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Excerpts from 'The Contemporary Workplace'

from *Gendered Space* (1985)

SPATIAL SEGREGATION IN THE WORKPLACE

To what extent do women and men who work in different occupations also work in different spaces? Baran and Teegarden (1987: 206) propose that occupational segregation in the insurance industry is 'tantamount to spatial segregation by gender' since managers are overwhelmingly male and clerical staff are predominantly female. This section examines the spatial conditions of women's work and men's work and proposes that working women and men come into daily contact with one another very infrequently. Further, women's jobs can be classified as 'open floor,' but men's jobs are more likely to be 'closed door.' That is, women work in a more public environment with less control of their space than men. This lack of spatial control both reflects and contributes to women's lower occupational status by limiting opportunities for the transfer of knowledge from men to women.

It bears repeating that my argument concerning space and status deals with structural workplace arrangements of women as a group and men as a group, *not* with occupational mobility for individual men and women. Extraordinary people always escape the statistical norm and experience upward mobility under a variety of circumstances. The emphasis here is on the ways in which workplaces are structured to provide different spatial arrangements for the typical working woman and the typical working man and how those arrangements contribute to gender stratification. . . .

Typical Women's Work: 'Open-Floor Jobs'

A significant proportion of women are employed in just three occupations: teaching, nursing, and secretarial work. In 1990 these three categories alone accounted for 16.5 million women, or 31 per cent of all women in the labor force (US Department of Labor 1991: 163, 183). Aside from being concentrated in occupations that bring them primarily into contact with other women, women are also concentrated spatially in jobs that limit their access to knowledge. The work of

elementary schoolteachers, for example, brings them into daily contact with children, but with few other adults. When not dealing with patients, nurses spend their time in a lounge separate from the doctors' lounge. Nursing and teaching share common spatial characteristics with the third major 'women's job' – that of secretary.

Secretarial/clerical work is the single largest job category for American women. In 1990, 14.9 million women, or more than one of every four employed women, were classified as 'administrative support, including clerical'; 98 per cent of all secretaries are female (US Department of Labor 1991: 163, 183). Secretarial and clerical occupations account for over three-quarters of this category and epitomize the typical 'woman's job.' It is similar to teaching and nursing in terms of the spatial context in which it occurs.

Two spatial aspects of secretarial work operate to reduce women's status. One is the concentration of many women together in one place (the secretarial 'pool') that removes them from observation of and/or input into the decision-making processes of the organization. Those decisions occur behind the 'closed doors' of the managers' offices. Second, paradoxically, is the very public nature of the space in which secretaries work. The lack of privacy, repeated interruptions, and potential for surveillance contribute to an inability to turn valuable knowledge into human capital that might advance careers or improve women's salaries relative to men's.

Like teachers and nurses, secretaries process knowledge, but seldom in a way beneficial to their own status. In fact, secretaries may wield considerable informal power in an organization, because they control the information flow. Management, however, has very clear expectations about how secretaries are to handle office information. Drawing from their successful experience with grid theory, business consultants Robert Blake, Jane Mouton, and Artie Stockton have outlined the ideal boss–secretary relationship for effective office teamwork. In the first chapter of *The Secretary Grid*, an American Management Association publication, the following advice is offered:

The secretary's position at the center of the information network raises the issue of privileged communications and how best to handle it. Privileged communication is information the secretary is not free to divulge, no matter how helpful it might be to others. And the key to handling it is the answer to the question 'Who owns the information?' The answer is, 'The boss does.' . . . The secretary's position with regard to this information is that of the hotel desk clerk to the contents of the safety deposit box that stores the guest's valuables. She doesn't own it, but she knows what it is and what is in it. The root of the word *secretary* is, after all, *secret*: something kept from the knowledge of others.

(Blake *et al.* 1983: 4–5; emphasis in original)

In other words, secretaries are paid *not* to use their knowledge for personal gain, but only for their employers' gain. The workplace arrangements that separate secretaries from managers within the same office reinforce status differences by

exposing the secretary mainly to other secretaries bound by the same rules of confidentiality. Lack of access to and interaction with managers inherently limits the status women can achieve within the organization.

The executive secretary is an exception to the rule of gendered spatial segregation in the workplace. The executive secretary may have her own office, and she has access to more aspects of the managerial process than other secretaries. According to another American Management Association publication titled *The Successful Secretary*:

Probably no person gets to observe and see management principles in operation on a more practical basis than an executive secretary. She is privy to nearly every decision the executive makes. She has the opportunity to witness the gathering of information and the elements that are considered before major decisions are made and implemented.

(Belker 1981: 191)

Yet instructions to the successful executive secretary suggest that those with the closest access to power are subject to the strictest guidelines regarding confidentiality. When physical barriers are breached and secretaries spend a great deal of time with the managers, rules governing the secretary's use of information become more important. The executive secretary is cautioned to hide shorthand notes, remove partially typed letters from the typewriter, lock files, and personally deliver interoffice memos to prevent unauthorized persons from gaining confidential information from the boss's office (Belker 1981: 66).

The executive secretary has access to substantial information about the company, but the highest compliment that can be paid her is that she does not divulge it to anyone or use it for personal gain. Comparing the importance of confidentiality to the seal of the confessional, Belker counsels secretaries that

the importance of confidentiality can't be over-emphasized. Your company can be involved in some delicate business matters or negotiations, and the wrong thing leaked to the wrong person could have an adverse effect on the result. . . . Years ago, executive secretaries were sometimes referred to as confidential secretaries. It's a shame that title fell out of popular usage, because it's an accurate description of the job.

(Belker 1981: 73-4)

Typical Men's Work: 'Closed-Door Jobs'

The largest occupational category for men is that of manager. In 1990, 8.9 million men were classified as 'executive, administrative, and managerial.' This group constituted 14 percent of all employed men (US Department of Labor 1991: 163, 183). Thus, more than one in ten men works in a supervisory position.

Spatial arrangements in the workplace reinforce these status distinctions, partially by providing more 'closed-door' potential to managers than to those they supervise. Although sales and production supervisors may circulate among their employees, their higher status within the organization is reflected by the private offices to which they can withdraw. The expectation is that privacy is required for

making decisions that affect the organization. Rather than sharing this privacy, the secretary is often in charge of 'gate-keeping' – protecting the boss from interruptions.

Just as there are professional manuals for the successful secretary, there are also numerous guidelines for the aspiring manager. Harry Levinson's widely read *Executive* (1981) (a revision of his 1968 *The Exceptional Executive*) stresses the importance of managerial knowledge of the entire organization. A survey of large American companies asking presidents about suitable qualities in their successors revealed the following profile:

A desirable successor is a person with a general knowledge and an understanding of the whole organization, capable of fitting specialized contributions into profitable patterns. . . . The person needs a wide range of liberal arts knowledge together with a fundamental knowledge of business. . . . A leader will be able to view the business in global historical and technical perspective. Such a perspective is itself the basis for the most important requisite, what one might call 'feel' – a certain intuitive sensitivity for the right action and for handling relationships with people.

(Levinson 1981: 136)

The importance of knowledge is stressed repeatedly in this description. The successful manager needs knowledge of the organization, of liberal arts, and of business in general. But equally important is the intuitive ability to carry out actions. This 'feel' is not truly intuitive, of course, but is developed through observation and emulation of successful executives. Levinson identifies managerial leadership and 'an art to be cultivated and developed,' which is why it cannot be learned by the book; rather, 'it must be learned in a relationship, through identification with a teacher' (Levinson 1981: 145).

Because the transfer of knowledge and the ability to use it are so crucial to leadership, Levinson devotes a chapter to 'The Executive as Teacher.' He advises that there is no prescription an executive can follow in acting as a teacher. The best strategy is the 'shine and show them' approach – the manager carries out the duties of office as effectively as possible and thereby demonstrates to subordinates how decisions are made. There are no formal conditions under which teaching takes place; it is incorporated as part of the routine of the business day. In Levinson's words,

The process of example-setting goes on all the time. Executives behave in certain ways, sizing up problems, considering the resources . . . that can be utilized to meet them, and making decisions about procedure. Subordinates, likewise, watch what they are doing and how they do it.

(Levinson 1981: 154)

Just as in the ceremonial men's huts of nonindustrial societies, constant contact between elders and initiates is necessary for the transmission of knowledge. Levinson implies that it should be frequent contact to transfer most effectively formal and informal knowledge. Such frequent and significant contact is

missing from the interaction between managers and secretaries. Given the spatial distance between the closed doors of managers and the open floors of secretaries, it is highly unlikely that sufficient contact between the two groups could occur for secretaries to alter their positions within the organization.

In addition to giving subordinates an opportunity to learn from the boss, spatial proximity provides opportunities for subordinates to be seen by the boss. This opportunity has been labelled 'visiposure' by the author of *Routes to the Executive Suite* (Jennings 1971: 113). A combination of 'visibility' and 'exposure,' visiposure refers to the opportunity to 'see and be seen by the right people' (Jennings 1971: 113). Jennings counsels the rising executive that 'the abilities to see and copy those who can influence his career and to keep himself in view of those who might promote him are all-important to success.' The ultimate form of visiposure is for the subordinate's manager to be seen by the right managers as well. Such 'serial visiposure' is the 'sine qua non of fast upward mobility' and is facilitated by face-to-face interaction among several levels of managers and subordinates (Jennings 1971: 113-14).

Both Levinson and Jennings acknowledge the importance of physical proximity to achieving power within an organization, yet neither pursues the assumptions underlying the transactions they discuss – that is, the spatial context within which such interactions occur. To the extent that women are segregated from men, the transfer of knowledge – with the potential for improving women's status – is limited.

OFFICE DESIGN AND GENDER STRATIFICATION

Contemporary office design clearly reflects the spatial segregation separating women and men. Secretaries (almost all of whom are women) and managers (nearly two-thirds of whom are men) have designated areas assigned within the organization. The following diagram prepared by an architectural firm for a business client demonstrates the open floorplan for secretaries and the closed doors behind which managers work. This diagram is typical of those in other books on office design (Black *et al.* 1986; Duffy *et al.* 1976; Mogulescu 1970).

Although salesmen have been given an open floorplan similar to that for secretaries (room 2b), their space is beside the managers' offices. Thus, salesmen are subject to less scrutiny than secretaries, whose desks are placed directly in front of the managers' doors. Indeed, the secretaries in this 'pool' are potentially observable by four managers (from rooms 3, 4, 5, and 6). In an ironic twist of the panoptic principle, members of the subordinate group (secretaries) have now been placed at the center to enhance supervision by managers at the periphery.

Privacy can be a scarce resource in the modern office. Empirical studies have shown that privacy in the office involves 'the ability to control access to one's self or group, particularly the ability to *limit others' access to one's workspace*' (Sundstrom 1986: 178; emphasis added). Business executives commonly define privacy as the ability to control information and space. In other words, privacy is

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connected in people's minds with the spatial reinforcement of secrecy. Studies of executives, managers, technicians, and clerical employees have found a high correlation between enclosure of the work space (walls and doors) and perceptions of privacy; the greater the privacy, the greater the satisfaction with work. Employees perceive spatial control as a resource in the workplace that affects their job satisfaction and performance (Sundstrom *et al.* 1980; Sundstrom 1986).

Not surprisingly, higher status within an organization is accompanied by greater control of space. In the Sundstrom study, most secretaries (75 percent) reported sharing an office; about one-half (55 percent) of bookkeepers and accountants shared an office; and only 18 percent of managers and administrators shared space. Secretaries had the least physical separation from other workers, while executives had the most (Sundstrom 1986: 184).

Two aspects of the work environment are striking when the spatial features of the workplaces for secretaries and executives are compared: the low number of walls or partitions surrounding secretaries (an average of 2.1), compared with executives (an average of 3.5), and the greater surveillance that accompanies the public space of secretaries. Three-quarters of all secretaries were visible to their supervisors, compared with only one-tenth of executives. As one would expect given the physical description of their respective offices, executives report the greater sense of privacy and secretaries the least (Sundstrom 1986: 185). Doors do not necessarily have to be closed or locked in order to convey the message of differential power; they merely have to be available for closing and be seen as controlled at the executive's discretion (Steele 1986: 46).

The spatial distribution of employees in an office highlights the complex ways in which spatial segregation contributes to gender stratification. Workers obviously are not assigned space on the basis of sex, but on the basis of their positions within the organization. Theoretically, managers have the most complex jobs and secretaries have the least complex, yet research on secretaries and managers with equal

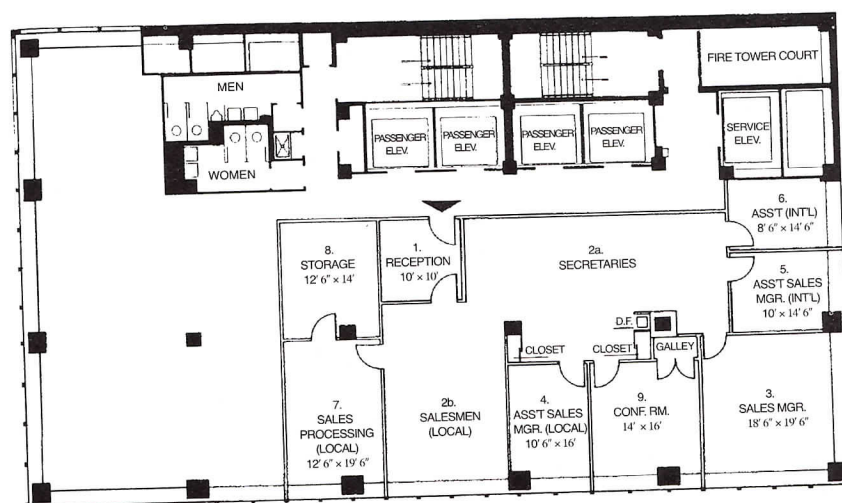


Figure 16.1
The office architect is cautioned that the initial space study must illustrate the 'relationships of the organization' clearly to the client

degrees of office enclosure suggests that women's space is still considered more public than men's space. Sundstrom found that

in the workspaces with equivalent enclosure – private offices – [respondents] showed different ratings of privacy, with lowest ratings by secretaries. This could reflect social norms. Secretaries have low ranks, and co-workers or visitors may feel free to walk unannounced into their work-spaces. However, they may knock respectfully at the entrance of the work-spaces of managers. . . . *Perhaps a private office is more private when occupied by a manager than when occupied by a secretary.*

(Sundstrom 1986: 191; emphasis added).

This passage suggests that even walls and a door do not insure privacy for the typical working woman in the same way they do for the typical working man. Features that should allow control of work space do not operate for secretaries as they do for managers.

What of the new 'open planning' intended to eliminate all spatial status distinctions in the office? Known by its German name of *Bürolandschaft*, or 'office landscape,' this design was introduced in the 1960s and featured offices without partitions or walls (Becker 1981; Pile 1978). It was characterized by the extensive use of plants to represent the openness of outdoors and furniture grouped together to 'suggest working relationships.' Diagrams of such offices at first strike the American eye as chaotic, but these plans were adopted by such corporations as DuPont, Eastman Kodak, Corning Glass, and the Ford Motor Company (Pile 1978).

For all its emphasis on increased communication, easier traffic flow, and an egalitarian environment, there were subtle spatial status distinctions built into the most open of offices. The German Quickborner Team that promoted the plan so vigorously illustrated a design describing an area for the manager 'screened by plants, files, and screens' and 'assigned extra space to symbolize status and increase[d] sense of privacy' (Pile 1978: 26).

Office landscaping, while apparently creating an environment totally opposite that of the Panopticon, served a similar function. The Quickborner Team explained to executives skeptical of the reduced privacy inherent in open planning that efficiency would be improved by their design, since 'most demands for privacy really cover a desire to hide from contacts and from work. An effective manager finds that his performance is enhanced, not hampered, when he moves into well-planned open space' (Pile 1978: 27).

By the end of the 1970s office landscaping had lost its novelty. Many companies had adopted its principles because it was relatively inexpensive and created an image of modernity in a competitive market. But the 'new democracy' supposedly characteristic of landscaped office design with more open space did not materialize. Those who had power in conventional offices still had it (Becker 1981: 59). The open office facilitates the ability of managers to supervise secretaries by creating greater enclosure for managers than for clerical staff. To the extent that there are fewer plants to provide privacy for secretaries, spatial segregation reinforces women's lower status.

This design represents the
Quickborner Team's a
Büro

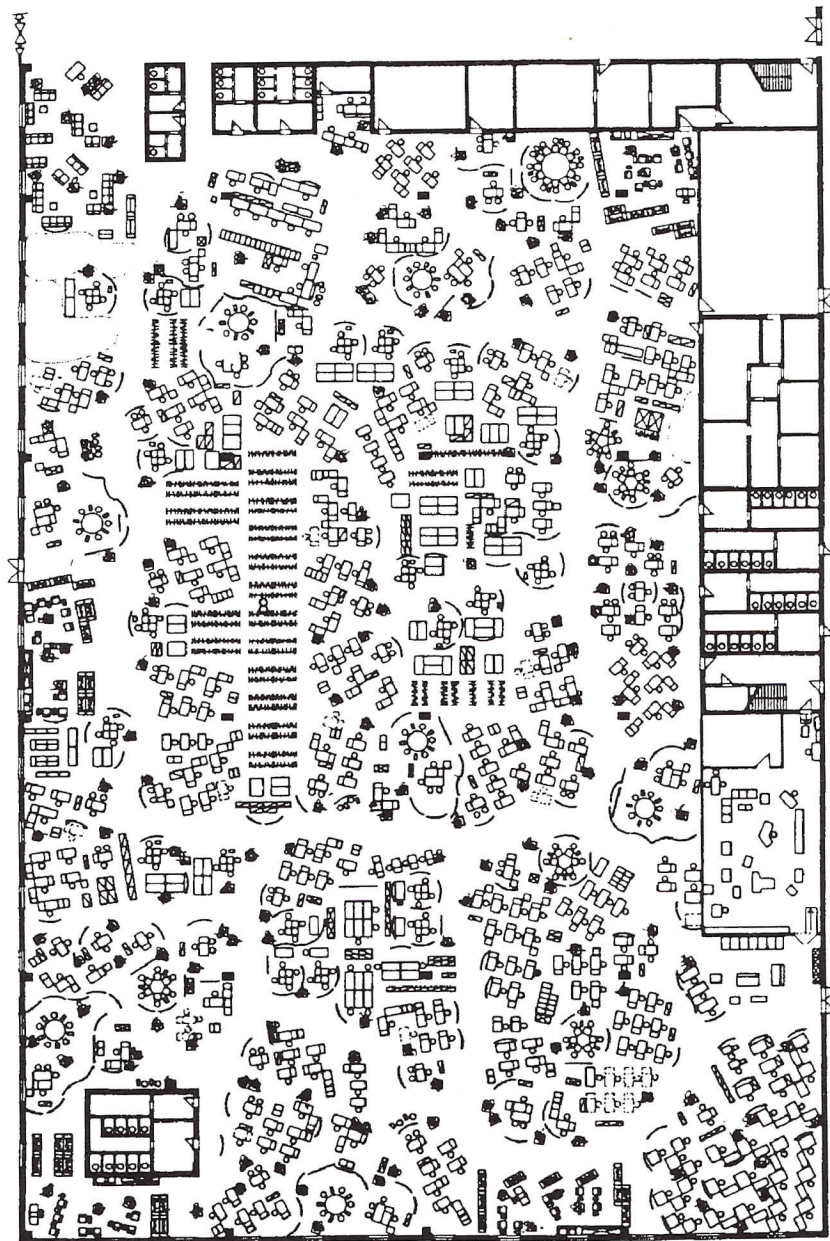


Figure 16.2
This design represents the German
Quickborner Team's approach to
Bürolandschaft

What of the office of the future, characterized by advanced information technology and a reduced need for spatial proximity? These work arrangements appeal to a minority of employees as a way of controlling their own environments by working at home (less than 2 percent of the labor force worked at home in 1980 [Kraut and Grambsch 1987]). Regardless of the costs or benefits to employees, a spatially dispersed labor force presents problems of control for management. In an analysis of the impact of computer technology on the workplace, Ellis observes that

much of the authority and control exercised by managers and supervisors stem from the physical integrity of the organization. . . . If the organization becomes too abstract, so too do many of the traditional tools of management. . . . How does one motivate, control, and evaluate the distant employee?

(Ellis 1986: 46)

Tracing workplace design from the Panopticon up through the home office reveals the common thread of reinforcement of stratification systems through spatial arrangements. Whether the spatial segregation is overt, as with the Panopticon, or covert, as with landscaped offices, the effect is similar. Managers retain control of knowledge by use of enclosed spaces, and secretaries remain on open floors that allow little control of space or knowledge.

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