



New spatialities of work in the city

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Abstract

This introduction discusses the objectives and concepts that are underlying the Special Issue on the new spatialities of work in the city. It highlights the urban impact of both the changing spatiotemporal working patterns and the increased diversity of workspaces that have resulted from post-industrial restructuring, globalisation, labour market flexibilisation and digitisation. Even pre-Covid-19, when the research in this Special Issue was undertaken, this impact on the urban structure and the social fabric of cities was significant, but had remained underexplored. Here therefore, we question models of work and commuting that continue to assume the spatially ‘fixed’ workplace, and explore how new understandings of work-space and multi-locality, developed in this Special Issue, can inform future research. This, we argue, is more important than ever as we come to understand the medium and long-term impacts of pandemic-altered work practices in cities. We further argue that the spatialities of work need to be connected with research on health, job quality and wellbeing in cities – such as, for example the risks that COVID-19 has exposed from driving and mobile work.

Keywords

employment/labour, homeworking, self-employment, freelance, commuting, mobile work

Background

Spatial and temporal working patterns and practices in cities have undergone changes due to post-industrial restructuring, globalisation and digitisation. While changing employment relations and the temporal changes of work have increasingly been studied, the spatial changes and their impact on cities have received much less attention. The objective of this Special Issue therefore is to identify new urban spatiotemporal patterns of work and to explore how new workplaces and spaces are impacting on the urban structure and the social fabric of cities. The ‘new’ dimension of the spatialities of work in the city we want to bring to light, relates to the flexibilisation of labour markets (e.g. rise in gig working, self-employment and freelancing), mobile technology and the increasing appreciation of workers of work-life balance and meanings of work other than pecuniary values (Gallie et al., 2012). These factors, amongst others, have contributed to the practice of working from home and the emergence of collaborative working spaces such as coworking spaces. This means that we need to think of residential neighbourhoods not purely as places to live but also as places of work and the location of micro-business activities (Reuschke and Houston, 2020; Kane and Clark, 2018; Ekinsmyth, 2013; Folmer, 2014). It is likely that the emergence of new workspaces changes the nature of their surrounding areas, for example through the attraction of more day time population or a shift in residential composition. Hence, if spatiotemporal working patterns and the diversity of workspaces are rising, more attention needs to be paid to these for understanding urban change.

There is a need for more critical thinking on these trends about how to ‘measure’ the workplace and how to sufficiently capture the spatiotemporal changes of contemporary

work. If workers use multiple workplaces or work temporarily in collaborative workspaces, what do conventional workplace statistics (that assume one fixed workplace) and the concept of commute that starts at home and ends in one workplace and vice versa tell us about the structure and life of cities (e.g. day time population)? What other concepts or measures can we use instead? Through this Special Issue and the seminar series that preceded it, we have aimed to contribute a critical discussion to the interdisciplinary field of urban studies about the spatial 'fix' of the workplace, as well as collect a new evidence base on the impact of spatiotemporal changes in contemporary cities on workers, residents and communities.

Now, at the time of writing in March 2021, COVID-19 has changed workplace geographies overnight. One of the most substantial changes during the COVID-19 crisis (redundancy and furlough aside) has been the shift of work into the home when national or local lockdowns were imposed by governments to arrest the spread of the virus. This has fuelled discussions about the impact of homeworking on the economic and social life in cities which we could not have imagined pre-crisis. We would argue, however, that this has made the ideas of this Special Issue and the presented (pre-COVID-19) empirical evidence more important than ever, as these help us to think about what may happen to cities and their residents, workers and communities post-COVID-19 and how can we empirically capture and monitor this change.

Some trends that we identified as 'new' at the beginning of our journey to compile this Special Issue are now 'mainstream' as far as homeworking in cities is concerned. In London, for example, working exclusively at home rose sharply from 8% to just below 60% in the first month of the first national lockdown in April 2020 (Felstead and

Reuschke, 2020). We have also seen new measures and classifications of the location of jobs in homes being developed and used to predict the economic impact of the pandemic in metropolitan areas and across nations (Dingel and Neiman, 2020; Mongey et al., 2020; Hatayama et al., 2020). This wide resonance of classifying jobs by whether they can be done at home and the attention homeworking has received in academia, policy and the wider public was beyond our imagination – as was the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people, firms and places.

Collaborative workspaces such as coworking spaces that we also included in our thinking about ‘new’ spatialities in the city (Capdevila, 2017; Di Marino and Lapintie, 2017) instead have ceased to operate during the pandemic in countries where strict mitigation measures were imposed on the operation of businesses and the mobility people. Further, there is evidence that in some instances and places, they have found a revised function (Gruenwald, 2021). However, the need or desire to collaborate in the knowledge economy is unlikely to have come to an end. We expect cities to return to their vibrancy and continue to offer benefits for economic activities, creativity and collaboration due to their diversity, density and infrastructure, even if in some different form compared to pre-crisis. This collection, again, provides a helpful guidance on possible changes in the future.

Beyond the traditional workplace

Pre-COVID-19 attention has been on movement and the idea that work would become more spatially fluid (Urry, 2000). Researchers focused on work carried out ‘on the move’

or in ‘third places’ (Martins, 2015; Liegl, 2014). Oldenburg and Brissett (1982, 271) who introduced the concept of the third place to describe public spaces used for social interactions that are neither home nor workplace, highlighted places such as cafés, taverns, pubs, the main street, bookstores, hair salons, post offices and beer gardens as ‘ordinary’ places that are not ‘special’ to ‘place outsiders’ but which are ‘well-integrated’ into the daily life of local residents and therefore perform important functions for local residents as places of social interaction. This concept has been applied to work. Transitional places of work identified in previous research include the car, the train, the plane, hotel lobbies, airport lounges, school gates and community spaces (Cousins and Robey, 2015; Ekinsmyth, 2011; Vartiainen and Hyrkkänen, 2010; Hislop and Axtell, 2007).

Information technology has greatly contributed to the freeing of work from one ‘fixed’ place. Mobile phones, laptops, e-mail and wireless connectivity have enabled office work to be performed where workers happened to be and whatever the time (Büscher, 2014; Hislop and Axtell, 2009). While urban research on coworking and third place has become more popular, these types of work have remained difficult to capture and quantify in existing surveys. This notwithstanding, statistics were compelling about overall level of workplace changes even before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. In 2015, for example, it was estimated that around three out of ten workers in Europe did not work at ‘traditional’ employers’ premises but instead worked mainly at home, on sites outside the factory or office and/or in a car or vehicle (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). People were also found to combine multiple workplaces. This applied to an estimated range of 37%-63% of workers across Europe (Ojala and Pyöriä, 2017, 11).

Knowledge, however, has remained limited about the extent and nature of these work location changes in cities. Research on work and cities and urbanism has had a strong emphasis on creative work and the creative industries (Brown, 2017; Jones and Warren, 2016; Martins, 2015; Liegl, 2014). This has provided insights into some work practices and their spatialities as well as the rhythms of creative and/or mobile workers in cities, but evidence has remained selective in terms of people and sectors that have been studied with the wider picture of the workplace diversity in cities and the scale of change remaining rather fuzzy.

Spatiotemporal changes of work as studied previously, have been closely related to wider trends towards labour market flexibilisation and job insecurity (Taylor, 2015; Yang Liu and Kolenda, 2012). Work has increasingly become more flexible in terms of employment contracts and temporal arrangements with new disruptions to standard employment contracts caused by the rise in 'on-demand business models' such as Uber and Deliveroo (Fleming, 2017; Stewart and Stanford, 2017). As a consequence, work has increasingly been organised outside employer-employee systems, people hold multiple jobs, or work freelance alongside a job. This has resulted in substantial changes of the spaces and places of work and business activities (Reuschke and Houston, 2020; Merkel, 2019; Stam and van de Vrande, 2017; Koroma *et al.*, 2014). Previous research has sought to measure nonstandard employment in particular cities and has revealed that the so-called 'contingent workforce' (those working as self-employed, part-time and/or from home) has increased in size. However, the implications of this for cities' economies and structure have been little researched (Yang Liu and Kolenda, 2012).

By extension, attention is turning to the role of non-standard working practices and workplaces in urban placemaking. Community entrepreneurship, paid and voluntary unpaid work, can be viewed through the lenses of urban activism and ‘DIY urbanism’ (Finn, 2014). New, ‘diverse’ working practices in unusual urban spaces (for example ‘meanwhile spaces’ (Moore-Cherry 2017)), especially where these practices are intended as a bottom-up resistance to wider political forces and top-down initiatives, are potentially important drivers of urban change into the future. Commonly studied in relation to the creative industries in cities (d’Ovidio and Morato, 2017; Colomb, 2017; Markusen and Gadwa, 2010), there is evidence that bottom-up work initiatives are changing cities and serve as useful locality-specific pointers to successful strategy for urban policy makers into the future (Colomb, 2012). The question for urban researchers is how much newly enabled, diverse working practices, freed from conventional rules and spaces of work, will gain concrete expression in urban space, and constitute a new, potentially more democratic force for urban placemaking into the future.

Consequences of diversity in work location and practices in cities

Transportation and urban studies have investigated the consequences of technological and societal changes on residential location and commuting patterns in cities and metropolitan areas mainly through telecommuting of employees who can partly work from home long before the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhu, 2013; Mokhtarian et al., 2004). Although these studies do not agree whether (voluntary or not pandemic-related) telecommuting leads to urban sprawl (Kim et al., 2012; Ory and Mokhtarian, 2006) and little attention has been paid to homeworkers who are not employed by (large) organisations, this research has

suggested that residential location choice is changing as a consequence of changes in telecommunication, work and society, but that we are only at the beginning of understanding how and what this means for cities.

Some studies have pointed at different commuting patterns among teleworkers (longer and fewer commutes) than those assumed for 'standard' employees (Helminen and Risimäki, 2007). This speaks in favour of the view that homeworking contributes to deconcentration of workers outside of large urban areas (Moos and Skarburskis, 2010). Furthermore, also within cities, homeworking has been found to facilitate a greater flexibility in households' residential choices (Moos and Skarburskis, 2007). This would mean a substantial change in the spatial and temporal commuting patterns if homeworking is rising.

Pre-COVID-19, homeworking, under favourable circumstances such as a dedicated office, has been related to job-related well-being and increased productivity (Reuschke, 2019; Felstead and Henseke, 2017; Wheatley, 2017; Bloom *et al.*, 2015; Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012; Menezes and Kelliher, 2011). Other studies have identified a contradictory picture of advantages and disadvantages of working at home, and have explored the ways in which a worker's experiences intersect with their social characteristics and life circumstances (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2020; Craig *et al.*, 2012; Hill *et al.*, 2008).

Other new forms of working such as gig working have received attention because of low job quality and the longer-term risk workers are exposed to through low paid, little protected and labour-intensive work (Kalleberg and Dunn, 2016). The concept of job quality has attracted increasing attention in work and employment studies (Adamson and

Roper, 2019). Urban studies have focussed on job skills and the increase in low-skilled work and the implications for cities (Sissons, 2020). However, connections between job quality and urban studies have remained under-researched.

Contributions to the Special Issue

Contributions to this Special Issue develop new concepts of workplace location and multi-locality working, and explore the relationships between the spatial characteristics of jobs and job quality, job satisfaction, work-life balance, work identity and individuals' perceived meaning of work. The collated papers cover both the spatial implications of a variety of work places and spaces, as well as how these impact on people and urban space. The empirical contributions draw attention to the variety of work types in contemporary capitalist cities including mobile work, working at home and working in a combination of places.

Census of Population data has been a unique source for studying workplace geographies, commutes and day/night time populations of places. However, as *Shearmur (2020)* shows, these data are not able to sufficiently capture where people work. He suggests instead to measure the location and time spent working in a variety of places which allows us to estimate the spatiotemporal work patterns and to predict what the author calls a 'probability space' of work in cities. This paper provides a useful framework of capturing a variety of workplaces people may occupy. This framework can be applied by researchers to capture workplace post-COVID-19.

Burchell et al. (2020) also use a novel concept of workplace location that measures where people work and how often they work in a particular type of place including the home, employers' premises and public spaces. This concept is less detailed than the one suggested by *Shearmur (2020)* but is able to sufficiently enough capture the concept of 'multi-locality' which the authors can measure on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Using European survey data, the authors reveal the practiced 'hyper complexity' of workers' workplace locations in contemporary urban Europe. The authors had to simplify the variety of multi-locality of work in order to further statistically investigate their characteristics. With the focus on gender, the study suggests that if the developed workplace location classification is applied, workplace gender segmentation is much greater in urban areas than existing studies that focussed solely on non-spatial job characteristics assumed.

Wheatley (2020) takes the classification of jobs by their spatial characteristics further through linking these with job quality. The empirical study not only uses multiple dimensions of job quality to capture worker wellbeing in a comprehensive fashion (security, autonomy, skills development, working time quality, earnings) but also applies this multidimensional approach to employees and the self-employed and hence considers the increasing variety of worker types in cities. The spatial worker types considered are office/premises workers, homeworkers, those who are driving/travelling for their job and those with multiple workplaces. Using the data of workers who live in urban areas in the United Kingdom, the findings reveal that workplace location is associated with certain features of job quality and that this relationship is further interconnected with self-employed work.

Rodriguez-Modrono's (2021) study focusses on self-employed women working at home with respect to, similar to *Wheatley (2020)*, a number of (objective and subjective) dimensions of job quality. The study uniquely combines quantitative analysis of the homeworking of self-employed women compared to self-employed men using European survey data and a qualitative investigation of self-employed women in the Spanish City of Sevilla. This comprehensive mixed methods design shows a similar job quality and work-life balance of self-employed women who work at home and those who do not work at home. However, self-employed women who combine working at home with working in coworking spaces can derive greater financial benefits than women who exclusively work at home. The study therefore concludes that combining working at home with coworking could be a solution to the lack of networks women working at home are exposed to and help increase their earnings. On the basis of this evidence, the author argues that it is crucial, particularly for women entrepreneurs, that there is easy access to low-cost coworking and incubators in urban areas.

D'Ovidio (2021) engages with diverse economic activities in Taranto (Italy) and connects these to the concept of placemaking with a focus on the question of how individual workers, worker initiatives and community-based projects and businesses are reconfiguring urban space through everyday practices. Taranto serves here as an example of a Southern European city that has struggled with economic restructuring and the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis. The study explores the ways in which the bottom-up everyday working practices and spatial choices of individuals and small groups can act as agents of urban regeneration and resistance to top-down transformative forces in the urban context. This links to debates about urban change, resistance and the resilience of cities that have been impacted by urban decline and identifies an important onward

research and policy agenda about community participation in decisions about urban futures.

Conclusions

The contributions to this Special Issue have shown that workplaces are often not spatially ‘fixed’ but instead many workers combine different workplaces or work in mobile spaces. While this is not entirely new and the Coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the spatial working patterns identified in this collection (with uncertain outcomes), the developed conceptual frameworks and the empirical material have made three important contributions to the field of urban studies. First, the full range of workplaces and multi-locational working observed in urban areas (pre-COVID-19) has been revealed for the first time. Second, relationships have been found between the spatial patterns of work and a number of socioeconomic phenomena (gender segmentation, job quality and wellbeing) contributing a new dimension of the reconfigurations of gender and work (Gray *et al.*, 2017) and of job quality and cities (Adamson and Roper, 2019; Harvey *et al.*, 2017). Third, because work does not exist in a vacuum, people are impacted through their work in urban public spaces in various ways (e.g. working patterns and behaviours, work identity, work ethos, activism and resistance).

Hence, urban areas have not only changed because of an increasingly diverse workforce, ICTs, the creative class and gig working – but the places and spaces of work and multi-locational working are connected with equality, inclusion and exclusion and worker wellbeing in cities. A growing literature on health in cities has studied, for example, air

pollution, noise, green infrastructure and mental health in cities (Grant *et al.*, 2017). It is suggested to widen this important research to include the spatialities of work as some driving, travelling and mobile work in cities is also related with low job quality and hence worker wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the high health risk, for example, of taxi drivers because of the mobile and ‘people-facing’ work they are doing (ONS, 2021).

The picture that emerged about the qualities and disadvantages of working at home are mixed. During the pandemic, working exclusively at home has soared – which was a minority phenomenon in cities prior to the pandemic (Burchell *et al.*, 2020). The impact of homeworking on people, firms and places is likely to remain a relevant issue for cities. Based on evidence presented in this Special Issue, we may assume that multi-locational work in cities will increase because of more people combining homeworking with working in an office. If only a small proportion of workers who were new to homeworking due to the pandemic continues working at home some of the time, the rhythms of cities and demand on infrastructure are likely to change as a consequence. There are multiple inequalities associated with homeworking that relate to people’s jobs, earnings, qualification and their demographic (Felstead and Reuschke, 2020; McDowell, 2008; Felstead *et al.*, 2002). These translate into stark spatial inequalities with residents in poor neighbourhoods being least likely to work in jobs that can be done from home and residents in more affluent neighbourhoods being most likely to work in jobs that can be done from home (Matheson *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, we are likely to see cities becoming more occupationally and socially divided which needs careful observation in the next years to come.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made very clear that the spatial characteristics of jobs not only impact on worker wellbeing and health but that city economies themselves (business and office clusters, High Streets etc.) are dependent on these. It will be relevant to monitor urban change and urban resilience in relation to significant changes in the spatialities of work in the city in the near future.

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