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The meaning of the office space in the wake off the COVID-19 pandemic

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The meaning of the office space in the wake off the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In December 2019 organisations all over the world had to abandon business-as-usual and change their ways of working due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. Many were forced to virtualise their work by moving from working at the office to working from home. Ultimately, when it became possible to return to the office many organisations implemented hybrid work arrangements. The office itself is an old concept, and throughout its history it has undergone several phases of restructuring and with hybrid work as the latest phase there has existed a fear that it will bring an almost complete de-contextualisation of work. Previous research on hybrid work has at times suffered due to technological determinism. While technology is important, relying too heavily on technology as a factor above all else often comes at the cost of others, such as routines, practices and the individuals' experiences. This leads to a simplistic view on the subject as other factors are important when determining how individuals are affected by the increasingly digital environment brought about by hybrid work arrangements. Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate how the meaning of the traditional office has changed due to the pandemic. In order to investigate, the study requires in-depth knowledge from a wide range of firm functions in an organisation affected by the spatial changes caused by the pandemic. This in-depth knowledge was collected through qualitative interviews with employees at two software companies similar to each other, both in terms of structure, and the services and products they offer. The empirical data suggests that the move to working from home was an entirely new experience for most, which forced many to bring the notion of work into their homes for the first time. Throughout the study, different phases for the two companies emerged that showed how changes to both technology and routines affected the employees and how they viewed the office. Our study contributes to previous research by offering the ability to capture spatial changes with a processual approach over time.

Keywords: Space, Spatial triad, Hybrid work, Imbrication process, Pandemic, Covid-19, The office, Home-based work, Remote work

Introduction

With the onset of the covid-19 pandemic, the entire world was suddenly forced to change the way it operated. As a result, many organisations virtualised their workspaces as a result of pandemic restrictions. For many employers, this would not have happened in absence of the pandemic, mainly due to fears of missing the perceived benefits that comes with the physical office space (Partridge, 2021; Technical, 2022). During the last two years of the pandemic, at least for many, the opposite of these fears has proven to be true (Boland et al, 2020; WSP, 2022). This has spurred what many call the “end of the space race”, where several large companies, for example, the big four accountancy firms have started to decrease the amount of office space they have in favour of a hybrid work model. Using this form of hybrid office creates flexibility due to new technological capabilities which enable employees to divide their time between working from the office and multiple locations, such as the home. This leads to an extension of the office domain into the home environment (Partridge, 2021; Petani & Mengis, 2021). Moving to a virtual workplace was a new experience for many, that neither employers nor employees were prepared for. However, after restrictions were imposed, productivity seems to have been bolstered when working from home (Boland et al, 2020) where employees were less distracted as a result of not being in the office, and maintained a more healthy work-life balance. Furthermore, the digital workplace can provide the individual with increased flexibility and autonomy (Technical, 2022; Parker, Horowitz and Minkin, 2020; Attaran et al, 2019; Bordi et al, 2018).

In general, the shift to working from home has been positive, where most would want to continue working from home to some degree (Smith, 2022; Parker, Horowitz and Minkin, 2020). However, whilst there have been positive effects emerging out of the situation, it has also elicited many limitations (Boland et al, 2020; Parker, Horowitz and Minkin, 2020; WSP, 2020). These can be traced profoundly to the knowledge economy, where organic physical interactions are not only vital for collaboration but also paramount for success. In a more granular fashion, the office space is evidently important when it comes to facilitating socialising and learning (WSP, 2020), but also in motivating younger employees (Parker, Horowitz and Minkin, 2020). The hybrid work model can also create other limitations, as many employees come to prefer working from home, and many can actively resist the physical office, which may harm collaborative ventures according to Petani & Mengis (2021). Furthermore, moving between different activities in a virtual environment while not working from the office can also present challenges for the employees to collectively focus on a task with other coworkers working from other locations, and for the individual as task fragmentation can arise out of an overload of information (Petani & Mengis, 2021; Attaran et al, 2019; Bordi et al, 2018). Despite positive sentiments from employees, working from home, or hybrid work creates new challenges for employers, such as scheduling. But also, the opportunity to work from home has also become a prerequisite for employment for many, which caused many to leave their employers (Smith, 2022) or negotiate pay cuts to continue to work from their homes (Bero, 2021).

Since the second world war there has been a rapid increase in both the number of office workers as well as the proportion of office workers in regards to the entire workforce, during this period earnings also increased for this category in comparison to those working

with manual labour. Furthermore, the distinction that is made between manual labour and non-manual labour relates closely to the distinction between the working class and middle class within popular discourse, as such the distinction relates to class and status (Hyman & Price, 1983). Over time, the term “office” has become synonymous with the form of work that is mental, administrative, non-manual, thus separated from traditional manual labour which previously was common (Baldry, 1997). There exists ample evidence that strategic decisions have an impact on spaces, and by understanding changes within spaces it is possible to see how these decisions at times have led to changes in how the office is utilised. The office space dates back a long time and over the last hundred years it has undergone several phases of restructuring. From small individual offices to bullpen offices, increasing supervision by management, a form of Taylorization of the office space (Baldry, 1997), towards large open offices emphasising social and collaborative work. Baldry (1997) states that spaces and their configurations are important for sending out signals and symbolic cues to those who occupy the space on how to appropriately behave within that space. While the open office spaces have several advantages, such as a sense of unity and being able to partake in organic information sharing. But the open configuration also has its share of disadvantages (Colenberg et al, 2021). Where the open office can serve as a liability as it potentially negatively affects well-being and performance through environmental stressors, such as noise levels and stimulus overload (Colenberg et al, 2021; Lusa et al, 2019).

Over time, the office has moved from merely being a vital space for performative purposes, but also for establishing a company culture and as an important element to attract and retain talent (Boland et. al, 2020), throughout its history, the configuration and purpose of the office have changed numerous times, and as such its meaning does not remain fixed. Instead, it is continually negotiated and constructed and can be riddled with ambiguity. This ambiguity and uncertainty regarding what the office should be and its function post-covid represent a challenge for employers and employees. With employees recognising that they are able to do their work from home, it will be difficult to motivate a complete return to the office. Consequently, the office and its purpose is changing, and as such its meaning as well.

There has previously existed a notion that the implementation of hybrid work will cause a near complete de-contextualisation of work due to advancing technological capabilities. Furthermore, previous studies which have contained a focus on hybrid work have had a tendency to focus too heavily on the enabling aspect of technology. This can lead to technological determinism, meaning that new technological capabilities in themselves are considered to lead to results independent of how it is appropriated by its users. This can put too much emphasis on technology at the cost of other factors and presents a far too simplistic view, as it excludes other factors (Petani & Mengis, 2021). Which is important to try to recognise and avoid as according to Bordi et al (2018) the individual’s skills, habits, and social conventions can affect how we become affected by the increasingly digital environment. As we operate within the digital environment it serves as an infrastructure, which makes technology a dominant factor that sets the definitions and boundaries (Bordi et al, 2018). Instead, it is important to focus on how technology, organisational routines, and human agency work together. Thus, in order to understand the dynamic process of socially constructing, i.e giving meaning to a particular space, a suitable theoretical disposition is the spatial triad, which orders space into three interconnected dimensions (Delaisse et al, 2020;

Farmaki et al, 2020; Petani & Mengis, 2021). Furthermore, by also incorporating imbrication process theory, the change process can be structured in terms of constraints and affordances motivating how structures emerge and change over time. Consequently, imbrication will facilitate an understanding of how the transition implicated employees' conception of space as a process. Ultimately, by utilising the spatial triad and imbrication process theory we hope on shining a new light on the phenomenon of the hybrid workspace as a result of the forced transition which occurred from the onset of the pandemic until today.

Therefore, we aim to answer the following research question:

- How has the meaning of the office space changed due to the pandemic?

As our research question suggests, this thesis aims to investigate how the meaning of the office space changed as a result of the pandemic. To understand the phenomenon two software companies will be included in the study and employees from both companies will be interviewed. Both companies are familiar with information technology, which is embedded in everyday work practices to a high degree. The purpose of selecting companies within this field is to see whether the transitioning from working in the office, to working from home, and ultimately, implementing hybrid models had any impact on the view employees' have of the traditional office space as a result of the changes in space with its subsequent impact. Two companies are included as one company could not provide a sufficient quantity of data. Consequently, the decision was made to expand the study to two companies operating within the same industry, with similar products and a similar degree of familiarity with information technology to have as consistent a sample as possible.

Theoretical framework

Spatial Triad

Henri Lefebvre was a French marxist whose work on space revolved around space as a medium of social intention. Through an understanding of space as a phenomenon, Henri Lefebvre argues in his works regarding social space that inhabitants of a particular space create the space which they inhabit, emphasising the importance of human intentions within the production and reproduction of space. Henri Lefebvre introduced the spatial triad in his book *The Production of Space* published in 1974 (Farmaki et al, 2020; Watkins, 2005). Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad grew in popularity as researchers started to view space as more than a mere container for organisational activities, and instead took the perspective of space as a process (Stephenson et al, 2020). By looking at space as a process Stephenson et al (2020) argue that space becomes more fluid, as it is modified through usage. The spatial triad describes space as dynamic and relational, representing a shift in how space is viewed. Previously, the common approach has been the dichotomy of space and place. Space has been viewed as something neutral, universal, and absolute that can be described geographically and precisely. Place, on the other hand, has been described as existing within space, but instead of being universal, place is rather something unique and individual. Place manages to become unique and "individualistic" through the meaning which is attributed to it by people's experiences and how they view that particular location. The dichotomy of space and place

has been useful in discerning the process in which space is transformed into place. However, this implies space as being a container, waiting to be filled with meaning, which can hinder critical reasoning and places too much confidence in the experiences' of people and the meaning that is placed upon a location (Delaisse et al, 2020; Stephenson et al, 2020).

By addressing space as a configuration made up of social relations, instead of an independent dimension, it becomes possible to avoid focusing on several aspects of space in isolation, such as the physical, the social, the cultural, and the institutional. The spatial triad can therefore connect rather than disconnect the physical, the mental, and the social spaces. The conceptualisation achieved through the spatial triad allows space to be seen as something produced while simultaneously being an outcome of a process, whilst it being a process in itself. This means that space is produced and bound up with social reality, as our actions within that space contribute to the ongoing process of production of space. Thus by entering space, we can shape that space, however, several layers of production of that space have already occurred whereby specific actions can become constrained as a result (Delaisse et al, 2020). The three dimensions of Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad allow researchers to theorise regarding space in an increasingly complex manner, and reach a deeper understanding of space (Stephenson et al, 2020). The three interrelated, interdependent dimensions within the spatial triad are the conceived space, spatial practices, and the lived, and these three dimensions are meant to encompass all aspects of space (Delaisse et al, 2020; Watkins, 2005).

Conceived space	Conceived space refers to the most dominant dimension, the space that is intentionally designed and shaped as a space and for its functions by those in power. The conceived space can be visualised through signs and codes, such as documents and strategies that provide insight into the intended use of the space by those in power (Delaisse et al, 2020; Watkins, 2005).
Spatial practices	Spatial practices are the way in which people make sense of the space they're acting within, through for example internalised understandings about how that space functions and the roles within it. As such spatial practises are ways of navigating that space for the individual, meaning that spatial practises refers to how space is used by those inhabiting it (Delaisse et al, 2020, Toro & Navarette-Hernandez, 2021).
Lived space	The lived space is the space that contains human interactions and practices. Toro & Navarette-Hernandez (2021) describes the lived space as meaning that we assign a particular space based upon our experience of that space. This may differ between different individuals, for example a new entry to a space may assign a different meaning whilst spatial practises might be the same. The lived space is shaped by spatial practices and dominated by the conceived space and as such it is passively experienced. However, it also offers the opportunity to challenge existing dynamics with the other spaces, in ways that either increase or decrease durability (Delaisse et al, 2020; Watkins, 2005).

In order to demonstrate the three different dimensions of the spatial triad Watkins (2005) presents it as a theatre performance in which each dimension can be visualised. The conceived space can be viewed as the structure through the script, the director, costume designers, composer, and producers. The spatial practices can be seen through the everyday routines and the acceptable behaviour within that environment displayed by the performers (Watkins, 2005). One example of a spatial practice within this environment is that the performers actually can remember their lines for the performance according to Watkins (2005). The lived space could be visualised through the fact that the performers recognised that actually rehearsing within the physical space, in which the performance would take place, would improve the performance (Watkins, 2005).

Delaisse et al (2020) emphasise the importance of not neglecting the reciprocity of the three interrelated dimensions in terms of the production of space. As mentioned, the conceived space is the dominant space and can influence spatial practices and the lived space. However, the conceived space requires the individual's understanding of the space to be the same as intended and also put into practice in order to be reinforced. Spatial practices are shaped by the conceived space, although they can affect the conceived space and the experience within the lived space as well. The conceived space and spatial practices can provide essential structures, which can be exemplified through work tasks performed by groups, which require an acceptance of both the conceived space and spatial practices in order for the dynamic to work in the lived space. This acceptance may serve as constraints upon the lived space, however, despite this the lived space can challenge the other dimensions. For example, if the lived space challenges and contests symbols, signs, and structures intentionally created by the conceived space, the lived space can affect the conceived space. It is also possible for the lived space to disrupt the dominant space through spatial practices. By performing a task in a novel way within the lived space, it can potentially become the new “normal”, therefore altering spatial practices which then can challenge the conceived space as the understanding of the space might have changed. Consequently, changes, or alterations within the structure provided by the conceived space, can change spatial practices and experiences within the lived space. And new practices or new experiences through the lived space can in turn affect the conceived space due to all three dimensions being interrelated, interdependent, and interconnected (Delaisse et al, 2020; Toro & Navarette-Hernandez, 2021). By utilising the spatial triad it becomes possible to capture how space as an entity is configured through the three dimensions of space. As such, the spatial triad will allow the researchers to capture a snapshot of the entire composition of space at different temporal stages throughout the pandemic.

The spatial triad has been used in a variety of different studies, on a macro level regarding city planning and urban regeneration. Whereas, on a micro level, it has for example been utilised in a study by Farmaki et al (2020) focusing on the tensions between hosts and guests in Airbnb. Where the spatial triad gave the researchers the ability to grasp the spatial dimension where transitory yet complex relations form and where the meaning of professionalising that environment could improve quality. The spatial triad has also been utilised in Toro & Navarette-Hernandez's (2021) work regarding the financialised production of space where they used the spatial triad to analyse real estate investment funds. The spatial triad has also been put to use by Delaisse et al (2020), who studied the role of occupation in

the production of space, where occupation serves as the visible element that can demonstrate the intentionality in the production of space. Furthermore, this approach is useful as it can visualise the different power dynamics involved in the production of space. The spatial triad provided this study with the capacity to theorise how the meaning of a particular space has been altered, partly due to changes towards the process itself, but also the outcomes of the process. However, despite its benefits and advantages, the spatial triad has been faced with criticism. Stephenson et al (2020) describe two main problems with the previous iterations of Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad. Firstly, according to Stephenson et al (2020) too many researchers have chosen not to use the spatial triad in its entirety but rather decided to focus on only one of the three dimensions, rather than all of them in their entirety. Secondly, previous usage of the spatial triad has also had the effect of focusing too heavily on the impact of human agency, partly due to the first criticism described above. This narrow use of the spatial triad has had the effect that other important factors have been neglected, a tendency which may be a limitation of Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad (Stephenson et al, 2020).

To address the first criticism, within this study the spatial triad will be used in its entirety, in order to ensure proper use of the theory. By using the spatial triad in its entirety, the risks of unintentionally putting emphasis on the importance of one of the dimensions, disproportionately above any other dimensions is mitigated. To address the second criticism by Stephenson et al (2020), for this particular study, technology will become an important factor as it facilitates home-based office solutions. While Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad allows for the inclusion of technology as a part of the conceived space or as a spatial practice, it does not focus or highlight technology in particular. In order to remedy this, Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad will be complemented by the use of Paul Leonardi's (2011) theory regarding the process of imbrication, which combines changes in routines and behaviour with technological advances in view of creating the infrastructure of an organisation.

Process of imbrication

Paul Leonardi (2011) offers an insight which, in contrast from Giddens structuration theory, also includes technology as a key actor in the constellation of a structure. The theoretical disposition centres on the intersection between material and human agency, which together forms, as named by Leonardi (2011), the infrastructure of organisations. Traditionally many authors have come to see human agency, i.e. the capacity of humans to achieve certain goals, and material agency, nonhuman entities acting performatively without human intervention, as a unidirectional phenomenon. Technology has often been seen as a rather static and constraining element that needs to be circumvented, ultimately altering other aspects to accommodate the goals of human agency. Rather, Leonardi (2011) claims that technology, the material agency, as of today is not a static element but rather a flexible entity that many organisations can freely alter to facilitate human agency, and as such it changes over time. While it is important to note that human and material agency are distinctly seen as separate, the intersection of these entities can however come to change, produce and maintain the infrastructure in organisations. Leonardi (2011) refers to this overlapping process as imbrication, i.e. the interlocking of both human and material agency to function interdependently.

According to Leonardi (2011) the key to explaining the phenomena of interlocking lies in what the technology offers in terms of affordances to the user. Affordances refers to the possibilities for action that users experience when using an object. This is a highly relational process, as different individuals can use the same object in different ways. In sum, Leonardi (2011) asserts that routines, human agency, and technology, material agency, imbricates to produce or sustain the infrastructure of the organisation over time, dependent on what affordances the technology can offer. What is important to note, and as briefly touched upon before, is that routines can also change, creating affordances for new technology to be implemented. As such, the process of imbrication recognises the importance of technology but is equally dependent on routines as an integral part of the process. This combination allows technology to be brought into the study while avoiding technological determinism, which as described by Petani & Mengis (2021) studies of hybrid work have previously suffered from. Consequently, as technology is seen as a flexible entity, outcomes that derive from the process of imbrication can either result in changing the technology, as a result of a routine change, or come to change the routine as a result of technological change. The strength of the process of imbrication can capture the process of change in routines and technology. Over time, if imbrications are continuously utilised in practice, i.e becomes taken for granted, they together form the infrastructure of the organisation. In turn, the process of imbrication becomes a dynamic process over time, as previous imbrications influence and form the basis for future imbrications to take place. This means that the process of imbrication can capture the changes as a process over time.

Spatial triad and process of imbrication

The spatial triad and the processes of imbrication, through affordances and constraints, can aid the process of understanding how the meaning and underlying infrastructure have changed as a result of the change in office space in different respects. The spatial triad distinct value lies in the three interconnected dimensions which all contribute to the configuration of space as an entity. By capturing this entity at different temporal stages it becomes possible to see how the workspace is constructed by those in power, how said construction implicates the practices within that space, and how that space is perceived by its inhabitants as well. As the components of the model are interconnected, changes to individual parts carry implications towards the rest. However, while the spatial triad allows space as an entity to be captured at different stages in time, it does not in itself look at space in a processual fashion. Yet, the entities which it captures can be used in a processual fashion, to explain the transitions. However, the process of imbrication, through affordances and constraints, enables an understanding of how certain aspects of the underlying infrastructure changes over time. This yields a high relevance as the model examines both technological changes and changes in regard to behaviour and routines. Therefore, by utilising the process of imbrication, space as an entity can be placed within a process and through that processual perspective it becomes possible to understand the transition within the office space over time, as illustrated by figure 1. Together, the spatial triad and the process of imbrication will be used in this thesis to understand the experience of the office space inhabitants during the transition from working at the office to working from home, and ultimately, to a hybrid work model.

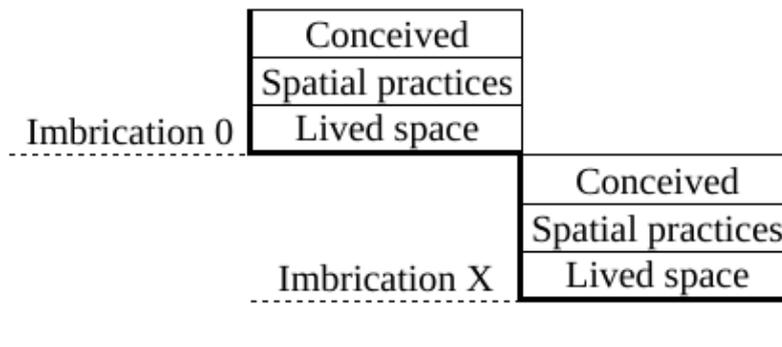


Figure 1: Spatial imbrications

Methodology

Qualitative design

Our study requires qualitative in-depth knowledge from a wide range of firm functions, from both the managers and employees which have gone through this spatial change. For this reason, the most appropriate data collection strategy for primary data was interviews, in order to reach an understanding of the experiences that the employees from the two companies went through, and how they were impacted by it.

Site and participants

As the phenomenon of interest is if there has been a change of meaning around the office space as an effect of a virtual hybridisation of the office space. The sites were purposefully selected before the research as the phenomenon was suspected to be located at two specific companies. The organisations of choice were two software development companies, offering similar products and services. Originally, the intention was to perform the study at only one company, however, during the process of gaining access to interviewees it seemed as the number of interviewees would not be satisfactory. Due to this, a second company was contacted and brought into the study to expand the sample size. The reasoning behind

choosing a second software company, which offered similar products and services, was that the two companies most likely worked in similar ways and as such their experiences might also be similar. Both organisations are located and operate in Sweden, with offices scattered across the country. The organisations are very widely organised and produce their products in-house, thus, housing a wide variety of organisational functions within the same office space, from developers to after-sales staff. This renders the organisations to be rather large, with one employing around 500 employees whilst the other employs close to 700 employees. Further, by being software producers, there is a high familiarity with information technology, thus, very incorporated into their company culture. Both companies were also founded around 1980. The high familiarity with information technology became evident at the start of the pandemic when most of the staff were moved to work from home with seemingly low interference on their business practices. This was achieved in a very short time, as many vital IT tools and practices were already present within the organisations.

For the interview participants, we employed purposeful sampling, being synonymous with the essence of qualitative research (Coyne, 1997). As emphasised by Coyne (1997), the delineation of sampling variants in the constellation of purposeful sampling is a long-standing discussion amongst authors. What is not left in ambiguity is the coherence of theoretical sampling and subsequently employing grounded theory as a method for analysis. As new concepts and themes emerge through the research process, through grounded theory, similarly, the theoretical sampling is simultaneously adjusted through the process, to seek out more data to be able to understand the phenomena at hand. This will also reverberate towards the interview guide, as questions might be prone to alterations as the research progresses. This enables the research to extract rich data flexibly for the researchers to reach an understanding of the phenomena under examination (Coyne, 1997)

The 24 interview participants were selected across organisational functions, to achieve an overarching sentiment of the office, not the experience of one department nor derived from a single professional role. The distribution within the sample was seven employees within the field of marketing, with varying responsibilities within said field, five after-sales service employees, two software developers, three managers and four whose tasks were administrative, such as human resource representatives and economists overseeing the internal operations. The distribution between the two companies was skewed more towards one company, which offered more interviewees, 19 individuals, whilst the other company provided five interviewees for interviewing. The selection was purposely done after the theoretical concepts that emerged throughout the research, given the abductive-deductive approach of grounded theory, this was not known before the research began. Whereby, the interview guide became adjusted to house new emerging concepts and themes, until the data became saturated. The selection process was initiated by contacting HR representatives from the two companies, to receive consent to conduct our study at each respective organisation. This was followed by a discussion where the content of the interview was discussed to ensure its appropriateness. We were then given a list of available candidates for the interview process. Whereupon the available candidates were later contacted by email, where a time slot for an interview was established between the two parties.

Interviews

We decided upon performing interviews as the means for collecting qualitative data, as the subjective experience is the focal point of our research (Qu and Dumay, 2011; Silverman, 2015). The demographics of the interviewees was a factor which we could not account for as the selection process was mostly governed by the companies on the basis of availability. This fact was also present in regards to the distribution of professions in the sample. As the available participants were handed to us, the researchers could not be selective in light of professional roles nor departments.

When conducting the data collection, all interviews were held online through Zoom, partly due to health concerns, but also due to logistics and time concerns, as one company was rather far away from the location of the researchers. When initiating the interviews a brief explanation followed regarding the logic behind the questions, their temporal disposition, to facilitate that their answers are within the correct period of time, as the study examined a change three overlapping temporal stages during the pandemic, The process relied on the exposure of individual narratives that are created amongst research participants through their experience with the phenomena of interest. Consequently, it facilitated reaching an understanding of (if) how hybrid virtualisation of the workplace has come to change the view of said space (Qu and Dumay, 2011).

After everything was clear and understood by the interviewee, the interviews were initiated, where the order and questions posed can be seen under appendix 1. The form of interviewing that fits the topic at hand was semi-structured interviews as it enabled the data collection to be focused around the purpose of the study, consistently across organisational functions, by the use of an interview guide, whilst keeping the guide loose enough to extract a rich understanding of the participants' experiences through the usage of frequent probing questions (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Throughout all interviews the same researcher acted as interviewer, whilst the other solely took extensive notes. The purpose of these rigid roles were to maintain a stable consistency in the interviews throughout the research, minimising any potential fluctuations due to a variance in interviewing techniques.

Data analysis

When each interview process was done, the interview was transcribed by the researchers. After said transcription, we immediately initiated the coding process, to ensure that the interview was still fresh in mind. During the coding process, each interview was divided into three temporal stages, before the pandemic, during the restrictions and the hybrid model, in order to code data directly into the structure in the empirical section. Furthermore, this coding process also allowed the researchers to establish a baseline prior to the pandemic, gain data regarding the transition and the major changes and lastly, the current situation and path forward for the two companies. As this thesis aims to understand whether the meaning of the office has changed it was considered important to be able to catch the changes over time to understand their impact and permanence.

During the coding process, certain trends were found within the interviews. For example, the shift had a great impact on the social aspects, communication, well being and the sense of unity. When all the interviews had been coded and the patterns had started to

emerge, all the data was summarised per the temporal stages mentioned above. The reason for this was to gain an overview of the data for the researchers but also to be able to easily compare and test whether the patterns were actually there, and lastly to ensure that no patterns had been overlooked by the researchers. Furthermore, summarising the data from all interviews according to the three temporal stages facilitated a process of spotting potential changes in the codes when moving between the three temporal stages. Each interviewee was coded separately, with codes and pieces of text added into a spreadsheet according to the temporal stages to retain the structure, the final summary was subsequently also done in a spreadsheet. The researchers also cross-examined each other's coding process, in order to ensure that both researchers agreed on the legitimacy of the emerging codes, thus, largely ensuring that there was no inter-researcher variability in the way the material was coded. After the spreadsheets were complete the researcher sat down to analyse the material in view of the theoretical literature, to formalise the discussion.

However, upon reaching the discussion section the researchers found that the chronological structure ceased to be beneficial. Due to the complex nature of the three dimensions of the spatial triad (Delaisse et al, 2020) in combination with the theory of imbrication (Leonardi, 2011). It was therefore difficult to present the discussion in a clear manner through the three temporal stages without it becoming unnecessarily long, complicated and repetitive. As a result, the discussion is structured in accordance with the three dimensions, the conceived space, spatial practices and the lived space, which also facilitated examining how imbrications affected the triad. This allowed the researchers to more clearly distinguish and present what occurred within each dimension and throughout the spatial change process in respect to emerging imbrications.

Ethical considerations

Throughout the research process, many precautionary measures were taken to ensure that the research kept an adequate ethical standard. Firstly, when performing the interviews, interviewees were always notified that the session was to be recorded, and simultaneously asking them for their consent to do so. Whilst also informing that their participation in the study was in light of full anonymity. The same can be said about the site, i.e the companies involved in the research. Where in the early stages of the research, during the first set of contacts between the researchers and organisations, the companies were informed that their participation would be in terms of full anonymity. Whereupon, details such as geographical location is not published as it would be detrimental towards said ambitions. Besides contemplations surrounding anonymity, the research was done in a non-harmful environment. Where participants were handed questions of non-invasive nature, performed in a calm environment of their choice.

Empirical

The analysis of the data shows that the two companies went through a very similar change process, in moving from a situation where the employees worked almost exclusively from their office to being forced to work from home. Eventually, both companies began to successively return to office but in hybrid form. In the subsequent subsections, the

experiences, perceptions, and reactions of the employees will be examined in closer detail through a chronological lens. The use of the chronological structure presented within this empirical section simplifies the ability of both researchers and readers to capture the change process within their space from pre-pandemic to the present.

Before the pandemic

Early on it became apparent that the dominant form of working was at the office in an open office space. A fact that was confirmed throughout the interviews was each interviewee worked on-site, and in an open office space, regardless of their respective position in each company. With their respective desks, in close proximity to coworkers within their teams. In the open office space, the individuals could focus on their respective tasks while other areas of the office were designed for other purposes, such as meetings being meant for specially equipped conference rooms rather than the open office space to avoid generating disturbances. Other areas, such as break rooms and lunchrooms, were meant to allow the employees to step away from their desks during the day, with many of the interviewees describing the lunchrooms as being quite crowded areas. In one of the companies at which interviews were performed there was also another type of space designed for leisure, rooms where employees could go to play games such as video games, ping pong, pool, etc as a break from work. This type of space was generally more used by those in younger generations. It is worth noting that employees from one of the companies noted the parking area outside their office was an important space. The parking area was often crowded and there was not a certainty that each employee would have an available parking space for their vehicle on any given morning, which some described as a source of frustration.

Prior to the pandemic, each interviewee worked almost exclusively from the office, the exception being a limited few that had either personal reasons for working one day from home or those who worked in multinational teams where coworkers were positioned abroad. As one interviewee noted “we always worked from the office in the open office. You sit together, that was the philosophy” (Coordinator).

For the vast majority who did not work from home, or had never done so at all throughout their work life, the reason for this was not entirely clear for the majority of the interviewees. However, there was a mention by a few of the interviewees in the companies that the reason was attributed to limitations regarding VPN clients, which stands for virtual private networks, the software in question enables safe connectivity to company servers from networks residing outside the company. As such, there was not a possibility to work from home due to technological deficiencies. Although some of them had the opportunity to do so it was never exploited, except in very rare instances. Many experienced working from home as taboo, something which required special approval from team leaders and managers which would only be given in very rare instances. Working from the office was either the only way of working or the only way of working that was encouraged. Many of the interviewees were concerned about performance, the predominant view being that working from home would have a negative impact and that they might be seen as less efficient than their coworkers. It should be noted that the majority of the interviewees thought the idea of working from never had been considered by the companies prior to the pandemic as one employee described it, “the old way of thinking was that work is to be done at work” (Customer support).

The office was for many described as mainly a place of business. However, the office was also described as a collaborative space, with a lot of meetings of various kinds, either between members of the teams or large-scale meetings involving entire departments which was a frequent occurrence. As mentioned, these meetings were confined to conference rooms located throughout the office building. Some of the interviewees, especially those in positions where meetings were a large part of the daily work, described how they sometimes moved between meetings with barely any breaks for extended periods, sometimes even between different buildings. Almost all of the interviewees also described the office as containing a social dimension, which could be experienced through organised activities such as exercising during lunch breaks, the occasional company trips, parties, after works, and team-building sessions. Throughout the data collection process, it was identified that the social dimension of the office lay not only in the organised but also in the unorganised, meaning the spontaneous organic social interactions between coworkers, which could be manifested in a quick chat in the open office space, talks about weekend plans, coffee, and lunch breaks and chats about personal matters entirely separate from work.

For many of the interviewees, an important part of the open office spaces was the ability to overhear something of interest or that concerned their own work and easily join the conversation. This was an efficient knowledge transfer, however, it also tended to increase the noise level in the office space. Furthermore, it should also be noted that not all of the interviewees viewed this sort of transfer of knowledge as an important aspect of the office, as one employee noted “a lot of the conversations at the office may be nice, but it is essentially a time thief for me” (salesman).

The interviewees described how the organic social interactions throughout their day created low barriers for communication, for example, if a problem arose for someone a quick unscheduled meeting was easy to organise due to the coworkers being within close proximity in the open office space, which while often being more efficient than booking a conference room and thus be appreciated it could on occasion drag in more coworkers than necessary and take up resources. More often than not, the preferred method of communication was to simply tap someone on the shoulder, especially for those who worked close to their respective teams. Digital communication tools, such as direct messaging, had been used prior to the pandemic to some degree, however, it was only used for minor questions, and as such proficiency in communicating with these tools was not extensive. Team leaders also described the low barriers of communication as important for organising and monitoring how their subordinates were working. It was also easy to monitor employee well-being. However, although most of the interviewees described the low barriers for communications as efficient for solving their own problems and performing their duties it also served as a distraction for them by being pulled into different impromptu meetings or problem-solving discussions, which may not have concerned them, being asked questions from other coworkers, or by simply joining a social conversation that ultimately could increase their workload or lead to an overload of information that was not always retained efficiently. Consider for example how one of the representatives of the customer support unit describes his memories of working in the office before the pandemic:

There were days when I felt like I was working double time. After all, I was the one a lot of people would ask questions, especially new people would have a lot of questions because I have been here longer. You want to help out and make sure everything goes okay but it can be quite demanding as it takes a lot of time (Customer support)

During the restrictions

As mentioned previously, not all employees at the two companies had access to a VPN solution, and, as such, were technologically limited to working from the office. However, it was a prioritised matter at both companies and a VPN solution was quickly provided to all employees in order to facilitate the shift to working from home. Besides a small minority of individuals who either stayed at the office or visited the office regularly due to their responsibilities, both companies in question moved their employees to work from home. The shift of working from the office to working from home meant an entry into the conceived space of the employees' home environments (Delaisse et al, 2020). This change of space caused a varied set of responses from the individuals. Some met this transition with resistance and tried to remain at the office for as long as possible. While others quickly moved their work home.

In general, the transition to work from home was rather facilitated by both companies as equipment from the office was offered to their employees to bring home to facilitate their work. The equipment that was issued to the majority of employees, besides their computers, were extra monitors, tables, and chairs. Many employees remarked this as a paramount aspect to be able to work from home, where the work set-up at home was essential.

My workstation has varied quite a lot from the beginning. I started on the couch and moved to the bed when the kids were home. Then I moved to the kitchen table, which was not good either. I had to get an office table in the living room, I needed a proper space for working (Business analyst)

It was evident that having a good set-up at home was one focal point in determining whether working from home was manageable. Of course, there were some minor variances where some individuals were not as dependent on equipment from the office. But the majority of interviewees experienced that not having a good workstation at home carried many negative implications for work and personal life. An adjustable table was repeatedly brought up as an entity that was missed from the office, due to ergonomic reasons, and many did not bring a table from the office as their homes could not fit it. In general, besides the equipment, what the majority of interviewees experienced was that it was hard working from home when dedicated space for working was not established at home. This was either exposed at the beginning of the transition as many did not have the possibilities for such a space, and had to force it onto other living areas.

I did not have a workstation in the beginning, I had a form of a table, but I had to basically force my workstation into my personal space and adapt. I did not like that, as I want to have a separation between my personal and professional life (Web developer)

Whilst some had a dedicated space, over time, the same individuals became comfortable working from home, thus moving to more comfortable arrangements such as the

couch or at times even the bed. Most experienced the hardships of working from home when either there was a lack of dedicated workspaces or when living areas became mixed with work, i.e. sitting on the couch or by the dinner table.

I was sitting really badly. Eventually, I brought a chair and a screen, but could not bring a table. The dinner table did not work as an adequate office desk. So in the end I usually just sat with the laptop, I felt trapped in the room I was sitting (Marketer)

Several interviewees mentioned that changing the surrounding milieu frequently was almost as important as being able to be social. In sum, this caused many to experience work and private life to become intertwined when working from home. The fact being irrespective of whether there was a lack of a dedicated workspace from the beginning or if spaces became intertwined over time. Amongst the individuals who fared best when working from home, these were the individuals who created a separation between workspaces and living spaces. Either through a dedicated room or simply an area in their accommodation that was solely meant for working. Some interviewees even elicited that having a good set-up acted as a barrier when thinking of returning to the office in the near future, as it was more fitted to their liking. As an HR representative from one of the companies said “The few who could and created an office space at home, have experienced it as harder to come back. It is nice being home. It is a big resistance for some” (HR representative).

An immense sentiment derived from most participants was that many enjoyed the flexibility which came with working from home. As some interviewees mentioned, when working from home it was possible to do home chores at the same time. Whereby, it freed up a lot of time that would otherwise have been spent past-office hours previously. This sentiment was a common topic amongst parents, who described that this freed-up time was very important for them and their children, ultimately improving their parental responsibilities as a result. This time also includes matters of logistics as many could more flexibly pick up and deliver their children to school or kindergarten in a better manner than before. Whilst this was emphasised by parents to a higher extent, a multitude of interviewees joyously agreed to the time savings in their everyday life as a result of working from home.

Working from home has been reliving as I have two small children. I can prioritise my home instead. It is sad to not meet my coworkers. But for my work responsibilities and my responsibilities at home, it has been better. It feels like I can be a better parent (Onboarding specialist)

One question that was answered in the same fashion by all interviewees was that none had experienced a shift in their responsibilities or work tasks when working from home. All employees did the same work at home as they did at the office. An important aspect, entangled with their work responsibilities, was that the majority experienced their efforts to be more efficient when working from home. When describing the root cause there were varying reasons for the occurrence. The majority of interviewees, however, experienced that when working from home, especially in light of administrative tasks, the silence and isolation benefited their focus. As both companies utilise open office spaces, there was a lot of noise and disturbances when working at the office. However, whilst focus dependent and individual tasks benefitted when working from home, group-oriented tasks, such as meetings, were not

basking in the same light. Where lack of technological proficiency was hampering adequate results amongst some, this was mostly observed at the beginning of the restrictions but came to be easier as time went by, as individuals became more familiar with software and technology for communication. However, there were clear-cut sentiments regarding improved efficiency when working from home. Aside from being able to focus, many also experienced that breaks became more scarce, due to reasons such as breaks being not as fulfilling, or that interviewees did not realise the importance of taking breaks throughout their day. Most individuals are also experiencing the loss of coworkers, which became evident after some time working from home. A few individuals put heavy emphasis that they missed coworkers early on, most came to the same conclusion after some time passed. One interviewee described it as “I missed my colleagues, the interplay with them. Just being able to talk about things that were not about work, you miss that. Coffee breaks and lunches” (Salesman)

In both companies, employees tried to replicate their social rituals or events in the virtual space, such as coffee breaks, kick-offs, and morning meetings. Whilst it was appreciated, a majority of the interviewees concurred that these measures were not good substitutes for their real-life counterparts. Besides trying to maintain already established practices, there were also new practices arising when working from home. One of these, which was abided heavily by one company, was daily morning check-ups. These check-ups were put in place to monitor the well-being of coworkers, and monitoring the progress of the team was also present but not emphasised to the same extent. “We started doing the daily check-ups, we never had to do those before the pandemic. Just so we know if someone is not feeling good” (Team leader). In this light, in one of the companies, it was expressed that members of one's team, and especially the team leader became more important, as their role became extended to monitor their team members' well-being. A role which was hard, according to some team leaders, due to coordination, leading, and monitoring the employees' health and stress levels.

As for communications, it was altered and turned to occur mostly between team members, aside from a handful of selected individuals, where interdepartmental interactions subsequently became harder. Many interviewees expressed that they lost contact with coworkers with which they, besides work-related queries, did not have regular contact. This fact was pointed out by interviewees from both companies since the organic and spontaneous coffee breaks and lunches disappeared when working from home. Whilst, many pointed out the negative consequences of missing out on interactions with coworkers outside their closest proximity. Some remarked that due to the fact that they interacted and built relations with unexpected individuals, interviewees would not have interacted to the same extent given that the situation would have been as it used to be. This was either with individuals with whom interviewees shared work queries, or simply with team members that the interviewees said they were not close with before. Many expressed that social relations and interactions in this sense were something that was previously taken for granted, and the use of social spaces has decreased significantly. As a result of working from home, relations grew in importance, due to not being able to interact in a normal sense anymore. The increased importance of social interactions was also exhibited amongst employees who were in daily contact with customers. The lack of social interactions as a result of the pandemic caused many to bond with their customers to a higher extent as they were more talkative and more personal with

clients and customers. As this was a way to satisfy social needs, particularly for those working in sales when the surrounding environment had become devoid of the traditional opportunities to do so.

It was evident that the social environment was greatly affected in both companies when the transition to working from home began. An important sentiment to note was that many individuals also experienced that besides work, their social efforts had also lessened in non-work-related situations. Where some experienced that the workplace and themselves have suffered from a decreased sense of unity and belonging due to a lack of interaction. The open office was a thing that was missed, in the way that many felt that the lack of organic dialogues. Be it either for leisure or work-related queries, the office space was a great facilitator for these interactions. This was also a fact surrounding knowledge and information sharing, where spontaneous questions or overheard conversations were often important when approaching one's problems or questions surrounding work responsibilities. What many interviewees now faced, instead of simply walking over to a colleague and tapping them on the shoulder, all communication had to be planned to varying extents, especially in meetings. It was not uncommon for interviewees to describe this need for planning as a barrier for communication. This in combination with the relatively low proficiency with digital tools caused some individuals to ask more questions, as coworkers were not present in close proximity, which resulted in insecurities in regards to not only work but also the technology and tools used for working at home.

During one day I get a ton of messages, more often than not you cannot answer directly without checking something. At home you have no one to bounce around an idea with, you are alone. Talking to people became harder, when we became digital some people asked before they thought because it was so easy and convenient (Sales manager)

In contrast, others experienced that they started taking more initiatives themselves in terms of decision making and information gathering, as coworkers were not as easy to communicate with anymore. When being met with questions about the importance and role of the office, many mentioned that it is a workplace, but by working from home, this sentiment slightly altered and became extended to emphasise the social dimensions of the office. This was either in a direct sense remarked by interviewees, or brought up as a criterion when deciding on the right time to work from the office. As it was continuously brought up that employees do not want to go to the office if their closest colleagues are not there.

Return to the office

Both the companies at which interviews were conducted have moved to a hybrid model of working, where employees must spend at least some of their time at the office. For the employees between the two companies it differs, at one the employees have to spend at least one day a week at the office but at the other, they are required to spend at least half of their working time at the office. The selectivity of where to work is a choice previously not available at either company but becomes possible due to an extension of the conceived space to actually involve the homes of the employees (Delaisse et al, 2020). None of the interviewees wished for a full return to the office as many of them had acclimated themselves

to working from home. Even though some of the interviewees are choosing to spend all their time at the office, especially those who are younger and live alone that may have suffered most during the pandemic, they are all unanimously against not having the option to choose where they work. When the option to return to the office was presented, many of the interviewees reported a reluctance to actually go back since their everyday lives had become much simpler, in terms of a logistical sense. Many experienced it as easier to get the work done, while also being able to spend more time with their family, as mentioned above some felt like they became better parents. A few of the interviewees cited the environment as an important factor for preferring to work from home, as commuting was no longer necessary.

When first presented with the option to return to the office to some degree, many of the interviewees reported that they had to overcome the reluctance mentioned above. Many of them reported changes in their perception and their inclination to actually overcome that resistance, as one interviewee said “if I wake up one morning and it is raining, I am more likely to work from home to simply avoid riding my bike through that weather” (Developer). Some of the interviewees have taken the stance that working from the office depends on the tasks they have to perform during the day, for example when they are going to be at the office they try to book as many physical meetings as possible while they try to avoid that when working from home. Despite the resistance that many experienced, the majority of the interviewees were excited to be able to work at the office for some of their time, mainly for the social interactions with coworkers. However, it was not uncommon among the interviewees to be disappointed on the days which they chose to work from the office, as more often than not, many of their coworkers were not there. One interviewee stated “I work alone from home, and from the office. To me it makes no difference if I go to the office if no one else is there” (Employee in sales).

As such a social condition has been formed that a majority of the interviewees agreed upon, they don't want to work from the office unless their team members attend the same day. This was more difficult at one of the companies as many of the employees no longer have their designated seat, and as such must book a desk prior to coming in, which may or may not be in proximity of their team members. Overall, this social condition has led to an increased need for coordination with team members in order to work from the office. When the pandemic struck and working from home was mandated, no one had experienced a shift in how they performed their work duties, except for increased reliance on digital tools. However, almost all of the interviewees have continued to experience an increased efficiency when working from home, that they achieve than before and it is not uncommon either that there is an increased sense of independence compared to before the pandemic.

Those who worked in roles that coordinated teams or worked on multiple projects experienced that working from home required more communication to stay updated in difference when at the office, where the organic knowledge transfer is more easily facilitated. As mentioned, the reliance on digital tools increased throughout the duration of the pandemic, an area where many interviewees experienced a lack of proficiency early on. Compared to the beginning of the pandemic the overall proficiency has, according to several interviewees, undoubtedly improved, making the use of such tools more efficient. One manager said:

When we started working from home, I was bombarded with questions and meeting requests, they could be for literally anything. I was swamped, there was an overload of information. Now I feel like we have learned how to use them, we are more confident and accustomed to them than before (Sales manager)

However, despite the increased proficiency, employees working in roles where they require a lot of information from different people or are in some form of management position, claimed that there was an increased need for clarity in communication. This was attributed to the fact that quick follow-up questions regarding for example an email could be handled when passing each other in the hallway at the office. Despite the hybrid solution, there is simply not the same space for that anymore, and as such clarity is essential to avoid unnecessary communication back and forth. The increased reliance on digital tools has also affected response times negatively overall. With limited organic interaction, the interviewees are to some extent at the mercy of the interviewee and her priorities when asking for some sort of information, however, contrary to the expectation this was not something that was particularly frustrating for the interviewees as it goes both ways and allowed people to prioritise and focus on the task at hand. Not even those working in positions with direct contact with customers stated this a big problem, as one interviewee said “they (customer) also have longer response times, internally. They understand that it is the same for us” (Salesman).

As mentioned previously, when working from the office many of the interviewees tried to schedule as many meetings as possible to have as many physical interactions as they can. This has led to an increased amount of meetings compared to prior to the pandemic, and with many working from home still, the way these meetings are performed has changed as well, with each participant using digital tools even though some may be present at the office. This was the way of working at one of the companies where they had found that this produced more efficient and inclusive meetings. One of the interviewees who worked part-time from home prior to the pandemic said this new practice among others has improved their ability to work from home.

You no longer forget coworkers who are at home. Previously working from home was abstract, you were not invited to some meetings or informed. There has definitely been a positive improvement on that front. Now if you work from home, people recognise that you are still working (Customer support)

Now that the hybrid models of working are being implemented, many of the interviewees experienced an improvement regarding the social dimension of their workplace. As mentioned previously there now exists a social condition for attending the office, which may present an obstacle for the employees during the time in which they freely choose where to work. However, with designated days at the office for their respective teams, there has been an improvement, as they know their team members will be there, even though at one of the companies the lack of a designated desk still remains challenging. Compared to when the pandemic struck, there has been a shift from only trying to replicate practices of a social character to establishing an entirely new one in certain teams. For example, one team has started to implement walk meetings, meaning simply a meeting where all the participants are out for a walk for the duration of it. The meeting may be used as an additional check-up, as a

platform to spread information important for all to have but mainly as a social activity. The majority of the interviewees did not experience any damage to the sense of unity within their own teams, however, it was not entirely uncommon for people to experience a disconnection with other teams that they may previously have met daily at the office. As there were few direct reasons to initiate contact other than for social reasons, it was often overlooked more often than not. When considering their teams, many of the interviewees made the reflections that the team leaders have gained a much more important role than prior to the pandemic, with increased responsibilities, as they have become essential in order to avoid people being overlooked, noting the well-being of team members and to ensure that the team remains efficient.

The team leaders are much more important now, they have to keep tabs on everyone and make sure we are all okay and can do our job. In my team it has worked fine, our team leader has been great. But I think it is more difficult now for them (Customer support)

As that sense of unity is considered important for both the culture and the corporate identity, many wanted to get back to that. Especially those who had not worked for either of the companies for that long before the pandemic, those with more experience on the other hand were less impacted by this overall. At one of the companies it was common knowledge that their employer wanted people back at the office, but by their own choice, not by mandate. In order to achieve this, there was a lot of focus from the employer's side to attract people back to the office, through happenings and breakfast. The employer has even initiated a remodelling of the offices to facilitate more social areas, recognising that many at the company return to the office for that reason rather than having the need to due to their work duties. Upon returning to the office, some of the interviewees from both companies stated that working from home has changed their tolerance, the noise was increasingly more disturbing and it has become harder to focus from the office compared to prior to the pandemic. Some of the interviewees went as far as stating that their work station was superior at home, not seeing any reason to go to the office besides meeting their coworkers.

I have worse conditions at the office, my desk, my screens and my keyboard are better at home. I really don't get much out of the office, work-related that is. If there is something special happening, it is better to just book that day (Developer)

For many, increased freedom was important, it could ensure that they could balance their time to receive the benefits of working from the office and working from home. For most of the interviewees, the main benefit of going back to the office was the social dimension, regardless of whether they intended to work full time at the office or not. However, it was far more common, with a majority of the interviewees wanting to work a couple of days at the office and the rest from home in order to gain the benefits of both.

Discussion

The discussion chapter is ordered in terms of the three parts of the spatial triad to be able to understand how the transition between the different work models has impacted their

respective parts. This structure was used to be able to reach an understanding of how the meaning of the office space has changed as a result of the pandemic. The shift to working from home marked the entry into a new conceived space, which previously had remained private and a separation from the environment designed for work. This was facilitated by technological advances in order to be able to move practices from the office into the home environment, in order to make it possible to work from home. Upon returning to the office, and the implementation of hybrid work models, an extension of the conceived space occurred, in which the office and the employees' home environments were combined. This entirely new conceived space also gave rise to a new practice, as the employees can choose from where they work, which marked a change in routines compared to before the pandemic.

Conceived space

For both of the companies, working from home was a notion that was nearly unthinkable before the pandemic, as it was always clear that working was always done in the office. However, whilst the vast majority of interviewees held such a belief, there were a few employees who had the opportunity to work from home, but only through being granted such opportunity, often due to special circumstances. It was clear that the company agenda had etched the notion of work as synonymous with being at the office. In terms of the spatial triad, this could be attributed to the conceived space, namely the space that is purposely designed and shaped by those in power (Delaisse et al, 2020; Watkins, 2005). Along these lines, the company, and its management, have purposely, and over time created the notion that work is done at the office. This can be seen in the working culture at both companies, that working from home was not something that was encouraged, and was almost viewed as taboo most of the time by the interviewees.

The shift from working from the office to working from home was a big change for the two companies. Neither company had the ambition to work from home prior to the pandemic, as such they had not developed a VPN solution that was available for all employees, but rather only a few. As such, the dramatic and abrupt changes to the routines that occurred when moving to home-based offices were not supported by technological capabilities early on in the pandemic. However, both companies prioritised implementing technical solutions that would support home-based offices, which in turn were quickly implemented. As the technology became further developed, it moved from a constraint to an affordance, allowing actions that had previously not been possible, which allowed people to work from home (Leonardi, 2011), we will refer to this stage as imbrication one. By using Leonardi's (2011) theories on the process of imbrication, it is possible to see how the entities change in the spatial triad over time, inviting a processual perspective. However, the technological developments and the actions they made available through the technology could not substitute social interactions. The introduction of technological affordances was necessary in order to facilitate home-based offices, and as such, the technology became an even more important part of the conceived space of the two companies than it had previously been.

Many of the interviewees were reluctant to work from home, which could be explained through this not being a direct change in the pre-existing conceived space, but instead an entry into an entirely new one, there now existed two conceived spaces, firstly, that

of the office which was designed for work by the two companies. Secondly, the conceived space of the employees' respective home environments, where they were those in power, designers of their own space. This means that the shift to working from home was more than merely a shift in physical setting, but rather an intrusion into a conceived space that previously belonged to the employees, but was now to be at least partly commandeered by the two companies. This constituted a change, as routines that were designed for a space designated for work had to be transferred to a new physical setting, which was not designed for that purpose. The homes of the employees were not necessarily designed to house a private office and areas in which meetings could be conducted, but rather for living and not working (Delaisse et al, 2020).

The commandeering of the employees' own conceived space also introduced it to potential changes, as a space where work had not been considered important now became essential to consider, and new actions and behaviours within that space were introduced (Delaisse et al, 2020; Toro & Navarrete-Hernandez, 2021). As such, the change to working from home caused the employees to reconsider the designed structure of their homes, and became forced to adapt it to some degree to ensure they had access to a good working environment. This could be understood through the importance of setups, i.e chairs and tables etc, in the new home offices affecting employees working from home. The home offices and their importance was an almost entirely new phenomenon for many, as it was a function they had previously never required within their own conceived space, however, when working from home these functions became essential. Consequently, the company's offer regarding office supplies can be seen as an attempt to mitigate these effects on the conceived space and the effects that it would have on their employees, facilitating their transition to home offices (Delaisse et al, 2020).

Furthermore, the move into the new conceived space also affected how the employees behaved and acted in the new physical setting. As people started to work from home, symbols, such as signs and the environment itself that represented the office space were removed and replaced with the employee's home environments (Delaisse et al, 2020). An outcome of this was that the co-workers changed their behaviour, they took fewer breaks and became more efficient, private and professional time became more intertwined and their view of what the office needed to be changed. Moreover, with the physically separate environments that each employee now found themselves in, the task of coordinating, monitoring well-being, and leading each team became increasingly difficult. At one of the companies, in particular, many of the interviewees reported that the team leaders became more important than ever, and they became integral to retaining some form of structure, and as such, they became an important part of the structure while working within this new conceived space. Furthermore, over the long time in which the employee's own conceived space had to be commandeered, there occurred minglings between the old conceived space and the new one. Despite not having returned to the office new structures were being formed, and over time they became increasingly accepted as the employees became increasingly accustomed to the new structure, which unless challenged through the lived space potentially could lead to an increase in its durability according to Delaisse et al (2020).

As the hybrid model was implemented, it was no longer necessary to work solely from home anymore. However, neither of the companies is currently exploring going back to

the office full time, instead, they are implementing hybrid models. At the two companies, the hybrid models differ slightly, with one to a couple of days at the week requiring them to work from the office, with the remaining days being up to the discretion of the employees. The return to the office with the option to work from home means that the separate conceived space no longer mingles but becomes one extended conceived space, in which they have the flexibility to determine from where they work. Within this new extended conceived space new capabilities are borrowed from the two separate physical settings, the office, and the home, and added into the extended conceived space. This is something that was not possible within the old conceived space. These two separate physical settings have different characteristics and as such can bring different benefits. For example, this new extended conceived space enables employees to choose their working environment depending on the task they have to perform, for some tasks the collaborative environment of the office may be important. Contrarily, some tasks might benefit from the quiet and focused environment of the home.

As all interviewees agreed about not wishing to forfeit what they have gained with this extended conceived space, they are actually challenging the old conceived space, simply through the realisation that the office is no longer the only place in which they can be efficient and productive at their work. Delaisse et al (2020) state that challenging the conceived space forces it to change, the implementation of the hybrid models themselves being a sign of that. This new extended conceived space is rather fluid, where those in power no longer can determine exactly where to work, but rather how often the employees can choose where they work. Consequently, it can be said that there has been a shift in the way the conceived space can exert its dominance (Delaisse et al, 2020; Leonardi, 2011).

Spatial practices

When discussing the conceived space, it is thus natural to extend the discussion towards the practices that are utilised in the conceived space, i.e spatial practices (Delaisse et al 2020). As there is inherent reciprocity between these two concepts, the conceived space, being the dominant space, constantly influences how spatial practices and roles within the space are performed. Before the pandemic, the spatial practices that were an integral part of work were derived from communicative practices between co-workers, as work was organised to be performed in teams. Whilst there were technological communication methods present at all times, instant messaging and emails, the most prevalent practices were organic and spontaneous communication. These practices became derivatives of the conceived space due to the proximity and social milieu, being able to overhear or partake in conversations either in the office or during hallway chatter, coffee breaks, leisure activities, or business trips. A fact emphasised by participants as they described that when facing a conundrum or having questions regarding work, one simply tapped on the shoulder of someone close by to ask for help or they simply overheard a solution to their problems. This spontaneous communicative practice was however experienced as a double-edged sword. It was a process of knowledge sharing for the inquirer, but it created more work for the respondent as it took up their time answering questions. It is important to note that these spatial practices emerged as a result of physically working at the office, as co-workers navigated the conceived space (Toro and Navarette-Hernandez, 2021).

As the conceived space is the dominant space, changes within it directly affect the spatial practices used to navigate it (Toro and Navarette-Hernandez (2021)). The shift from working at the office to working from home, therefore also constituted a massive shift in routine as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Where the dramatic and abrupt changes to the routines that occurred when moving to home-based offices were not supported by technological capabilities early on in the pandemic. This meant that the technology served as a constraint (Leonardi, 2011). However, despite the technology being a constraint early on in the pandemic, both companies prioritised implementing technical solutions that would support home-based offices, which later also were quickly implemented. As the technology became further developed, it moved from a constraint to an affordance, by transferring spatial practices from the office to the home environment, enabling actions that had previously not been possible. This initiated further changes in the routines, i.e working from home, and a new infrastructure started to form, i.e the first stage of imbrication as earlier mentioned.

The infrastructure of an organisation is according to Leonardi (2011) produced through a process of imbrication of both routines and technology, meaning that imbrication one (see figure 2) was formed when the technology moved from a constraint to an affordance, allowing for work practices to be performed at home. The effect of the transition to work from home was that the physical separation disappeared as the private and professional milieus became intertwined. Thus, transferring spatial practices from the office into the employees' homes, as these spatial practices were vital to carry out their work responsibilities for the home office to work. How individual work responsibilities were carried out however was largely unaltered, as these were enabled by the technological affordance of using a VPN, thus having the same technological tools at home as in the office. However, at both the companies it became apparent that physical social interaction was an important element in many spatial practices that were forced into the employees' homes. Whilst the isolation brought fewer disturbances which contributed to an increased focus and efficiency, it also did not enable the spontaneous communicative practices that used to occur in the office. Consequently, one of the companies, therefore, created new routines as a result, daily morning check-ups to monitor the well-being of employees, but also virtualised social activities such as coffee breaks, after work, breakfasts, and monthly meetings. These new routines provided a way to bring back the social element found in the office, but they also enabled new individual freedom. Where priorly employees had to physically attend to those interactions, but in the virtual setting many found themselves participating and simultaneously doing other things, such as taking care of their children, exercising, or cleaning. The increased flexibility made it easier to balance private and professional responsibilities as the proficiency in incorporating spatial practices from the office into the home milieu increased over time. Through the usage of routines and behaviour, it is possible to escape from technological determinism, which is evident as routines and behaviour had to become adapted to the new environment, not only amenable through technological implementations (Petani & Mengis, 2021).

When upon returning to the office, there was a reluctance to let go of the affordance found when working from home, namely the flexibility. It is important to note that by performing the act of returning to the office in part, the employees were engaging in a new routine through the use of a hybrid model, i.e a new imbrication, imbrication two (see figure

2). As the hybrid work model was created, a new spatial practice emerged as a way to navigate the extended conceived space (Delaisse et al, 2020; Toro and Navarette-Hernandez, 2021). As both companies' work models only posit a minimum requirement for the number of days being spent at the office. It does not disclose which days co-workers were to attend the office. As a result, it is up to the co-workers and teams to select the space that fits the purpose of work and the individual who performs it. Thus resulting in a new routine, the selectivity of space, enabling coworkers in the hybrid model to combine the flexibility of working from home and the social dimension only found at the office. Therefore, integrating the old conceived space, i.e the office, and the new conceived space, coworkers' homes, into an extended conceived space housing each respective affordances within the same space. What resulted through these changes, in terms of both technological advances and routines, mainly the selectivity of space, was that employees received more control over their extended conceived space, as they could more freely alter their schedule and location to fit their and their company's needs. However, it is important to note that this is a new process of developing new spatial practices for both companies, a practice of trial and error, improvisation, and adaptation. With it being a process, it is important to remember that the current iterations of hybrid work may not be the final product. As these new dynamics have not settled, the durability (Delaisse et al, 2020) of the new structure is for time to tell.

Lived space

Prior to the pandemic, most of the interviewees viewed the office as a space mainly for carrying out work duties. Although the office was imbued with social interactions due to the proximity with co-workers through meetings and other collaborative activities the interviewees did not view the office as important as a social space, at least not according to their experiences at the time. No longer working at the office had dramatic effects on the social dimension of the workplace. When removed from the physical office nearly all organic social interaction ceased and despite increased digital interactions working from home could not fulfil the social needs of most of the interviewees. As a result of this, a change in the lived space occurred, many interviewees that had previously referred to the physical office as mainly a place of business started to talk about the physical office space in terms of a place for social interactions. As it was no longer allowed for the employees to be physically present, social activities became inaccessible as well. As mentioned, there were attempts at virtual social activities and interaction, however, they did not satisfy the social need for the majority of the interviewees at both of the companies. As a result of moving into the employees' conceived space and the changes in spatial practices a change in meaning started to take place within the lived space, which meant that instead of the office being viewed mainly as a place of work, a new appreciation for the social dimension was apparent among the interviewees, as it was perhaps previously taken for granted by some and discovered by some for the first time (Delaisse et al, 2020; Toro & Navarette-Hernandez, 2021).

Early on in the pandemic, many struggled with feelings of loneliness and isolation while still enjoying many of the perks that working from home brought. Bringing in spatial practices from the office into the employees' conceived space created turmoil which caused distress for some of the interviewees. This distress could be explained through the lived space as each employee had assigned their own meaning to their home environments, which

became contradicted when that environment was commandeered by their work. The reason for the different meanings in the lived space between the office and the home environment lies partly in the designs of these spaces but mainly within the experiences from the two different physical settings. Furthermore, as it was no longer possible to work from the office the employees were separated from the space which according to their experiences was meant for work. This meant that a re-evaluation of the meaning of the home environment within their lived space was forced upon the employees, as it now became a space for work as well. The feelings of loneliness and isolation also contributed to a decreased sense of unity, especially among members of different teams within the two companies. This was especially prominent within one of the companies, where many of the interviewees stressed the importance of the team leaders to remedy this. Despite practices such as daily check-ups within one of the companies many of the interviewees experienced an increased need to plan their interactions, which served as a barrier (Delaisse et al, 2020). Consequently, working from home served as a constraint, as it could not, despite new technological capabilities, facilitate social interaction between employees at the company (Leonardi, 2011).

However, as time went on, the hybrid work model became implemented within the two companies, and the employees' own conceived space was no longer commandeered but rather combined with the conceived space of the office, moving from two conceived spaces into one extended conceived space. The extended conceived space introduced as mentioned in the section above, the practice of selectivity of space which allowed the employees to return to the office and work with the social condition they now experienced fulfilled, while simultaneously retaining the benefits of previous technological affordances. As such, the latest stage of imbrication, imbrication two (see figure 2), the hybrid work model, managed to remove the constraints regarding the social from the previous stage of imbrication (Leonardi, 2011). Furthermore, imbrication two also removed the forced re-evaluation of the home environment, as it no longer was essential to consider it a place of work, instead it became optional. However, this does not necessarily mean a return to the previous meaning of the home environment within the lived space, but rather that the home environment becomes a space in which they can perform certain tasks, but perhaps not all tasks. For example, many of the interviewees wanted to perform collaborative tasks such as meetings at the office, while performing tasks where they need to focus and concentrate away from the office. As such, the meaning that the employees assigned to both the office and the home environment can be task-dependent. However, the meaning of the home environment has nonetheless changed, as it is now partly for work for most (Delaisse et al, 2020).

Furthermore, as the hybrid work model was starting to be implemented at the two companies, a new acceptance and appreciation for their new working conditions and the selectivity of space had emerged. As Delaisse et al (2020) states that the lived space can either increase or decrease its durability depending on whether it accepts the structure. Although certainly challenging, most, but not all of the interviewees over time grew to accept the changes which increased the durability of the structure, meaning the extended conceived space and the spatial practices. An important part of this was that despite blurring lines between private and professional life a majority of the interviewees experienced increased flexibility, within both the private and professional life. As mentioned, this flexibility became essential for some of the interviewees even, as some felt their capacities as parents increased

for example, or simply managing the everyday puzzles. As the interviewees grew to accept the changes that occurred, the new infrastructure that was starting to form due to the process of imbrication was becoming more stable (Leonardi, 2011).

However, many of the interviewees experienced an initial reluctance in going back to the office, despite many reporting that the social aspects were something that they missed. This means that when technology made it possible to work from home a social affordance was created, in the form of increased flexibility, a form of focus and efficiency the interviewees had not experienced in their workplace before. As such, the changes that have happened within the lived space, i.e the meanings that are assigned to a particular space would challenge the structures that existed before the pandemic (Leonardi, 2011; Delaisse et al, 2020; Toro & Navarette-Hernandez, 2021). What could ultimately be said about the present imbrication, and as pointed out by some interviewees, is that the current model, in view of working, is the best of both worlds. Whilst some constraints are placed, where some employees are reluctant to return to the office due to the comforts of working from home. In contrast, there are also those who, when working from home, experience that social dimensions are stifled when working from home. Being able to develop new routines is of the essence, which encapsulates these constraints in a good manner. This is however a question of future imbrications, which is presently unknown.

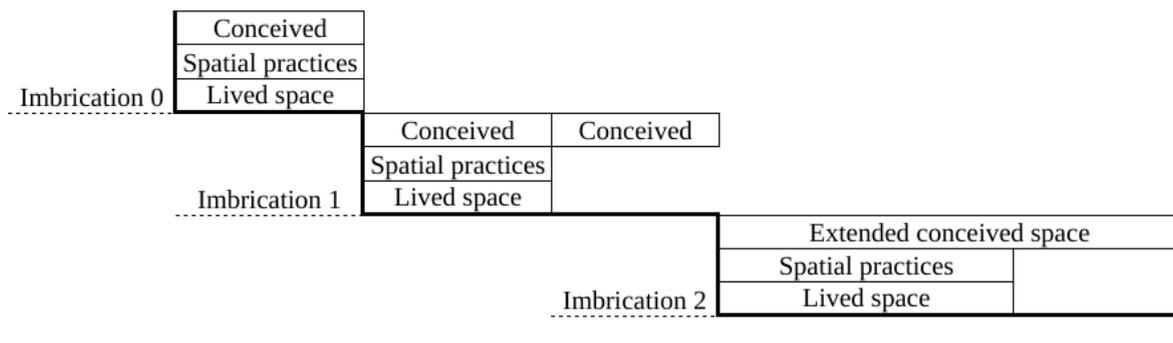


Figure 2: Spatial imbrications

Conclusion

This qualitative study set out to examine how the meaning of the office space has changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Where interviews were conducted to collect data from two Swedish software companies that made substantial alterations to their workspaces throughout the pandemic, with a seemingly low interference upon their operational capabilities.

When examining how coworkers saw the office space before the pandemic, the results were very consistent with Baldry (1997), where the meaning of the office was highly entwined with the notion of work. However, when the pandemic restrictions were imposed, a new conceived space was entered, when working from home. New structures emerged in both companies, as the old structures, i.e imbrications, were not sufficient to support the new conceived space. Consequently, both technology and routines had to change, to create a new

infrastructure to be able to work from home. This was made possible, firstly by implementing a VPN solution, available for all employees, a technological change that enabled work responsibilities to be performed remotely.

Secondly, many routines and social interactions had to be adjusted to fit the new conceived space, whereupon a full virtualisation of many activities occurred, to maintain the social elements of the workplace whilst working in the isolated environment at home. Thus, through the process of imbrication, changing both routines and technology, the imbalances that occurred in the triad as a result of the new conceived space, created a new equilibrium that rebalanced the three interconnected parts. These emerged as a result of the lived space not accepting the new structures in full, where many felt a lack of unity and belonging. As many employees were not faring well without the social elements present in the office, suspectedly as they originated from an open office space (Colenberg et al, 2021). In difference from before the pandemic, the experiences and sentiment of the office had begun to alter amongst employees, to instead view the office in a more social light. Something that was previously taken for granted, and as earlier mentioned, created subsequent tensions in the lived space as a result. But also the notion that work could only be performed at the office, which in actuality could be performed at home with a rather small interference on the performative outcome. Lessening the importance of the office when put against the notion of professional life, but perhaps extending the importance of the office in the private life, as the office was imperative for many for their social needs.

When upon, attempts to return to the office were made, the infrastructure that had been built around the newly conceived space at home manifested as a reluctance to return to the office. As working from home gave many an increased flexibility and comfortability between work and private life, employees had thus received more power over their conceived space. Consequently, these affordances that were created resulted in a reluctance to return to the old structure that was in place before the pandemic. However, whilst there was an appreciation to return to the social atmosphere of the office, the flexibility and comfortability in the lived space were highly valued. Instead, a hybrid model was implemented, where instead of having two separate conceived spaces, the hybrid model instead created an extended conceived space, which combines both the office space and employees' home environment. A new imbrication emerged, guided by a new spatial practice, the selectivity of space, which enabled employees to be selective in terms of their office space, with only a minimum set of days per week needed to be spent at the office. This created a routine where employees choose to spend days at the office in coordination with the rest of the team, but also in view of the work tasks that needed to be performed. Further, to be able to select the space that suited the needs of the company and the employees, gave the employees more power over the conceived space than before. Where one space could be utilised for intensive and focused work, the home environment, where the office could be used in view of social and collaborative activities. The new structure was experienced as the best of both worlds, where the new structure became accepted as a result of encapsulating the affordances found in each environment into one infrastructure. As a result, through another process of imbrication, the spatial triad found a new equilibrium. Where employees could partake in the social atmosphere of the office space whilst being able to have the control to choose the space that suits their work responsibilities, clearly an advantage of venturing further into the digital

workplace (Attaran et al, 2019). It is clear that the office is experienced as more than simply a space for working. It is a space imbued by sociality, where employees selectively gather to build and nurture private and professional bonds. Where collaborative work activities can be emphasised and carried out, without suffering the cost of inefficiencies in terms of the individual work that requires an adamant focus.

The theoretical contributions from this thesis can be summarised and presented in three key findings. Firstly, the theoretical implications of the research can mainly be seen in the applicability of the theoretical disposition of imbrications (Leonardi, 2011), to the spatial triad (Delaisse et al, 2020). Where it seemingly can be used as an explanatory element to changes in the spatial triad. Where new imbrications arise as a result of an imbalance in the spatial triad, striving to create a new equilibrium between the components in the triad. Consequently, this also creates practical implications where these models can be used for analytical purposes regarding change efforts, where deficiencies in any component can be analysed and met with alterations to the infrastructure, i.e the routines and technology, to reach a new equilibrium which satisfies all the three parts of the spatial triad. Thus, the models used conjointly, could both be applicable before a change process as a guiding framework, or as a post-change evaluative tool.

Secondly, the use of imbrication conjointly with the spatial triad emphasises the importance of technology, as it is an essential part of hybrid work. However, by combining it with the spatial triad we can, more importantly, include technology without being prone to technological determinism (Petani & Mengis, 2021). By incorporating technology into the spatial triad through imbrications, be it as a spatial practice or as a component in the infrastructure of the conceived space, it renders technology to not dictate how the spatial triad is configured in its entirety. As it is not important whether the technology exists but rather how said technology is incorporated into the workplace and used by its employees. This was discernible when the companies constructed the conceived space for working remotely. Indeed, how the technology was incorporated enabled the transition, but the success of transitioning to work remotely was achieved through also altering the surrounding routines.

Thirdly, through the utilisation of spatial practices, it is possible to extend the notion of conceived space to encompass other milieus with other distinct characteristics. As exemplified in the research, the home environment and the office space, through a change to the routine and technology, enabled these two separate conceived spaces to merge into an extended conceived space. Thus, also merging their respective characteristics and the affordances they provide to act as one larger space. This would not have been possible without the selectivity of space, as the two milieus would have been separate, either employees would work from home or from the office, thus abiding to the governing respective characteristics of the employed space.

For the rigidity of such claims, future research should be primed towards, firstly, investigating whether a change process guided by this framework would in actuality benefit said change. This is also applicable when approaching the framework for evaluative purposes, where research could be done to investigate whether utilising the model facilitates said efforts. Secondly, more research should also be conducted to further confirm that the inclusion of technology in the spatial triad minimises the risk of technological determinism. Where routines and behaviour are not overlooked when examining space in the presence of

technological changes. Lastly, for the notion of an extended conceived space, future research should be primed to verify the existence and requirements of the phenomenon, to further strengthen the concept.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Spatial imbrications

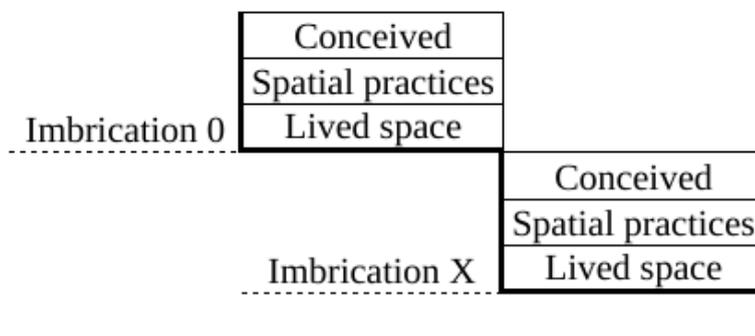


Figure 1: Spatial imbrications

Figure 2: Spatial imbrications

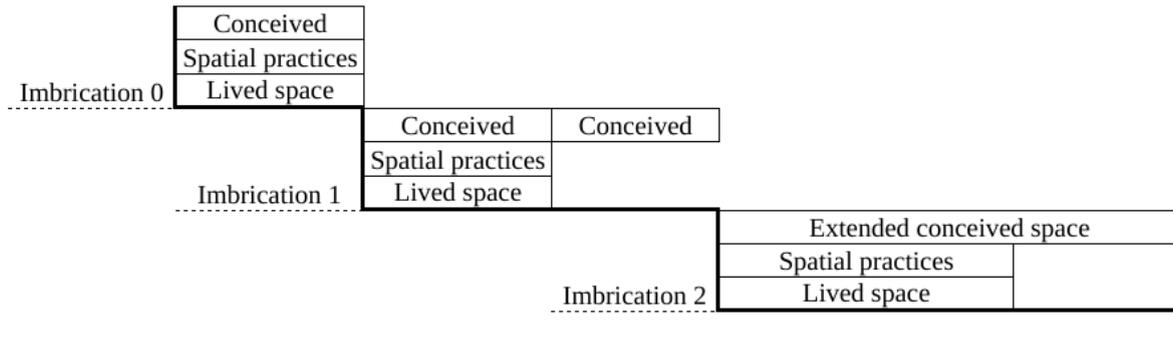


Figure 2: Spatial imbrications

Appendix 1: Interview guide

Interview guide

Introduction

1. Please tell us about yourself, your position and what you do
2. How long have you been working at the company?
3. Potential probing questions.....

Prior to the pandemic

Space

1. Could you describe a normal work day?
 - a. Did you have an open workplace in terms of space or where you actually sat?
 - b. How did you traverse through the office during your day?
2. How much of your work was positioned at the office before the pandemic?
3. Did you experience a need to be physically present at the office in order to perform your work, perhaps from a practical point of view or a corporate point of view?

Work Practices

4. Could you describe your work routines on a normal day at the office?
5. How often did you bring your work home with you?
6. How much freedom did you feel in terms of managing where you worked and how you worked?

Social

7. Could you describe how you normally socialised?
 - a. Was there a lot of activities, if yes, what type of activities?

Communication

8. How did you go about communicating with your co-workers?

Well-being

9. Could you describe what the office meant to you?

After Covid-19 restrictions

Space

1. Could you describe a normal work day?
2. Could you describe your work station at home?
 - a. Did you miss anything in your home office?

Work practices

3. How did your working situation change when the pandemic struck Sweden?
4. Could you describe your work routines on a normal day?
 - a. Were there any major changes in the way you performed your work duties, if so, how?
5. Did you feel like you were a part of developing new routines?

Social

6. Could you describe how you normally socialised, what changed?
 - a. How did that impact you?

Communication

7. How did you go about communicating with your co-workers?
 - a. Was there any changes to how you communicated with your colleagues regarding work, if so, how?
 - b. What methods did you use for communication and how was the experience?
 - c. Was it more difficult to get in touch with people, how did you go about it?
 - d. How did that impact you?

Well-being

8. Could you describe how not being at the office affected you?
 - a. How did this affect you in terms of stress, anxiety etc?
 - b. Was there anything special that you missed from the office?

Current situation - Hybrid model

Spaces

1. Could you describe a normal work day?
 - a. How do you split your time working at the office and from home?
2. How do you feel about your work going forward, do you have a preference for home work or being at the office?
 - a. How would you ideally like to work?

Work practices

3. Could you describe your work routines on a normal day now?
 - a. What has been the biggest change, in relation to the beginning of the restrictions?

Social

4. Can you describe how you normally socialise, what has changed?
 - a. Is there anything you miss?

Communication

5. How do you go about communicating with your co-workers now?
 - a. Can you describe if these changes have impacted you in any way?

Well-being

6. Can you describe how you feel about going back to the office?
7. Can you describe what the office means to you now?