BLURRING BOUNDARIES:
SOCIO-SPATIAL CONSEQUENCES OF WORKING AT HOME

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ABSTRACT

This report looks at a cross-section of professional homeworkers in various occupations, both self-employed and corporate-employed. It identifies patterns of divergent activities within the home, assesses the success or hinderance in accommodating multiple roles in the same place, and identifies facility requirements to support home working.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESEARCH PURPOSE

When multiple, divergent activities (i.e. childcare, leisure, domestic work, professional work) occur in the same space, changes in the structure of homes and neighborhoods, and in living and work patterns, may occur to accommodate those activities. Identifying these patterns, and assessing their success or hindrance in accommodating multiple roles in the same place is the purpose of this study.

STUDY SAMPLE

This study is a cross-sectional survey design consisting of self-administered questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, a modified time diary, and photographs, sketches, and a physical inventory of the home and workspace of 104 professional homeworkers in various occupations. Both self-employed and corporate-employed homeworkers were interviewed. On average, these homeworkers spend 40 hours a week at home working.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS

Besides working day hours, a considerable number of homeworkers work night and early morning hours. Almost half of this sample work (especially those individuals who live alone) sometime between 9:00 p.m. and midnight. Almost 15% work sometime between midnight and 6:00 a.m. These late-night work hours are one way to adjust to other family members’ schedules. But they also reflect people’s personal work styles, accessibility to cheaper computer connect-time and phone rates, and long working days.

Facilities and services instrumental to work tasks, such as the post office and copy center, take on added importance as neighborhood amenities. Ambient neighborhood qualities such as privacy, quietness, view, and places to walk, also gain importance. People now spend more time in their neighborhoods. They need services which are amenable to their work, but they also want their neighborhoods to be pleasant places to view, to walk in, and to impress clients.

Homeworkers are not likely to notice strangers on the street. They are only moderately attentive to what is happening on their block or in their building while they are working. Usually homeworkers are absorbed in their work and keep blinds and curtains closed because of glare problems. These work patterns do not support on-going street surveillance.
For existing workspaces, people typically choose those spaces which were available. These are generally spare bedrooms and basements although homeworkers also convert family rooms, living rooms, and dining rooms into offices.

The major problems with existing workspaces are temperature, electrical outlets and circuits, lighting, insufficient storage and inadequate size.

In an ideal home, the bathroom and front entry would be close to the workspace. Rooms in which noise is frequently produced (e.g. TV room, den) and bedrooms are preferred in distant locations from the workspace. Bedrooms are desired to be distant so that printer noise does not disturb sleeping household members. But also, they reflect a "private" area of the home which should be separate from the more "public" workspace.

A desire for view from the workspace is often expressed. Typically homeworkers want an expansive, landscaped view of the outdoors so they do not feel confined and are able to momentarily mentally "disconnect" from their work. A few people want a view from the workspace into relatively vacant rooms or corridors, again to allow feelings of distancing and extension.

Homeworkers want a separate room in the home for their workspace but they do not want a separate detached structure.

Most homeworkers in this sample have work rooms used exclusively for their work. In those workspaces which are in a room with other functions, there have been few physical boundaries erected. Typically, in these shared rooms, the arrangement of the furniture is all that differentiates the workspace from other activity functions of the room.

Many types of business equipment are located in home workspaces. There are a high percentage of homes with computers, printers and answering machines. Almost half of the homeworkers in this sample also had a modem and a business phone line. One-quarter had their own copy machines.

Over half of this sample at some time have clients, business partners, or employees in their homes. This work characteristic has noticeable impact on how people feel about their homes and what they prefer in an ideal home workspace.

Homeworkers use multiple spaces in the home for their work. In this study 72% do. Besides the primary workspaces, they use dining rooms, living rooms and kitchens. Use of other areas for work does not necessarily reflect the inadequacy of their current workspaces, but preferences to get out of the workspaces on occasion. In some cases people would like to work outside. If they could move their computers outdoors in good weather, they probably would.
The meaning of home has changed for many of these homeworkers. For some, home has lost its refuge nature and acquired more of a confining or isolating one. They adjust to this by getting out of their homes regularly. For others, the workspace becomes a refuge within the home. The home might assume a professional identification, which is both liked and disliked. For others, the home identifies them with a strong and undesirable domestic image. In addition, people become much more aware of the space and order of their homes, and often respond to this by remodeling and more frequent housecleaning.
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And finally this report would never have been completed without my dining room table!
There's No Place Like Home.

There's No Place Like Home....

Where do we eat lunch today, Frank?
The Executive.

I'll be wanting to see that report before you leave tonight, honey.

There's No Place Like The Office.

There's No Place Like The Office.