Joanna Doona), the writing of fiction (Nyblom), and financial trading (Alexander Paulsson).

DESKS AND BODIES

As Martinell Barfoed and Hjärpe show in their chapter on social work in this volume, how professionals and clients are positioned around desks may reinforce power relations—or make them less apparent. One textbook on social work recommends an intimate seating arrangement, with the professional behind the desk and the client located on a short side. A similar arrangement is also common in the late-night television shows examined by Doona. The host is usually sitting behind the desk, and guests to his (or sometimes her) right. That the setup creates a certain dynamic between host and guests becomes evident when the format is changed. Doona exemplifies this with Conan O'Brian, who replaced his desk with armchairs and a coffee table in 2019. The new format made space for conversations and "extended sit-downs" with the guests. The seating arrangement and table had much in common with shows like *Oprah* and *Ellen*. It is hard to imagine these hosts behind desks—intimate conversations require informal settings.

Björkvall has classified tables into two major categories: those that allow a user to place his or her knees underneath them, and those that do not. Tables in the first category are characterized by a more intense human–table interaction and tables in the second category by a restrained interaction. Dining tables and desks belong to the first group, and coffee tables and side

tables to the second. Björkvall also makes a distinction between human- and object-oriented tables, where dining and meeting tables fall into the first category, and desks and side tables into the second. Humans can gather around most tables, but, according to Björkvall, interpersonal relations are more likely and varied around human-oriented tables with a high degree of human–table interaction. The size and shape of the table top, and the way in which people place themselves around it, create different potentials for interpersonal relations. Do people face each other or do they have to turn their heads? Does the table position people in some kind of hierarchy, or does it support collective equality? What kind of social distance is created by the size of the table top?[29] A similar point about the shape of a table, and how it can assume social relations, is suggested by media and organizational scholars Lisa Conrad and Nancy Richter. For example, the conference tables of executive boards are often round, a format supporting agreement and avoiding conflict.[30] The design of the table provides users with resources and limitations—but it is perfectly possible to turn the table and rearrange the seats in order to overcome some of the limitations. The cases put forward by authors Martinell Barfoed, Hjärpe, and Doona are examples of this. Still, a rectangular table will always remain rectangular.

Depending on whether you are placed behind or in front of the desk, you are assigned different hierarchical positions. The same could be said if, as in the famous pictures of presidents, you are sitting at the desk (the executive power), are standing behind it (as a supporter), or are in front of it (as a person taking the picture). As people engaged in a meeting, you sit opposite each other; if you are a secretary at this meeting, recording what is said, you are probably placed to the side. If you are a lover, you perhaps sit on top of the desk. These prepositions, in front of, behind, at the side, on top, all express the dimensions of power just by the corporeal placement—or the spatial division around the furniture. Drawing on Björkvall's categorization above, some desks allow for a high degree of human–table interaction, while others are designed for a more restrained interaction. Some desks have closed sides and front. This means that the person sitting behind it can place his or her knees underneath, but the person placed in front of it or to the side cannot. Such a design makes hierarchies even more explicit: the desk pushes visitors away from the person positioned behind it.

Advertisement for Ellams Duplicator 1938, designed to reduce the need for the secretary, here seated at the side of the desk. Illustration by Greta Johnsson, Archive of Advertisements, Landskrona museum.

Another expression of power through the meeting of body and desk is the design of office desks during the first half of the 20th century. One common understanding was that the desk was "a tool for making the quickest possible turnover of business papers," as organizational theorist Lee Galloway wrote in a book on office organization in 1918.[31] In order to make information flow more quickly through the administration, both the microcosm of the desk and the macrocosm of the office had to be reconfigured. The spatial arrangement where typists sat in large rooms, with desks set up in neat rows, was a common means of making control over work—and the workers—more efficient. In these large typing pools, the noise from the typewriters was deafening, and the work was monotonous and boring. Historian of technology Delphine Gardey argues that office furniture (typing chairs, tables, desks, adjustable lamps, and document holders) was "used to dictate the position of the body, the appropriateness of the gestures, and the correct way of using the object [the typewriter]." Gardey also adds that the "body was committed to the space in a specific manner, and coaxed into its actions by the equipment, which served as a veritable guide to the sanctioned gestures and rhythms."[32] This control over the typist's body had a parallel in the ordering of papers in the desk drawers, which were standardized according to the paper formats.[33]

Desks have also been connected to the corporeal in a completely different way: as personal extensions of their users. In museum collections, as Andreas Nyblom has shown, desks have been understood as biographical and culturally charged objects, and as "authentic links to the artist's bodies, life and work."[34] Charlotte Brontë's writing desk, as the former president of the Brontë Society Donald Hopewell reports, is a typical Early Victorian work in mahogany with brass inlays. But more intriguing is the fact that it is filled with her personal papers (visiting cards, two French textbooks, an invitation, a list, a tress of her younger sister's hair). Most importantly, according to Hopewell, it is "to be seen in its original home, where it will keep company with [her sister] Emily's desk."[35] In this case, the desk and its contents bear witness of the person herself and the scene where the novels were written. Or it could be seen as a variation of what Mark Moss writes about framed photographs placed on desks, as a "memento of the absent": the bodily absence of the dead author is accentuated by the presence of the writing desk itself.[36]

This connection between person and desk is also taken as a starting point in a whole different setting: psychological research trying to track different personality traits in human surroundings. In several studies, desks have

been part of experiments trying to visualize and characterize different personalities. Social psychologist Samuel Gosling and colleagues, for example, write that an "organized desk could serve as the lens through which an observer perceives an occupant's high level of Conscientiousness."[37] This theme is discussed in more detail in Järpvall's chapter.

This section started off with the physical properties of desks and how design choices shape interactions—and ended up in a discussion about desks as personally charged objects. If we follow an object from its manufacture through its use and re-use, this is where we often end up. As media scholar Sean Cubitt explains: "It seems increasingly that the intention behind designed objects plays a smaller and smaller role in their use as they move further, spatially, culturally, and temporally, from their point of manufacture."[38] The meaning of Charlotte Brontë's desk in the museum has very little to do with its design. Visitors sitting down behind it, using it as it was intended by the carpenter, will probably be reprimanded or thrown out. Design is important, but other forces might determine how objects are actually used and understood.

REMOTE DESK CONNECTIONS

It is often difficult to separate the physical object from the ideas attached to it. On the one hand, desks are observatories, places where the world becomes visible and manageable in mediated forms. Latour describes such locations as "centers of calculation," where facts and objects are transferred to be assembled and analyzed by experts. Messengers, mailmen, telephone lines, and internet connections deliver information from the world outside and make remote access—and remote control—possible. "Every time an instrument is hooked up to something, masses of inscriptions pour in, tipping the *scale* once again by forcing the world to come to the centres—at least on paper."[39] Several of the cases analyzed in this book exemplify this. The Bloomberg terminal, examined by Paulsson, is intended to make the financial markets visible from the traders' desks. The social worker's desk is where data is gathered and cases are processed. Even the housewives of the 1930s were supposed to be connected in order to manage the household in an efficient way. The Gilbreth Management Desk, studied by Andersson and Gregg, came equipped with a telephone and a radio, as well as index cards, and was supposed to bring modern administration systems into the domestic sphere. Without doubt, desks are important nodes in communication networks and those located behind them have the privilege of seeing and sometimes manipulating what is going on far away.[40]

Media critics, on the other hand, reject the idea that the available communication technologies are able to bridge distance. They emphasize local knowledge "in the field," information that cannot be transferred. From their perspective, the desk is not an observatory but a place detached from reality.[41] This idea shows up in the essays analyzed by Martinell Barfoed and Hjärpe, written by students coming back from their internship in a social work organization: "I really hope I won't get stuck behind a desk, and that I get the opportunity to go out there in the field and see with my own eyes what it's like." The case files piling up on the desks of the social workers indicate that information scarcity is not their main problem. Yet, what the quoted student is expressing is that more valuable information is to be found beyond the desk, and that "my own eyes" are more reliable sources than files. This line of thinking is reproduced in several languages. *Skrivbordsgeneral* in Swedish is a military general seated at a desk with no experience of the battlefield. *Schreibtischprodukt* in German describes a construction on paper with no real value: "Eine zukünftige europäische Verfassung darf kein Schreibtischprodukt aus Brüssel werden."[42] Not everyone working behind a desk is powerful, but those in power are usually located there. As the quotation shows, *Schreibtischprodukt* is often used as shorthand for a critique of elites, in this case the EU bureaucrats in Brussels. The words are difficult to translate into English, but similar expressions can be found, as when navy hydrographers working from their desks are referred to as "table-top sailors."[43] It is more common in English to position people who are detached from reality in "armchairs." The connotations are very similar though. Just listen to Brigadier General Paul Mireau in Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957): "I can't understand these armchair officers, fellows trying to fight from behind a desk, waving papers at the enemy."

Still, decision-makers seated behind desks will often have a real-world impact. Stalin's pencil might have been the most lethal weapon ever created.[44] The new "criminal type" fostered by the Nazi rule in Germany was a *Schreibtischtäter* ("desk murderer"), a bureaucrat who did not kill anyone personally, but organized murder from a distance. The physical distance made them feel less involved in the crimes. Adolf Eichmann and other civil servants in Nazi Germany are extreme cases, but they could also be seen as "exemplary figures" in the history of bureaucratic organization.[45] Max Weber concluded that: "Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is 'dehumanized,' the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation."[46] From this perspective,

physical distance makes personal distance easier to sustain. The most favored media forms used to connect desks with the outside world have generally been those that limit any personal imprint on communication. Diagrams, lists, tables, and preprinted forms can be understood as technologies of distancing.[47] These media forms are also the ones that dominate financial trading, examined by Paulsson, and the social services office studied by Martinell Barfoed and Hjärpe.

VIRTUAL DESKS

One motivation behind Frans Willigers' design of "the last writing desk" discussed above was that laptops had made the desk "useless." As Nyblom shows in his chapter on authors writing in public spaces, mobile technologies make it possible to work outside offices and away from desks. Yet, desks are remediated in symbolic form in the graphical user interfaces we interact with on most computers. The desktop metaphor structuring the interface displays tools and functions as the objects found on a traditional desktop. Here we find files, folders, and calendars, scissors and paste, magnifying glasses and erasers, everything placed on top of a virtual desk.[48] When developers wanted to create a user-friendly interface in the 1970s, they tried to recreate an already familiar environment in graphical form. And what environment did most users have in common? The office—later on also giving name to the software package developed by Microsoft.[49] The interface makes it easier to learn, interact with, and use the digital tools—at least for users familiar with desks and office supplies. Users accustomed to traditional desks need no instruction, they can easily learn as they go: "Users can rely on their knowledge of a typical office environment to make informed guesses about how individual objects and features of a desktop system can be employed to carry out the task at hand."[50] However, some of the things that the icons are meant to represent are rare objects in most offices nowadays. Clipboards are not very common anymore, never mind floppy disks. Nicholas Negroponte, architect and co-founder of MIT Media Lab, wrote back in 1991 that "the desktop metaphor is subject to serious change, soon." What he saw coming was a diverse set of digital "agents" with which a user would interact using his or her voice.[51] The editors of a volume published in 2007, *Beyond the Desktop Metaphor*, developed these critical observations further:

> Arguably, an obstacle to more effective solutions is the inherent limitations of the desktop metaphor. The very name "desktop" implies a single, limited

physical surface used as a window to all of the resources of a virtual environment. However, current technological developments offer a much wider range of possibilities. Multiple, large-screen, and ambient displays, as well as new input and sensing technologies, open up new possibilities for combining information access and information display.[52]

Thirty years after Negroponte's remark, voice-controlled assistants like Siri and Alexa are all around us (in some markets at least), but so is the traditional desktop interface. Standards are difficult to change when people become used to them and other systems adapt to them. Those using laptops in the near future will probably keep interacting with an interface that mimics what was found on desktops in the 1970s. Desks, even symbolic ones, can be difficult to get rid of. In the light of this introduction, viewing desktops as "a single, limited physical surface" is too restricted a viewpoint, which neglects the complexities of the office desk as an information technology.

THE CHAPTERS

This volume presents seven chapters in which the materiality and symbolic meanings of desks and desk work are analyzed in a range of professional and private settings.

CHARLIE JÄRPVALL traces ideas about clean desktops back to the early 1900s, when administration expanded and the assembly line was used as a model for rational office work. An effective administration required papers to circulate through the organization. A messy desk represented a break in the chain, blocking papers from being transferred and processed by the system. The ideal of having a clean desk is still being promoted, but for different reasons. Desks were once relays within larger systems of paper flows—now they are more likely to represent the personal qualities of the individuals sitting behind them. In present-day self-help manuals, a clean desk signifies an ordered and happy life.

ANDREAS NYBLOM examines shifting ideals and practices of writing, from the long tradition of writing in isolation and silence in the private sphere, to contemporary notions of writing on the move, surrounded by people and noise in (non)places like cafés and airports. For hundreds of years, the desk was seen as the primal scene for writing, the place where poetry and fiction were created. Silence and solitude were the essential conditions for writing. During the last few decades, however, the isolated desk seems to have lost its former primacy. Today, creativity is often associated with nomadic

modes of working, characterized by connectivity and circulation. The main source of disturbance is no longer urban soundscapes, but the writing tool itself, the digital desktop with its notifications of software updates, new emails, and social media posts.

JOANNA DOONA examines the desk in a very different setting: center stage during late-night television talk shows. Ever since the first shows were broadcast in the 1950s, hosts seated behind desks have been a staple of the genre. The shows borrow several elements from traditional newscasts, presenting jokes and satirical news reports in so-called desk pieces. From behind the desk, the host becomes an imaginary center of operations, connecting all the acts and people involved in the show (while the actual command center is the off-stage control room). Doona discusses two events highlighting these desks in different ways: Seth Meyer's decision to extend segments behind the desk in 2015, in order to include more news satire, and Conan O'Brian's removal of his desk altogether in 2019, allowing him to conduct guest interviews in a less formal seating arrangement.

ALEXANDER PAULSSON traces the shifting practices of financial trading as the "open outcry" of the pits was replaced by work in front of terminals in the offices of investment banks. The open trading floors represented the centers of global capitalism, but when the Bloomberg terminal was introduced in the early 1980s, trading became spatially distributed and transformed into desk work. Market information is now visualized on multiple screens— so many that traders need to stand up to see them all. The desk has become a site from which financial markets are observed and enacted, which means that it is difficult to leave the desk without becoming disconnected.

MAGNUS ANDERSSON and MELISSA GREGG analyze a management desk for domestic use designed in the 1930s to facilitate the organizing and planning of housework. The management desk was developed by Lillian Gilbreth for IBM and presented at the Chicago World Fair in 1933. Gilbreth had a PhD in psychology, was a pioneer of industrial psychology, and was a management consultant promoting the methods of scientific management. The desk came equipped with an adding machine, visible charts, a telephone, index cards, and a typewriter, everything necessary to organize a modern household. Andersson and Gregg examine how this desk introduced scientific methods into a home setting, transforming housewives into home managers.

ELIZABETH MARTINELL BARFOED and TERES HJÄRPE examine desks within social work and the conflict between bureaucratic desk work and client-centered approaches where, ideally, work is conducted in the field. The desk serves as a barrier both between internal logics and the outside world, and between the professional and clients during meetings in the office. Yet, it is also the site where most of the work takes place. Present-day social work is based on case files, preprinted forms, and digital registers: the client is what is documented in the files. Piles of papers placed on the desk are a signal that the social worker has a lot to do, and when a case is closed, it is physically removed from the desk.

JOHAN JARLBRINK studies the experiences of people forced to work from home during the global pandemic in 2020, in light of ideas about telecommuting that have developed since the 1970s. Notions about a future where office workers will be located at home—or on the beach—instead of in centralized offices emerged alongside the technologies that made remote working possible. But where the visionaries of telecommuting and nomadic work usually emphasized the placeless nature of digital working conditions, many of those working from home during the pandemic longed for a room of their own, a proper desk, and an ergonomic chair. Sales of office furniture skyrocketed, but the restrictions and lockdowns also resulted in the creative reuse and rearrangement of furniture and space in order to recreate office areas at home.

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1

Attractions of the Empty Desktop

CHARLIE JÄRPVALL

An "empty table," posits media philosopher Vilém Flusser, is "an unattainable ideal." Flusser goes on to observe that "one is filled with envy noticing on television the vast and empty writing desks behind which sit those said to be powerful."[1] A similar ideal was seen circulating in advertisements from Swedish trade journals and office handbooks in the 1940s, wherein the virtue of cleanness was promoted when discussing desks as tools for office work. Papers should be sorted into drawers or organized in binders, pens and other tools put in their place, only the material that currently was worked with should occupy the surface of the desk: only in this way would the work be effective.[2] This ideal persists up to the present day, with a 2016 article in a local Swedish newspaper noting that a clean desk at home is the "dream for many, but is it possible to realize?"[3] Nowadays, formal "clean desk policies" are also to be found in many companies and large corporations.[4] One of these policies justifies its own existence on the basis that it "is generally accepted that a tidy desk and office is a sign of efficiency and effectiveness," and makes the correct impression on clients. The clean desk policy goes on to address security issues, stress mitigation, and accidents and spills prevention.[5] Clean desk policies found in activity-based flexible offices are different. These policies do not regulate private desks but rather set up rules for desk sharing in an office. As such, these policies not only include how workstations should be cleaned of stationaries and papers, but also how to use phones, interact verbally, and claim a place to sit. Here, the policies prescribe that the desk should be emptied when a person leaves for the day so that another employee can use the space. The implementation of these policies seems not to be without friction, however.[6]

The ideal of the clean desk, and the ideas on how to best order a desk, were promoted in various historical and cultural contexts during the 1900s. Yet the realities of people's desks seemed to be in direct contradiction with these thoughts. Looking at pictures of desks in the digitized collections of Swedish museums, the prescribed cleanliness is seldom in evidence. Most

of the (often staged) photographs showing people at their desk reveal desktops filled with stationaries, piles of papers, and knick-knacks.[7] If depicting a home from the early 1900s, desks were often a place to put plants and flowers. Again, this trend persists to the present: the photographs of desks from around the world collected in the book *My Desk Is My Castle* most commonly exhibits an incredible mess of computers, papers, food, and other miscellanea covering the desktop.[8]

Starting from this discrepancy between ideals and reality, the purpose of this chapter is to track the ideal of cleanness in different contexts and time periods. The chapter asks: What was this order meant to do, and what do these discourses of order signify? Desks in this chapter are understood as ordering devices in both a practical and a moral sense. They are furniture organizing papers, but their (supposedly) clean surfaces are also substrates for ideals of ordering: ideals which are subsequently projected onto the person sitting behind it. The tidiness or messiness of a tabletop is closely related to the character of the individual that owns said desk. I trace these ideas of the ordered desk both in the world of offices and in the domestic sphere. Ideas of the empty desk appears in discussions on desks in management literature, trade journals, news articles, and advertisements in the early and mid-1900s, with more recent iterations of the discussion appearing in popular home management literature, as well as experimental psychological research from across different periods of time. With a partial focus on Swedish publications, these sources form the empirical base of the chapter.

DESK ORGANIZATION

The supposed relationship between a clean desktop and efficiency has long historical roots, at least dating back to the discourses of office management in the early 1900s. As this chapter shows, this ideal also existed in the domestic realm, where the well-ordered desk is a topic discussed in organizing and cleaning discourses. If Flusser's empty desktops connoted political or economic power in the world, the domestic desks indicate power over one's own belongings. The lack of order signifies a deficiency of character. A cluttered desk is a cluttered mind, so the argument goes. Yet few empirical studies on the matter support the notion that a clean desk is the most effective one.[9] Organizational theorist Thomas Malone, in his classic study from the 1980s, identified two types in the organization regimes of information on desks: filing and piling. Malone's starting point is what he calls "desk organization," a concept that captures not only the information management on desktops but also includes shelves, filing cabinets, tables,

and other kinds of storage in offices.[10] For this chapter, desk organization is expanded to also include the management of other things than information, since the desk has been an ordering device in many ways.

After describing one worker's messy office, Malone adds in a note that this messiness "does not imply that his work is disorganized—in fact, quite the opposite seems to be true."[11] In Malone's study, people with neat offices tended to find documents and remember to do tasks more often, but at the same time it was not clear if the effort put into organizing was ultimately worth it. Finding and remembering were revealed to be the most important practices, and having documents lying on the desktop was in fact a way of remembering tasks that stood in contrast to the purposeful search through an organized structure.[12] "Whether or not it is worth the effort to keep an office neat, it is clear that there is perceived social value placed on having a neat office."[13] The management theorist Eric Abrahamson and journalist David Freeman similarly argue that there is little evidence that being organized, and keeping homes and workplaces neat, is worth the labor involved. Time spent on keeping things neat surpasses the time put into looking for things in a mess, they observe. That we are not orderly enough is a common complaint in today's society expressed in newsmagazines, television talk shows, and by personal organization consultants. Even parents telling their children to clean up forms part of this refrain.[14]

The reason why the desk should be tidy varies over time: from the first half of 1900s, where the fixation on maximizing productivity framed the desk as a means of controlling work, to the 2010s, when domestic desk organization was put forward as a means for managing the overflow of paper and the abundance of office-related consumer goods. John Laws' idea on social order in modernity is appropriate here. He claims that there is no such thing as ord*er* but instead a continuous process of orde*ring*.[15] On the mundane level of desks and desk organization, both in the workplace and at home, the struggle against entropy seems to be constant. Over time, things pile up, stacks of paper grow, and disorder threatens neatness. Desks, like modern societies writ large, are in a constant state of ordering, both materially and discursively.

PAPERLESS DESKS IN AMERICAN OFFICES
OF THE EARLY 1900S

"The first principle underlying all organized deskwork [. . .] is to have nothing on the desk top except what is being worked on at the moment, plus the 'tools' being used at the time."[16] This quote is taken from one of the

leading thinkers of the organization theory of offices, William H. Leffing-well, dubbed by some as the "father of scientific office management."[17] An avid proponent of organizing administrative work in the early 1900s and inspired by Frederick Taylor's scientific management, Leffingwell wrote several books on office work. The desk was an indispensable topic of discussion in these books as they prescribed how to manage paper-based information. Office manuals like these, architecture theorist Alexandra Lange notes, promoted ideas of an assembly line of paperwork within a paper-processing hierarchy, drawing schematic diagrams of the proper arrangement of office machinery, workers, and desks. The spatial distribution of desks was decided by the most efficient path for paper to travel across the assembly line. In larger offices, different technological systems for the circulation of paper were installed, such as pneumatic tubes, conveyor belts, elevators, or an "overhead ferry of clips strung from moving cables."[18] These ideas and techniques of office work organization emanated from the United States but spread to other countries in the Western world. In Sweden these concepts were disseminated through trade journals and handbooks.

Theorists like Leffingwell and his contemporary Lee Galloway also saw the organization of the individual desk as an important issue to deal with and wrote in detail on the forms of desks and how they should be used. The forms and functions of the desk varied in line with the office worker's place in the hierarchy, from executives to clerks and stenographers. What they all shared was a common aim of having an ordered desk with an empty table surface. As experts in the field of office management, Leffingwell and Galloway wrote books about office organization which sought to establish basic principles and offer guidance on how to most effectively put these principles into practice. Although offices were portrayed like factories and envisioned as an elaborate and interconnected system, efficient offices depended on office workers having neat desk to sustain said efficiency.

Neatness, for Galloway and Leffingwell, was not just connected to a general tidiness that the individual worker should maintain for improved workflow but also bettered cognition and effectiveness of information processing. According to Leffingwell, "anything on a desk or table which does not contribute directly to the better performance of the work being done distracts attention and makes concentration on the task in hand more difficult."[19] Messes claimed brain capacity, and papers should be in motion rather than lying on the office worker's desk. So, for people higher up in the hierarchy, whose assignments where more intellectual than manual, they both recommended a table rather than a desk (or as Leffingwell pre-

ferred to call it: workbench) that minimized the number of drawers. There-by, the storage of any paperwork was avoided. Information should flow, and any paper lying around was merely a source of a mess. Apart from this cognitive perspective, the usual problems with clutter were also an issue. "Unless there is a place for everything and everything in its place, time is wasted and mistakes are made. An untidy desktop is the frequent cause of letters being mixed with carbon copies, delayed mailings, the omission of important enclosures, letters written on wrong letterheads, and many other avoidable errors."[20]

When Galloway wrote about "The Modern Efficiency Desk," the real innovation was that "there is no room for placing current work in the draw-ers, any tendency to defer until tomorrow what can be done today is nipped in the bud." A desk, accordingly, should not be a storage space for un-finished work, but rather a "tool for making the quickest possible turnover of business papers." The roll-top desk—more common in the 1910s than in the 1950s—with a lid that covers the writing surface, was seen as an espe-cially bad design because it made it possible to hide unfinished work from co-workers and managers. Such a design encouraged "disorder and lack of neatness."[21] Thus, the flat-top desks, with shallow drawers, was a medium of control, transparency, and speed. The constant flow of information could be monitored by managers when the work of a clerk was laid out bare on the table. The empty surface should not show any evidence of all the work that had taken place there. Galloway adds that something is wrong if a clerk "in seven seconds, cannot put his hand on any paper or article needed."[22] These rules applied not just to clerks, but also to upper management and even executives, whose records should be stored in filing cabinets and other equipment designated for the purpose of storage. For typists and stenogra-phers, the "precise method of arranging individual equipment is usually left to each girl's fancy," though this autonomy was in fact quite limited if one followed Galloway's specific instructions, which listed 21 different materials that should be placed in assigned drawers. The upper right-hand drawer, for instance, should contain different letterheads, special papers for long memos, and telegram forms, while the lower right-hand drawer was reserved for different envelopes, slips, and "well-sharpened pencils."[23] Papers, meanwhile, should be "at hand" at any time. In fact, the freedom to choose how to organize the stationary should be understood in the all too common context where the typist was working in large typing pools, producing and reproducing information at high speed under intense super-vision by managers. The optimal typist was one who sat completely still,

with only her fingers moving. While the clerks, by contrast, could be seen as undertaking some sort of intellectual labor, these girls were most certainly relegated to manual laborers.

Leffingwell and Galloway both identified that the different functions in the office system required different desks. But, as shown in the descriptions above, the overall ideal of how to organize the tools and means of information processing was common for all persons working in an office. Except for stenographers and typists, all documents should be stored elsewhere—in filing cabinets or cupboards—or immediately dispatched from the desk. The ideal worker in this period sat in his or her place. From the end of the 19th century and onwards, the office in the Western world became an increasingly more important and more sophisticated functional unit in private companies and governmental administration. The offices grew both in size and complexity, from small and poorly staffed operations, and consequently became much more dependent on proper communication.[24] The bulk of information was produced, processed, and circulated by a growing number of office workers, who did their typing and counting with typewriters and calculating machines on paper and printed forms. Adding to this was a plethora of ordering devices for organizing information. Among these devices, the filing cabinet stood out as crucial for the administrative digestion of information. According to media scholar Craig Robertson, since its invention in the 1890s, the filing cabinet played an important part in the conceptualization of information as a discrete entity, as well as illustrating the drive for speed, standardization, rationalization, and precision in office work in the beginning of the 1900s.[25] Vertical filing—as opposed to horizontal piling (that is, laying files flatly atop one another)—increased both the storage capacity and retrieval efficiency. This way of storing documents also had the advantage that information could be reorganized more easily.[26] Piles on the desk were a threat to efficiency, while documents filed in a cabinet leveraged the tool's intended benefits. Thus, the categories of piling and filing later used by Malone in his ethnography of desk organization have deeper historical roots than might be presumed at first glance.

The discourse on desks shows that even if office machinery, management and organization theory, routines, and standards where developed, the main problem was that of manual labor. The sorting, counting, writing, reading, checking, and conferring were all manual practices crucial to the processing of information. Media historian Cornelia Vismann has argued that a desk could be seen as the "microcosm of the state."[27] In a business setting, they could similarly be understood as the microcosm of the company. The

detailed descriptions of desk organization could be understood as efforts to exercise control over the individual worker and to maximize the productivity of an important node in the network. The pace of the whole system was dependent on an individual worker's productivity. Controlling a worker's attention, fatigue, and speed were therefore vital. As business historians Ingrid Jeacle and Lee Parker note: "Although the office desk was the main focus of furniture investigations, its companion, the chair, was not completely forgotten. The pursuit of efficiency was jeopardised by worker fatigue, so the quest for the seat 'which prevents fatigue' was a worthy one."[28]

DESK PRACTICES BETWEEN OFFICE AND HOME

Entering the postwar period, and thereby a new era in how to spatially organize offices with the emergence of the open plan office, desks persisted as the focal point for managing work practices. In line with Vismann, Jeacle, and Parker, design historian Jennifer Kaufmann-Buhler points out that in America "the essential building block of the office plan was the desk."[29] In this period, the single tables in large typing pools were reimagined as part of workstations placed in cubicles. From being a concept associated with factories or laboratories, the workstation in postwar American open-plan offices became the central unit for the individual office worker, combining desks, storage units, work surfaces, and partitions. Although the concept is of later date, the main goal of this way of organizing office space was to optimize work. Yet, the means to do so were diametrically opposed to the means of the proceeding era.

The inventor Robert Propst, the man behind the Action Office which would later evolve into the cubicle system, was an influential thinker in the postwar period. In his view, altering office space meant a shift from function and fixed space to individual and interior flexibility "so that workers should be able to adjust the interior workspace to suit their own individual working needs," as Kaufmann-Buhler summarizes it.[30] Since the late 1940s, the manufacturing of office desks were increasingly modularized and standardized so that a desk could be individually built up according to the specific needs of the task. Propst's vision of desk organization was the opposite of the ideals of Leffingwell and Galloway. Clutter and paper were not something to be eliminated, according to Propst, but instead important components in the work process. The Action Office was designed to function as an interface for paperwork, and the aim was to support the processes of creative thinking. In Propst's eyes, the office workers should be

surrounded by the visual signals of their work, sitting at the center surrounded by the material arranged, pinned, and organized in the workstation.[31] The paradigm of the efficient paperless desk of early 1900s seemed to have been replaced, and the clutter that hindered thinking decades earlier was now seen as a productive force promoting creativity.

In the modern postwar American household, as media scholar Lynn Spigel has shown, office work and housework became gradually more entangled, as desks and storage solutions, communication devices, and home offices were brought into the domestic space. Even if the home office was imagined as a male space, the managerial aspects of housework were increasingly understood as important. Planning, accounting, investment, and decision making became increasingly important among the duties of the housewife, and women were expected to be "family secretaries by keeping track of bills, filing receipts, and compiling family data." Along with these new duties came the requirement for a desk.[32] Robertson argues that office technologies, and rationales, entered the domestic sphere even earlier than Spigel proposes (see also Andersson and Gregg in this volume). In the early 1900s, both technologies and methods from the office were being imported to the household, supposedly to make housework more efficient. In the literature on scientific housekeeping, domestic work was associated with office work to raise its status. The call for desks (and filing cabinets) in the home was part of an attempt to change the status of housework, and these desks were that of managers, not clerks.[33]

The empirical evidence indicates that this was also true for Sweden. Since the 1940s, tools and recommendations for the "home office" where advertised in newspapers and discussed in articles, often focusing on order, tidiness, and cleanness as a way of organizing the information of everyday life. One recurring example illustrated in these advertisements was the annual filling of income-tax returns. The domestic office in 1940s advertisement—especially the ads of the stationary company Esselte—did not emphasize the desk, as such, but instead highlighted shelving units, binders, home archives, and briefcases. "It is both easy and comfortable for you to keep your domestic finances and papers in order if you have a home office."[34] Twenty years later the Swedish office machine manufacturer Facit introduced onto the market a typewriter aimed for household use and described as an "important asset for the modern family."[35] This implies that the industry saw the domestic realm as a potential market for office-related products, which marks a more widespread diffusion of office appliances and practices. This transfer of office technologies also suggests that office

rationality was being applied to domestic paperwork. The home office was now compelled to be as organized as the office, and the modern family as efficient as a business.

This coincides with an ordering project on a societal level which involved experts, politicians, scientists, and private companies. With the goal of creating a modern welfare state in Sweden, and to raise living standards though an expansive housing program, new apartments and houses were built. These social and housing reforms where embedded with ideas of technological progress, rationalization, and bureaucratization. And the houses themselves would need to be furnished.

One manifestation of this rationalization effort was a series of books covering common furniture in homes. In 1957, the Swedish architect Erik Berglund published a book called *Bord* (Tables) as the second volume in a book series. The series itself was the outcome of a survey aimed at finding the appropriate sizes, types, and qualities of different furniture in Swedish homes.[36] In *Bord*, Berglund discussed the standards for a table's height and width as well as its placement in the home. In Berglund's account, the desk was foremost a place for different kinds of writing. Depending on the amount of writing that had to be done—categorized as sporadic writing, frequent writing, and professional writing/homework—the placement and type of table differed. Berglund also stressed the non-writing functions of desks, given that many older homes had large writing desks which used to be "part of the necessary properties of the 'gentlemen's room'."[37] This demonstrates that not only was the desktop to be in order, but also the desk itself. Through the standards and recommendations, an ideal desk could be identified that suited the individual needs of the user and properly supported the managing of domestic information. Standardizing these material aspects of desks had already been put into practice in the office realm since the 1940s in Sweden, where the manufacturer Åtvidabergs industrier named one series of office furniture "the standard series." The desk could here be seen as one expression of the ordering of modern Swedish society, with both the societal and commercial spheres pushing for standardization.

DOMESTIC PAPERWORK AND ORGANIZING
FOR CREATIVITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

At a visit to my local IKEA-store in February 2020, an Ivar bookshelf—with a built-in desk—was on display, filled with boxes, trays, and other ordering paraphernalia, along with a sign saying: "Let the creativity flow, in an organized way." In a similar manner to the order that was intended to

facilitate accurate and speedy information management, as discussed above, this anecdote illustrates another rationale for the ordering of the domestic sphere, creativity; and it is creativity, we are now told, that is enabled by maintaining an organized desk. Creativity is one of the achievements unlocked by empty desks in a domestic setting; the other is the control over the overflow of products endemic to consumer society and which companies like IKEA are responsible for.

It is not only IKEA which is interested in organizing the things of everyday life. Research in ethnology, anthropology, consumer studies, and the like have taken an interest in the management of things in contemporary consumer society. One aim of these studies is to understand what the abundance of "stuff" accumulated in people's homes means in both symbolic and real terms.[38] The inability to manage clutter and chaos at home have also created a market for professional organizers, and in the US a whole industry has developed dedicated to helping ordinary people and companies to organize their material environment.[39] In the pursuit of material and intellectual order, this industry has many similarities with office organizers a hundred years ago.

Linked to this consultancy industry is a plethora of self-help books, magazines, and news articles which advise on how to organize and tidy the home. Many of these books on how to best manage the home and household also give advice on the organization of desks, home office, and domestic paperwork. In literature on the problem of domestic paperwork, desks are mentioned first and foremost as something that must be cleaned, and the papers covering these desks' surface as something that must be organized. The writers of these advisory messages often adopt an autobiographical style, presenting a confessional "I" and describing their journey from chaos to order. Through pictures of tidy homes and inspirational texts, an ideal and ordered domestic world is mediated, where objects are on their proper shelves or tucked away in fancy-colored boxes. Material ordering devices, highly rational cleaning guides, prepared "to-do" lists, and other different methods are prescribed in attaining the ideal of an ordered home. Many of the documents describing domestic paperwork are published in holiday specials focusing on wellbeing and similar themes. Most of them also include a checklist on how the achieve order in one's paperwork, listing certain practices that one should follow. One handbook aligns to the ideal of cleanness discussed earlier: "If you have a desk, review what's on it. Only the most necessary should be displayed. The rest should be hidden in drawers and cupboards."[40]

The office-management theories of the early 1900s and homemaking in the early 2000s differ in many ways, but there are also some striking similarities. The lecturing tone of the best practices of desk organization from the early 1900s is later echoed in the handbooks meant to inspire the creation of the perfect home a hundred years later. "Clean regularly! To have order in your [home] office is to respect both yourself and your company," a book on the "mindful" home explains. Rather than being an effective tool for the flow of information, the ordered desk in this case is part of an environment promoting contemplation and inner peace. The desk of the mindful home should be well organized, yes, but make room for a tabletop fountain.[41] In the art of creating and maintaining order at home, deletion and trashing are the prerequisite for cleaning. Order can first be obtained if a lot of items that are not in use are thrown out. "Only keep important stuff and those things that you use or like a lot."[42] Cleaning and tidying are often presented as processes with discrete steps, accompanied by questions that one must ask oneself. The method is often characterized by being goal-oriented and aimed at altering the relationship between the readers and their possessions, aspiring to change the practices of consuming, ordering, and trashing the objects of everyday life. Most famous in this category is the Japanese organizing consultant Marie Kondo, and her KonMari-method. She recommends that an overhaul of one's belongings should begin with the removal of most things from the home. Only around a third or a quarter of the possessions should remain. Kondo's "basic principle for sorting papers is to throw them away," and only papers that fall under the categories "currently in use, needed for a limited period, or must be kept indefinitely" should be saved.[43] For Kondo, a traditional ordering of paperwork does not suffice. "One of my clients was a woman in her thirties who worked for an advertising company. The moment I entered her room, I felt like I was in an office. My eyes were assaulted by rows of files with carefully printed titles."[44]

This way of dealing with the material abundance in everyday life is connected to ideas on how to live a minimalist lifestyle. To have less things becomes a kind of countermovement to the contemporary consumer culture. Lesser things mean more order, both actually and symbolically. On the other hand, order could also be achieved through buying more stuff, especially ordering devices from the office realm. Binders, calendars, labels, and boxes make organization possible, and are suggested solutions to problems of clutter and mess. If cleaning is part of everyday maintenance and perceived as dull and burdensome, this ordering is promoted as a creative

and meaningful duty. The piling and filing as suggested by Malone could be seen as inadequate categories in this context. These mundane sorting practices are, in the words of information researchers Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, "desktop classifications" that are in various ways linked to socially formalized classifications and standards, such as paper formats or internet protocols.[45] The organization, labelling, and color coordinating could be understood as materializations of domestic classification practices. One of the handbooks is structured after different classes of things and how to manage each class: mail, memorabilia, magazines, and recipes are all different objects that each demand diverse managing practices.[46] Besides these products, other classes of objects that pile up on desks also need to be sorted into the right categories (for example, photographs, toys, cactuses, stationary, and books).[47]

The paperless home office seems to be far away, but as a vision and a method of ordering, digitization is a key component in the literature. In the push for a paperless office, the number of items on the desk should be limited to the "[c]omputer, telephone, and a note pad where you have your 'to do'-list. That's enough."[48] The paperless home office is a solution to the ordering problem, often by digitizing documents before they are discarded. Important papers can be photographed, subscription to magazines shifted to digital editions, and thoughts and ideas stored in apps and web services (for example Pinterest, Trello, or Evernote).[49] Despite this, the digital devices of the paperless home office create their own messes, where tangled cords from computers and other electronic appliances need to be taken care of and hidden from sight. The order of files and folders inside the computer or telephone is not a problem that is discussed in the literature.

The discourses around the creation of a clean desk in the domestic realm are both commercial and rational: commercial in that they aim to sell both ordering devices and advice (that is, consulting services and books); rational in the sense that, to create order, the individual should have structured methods for creating a tidy space and to stave off the threat of messiness. IKEA's product-based ordering, the KonMari-method of deletion, the Zen-inspired mindfulness, and the classification of objects are all different methods that could be applied. Despite the differences between these approaches, they all share a goal: the neat and tidy desk and the uncluttered home. Consumer researchers Russell Belk, Joon Yong Seo, and Eric Li note that "a physically disorganized home means a disorganized life and a fragmented and chaotic sense of self."[50] Exercising power over one's belongings

is a representation of self-control. In line with this, the ideal of the clean desk could also be an expression of ideals of how to live one's life.

THE DESK AND THE SELF

From the desk of the efficient office worker of the early 1900s to the desk in the contemporary home, this last section digs deeper into the connection between the desk and the self. A biography about Dag Hammarskjöld describes the office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in the 1950s as follows: "His desk was always clean—except for some pens and a paper knife."[51] The quote could be read not so much as a description of the actual circumstances, but metaphorically of Hammarskjöld as a person. Or, as it is elaborated in a book on individualization of office space, the desk "is highly charged with subjective-emotional connotations: it marks the territory of its owners and informs us about their status, their private preferences and desires."[52]

Based on American lifestyle magazines, Mark Moss studies "objects on men's desks" as representations of masculine identity and as an arena where masculine identity is expressed. The desk is here a surface to display objects "strategically placed, carefully angled, and thoughtfully selected," giving them a "museum-like aura." Moss' list of items includes photographs in frames, toys, collectibles, games, Zen gardens, sporting paraphernalia, Montblanc pens, clocks, busts, and ceramics. These desk objects are significant for either personal or monetary reasons and show "taste, refinement, power, wealth, erudition, and acquisitiveness." [53] Indeed, the desk is here the territory where status and preferences are mediated. Not only is masculinity expressed, however, but also class, wealth, identity, and nationality (that is, American culture). Moss is not interested in order and chaos but rather in the manifestation of refinement and cultural belonging. Still, the deliberate staging and selection of objects are ordering practices by which the owner tells something about himself. The desk becomes a stage, and the objects become props. This function of the desk as a stage is of course not new, or exclusive for the US. In a survey about the furnishing of Swedish rural homes in the 1950s, the architect Eva Hamrin concludes the following:

> Independent of its design many desks are used as ordinary window-tables in the kitchen chamber or bedroom. Judging from photographs they are often used by the housewife as a place to gather potted plants. It is common to arrange knick-knacks, candlesticks, photographs, books, etc. in pleasing groups, especially in rooms with more distinguished character.[54]

In this quote, desks in the Swedish countryside have a similar function as those described by Moss. The desk objects have little to do with work, writing, or domestic paperwork. Instead, the desk serves as a place to stages items in order to convey the orderliness, neatness, or wealth of the owner. It is no longer a question of whether the desk is neat, messy, or empty—or any of the connotations that could be derived therefrom—but a deliberate way of expressing oneself.

The connection between the desk and the self has been taken as a starting point in the study of personality traits in psychological research. Several experimental studies have used different desk setups to let people extrapolate the character of its occupant. An underlying assumption is that an ordered desk could be used as way of perceiving another person's "high level of Conscientiousness," as Terrence Horgan and his colleagues suggests.[55] The researchers had set up a test environment with desks in different levels of messiness. Participants in the experiment were then seated in the office for ten minutes, after which they were told to describe the character of the desk's owner, using the taxonomy in the Big Five Inventory of personality types. The hypothesis of the experiment was that the "observers would agree about the occupants' personalities solely on the basis of the occupants' workspaces." The results showed that participants perceived an individual owning a neat desk as possessing greater conscientiousness than one with a messy desk.[56] In another experimental psychology study, different desks settings were created based on the DSM–5 manual, a taxonomic diagnostic tool developed by the American Psychiatric Association. This resulted in eleven different layouts, corresponding to different personality styles, for example schizoid (empty sterile desk with no personal items), obsessive-compulsive (organized boxes, to-do lists, arranged orders of items), and passive-aggressive (chaotic and messy desk, dead flowers, unfulfilled tasks). Participants were then asked to choose the desk that reflected their personality best and told to complete a standardized psychological test. The results were then compared, and the conclusion was a "lack of correspondence between personality style and desks."[57]

Regardless of the success or failure of these curious psychological experiments, they seem to propose something similar to graphology, the art or science of determining a person's character from their handwriting. Here, instead, we see a form of *deskology*, where reading someone's desk serves as a method for reading the individual's personal qualities. For Moss, the staging of objects was a deliberate act, but desks in these experiments are read for the signs that are left unconsciously. Our personality traits and

styles are revealed in the residue of our work. The sorting, cleaning, and deletion of these traces could therefore be understood as a way of hiding our true selves behind the clean desk. This effort to classify humans from the character of their workplaces might be one step too far, but in it is a theme that has been reoccurring throughout preceding discussion in this chapter.

CONCLUSION

That cluttered desks are a problem worthy of attention is clear, judging from the books, manuals, newspaper articles, and scientific journals that are written about the topic. A rather disparate choir of philosophers, management theorists, psychologists, home decorators, and professional organizers have promoted the ideal of the clean desk. The attraction of the empty tabletop seems to be a stable discourse over the last 100 years. But even if the choir seems tuned into the same chord, the reasons for having an empty desk vary. The desks in the offices of the early 1900s were essentially critical nodes in larger information networks. Having the desk in order was therefore important for the constant flow of information. Control over the desk implies control over the system. Thus, the desk was a place for managers to exercise power over the workforce. Domestic desk organization in the decades after 1950 were influenced by the office sector. In focus was the paperwork that needed to be done in order to manage the household. The ideal of the clean desk in this context shared similarities with the office realm but lacked the aspect of speed and the importance of flow. Instead, the home office in the postwar period was given the role of an archive that was to be activated on specific occasions, such as the annual filing of taxes. As discussed in the second part of the chapter, the ideal of the clean desk was not only about efficient information management, but it is also part of a wider discourse of cleaning. This means that the variety of "stuff" that needed to be organized expanded, both in the management of information and in the management of items in the home more generally. A clean desk signified an ordered life.

The attractions of the empty desktop go beyond the everyday sorting and cleaning. Desks are both devices where classification of materials takes place (home organization) and tools for the classification of people (experimental psychology). The order of desks can thus also signify social order, materialized in Galloways different desk types and in the cleaning discourses of today. The ordering of desks can be understood on many, intertwined levels, connecting the sorting of paper on the desk with societal orderings of modernity.

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2

Unsettling the Scene of Writing: From the Reign of the Desk to Writing in Transit

ANDREAS NYBLOM

Give me silence only, a desk, books,
And solitude and undivided time,
And like a lark cheering towards the heights
My mind swings on a liberated wing,
And the present, the ancient and the future, earth and heaven,
And everything I touch will resound in verse.[1]

Anders Robert von Kraemer, *Diamanter i stenkol* (1857)

My energy derives from movement—from the shuddering of buses, the rumble of planes, trains' and ferries' rocking. [---] I've learned to write on trains and in hotels and waiting rooms. On the tray tables on planes. I take notes at lunch, under the table, or in the bathroom. I write in museum stairwells, in cafés, in the car on the shoulder of the motorway.[2]

Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights* (2007)

"The desk as we know it, is as good as dead," Dutch designer Frans Willigers claimed as he was presenting his new design, the Last Writing Desk, in 2016. According to Willigers, the traditional, heavy, and capacious desk with drawers had become useless in face of new ways of working and the general use of laptops. Work and writing, obviously, could be performed anywhere and on any imaginable surface. As noted by media scholar José van Dijck, writing has become an increasingly social venture that "happens everywhere" and "fills all pockets of time and space."[3] The Last Writing Desk, a streamlined hybrid between chair and table, embodied this transition from sedentary and place-bound work to a situation increasingly marked by mobility, movement, and spatial flexibility. Simultaneously challenging long-standing notions about writing as a solitary, private, and domestic activity, the Last Writing Desk was "ready for departure" and custom-made for momentary work in semi-public spaces such as the airport.[4]

With the proliferation of desk-less offices and ergonomic alarms about "sitting as the new smoking," the paradigm of mobility—induced by the promises of digital technology—certainly seems to imply that the days of the writing desk are numbered.[5] But the writing desk is not merely a piece of furniture whose significance is limited to material properties and actual work habits; and the prophesy about its demise entails more than the introduction of novel work-life ideologies and the physical wellbeing of office workers.

Since its rise into more common use in the 13th century, the writing desk has acquired a standing as something of a primal scene in the genealogy of modern civilization and culture.[6] Through its intimate connection with highly esteemed intellectual and elusive activities such as writing and thinking, the writing desk has been awarded an elevated position as a material and symbolic site of literary invention. As the centerpiece of the private study, it is part of an emblematic topography of literary creation, and it occupies a vital position in what one may call an iconic "scene of writing" or "theater of composition."[7] On the one hand, the desk may be seen as a technology that enables writing and literature, and as a writing tool that is "also working on our thoughts," as Nietzsche would have it.[8] In this vein media historian Markus Krajewski has argued that the writing desk is a piece of "thought furniture" (*Denkmöbel*), without which neither the production of literature nor the material practice of writing can be fully realized.[9] On the other hand, desks can be said to serve a more symbolic function, as tangible signs of "the experiential vacuities known as reading and writing," or as "the material counterweights to the lightness of thought."[10] In this way, literary scholar Andrew Piper suggests, the desk is, or has until recently been, about "locating this kind of mental and physical labor in space."[11]

If the reign of the desk is really coming to an end, this is an event that merits serious consideration; we need to ask what the desk represents, why it is being ditched, and with what possible consequences. Is the fall of the writing desk to be interpreted as a premonition of the very end of writing and literature altogether, or as an anticipated liberation of writing from spatial constraints as well as ceremonious expectations about solitude and silence?

Figure 2.1. The Last Writing Desk (design by Frans Willigers 2016). Intended for momentary work in public spaces, Williger's design embodies a transition from place-bound and sedentary work to a paradigm of mobility and spatial flexibility. Reproduced by kind permission of Frans Willigers.

In this chapter I explore the rise and alleged fall of the writing desk as a paradigmatic site of literary creation. I focus on significances that have been attached to the desk, what ideals of writing they convey, and how those ideals and values are renegotiated when literary creation seeks alternative spaces to represent its cultural identity.[12]

Rather than attending to individual processes of writing or how different spaces and technologies impact the outcomes of writing, I am interested in aggregated conceptualizations of writing as either bound to, or freed from, the desk, that is: the symbolic significances invested in the desk and alternative scenes of writing. Spaces of writing are not only physical but also metaphysical or metaphorical spaces, since they are produced through reflection on space and include complex signals for creativity, productivity, and autonomy, including gender-inflected concerns.[13] To be sure, writing is not a monolithic practice. It should rather, as proposed by literary scholar Daniel Ehrmann, be seen as a "conglomerate of distinct cases," since writers, in reality, use diverse tools and work in different contexts and spaces: on board trains, alone or in collaboration with others. And yet, although the production of literature is not dependent on any particular space, it requires scenes of writing that have been invested with symbolic significances in order to become visible.[14] What I am interested in here, is the interaction and competition between such symbolically invested scenes through which the practice of writing has been mediated and imagined. Different scenes carry different meanings: their material and spatial settings, and the cultural connotations that they are intertwined in, cultivate and bring forth various ideals and values.

In line with media scholar Jay David Bolter's claim that "literate culture is simply using the new tools provided by digital technology to reconfigure the relationship between the material practices of writing and the ideal of writing that these practices express," I suggest that the present renegotiation of the writing desk is entangled in ideals and conditions, promoted by digital and mobile culture, that appear to run counter to those traditionally associated with the writing desk and the private study.[15]At least in the German and Swedish languages, the writing desk, much like the armchair in English, has come to serve as a metaphor for qualifying something as abstract, impractical, and removed from reality.[16] Presently, it would seem, writing seeks to distance itself from such connotations. Contrary to desks associated with the production of news, and other desks discussed in this book—for example those of stock traders (Paulsson's chapter) and social workers (the chapter by Martinell Barfoed and Hjärpe)—the writer's desk

is not presented as an observatory, a node in an information network or a space of interaction.[17] It is rather portrayed as an inward-facing and cerebral site, securely screened off from outer stimuli. Consequently, the current inclination to separate literary creation from the writing desk brings it more in tune with ideals and practicalities that, in other lines of work, are supported by desks.

If the traditional scene of writing is deskbound and sedentary and projects literary creation as a solitary endeavor that requires silence, contemplation, and a withdrawal from society, emerging scenes of writing tend to situate literary creation within society. Linked to public spaces associated with mobility, writing is projected as an activity that is increasingly social and not opposed to distraction. In order to understand this contrast, and how scenes of writing AFD (Away from Desk) may be seen as attempts to emancipate, secularize and demystify literary creation, the following sections provide brief insights into the symbolic significances of these opposing scenes and spaces.

DESKBOUND: THE ICONIC SCENE OF WRITING

The iconic scene of writing—picturing a solitary writer working alone in a cold garret by the thin light of a candle—has had considerable impact on how we imagine literary creation, writing and authorship. As noted by literary scholar Linda Brodkey, the writer-writes-alone is a familiar icon of art which should be understood as a romantic representation of the production of canonical literature. The image, which both immortalizes and immobilizes the solitary writer in the moment of transcription, is, according to Brodkey, a picture postcard of writing: "It is, in other words, an official view of writing and as such exercises the same kind of control over our experience and memory of writing as postcards of national monuments do."[18] The iconic scene of writing provides a vocabulary for explaining and thinking about writing, and in order to see writing anew, Brodkey suggests, "we must re-read an image that we have come to think of as the reality of writing."[19]

While Brodkey frames the iconic scene of writing as an artifact of literary modernism, prototypes accentuating the solitary and ascetic life of writers, and the writer's desk and study as places of retreat and refuge, can be found centuries before. Francesco Petrarch's treatise *De vita solitaria* (1366), for example, argues for meditative retirement in the countryside, as a prerequisite for writing; and in the early 16th century Albrecht Dürer's engraving "Saint Jerome in his Study," used to be placed in libraries and study

chambers as a memento, accentuating writing as a humanistic and sacro-
sanct occupation to be performed in solitude and silence.[20]

The iconic scene of writing privileges a freeze frame of the writing pro-
cess in which the writer emerges as a writing machine, alienated, and cut
off from society. Social life is placed on the other side of writing, and
nothing is permitted to enter, interfere with or disturb the writer in the
garret.[21] In 1897, Finnish-Swedish writer Zacharias Topelius' writing re-
treat, a cottage in the Bothnian archipelago, was described in correspond-
ence with this image. There, in the evenings, "the poet's imagination in-
voked wonderful tales; as nature fell in peace and quiet, delightful 'heath-
er flowers' burst forth in the garret."[22] And in the home of the Danish
writer Holger Drachmann, children and guests had to keep away from the
master's study, which was "a sanctuary they were not allowed to enter."[23]

Some writers' pursuits of silence appear particularly elaborate and des-
perate. A well-known example is Marcel Proust's cork-lined bedroom in
Paris; another is Thomas Carlyle's struggle to achieve peace and quiet in
Victorian London.[24] Carlyle, who was disturbed in his work by piano-play-
ing neighbors, mad roosters, and organ grinders, had a soundproof study,
or a "well deafened observatory," built in the attic to shield his writing from
the intrusive noises of family life and the urban city.[25] Set within a battle
against city noise led by writers, artists, and other professionals who were
doing "brain-work" in their homes, Carlyle's soundproof chamber "insti-
tutionalized silence to 'assure the durability' of the author's literary ability
and power."[26] At least initially, Carlyle was happy with his secure cell, which
contained a fire place, a shelf of books, a writing desk, and a chair. Here,
Carlyle said, "I sit, lifted above the noise of the world, peremptory to let
no mortal enter my privacy here."[27]

Apart from Carlyle's and Proust's soundproof rooms, solitude and silence
have more generally been perceived as essential conditions for literary
creation. Already in the first decades of the current era, the philosopher
Seneca complained that the noisy environment around his home in Rome
made it difficult to write, and the ideal of a solitary life in contemplation
and dreams about retreats from urban life, have a similar lineage from
Antiquity to Romanticism and beyond in Western literary tradition.[28]

Considering the "foibles of great authors," a brief article in the *Daily
Mail* 1926 concluded that many writers "dread disturbance of any kind, and
even the slightest noise upsets them."[29] Apart from the eccentric measures
taken by some writers, who leave the city for the country "where they lie
in hiding until their book is finished," the article provided contrasting

Figure 2.2. Der heilige Hieronymus im Gehäus (copper engraving by Albrecht Dürer 1514), showing Saint Jerome at work behind his writing desk. Rich in symbols, the engraving accentuates writing as a sacrosanct operation to be performed in solitude and silence. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons.

examples of writers who, by exception, did not demand utter silence nor required a particular space to write. A.A. Milne was said to appreciate interruptions: "He actually tells his wife to invite callers, and declares that it freshens the mind and stimulates ideas." Sir Philip Gibbs was believed to be able to write "in any din," while Bernard Shaw had written some of his plays while travelling on top of a London bus, and Cutcliffe Hyne had composed "some of his most exciting yarns while rushing through space on board an express train."[30]

Obviously serving as counter-images to the iconic scene of writing, observations like these have remained exceptions, overshadowed by the mediation of the writer's desk and workshop as key locations and attractions. While writing is not bound to any particular space or surface, as the examples above illustrate, the writing desk tends to be ascribed an elevated position in writers' self-presentations.[31] And the writer's workshop or study has similarly operated as a space of imagination of central importance to literature.[32] Despite the significances appointed to the writing desk and the study, however, literary creation has often been perceived as an abstract, mysterious, and spiritual operation, as if literature somehow appeared out of thin air. As noted by media philosopher Vilém Flusser, literary criticism has commonly viewed writing as a heavenly rather than earthly phenomenon.[33] Similarly, literary scholar Diana Fuss has argued that creativity, and in particular creative genius, has often been "idealized as unfettered imagination, transcending base materiality, something cut loose from the mere bodily act of putting pen to paper."[34]

In reality, of course, writing is situated in the material world in a number of ways, since it "always occurs in a material setting, employs material tools, and results in material artifacts."[35] The most recognizable and mediated aspect of this materiality is that writers work at various kinds of desks, or—as exceptions to the rule—"forego a desk altogether, preferring a kitchen table, or a lap, or the dashboard of a car."[36] The cultural and visual prominence of the writer's desk, however, is not an outcome of attempts to emphasize the materiality and spatiality of writing, as opposed to notions about writing as a merely spiritual phenomenon. If that were the case, the significance awarded to the desk could, as suggested by literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes, be seen as an anti-mythological action, or, with science and technology scholar Donna Haraway, as an embodied and situated stance towards a "god trick" perspective on literary creation.[37] But there is nothing anti-mythological about the practices and discourses that the desk has become intertwined in. Rather than an instrument for over-

turning the myth and adding to a secularization of writing, the writing desk has served as a material prop in the mythology, as an insignia of romanticized notions about writing, and an altar for literary worship and devotion.

Bestowed with bibliographical and biographical values, with life-like qualities as well as afterlives, the writer's study and desk occupy central roles as objects of identification for writers, readers, and admirers.[38] Ever since the early modern invention of literary tourism, which notably included pilgrimages to Petrarch's House in Arquà where the poet's study was the main attraction and *sanctum sanctorum*, objects and places associated with writers and literary creation have been intertwined in semi-religious meanings.[39] Innumerable desks as well as complete studies have been preserved, reconstructed and put on display as objects of memory in museums.[40] In combination with recurring representations of the workspaces and desks of contemporary writers, like the long-running series in *The Guardian* (since 2007) and *Die Zeit* (since 2008), and photobooks like Jill Krementz' *The Writer's Desk* (1996), musealized desks cater to the continuing allure of such spaces and support notions about literary creation as sedentary and place-bound.[41] Also, when the act of writing is portrayed on film, it is regularly staged in accordance with this conventional pattern.[42]

The writing desk and the private study thus remain symbolic markers that communicate solitude, silence, and contemplation as essential to literary creation. This shared capacity of the desk and the study is not surprising, since the study can be said to have evolved out of the writing desk, when in 14th century Europe the locked cabinet or writing desk expanded in function until it occupied a space of its own. As an exclusionary and private space used by the master of the house for studies and household secrets, the study, just as the writing desk, is bound up with the preservation of masculine power within the home.[43]

As noted by historian Mark Moss, specific masculine areas within the home were, from the Victorian era and onwards, clearly demarcated and for all intents and purposes off-limits to women. While the home was assigned to the domain of women, "a man's desk, whether in a library or a study, often serves as the lone repository of masculine culture."[44] Female writers' use of sewing tables instead of writing desks, of course, testify to this gendered history.[45] It is also worth noticing, as cultural theorist Sara Ahmed has, the feminist publisher named "Kitchen Table Press," signposting the kind of surface on which women tend to work, but at the same time reorienting the table that supports domestic work, to do political work.[46] Although terms like "man cave" and "she shed" may have an ironic ring to

them, such gendered retreats also attest to the continuing desire of women and men to claim separate places of refuge as spaces to write.[47] Likewise, in the early 20th century, the articulation of female writerly autonomy assumed architectonic dimensions, not least in Virginia Woolf's dream image of "a woman, sitting at her own desk, alone in her own room, writing."[48]

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf notes that writing, through writers' accounts and confessions, appears as an exceptionally fragile activity. To write a work of genius, she declares, almost always seemed "a feat of prodigious difficulty."[49] Everything appeared to work "against the likelihood that it will come from the writer's mind whole and entire. Generally material circumstances are against it. Dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down."[50] Woolf's point, of course, was that these difficulties and disruptions were unequally distributed between female and male writers. While the latter enjoyed privileged isolation in their work, for female writers it was out of the question to have a room of one's own; "let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room," Woolf added, having visited Carlyle's House on several occasions since it opened to the public in 1895.[51]

Woolf's essay was a call for greater physical privacy and sought to challenge patriarchal spatial hierarchies within the home, but it did not seek to adopt the splendid isolation and insularity of the masculine study. As noted by literary scholar Wendy Gan, Woolf's demand was not for a study, but for a room, that is a more gender-neutral and flexible space which allowed opportunities for exclusion as well as inclusion, for solitude and community.[52] Female writers, after all, had shown that writing was possible even without access to a separate study or a writing desk. Jane Austen, for example, wrote her novels on a sewing table in the common sitting room where she was regularly interrupted and had to hide her manuscript when someone entered. And interruptions, Woolf settled, "there will always be."[53]

Distraction free writing and access to a private space would long remain masculine privileges. As shown by a letter to a newspaper in the 1940s, women with writing ambitions could, even then, find it necessary to hide their writing from their husbands. While men were entitled to peace and quiet in their work, the female letter writer was advised to "write, or at least plan and process ideas, already while you are washing dishes or darning socks."[54] In light of this gendered history, later feminists may perhaps be excused for reproducing rather than re-reading or challenging the romanticized ideal of solitude and privacy. In *Herspace: Women, Writing, and Solitude* (2003), a quiet space to write is, much like the 19th century apotheosis

of garrets and desks, presented as sacred and special, "a necessary prerequisite for inspiration," which invites the muse.[55]

Finnish-Swedish writer Märta Tikkanen, one of many female writers who have experienced conditions similar to those of the letter writer above, nevertheless abandoned the dream of a room of her own for a scene of writing defined by full participation in everyday life. As a counter-image to masculine notions about creativity, Tikkanen imagined a writing space that was deliberately "unsuitable," occupying passages and walk-through areas with no doors to shut and the writing desk positioned behind the TV, in the middle of the room, and in the midst of life and disorder.[56]

Today, as distraction free writing, in many parts of the world, may seem equally unreachable to everyone, the gendered imbalance appears to have been dissolved. While Woolf lamented that women never had half an hour that they could call their own, literary scholar Emily Hodgson Anderson, writing in 2020, reflects that today there is a more general frenzy: "symptomatic of the technology and social media that make us all, regardless of gender, susceptible to interruption and distractions that we voluntarily seek out."[57] Interruptions, however, are not necessarily inimical to creativity, and as the ideals of solitude, retreat and silence appear increasingly unattainable, outdated or even provocative in our "age of distraction," writing may explore other scenes and spaces that appear more in tune with keywords such as mobility, flexibility, and social interaction.[58]

UNSETTLING THE SCENE OF WRITING

Much suggests that the symbolic hegemony of the writing desk and the private study, as emblematic spaces of literary creation, is presently destabilized. The status of the desk is challenged from at least two, seemingly disparate, directions. In line with changing material and spatial conditions for creative work, new ideals and practices emerge, and recent attempts to localize intellectual labor either remain in domestic space, signposting the bed and the bedroom as imaginative centers, or they circumvent localization altogether by associating literary creation with mobility and spaces of transit. While for Barthes, writing in the 1970s, different areas of the home had distinct and fixed connotations, such as the bed being "the locus of irresponsibility" whereas the table was that of responsibility, recent convergences of living space and working space have unsettled such distinctions.[59] The bed, which used to be the ultimate utopia of industrial workers, is no longer a place where we can lazily lie around to rest from work, architect Andreas Rumpfhuber suggests. In an economy where forms of immaterial

labor become dominant, the bed serves as a symbolic site of the unbounded labor society of Western, post-industrial nations. "Today," Rumpfhuber concludes, "the bed is the paradigmatic site of contemporary forms of knowledge and creative work."[60]

The bed and the bedroom may of course have served as actual writing spaces all along. Indeed, the editors of a volume on the interior decoration of literature, imply that modern literature, in search of its own truth, bumps into the writing desk but eventually ends up in bed.[61] Not focusing on truths, but rather the lies or legends literature tells about its spatial and material origins, the bed's newly acquired status as a space of work and responsibility does not seem to meet the identity sought by contemporary writing. The bed, after all, is burdened with notions about irresponsibility, idleness, and withdrawal that are quite congruent with the Romantic myth of writerly isolation. And in relation to its long history as an activity identified with domestic space rather than offices and regular workplaces, the current collapse of living space and working space presents no novelty to writing. Quite contrary, the absence of a clearly defined workspace appeared as a dilemma already to Carlyle and his contemporaries within an emerging class of housebound professionals, "whose place of labor," as noted by media historian John Picker, "doubled as their place of rest."[62] While dissolved boundaries between work and leisure, and between the private and the professional, have continued to haunt those who have attempted to realize the visions of telework, and, of course, those forced to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Jarlbrink's chapter in this volume), writing appears to have tired of such distinctions and struggles within the home.

I suggest that, in terms of symbolism, it is rather the orientation towards nomadic modes and spaces of transit, that presents itself as an alternative to traditional scenes of writing. Of course, ideals of mobility and movement are not actually new in regard to writing. But compared to the idea of the rural, contemplative walk, cherished by Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge—and before them by Rousseau—contemporary forms of nomadic writing defy, not only the stillness and spatial constraints of the iconic scene of writing, but also the myth of bardic isolation and solitary inspiration.[63] One aspect, at least, of the current tendency to associate writing with communal spaces away from home is that it tends to de-romanticize and professionalize writing as a serious line of work. New York writer Evan Hughes, for example, suggests that writing, inevitably, runs the risk of being thought of as a peculiar and dubious hobby. According to Hughes, many writers feel that there is "something embarrassing about working

from home," which, he suggests, explains the rise, although marginal, of shared writers' spaces or offices.[64] More importantly however, new scenes of writing away from home and away from the desk, serve to challenge traditional notions about writing, and to connect literary creation with a world increasingly defined by circulation, connectedness, and mobility. To be on the move, philosopher Zygmunt Bauman suggests, is a default mode in our late-modern times: "We are on the move even if, physically, we stay put: immobility is not a realistic option in a world of permanent change."[65] While Brodkey contends that, if it is "romance we require in our pictures of writers and writing, then it will not be an easy charge to revise the scene of writing," nomadic modes of writerly identification may appear as attempts to challenge the traditional scene of writing by providing a more realistic and, perhaps, less romantic alternative.[66]

UNBOUND: WRITING IN TRANSIT

Embodied, respectively, by the private study and, for example, the airport, the iconic scene of writing and emerging scenes of writing in transit integrate conflicting notions about space, often thought of as a binary opposition between place and space, place and non-place, or between the sedentary and the mobile (see Jarlbrink's chapter for a discussion on the rise of these ideas during the 1990s). Geographer Tim Cresswell has discussed this opposition between fixity and flow in terms of two ways of viewing the world: a sedentarist metaphysics and a nomadic metaphysics. In a sedentarist worldview, that which is situated, local, and stationary is associated with meaning, memory, and belonging, while that which is mobile and fluid is related to rootlessness, disorder, and change and is seen as a threat to the moral and authentic existence of place.[67] In this vein, spaces of transit have often, as in anthropologist Marc Augé's influential conception of non-places, been defined as impersonal and abstract spaces incapable of accommodating memories, identities, and emotions, as opposed to authentic places such as the home.[68] Exemplifying non-places with supermarkets, hotel chains, and wireless networks, Augé suggests that the "traveller's space may [...] be the archetype of *non-place*."[69]

With regard to literature, notions like these have left marks in various ways: in dismissive perceptions about audiobooks, for example, implying a correspondence between the mobile practice of listening and the, allegedly, trivial contents of the literature available in that format; or in derogatory terms like airport novel and *roman de Gare* (railway station novel) where reference to spaces of transit and transportation signal cheap paper-

back editions and less weighty works of fiction, suitable for transient consumption and diversion.[70] Similarly, when writing is associated with spaces of transit, this seems to challenge ceremonial notions about literary creation. Compared to reading, writing seems to have a stronger affinity with a sedentarist rather than a nomadic metaphysics. As noted by historian and philosopher Michel de Certeau, reading is an ephemeral practice that only rarely leaves traces and easily shakes off all constraints, while writing, by contrast, is conservative, fixed, and durable.[71]

Thought of as non-places, transit spaces appear improbable settings for literary creation. It is, for example, no coincidence that Willigers' the Last Writing Desk was adapted for airports and life in the fast lane—somehow representing the desk's final frontier, before extinction. Similarly, in architect Rem Koolhaas' exposition of "Junkspace," which, like Augé's non-place, designates the proliferation of shopping mall architecture and imperatives of mobility and consumerism, a defining feature is that "desks become sculptures," suggesting a position as antiquated monuments rather than purposeful tools.[72] If literary creation is presently in search of a new identity, to challenge the romanticized and sedentarist ideals superimposed in the image of the writing desk, there may be no sharper contrast than the acknowledgement of spaces where desks appear as anomalies and writing seems an unlikely activity.

Since mobility is a central marker of our time, a nomadic view of the world has become more pervasive, and place and sentiments of the sedentary are increasingly portrayed as dull, "stuck in the past, overly confining, and possibly reactionary," while flows, flux, and dynamism are seen as progressive, exciting, and contemporary.[73] In the nomadic view, mobility is linked to a world of anti-essentialism and resistance to established forms of ordering and discipline, and mobility is even said to be against representation.[74] To imagine writing and literary creation as detached from the sedentary and place bound—from the iconic image of the desk and the study—may perhaps be seen as an indication of such a nonrepresentational desire. But to associate creativity with mobility and spaces of transit may also be seen as an attempt to reverse traditional notions and symbols in favor of spaces and values that support representation of writing as modern and progressive. The contrast between the two scenes of writing—one signifying roots, the other routes—is what makes literary creation in transit emerge as unexpected. A similar juxtaposition is presented by art critic Nicolas Bourriaud when he suggests that the airport, the car, and the train station are the new metaphors for the house/home.[75]

Elements of surprise, sensation, and contrast obviously play a role when writing and other kinds of brainwork are relocated to urban public spaces. As illustrated by an example from a Swedish advertising agency, the mobile work of a writer in public was bound to attract people's attention. In 2009 the agency launched a campaign for a broadband company bearing the slogan "Today, I work from here." A number of individuals were positioned at various sites in central Stockholm where they performed "mobile work," one of them being the well-known writer Björn Ranelid who was writing on his forthcoming novel, locked up in a transparent advertising column in the city center.[76] Another example is architect Hans Hollein's project Mobiles Büro (1969)—a portable office in the form of an inflatable plastic bubble. The mobile office was based on a vision that work, in the future, could be performed anywhere, as illustrated by photographs of Hollein working inside his plastic bubble in the middle of an airfield—implying, of course, that this was a most unlikely space for creative work.[77]

In contemporary culture there is a growing interest among writers as well as other agents in connecting literature and the act of writing to spaces of transit and transportation.[78] An interesting example is Heathrow Airport's writers-in-residence campaigns in 2009 and 2011, in which two acclaimed writers—Alain de Botton and Tony Parsons—were invited to work at the airport. Here too, the promotional setting of a brand-building campaign invites consideration of how the unconventional combination of literature, writing, and transit space served to invoke awareness and attention. The campaign simultaneously prompted reassessment of the airport as place rather than non-place, and encouraged reevaluation of the spatial connotations of literary production. The phrase "writer-in-residence" indicated the airport as a physically distinct and habitable place, or, as suggested by Bourriaud, a new metaphor for the home.

Of the two writers, de Botton in particular reflected upon and approached the airport as an alternative scene of writing. While notably working at a writing desk, the table was unconventionally situated in the middle of the check-in area of Heathrow's Terminal 5, a space commonly associated with crowds, noise, and interruptions that could qualify it as the very opposite of the traditional scene of writing. To de Botton, however, the airport terminal was among the spaces that he found "unexpectedly poetic."[79] And the relocation of the desk, as an indexical sign of writing, could be interpreted as an enactment of an alternative scene of writing. To de Botton the terminal represented a relief from inhibitions and expectations associated with traditional spaces of writing. In *A Week at the Airport: A Heathrow Diary*

Figure 2.3. Alain de Botton at Heathrow Airport (photograph by Richard Baker 2009), showing the writer at work at his writing desk in Terminal 5 during his stint as Heathrow's writer-in-residence. Reproduced by kind permission of Richard Baker.

(2009), which was issued shortly after his residency, de Botton names the airport "the imaginative centre of contemporary culture" and reckons that the terminal was an ideal spot in which to write, because it "rendered the idea of writing so unlikely as to make it possible again."[80]

To de Botton, designated non-places obviously had an appeal because of their distinct dissimilarity with the home and conventional spaces of writing. In *The Art of Travel* (2002) he declares that the immobility and stasis of the domestic setting keeps us tethered to the person we are in ordinary life. Possibly including the writing desk, he suggests that even "[t]he furniture insists that we cannot change because it does not."[81] Here, obviously, furniture has taken on other connotations than the nomadic

practices and meanings originally implied by words such as "meuble" and "mobilier," that is movables or transportable goods.[82] In de Botton's account, hotel rooms and other spaces of travel, by contrast, are said to give us the "opportunity to escape our habits of mind" and the confinements of the ordinary, rooted world.[83]

Approaching the end of his sojourn at Heathrow, de Botton worries that he, as a writer, might "never have another reason to leave the house."[84] A reviewer of Tony Parsons' *Departures: Seven Stories from Heathrow* (2011) similarly remarked that the writer's enthusiasm for the airport, likely was due to the fact that he had "been enticed by the sheer novelty of getting out of the house," implying that writing, normally, is a solitary pursuit undertaken in the quiet studies of suburban homes, rather than "in the midst of a last call announcement for the 0930 flight to Abu Dhabi."[85] The very idea of writing in the crowded, busy, and public space of the airport defamiliarized traditional notions of writing as a solitary, private, and domestic activity.

While the iconic scene of writing can be said to hide the technologies of writing, notions about work and writing in public spaces tend to signpost particular technologies and material conditions.[86] At Heathrow, de Botton's laptop seemed essential; for Hollein access to a telephone was a prerequisite for the mobile office, and in the case of the writer in the advertising column, wireless broadband was presented as a key to mobile writing. And yet, these technologies have increasingly been associated with the interruption of writing rather than its fulfilment and realization.

In *Does Writing Have a Future?* (2011)—a question Flusser answers in the negative—the telephone and the radio are described as objects that intrude on the order of the desk, interfering with and interrupting writing.[87] Much earlier, the very mechanics and noise of typewriters had been found distracting.[88] Moreover, writing machines and keyboards signified speed and modernity compared to the slow and time-honored practice of writing by hand, and the introduction of portable typewriters came to represent the exodus of the keyboard from the office as it linked writing to mobility.[89] Computer technologies, however, have a particularly Janus-faced relationship with writing.

On the one hand, as regular tools for writing, computers have seemingly replaced the physical desk with the desk-top metaphor of the screen's user interface. Quite significantly, the "Writers' Rooms"-series in *The Guardian* was followed in 2011 by a series called "Writers' Desktops."[90] Notebooks, tablets, and smartphones have also encouraged nomadic notions about

work and writing, since they are tools with no native environment. Instead, they are almost synonymous with travel and movement, and they elevate transit zones to the status of workspaces while simultaneously enabling virtual movement. "Both kinds of movement, physical and virtual," communication scholar Jason Swarts points out, "trouble the idea that work occurs in a single, definable space."[91] Brought forward by the keyboard and the logic of Gutenberg's moveable type, the digital devices that we carry with us have made writing ubiquitous and integral to everyday life. In a sense, these technologies have emancipated writing from the monasterial scriptorium and other closed off spaces, into a demystified, everyday practice.[92]

On the other hand, this progression from the analog to the digital, and from the sedentary to the mobile tends to be associated with a shift from silence and concentration to disruption and distraction, which is often perceived as particularly challenging. Comparing the difficulties experienced by Carlyle's generation, to those of his own time, at the brink of the new millennium, Picker suggests that, with telecommuting in ascent, the territorial problems that plagued intellectual workers in the 19th century have renewed immediacy. The battle for spaces to concentrate and to write, he suggests, will continue "against the new auditory challenges of technology—the beeps of cell phones, the blare of car alarms, and the buzz of superhighways."[93] Presently, however, it is not actual, acoustic noise that is appointed the primal enemy of resilient writing, but the built-in distractions of our writing tools: email, browsers, social media.[94]

In a book about the history of silence, writer Jane Brox points out that our writing tools constitute an assault on silence. The faint clicks from the keyboard have replaced the pen's scratch and the clacking sound of the typewriter, but digital technology has simultaneously opened our homes to the world in a profound manner, and this kind of connection, Brox ponders, is possibly a greater threat to silence than actual noise, since "distraction is also its opposite."[95] In *A History of Silence* (2018), historian Alain Corbin similarly claims that it is not the noisy commotion of urban life that is to blame for the loss of silence, but hyper-mediation and our constant connection to an infinite flow of information.[96] On the same note, writer Nicholas Carr declares in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (2010), that our words have become embedded in the computer's "ecology of interruption technologies."[97] The ways in which we have come to use computers, he claims, means that we "have cast our lot with the juggler" and rejected the intellectual tradition of solitary, single-minded concentration.[98] Writers commonly cite their strategies for shielding them-

selves from such distractions.[99] And "distraction-free" applications like ZenWriter and WriteRoom have been developed to support concentrated writing, while at the same time encouraging the idea that "a room of one's own is not stationary but mobile."[100] In a recent article in *The New Yorker*, writer Julian Lucas admits that one such distraction free program actually allowed him to write anywhere with meditative ease, "as though I were carrying a small study in my pocket." In comparison, Lucas suggests, a simple focus mode setting on a regular "everything device" with internet connection, equals the establishment of "a meditation room in a casino."[101]

Writing, it would seem, seeks to distance itself from its deskbound and romantic legacy, but the pursuit of silence and concentration remains. To fully reverse the iconic scene of writing, however, writing would have to replace the poetics of the desk with a poetics of distraction.

VACATING THE GARRET

Neither the iconic scene of writing, nor alternative scenes of writing in transit, are to be interpreted as representations of actual, applied practices. They are idealized images that seek to project writing as either mysterious or mundane, as withdrawn from or intertwined in society. The two epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter—the solitary, sedentary, and highly romantic desk-scene in von Kraemer's poem, and the narrator's nomadic and restless writing in Tokarczuk's novel—obviously demonstrate quite opposite attitudes to writing. Although they mirror different mindsets towards literature and society, they do not necessarily reflect a general historical process, from a sedentarist to a nomadic world order.

As noted by literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt, "the pervasiveness and power of contemporary developments have paradoxically [...] reinforced the assumption that the originary condition was one of fixity and coherence."[102] In terms of discourse, the period between 1800 and 1945 has in fact been defined as a sedentary parenthesis in an essentially mobile world view. The sedentary view thus dominated during a period when mobility forcefully accelerated in the world.[103] In many ways this period coincided with the golden age of the reign of the desk—with the Romantic cult of genius, the advent of literary tourism, and the musealization and mediatization of writers' desks, workshops, and homes. The iconic scene of writing, countryside retreats, and the ideals of solitude and silence thus worked as counter images to the imperatives of modernity—the movement, speed, noise, and crowds brought about by urbanization, technologies, and new means of transportation.

In our present age of mobility and distraction the writing desk remains a token of resistance, and the iconic scene of writing is regularly invoked as an image comprising conditions essential to writing. Towards the end of *The Shallows*, Carr addresses the seemingly contradictory fact that he has himself succeeded in writing a voluminous book, despite its topic being the difficulties of reading, writing, and thinking in a digital world. It was not easy, he admits, initially experiencing how interruptions constantly scattered his words and thoughts. Eventually, however, Carr moved from his Boston suburb to a remote countryside where there was no cell phone service and the internet connection was slow; he turned off his email, shut down his blog, and logged out from his social media accounts. In essence, Carr staged an iconic scene of writing—a garret and a refuge—whereby his work was cut off, not only from distractions but from contemporary society and the social world. His privilege to dismantle his online life somehow parallels the "closed shutters of the garret, the drawn drapes of the study, or the walls of books lining the library," that, according to Brodkey, "all effectively remove the writer from time as well as space."[104]

The opposite would be to leave the desk behind and "vacate the garret," signifying an ambition to demystify writing and literary creation, and to make excursions, as Brodkey puts it, "into the very social, historical, and political circumstances from which garrets have been defending us."[105] Such an approach to writing, that does not ask for long hours of uninterrupted work, like Tikkanen's scene of writing which supported the fragmentary emergence of words in the brief intervals between everyday obligations and distractions, would acknowledge what already Woolf realized: that interruptions will always occur.[106] Like the text editor Write or Die, which begins erasing your text from the end if you paus to reflect or procrastinate, a full-blown poetics of distraction would make a virtue of restlessness rather than contemplation.[107] And in the end, the ability to write under any circumstances and to generate fragmentary and incoherent texts would—like hyper-attentive reading—be recognized as a resourceful cognitive style, rather than a failure to meet ideals and norms that appear increasingly unrealistic.[108]

Presently, the COVID-19 pandemic has turned things on their heads, and the writing desk could, much like Mark Twain upon reading his premature obituary in a newspaper in 1897, respond by saying that "the report of my death was an exaggeration." To write in transit has not been a viable option for two years, and many of those doing brainwork have been encouraged or forced to work from home. I have myself been writing this chapter sitting

at my desk on the second floor of our countryside home—provokingly reminiscent of an iconic scene of writing. And yet, what was a viable option for Carr ten years ago, appears almost impossible today. With high-speed broadband and video applications there are no actual retreats, rooms of our own, or places of withdrawal, when writing, along with conferences, meetings, and seminars happen on one and the same screen.

Regardless of what eventually will come of our until recently mobile world, scenes of writing AFD have brought attention to and unsettled the romanticized ideals of writing inscribed in the desk and the private study. Away from desk, writing is projected, not as frail, inaccessible, or burdened with class-bound and patriarchal models of the creative process, but as a worldly, secular, and mundane activity. Sitting at her kitchen table in the midst of the pandemic, Emily Hodgson Anderson declares that "[t]his table is [...] where we do homework, draw pictures, read stories. It is where we eat pancakes and have Zoom meetings and pay bills. It is also where I write."[109]

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3

Guided by the Fool at the Desk: Generic Practices in Late-Night Comedy Talk Shows

JOANNA DOONA

Across the world, late-night comedy talk shows still look strikingly similar to their 1950s American predecessors. The format—based on variety and topical entertainment—is ubiquitous, especially visually and in labeling, originating from *The Tonight Show* (NBC, 1954–). We only need a quick glance to identify a late-night comedy talk show: a host, a desk, and a guest chair or sofa. Often including an in-studio audience, a band, and a nighttime skyline backdrop. Though on-demand media challenge tradition in this so-called post-network era, late-night remains strikingly similar.[1]

Scholarly attention devoted to late-night comedy talk shows (hereafter late-night) concerns issues like celebrity, public discourse, and audiences. The object in the middle of it all, the desk, seems unnoticed. Its more serious older sibling, the news desk, gains more interest.[2] Unlike late-night desks, news desks are associated with modern era journalism and democracy. Like the news desk, the late-night desk is placed front-and-center in the studio. In this sense, it differs from some of the other desks in this collection, like Andreas Nyblom's isolated writer's desk or Alexander Paulsson's back-office stock-analysts' desk. Late-night desks are used for social interaction—like Elizabeth Martinell Barfoed and Teres Hjärpe's social workers' desk. But unlike them, late-night desks are a place for the performance of celebrities and entertainers, or even zoo animals.

Studio sets are meaningful communicative spaces that express shows' profiles and communicative intentionality.[3] While desks in general often symbolize modern era seriousness, in these spaces, they've become important visual cues for *comedy*—part of a regularly occurring late-night jest with that seriousness.

The late-night format is a product of the American broadcasting era: time-bound, commercial, and relatively cheaply produced—created to sell

audiences to advertisers in a previously unused timeslot.[4] Correspond-ingly, audiences developed late-evening viewing habits. Late-night is one of several so-called dayparts structuring television schedules, following primetime at 11:30 p.m. In smaller media markets, audiences are too small to motivate original production in those timeslots. Instead, many non-American late-night shows are broadcast earlier in the evening, often using words like late and night in their titles anyway.

This chapter explores late-night by studying these desks' ubiquity, focus-ing especially on constructions of the relationship between set design and comedy work. The way hosts, producers, writers, and journalists verbalize the desk's importance is part of a generic discourse, which in turn produces and reproduces late-night, keeping its desk meaningful and omnipresent. Guided by an interest in communicative intentionality, the selection of materials focuses on production discourse and entertainment journalism, rather than the shows themselves, or their audiences (although these figure in entertainment journalism and production discourse). Following the coming section's contextualization of late-night as a phenomenon, Amer-ican late-night shows are in focus, motivated by the genre's origin, its inter-national influence, and the considerable size and consistency of the US television market.

LATE-NIGHT DESKS ACROSS THE WORLD

If only the original 1954 *Tonight Show* production team had known how universal and long-lasting their set design would become! Despite differ-ences in studio and audience size, as well as broadcasting frequency, stage sets, program titles, and hosts' gender are remarkably similar. For instance, Georgian *Night Show with Giorgi Gabunia* (Imedi, 2018–) and Bulgarian *Nikolaos Tsitiridis Show* (bTV, 2020–) share set and graphic design elements with *The Tonight Show*. Some include sidekicks with their own desks/pulpits, like the French *The Claudy Show* (France Ô, 2013–2015) or Albanian *Xing with Ermalin* (TV Klan, 2016–) where scantily dressed female sidekicks sometimes sit *on* the hosts' desk, reminiscent of midcentury secretaries in film and television. Some include a bar and bartender serving drinks, like in popular Brazilian *Jô Talkshow* (Globo, 2000–2016). In Taiwanese *The Night Night Show with Brian Tseng* (STR Network, 2018–) the stage is bare beyond desk and guest chair; while Algerian *The Great Sbitar* (Nessman/Echourouch TV, 2013–2016) included desktop family photos and other knick-knacks. The main set of Austrian *Welcome Austria with Stermann & Grissemann* (ORF 1, 2007–) looks like a conservative living room, with flowery window cur-

CONAN DESKS

Figure 3.1. Conan O'Brien's different desks. The top right-hand was the last one. Compiled and used with permission by Sydnie Ponic.

tains framing a view of the Alps. Backdrops are another commonality, often depicting a city night skyline, connoting newscasts' world maps, yet more regional or local.

There are elements of trend with regard to furniture and studio design in late-night, alongside the international variations. Still, desks are almost always big and solid-looking, rectangular, or slightly curved in shape, and variously ornate. Often, but not always with a closed front that only lets us see the host from the waist-up. Two main styles dominate: the older mid-century modern look, with solid wooden desks; and the newer, end-of-the-century glitzy style dominating contemporary news, where desks are made of glass and plastic, often with color, lights, and lots of shine. In the US, the former dominates—except for in programs like *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, 1996–) which explicitly parody news. The more variety-based shows often sport a Madison Avenue-looking style: teak or mahogany-colored, with abstract patterns or details. Sometimes these desks include neon light streaks, incorporating an element of the new within the mid-century look.

Another slight difference is found on desktops: some are clean, perhaps with script-cards, a microphone, or laptop. Others include personal items, referencing the host. While the abovementioned family photos are rare in American shows, objects often speak to fan knowledge: Conan O'Brien is a presidential history buff, reflected in his pen-holding mug shaped like Eisenhower's head; Seth Meyers keeps a babushka-doll version of a fan-favorite character he co-created at *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1976–).[5]

The COVID-19 pandemic forced hosts to record or even broadcast from home. While this made some hosts avoid desks entirely, others attempted a television-studio likeness: Stephen Colbert had a satellite truck parked on his front-lawn and used his family as crew; John Oliver spoke about his apartment room-turned-studio as a blank void, connoting its neutral, white background (and maybe also an affective state); while O'Brien, less concerned with achieving a studio-like look, recorded from his real-life home-office desk, with guitars, art, and books visible behind him. For once, some of the late-night desks were in actual offices, rather than television studios.

APPROACHING DESK EVENTS AND DESK PIECES

Lamenting problems of exclusively textual approaches, scholars like Jane Feuer, Steve Neale, and Jason Mittell argue for poststructuralist views of genres as continually made and re-made through discursive practice.[6] The firmly kept generic traditions are incremental to such practice, as "there is no causal mechanism or active process of generic continuity in the programs."[7] Rather, "[p]rocesses of genre reproduction, such as creating new sitcoms [. . .] only occur through the actions of industries and audiences, not texts themselves."[8] These processes result from genre work, involving "immersive and reflexive modes of engagement and experience."[9] Here, journalists' and producers' engagement is highlighted, expressed through discursive constructions of desks' practical and symbolic meaning. How do writers, producers, hosts, journalists, and critics construct this pervasive object; how is it utilized, enjoyed, problematized or valued?

To grasp not only the physical but the generic meaning of the late-night desk, two types of materials are studied. First, journalistic materials, focused on desk-related shifts in two different shows ("desk events"): NBC's *Late Night with Seth Meyers* (1982–) and TBS's *Conan* (2010–2021). Second, books and websites about late-night comedy writing as craft ("how-to"). These materials include both whispers of tradition and contemporary late-night know-how.

In 2015, *Late Night* host Seth Meyers began performing his opening monologue segment from behind the desk. This seemingly slight shift meant deviating from the common structure, with specific types and ordering of segments. Meyer's monologue became a so-called desk piece, a segment usually following the initial monologue (done standing, facing the studio audience), preceding guest interviews, games, sketches, or pre-recorded videos.[10] In desk pieces, hosts make jokes sitting behind the desk,

looking straight into the camera, sometimes with on-screen illustrations beside them, as in classic newscasts, or using props such as photographs. When interviewed in a how-to book, *Conan*-writer Todd Levin describes desk pieces: "The simplicity of this format is deceivingly hard to crack. It must be generic enough to accommodate all kinds of jokes, familiar enough to require very little setup, and fresh enough that it hasn't already been attempted in more than a half century."[11]

Desk pieces are difficult despite their simplicity, reflecting a strong theme in how-to materials: comedy production hardships, especially related to production demands. American late-night often runs four or five 40-minute-episodes weekly, compared to, for instance, sitcoms with one 20-minute-episode weekly.

Meyers' protracted desk pieces were constructed as part of a fine-tuning, which sometimes reflects low ratings after switching hosts. However, not always: the host's own comfort matters too, alongside considerations of what segment clips become popular online—an added consideration since streaming and Youtube. Discourse-focused genre analysis centers on "what terms and definitions circulate around any given generic instance, and how specific cultural assumptions are linked to particular genres."[12] Journalistic constructions of late-night habitually focuses on ratings. It fits the common media game or war frame, signaling impending doom or glorious victory. American late-night is highly competitive, especially when veteran hosts retire from long-running franchises like NBC's *The Tonight Show* and *Late Night*, or CBS's *The Late Show* (1993–) and *The Late Late Show* (1995–). Game and war frames are functions of media logic—ways for journalism to create a sense of urgency. Late-night is depicted as in constant decline, much like some of the other chapters show discourse on the decline of the desk itself. But it is clearly a slow death. The fact that companies still consider the format profitable *enough* is rarely mentioned.

Meyers highlights comedy as craft by saying: "I don't think these are traditions as much as they are structures that have proved they can bear comedy weight."[13] The reformatting of *Late Night*'s initial monologue is mainly constructed as matching his comfort and style better. Late-night hosts often look the same, but they have different personas. Elements of physicality (dancing or other physical comedy) fit better with standing monologues, where the camera has wider and taller range.[14] O'Brien often performed silly dances during his monologues, played with the camera (operator) by running up to them and create unsettling close-ups, or running out of frame. Meyers, however, does not; desk pieces fit his more satirical

comedic persona. While his set looks conventional visually speaking, staying behind the desk signals his satirical current affairs focus.

Interestingly, the desk's importance is both emphasized and downplayed. When the traditional-looking cable show *Conan* (TBS, 2010–2021) removed the desk entirely in 2019, host O'Brien said: "It's nicer without the desk. I used to really feel like I was doing people's taxes."[15] *Conan*'s desk removal came alongside a few other changes and slight shifts in O'Brien's comic persona. Similar to the increasingly mobile writers identified in Nyblom's chapter, he had begun travelling the world for his segment-turned-show, *Conan without Borders* (TBS, 2015–2019).

O'Brien is a veteran of *Late Night* and *The Tonight Show*, with 26 years of hosting. Alongside reverence to tradition, longevity has always been lauded in late-night discourse, underscoring consistency: Johnny Carson did almost 30 years, David Letterman 33.[16] Though O'Brien represents a niche late-night brand, that was not really communicated through set design or formatting until 2019. In this case, ratings were also mentioned as the main motivator:

> The audience for the traditional late-night carnivals is shrinking and aging. The average viewer of Jimmy Fallon's "Tonight"—prized [...] for its relatively youthful demographics—is going on fifty-eight years old. Perhaps "Conan" is more sensitive to tremors in the entertainment landscape.[17]

The shift was considered slightly more radical than Meyer's, but according to conservative *The Federalist*'s review, it was overhyped: "Ahead of the revamped [...] debut, O'Brien teased a big shakeup of the late-night format: no suits, no band, no musical guests, no desk. In practice, these much-hyped changes actually feel more like tweaks than disruptions."[18] In an in-depth interview with *The New York Times,* market conditions where again mentioned as the motivation for shifting, but beyond that, "O'Brien hopes [it] will also help the program capture more of the unpredictable comic energy he's been chasing from the moment he succeeded David Letterman [...] in 1993."[19]

These constructions make contents and stage sets inseparable. And while *The Federalist* needs to gain attention just like late-night does, the "revamp" *was* a PR opportunity. Without negating other justifications given, it does add to the discursive complexity of events. *The Federalist* taps into a discourse on self-centered Hollywood elites' hype, to target conservative readers—resulting in a somewhat critical reading, uncommon in the studied materials.

Possibly reflecting his veteran confidence, or conversely, his position at a smaller cable channel, O'Brien was more explicit than Meyers about corporate management, comedic style, and marketing:

> When he looked back on himself in those earliest broadcasts, O'Brien [...] said he saw a performer attempting to fulfill competing desires. "We're trying to be anarchists, but I'm trying to be a good boy and do a good job for the network," he said. What he's engaged in now, he said, "is this gradual progression toward me making the job fit me more — what do I like?"[20]

The balancing of style and continuity are important here, as late-night seems to stay the same, yet evolves. Considering genres both active processes and stable formations means late-night is a discursive cluster where "certain definitions, interpretations, and evaluations com[e] together."[21] Diverse considerations align to form it. With this perspective comes an understanding of development, where genre history is a "fluid and active process, not a teleological tale of textual rise and fall."[22] Ironically, journalistic discourse constructs late-night through precisely such tales.

Production discourse's reverence to tradition seems almost mandatory. Tradition, in turn, becomes related to business-minded risk avoidance, inseparable from other production considerations. Adherence to classic sets and structures assures consistent production, again emphasizing genre as active and stable, with several aspects in need of coordination. At the center we find the hosts, not only their comedic style—their names are in shows' titles, and they are part of senior production management. In practice, this means tweaking branding to compete better: Meyers becomes slightly more satirical, matching what he was known for after several years at *Saturday Night Live*. His shift to more topical humor hence relates both to genre/style, *and* ratings, conflating the two: "*Late Night* was launched on the back of the persona Meyers had developed [...] at *Saturday Night Live*, but when starting out, all he wanted to do was avoid repeating himself. Hence, the delayed transition to moving behind the desk."[23] Conversely, O'Brien saw an opportunity: "What I'm trying to do is hang on to all the things that I think we do well, and remove some of the stuff that was making me feel like, 'Why are we still doing this?' especially in an era [...] of 135 late-night talk shows."[24]

COMEDY WORK AND THE PROJECTION
OF (MASCULINE) CONTINUITY AND POWER

How-to discourse tends to avoid game or war frames. Instead, it focuses on production pace or comedy writing difficulties. Either way, late-night traditions are constructed as providing safety and stricture. Meyers mentions wanting to "give the traditional look a try" at first, as "the priority was just making it through every episode."[25] Then, there was room for reflection:

> Like many of the late-night hosts before him, Meyers has realized the value of the genre's inbuilt formats. [...] "That's the reason people keep using them," he says. The stand-up monologue is a quick way to knock out gags about whatever's happening in the world—vital for any hour-long show that needs to be funny every day. [...] Behind a desk, the jokes are similar, but can be slightly more evolved. "It's a tried-and-true, tested delivery system," Meyers says, adding that the format allows him to punctuate his jokes visually.[26]

Satire or topical humor is better at the desk, not only for its association with news, but for the visual frame it provides—a kind of *sit-down* comedy.

In a sense, the late-night desk like its sibling news desk, is a collecting place, a node in an information network, as described by Latour.[27] Beyond jokingly recounting the day's stories, hosts use scripts, pens, and microphones at their desks—or as in the case of *The Tonight Show*'s first host, Steve Allen, "timetables."[28] Like news anchors, they speak to people "in the field," sometimes via link; or they go out themselves, coming back to the desk with reports. These so-called remotes signify the desk as the base of operations. From behind them, hosts speak to off-camera producers and cameramen; communicating that they are in command, even though their real desk—where they do their off-air everyday work—is somewhere else, off-stage.

The continuity created through these clustering genre discourses reflect the old and new—channeled via the desk and person behind it. Latour wrote about bureaucrats and researchers, emphasizing differences between the two. Applied to late-night, the desk becomes an affective, somewhat silly, cultural node. Here a more vernacular account of the state of things contributes to a constantly ongoing collecting and processing, different from the straighter forms of information associated with researchers and bureaucrats, or news journalists. The city night backdrop reminds audiences of a shared generic reference, and the time of night, further signifying a kind of assembling, a regular coming-together.

This in turn indicates a powerful position, embodied by the amalgamation of host and desk. In *Slate Magazine*, Noreen Malone wonders why late-night desks generally appear on the right-hand side of studios (from the audience perspective): "virtually all late-night hosts have used this right-screen setup—Steve Allen, Jack Paar, Johnny Carson, David Letterman, Jay Leno, Craig Ferguson, Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and even the fictional Larry Sanders."[29] According to her, Western languages' left-to-right direction impacts how we look at screens. She cites a generalized "theory of stagecraft" which holds that "a rightward placement telegraphs royalty [...] no matter how famous the guest may be, sitting to the left makes him or her seem subservient."[30] This idea is found in formal seating etiquette too, impacting the placement of men and women, or guests of honor. In television, it is further reinforced by hosts often sitting slightly upstage from guests.

Former late-night head writer Joe Toplyn highlights desks and desk pieces in his how-to book for aspiring writers. For him, they have essential psychological and practical affordances: the practical deals with camera work and angles, like having a clear fixed surface on which to show pictures and props, and somewhere to hide them before and after performances. When comedian Jon Stewart (famous from satirical *The Daily Show*) appears on Stephen Colbert's *The Late Show*, he often enters the stage by comically crawling up from behind/under Colbert's desk, as if that is where he lives.

Toplyn mentions the desk as a form of practical node too, expressed as relating to the "fair amount of paperwork and paraphernalia" that are handled during the show, including scripts and notes.[31] Sometimes they cross over and become props—as with *Last Week Tonight*'s (HBO, 2014–) John Oliver, who slams comically large stacks of papers onto his desk to illustrate paperwork or research. Again, late-night desks are workspaces with paper, pens, glasses of water, coffee mugs (often depicting show logos), et cetera. In how-to books, this practical aspect is constructed as a logic of production. Still, it is not difficult to imagine other kinds of furniture and set designs that could accommodate those same needs: the existence of late-night programming without desks is proof that drinks, notes, and props could be handled differently.

Turning to Toplyn's psychological aspects, the desk gains another yet related meaning. It is the place where hosts spend the most time, "performing comedy, interviewing guests, and presiding like a ringmaster over the other activities inside and outside the studio."[32] A ringmaster is a kind of node—coordinating and controlling timing and flows of information, or

rather, the performance of them. The stage area with the desk and guest chairs or sofa is referred to as homebase—a baseball metaphor signifying where the batter stands, but also the place runners must reach safely in order to score. In this mixing of metaphors, Toplyn emphasizes the desk's many functions, relating to the fast-paced production, as well as the projection of power: it is tough to keep track of every moving part of a late-night production, so the desk creates stability and safety in both a psychological and a practical sense. Both desk events mentioned confirm this—Myers needed more desk pieces for comfort, early on in his late-night hosting career, and O'Brien decided to lose the desk to scare himself, after many years as host.[33]

Toplyn's construction of psychological reasons for desks and desk pieces further develops the power aspect:

> A big, handsome desk bestows an air of authority of the host that makes it a little easier for him to do his job. A desk gives the host an edge when it comes to commanding respect and attention. It signals to audience and guests, "The guy sitting here is in charge." […] a host sits at an expensive desk for the same reason the CEO of a large corporation often rules his empire from behind an enormous desk and a judge sits at an elevated desk […]. The need to project power and credibility is also why hosts tend to dress like CEOs.[34]

The use of male pronouns, wording like "handsome," and the comparisons to this type of CEO creates a desk that symbolizes and protects masculine power. Late-night is often criticized for failing to include and represent more diverse sets of hosts. In part, this relates to target audiences and television channels' branding. During the past few years, Meyers has featured a recurring desk piece with female, black, and/or gay members of his writing staff called "Jokes Seth Can't Tell." In the segment, they sit beside him behind the desk telling jokes that expose how the joke-teller's position matters to the joke itself: Meyers delivers the joke setup and the writers deliver the punchline. The literal position of being behind the desk is temporarily shared—visually, and in joke-telling. A kind of carnival within the carnival, in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense. While forward-thinking, it becomes proof of late-night's pervasive masculinity.

So far, female comedians have only hosted late-night shows made for them—original *to* them, that is, such as *The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers* (Fox, 1986–1987), or *Chelsea Lately* (E!, 2007–2014).[35] And while Joan Rivers had a desk, Chelsea Handler had a large high table for her panel segment,

with three or four participants; then moving to armchairs for guest interviews. Often, women's talk shows—late-night or otherwise—include other kinds of furniture, like high tables with several people, sofas, or armchairs. Less of a single authority is projected. These setups are also more common to British so-called chat shows, notwithstanding hosts' gender.

Toplyn's constructions of late-night hosts as exclusively male is significant since head writers hire other writers (or write how-to books). While the issue lies slightly outside the scope of this chapter, it is important because it relates to tradition, and the weight given to it—especially visual tradition.[36] While male and female differences in comedic style could be problematized too, the visual element—the fact that women look like women—is difficult to change. As with the female writers in Nyblom's chapter, the desk continues to carry a cultural connotation of masculinity. If it was noteworthy that Conan stopped dressing like a CEO in 2019, women clearly still have a way to go. Despite gaining ground in other comedic spheres like stand-up comedy or sit-coms, the late-night format still carries a strong masculine norm.

THE EMBODIMENT OF MASS-PRODUCED FOLLY

As theorized by William Willeford and developed by Julia Fox, the comedian as a public fool can be considered an "embodiment of folly itself as a uniquely and universally human way of adapting to the social world."[37] She emphasizes how our engagement with folly is not only about appreciating jokes, but also about "getting in touch with our own knowledge and experience of folly" in the world.[38] This too emphasizes desk-host amalgams as cultural as well as affective nodes, connecting with another form of information: audiences' existing knowledge and experiences.

In that sense, late-night symbolizes the broadcast era of mass entertainment, where a *we* is perpetually created through ritual media engagement. As expressed by Paddy Scannell, the communicative structure of broadcast television can be understood as a "for-anyone-as-someone structure"—especially in situations where hosts look straight into the camera, addressing home audiences directly.[39] Television, then:

> mediates between the for-anyone structures of publicly available anonymous (mass-produced) usable things and the for-someone of purely personal things (letters, family snapshots and videos, etc.). The intermediary character of for-anyone-as-someone structures makes possible the use of "we," for it is that which is mediated by the structure.[40]

The *we* is both shrinking and multiplying, ratings-wise. As with other media genres, digitalization increases comedic genre mixing, hybridization, and specialization, contributing to the broader trend of fragmented media and engagement. The role of timeslots, which add a *now* to the *we* and create a kind of temporal collective collecting place, is increasingly threatened.

Late-night comedy's relationship to the topical is part of this temporally charged collecting continuity too. The topical jokes told at the desk mirror stories told earlier in the evening at the sibling news desk, signaling a collective *we* moving through time—guided by the fool at the desk. While topical humor may be harsh or controversial at times (marked by the too-soon expression), it is still experienced as easier to engage with when we are tired, stressed, or worried, than serious or troubling news stories are. Late-night topical comedy exposes the world's folly in a more reflexive mode, providing what humor scholar Simon Critchley calls "an abstract relation to the world."[41]

The fact that late-night desks are positioned to face a live studio audience further marks something communal. When O'Brien removed his desk, one stated motivation was to be closer to the audience, and "less presentational in the old-school way", exposing how closeness and community is constructed and attributed in different ways here.[42] For him, the studio audience is highlighted as he wants to be rid of the desk-as-barrier—in line with ideas associated with the desk in social work (see Martinell Barfoed and Hjärpe's chapter); for Meyers, the added desk-time served home audiences' *we*. In both cases, laughing along with others—the people next to us, the studio audience, and/or the home audience—affirms community.[43] Beyond television business' financial purpose, to sell audiences to advertisers, this makes for an affectively charged social-temporal function close to, but still different from, that of the newscast.

The weighting of practical use against symbolic meaning is emphasized differently in the two sets of studied materials, yet always convey total intentionality, perhaps obscuring aspects of tradition somewhat. Tradition relates to esteem—as shown, it is common for hosts to pay tribute to late-night comedy heroes such as Jack Parr, Johnny Carson, and David Letterman—but also perhaps, to the risk-averse conservatism characterizing cultural industries. O'Brien highlights the process where hosts grow up as fans of their predecessors. As he shifted his format, he began reflecting on this:

> I grew up revering the format, and then over time, you think, what's feeling like it's vestigial? I really don't miss the desk. [. . .] [Production is] turbulent and there's conflict and I like it. It's Lenin's Politburo versus Brezhnev's.

> One is lots of angry disagreement and the other one is like, uhhh, grain
> production, and everyone knows this has to go another five years anyway.[44]

While it did not go "another five years" in this case (the last episode of
Conan aired in June 2021), describing late-night comedy work in terms of
mass production is similarly present in how-to materials, where metaphors
of factory work are common. The need for high pacing is not only con-
structed as related to staggering amounts of episodes or being understaffed,
it is also about comedy as a difficult art form. Many of the jokes and bits
written are thrown out, as former Madison Avenue marketing executive
turned media professor Mel Helitzer put it: "Even when a writer's imagi-
nation is going full steam, the rule of ten in, nine out applies: For every ten
jokes written, only one might be acceptable."[45] Toplyn develops this in
relation to the logic of desk pieces:

> Every head writer loves refillable, repeatable pieces because they really help
> "feed the beast," that is, fill those empty comedy slots that stretch out in-
> definitely into the future. Serving up totally new comedy pieces every night
> is the ideal but coming up with new themes takes a lot of work. Time-tested,
> repeatable pieces lighten the load considerably.[46]

"Feeding the beast" is an example of the discursive differences between the
promotional media materials, and the backstage-focused how-to materials.
Risk minimization is a strong discursive theme: taking risks with time and
pacing of production work, or audience responses, can translate to financial
risks.[47] And while such an environment might not encourage creative ex-
plorations of the comedic art form, limits on creativity—alongside the ways
we motivate, frame, and speak of such limits—are part of the production
and re-production of genre as discursive practice. A freer form of comedy
would not, per definition, be late-night comedy. After 70 years, these con-
straints and the ways they are constructed are aspects, rather than limits,
of late-nights artistic and aesthetic expression. The question is, "What can
be done within these confines?" In other words, the abilities of writers,
producers, and performers to create and market comedy within those strict
confines, become part of late-night's comedic quality.

The difficulties of late-night writing relate to balancing quality with
quantity, and speed. Mary Douglas considered the joke a form of "anti-
rite," that mocks or parodies rites and societal ritual practices.[48] In late-
night, the shows themselves can be considered ritual practices with their
extreme consistency over time and formatting; meaning the anti-element
here, the jokes themselves, are embedded or tucked in—just as the at-home

late-night viewers may be. In this sense, late-night comedy becomes a kind of grown-up bedtime story. The predictability of the format allows ritual engagement with the mentioned "abstract relation to the world," albeit with a sense of an extra safety cushion, softening the experience and protecting viewers from the unexpected.

O'Brien is known for referring to silliness and time-wasting as his main comedic contributions. Former staff writer Scott Fairdner says that "the highest praise a sketch could get from O'Brien was 'What a waste of everyone's time!'"[49] Here, O'Brien purposeful time-wasting could be seen as an active *disengagement* with the daily information flow, making the late-night desk a kind of endpoint for the night, rather than a node. Wasting time signals something less important, and certainly not something special.

Design writer Steven Heller describes the early days of late-night and news sets. In 1954, *The Tonight Show* "introduced scenic restraint;" the early incarnation of the show "was not a 'spectacular'". Rather, "Allen promised it would be kind of 'monotonous,' noting that the Hudson theater on 44th Street [...] 'slept' over eight hundred people."[50] Allen and 1950s NBC did not count on people wanting too much of anything "spectacular" in the late evening. The slightly boring set design was intentional:

> The older, colorless sets had been built on the theory that whether viewers were fed news or entertainment, they should feel comfortable with a show's informal formality that resembled their own domesticity (or psychiatrist's office) with desk, carpet, and house plants ... Each show's host had a persona, but the sets were mostly the same.[51]

This idea of informal formality still seems to rule the world of late-night, even after news studios increasingly started looking like "space ships," with contrived "high-tech, luminescent glitz" as Heller puts it—with shinier more colorful floors and glass or plastic desks, in front of lots of large screens.[52] Both American and international examples studied here can include such glitz, perhaps counteracting the informal formality; however, older styles are as mentioned still common. In *Welcome Austria with Stermann & Grissemann* the set seems decorated in the style of what might be described as an older lady's living room, complete with adjacent rooms making it resemble a real home.

CONCLUSIONS:
CIRCULAR ASSUMPTIONS OF DESK UNIVERSALITY

There is a certain kind of nostalgic feel to the discussion on late-night's demise, because the desk as a cultural-affective node does seem to provide everyone involved—producers, performers, management, and engaged audiences—a sense of security, stability, and, sometimes, stifling conservatism; both psychologically and practically. Sensing safety at bedtime is probably beneficial in many ways, but the authority and credibility bestowed to this amalgamation of a node might be questioned, in an age when power and normativity have become important themes in and around comedy. For certain niche audiences, such security might look different than the current strait-laced Mad Men-looking, albeit jesting suit-clad host; late-night clearly still promotes a traditional and specific form of masculine command. Perhaps this is why O'Brien decided to lose the desk, and Meyers has begun sharing his. The exception seems to be when late-night veers into satire, where stage design is glitzier to parody news shows. But maybe not even then: one of the more popular female late-night satire hosts, Samantha Bee, does not use a desk in her *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* (TBS, 2015–). The identified clusters of genre constructions do not always overlap, as the wide variety of broadcast, cable, digital, and international examples illustrate. Niche marketing matters here: a more conservative audience might very well get to keep their male authority, perhaps even with a beautiful woman placed on his desk.

The practical and symbolic affordances ascribed to the late-night desk illustrate how genre constructions are inductive as well as deductive, creating a kind of circular argument amounting to the idea that there must be a reason for the desk being there. The late-night desk's potential demise symbolizes a loss of a mass-mediated *we*, as the for-anyone-as-someone structure becomes weakened through media fragmentation. The practice of collectively joking about or mocking a generalized human or societal folly—rather than that of specific groups or perspectives—is what is at stake. Watching grown-up bedtime stories was never something *everyone* did, but the cultural importance bestowed to them in a broader sense made for a kind of collective affective force: topical, but not too serious. Having regularly mediated spaces for this kind of informal formality, directed towards a broader *we*, has value. But the tricky equation of appealing to ageing mass audiences as well as younger niche audiences is yet to be solved. It seems more likely that the relevance of the late-night desk-host amalgams will diminish at the same pace as their ageing audiences.

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51. Heller, "Second Rate Prime."

52. The exception here is news satire, such as *The Daily Show*, which stays closer to the look of contemporary news sets.

4

Trading Places:
Global Financial Markets
Viewed from the Desk

ALEXANDER PAULSSON

In this chapter, I describe the desks of stock traders. By providing a narrative of how the desk has been entangled with other stock market related artifacts, primarily screens, computers, and keyboards, I analyze how global financial markets operate when viewed from the desk. The aim of this chapter, then, is to explore how the desk became a place from which the financial markets are not only observed, but also enacted. Analytically, I move between interrogating what meanings have been attributed to this particular artifact and how this artifact came to represent relationships between people, located at different places in the world.

In the financial industry, the concept of a desk is a well-established metaphor for a specialized office in the larger investment banks. Equity Desk, Commodity Desk, Currency Desk are literally offices, staffed with licensed traders, specialized in analyzing financial data and executing transactions. These desks occupy nodal positions in the continuous flows of information that shape the global financial markets. In order to process information, the financial industry, including the larger investment banks and their desks, have developed its own special-purpose technologies over the years.[1] During the late 19th century, the stock ticker, which continuously printed quotes and stock prices on a small roll of paper, led the way.[2] Stationary phones, and later handheld devices, both adapted for financial trading, were frequently used, and still are.[3] Some of the first computers in the financial industry were basic electronic tickers. With the launch of the electronic trading platform Nasdaq in 1972, computers were introduced and used to assemble and distribute information about price quotes as well as buy and sell orders.[4] This development made it possible for the traders to keep track of where the market was going. But it also enabled personalized information flows, as traders created their own heuristics to track stocks or

commodities that they had taken a position on. Yet, it was not until the early 1980s, around the time when desktop computers entered the trading rooms, that the desk became a key artifact in the financial markets.[5] The desks then worked as an infrastructure for another artifact, the Bloomberg Terminal, with its unmistakable black desktop screen and multi-monitor environment.[6]

There is a larger context to all of this. In the 1980s, waves of deregulation and liberalization of financial transactions meant that the financial markets expanded. What really changed how computers were used in the industry was Black Monday, the sudden stock market crash on Wall Street in 1987. For the regulators, transactions over computer networks were traceable and possible to oversee, compared to transactions executed over phones. As computerized transactions could be executed in an "orderly manner," regulators demanded electronic records stored on hard drives.[7] Around this time, NASDAQ also began providing the possibility to place buy and sell orders on securities from their networks. Yet, the decisive turn occurred in the mid-1990s. Then the stock exchanges in New York, Chicago and Toronto started to move trading from floors to digital networks. "Open outcry trading" on the floors, which had been the dominating form of trading for the past century, was being supplemented by computerized on-screen trading and trading with handheld devices on the floors. This also repositioned the desk. From being marginal place, the desk came out as the trader's primary workplace.

CENTERS OF CALCULATIONS

During the 20th century, when so-called open outcry dominated, trading floors were designed without a proper center, reflecting the notion that markets operate as distributed informational networks. Traders gathered in pits, which resembled small, submerged amphitheaters. Trading was done by screaming orders at each other and at the brokers at the bottom of the pit. The transactions were later cleared by exchanges in back offices.[8] While each stock exchange had several such pits, trading in a certain type of stock always took place at a predetermined pit.[9]

This design of the trading floors meant that no trader could be more centrally located than any other. Even though trading floors were designed without a center, these exchanges themselves have become the global centers of financial capitalism. In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour argues that global capitalism preferably should be studied through careful observations of centers of calculations. In fact, Latour argues that a Wall Street trading room is an example of such a center, as it does

connect to the "whole world" through the tiny but expeditious conduits of millions of bits of information per second, which, after having been digested by traders, are flashed back to the very same place by the Reuters or Bloomberg trading screens that register all of the transactions and are then wired to the "rest of the (connected) world" to determine someone's net worth.[10]

Although speaking about stock trading on a globalized market, Latour is very clear in how capitalism can be studied: it is by understanding the data terminals and the networks through which information is processed, translated, and communicated in these centers of calculations. Although his concept of center of calculations offers a point of departure for this study of desks, Latour himself fails to recognize the significance of the desk, both as an artifact and as a metaphor for specialized offices in investment banks.

As an analytical concept, centers of calculations suggest that quantitative data, such as price quotes and the number of booked orders, flow in and out of these desks. Although correct on its own terms, it only tells part of the story. Besides quantitative data, there is also the financial press, with journalists broadcasting live from the trading floors, reporting on corporate events, which occasionally trigger movements in the stock markets.[11] Sitting at their desks, traders keep themselves updated about global events. An unexpected violent conflict, a trade war, or a coup d'état will certainly trigger movements in prices, not least if global supply chains are disrupted. As traders want to have information about such events in real-time, the global news feeds, produced by channels like CNN or Bloomberg News, are present at these centers of calculations.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC GAZE

Several ethnographic studies of Wall Street and stock trading have emerged over the years. One of the most recent acclaimed works is *Liquidated*, from anthropologist Karen Ho. In her study of Wall Street, she followed the work of stock traders, brokers, and analysts. Observing the social norms at work on Wall Street, she traced how those norms were shaken by massive lay-offs and downsizing efforts, occurring just prior to the 2008 global financial crisis. Instead of only following the experienced traders and analysts, she joined a group of junior recruits, who were just starting in the industry, trying to find their way into the well-organized hierarchy of Wall Street.[12]

Although not interested in the technologies or artifacts used in the financial markets, she does touch upon this as the junior staff could not help but talk about these things. In a colorful description of the design of the

office spaces, she describes that high-end computer technology is primarily used on the trading floors and in the technology rooms, that is, the back offices where transactions are processed and cleared. High-capacity servers are used to increase the speed of the networks and, at the same time, show to the outside world that the stock market is at the forefront of the technological development.[13] Since the early 2000s, the large investment banks have invested in computational capacity, as this is perceived to be needed to store, process, and later access the ever-increasing amounts of quantitative data.[14]

Karen Ho highlights that a major part of the investment banks' operations is relegated to worn back-office landscapes, crowded with far too many desks per square meter, and desktops with just enough computational capacity. Ho notes that "analysts and associates at JP Morgan and Goldman Sachs were often embarrassed to show me their desks, as the only professional spaces that matched images of Wall Street grandeur were their lobbies, conference floors, and senior executive dining rooms and offices."[15] Echoing Goffman's dramaturgical metaphors of frontstage and backstage, a growing rift between the image communicated to the outside world and the reality experienced by the junior staff led to a certain degree of cynicism amongst the latter.[16] Yet, in this account, there is possibly a clue as to why the desk has become a key artifact in the globalized stock markets. Large groups of employees, who actually work on the markets, are located far away from the action-filled trading floors and the glamorous lobbies. For them, the desk is a place around which their work is orbiting and, as will be clear below, a second home of sorts.

Because the dress code is strong in the financial industry, it is difficult to visually show off high status. Instead, status is often expressed in other subtle ways, including the size of one's office, the size of one's desk, or the number of scheduled meetings. But it is also expressed through the social interactions and through the giving and taking of work tasks. Karen Ho provides a vivid account of this, when describing how a senior analyst, late in the afternoon, required a newly requited analyst to produce a data set for early next morning. This put the junior analyst under a lot of pressure and ostensibly forced her into late-night work. Failing to produce such a data set, the junior analyst reflected, would send a signal that she would not be equipped to work long and hard evenings at her desk.[17] This brief account captures both the expectations on the high-commitment work ethic and what many traders and analysts do at work. They sit at their desks trying to analyze the performance of companies, calculate the expected

cashflow of a certain company during the coming quarter, figure out what patents or contracts are in progress, or calculate the future prospects of entire industries. But they also calculate how a change in regulation or interest rate might impact a certain sector or industry. Such calculations are considered crucial as they can raise expectations of future returns and increase the demand for a particular stock, commodity, or currency.[18]

As a center of calculations, the desk has become an artifact, disposed to consolidate the well-organized hierarchy that makes up the investment banks and the global financial markets. Beyond these centers, there is also a huge and growing periphery. Financial markets attract many day traders, non-professionals who work far from Wall Street, at their home offices, trying to make money by betting on price fluctuations. Alex Preda studies these so-called noise traders in his book *Noise: Living and Trading in Electronic Finance*.[19] Preda confess that at the start of his ethnography, he was "fascinated by the trading screens: their flickering, colored numbers, continuously moving up and down."[20] Yet, he shied away from interrogating the significance of the screens and the market-related artifacts surrounding the traders. The non-professionals design their home offices and desk spaces so as to offer a suitable work environment. Often, they do so by mimicking the desk space of the professional traders, including their multi-monitor set-up.[21] While professionals and non-professionals in the US have a similar set-up, they share these similarities with other traders, working at entirely different sites in the global system that makes up the financial markets.

Across the Atlantic, Lépinay studied a global investment bank in France. He explains how financial markets have been, and still are, shaped by the emergence of a new category of financial products, namely derivate instruments.[22] Being a new category, derivate instruments bring together quantivative engineers, or quants, and traders, who represent two different categories of employees. While the quants provide analyses based on mathematical models, the traders are then supposed to integrate these into their trading.[23] Based on the financial instrument that the quants and the traders work on, their desks are grouped in order to facilitate a continuous flow of information and a translation of informal codes.[24]

The desks bring together operators likely to mobilize the same tools and who thus find themselves working with the same language, driven by the instruments at their disposal. When traders leave their spaces, they are likely to enter zones where they must deal with different approaches to products, whether those of the salespeople or of traders working at other desks. In spaces where different players mix, though, matters of most importance

to these specialists are not put on hold; quite the opposite occurs. Coffee breaks and strolls through the trading room become opportunities to obtain information on other markets, on other products, and in general on the inclinations of other players on the floor.[25]

Prices, as well as buy and sell orders, are flickering on the traders' screens. While trade is prompted by the multi-monitor screen environment, the analysts are seeking to grasp underlaying values, not prices. Latour is also perfectly aware of this when discussing trading rooms as centers of calculations. Subsequently, he suggests that buy and sell orders follow a predestined path, channeled through a number of different transits, where hardware and software are combined in purpose-built tools, developed for measuring and evaluating values.

> To tell the truth, we are very familiar with the paths through which economics transits: account books, balance sheets, pay stubs, statistical tools, trading rooms, Reuter screens, flowcharts, agendas, project management software, automated sales of shares, in short, what we can group together under the expression allocation keys, or under the invented term *value meter* since it measures evaluations and values.[26]

In short, a *value meter* is a composite of physical and digital wares through which value is measured. Such a thin description does not offer much analytical depth, but add to this the fact that each traders' desk occupies a position as a center of the center of calculations, around which those value meters are orbiting. Paradoxically though, these desks are empty. The desks of the traders are generally empty due to the investment banks' clean desk policy[27] As personal items or personalized traces are not allowed, this literally makes the desks into non-places, in Marc Augé's terms.[28] On top of each desk stands a wall of monitors, which entirely fills the traders' field of sight. While a clean desks policy is invoking a rationality of efficiency, as Charlie Järpvall's chapter discusses elsewhere in this book, it is a policy which ostensibly make these desks operate, cleared and unhindered, as a center of calculations, by involving an assemblage of value meters, which are packaged into the computer terminals and their software.

THE TERMINAL

While mechanical stock tickers were being replaced by electronic ones during the 1970s, this only cemented the notion that prices should not depend on the trustworthiness of persons, or be confined to local representations, but be distributed over larger informational networks. According to Preda,

it is difficult to "conceive contemporary financial transactions without machines for recording prices and even for conducting transactions."[29] Enterprise-based ICT-systems and large computers were becoming more common in the 1970s, though desktop computers would not end up on the traders' desk for still a few years. It was not until the early 1980s, with the introduction of the Bloomberg Terminal, that desktop computers or terminals and monitors became commonplace in the trading rooms.[30]

Computers were introduced around the same time the stock market grew. In the US, the New York Stock Exchange met serious competition from Nasdaq, which was launched in the early 1970s and grew rapidly as it attracted companies from the booming technology sector. As new companies found their ways into the established stock markets during the following decade, the investment banks also grew and added new services and products to their portfolios. Trading in stocks grew rapidly amongst the wider population as well. And at the same time, risky mortgages and car loans meant the market was swimming in so-called junk bonds. A wave of neoliberal reforms propelled all of this.[31] As a result, the financial industry expanded. It was also during this time, that the stock prices started to circulate more broadly. In New York, on the investment banks' buildings, light boards were set up, with stock prices rolling day and night. This also points to the widespread accessibility to financial information, but also to the increasingly diffused boundary between finance and society.[32]

The advent of the computer in the 1980s came at a time when financial markets were experiencing a booming bull market, a wave of mergers and acquisitions and a period of strong growth.[33] The Bloomberg Terminal quickly set the standard in the financial industry when it was launched in 1982. Mike Bloomberg, who is perhaps best-known today for being the mayor of New York between 2002 and 2013, had a career in journalism (founder and owner of Bloomberg News), and before that he was a Wall Street profile. ICT and computer systems customized for the trading floors was his first real passion, according to his autobiography, *Bloomberg on Bloomberg*. While working at Salomon Brothers, one of the larger investment firms in the mid-1970s, he developed what would eventually become the Bloomberg system for electronically monitoring price developments in bonds and equities.[34]

Until the early 1970s, IBM dominated computerization in the United States, and Wall Street was no exception. At that time, computers were still gigantic cabinets operating on the basis of punch cards.[35] Bloomberg and his colleagues at Salomon Brothers wanted to change this. Traders should be able to sit at their desks and still obtain a good overview of what happened in

the markets, but also have easy access to historical data on prices. In his autobiography, Bloomberg devotes an entire chapter to the development of the Bloomberg Terminal, entitled "Computers for Virgins." As the heading suggests, Bloomberg's idea was to develop a computer for people unaccustomed to sit in front of one, which included most of the experienced traders at the time. The computer would be designed so that a novice could learn the basic features in just a few hours. However, development was slow, partly because it hinged on auxiliary technologies. Bloomberg writes:

> The project was not just to write some computer code. One task was to find the right display device to put in front of the traders and salespeople. (PCs did not exist in those days.) On its equity desks, Salomon already used one that flashed stock quotes, a machine called "Ultronics", manufactured by General Telephone & Electronics, now GTE Corporation. But it was cumbersome, not suited for the bond markets, and technologically impossible to employ for the data distribution we contemplated. These desktop terminals were not general-purpose computers; they were just sophisticated successors to the old ticker tape. An electronic screen blinked the last sale, bid, and offer prices for stocks traded on all major US stock exchanges.[36]

The software was in fact no more than an advanced electronic stock ticker. While this shows how the development of technology is an iterative process, it also points to the organizational practices such a development is interwoven in. Bloomberg wanted the software to be used in a newly developed computer, which was better compatible with the system he had developed.

> "We should remove Ultronics and install Quotrons," I told my bosses. Quotron was another brand of terminal just becoming popular, leased by a small, private California company. "Quotrons will work better and connect with our in-house computers directly from the desks. We'll have access to our trading records, be able to retrieve all the publicly available securities indicative data (ratings, call features, P/E ratios, and so on) instantly and effortlessly, and have our own electronic messaging system for fast, reliable internal communication."[37]

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the common desktop computers on the personal computer market had no windows-based interface. Navigating around the computer was cumbersome, and using a computer required some knowledge on how to manually enter commands. Therefore, the Bloomberg keyboard was filled with a series of color-coded shortcuts, so that traders quickly could locate the desired information (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Bill Gross' Bloomberg Keyboard. National Museum of American History, id number 2014.0144.02.

Bloomberg was fired from Solomon Brothers in the early 1980s, quite unexpectedly according to his own accounts. But being well compensated, he launched his own ICT and software company in 1982: Innovation Market Systems.

From the outset, the Bloomberg Terminal provided real-time data on buy and sell orders, historical data as well as analyses. Four years later, the company was renamed Bloomberg LP, and in 1988, the opportunity to trade, that is to buy and sell stocks, was integrated into the Terminal. While the established markets in New York and Chicago slowly began to accommodate electronic trading, NASDAQ was the only exchange that exclusively did this in the 1980s. Fast forward to the 1990s, the Bloomberg Terminal came to contain a number of social functions. As an exclusively targeted group of users, traders gained access to auction results from Sotheby's, results from baseball, basketball, and other sports, as well as restaurant and film reviews.[38] By integrating both financial and social functions, the Bloomberg Terminal came to be more than a communication and analysis device, it actually came to represent the market itself.[39]

Just as the stock ticker visualized prices on printed paper and its mechanical workings created a rhythm to the trade and sonic environment, the introduction of the Bloomberg Terminal impacted the audio-visual environment.[40] While traders first got a desktop computer and one monitor

each on their desks, over time, the Bloomberg Terminal came to be associated with a multi-monitor environment. The more screens, the more information.[41] And the more information, the better deals. With the multi-monitor environment, the traders are supposed to gain a superior overview of the markets.[42] However, the upper rows of monitors are so much elevated, that it may be difficult to keep track of movements there by sitting in the swivel chairs.[43] So, on busy days, the traders occasionally stand up in order to closely survey price movements on these monitors, according to Lépinay. What this amount to is a type of polyrhythm, in which traders survey the markets by jumping between monitors that visualize a multitude of real-time price movements.[44]

In the financial markets, desk work is ostensibly equal to screen-work. Because the work of the traders is about processing and interacting with information visualized on screens, sociologists Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Bruegger conceptualize the traders' work as screen-work.[45] But rather than simply representing the financial markets, the screens contribute to their enactment. In fact, the screens—and the trader's interaction with them—make the markets what they are. For example, before prices and orders were displayed on screens, it was difficult to know where the market was, according to Knorr Cetina and Bruegger.[46] Back then, a lot of effort had to go into finding out *what* was being traded, and at *which* price levels. Now, with real-time data on multiple monitors, the market has become a totality, in which the traders are immersed. Due to the global character of financial markets, there is always an exchange open somewhere. This also means that the traders are following the markets around the clock.[47]

FINANCIAL FURNITURE

As the trader's interact on and engage with the information on the screens of the Bloomberg Terminal, screen-work has become the way the financial markets are enacted. While the Bloomberg keyboard was tailored to experienced traders unfamiliar with computers, the trading desks and their designs have also taken on a trajectory of their own.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, the investments banks organized the desks in clusters, like islands in an open landscape. In this way, traders working with similar tasks were working close to each other. Special-purpose desks—or what colloquially has been called financial furniture—were designed by the major office furniture manufacturers in the USA, such as Knoll and Steel Case. When desktop computers eventually were introduced to the trading rooms in the 1980s, many investment banks began
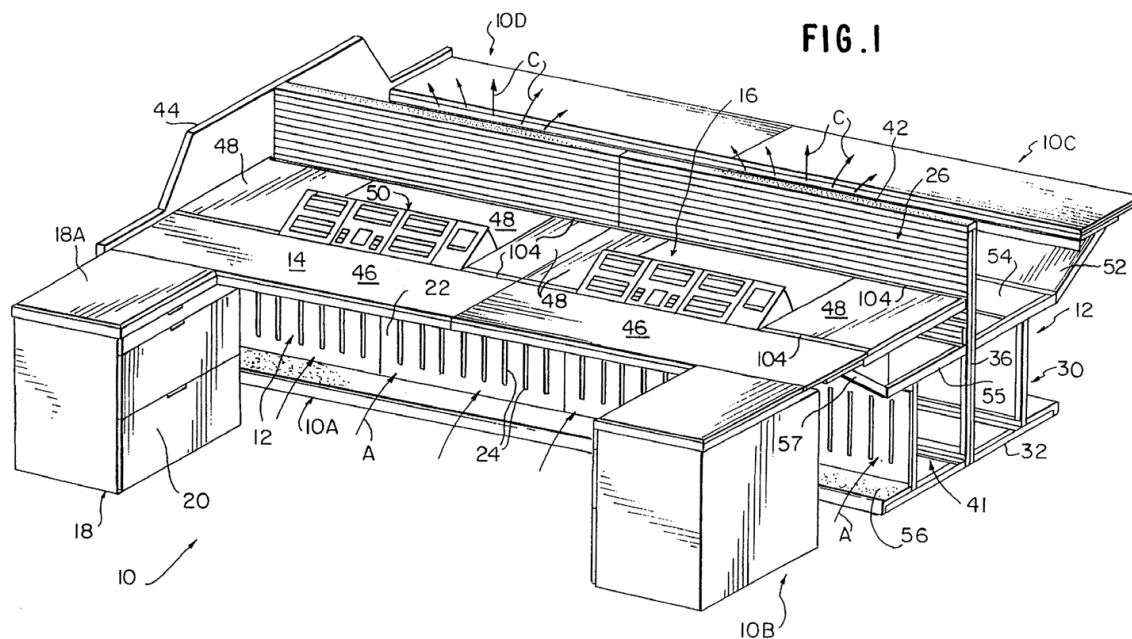
Figure 4.2. Self-supporting data processing desk module. US Patent 1994, number US5499868A.

placing the desks next to each other, forming long benches. On Wall Street, J.P. Morgan was one of the first investment banks to design a trading room in this way.[48] As this spatial organization became popular among the investment banks, the desks' design also changed. Designed to be locked together, the desks created a robust bench infrastructure, on which the monitors were placed. As the monitors were getting bigger and bigger towards the end of the 1980s until the mid-1990s, this invariably increased the weight, the desks had to carry (see Figure 4.2).

This spatial organization of the trading room made it easy for managers to identify when traders where not at their workstations. Reflecting on this in the case of the French Global Bank, Lépinay gives the following account: "The room is set up as an open space, such that each person is under the eye of everyone else. The only blocking of this transparency came from the presence of computers inhabiting every desk in the room."[49] This spatial organization stands in clear contrast to the former trading floors, where visibility was augmented by the amphitheater-like design of the trading pits. The trading room that Lépinay describe is designed to produce a hierarchy, of superiority and subordination, while the trading pits were designed to facilitate face-to-face interactions. By observing each other and

by following how the experienced traders acted on the trading floors, a social dynamic emerged. While more experienced traders were seen as informal leaders by the crowd, this changed quickly if they underperformed. As electronic trading began to replace face-to-face interactions on the trading floors, trading was something traders did at their desks. This also changed the social dynamic.[50]

Earlier, on the trading floors, the sound could be quite intense. In her partly autoethnographic work *Out of the Pits: Traders and Technology from Chicago to London*, cultural anthropologist Caitlin M. Zaloom describes how she "worked at a 'desk', a long table lined with phones dedicated to the swelling business of the DJIA pit."[51] As traders phoned the brokers on the trading floor to get their orders through, the noise could become overwhelming. But after the 9/11 attacks, the previously busy trading floors were emptied overnight. For example, the New York Stock Exchange shut down and stayed closed for a week. Much of the deafening noise disappeared because of this, but only temporarily. In fact, acclaimed terminal manufacturers and software developers soon started to produce audio programs—Market Sound, just to name one example—to emulate the sonic atmosphere previously heard on the floors. But trying to recreate this noise was not well-received, at least not by the traders in Chicago and London that Zaloom studied.

Besides the ambient sound of the markets, programmed warning systems could also go off and make a lot of noise. For example, when a certain stock reached a predetermined price level, the terminals were programmed to read this information aloud, as a voice message. Moreover, some traders chose to put in place their own warning systems, using tailored sounds. In case something critical happened to their portfolio, for example if the positions taken on the markets were underperforming, a recognizable sound would go off. During busy days, Zaloom describes how small metallic-sounding speakers could fill the room with "simulated sounds of breaking glass and ricocheting bullets."[52] Situated as a center of calculations, the desk, together with the Bloomberg Terminal and its multi-monitor environment, came to operate not only as a nodal point in a network of informational flows, but it also came with a distinct audio-visual environment.

A SECOND HOME

Being a center of calculations, the desk has virtually become a second home for many traders, as well as for many analysts and quants. Due to the harsh performance culture of the financial markets in general, and on Wall Street in

particular, overtime has been common. If employees work later than 7:00 PM, the Wall Street firms provide vouchers for takeaway food and pay the taxi-ride home. Because so much time is spent at the desk, in front of the screens, this piece of furniture has, in many ways, become a place where employees spend a considerable amount of their lives (see the introduction to this volume). Writing about the long workhours, Knorr Cetina and Bruegger have observed traders

> to take lunch at their desk and to spend long hours on the floor (from approximately 7 am to 6 pm), after which they keep track of the markets through hand-held Reuters' screens or by watching the markets on CNN and other specialized channels at home.[53]

In *Liquidated*, Ho cites a junior stock market analyst who reflects on the connection between the long workhours and the desk.

> I was so hardcore, in fact, that I did not have time for basic maintenance or hygiene. I went three days without changing my shirt. I kept a toothbrush in my desk. I had Q-tips hidden behind my monitor. I once sat on my cloth swivel chair, hyped on free Coke and stuffed with the dinner I bought with my green corporate card, for the amount of time it took one of the senior guys in my office to fly back from his golf outing in Iceland. I'll bet your employer did not even like you enough to pay for your brown bag lunch, but my firm bought me seared ahi lunch and fire-grilled dinner.[54]

As the desk morphed into a second home, it became a place filled with notions of privacy, which in turn were built on a form of generalized morality: the work ethic. Lépinay suggests that "[a]t the level of the desk, privacy is the ultimate rule: the trader is the owner of his or her workstation, and protects the area surrounding this station."[55] Yet, because of the clean desk policy, any form of personalization of standardized artifacts is expressed in informal, or even covert, forms. Lépinay describes how traders put their names on the arms of the swivel chairs. Without such personalization, the swivel chairs would start moving around in the office due to their scarce supply. So, the traders did what they could to hold on to what they considered to be theirs.

As with all rules, the clean desk policy indeed has exceptions, and such was the case in Lépinay's French Global Bank. On the desks of the traders, he only found "a couple of notepads and pens with which to formulate and clarify puzzling problems with passersby willing to help."[56] In other places it looked different. On the desks of the quants and analysts, heaps of scientific papers and professional magazines abounded, together with textbooks

in financial risk management. What a difference! But why? While traders generally work in front offices, the analysts work in back offices, or somewhere in-between. This means that the desks of the analysts are not shown when clients visit the premises. The analyst's professional identity is probably also tightly linked to their academic background. Having scientific papers laying around could then be a way to exhibit know-how and work-efforts. Piles of papers on a desk represent something else as well. A desk filled with piles of paper gives the impression of an unorganized employee, stuck in the past, unwilling to clean his or her desk to tackle future-oriented challenges, according to Sellen and Harper. In an office with a clean desk policy, unclean and messy workstations signal that the hierarchal chain of command is broken, as managers obviously then must have surrendered to the chaos.[57]

In the hypermobile world of financial markets, the desks remain immobile (see also Järpvall's chapter in this volume). Because of this and because of the centrality of the desk, all time spent away from the workstation risks being perceived by others as a waste of time (on being "Away From Desk," see Nyblom's contribution in this volume). Again, here the work ethic enters the picture. But the work ethic is not only about actual performance. Kate Miller, a former stock market analyst at Morgan Stanley, has argued that it is just as much about the image of performing and working:

> Image is everything from the way you dress, the way you talk, the way you respond to situations, the way you approach a problem. Even something as ludicrous as the way you eat or — these are such little things. If you ate in the lunchroom too often, there was a perception that, you know, it just was not something that was done. Everybody brought their food back to their desk. And you could be sitting around joking and talking in your office, but you were at your desk.[58]

Unlike traders and market makers, analysts are often confined to back-office spaces. They rarely meet clients, and they tend to have messier desks, as mentioned earlier. Yet, there is a widespread expectation on Wall Street that analysts must sit at their desks—all the time. Ho lucidly describes the logic behind this: "Being seen eating and talking in the cafeteria too often or for too long was not considered professional, except on occasion, because it connoted time away from hard work."[59] Echoing this morality of desks, Knorr Cetina and Preda provide this colorful account of trading practices:

> In the morning, traders strap themselves to their seats, figuratively speaking, they bring up their screens, and from then on their eyes will be glued

to these screens, their regard captured by it even when they talk or shout to each other, their bodies and the screen world melting together in what appears to be a total immersion in the action in which they are taking part.[60]

Although spending much time at his desk, one of the junior analysts that Ho talked to, confessed that he, of course, chatted about many other things than just work-related stuff there. Yet, the benches and the multi-monitor environment have come to symbolize the white-collar sweatshop, which is how Ho conceptualizes the back-offices, where junior analysts on Wall Street begin their careers.

ENACTING THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL MARKETS

While trying to summarize the above discussion, I want to return to the initial question I posed, namely how meaning is attributed to the market when viewed from the desk, but also what the desk is doing to the work of traders. While this has no straightforward answer, the desk has undeniably become a place from which the financial markets are not only observed, but also enacted, especially since the emergence of electronic trading and later due to the disappearance of the previously hyperactive and noisy trading floors.

Because markets and screens are so closely interconnected, Knorr Cetina and Bruegger believe that "the screen is a building site on which an entire economic and epistemological world is erected."[61] Since the markets are constantly moving, they must be constantly observed, interacted with, and acted upon. After all, the traders enter the market by taking a position in it so to speak and acting on the basis of this. But the social dynamics that previously characterized the trading floors on the stock exchanges have been replaced by what Knorr Cetina and Bruegger call "post-social" relationships.[62] Such relationships are signified by the connections between humans and artifacts, in this case between traders and their screens, but also between their screens and their desks.

The desk has become an assemblage of artifacts, on which the markets are enacted. Because so much work on the markets departs from this assemblage of artifacts, this also constitutes a center of calculations. Unlike Latour, though, who suggests that the trading rooms are the centers of calculation, I would propose that the desks are the center of these centers of calculation.[63] This imply that any exploration of global capitalism must include both the centers and the peripheries of trade, otherwise it will be difficult to observe the unequal terms of trading and trace the uneven consequences of global trade patterns. As a center of centers of calculations,

the desk offers a valuable point of departure for such an exploration. But tracing the unequal exchanges that underpin financial trade would also require a closer study of the peripheralization of the Global South and the ruthless extractivism, which the trading rooms on Wall Street rely on and propel, being, as they are, the centers of calculations.

NOTES

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2. Alex Preda, "Socio-Technical Agency in Financial Markets: The Case of the Stock Ticker," *Social Studies of Science* 36, no. 5 (2006), 753–782; see also Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 406.

3. This is especially the case in market making. Market making is a process where a broker, or a so-called market maker, connects a buyer and a seller and thereby facilitates a transaction between them. See Fabian Muniesa, "Trading-Room Telephones and the Identification of Counterparts," in *Living in a Material World: Economic Sociology Meets Science and Technology Studies*, eds. Trevor Pinch and Richard Swedberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

4. Wyatt Wells, "Certificates and Computers: The Remaking of Wall Street, 1967 to 1971," *Business History Review* 74, no. 2 (2000): 193–235; Thomas Haigh, "Inventing Information Systems: The Systems Men and the Computer, 1950–1968," *The Business History Review* 75, no. 1 (2001): 15–61.

5. Karin Knorr Cetina and Alex Preda, "The Temporalization of Financial Markets: From Network to Flow," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7–8 (2007): 116–138.

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7. James L. Cochrane, Brian McNamara, James E. Shapiro, and Michael J. Simon, "The Structure and Regulation of the New York Stock Exchange," *Journal of Corporation Law* 18, no. 1 (1992): 57–78; Caroline Bradley, "Disorderly Conduct: Day Traders and the Ideology of Fair and Orderly Markets," *Journal of Corporation Law* 26, no. 1 (2000): 63–96; Kurt Eichenwald and John Markoff, "Wall Street's Souped-Up Computers," *The New York Times*, October 16, 1988.

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9. Caitlin Zaloom, *Out of the Pits: Traders and Technology from Chicago to London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

10. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 178.

11. Thomas Schuster, *The Markets and the Media: Business News and Stock Market Movements* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006). See also Jan Kleinnijenhuis, Friederike Schultz, Dirk Oegema, and Wouter van Atteveldt, "Financial News and Market Panics in the Age of High-Frequency Sentiment Trading Algorithms," *Journalism* 14, no. 2 (2013): 271–291.

12. Karen Ho, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

13. The fetishization of hard data led the investment banks during the 1990s and 2000s to hire math-savvy physicists, so-called quants. But this trend scaled downed once the computational models for pricing were in place and trading practices changed. See Jeremy Bernstein, "The Rise and Fall of the Quants," in *Physicists on Wall Street and Other Essays on Science and Society*, ed. Jeremy Bernstein (New York: Springer, 2008), 15–22.

14. Ho, *Liquidated*.

15. Ibid., 81–82.

16. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).

17. Ho, *Liquidated.*

18. See for example Hayagreeva Rao, Heinrich R. Greve, and Gerald F. Davis, "Fool's Gold: Social Proof in the Initiation and Abandonment of Coverage by Wall Street Analysts," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2001): 502–526.

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https://iamautonomous.medium.com/5-steps-to-building-the-perfect-trading-desk-setup-f0b2c44d1a44.

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22. Vincent Antonin Lépinay, *Codes of Finance: Engineering Derivatives in a Global Bank* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

23. According to Lépinay "Quants were brought to the trading rooms when derivative products started to lend themselves to precise calculative methods imported from mathematics and physics." See Lépinay, *Codes*, 9–10.

24. Derivatives are hedging instruments used to securitize the value of an underlaying asset, for example a stock, commodity, or currency, that is prone to price volatility. The sociology of derivatives is diligently explored in Donald MacKenzie, *An Engine, Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

25. Lépinay, *Codes*, 34–35

26. Latour, *An Inquiry*, 406.

27. See Lépinay, *Codes*.

28. See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London & New York: Verso Books, 1995).

29. Alex Preda, *Framing Finance: The Boundaries of Markets and Modern Capitalism* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 114.

30. Knorr Cetina and Preda, "The Temporalization of Financial Markets."

31. Charles R. Geisst, *Wall Street: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018).

32. Preda, *Framing*.

33. In fact, Geisst label the period between 1982 and 1997 on Wall Street as "mergermania." The Oliver Stone movie *Wall Street* (1987) captures the peak of this period.

34. Mike Bloomberg, *Bloomberg by Bloomberg* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001).

35. Wells, "Certificates and computers."

36. Bloomberg, *Bloomberg by Bloomberg*, 115.

37. Ibid.

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39. For a similar argument, see Karin Knorr Cetina and Urs Bruegger, "Global Microstructures: The Interaction Practices of Financial Markets," *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 4 (2000): 905–950.

40. Preda, "Socio-Technical Agency in Financial Markets."

41. Chen Ling, Alex Stegman, Chintan Barhbaya, and Randa Shehab, "Are Two Better Than One? A Comparison Between Single- and Dual-Monitor Work Stations in Productivity and User's Windows Management Style," *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 33, no. 3 (2017): 190–198.

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44. Ibid.

45. Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, *Global Microstructures*.

46. Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, *Traders' Engagement with Markets*.

47. Knorr Cetina & Preda. "The Temporalization of Financial Markets."

48. See Robert Joseph Stevenson, *The Boiler Room and Other Telephone Sales Scams*

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49. Lépinay, *Codes*, 93.

50. Zaloom, *Out of the Pits*.

51. Ibid., 9. djia is short for Dow Jones Industrial Average.

52. Ibid., 155.

53. Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, "Traders' Engagement with Markets," 175.

54. Sherrill 2004, cited in Ho, *Liquidated*, 91.

55. Lépinay, *Codes*, 92.

56. Ibid., 75.

57. Abigail J. Sellen and Richard H. R. Harper, *The Myth of the Paperless Office* (Cambridge ma & London: mit Press, 2001), especially chapter 2.

58. Ho, *Liquidated*, 120.

59. Ibid., 121.

60. Knorr Cetina and Preda, "The Temporalization of Financial Markets," 125.

61. Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, "Traders' Engagement with Markets," 167. Italics in original.

62. Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, "Traders' Engagement with Markets," 162; Karin Knorr Cetina, "Sociology with Objects: Social Relations in Postsocial Knowledge Societies," *Theory, Culture & Society* 14, no. 4 (1997): 1–30.

63. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

5

Lillian Gilbreth's Management Desk: Bringing Efficiency Home

MAGNUS ANDERSSON AND MELISSA GREGG

In 1933, in the middle of the Depression, the city of Chicago played host to A Century of Progress International Exposition—otherwise known as Chicago World's Fair. With roughly 25 percent of the American workforce unemployed, it was a time in desperate need for hope and images of a bright future, even if the slogans accompanying the event conveyed a sense of foreboding: "Science Finds, Industry Applies, Man Conforms."[1] Among the many exhibits on show, in the category of innovations intended for the modern home, was a desk designed by Lillian Gilbreth for IBM.[2] In accordance with progressivist principles, much was invested in the benefits to come from proper application of science and technology. The Management Desk aimed to facilitate the organizing and the planning of housework and thereby transform housewives to home managers. It was an extension of previous prototypes developed for Gilbreth's model kitchens, although none of these models were ever produced for retail. Its inclusion at the expo can be seen in the broader context of a process of *scientification* of the home taking hold in the early 20th century, with figures such as Christine Fredericks, author of *Household Engineering* (1915), and Mary Pattisson, who wrote *The Business of Home Management: The Principles of Domestic Engineering* (1915).[3] Ellen Richards, a pioneer of home economics and chemistry, whose perspectives were documented in *The Art of Right Living* (1904) should also be mentioned in this milieux.[4] In various ways, these writers were attempting to raise the status of women's housework, at a time when their intellectual voices were rarely credited with scientific merit. As demonstrated in the anthology *Cold War Kitchen*, the domestic setting has always been a site for ideological struggle, whether between genders and their expected roles, or at the level of macro-politics in the geographies that emerged postwar.[5] This chapter explores how Gilbreth's work provided a platform for the ideology of efficiency that entered the home at the same time as it did in business.
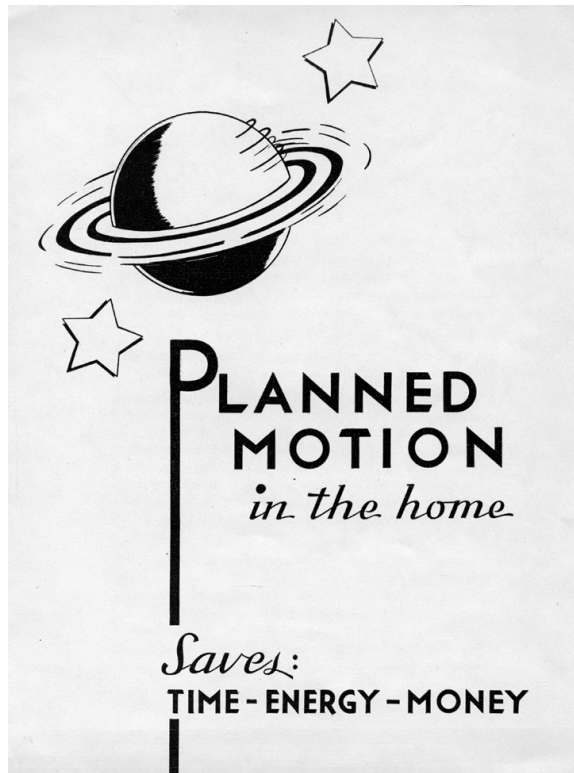
Figure 5.1 a & b. From the brochure that accompanied the Gilbreth Management Desk at display at the Chicago World's Fair, A Century of Progress International Exposition, in 1933. To the left is the frontpage and to the right, an illustration of the desk and its compartments.

Lillian Gilbreth epitomized the rationalization of scientific management by advocating that domestic chores should be planned and ordered in order to save time, energy, and money. Instead of doing domestic work fortuitously, moving haphazardly from one task to another, the introduction of a system could avoid unnecessary fatigue, with more minutes available for family happiness. Gilbreth's Management Desk contained a number of elements considered helpful for freeing time—even if, as we will see, this saved effort often entailed more work in the form of emotional labor.[6] Our analysis of Gilbreth's remarkable desk in this chapter is pieced together via booklets, brochures, and other printed material from companies and institutes sponsoring her work up to and during the 1930s.[7] In the process, we also provide an account of an extraordinary life and career—in her case they were inseparable—since Gilbreth remains a key influence in the modernization of industrial and domestic management. Lillian Gilbreth (1874–1972) raised eleven children and lived almost half of her life as a widow.[8] She had a PhD in psychology, wrote books and scientific articles (sometimes under her husband's name), and pursued her calling for engineering across building sites, laboratories, classrooms, and cocktail parties hosted by Frederick Winslow Taylor and his wife Louise Spooner. These are not trivial biographical facts, but important scenes of emergence for the first generation of

International Electric Clock

Radio

Lock Compartment

Reference Books

Typewriter

Telephone

Visible Charts

Schedules

Adding Machine

Card Index

Reminder File

Desk Supplies

Utility Drawer

Alphabetic Files A-L

Classified Data File

Alphabetic Files M-Z

Stationery Supply
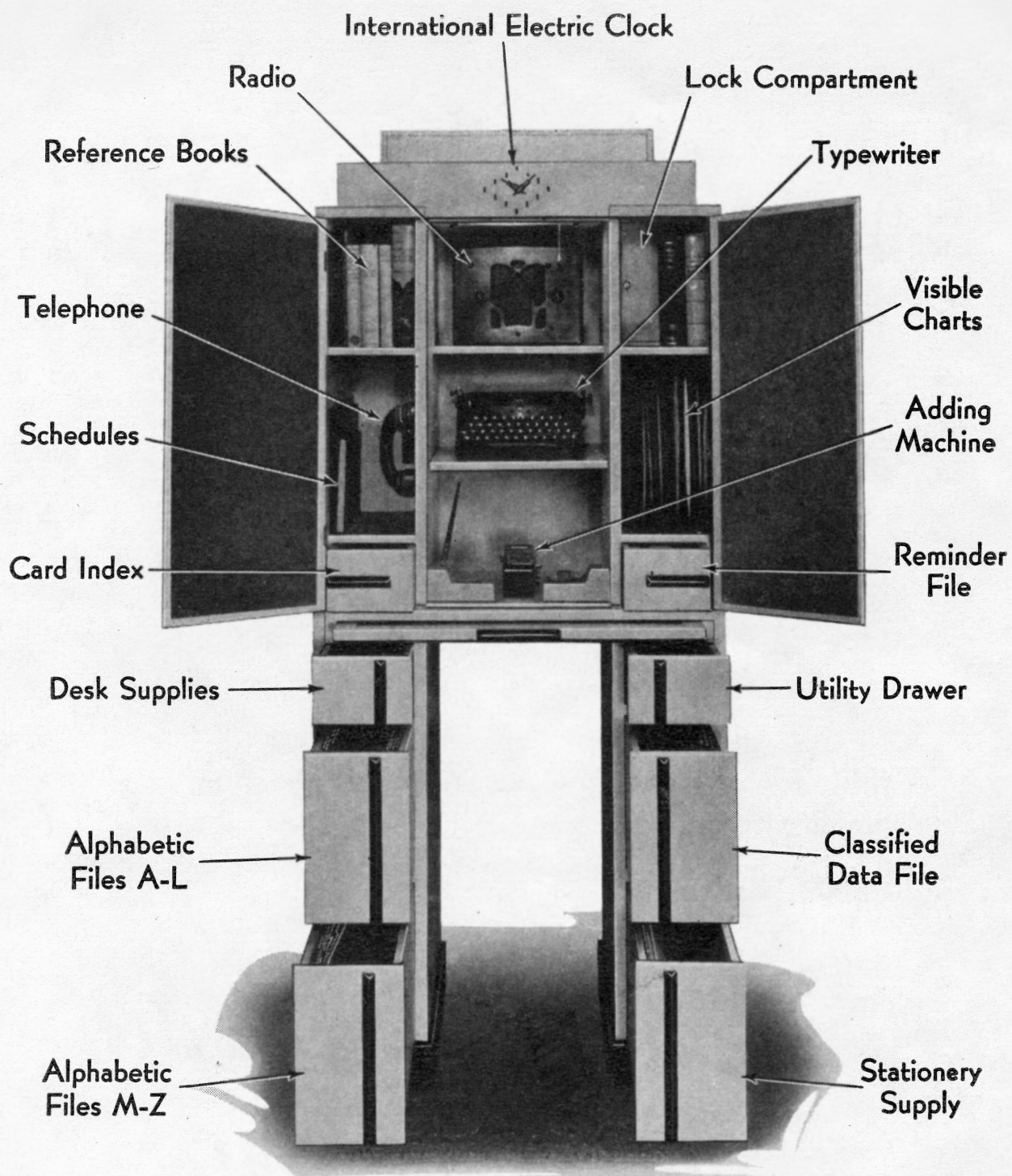
The Gilbreth Management Desk aids in solving household problems concerning Children, Clothing, Education, Finance and Maintenance, Food, Health and Medical Care, House Cleaning, Laundry, Recreation and Culture, Servants, Social Affairs and many other subjects.

management consultants. In Gilbreth's work the world of efficiency, scientific progress, and the home were closely linked and enriched each other.[9]

The Management Desk is interesting since it is a material expression of domestic imaginaries of how a home should be ordered, organized and managed. Connecting domestic details to larger societal contexts, our chapter sheds light on enduring dualities like masculine–feminine, private–public, production–reproduction, and work–leisure. Gilbreth's contributions reflect the theoretical premise that domestic artifacts (even discursive ones) are not neutral objects; they are devices that enable and promote certain practices whilst precluding others. Lynn Spiegel's media history of the Storagewall and Craig Robertson's account of the vertical filing cabinet are inspirations for this line of inquiry.[10] To begin the discussion, we start by documenting the rise of Gilbreth Inc., the consulting firm Lillian ran together with Frank Gilbreth—her husband, business partner, and frequent co-author. This pioneering team set the foundation for Lillian's extensive application of scientific management in the home, right down to the shape of furniture. Analyzing the Management Desk on display in Chicago allows a consideration of Gilbreth's philosophy regarding domesticity and domestic work, which we turn to next. The final section focuses on the precursors and successors of the Management Desk, noting continuities and changes regarding Lillian Gilbreth's ideas of the scientific home.

<div align="center">

GILBRETH INC.—"ONE BEST WAY TO DO WORK!"

</div>

Before Lillian Gilbreth became a domestic consultant and housework engineer she had a successful career within management consulting, which at the time was a brand-new type of enterprise.[11] As partner in a consultant firm, Lillian Gilbreth came in contact with the professional worlds of business and engineering and their characteristic striving for efficiency, ideas that she brought to the home.[12] Gilbreth Inc. had a unique approach to scientific management which included research, writing, corporate film, and evangelist-style speeches.[13] The couple was very influenced by the systematic industrial rationalization associated with Taylor, the founder of Scientific Management and the time study method which gave rise to Gilbreth's claim to promote "One Best Way" to do work. For Taylor, efficiency increased productivity and thus profit. The *way* to do it was extreme specialization and standardization of work tasks, which made planning a central feature. That in turn required constant supervision and monitoring of workers. As sociologist Laurel Graham puts it, "Taylor sought to do to groups of workers what mechanical engineering had done to machines—

make the parts into interchangeable components of a smoothly functioning system."[14] In a similar vein, the geographer Tim Cresswell points out the ideology of the system, how it "effectively transformed the threatening body of the lazy worker into a machine—an object that served capitalist production."[15] These quotes shed light on Taylor's instrumental views on production which conveyed a crude perspective on workers, who ideally did nothing else than perform optimized instructions as fast as possible.

Initially, the Gilbreths had some collaboration with Taylor and the two families became friends.[16] They shared the professional view that one had to distinguish between physical and mental work in order to render them scientific. In concrete terms, manual work practices and the planning of them were two different things. The Gilbreths also shared the belief that individual practices had to be identified in order to determine the most efficient way to conduct these practices—something that required new modes of measuring. Nevertheless, over time, it became clear that the consultants held different views on scientific management which eventually ended their friendship.[17]

The Gilbreths deviated from Taylor in two important ways. Most significant was the human factors perspective they brought to the field, recognizing that management is about psychology as much as engineering. With Lillian's PhD in psychology (with a focus on industrial psychology) and Frank's background as an uneducated bricklayer and building contractor, they had a basis for management consulting that went beyond a simple desire to increase productivity.[18] They saw the importance of convincing not only managers but also workers about the advantages of scientific management. They called their approach "fatigue studies" in order to underscore the perspective of workers.[19] At a time when scientific management in general—and Taylor in particular—was criticized for exploiting workers, the Gilbreths promoted the value of empowerment for everyone. For Lillian in particular, "[i]ndustrialization, not scientific management, had robbed workers of their skill. Now it was up to the engineers and management experts to return new skills to the work process."[20] In other other words, standardized work and skilled work should not be considered as mutually exclusive.

The second deviation from Taylor's scientific management concerned methods.[21] Gilbreth Inc. invigorated and developed scientific management by taking advantage of the latest innovations in media and communication technology.[22] Taylor's main method was time studies, the use of a stopwatch to find the fastest way to perform a particular work task. By contrast, Frank

and Lillian developed an additional approach of motion studies, which placed movement alongside time at the center of observation. Just like Taylor, they saw the value of identifying the smallest unit of work. To do this they constructed a grammar of seventeen units of (work) motions, based on empirical data, which they called "therbligs" (in an entrepreneurial reversal of the consultants' surname). All work tasks were composed of a unique composition of these motion units. Each therblig had its own symbol, which was used in flowcharts.[23] In order to measure motions rather than time, work practices were filmed against a gridded, cross-sectioned background with chronometers. They also invented a method using a "chronocyclegraph"—a map of activity traced by electric lightbulbs attached to hands or body parts and then filmed—to analyze motions of work practices.[24] This novel technique allowed for the time and space of a task to be grasped in a single frame.

The Gilbreths took full advantage of new technology to advance their business aims: motion picture camera, chronocyclegraph, "simultaneous motion cycle chart", the grammar of therbligs, and process flowcharts. Hence, they were iconic ambassadors of modern management. By producing a record with scientific precision, the measurements became a marketing strategy. This was an early version of "lab-based consulting," where the "objectivity" of the film camera as well as the the laboratory setting testified scientific quality. As Florian Hoof notes: "New media technologies and the direct experience of the motion studies produced film-based consulting's atmosphere of evidence-based scientificity."[25] Hence, the affirmation of technological solution should be interpreted both as a result of the zeitgeist and as PR in the context of the competition between consulting companies. In this sense, the Gilbreths were pioneers of what Hoof calls *visual management.* The client was convinced of results through rhetorically constructed visualizations rather than written reports—a discourse that is still thriving within management consulting.[26]

Lillian Gilbreth's experience of the masculine world of engineering, productivity rationality, technology, and scientificity is an important background for the ideas about domestic work and home management that inform her desk prototype. It is also noteworthy that even if the consulting firm preceded Lillian's home management consulting, the couple's own home functioned as an important testbed and laboratory for their industrial management program.[27] A concrete example is the family council established in the household, where plans were made and division of work decided.[28] As Lillian Gilbreth commented many years later:

We considered our time too valuable to be devoted to actual labor in the home. We were executives. So we worked out a plan for the running of our house, adopting charts and a maintenance and follow-up system as is used in factories. When one of the children took a bath or brushed his teeth he made a cross on a chart. Household tasks were divided between children. We had three rows of hooks, one marked "Jobs to be done," one marked "Jobs being done" and a third marked "Jobs completed" with tags which were moved from hook to hook to indicate the progress of the task.[29]

Here we can see the interplay between the knowledge fields of industrial and domestic management, as well as a precursor for the agile product development practices of our contemporary era. For the Gilbreths, the home was hardly a sphere for withdrawal; it was a crucial arena and laboratory for studies that would build the commonsense tenets of productivity.[30]

THE GILBRETH MANAGEMENT DESK: "A MODERN AID IN THE SOLVING OF HOME MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS!"

It was almost ten years after Frank Gilbreth's sudden death, and the subsequent closing of Gilbreth Inc., that the Management Desk was on display at the huge world's fair in Chicago. This spectacular piece of furniture was more than a desk; it was a materialization of imaginaries of future homes, home management, and home managers. Actually, it was more of a cabinet than a desk, which made sense given that storage of information was (and is) a dominant aspect of home administration.[31] Nevertheless, calling it a desk afforded an additional connotation for management. In contrast to other imagined systems of information management—like Vannevar Bush's utopian Memex, a domestic device that would store all information in the world for personal use—the Management Desk was a manifest object that had concrete functions in the execution of daily domestic work.[32] In accordance with Lillian Gilbreth's academic training, the design was the result of a rigorous research process, based on literature review, homemakers' experience, business management, and personal thoughts on home management.[33] As she described it in 1935, two years after the world's fair:

Before it was designed we outlined all possible home problems and consulted every authoritative book on home economics. The outline was checked with actual procedure in a diversity of homes. Thus we got an excellent idea of scope and diversity of problems. Our total original outline, of course, contained a far longer list of problems than any one homemaker was likely to face. So we checked through carefully to find out what things most home-

makers did most often and what was the usual way in which they were done. Then we asked ourselves, "Are there better ways in business, in the home, and in industry?" The desk is the answer to these questions.[34]

At the fair, the Management Desk was displayed along charts and with the slogan "Lightens the burden of the housewife" (see Figure 5.2). It was described and promoted in a brochure containing text sections with promotional product information and the illustration of the open desk with all its devices and functions (see Figure 5.1). One of the sections talks directly to the housewife and her daily experiences:

> When is Grandma's birthday?... I wonder if the taxes are due?... Goodness, haven't I paid that bill?...These and many, many other important questions are brought to your attention before they can become embarrassing, by the Management Desk Reminder File. [...] Nor will the grocer, the butcher or the baker ever be paid more than his just due, when all the purchase slips and quotations are quickly tabulated on the handy adding machine. What a boon to housekeeping that little device is![35]

The brochure talks to the housewife in her role as a "household memory," the caring person who keeps track of birthdays, deadlines, grocery lists, and where things can be found in the home. More than 50 years later Arlie Russell Hochschild described "management of domestic life" as one of the housewife's tacit duties, often taken for granted by other household members: "remembering, planning, and scheduling domestic chores and events, which included such tasks as making up the grocery list, paying bills, sending birthday and holiday cards, arranging baby-sitting, and preparing birthday parties of the child."[36] Hochschild's point here is that this is something else than cooking and cleaning, that is, manual work tasks that we often connect to domestic labor. What Gilbreth described in advance of Hochschild's later studies is administrative work, an often-neglected aspect of domestic work encompassing emotional, ordering, as well as memory work. This type of work, domestic information management, justified the presence of traditional office devices in the home, in spite of the potential feelings of intrusion they could cause. Gilbreth even described "Visible Graphic Charts"—placed in the right compartment in the middle section or pinned to the cork-backed inside of the doors—as necessary parts of daily toil, for example regarding the planning of meals and the arranging of the laundry. One thing to be noted in relation this discussion on the Management Desk and Hochschild's "management of domestic life" is that management in this context is not automatically linked to power. It is

instead a form of logistical planning designed to contain the disorder of everyday life.

Another section of the brochure praises "order" and the potential savings of domestic economy. Instead of a personal tone, it is the voice of scientific management that speaks to the sensitive and rational housewife/home manager:

> "Order is Heaven's first law," reads an ancient axiom. This artistically designed desk brings home a little nearer Heaven by establishing and maintaining *order* in household planning. The Gilbreth Management Desk will relieve the strain on mind, muscles and pocketbook. It places within easy reach the devices necessary to accomplish specific, routine tasks. Unnecessary steps are eliminated… unnecessary fatigue is banished.[37]

Scientific management is not mentioned explicitly (as it is in Gilbreth's other texts on home management), although it is present in the formulation and the choice of words: "order," "within easy reach," "unnecessary steps eliminated," and the stress of planning. Looking at the illustration of the desk (Figure 5.1), one can notice that a huge part of the devices of it were ordering devices, or related to order, for example filing systems, charts, card index, classified data file, schedules, and reminder file. It illustrates a close connection between scientific management and information management, resulting in efficiency and a sense of control.[38] Moreover, the mention of "fatigue" gestures to the field of "fatigue studies," Gilbreths' own version of scientific management.[39] In fact, she refined this approach under the name "fatigue elimination" in her projects on kitchens. This in turn, as argued by Jane Lancaster, laid the foundation for what we today call ergonomics.[40]

The reference to Heaven in the quote might not be a coincidence. The imperative of keeping order was often linked to notions of morality and religious devotion at the time. Modern rationality and religious morality might be seen as an odd couple but, order unites them. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Max Weber points out the meaning of a pietistic background in relation to self-control, frugality, and the willing-

Figure 5.2. Photograph from A Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago 1933, showing how the Management Desk was displayed, with graphs and illustrations. Frank and Lillian Gilbreth Library of Management Research and Professional papers, Purdue University Archives and Special Collections (ID: MSP8b164f009i004).

THE GILBRETH MANAGEMENT DESK
LIGHTENS THE BURDEN OF THE HOUSEWIFE

THE G

THINK

GILBRETH MANAGEMENT DESK

LIGHTENS THE BURDEN OF THE HOUSEWIFE
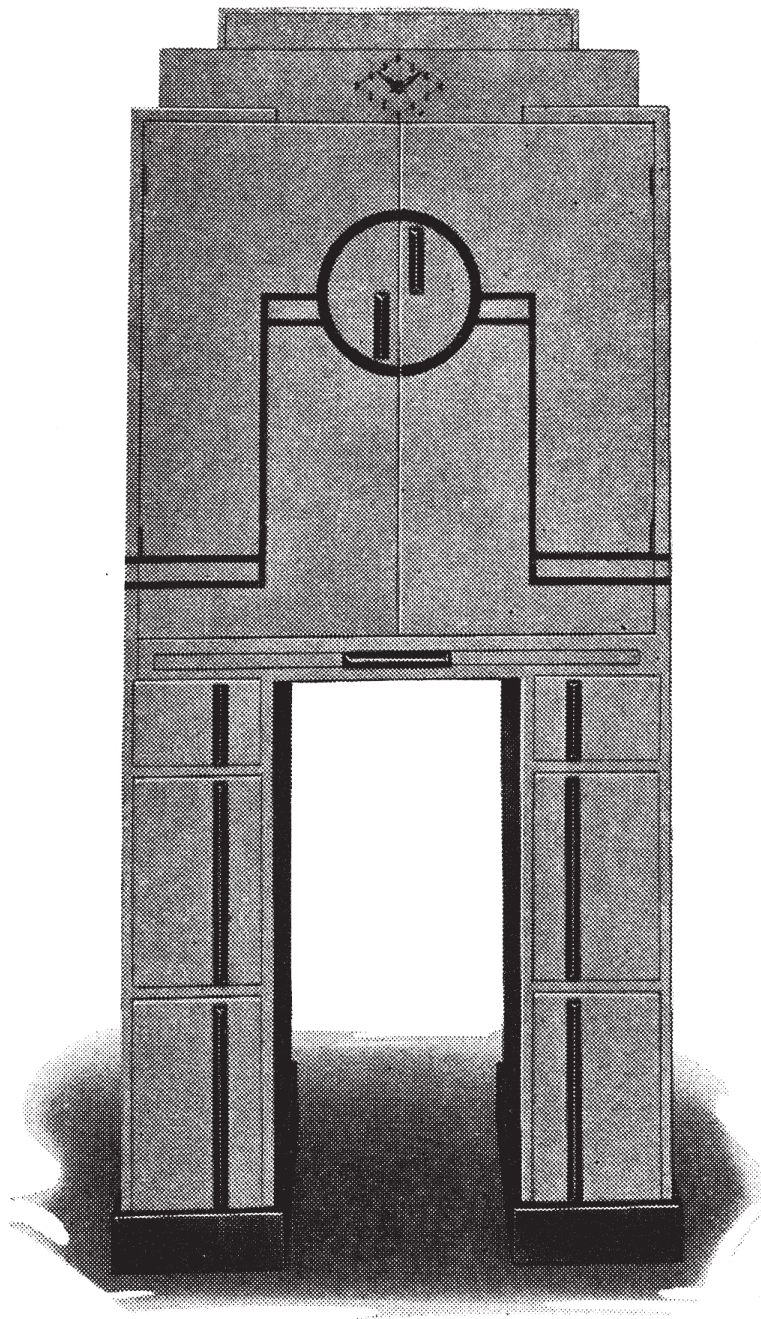
TODAY—

~YESTERDAY

THINK
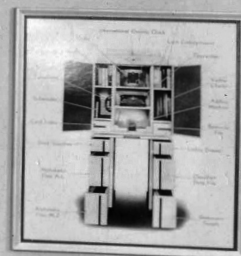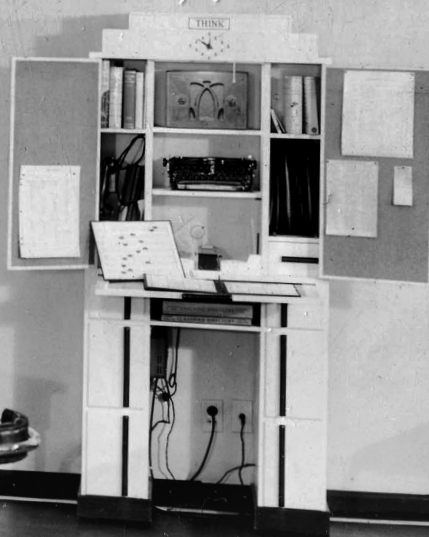
Figure 5.3. The Management Desk when closed. Note the caption that highlights its aesthetic qualities. *Planned Motion in the Home. Saves: Time – Energy – Money* (1933).

ness to learn rational methods in modern history.[41] The virtue of the housewife and the religious underpinnings of her domestic duties have been implicitly present in the genre of domestic handbooks since the 19th century.[42] In this era, practicing "domestic economy [was] a matter of creating a resilient structure that ensures refined calm in service to others and, above all, to God."[43] Lillian Gilbreth was a "devout Lutheran," although religion was not explicitly present in her work.[44] Nevertheless, her rationalization of motions had *moral* dimensions; it was about taking care of the most important thing—the family.[45] Modernity, mobility, and morality are hence interlinked in Gilbreth's work, Cresswell argues. The Management Desk articulated these various aspects of managerial, manual, and emotional work.

Another section of the pamphlet describes the different compartments and their functions. There are explicit references to business life: "The new Gilbreth Management Desk might well be called the General Business Headquarters of the Household Manager." Also, the description of the devices of the desk is marked by a management perspective, pointing out the many knowledge areas a housewife had to master:

> Immediately at hand, in compartments at right and left, are located the household money budget and the visible charts containing comprehensive information on food, marketing, cooking, cleaning, health, education, finance and many other important subjects. And, in two neat drawers on either side, we find the cards of a complete household filing system.[46]

The stress on "[i]mmediately at hand" indicates the significance of efficiency and the reduction of movements, something that also was highlighted in handbooks of office work at the time.[47] At another place in the brochure there is an even more extensive list of "household problems" it can be used for: "Children, Clothing, Education, Finance and Maintenance, Food, Health and Medical Care, House Cleaning, Laundry, Recreation and Culture, Servants, Social Affairs and many other subjects." The many facets and diversity of expertise recounted further emphasizes that homemaking was (and is) not only about manual work, but also managerial work, requiring the skills of a generalist who can ensure that the household as an enterprise runs smoothly. And if the housewife has the role of the secretary in relation to the "household memory," she is a manager when it comes to questions regarding parenting, clothes, cooking, dinner parties, and much else.

Finally, even if efficiency, order, and functionality were crucial in relation to the Management Desk, aesthetics were also critical. Figure 5.3 shows the

desk in a closed view. Gone is the workplace with all its managerial de-vices—schedules, classified data files, card index, charts, and "the cards of a complete household filing system." Even the desktop itself is hidden. In-stead a decorative furniture piece appears, which can "harmonize with any interior design."[48] This streamlined design not only foreclosed any remind-ers of work contained inside, it also addressed the stylistic needs of an urban middle class.

Not all functionalities were hidden. The "international electric clock" was visible even when the doors were closed (see Figure 5.1). Why an "in-ternational" clock would be considered useful in America at this moment in history is not clear. Perhaps it strengthened symbolic links to a new modern world—which also happened to be an appropriate connotation for a piece of furniture at a world's fair. Gilbreth placed it on the outside of the desk for a number of efficiency reasons. As she put it in another context: "At the top and available for use all through the kitchen is a clock with hour, minute and second hands for recording 'time when' and 'time how long.'"[49] Form and function are not mutually exclusive.

THE MANAGEMENT DESK
BEFORE AND AFTER "A CENTURY OF PROGRESS
INTERNATIONAL EXPOSITION"

The Management Desk was the culmination of an extended period of industrial consulting unique for its time, arising out of extraordinary cir-cumstances. In 1925 Lillian not only lost her husband, the father of her children, and business partner; because she was a woman she also lost al-most all of Gilbreth Inc.'s consulting contracts within the industry.[50] En-couraged by a vice president at Johnson & Johnson she started Gilbreth Summer School at her home in Montclair, New Jersey, where managers from the same firm and executives from other firms were given a "a four-month tutorial in the Gilbreth brand of motion study."[51] This was a stra-tegic career move since teaching motion studies was perceived as more appropriate for a woman than the actual conduct of these studies. She also provided consulting services for department stores and retail companies, such as Macy's and Johnson & Johnson, to help them appeal to female consumers.[52] Her interest for home management—a thriving field in an academic and commercial context at the time—increased, and she discerned its potential as livelihood.[53] Authoring texts about scientific management was something she had done before, whether or not it had been recognized by others. She started to collaborate with different companies, for example

Brooklyn Gas Company and Narragansett Light Company, in designing model kitchens.[54]

Virtually all model kitchens designed by Lillian Gilbreth from 1929 and onwards contained a desk or a workspace designated for planning and organizing the home. At first they were termed planning desks, but the Management Desk was the official name adopted in 1933, following collaboration with IBM. The planning desks were continuously refined, especially during her time with the New York Herald Tribune Institute between 1930 and 1935.[55] The latter described itself as "a practical laboratory and a center of recent information and help in the most human and most important profession in the world—homemaking."[56] The institute had a showroom in New York and linked to that they produced a number of booklets evolving around model kitchens designed by Lillian Gilbreth. A "housekeeper's planning desk" is presented in an early one (see Figure 5.4). It was a very basic version of the Management Desk, introduced some years later. This early version did not contain as many office technologies or filing and ordering functions as the succeeding Management Desk. Yet, it had the functionality of a center for keeping order, planning, and communication. For example, it had a shelf for reference books on cookery and nutrition, a desk flap for making notes or reading, a telephone (above all for "telephoned grocery order"), and drawers for paid and unpaid bills.

While the Management Desk's lower part was composed of several filing systems, this simpler planning desk had a bottom drawer to keep "a housewife's tool chest" which was "a small tool kit containing screws, nails, hammer, screwdriver and other implements necessary for a quick repair job."[57] This illustrates Gilbreth's pragmatic view on gender. She was not a radical feminist—she was part of the succesful campaign to elect Republican Herbert Hoover to US presidency in 1929—still, it seems like meritocracy and collaboration were close to her heart, both in the world of engineering and the home.[58] For example, in the promotion material for the model kitchens, pictures depict wife, husband (with an apron), and child, working together in the kitchen.[59] There is, however, no doubt that the home was considered a female domain. As it is put in relation to the description of the planning desk: "It is the Herald Tribune Institute's belief that the business of running a house demands a well planned little 'office' just as surely as does any business run by a man."[60] The symbolic value of this stated equivalence is significant; it recognized space for the homemaker that signaled professional labor.[61]

A booklet published later in 1930 presented not one but four model

kitchens for households of different size—all available to be visited in a showroom of the institute.[62] "The Practical Kitchen For a Family of Five" is the first and most extensive section of the booklet, addressing what seems to be the middle class nuclear family. This section includes a presentation of the planning desk discussed above. The kitchenettes are described under the heading "Efficiency in Small Quarters." According to Julie Des Jardins, these small kitchens were a way to adapt to the Great Depression as well as address "the dual-career couple," an emerging phenomenon in cities at the time.[63] The larger of two kitchenettes is particularly interesting. With today's spatial living standards in large parts of the Western world, the description of what the kitchenette might accommodate sounds almost surreal: "Though it is only five feet, three inches wide and seven feet long, it has an 'entertainment capacity' for a dinner for four or a bridge party for eight. For informal, buffet entertainment, its capacity is, of course, much greater."[64] The cabinets, utensils and equipment are planned in detail to save not only inches but time and energy as well, according to the maxim of scientific management. The cramped space still accommodates a workspace for planning (see Figure 5.5). After a description of an extra shelf above the refrigerator, intended for storage of canned foods and the special dishes of the refrigerator, the text continues:

> This kitchen left ten inches between the refrigerator and cabinet. Dr Gilbreth has utilized this for the planning desk which she says no kitchen, large or small, can afford to be without. This space houses a small table on wheels which can be pulled out and used as additional work space. Above the table hang large pockets (black sateen, with red and green stripes)—not easily soiled and easy to make for stationery, pens, pencils, erasers, rubber bands and other desk necessities. Over all are three shelves for recipe books and boxes, account books and bills. There stands the radio loud speaker—an extension from the living room—and, of course, a telephone.[65]

Since the aim of these prototypes was to support people planning their own kitchen, the booklet includes lists of equipment needed for the various models as appendices. These lists are arranged according to work units, for example "sink unit," "food preparation unit," "storage unit," and also

Figure 5.4. A so-called planning desk placed in a model kitchen from 1930. This precursor to the Management Desk was at display in Herald Tribune Institute's showroom in New York. Photograph from Frank and Lillian Gilbreth Library of Management Research and Professional papers, Purdue University Archives and Special Collections (ID: MSP8b164f009i014).
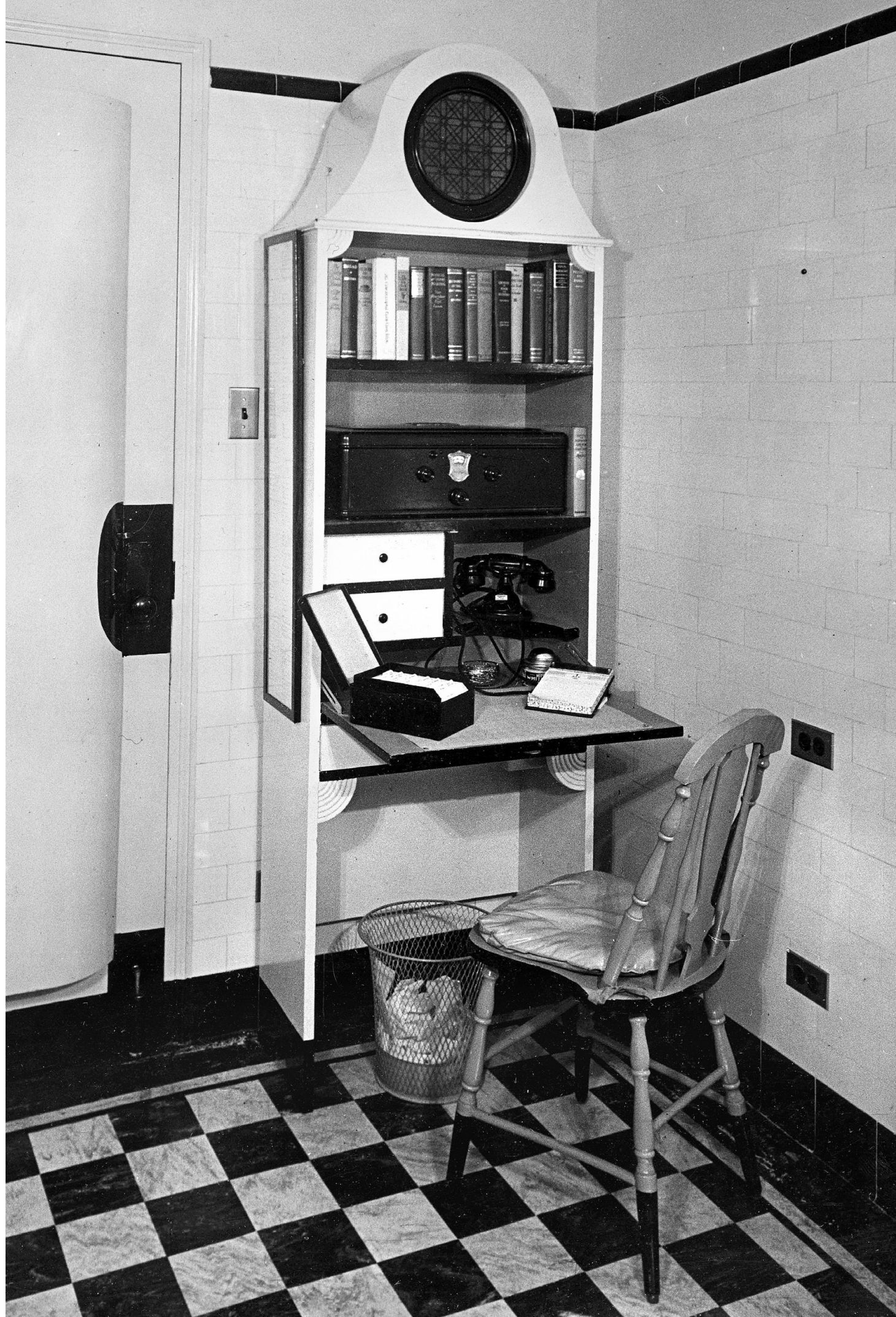
Right, the kitchen cabinet table leaf pulls out to generous size for baking processes. It is covered with stainless, black top. Between the cabinet and the refrigerator are a telephone, work table and book shelves.

Figure 5.5. Part of the interior of a "kitchenette for the family of two or three," displayed in the Herald Tribune Institute's showroom in New York. The small middle section, between the fridge and the cabinet was aimed for planning work. *The New York Herald Tribune Institute Presents Four Model Kitchens* (1930), 17.

"planning unit." Figure 5.6 shows an excerpt of such a list, in this case for a family of five.

A "Planning desk" is the first item listed under "planning unit." According to another list in the appendices, it cost $35 at the time (in comparison, the approximate price for a breakfast table was $14.50). The rest of the items are quite ordinary office supplies. The list illustrates how the New

York Herald Tribune Institute navigated a space between commercial interest and public service. In that sense, it was like an early branding project; a way to create "loyal" relations to a modern urban middle class, both as a "homemaking agency" and as a large newspaper. As it was put, the institute "speaks to homemakers through the weekly household section of the *New York Herald Tribune* Sunday Magazine and in the weekday issues of the paper."[66] It had an advisory council (in which "consulting Engineer Dr Lillian M Gilbreth" is the first listed person) and "regular service on kitchen planning and equipment." The public was welcome to inspect the model kitchens at the showroom and/or contact the institute by telephone or letters with queries regarding the home. A staff of "home experts" was apparently on hand to help with considerations. In many European countries a similar public service was provided by the state, although only some years later.[67]

Together with the Management Desk, these early planning desks embodied Lillian Gilbreth's ideas about the home, domestic work, and home management. The desks and accompanying text material illustrate her humane version of scientific management, which comprised three aspects we discuss in order below: the categorization of domestic work into units; the distinction between manual domestic work and the planning of it; and the role of visualization.

First, Gilbreth deconstructed domestic work in the kitchen into different units, where each one centered around a set of practices and equipment. This approach is clearly connected to the motion studies she had conducted in Gilbreth Inc., where breaking work down into smaller parts was a key principle. Depending on the work task, the housewife was supposed to move between these units through the day, for example from the sink unit to the storage unit to the planning unit to the food preparation unit and so on (note how this encouragement to move reflects the supposed mobility of contemporary knowledge workers in today's activity based offices). The design facilitated multitasking. One could for example check the bills at the planning unit while a sponge cake was in the oven. This might explain the seemingly absent ergonomic ideas in the design of the Management Desk, illustrated by, for example, the limited work surface offered by the sliding shelf (desktop) and the very little legroom (see Figure 5.4 and 5.8). It was simply not designed for working long hours—the housewife was supposed to be on the move between different work units anyway. Another aspect of a particular planning unit is the symbolic value of it. While bill payment and other managerial activities could be performed at the kitchen

table, for example, a planning unit with a Management Desk conferred a change of status, making the task more dignified.[68]

The range of work units and the emphasis on mobility reinforced the unqiue qualities of *domestic efficiency*, the larger plan that the Management Desk (including the precursors) was part of. As Lillian Gilbreth put it elsewhere: "The business man or industrial worker has one job. The housewife has a dozen."[69] The work units both revealed and systematized the complexity of this multi-layered domestic work. The ideas of efficiency not only marked individual work units, but also the relation between them. Through measuring the daily movements of the housewife one could calculate the most efficient layout of the work units in order to save time, space, and energy.

Second, the division of work units illustrates that the homemaker was not only a manual worker, but a home manager incentivized to plan and organize this labor in order to save time for family. It was not enough to know the manual practices; they required thinking and planning. That made a planning unit an essential part of the kitchen. This reflects one of the main principles of general scientific management: manual work and the planning of the same work have to be separated. They are two different things requiring very different skills. That is why Taylor introduced planning departments in the factories and a system of foremen to monitor the workers' performances.[70] A planning desk, at least the model designed for a family of five, is thus the domestic equivalent to the industrial planning department—a work sphere, partly separated from the spheres of manual work, adapted to and equipped for brainwork like planning and organizing (see Figure 5.7). What was particular about the home, however, was that one and the same person was expected to do both the manual work and the planning; she was supposed to peel the carrots *and* write plans and records on the portable typewriter.[71] This further underscores the complexity of domestic work and the diverse skills it required—and requires.

Third, recalling the significance of Gilbreths' time and motion technique, an interesting feature of the desks was the incorporation of visual tools. In particular we are thinking of the visible graphic charts that had their own compartment in the desk and could be pinned up on the insides of the doors (see Figure 5.8). Graphic charts are not self-evident in domestic work, yet Lillian Gilbreth claimed that "perplexing problems" could be "ironed out by the Visible Graphic Charts."[72] These visualization methods remain closely connected to consulting and efficiency engineering in corporate life. The discourse of visual management established at the beginning of the 20th century transformed graphic charts and visuals to knowledge-produc-

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                             │
│  List of Equipment in Institute Kitchen                     │
│  for a Two or Three Room Apartment                          │
│                    (Continued)                              │
│                                                             │
│  Preparation Unit (Cont.)  Planning Unit (Cont.             │
│                                                             │
│     Utility Drawer          Fountain pen                    │
│       Large spatula         Note pad                        │
│       Slicing knife         Clips                           │
│       Paring knife          Movable table                   │
│       4 Tablespoons         Apron                           │
│       2 Teaspoons           Hammer                          │
│       3 Forks               Nails                           │
│                             Thumb tacks                     │
│     Work Cabinet            Screw driver                    │
│       First drawer:         Telephone                       │
│       4 Dish cloths         Radio loud speaker              │
│       8-12 Towels                                           │
│       Paper napkins      Storage Unit                       │
│       Paper towels                                          │
│       Second drawer:        Dry Storage Cabinet             │
│       1 Large wooden spoon    28 in. cabinet over refrig-   │
│       1 Biscuit cutter          erator                      │
│       1 Knife sharpener       Loaf pan                      │
│       1 Rolling pin           Casserole                     │
│       1 Egg beater            3 Sizes storage dishes        │
│       Pastry brush            Vegetable container           │
│       Pastry cutter           Storage bottle                │
│       1 Set sandwich cutters  Covered pitcher               │
│       Lower section:          Corkscrew and bottle opener   │
│       Muffin tins                                           │
│       Biscuit pan           Cold Storage                    │
│       Baking sheet            Electric refrigerator, 5 cubic│
│       Food chopper              ft. size                    │
│       Angel cake tin          Rubber trays                  │
│       Wire strainer (large)                                 │
│       Wire strainer (small) Textile Materials               │
│       Wooden bowl and chopper                               │
│       Pie pan                 Curtains:                     │
│       Griddle                   Red washable cambric        │
│       Muffin pans               Green washable cambric      │
│       4 Scallop shells          Black washable cambric      │
│       2 Round cake tins         White washable cambric      │
│       1 Square cake tin       Holders for gloves:           │
│       3 Cake coolers            Black oilcloth              │
│       1 Large baking pan        Red bias tape               │
│                               Pockets for stationery:       │
│  Planning Unit                  Black sateen                │
│     Planning desk               Green and red washable      │
│     Black and Orange Recipe Box   cambric (see above)       │
│     Books                     Apron for hammer and nails    │
│     Ink                         See pockets for stationery  │
│     Calendar                  Stool pad                     │
│     Stationery pads             See glove holders           │
│     Rubber bands                                            │
│     Stickers                                                │
│     Pencils                                                 │
│                                                             │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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[31]

Figure 5.6. A list of what is needed for the different work units in the kitchen, including the Planning Unit. One of the appendices in the booklet *The Herald Tribune Institute Presents Four Model Kitchens* (1930), 31.
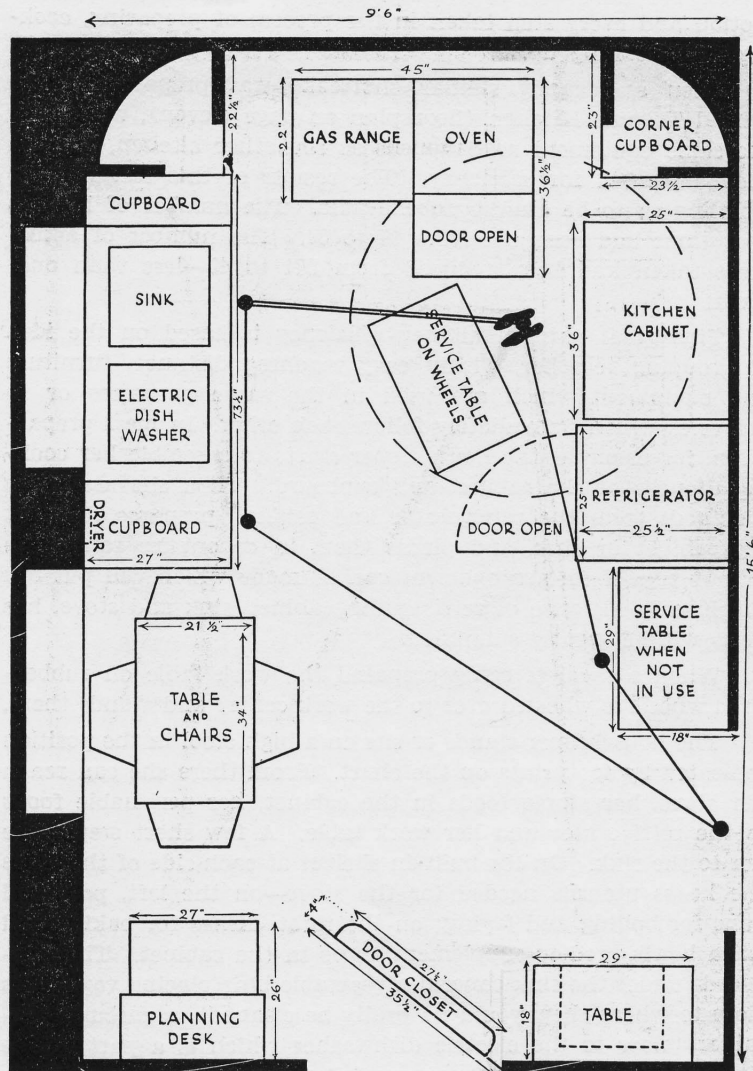
Plan No. II—The same kitchen, with the same working equipment, in its efficient circular work space arrangement. By moving the service table in front of the electric dishwasher another circular work space is created. (Note the minimum of retracing steps required by this arrangement in the preparation of the test recipe).

[11]

Figure 5.7. Detailed plan of a kitchen for a family of five, designed by Lillian Gilbreth for the Herald Tribune Institute. The planning desk in the corner represents the planning unit, and it is slightly separated from the other work units. *The New York Herald Tribune Institute Presents Four Model Kitchens* (1930), 11.

Figure 5.8. Lillian Gilbreth in the Herald Tribune Institute's new model kitchen in 1935. The Management Desk, still with the Think-sign from IBM, had replaced the planning desk from the institute's earlier model kitchen. *The Model Kitchen is Remodeled* (1935), 7.

ing tools with a rhetorical ability to convince.[73] The visual media technologies pioneered by Gilbreth Inc. were the vanguard for this development. The graphs and charts of the Management Desk took this development one step further; it was the end-user—the homemaker, and not the consultant—who should produce the knowledge and thereby convince herself about "the best way." Lillian Gilbreth demystified the expertise of the consultant by encouraging women to use the visual tools herself. Doing graphic charts, in other words, could empower women and the mundane practice of domestic work.

Lillian Gilbreth's desk designs seemed to peak at the Chicago World's Fair, and the IBM model never went into commercial production. It did not disappear entirely though. In 1935, when the Herald Tribune Home Institute redecorated their public showroom in New York City, the Management Desk was part of the interior (see Figure 5.8). The exhibition was accompanied by a new publication, *The Model Kitchen is Remodeled*, in which the desk is described as a result of the long collaboration between the institute and Gilbreth. That said, the trace of another business partner is apparent in a sign at the top saying "THINK"—since 1914 the slogan, motto, and (later) trademark of IBM.[74]

In 1935 Lillian Gilbreth took a part-time post at the Department of Home Economics at Purdue University, where she established a program called "Work Simplification." In 1954, together with two colleagues, she wrote the book *Management in the Home: Happier Living through Saving Time and Energy*, which was revised, enlarged, and republished in 1960.[75] The

Management Desk does not appear in either. What remains of the desk in the latter edition is a drawing of a kitchen layout, where a "[p]lanning center and book shelves" are marked out in the dinette, just beside a record player.[76] The emphasis on planning and order is still present, but instead of a bulky Management Desk, the authors suggest something more flexible: "This is a good time to invest in two notebooks—a large loose-leaf one with divisions for different subjects, and a small one for your purse, to jot down memos when you are out."[77] In retrospect, this seems quite logical for a woman who dedicated her life to efficiency and the eradication of superfluous mobilities.[78]

The large notebook was recommended for many things: making budgets of economy and energy, entering reflections on "motionmindedness," and for making charts of different kinds, for example of motion studies. Housemakers are even recommended to use therbligs in their observations, which the book humbly explains as "a coined word made by spelling backward the name of the engineer who first identified them."[79]

Many years after the last(?) appearance of the Management Desk in 1935 at the New York Herald Tribune Institute, Gilbreth and her co-authors seemed to draw the conclusion that the desk was superfluous; that all related home management practices, deeply molded by scientific management, could be performed just as well without it. To be open, curious, and prepared to change one's mind was an important principle for Gilbreth through all her career. Another example of this mindset is the advice she gave homemakers to document their motion studies with camera and a process chart. These visuals should be kept close at hand, though the authors warned: "But don't ever think of them as the last word. Regard them rather as an interim report, and keep looking for the One Best Way."[80] Gilbreth Inc.'s slogan from 1915 was an ongoing feature of her career, committed to constant improvement in efficiencies.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Even if Lillian Gilbreth wrote several books and held frequent public lectures on the making and managing of home, it was through the model kitchens and the publicity around them that she earned a wider reputation.[81] Together with other experts of domestic management and home economics in the first half of the 20th century, Gilbreth highlighted the diversity and complexity of housework. With recognition and respect, and with the help of the desks discussed here, she professionalized daily chores of many women and turned the housewife to a home manager. Another

way to put it is that she gave agency to the housewife and thus challenged the dominant ideology of gender and home. Paradoxically, however, she also played a part in the reproduction of the ideological infrastructure, the underlying belief system that the home is a sphere of reproduction and a female responsibility. The Management Desk facilitated efficiency. The time saved should be spent creating a warm and homely atmosphere for family. Efficiency was therefore not meant for personal relaxation, for sitting down and listening to your favorite radio show. The minutes saved were meant for labor of another kind: emotional labor, serving others, and taking care of others' needs.

The Management Desk and its precursors played a part in bridging the private and the public. An obvious example is the many communication technologies—radio, typewriter, reference books, graphical charts, clock, and telephone—that were valued in both spheres.[82] On a more abstract level one can argue that the public world surrounding the private home was a constitutive part of the Management Desk. Its functions and associated practices were symbolically and materially constructed from a masculine world of business. Its ideas and activities were a byproduct of industrial scientific management, where the planning department was the model. These scientific features could be seen as a threat to the warm atmosphere of the private and intimate home; a home that maintained its meaning through keeping a proper distance the public world. The home-maker's emotional labor was therefore crtical to offset the cold and calculating logic of the bulky desk, and the efficiency imperatives it set for the home enteprise.

As more middle class families negotiate the porous boundaries of professional life at home today, we are not so far removed from the questions first raised by the Management Desk nearly a century ago. There are still, on all levels, discussions, arguments and concerns about the sanctity of the home, its boundaries, and who is supposed to do what where. Managerial, manual, and emotional work still take place amid anxieties about optimal efficiency, even as life has been completely upended by a global pandemic. People who have worked from home over recent years have had daily reminders regarding these issues, and the amount of labor that is required to keep order. Families have experienced colliding worlds as they come to terms with the logistical and pyschological burden of turning the kitchen table into an office desk and back again (see see Jarlbrink's chapter in this volume). Lillian Gilbreth's design for a Management Desk, with doors providing a momentary reprieve from the unrelenting demands of work, may yet prove to be an idea ahead of its time.

NOTES

1. Cheryl R. Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: A Century of Progress* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 3.

2. Robert W. Rydell, "Century of Progress Exposition." In *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, accessed June 2, 2021, http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/225.html.

3. Julie Des Jardins, *Lillian Gilbreth: Redefining Domesticity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013), 133; Deborah Chambers, *Cultural Ideals of Home: The Social Dynamics of Domestic Space* (London: Routledge, 2020), 63–80, 193; Melissa Gregg, *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 30–34.

4. Gregg, *Counterproductive*, 24–25.

5. Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, eds., *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

6. Compare Arlie Hochshild and Annie Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

7. The empirical material comes from Gilbreth Library of Management Research and Professional papers, Purdue University Archives and Special Collections, West Lafayette, IN. It is identified as MP8 in relation to other collections of material from Gilbreth. See "Finding aid to the Gilbreth Library of management papers", Purdue University Libraries Archives and Special Collections, last modified March 22, 2021, https://archives.lib.purdue.edu/fa/msp8_gilbrethLOM.pdf. A special thank you to Katey Watson, France A. Córdova Archivist, who has been extraordinarily helpful during the research process.

8. She gave birth to twelve children, but the five-year-old Mary died in 1912 in diphteria. Des Jardins, *Lillian Gilbreth*, 71.

9. Laurel Graham, *Managing on Her Own: Dr Lillian Gilbreth and Women's Work in the Interwar Era* (Norcross: Engineering and Management Press, 1998), 160–161; Gregg, *Counterproductive*, 23; Des Jardins, *Lillian Gilbreth*, 102–104.

10. Lynn Spigel, "Object Lessons for the Material Home: From Storagewall to Invisible Design," *Public Culture* 24, no. 3 (2012); Craig Robertson, *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021). Compare Elizabeth A. Patton, *Easy Living: The Rise of the Home Office* (New Brunnswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

11. Florian Hoof, *Angels of Efficiency: A Media History of Consulting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

12. Gregg, *Counterproductive*, 32–33.

13. Graham, *Managing*, 82.

14. Ibid., 40.

15. Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 94.

16. Graham, *Managing*, 39.

17. Des Jardins, *Lillian Gilbreth*, 68.

18. Ibid, 64–66.

19. Graham, *Managing*, 74.

20. Ibid, 76.

21. Gilbreths' unique methods are discussed in Hoof, *Angels of Efficiency*, 133–185; Cresswell, *On the Move*, 88–121; Graham, *Managing*, 43–84; Des Jardins, *Lillian Gilbreth*, 52–97; and Gregg *Counterproductive*, 36–40 from which these paragraphs draw on.

22. A selection of Gilbreth's films 1910–1924 (published 1945) can be seen as "Original Films by Frank B. Gilbreth", Internet Archive, accessed June 2, 2021, https://archive.org/details/0809_Original_Films_of_Frank_B_Gilbreth_02_12_3 4_00.

23. Graham, *Managing*, 65–66.

24. Hoof, *Angels of Efficiency*, 154–162.

25. Ibid., 151.

26. Ibid., 11–16. Hoof traces the visual management to the articulation of three related, although separated developments: the emergence of independent managerial practice (that is, the professionalization of managers); the rise of corporate consulting as a field; and the innovation of several visualization techniques at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

27. Graham, *Managing*, 159.

28. Des Jardins, *Lillian Gilbreth*, 114.

29. Address to The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, NY Division, 1930. Cited in Graham, *Managing*, 160.

30. Gregg, *Counterproductive*, 23.

31. Robertson, *The Filing Cabinet*, 224.

32. Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think," *The Atlantic Monthly* 176, no. 1 (July 1945).

33. Her interest for homemakers' own experience can be compared to what today is called "user experience" or "UX" within Interaction Design.

34. *The Model Kitchen is Remodeled* (New York: The New York Herald Tribune Home Institute, 1935), 8.

35. Brochure at the fair, *Planned Motion in the Home. Saves: Time—Energy—Money* (1933), no pagination.

36. Hochshild and Machung, *The Second Shift*, 290.

37. *Planned Motion*.

38. Compare Markus Krajewski, *Paper Machines* (Boston: MIT Press, 2011); Robertson, *The Filing Cabinet*.

39. Graham, *Managing*, 74–75.

40. Jane Lancaster, *Making Time: Lillian Gilbreth, a Life beyond "Cheaper by the Dozen"* (Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 15.

41. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 62–63.

42. Sarah A. Leavitt, "It Was Always a Good Thing: Historical Precedents for Martha Stewart," *American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2001): 125–131.

43. Gregg, *Counterproductive*, 27.

44. Regarding her faith, see Des Jardins, *Lillian Gilbreth*, 32.

45. Cresswell, *On the Move*, 120–121.

46. *Planned Motion*.

47. Gregg, *Counterproductive*, 57–58. See also Charlie Järpvall, *Pappersarbete: Formandet av och föreställningar om kontorspapper som medium* (Lund: Lunds universitet, 2016).

48. In that way it reminds about George Nelson's storagewalls, studied by Lynn Spigel in "Object Lessons."

49. *The Model Kitchen is Remodeled*, 8.

50. Julie Des jardin describes Lillian Gilbreth's life 1924–1928 under the heading "Sexism and breadwinning," *Lillian Gilbreth*, 113–127. This fact underscores the aptness of the title of Laurel Graham's book on Lillian Gibreth: *Managing on Her Own*. See especially chapter 3 for details regarding these years.

51. Des Jardin, *Lillian Gilbreth*, 121.

52. Ibid, 123–127.

53. Gregg, *Counterproductive*, 21–24; Robertson, *The Filing Cabinet*, chapter 7.

54. Des Jardins, *Lillian Gilbreth*, 134–135.

55. The name differs in the documents: Herald Tribune Institute, New York Herald Tribune Institute, New York Herald Tribune Home Institute.

56. *The Model Kitchen is Remodeled*, 3. The Institute was associated with the Better Homes of America Trade Association, according to Des Jardins, *Lillian Gilbreth*, 135.

57. *The Model Kitchen is Remodeled*, 12.

58. Graham, *Managing*, 223.

59. Ibid., 191.

60. *The Herald Tribune Practical Kitchen: A Model Kitchen That Saves Time and Labor* (New York: New York Herald Tribune Institute, 1930), 11.

61. Robertson, *The Filing Cabinet*, 241–242.

62. *The New York Herald Tribune Institute Presents Four Model Kitchens* (New York: New York Herald Tribune Institute, 1930).

63. Des Jardins, *Gillian Gilbreth*, 136.

64. *Four Model Kitchens*, 15.

65. Ibid., 18.

66. Ibid., 3.

67. The Swedish Hemmens Forskningsinstitut (The Research Institute of the Homes), founded in 1944, is one such example.

68. Robertson, *The Filing Cabinet*, 241–242.

69. Lillian Gilbreth, Orpha Mae Thomas, and Eleanor Clymer, *Management in the Home: Happier Living Through Saving Time and Energy* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1960), 5.

70. Cresswell, *On the Move*, 87.

71. Advertisements for portable typewriters were in the American interwar period addressing (business) men on the move and women tethered to the home. Rachel

Plotnick, "Tethered Women, Mobile Men: Gendered Mobilities of Typewriting," *Mobile Media & Communication* 8, no. 2 (2020).

72. *Planned Motion*.

73. Hoof, *Angels of Efficiency*, 14.

74. "Think Sign", IBM Archives, accessed June 2, 2021, https://www.ibm.com/ibm/history/exhibits/attic2/attic2_207.html.

75. Regarding Gilbreth's time at Purdue University, see Graham, *Managing*, 191–192.

76. Gilbreth, Mae Thomas, and Clymer, *Management in the home*, 83.

77. Ibid., 10.

78. Cresswell, *On the Move*, 120.

79. Gilbreth, Mae Thomas, and Clymer, *Management in the Home*, 89–90.

80. Ibid., 99.

81. Graham, *Managing on Her Own*, 190–191.

82. Magnus Andersson, "The Flexible Home," in *Geographies of Communication: The Spatial Turn in Media Studies*, eds. Jesper Falkheimer and André Jansson (Göteborg: Nordicom, 2006); Timon Beyes, Robin Holt, and Claus Pias, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Media, Technology, and Organization Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

6

The Desk as Barrier
and Carrier in Social Work

ELIZABETH MARTINELL BARFOED AND TERES HJÄRPE

In modern welfare states like Sweden, social workers meet citizens with different needs, often as representatives of a public authority or organization, such as social services, probation services, or health care institutions. The social worker is expected to respond to social problems and difficult living conditions through working methods developed in part in relation to state bureaucratic and administrative logic.[1] Thus, the very preconditions of this professional exercise call for balancing citizen needs against organizational requirements and rules, as reflected in the alternating duties of being in the field interacting with clients and working at the desk, planning, documenting, and reporting.

This chapter explores the desk as a material object as well as its symbolic representations in social work from a professional perspective. As we will demonstrate, different and sometimes incompatible meanings and functions associated with the desk reflect current tensions and professional dilemmas: On the one hand, ever since the emergence of the social work profession, the desk has symbolized a distanced and uncommitted social worker, even representing asymmetric power relations.[2] On the other hand, recent endeavors at professionalization, evidence-based practices, and accountable welfare work have resulted, to some degree unintentionally, in an administrative turn and a strengthening of the bureaucratic understanding of the mission.[3] Social workers, often described as semi-professionals striving for higher status, face trade-offs between traditional ideals of being committed and working close to the community, and administrative work in the office.[4]

When professional challenges and dilemmas are analyzed in social work, the desk often goes unnoticed, although some attention has been given to other artifacts. Social work scholar Mathilde Høybye-Mortensen, for example, gives attention to materiality through the ways social workers use computers, logos, standards, and policy documents as "objective" tools for

different purposes, such as convincing a client or legitimizing decisions.[5] Other studies highlight reification processes and the production of clients through the ways in which documentation and numbers are used in practice.[6] Several rationales support a focus on the desk and its meanings. First, even with today's high degree of digitalization and new mobile working practices taking form, the traditional desk is central in organizing work, as a place to remember, plan, prioritize, predict, and communicate. Studies show that how work is handled and organized administratively has strong implications for how the overall work is performed and shaped.[7] Second, analysis of how the desk is used in mundane work allows us to trace professional and ideological change over time. Material artifacts such as the desk intervene in human interaction by structuring activities, supporting some activities and restricting others.[8] As an illustrative example, Johan Jarlbrink, a researcher in media studies, examined shifting uses of the desk in journalism and identified foundational changes in the profession. In journalism, practices have changed from the desk being at the heart of news work, with the immobile reporter using pen and scissors at the desk, to the concept of the investigative journalist out in the field, to today's more internationally connected yet desk-based journalism.[9] Third, as anthropologist Lucy Suchman argues, professional handcraft is shaped through an interplay in which humans and objects and artifacts mutually constitute each other.[10]

Thus, the desk can be regarded as a place for assemblage and for organizing, and with this assemblage, there are specific artifacts, both material and symbolic.[11] A desk is not a dead or anonymous material object but a place for actions and interactions, as well as emotions and identity construction, with professional consequences. In this chapter, we find that the desk is a place to produce welfare investigations, pile up important memos, and write notes while talking on the phone, as well as a symbol for making sense of and giving meaning to everyday social work. Our aim is to explore different meanings of the desk in social work and its conflicting positions within the profession, and to discuss how these meanings interrelate. Empirically, we use qualitative interviews and observation data from two research projects investigating everyday interaction in the social services, and written assignments by students reflecting on their internship in different social work organizations. We start by giving a short history of competing ideals in social work that can be connected to the different meanings of the desk that we identified in the empirical data.

SOCIAL WORK, IDEALS, AND DEVELOPMENTS
—A SHORT HISTORY

To understand the connotations of the desk in social work today, we set the scene by giving attention to ideals historically embedded in social work. As industrialization in the 19th and early 20th century separated work and family life, new social problems and needs arose. Housing shortages in the cities, unemployment, lack of family support, and poverty were social conditions that were difficult for emerging welfare states to ignore. State responsibilities accompanied, extended, and replaced philanthropic and voluntary work associated with poor and vulnerable people, and social work as a profession was slowly consolidated.[12] Christian ideals of helping the "unfortunate" merged with government ambitions and needs to control and discipline the population.[13] It has been argued that it was this identification of social problems as something for society to intervene in and correct that paved the way for social workers' contradictory mission to help and emancipate versus to control and discipline citizens. As public welfare programs expanded, social workers became gatekeepers, giving access to social benefits as well as controlling the clients.[14] Following these developments, families became a target for disciplinary change, which had many implications for welfare policy design.[15]

In the context described above, two different approaches or ideal types regarding the more specific social work mission took form. The diverging approaches are ascribed to the two social work pioneers Jane Addams (1860–1935) and Mary Richmond (1861–1928), both from the USA. Both of them wanted to consolidate and develop social work but chose different paths. Jane Addams, working in a poor settlement organization in Chicago, claimed that poverty should be fought by living close to the poor and learning by sharing their living conditions and experiences. The preferred way to empower people to find strategies to lift themselves from precarious conditions, she reasoned, was truly knowing what their everyday lives were like. Mary Richmond chose another direction. She wanted to work with social problems through the professionalization of social work. Her argument was that university-based social work education built on a solid and scientific knowledge base, and relying on systematic working models would give social workers the status and impact to make a change.[16]

Both orientations have been represented in social work practice ever since. Empowerment-striving working models, community work, civil society engagements, preventive work, and field work have evolved from Jane Addams' ideals. Reflecting Mary Richmond's ideals, the case work tradition

emerged, where families and individuals are offered treatment by visiting public welfare institutions like the social services, hospitals, or private counseling. Today, traces of both community and individual social work exist, and how social problems are best solved remains an ongoing debate. Community social work is associated with advocacy and political action at a collective level, whereas individual social work, which is most associated with deskwork, is said to personalize injustices.[17]

During recent decades, several stakeholders have questioned the knowledge base of social work methods. Studies in the 1990s yielded little proof that the interventions used had any effects for the clients, and they raised concerns that these interventions might even be harmful.[18] Parallel pursuits of evidence-based practices from within the profession and requests for transparency and accountability from politicians and management resulted in formalization of the knowledge base and a stronger emphasis on documentation, evaluation, and measurability.[19] Sociologist Julia Evetts describes this development with illustrative concepts. She suggests that an "occupational professionalism" is being challenged by an "organizational professionalism," the former relying more on the social workers' tacit knowledge and collegial norms and the latter being more loyal to demands and expectations regarding transparency and accountability from a managerial level.[20] A new professionalism emanating from the two strands of professionalisms is more aligned with Richmond's ideas in the sense of an emphasis on strengthening evidence-based practice and more systematic and structured working methods.[21] Partly unintentionally, these developments have meant that social work has taken an "administrative turn," leading among other things to more documentation governance, evaluations, standardization, and working quotas.[22]

With this brief background, we move on to an analysis of how the desk is handled and talked about among Swedish social workers and social work students. The analysis that follows is structured around four main meanings of the desk that we identified in the fieldwork data (from social services and in a probation office) and in student papers (reflecting on practical placements). In the first two meanings—forming what we call the barrier discourse—the desk appears as a symbol for unwanted characteristics and as something that the social worker should avoid or counter because it hinders contact with the client. In next two meanings, which form the carrier discourse, the desk manifests in a more material way, as an important, inevitable (and often appreciated) work node, where tasks and activities are planned and organized, as well as a place with increased importance in

the pursuit of evidence-based practice and transparency. Finally, we round up the analysis with some observations regarding new digital practices and what they can mean for these competing discourses. In the analysis, you will find both material and symbolic meanings of the desk, something that we comment on along the way.

DESK-CENTERED VERSUS CLIENT-CENTERED SOCIAL WORK

Ever since social work was incorporated into welfare bureaucracies, there have been fears that social workers are being overrun by an administrative logic, distancing them from community or client engagement. Rooted in Addams' approach to social work, ideals of solving social problems by living among the poor and understanding their everyday conditions have been prominent when advocating a client-centered approach. Both in our earlier studies and in the empirical data analyzed for this chapter, we find these ideas being reproduced through an anti-ideal, where the desk is a symbol of distance and disengagement. Following this line of reasoning, the ideal social worker can be defined as anything but a desk bureaucrat. In a qualitative study, Teres Hjärpe and Hanna Falkenström investigated how social workers balance emotional work and paperwork when conducting different kinds of needs assessments.[23] Their findings show that professionals defined documentation as something that both helped and hindered them from performing emotional work. One recurrent point of view was that paperwork was defined in opposition to "real" social work. For example, a child welfare worker described the activity of writing as "window dressing" to be done before or after work in relation to the "work you are good at and that you like," the work of interacting with clients directly. Another child welfare social worker reported that when doing paperwork, "we disappear from the clients. We listen less and write more."[24] In this short quote, a dichotomy is established, as if listening and writing are contrasting activities and the latter entails distancing oneself from the client.

These ideals already seem to be formed during social work education, embedded in the perceptions of how a social worker should be and behave, and the ideals are apparently present even before entering working life. The discursive split is exemplified in a written assignment by a student, reflecting on the kind of social worker she wants to become:

> At my internship placement, they have a lot of contact with the users, but also a lot of documentation requirements. As I said before, I really hope I won't get stuck behind a desk, and that I get the opportunity to go out there in the field and see with my own eyes what it's like.[25]

The distinction between a desk-centered and a client-centered social work is reproduced in the student's reflection. The desk seems to pose a threat to the student, potentially robbing her of the possibility of meeting reality and learning the tricks of the trade. In a feedback letter from a teacher to another student, who had revealed feelings of insecurity when interacting with the clients, the teacher confirmed the anti-desk ideal:

> In the long run, the uncomfortable situation now will be to your advantage, you don't have a desk or any administrative tasks to hide behind. Instead, you will be forced to throw yourself into the social, you'll learn a great deal, even though it at times can be scary.[26]

Organizational theorists Gibson Burrell and Karen Dale argue that the desk has not only material but also epistemological and other meanings and functions.[27] In this answer from the teacher to the student, the desk symbolizes something that the student, or social worker, can get stuck behind unwillingly (as in the previous quote), but it can also be a place to hide when feeling insecure. According to the teacher, the student should instead be encouraged to be out there engaging in "the social": Learning takes place while being in the field rather than when hiding behind a desk. Knowledge emanating from the field, so-called practice knowledge, might appear "scary," to quote the student, but represents a more genuine, or preferable, way of learning.[28] In promoting an appropriate professional style, the student and the teacher in this case use the desk as a metaphor, rather than focusing on its physical appearance.

To sum up, in the examples in this section, the distinction between desk-centered and client-centered social work is reproduced in images of an engaged and involved social worker contrasted with a distanced social worker hiding behind the desk and not being able to help the client (or not even meeting them). Client-centered social work in the field is contrasted with paperwork and documentation by the desk, and the two professional tasks are kept separate. The dichotomy is worked up and consolidated rather than problematized: Desk work is associated with bureaucratic (meaningless) paperwork, rather than with community- and client-centered engagements.

THE DESK AND POWER ASYMMETRY

The desk reappears as a symbol of the exercise of power and of the power imbalance between the bureaucrat social worker and the client. With an academic gaze, social work is often looked upon as a normative disciplinary

practice, with social workers guarding and demarcating how citizens should behave and live their lives, how parents should bring up their children, how a healthy life is lived, and so on. From this perspective, social workers are normative brokers, or judges, categorizing people and deciding what is regarded as safe and sound behavior.[29] Historically, social work is built on an imagined opposition between the deserving and the non-deserving poor, a concept that has existed in Western cultures at least since the medieval times.[30]

Along with coining the concept and defining the characteristics of the "street-level bureaucrat," social welfare scholar Michael Lipsky made the point that the asymmetric relation between bureaucrat and client is visible and embedded in routines set by the organization beforehand, such as visiting hours, time frames for treatments, and limited sets of intervention alternatives.[31] French sociologist Vincent Dubois, in the pre-framing of the client interaction, includes material aspects such as furnishing, spacing, and the design of the furniture.[32] In his analyses of desk interaction at a French social service office, he shows that the desk itself and its placement in the room reproduce the structural inequality of the relationships. One example is the placing of desks in a reception, intentionally leaving no space for clients to gather or form a group, a strategy he calls "fragmentation of the public," intended to make citizens more manageable.[33]

Against these preconditions of the state–citizen exchange, efforts from the social workers' perspective often become a matter of trying to neutralize or to even out the power imbalance, sometimes in very concrete ways. In their textbook *The Structural Approach to Direct Practice in Social Work*, Gale Goldberg Wood and Carolyn T. Tully display the delicate balance between control and support for a social worker, paying particular attention to the desk and power relations.[34] They express that a social worker consciously can work with the desk and its decor to create a certain atmosphere. For example, with the placement of some personal items on the desktop, the meeting becomes less formal. The authors also pay special attention to the placement of the desk in client encounters, with reference to the power asymmetries being reproduced if the space is wrongly furnished. However, the desk in itself does not carry inherent power tensions, and what matters is how the social worker uses it. The different positions that the social worker and the client can take are thoroughly worked through, clearly relating the positions to power issues:

> Where the client is physically positioned in relation to the worker conveys
> a lot about how the worker views her status and the status of the client. For
> example, if the worker physically positions herself behind a large desk with
> the client seated squarely opposite (where the client and worker are at 180
> degrees), the desk provides a physical barrier that may convey a sense of
> distrust and power imbalance.[35]

In Figure 6.1, the authors illustrate various placement options for furniture
in an office. Later in the text, Goldberg Wood and Tully comment on the
different seating arrangements:

> It is best to be seated in the most intimate arrangement possible. In addi-
> tion to being the most intimate situation, the knee-to-knee position in A
> is also the one that suggests the least power differential between worker
> and client. In situation C, on the other hand, power is vested in the person
> behind the desk, and this direct face-to-face position is a setup for confron-
> tation and conflict.[36]

The desk itself and the positioning around it are given a strong significance
in this example; the materiality of the desk gives it a status of an actor with
a clear influence on the interaction.[37] Furthermore, with a high level of
consciousness, the social worker and client interaction is directed with the
desk as an important member of the interplay.[38] In all positions, the desk
is represented as a barrier, signaling different degrees of authority. In posi-
tion C, the desk almost appears as a power extension of the social worker,
and the setup seems similar to a police interrogation. In position A, how-
ever, inherent power tensions are softened. The positioning around the
desk is used to equalize power imbalances between the social worker and
the client, and the desk is central in this endeavor.

In addition to the fact of the desk itself, its specific form can have bear-
ing on the interaction and construct and constitute social relations. Media
and organizational scholars Lisa Conrad and Nancy Richter explore differ-
ences between tables: A rectangular desk carries connotations of authority
and tension, but a round table invites cooperation, creating an atmosphere
of consensus.[39] In this sense, the desk becomes a mediating technology, and
social and spatial organizing and disciplining relations are performed with
the desk as a central node.[40] Burrell and Dale find that the desk offers a
bureaucratic separation between the private self and the public role.[41] In
social work, a core discussion in becoming professional is how to balance
your personal style, emanating from a private self, with a public role. The
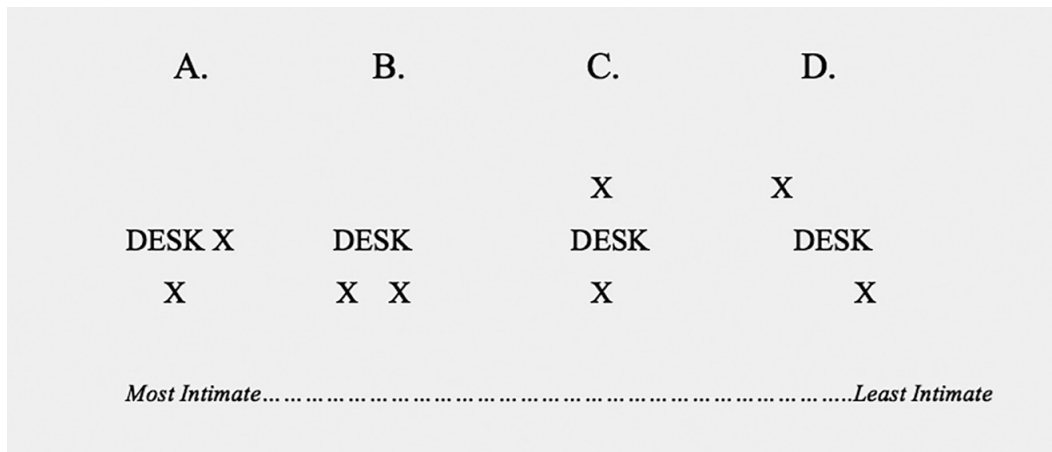two are closely interlinked, and social workers need to find their own way

Figure 6.1. Illustration of office seating arrangements and the level of intimacy they impose between social worker and client. Gale Goldberg Wood and Carolyn T. Tully, *The Structural Approach to Direct Practice in Social Work*, 3rd ed. (2006), 232.

in integrating this contradiction. The tensions around the desk, as a material as well as a symbolic object, can partly be understood in this light.

Just like the dichotomy between desk-centered versus client-centered social work elaborated on earlier, the desk as an unwanted symbol of power is found in this quote from a student paper:.

> How should you respond to them [the service users], so they can feel equal in the relationship? Unfortunately, there will always be an inevitable power advantage for those who sit behind the desk in a government position, and this is something to be aware of.[42]

The social worker sitting behind the desk reproduces power structures, and in this position, inherent tensions in the contact with the clients are played out. The student worries about being unaware of this position when entering the professional role. In even more abstract ways, the desk is used as a symbol to counteract the inherent power asymmetry, by an acknowledgment that anyone can end up on the other side of the table, as in this example from a student:

> In the article, we read about the importance of remembering that social workers are not superior to other people. These are thoughts that have been with me forever, with my father's words ringing in my ears: "In social work, you will never know on which side of the desk you will find yourself. Sometimes you can be the helper to people who are in trouble, and sometimes you yourself can be in need of help when you are in trouble."[43]

This student is just about to start her internship and reminds herself not to incorporate the power hierarchy of social worker–client in her mindset. In the example, the desk is a metaphor and becomes the thin line between fortune and misfortune. It is never evident how life will turn out, and destinies can change, so no one can take their current trajectory for granted. Her father's words in the quote are used as a resource to emphasize this unpredictability of life.

After these two sections examining the abstract symbolism of the desk, we now turn to its more straightforward function. It becomes a place where work is organized, prioritized, planned, and executed.

THE DESK, CASE WORK, AND (DIGITAL) PAPER CLIENTS

In parallel and possibly in contrast to the anti-desk ideals described in the previous sections, our observational data reveal the centrality of the desk in ordinary workdays in the social services.[44] Even though the social worker makes temporary excursions to other places—to meet colleagues and clients or for other errands—the desk appears as the liaison center for almost all activities. It is the place to start the day, open up documentation and registration systems, and check mail and the calendar. The desk is where the social worker makes a stopover between activities, to write, make phone calls, schedule the week, and create to-do lists, and it's a place for a short break and a cup of coffee. The desk is also where activities are completed, most often documentation activities. When the social worker signs out for the day, the paperwork is left lying on the desk, and what is left must be dealt with the next morning. As research on office work shows, both the *finding* and the *reminding* functions of the desk are paramount, not least in making work manageable with the help of pens, papers, sticky notes, calendars, computers, and various software.[45] As one student puts it in an assignment:

> Some days are very intense, and one client meeting immediately is followed by another. And the desk is filled with Post-it notes with things you need to remember. Even though it sometimes feels a bit messy, I sense that I somehow manage to uphold some kind of control in the chaos, and I have found systems for working with the areas where I am responsible. So, it feels a bit more organized than in the beginning.[46] .

An overburdened desk signals a lot to do, and the many sticky notes fill a reminding function. Organizing one's desk is organizing one's work. In fact, research shows that the level of organization on the desk can be connected to employees' perceptions of their workdays. An interview study of

Figure 6.2. Case files by a social worker's desk, Årby municipality, 2017.
Photo: Teres Hjärpe.

desk organization and how people organize office work, including desks, tablets, shelves, and file cabinets, characterized two types: At one extreme is the *neat* desk organizer, and at the other extreme is the *messy* desk organizer.[47] People with messy offices found it more problematic to locate information and remember tasks than people with neat offices, although the authors did not conclude that the work performed by those with messy desks was less skillful.

We will devote special attention to the desk as a place for visualization of the social worker's personal workload and responsibility, something that

co-workers also can use strategically for their purposes. In the case work tradition (represented by already mentioned Mary Richmond), the individual social worker is responsible for a certain number of cases, sometimes together with a co-investigator. In Figure 6.2, a child protection investigator has started the day by rolling the wagon of his cases to the desk. Sitting by the desk, the social worker explains to the researcher:

> Yes, these are all the cases that I have the files of. Then there are others where I am the co-investigator, but these files are in the main investigator's wagon. I think there are 12 more files for cases where I am involved.
>   Researcher: OK, so how many cases do you have in total?
>   Social worker: Well, I think there are 30 to 40 cases, here. The first ones are in the investigative phase... 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ... 12 investigations ... and after that comes ongoing interventions to be followed up 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 ... 13, 14 files for interventions. And then the 12 files where I am the co-investigator, that makes 38 cases.
>   Researcher: That seems like a lot! Do you compare [your case load] much with the others?
>   Social worker: I mean, yes, if someone has 11 or more cases in the investigative case, you normally react. Oh, and then below there are some files that are too big that they don't fit with the others ...[48]

The social worker accounts for his workload in terms of the number of cases he has, and there is also a clear prioritization order in the wagon: first the ongoing investigations with demanding and current work, and then the follow-up-cases. These cases also seem to function as a reference point when social workers value or resonate about their respective workload.

It is well-known that individuals applying for help, for example from the social services, are adjusted to the logic of the organization; individual needs and wishes are transformed into recognizable needs that can be met or rejected.[49] During the investigation process, individuals of flesh and blood are transformed into (digital) paper clients moving between desks and/or transmitted between computers. Social welfare scholar Yeshekel Hasenfeld called this phenomenon of individuals being turned into clients *people processing*.[50] Sociologist James A. Holstein took this concept further by coining the transformation *people production*.[51] By using this concept, Holstein underlines both the activity of this work and its consequences. People in public welfare institutions are not merely processed but also actively produced. One example is when a computer program produces digital stories based on the results from a standardized assessment interview with digitized numerical answers (from a physical meeting with the

client).[52] A computerized story with a humanized voice appears. Following Baudrillard, a hyperreality materializes: "It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real." [53]

The reframing of a client into a material file also has other consequences, including enabling a concrete shifting of responsibility via the paper case files. The simple act of putting a document on someone's desk is a way to signal who is responsible for taking the next step, as in the following short dialogue from the social services:

> Manager: What about the X-case?
>   Social worker: It lies on your desk now, we have to deal with it after the meeting at the Children's Advocacy Center. We have to take one disaster at a time.[54]

The workload on the desk is built up, using a strong rhetoric. When cases cannot be completed, the "paper clients" on the desk (and on the screen) from the social worker's point of view become stressful or even disturbing elements during the workday. Having cases on the desk begs the individual social worker to take action. A given family's problems can be alarming, and priorities must be established swiftly. Cases lying on the desk unaccounted for can be the cause of other people's sufferings, and in a worst-case scenario, even death.[55] When eight-year-old Yara was beaten to death by her foster parents in the Swedish town of Karlskrona in 2014, one circumstance received a lot of attention: the fact that a fax signaling concern for Yara's health had been sent to the social services, but it lay forgotten in the post box for several days and thus never reached the responsible social worker's desk. The social services were questioned for not taking action on time. Not "being a case" or a document on someone's table apparently can mean falling between areas of responsibility, with severe consequences.

The cases piling up on the desk can be filled with emotional loadings, reminding the social workers of clients with different complexities and challenges. In the following example, two social workers are discussing so-called difficult cases on their desks, using a metaphorical language:

> Social worker 1: Yes, it's the same old story. There is always a pile of cases on the desk, and some of them provoking that bad feeling, the "never-ending stories" that you get never finished with … I guess your problem at the moment are the crazy mother calling, well you know …
>   Social worker 2: Yes, and don't forget about the custody battles … they are also "never-ending stories"…

> Social worker 1: Well … and you are working with investigations. Among your cases you have certain problematic ones, and they are only 10 percent of the cases … which means that in 90 percent, we are doing a great job.
>
> Social worker 2: Yes, it is important not to focus on the problematic ones …[56]

Note how the participants talk about their files on the desk, letting them symbolize the clients. In the example, certain demanding clients with perceived unrealistic expectations—and hence impossible to help—are metaphorically depicted as cases piling up on the desk with a certain bad flavor. They are "never-ending stories," difficult to finish in the sense that they never leave the desk. A professional off-stage jargon is worked up, far from ideals of the well-meaning and empathetic professional.[57] Difficult clients lead to professional frustration, and indirectly, the two social workers seem to criticize themselves for not doing a good job; they reassure themselves that these types of client are in the minority. To the outsider, the jargon sounds rather raw and blunt.

PROFESSIONALIZATION AND DESK WORK

In recent years, the desk has in part and unintentionally become even more central in human service organizations. In this part of the analysis, the desk will not appear as clearly visible as in the quotes and fieldnotes in the three previous sections. However, we will assume that more time behind the desk follows the administrative turn in social work since the 1990s that is a well-documented consequence of the pursuit of professionalization transparency in the public sector. In the wake of New Public Management (NPM) and Evidence-based Practice, social workers are encouraged to document, systematize, evaluate, audit, and report their work on a continuous basis. In the "new professionalism," organizational and professional norms are blended, and professionals incorporate the logic of the management. This incorporation implies taking greater responsibility for the municipality's overall economy, caring about how the organization is represented in national rankings and ratings, or defining reporting and documenting as core social work.[58] It also implies a certain attitude towards the knowledge base of social work, as is outlined in the following quote, where a manager talks about how to discuss improvements together with her employees, using numbers as a privileged knowledge form:

> And then you also use numbers as a basis in the soft discussion. Then you have a basis to relate to instead of putting your finger in the air: "I feel, I think, I guess" … You get a basis to discuss from … and … you can verify things, or on the contrary deny, to "OK here, this is what it looks like, here you have it in black and white …"[59]

A professional and modern social worker has documentation and hard facts to think and act on. A social worker who instead feels and uses her intuition is equivalent to someone without direction or professional conviction.

Intentionally or not, this discourse generates more administrative tasks. Documentation requirements, small- and large-scale quantification projects, organizational reforms in general, and NPM reforms specifically, always involve extensive administrative efforts.[60] In connection with the institutionalization of the role of evaluation in the public sector, organizations need to acquire "assessment literacy," which is why new skills are demanded.[61] This literacy typically references tasks performed behind the desk: skills in identifying appropriate target values, selecting measuring instruments, using computerized control systems and reporting, analyzing, and interpreting statistics. New assignments and titles also arise for social workers who can hold new managerial assignments or work as controllers, quality developers, or development secretaries, and in other statistical assignments.[62]

Several studies show that this administrative workforce has spread at the expense of the operational workforce that performs the organization's actual mission.[63] Those who work directly with clients are also described as needing to spend more time on paperwork.[64] The fact that social workers, doctors, nurses, teachers, and others work in administrative assignments for which they do not have training has given rise to a growing literature on what is called a hybridization of the welfare professions' assignments.[65]

These tasks and positions are closely linked to the desk, as the changes result in yet another emphasis on desktop tasks in social work, not only for quality controllers but also for the social workers because they too get involved in the reporting activities. A workplace study from 2017 showed that child protection social workers spent 2 percent of their time meeting the children.[66] Most of the remaining time was dedicated to administration and meetings. We will illustrate the administrative character of social work in an everyday scene from a recent ethnographic research project: Social worker Karin, a middle manager at the social services with responsibility for elder care in a Swedish city, has been called to report statistics to a government audit agency (IVO).[67] One of her employees needs help:

> We enter the office where quality controller Linn, sitting by the desk doing computer work, smiles brightly. She is new on the job and responsible for reporting decisions not being executed by the social workers within a set time frame and sending reports to IVO. Linn is writing on the computer. Karin takes a chair and sits by her side. Linn says: "I tried to get into the system this morning but was logged out." They discuss problems with the e-identification. Finally, they get access to the computer system and click on the icon "Not executed decisions." Now they have to choose a correct entrance date among a couple of alternatives. They are basing their doings on a paper form, where all the decisions that haven't been executed have been written down by the social workers, collected, and handed to Linn.[68]

The computer work is causing problems for Linn, and it often is not evident how to find one's way through a program, necessitating many clicks and tactics to solve the problems. With the help of Karin, Linn manages to finalize the report and looks relieved. The example shows three things: First, new social work occupations (in this case, controllers) have entered the social work scene, with the main objective of having responsibility for quality improvement and accounting practices. Second, documentation in digital form take up a lot of time in social work today, not only for the controllers but also for the outreach social workers, who are needed to report decisions not being executed within a certain time frame (the paper form in the example), on a weekly basis. As we see, managers are also involved in the extensive digital paperwork. Third, national surveillance institutions are continually asking for updated statistics to steer and compare performances at the local level, all executed by the desk.[69]

DIGITALIZATION AND MOBILE DESKS

Before rounding up our analysis with a discussion, we will make a few comments about a current and important development with the potential to bridge or cement the parallel discourses we have accounted for here. The material desk as a central node in social work institutions seems widely accepted, but with the digital development of today, it is also challenged. The desk is still needed to organize piles of papers, applications, and letters, and to an increasing extent, digital documents in computerized systems.[70] The "electronic turn" in social work has been described not only as increasing the administrative burden and strengthening the bureaucratization of human service work but also as opening up the profession to mobile solutions and flexibility.[71] Social work researcher Camilla Granholm, for example, describes information and communication technology as a means of

coming back to an emancipating and community-based social work, as in Jane Addams' understanding. [72]

During our fieldwork, we found different ways of organizing meetings with clients and colleagues and certainly observed signs of new and flexible digital practices. In many meetings, the client sat in a chair beside the desk, with the social worker in front of the computer (compare with Figure 6.1, where different positions are presented). However, sometimes the two would sit in another part of the office with a small collection of more comfortable furniture. On other occasions, specific rooms were used for certain kinds of conversational purposes, and in these rooms, the power imbalances caused by positioning around the desk were absent. Social workers also made home visits or participated in meetings at other work places. Bringing a part of the desk, in terms of a laptop or tablet to meetings out of the office, can serve the social workers in different ways, including offering the possibility of instant search for information, simultaneous compliance with documentation requirements, or even the involvement of the clients in the documentation.[73]

Switching from paper-based to digitally based professional practice also has its challenges when it comes to technology, mobility, and decision-making. To take one example: In an English study on information practices, scholars of information systems and social work, David Wastell and Sue White found that social workers were given important visual cues in the paper file, such as detecting a family's history in social work based on the degree of paper yellowing, a history that was not as easily detectable in digital filing. In this way, the material desk proved to be important during decision-making.[74] A need to produce summaries to make sense of the files was, according to the social workers, "much harder" with an electronic system. A quote from the study: "The computer is a flat screen [. . .] A file is something you get hold of, the tactile experience is needed. You need to be able to hold the file."[75] The researchers introduced an E-table prototype with a virtual desk:

> Social workers often tell of taking files home, spreading their contents across the surface of the dining table, grouping documents into piles, and so on. E-table attempts to mimic this process. Source documents can be pulled out of the case file and placed on the electronic tabletop, where they are represented by a simple link.[76]

The success of this E-table is not known, but the example demonstrates the importance of both the material desk as a place to organize documents

during decision-making, and the metaphoric meaning of the desk as an organizing principle in social work. Malone shows similar findings from interviews of office workers about their work: The *finding* and the *reminding* functions of the desk in office work still prove to be important.[77]

DISCUSSION

By analyzing data from a Swedish social work context, we identified four different functions and meanings of the desk: First is the desk representing the opposite of client-centered social work. Second is the desk as a symbol of the bureaucrat's exercise of power. Third, the desk is a node for mundane tasks, and fourth, the desk is a center for professional pursuits. The four meanings we detected can be summarized in two contrasting positions: *the desk as a carrier* (of paperwork, investigations, notes, tired elbows, and so on) that helps get the job done and demonstrate professional skills, and *the desk as a barrier* (the social worker not "being out meeting clients"), hindering an empowering approach in which the power imbalance between social worker and client is actively opposed.

We find a difference between talk and action when the desk materializes. It is mainly in talk and rhetoric that the anti-desk expressions dominate (desk as *barrier* discourse), whereas its material manifestations and manifestations of professionality are more visible in interactions and activities (desk as *carrier* discourse). Thus, the desk as a symbol is referred to as something negative. The work associated with the material desk, however, is referred to as a matter of fact—as a dead object used for finalizing burgeoning administration or as an example of the decent bureaucrat in control of all of the papers.

How the desk is presented in textbooks and social work education also differs from what has been observable when sitting in during client meetings. Education and textbooks emphasize the need to meet with clients and be in the field instead of getting stuck behind the desk. This ideal clashes with administrative demands in professional life where students experience ethical stress from conflicting expectations.[78] The junior social worker has to renegotiate ideals adapted to the organizational reality and the new perceptions of professionalism, which might create feelings of guilt and disappointment, challenging ethical standards and values.[79] By visualizing these clashing ideals, we can offer an interpretation of the dissatisfaction and turnover amongst Swedish social workers reported during the last decade.[80]

Desk work practices have always been in interplay with organizational and societal changes. We have demonstrated how professional ideals, the

pursuit of professionalization, and requests for transparency are tied to different desk practices. The transformation towards digital societies is ongoing and changing how desk work is done, in ways not yet fully understood. Greater work mobility, accelerated in recent years by the pandemic, is a factor changing the use of the desk, as the borders between home work and office work are changing (see Jarlbrink's chapter in this volume). However, as this chapter shows, the desk in social work is omnipresent and has varying significance. In its various forms—physical, metaphoric, or symbolic—the desk is highly and actively talked about and handled in everyday social work. The desk has proven to be a central node in doing social work, not only in public organizations such as the social services but also in social work education, where the desk is saturated with symbolic connotations. Although talk and actions enclosing the desk vary, we hope that we have given the desk—which has lived an anonymous life in social work, hidden under piles of paper and at times being used in a derogatory way—the attention in social work that it deserves.

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7

Worlds are Colliding!
Office Work from Home
in a Time of Crisis

JOHAN JARLBRINK

As COVID-19 spread around the world in 2020, we got a rare glimpse into people's homes. Millions of office workers were asked to work from home and many posted pictures of their domestic work environment. Canadian Prime minister Justin Trudeau was one of them. After his wife tested positive in early March 2020, he put himself in self-quarantine and ruled the country from home. A photo taken by his daughter shows him behind his desk:

> Since it was taken from outside the doorway you can't see everything but it's still a pretty interesting look into his home life. Trudeau is sitting behind a massive and ornate wooden desk so you can only see what he's wearing on top, a button-down shirt. However, if he's anything like people who work from home, he's probably got sweatpants or PJ bottoms on. At least he's not wearing a tie! The desk is pretty cluttered with lots of papers and behind him are two shelves packed with books but it still looks like a cozy little office.[1]

Others also shared their experiences of working from home on Twitter, posting photos of their home offices, screens with colleagues joining in video conferences, improvised desk setups, coworking with children and pets, and so on. Numerous newspaper articles and videos gave advice on how to remain productive when working from home. The home office often became news itself. News anchors and reporters working from home asked correspondents, experts, and ordinary citizens how they were organizing their work space during these times of social isolation.

From a historical perspective, it is surprising that it took a virus to make office employees work from home. With all the technology keeping us connected, we were supposed to be working from home already! The telecom company AT&T claimed in the 1970s that "every American" would be

Figure 7.1. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau working in his home office on March 13, 2020. Photo posted on Twitter by @JustinTrudeau.

working from home by 1990. A decade later, it was predicted that 40 percent of the same population would be working from home by 2000.[2] Yet, statistics from the USA show that only 3.6 percent of the workforce worked from home half-time or more in 2018.[3] Data from the European Union showed that 5 percent of employed people were usually working from home in 2017.[4] These low numbers confirm what has been concluded in empirical studies. Much research in the field focuses on why it simply does not work for most organizations and office workers to work from home. During the pandemic, however, it just *had* to work.

As sociologist Christina Nippert-Eng has shown in *Home and Work: Negotiating Boundaries through Everyday Life* (1995), home and work are

rarely completely separated, even in those cases where the different spheres are separated in space. Hanging family photos in the office and inviting colleagues home for dinner are examples of common practices in which the two domains are intermingled. Negotiating boundaries is an ongoing process, even without a pandemic.[5] Yet, maintaining the boundaries is much more demanding when your desk is your kitchen table, children are playing around you, and a dog is begging for your attention.

The aim of this chapter is to examine boundary work during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic, the advice on how to manage office work in a home setting, how people managed the situation, and the problems they had to deal with. How was the art of separation—between private life and work—carried out in practice when millions of people were forced to become teleworkers during the pandemic? In what ways were homes adjusted to serve as offices and how was the need for desks met in this unusual situation?

The concept of boundary work was first developed to describe the "rhetorical style" used by scientists to demarcate between science and non-science.[6] Yet, as management researchers Glen Kreiner, Elaine Hollensbe, and Mathew Sheep have shown, boundary work can also involve other methods. They studied how priests living next door to their church tried to separate private life from business. A common strategy to keep the two domains apart was to build a fence.[7] My own interest in boundary work extends beyond the textual rhetoric, to also include the demarcation between private life and work using things like clothes, walls, headphones, and furniture. I begin with an overview of the development of telework from the 1970s to the 2000s. In two empirical sections, I analyze dominant themes in the recommendations given to homeworkers, as well as the experiences of those who tried to make it work, the problems they faced, and how they dealt with them. The analysis is based on articles and videos from March and April 2020, on personal testimonies collected by the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, and customer reviews of desks bought online.

OFFICE WORK OUT OF OFFICE:
FROM TELECOMMUTERS TO DIGITAL NOMADS

Working from home goes under different names. Teleworking, remote working, and telecommuting are the most common. Sometimes it is combined with other ways of organizing work, such as flexible working, hoteling, satellite working, and virtual organizations. Telecommuting was probably the first term used. If it took a pandemic to make millions of people

work from home in 2020, it was another global crisis that helped to launch the idea: the oil crisis of the 1970s. The rise in costs for fuel made it expensive to commute and people were asked to do what they could to save energy. Jack M. Nilles, the consultant and former engineer who coined and promoted the term telecommuting, also highlighted the time spent in cars traveling to and from work, the growing concern about air pollution, the decline of business districts in US urban centers, and the ability to attract skilled personnel living outside of urban areas. To be able to commute without the need for transportation between home and work seemed to be a solution to several problems.[8]

New information technologies had made telecommuting possible. "Over the past decade," Nilles wrote in 1975, "computer technology has become very sophisticated, permitting expanded applications and lower costs."[9] Computers could be connected via networks such as ARPANET and be located outside a central office. The organizations with the greatest potential for decentralization were all part of "the information industry," including much of the service sector, which represented about half of the US workforce. Most of the work in this industry was already computerized, and more tasks would be so in the future.[10]

Those working from home in Nilles' original notion of telecommuting would primarily be housewives taking care of children, and disabled persons—those with limited opportunities to leave home. The majority of these telecommuters would work in offices located in their immediate neighborhood.[11] When others developed his idea, however, the home became the primary location for *all* telecommuters. The most radical advocate of this view was American futurist Alvin Toffler. In his book *The Third Wave* (1980), he described how new technology would reshape society and the organization of work. Where the industrial revolution had separated home and work, the ongoing revolution would eventually bring them back together. Toffler summarized his vision using the metaphor of "the electronic cottage." When information processing replaces manufacturing as the main branch of industry, and when computers, fax machines, and equipment for teleconferencing make it possible to work outside of the traditional office, this will lead to "a return to cottage industry on a new, higher, electronic basis, and with it a new emphasis on the home as the center of society."[12] The consequences of this shift would be far-reaching. The future society would be family-oriented, it would be de-urbanized and work would be organized in small, decentralized home units. "The electronic cottage raises once more on a mass scale the possibility of husbands

and wives, and perhaps even children, working together as a unit."[13] Toffler was describing a whole new society. At the heart of it, we find the computerized home office.

The liberal tradition on which much of modern Western civilization has been based is, as political theorist Michael Walzer has pointed out, a tradition of keeping things apart: private and public life, church and state, market and state, home and workplace, and so on. "The art of separation works to isolate social settings."[14] What Toffler saw coming was a future where some of these separations collapsed. To clarify the implications of this transition, we could compare the home-based work in Toffler's future information economy with the most traditional kind of desk work in industrial society: administration and bureaucracy. When Max Weber laid out its key characteristics in *Economy and Society* (1921), he pointed to the separation of private and public, home and work, as its most basic principle: "the modern organization of the civil service separates the bureau from the private domicile of the official and, in general, segregates official activity from the sphere of private life." It was not only public bureaucracy that was based on this division, but also administration in private firms, including top management: "the *Kontor* (office) is separated from the household, business from private correspondence, and business assets from private wealth."[15] When the bureaucrat or administrator entered the realm of the office, he should do so "eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation."[16] We will see further on how this art of separation was reinvented, negotiated, and performed in practice as millions of office workers were forced to work from home in 2020.

The separation of home, family life, and work was never complete, however, even in the urban centers of the industrial age. As Andreas Nyblom shows in his chapter in this volume, authors remained home-bound for most of the modern period. And, as Magnus Andersson and Melissa Gregg point out, office equipment and management systems from industry and administration were brought into homes during the 1920s in order to make housewives into more efficient household managers. Even after World War II, when the ideals of gender-separated spheres and responsibilities were at their strongest, the strict division between domestic life and paid labor was never definitive in practice.[17]

Feminist historians have shown that, as industrial society developed, it was men and unmarried women who started to work outside the home. Many married women—and children—became waged laborers inside their

own homes. Home-based work was most common in shoe manufacturing, the clothing industry, the tobacco industry (cigar rolling), and parts of the food industry (sorting beans, cracking nuts, and similar work). In 1910, it was estimated that 250,000 women did this kind of home-based work in New York alone.[18] Working from home continued to provide an important income for married women, but the work itself gradually shifted from industrial to clerical. Examples from the 1970s and 1980s were typing, transcribing medical and legal documents, data entry, insurance rating, bookkeeping, and word processing.[19] Office suppliers in the US regularly targeted this segment in their marketing. Desks, typewriters, and additional phone extensions were needed if homemakers wanted to make money. Those without spare rooms were advised to put the desk in a corner of the bedroom.[20] Working from home was often advertised as a way for women to become independent, but many of them found it hard to combine it with regular family duties. They had to work during the evenings when children were sleeping, and instead of making them more independent many felt trapped in their own homes, with limited opportunities to advance within their organizations.[21]

Most of what was written about telework and telecommuting in the 1970s and 1980s began with the idea that it was computers and electronic communication networks that made working from home possible. New information technology became part of the definition: Telework and telecommuting referred to the use of "computer and communication technology to transport work to the worker as a substitute for physical transportation of the worker to the location of the work."[22] Yet, a US national survey from 1985, about women's paid labor in the home, showed that only one out of four women used computers in their work. The most common tools were typewriters, telephones, and pencils. Comparing the reality of homework to Toffler's vision, research psychologist Kathleen Christensen concluded that: "For most home-based clerical workers, therefore, their cottages were electronic only to the extent that they plug in their typewriters."[23]

This use of old media like typewriters and pencils was perhaps one of the reasons why women doing clerical work from home remained to a large extent invisible in much of what was written about telework and telecommuting during the 1980s. One of the most thoroughly studied groups was probably computer engineers and programmers working in the tech industry in California. In contrast to the many women doing clerical work, this group of mostly male professionals had access to new information

technology, they knew how to use it, and held high-status jobs in a high-status industry. The long hours spent in cars on their way to work made them ideal telecommuters. Still, there were very few of them: "There are more people doing research on telework than there are actual teleworkers."[24]

In a literature review from 1989, information scientist Margrethe Olson concluded that most teleworking professionals worked from home only part of the time. The majority of them were satisfied with these arrangements. What they missed most was the casual interaction with colleagues, but they believed that they were more productive when they worked away from the distractions of the regular office. Managers, on the other hand, were not as positive. In most organizations, management was still based on walking around the office and being able to see employees working behind their desks. Supervising staff who worked from home was more time consuming, and not completely satisfactory. Managers reported that those wanting to work from home first had to qualify as reliable, productive, and self-disciplined. Olson mentioned organizational culture as the most important reason why teleworking was still a marginal phenomenon.[25]

Working from home made taken-for-granted aspects of office life visible. The water cooler as a meeting point is one example (in other cultures, it would be the coffee machine). Many tasks can easily be completed with a computer and an internet connection. An effective organization, however, requires colleagues to think together and informal ways to exchange ideas and information. In an office, much of this takes place when coworkers meet during breaks, in the cafeteria, or around the water cooler. "The symbol of the watercooler is often referenced by teleworkers as a way of representing the intangible social aspects of the workplace that are unavailable to those not physically present."[26] The symbolic meaning of rooms and furniture is another example of taken-for-granted aspects becoming visible—and lost—as work moves home. As Alexander Paulsson shows in his chapter on trading as desk work, room and furniture size are particularly important status symbols in organizations with formal dress codes. Erving Goffman used the office setting as one of his examples of "front regions" in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*: "the private office of an executive is certainly the front region where his status in the organization is intensively expressed by means of the quality of his office furnishings."[27] In a virtual organization, such "identity-evoking items" will have to be reinvented.[28]

If the first generation of telework was associated with the home and Toffler's idea of the "electronic cottage," the next generation was linked to
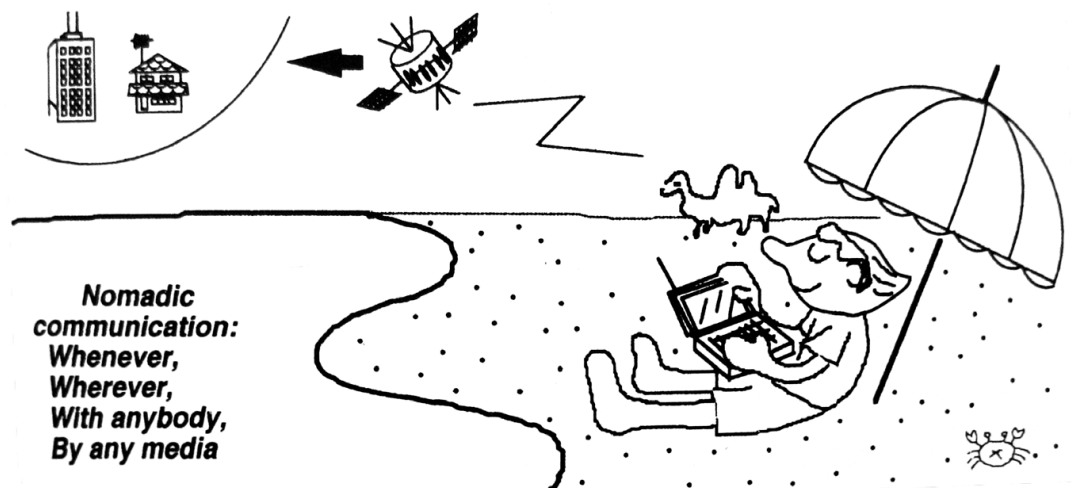
Figure 7.2. "The Nomadic Age" as imagined by Tsugio Makimoto
and David Manners in *Digital Nomads* (1997), 27.

portable devices and the vision presented by computer engineer Tsugio
Makimoto and technology writer David Manners in *Digital Nomad* (1997).[29]
While earlier telework was enabled by "home computers," the technologies
emphasized in the 1990s were mobile. What Makimoto and Manners called
"the Complete Nomadic Toolset" was not yet in place in 1997, but it would
soon be available for a low cost. This toolset would include wireless con-
nections and a device that could handle text and moving images, fax, and
broadcast tv. "When such a tool is as ubiquitous and as robust as the fax
machine, nomadism can take off."[30] In five or ten years, a laptop, a mobile
phone, or a pocket computer would make it possible to "see people, docu-
ments and pictures wherever they happen to be, from anywhere we happen
to be."[31] With mobile technologies, settlers would become nomads. People
would work from wherever they chose, on the move, or from the beach.

Their vision may seem far-fetched, but similar ideas were widespread in
the 1990s. Nicholas Negroponte, architect and co-founder of MIT Media
Lab, wrote in 1995 that digital technologies "will remove the limitations
of geography." What he referred to as the "atoms" of the industrial age had
to be produced in a specific place at a given time. The "bits" of the informa-
tion age, however, could be produced anywhere, at any time. "Being digi-
tal" was to occupy a "place without space."[32] Zygmunt Bauman, writing in
a more critical tradition, explained in *Liquid Modernity* (2000) that we were
witnessing "the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality
and settlement."[33] Where Makimoto and Manners used the beach as an

illustration of the future workplace, Bauman described the rise of "non-places." These were places that resisted domestication, such as hotel rooms, airports, shopping malls, trains, franchised cafés—places without identity or history. People of all sorts passed through, but those who thrived in such environments belonged to "the nomadic elite."[34] Bill Gates, one possible member of this new class, described sending emails on the road in his book *The Road Ahead* (1995): "Most recipients will not even be aware that I am out of the office."[35] And yet, for some tasks it was obviously better to work somewhere closer to home. Gates wrote in his foreword that: "To complete the book, I had to take time off and isolate myself in my summer cabin with my PC."[36]

The fact is, most teleworkers in the 1990s were far from nomadic. Their workplaces were not beaches or non-places. If they moved around at all, they were more likely to be moving between locations within their own homes. A Swedish public investigation about teleworking in 1998 summarized recent research in this way:

> After telephone interviews with more than 40 households it was revealed that a majority worked in the bedroom, followed by a storehouse. It is also common to have a dedicated home office, which is often used as a guest room or a bedroom for children who live at home occasionally. Many do not have a dedicated place at home where they work but use different rooms. Hallways and closets are also used, actually more often than kitchens.[37]

To find examples of widespread mobile work, it is tempting to turn to the tech industry—after all, it is the producers of digital hardware and software that make present-day remote working possible. Several of them, however, restricted teleworking to a minimum during the 2000s and 2010s. Hewlett-Packard and Yahoo changed their policy in 2013, IBM in 2017.[38] The reason put forward by the companies themselves was that employees were more creative when everyone was physically present. Working from home might be an effective way to complete individual and predefined tasks, but, as an IBM representative explained: "Bringing people together creates its own X factor."[39] Google was another organization that promoted traditional office work in-house. Google had invested in offices because "we expect people to work there, not from home."[40] Yet, as COVID-19 spread around the world in 2020, even Google employees were sent home.

THE ART OF SEPARATION

As office staff all over the world became teleworkers in February and March 2020, numerous articles and videos gave advice on how to make it work. A journalist from *Deutsche Welle*, reporting from her own home, summarized the most common recommendations:

> Get out of your pajamas, take a shower, put make-up on. All of this tells your brain that it is time to work.
>
> Get your tech together, make sure that everything is working.
>
> Don't work in bed. Set up a separate, clean, quiet work space, away from distractions.
>
> On Skype, Zoom, FaceTime: Look presentable. Talking face to face is the best way to feel less alone. And happy hour can be virtual too.
>
> Enjoy the bright sides: Extra sleep instead of spending time commuting, cook delicious meals for lunch.[41]

Many similar lists were published in March 2020. Some of them were written by journalists with extensive experience of teleworking, others were based on interviews with researchers and experts. While people were isolated at home, these articles and videos gave advice on how to isolate work within the home itself. As Max Weber and others have pointed out, private and professional life follow different codes. A standard method to keep them apart is to separate them in space. How could this be done within a home setting?

In her book on boundary work in everyday life, Nippert-Eng distinguished between strategies to negotiate and maintain boundaries, and the methods used to transition from one domain to another.[42] The articles and videos giving advice on working from home early in the pandemic all focused on these strategies. Nippert-Eng once emphasized that boundary work "is first of all a mental activity."[43] One explanation was perhaps that she studied the way in which people negotiated between domains that were already separated in space, her interviewees did not have to build workplaces themselves. Yet, such physical barriers had to be (re-)created when working from home suddenly became mandatory—and they were material as well as symbolic. Ideal barriers were semipermeable, letting through the work-related communications with colleagues and clients, while filtering out all the noise and distractions of the private sphere. Arranging a separate workplace was the first step toward accomplishing this.

The photo of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau behind his desk was taken "from outside the doorway." The ideal workplace sketched by Virginia Woolf in 1929 was still the most sought after in 2020: a room of one's own,

"a room with a lock on the door."[44] To work from a separate room with a door to close creates a physical barrier between private life and work. Doors, as media historian Bernhard Siegert has pointed out, create the difference between inside and outside, they are operators of symbolic, epistemic, and social processes, generating "spheres of law, secrecy, and privacy and thereby articulate space in such a way that it becomes a carrier of cultural codes."[45] Without the doors keeping them apart, it is difficult to uphold the separate rules that govern different domains. An elected prime minister is always on duty, and yet, citizens expect family matters to be kept separate from state affairs.

Most of the articles providing advice early on in the coronavirus pandemic were not very concerned with the legal aspects of work-related decision-making in a private home setting. A door was first of all a way to keep out sounds, visual distractions, and disturbing social contacts. The work-from-home veterans offering advice already had barriers in place: "a dedicated office where I could shut the door."[46] Even a locked door has its weak points though—people with keys. That is why the physical barrier works best when combined with a social agreement: "make sure everyone in your family (kids, parents, spouses, and everyone else with a key to the premises) knows that when you're working you're not available."[47] A fence built between church and home does not prevent members of the congregation from knocking on the priest's private door, but it is a sign reminding them that the priest has a private life separate from the professional. Homeworkers in 2020 were advised to erect similar barriers. Yet, they were not only symbolic. Curtains could block visual distractions, and baby gates kept curious hands away from important documents.[48]

Those who could not lock the door to a home office were advised to invest in a pair of noise-canceling headphones. In fact, apart from an internet connection, headphones were the only "must-haves." They reduced noise generated by other family members, but also served as a signal telling them that "you're not to be disturbed."[49] When headphones plugged into a Walkman became popular during the 1980s, they were used to create personal space in a public environment, but they were also criticized because users became distracted from the world around them.[50] Headphones in 2020 created the opposite effect, a workspace where users could maintain their attention and avoid the distractions of private life. Other methods to block distractions included the use of anti-distraction apps, putting on an old movie to provide a "background hum," or turning on a fan to mask external noise.[51] The manipulation of the soundscape created more blurred

barriers than a closed door, but could still be used to set up a pocket of non-distraction.

The home is not a non-place. Areas for sleeping, eating, and working are coded differently, even in most small apartments. Whatever spot home-workers chose to settle down on, they were advised to absolutely avoid the bed. Since space is subdivided and coded by walls, doors, windows, furniture, and other equipment, overwriting an established code with a new one might cause some tension.[52] This explains why several experts emphasized the importance of "a dedicated workplace" being "a place you don't go to relax."[53] One paper suggested that it might help "moving some furniture around."[54] Another advised readers (of the "Shopping" section) to invest in a desk, preferably from their sponsor Amazon: "Never underestimate the value of a dedicated work space, which may mean extra purchases that pay off in productivity."[55] Most news outlets did not publish shopping lists with links to office suppliers, but they still emphasized the importance of a table. A desk dedicated to work created a barrier in itself, separating what was on top of it from everything else.[56] This also explains why eating "lunch at your desk is a bad idea."[57]

If a proper desk was not available, a separation between work and non-work could be made in time. In such cases, a kitchen table became a desk during working hours, and a dining table the rest of the time. The kitchen counter and a stack of large books made a desk for those who preferred standing.[58] Such an arrangement, however, required a tidy kitchen and the removal of distractions, especially during video calls: "what will everyone else on the video call be seeing behind you? Do they see a messy kitchen behind you, a pile of laundry or do they see a tidy, professional background?"[59] The visual environment could also distract the person immediately surrounded by it. One article warned that a window with a view might make you less focused.[60]

To transit from private family life to work is to switch between codes. Apart from ergonomic reasons, this is why working in bed should be avoided: the switch is not definitive enough. In Nippert-Eng's analysis, the time that workers spent commuting was a time of transition, often associated with rites of passage, repeated day after day. A coffee and a novel on the train, buying a snack in the same bakery every morning, listening to the radio in the car—these repeated movements and activities in between helped workers transition from one domain to another.[61] Those working from home do not need transport, and if they are not used to the situation they may lack other routines to replace those associated with a transition.

Newspapers suggested several new routines to start off the working day: moving from one room to another, exercise or a short walk, writing to-do lists or schedules, checking in with a colleague.[62] One of the most important ways of managing the boundaries among the workers studied by Nippert-Eng was to change clothes.[63] Hardly any article or video I have come across forgets to emphasize the importance of clothing. *Forbes* summarized the advice: "dressing like you do at work, even a little, will remind you that you're in work-mode now."[64]

Creating boundaries within the home was key to make working at home effective. Boundaries between the home, colleagues, and clients, however, needed to be bridged. The physical separation made it important to "over-communicate with your team" and to "proactively staying in touch with others rather than waiting for someone to reach out."[65] To compensate for the missing body language in written communication, people were asked to add emojis and exclamation marks "to accurately reflect how you would have said it in person."[66] A frequent piece of advice was also to set up a "virtual water cooler" to recreate the casual conversations needed to share information and keep teams together. Using Zoom or Skype to bring colleagues together for a coffee break or a beer after work were suggested as possible solutions.[67]

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

A video that went viral in 2017 showed professor of political science Robert Kelly being interviewed on bbc News from his home office in Seoul. He was just explaining how the ongoing impeachment of South Korean president Park Geun-Hye would impact on the relations with North Korea when his four-year-old daughter and toddler son walked through the door asking for his attention. The report on the political crisis was suddenly interrupted by a domestic crisis. His wife Jung-a Kim, trying to save the situation, rushed in a few seconds later, only to make it more awkward—and comical.[68] The reason why the incident caught viewers' attention was that a professional setting was invaded by the private in a way that we rarely see on live tv. Working from home during the pandemic made such invasions part of everyday life. While experts gave advice on how to keep work and private life apart, other reports showed how these worlds kept colliding.[69]

People occupying spacious homes sometimes had the ability to "sit and work in opposite ends of the house."[70] Others lacked the luxury of separate home offices—or any separate rooms at all. Australian media researchers

Ash Watson, Deborah Lupton, and Mike Michael use the concept of socio-material choreographies to describe the assemblage of people and technology in homes during the pandemic. The concept captures the ways in which people moved around, moved furniture, and reconfigured places and devices, in order to create functioning workplaces.[71] Stories about such movements and reconfigurations were told over and over again early in the pandemic. One newspaper columnist referred to a conversation he had with his wife "as we were eating in her office—which is also my own office, and little B's study, and B-Dog's dogrun, turned back into a kitchen every evening."[72]

Similar remarks were common among the memories collected online by the Nordic Museum in Stockholm. "I almost panic, we're four people in a small apartment."[73] The kitchen table seems to have been a common workplace, often shared between several family members. "We sit around the kitchen table hunched like cheese curls in front of our computers."[74] A man reported that he and his wife both worked at the kitchen table and that it was "cozy, but non-ergonomic."[75] Others settled down in bedrooms, guestrooms, or "with a computer on my lap in my son's room."[76] Pictures posted on Twitter, with hashtags such as #stayathome, #myhomeoffice, and #wfh (working from home), show standing desks built with children's furniture stacked on top of each other, people working lying on the floor, dads sharing desks with children and dogs.

Although these accounts are anecdotal, they suggest that many office workers were ill-prepared for home working. They lacked most of the barriers and equipment needed to set up "a dedicated workplace." Surveys on working from home during the pandemic show similar tendencies. The results differ somewhat between countries and professions, but they indicate that many people had no access to a separate home office. A survey of 2,500 Americans working from home in May 2021 showed that only 50 percent had access to a room of their own that was not the bedroom, 26 percent worked alone in their bedroom, and 24 percent shared a room with someone else.[77] Almost 50 percent of the 271 people (80 percent male) working for a large tech company in the Netherlands reported in late 2020 that they worked in a dedicated room, but more than 20 answered that they worked in a "non-work setting."[78] A study of 464 homeworkers in London in January 2021 found that bedrooms (41.6 percent) and living rooms (41.6 percent)—including open-plan kitchens—were the most common workplaces.[79]

The testimonies from homeworkers resemble those from employees working in flexible and activity-based workplaces. Most homes are not built

as offices, but they share some of the features of "coworking spaces." Working from home regularly involves the "collaborative consumption of office environments, shared between individuals with different backgrounds or from different organizations."[80] As employees in activity-based offices, homeworkers often move around and settle down in a spot that is good enough to complete the tasks at hand. Yet, their options might be limited and the best spots are usually occupied by someone else. Studies have shown that some office workers appreciate and adapt to flexible and activity-based workplaces. Others complain about noise levels and having difficulty focusing on tasks. Workstations are often not numerous enough and too small for those who want to spread out necessary paperwork and use external monitors. Sometimes they have to switch between workstations several times a day, spending too much time packing up and getting the technology running.[81]

Due to the lockdowns and stay-at-home orders in many countries during the pandemic, there was a general reduction in outdoor noise levels in many places.[82] The new situation created other kinds of disturbances, however. In a home setting, as well as in shared offices, it is the constant presence of others that makes it difficult to focus: colleagues, spouses, children. The frequency of noise complaints indicates that many of the workers reporting on their problems were living in families where several people shared the same space. People living by themselves experienced other issues, such as loneliness and isolation. Yet, these problems seem to have come later on, after a long period of working from home. What dominated in the spring of 2020 was people's inability to isolate themselves, not the forced isolation experienced by those living and working alone.

Depending on work activities and available space, people working from home during the pandemic moved between couches and regular desks, kitchen tables and beds, between patios, balconies, and sometimes even floors. Like workers in flexible office environments, they were nomads, but in their own homes. A survey answered by 843 staff members at the University of Cincinnati in April 2020 showed that 55 percent usually worked at traditional desk and 41 percent at makeshift desks, such as kitchen tables, while 12 percent reported that they had no worksurface at all.[83] The situation seems to have been similar elsewhere. A few days of work at the kitchen table or on the couch might be fine for most people, but when days became weeks and months, there was a growing demand for proper desks. IKEA, Overstock and other retailers reported a spike in sales of home office furniture during the spring of 2020.[84] Product reviews on Amazon and

Overstock were often explicit about the needs: "When quarantine started I struggled switching from couch to bed and other areas of my house. I needed my own little corner."[85] Several of the reviewers also mentioned where they placed the desks: "It matches my bedroom furniture."[86] Others described the way furniture was divided between family members: "we are working from home and both needed desks—I use my vanity and my husband uses this [computer desk]."[87] A small desk made it easy to move it around and transform a living area into an office space—and back again. "I needed something smaller and light-weight because I have limited space and need to be able to shift things around when my 'office' transforms back into my living room on weekends."[88] All of the examples here are taken from reviews of low-priced and small desks, which were the most frequently sold and reviewed at the time. Since working from home was seen as something temporary, the desks were thought of as disposable. "The desk came damaged, but since I only need it temporarily, I didn't mind."[89] Many people did not have desks when the crisis started, and did not think they would need them afterwards. Working from home in the spring of 2020 was clearly seen as a temporary and short-term solution.

With or without a proper desk, an ideal workplace was located away from distractions. A family sharing a kitchen table could perhaps focus on individual tasks as long as they stayed quiet. What made coworking especially difficult was video calls and the noise generated by children's online classes. One family in Stockholm, trapped in an apartment with no separate office areas, reported that "we try to cope with a new everyday life as we step on each other in the kitchen and bathroom and make noise in various online meetings and classes."[90] Some couples were lucky enough to have separate rooms where they did not disturb one another, while others used the kitchen as a room for conference calls and took turns to use it individually.[91] Still, separate rooms were not always enough to prevent the "overhearing of day-long conference calls, despite closed doors."[92]

Video calls were a source of constant frustration for those sharing a small space, but they seem to have worked well for bringing colleagues together,

Figure 7.3. Photo from the online collection of memories of COVID and everyday life, gathered by the Nordic Museum in Stockholm. It was posted on April 7, 2020, by signature Maria 65, who explained: "it is hard to separate between different tasks, there are no boundaries between work, exercise, and household duties."
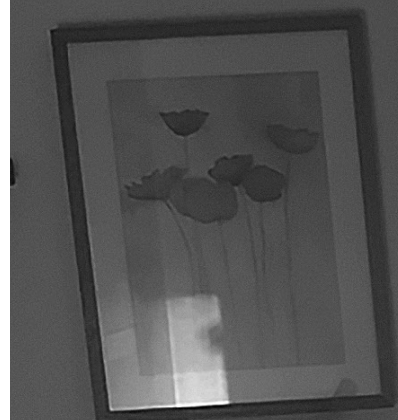
at least on a technical level. Those working from home during the pandemic continued to have meetings and collaborations with colleagues online. Several stories collected by the Nordic Museum also tell of regular coffee breaks online and gatherings for a beer after work.[93] Yet, these technical solutions soon revealed their limits. What was hard to recreate online was the spontaneous discussions and the "'unnecessary' small talk."[94] Previous research on teleworking show that informal discussions are what staff members working from home miss the most. Small talk between co-workers running into each other in corridors and around coffee machines is especially crucial in organizations that depend on constant innovation, knowledge sharing, and creative processes.[95] The technologies that facilitate video calls and chats were much more accessible and reliable in 2020 compared to the situation ten or twenty years earlier. Still, they could hardly replace physical presence: "I miss the opportunities to socialize with colleagues and talk about work. We have digital meetings, but it is not the same."[96] The more people communicated using Zoom and Skype, the more they missed the social contacts "in the flesh."[97]

The technologies connecting colleagues were not always good enough to really bring them together. Meanwhile, barriers separating private life and work kept collapsing. People did what they could to set up boundaries, bought extra equipment, and improvised. Still, those sharing small spaces found it hard to make it work. "It is difficult to go aside and get some quiet time on your own."[98] One woman working at a desk in a room also used as a gym and for laundry explained that "it is hard to separate between different tasks, there are no boundaries between work, exercise, and household duties."[99]

HOT-DESKING AT HOME

The advocates of teleworking have emphasized the possibilities of advanced communication technologies since the 1970s, claiming that, as soon as people have access to technologies that can bridge distances and domains, they will work from home, or wherever they choose. In 2020, most office workers (at least in the Western world) had access to the equipment that these visionaries had been dreaming about: everyone with a smartphone now carried "the Complete Nomadic Toolset" in their pocket. Yet, when working from home became mandatory during the pandemic, it was not primarily the connecting bridges that were discussed, but the boundaries keeping different domains apart. It was suddenly clear that the possibilities of tele-

working depended not only on advanced communication technologies, but also on the mundane materiality of walls, doors, desks, and chairs.

This goes to show that homes are far from the non-places and places without spaces that proponents of flexible working highlighted during the 1990s. A laptop and an internet connection make it possible to work any-where—in theory. What the pandemic showed, however, was that "any-where" for many homeworkers became a choice between the bed, the couch, and the kitchen table. As they tried to cope with the new situation, many families seem to have ended up in home-made versions of activity-based offices. They often lacked enough desks and rooms for everyone to have their own. Instead, they had to share, rearrange, and move around based on needs, work tasks, and the space available. In the end, a proper desk and a chair were perhaps what people missed the most from their regular office environment. When the stay-at-home orders were prolonged, sales of desks and other office equipment spiked.

The fact that many homeworkers shared domestic working areas with other family members made the environment similar to the "electronic cottage" once envisioned by Alvin Toffler. There is no doubt that the pandemic led to "a new emphasis on the home as the center of society" with "husbands and wives, and perhaps even children, working together as a unit." Yet, what had been a utopian dream for Toffler became a struggle for families who had to make it work. The home, constructed and coded as a space for relaxation and social relationships within the family, offered resistance when it suddenly had to be transformed into a workplace. Shar-ing a kitchen table with a spouse and children was far from ideal.

A situation in which children and office workers were more or less forced to work together from home may resemble what Toffler saw coming, but other advocates of teleworking have approached it as a possibility for some, rather than being mandatory for all. Seen as a large-scale experiment, work-ing from home during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic was a rather special case—few individuals or organizations are likely to use it as a blueprint for future plans. Yet, the pandemic also revealed the possibilities of teleworking. For some office workers, it obviously works fine to telecom-mute, at least some of the time. Polls from 2020 and 2021 show that a majority would also like to work from home in the future—if they them-selves have control over when and how much.[100]

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DESKS ARE CENTRAL NODES IN OUR MODERN SOCIETY. Office employees spend many of their working hours behind desks. School children doing homework sit at them, as do authors writing fiction. Countries are governed and corporations are controlled by people behind desks. Those of us working from the couch do not escape them, since they are remediated in the graphical user interface on our computers. Most research is the product of desk work, but little scholarly attention has been paid to the desks themselves.

This book presents new perspectives on changing ideals and practices surrounding desks and desk work in offices, homes, and in popular culture. The authors represent a broad range of interests and disciplines: business administration, cultural studies, library and information science, literary studies, media and communication studies, media history, and social work. They have all been encouraged to ask new questions about familiar contexts and topics: What is the role of the desk in the daily lives of social workers? What difference does it make that most traders on the financial markets have moved from trading floors to desks where movements and transactions are visible on screens? Why are so many talk show hosts sitting behind desks? And what happens when the desks are left for other arrangements?