1

Putting Work in Its Place

In a small New England town, Quentin, a software designer, finishes breakfast at home and then walks across a courtyard to his office – one of eight located in the community centre’s two-storey office wing of a new co-housing community. His office is revolutionary in concept but ordinary in appearance. Some 4,000 kilometres separate his workspace from his employer’s head office. But more important is the short distance separating the family’s home from Quentin’s office. That separation – the equivalent of one city block between the home he shares with his wife and young child and his workspace – helps him to balance his employment and his family roles. Having the on-site office saves the time he would ordinarily spend commuting, thereby extending his family time. In his words, “Commuting ... is kind of draining ... it takes lots of energy. Being able to eat lunch at home is an extra five hours of family time in a week.” The physical separation of his workplace from his home protects his work from interruption, but that boundary also helps him to keep his work from overtaking all of his waking hours.

In a downtown neighbourhood of a large Canadian city, Ursula, a fundraising consultant to non-profit organizations, has only to cross a busy avenue to reach her office workspace on the third floor of a century-old foundry building. Developed as a partnership between a neighbourhood community centre and the local business improvement association, the facility is a business “incubator” created to nourish small and fledgling enterprises. The space supports some thirty-five such small businesses. Virtually all of the tenants, like Ursula, live in the neighbourhood, close to the office building. They work in a wide range of industries, including multimedia design, organizational consulting, and software development. The individual workstations are furnished comfortably and provide access to basic office infrastructure equipment and services. Only the pool table in the common area beside the meeting room
makes the environment look other than typically businesslike. According to Ursula, the office environment is characterized by creative energy. Far from being a nine-to-five culture, there is activity at the foundry office space all hours of the day, and all days of the week. For Ursula, it is a safe and convenient environment in which her business is thriving. She has even taken on a business partner – a development that can easily be accommodated within this flexible workplace.

Quentin’s and Ursula’s workspaces are two versions of the co-workplace, a new concept that combines private workspaces close to home with shared facilities and services. An alternative to the home office, the co-workplace allows people to work independently while being linked electronically to their colleagues, supervisors, clients, and databases. It addresses the particular needs of a growing number of teleworkers – those who work outside a corporate office, facilitated by telecommunication technologies. It offers the flexibility and convenience of home-based work without the isolation that can characterize it. Located near home, but beyond its front door, a co-workplace offers significant savings in commuting time. By separating the workplace from the home, the co-workplace avoids the dual risks of homeworking: working too little due to interference from non-work activities and working too much, or “workaholism.”

The co-workplace is a term coined to describe a local, neighbourhood-based centre to support collective telework. It is a facility that incorporates components of the telework centre and the business incubator. A telework centre (also known as a telecentre or telecommuting centre) is a telecommunications-equipped work environment combining individual workstations with shared facilities and equipment. A telecentre can accommodate employees of various companies or employers, or it can be a decentralized or satellite office for employees of one employer. Business incubators, on the other hand, are designed to support fledgling enterprises by providing workspaces, equipment, training, technical support, networking opportunities, and other needed services. While telework centres and incubators can take a variety of forms, there are currently few examples of such facilities incorporated into residential environments.

The co-workplace’s proximity to the homes of its users, as exemplified by Quentin’s and Ursula’s short journeys to work, is an essential characteristic. Located within a residential neighbourhood, a co-workplace combines the convenience of home with the resources of a central office. It provides a workspace that is easily accessible, secure, and supported by up-to-date equipment and furnishings. The
Putting Work in Its Place

co-workplace concept is made feasible by the recent advances in telecommunications technology that enable increasing numbers of jobs to be done away from a central office.

Who is likely to locate an office in this new co-workplace? The early adopters of the co-workplace option have generally been professional workers, many of them self-employed. A review of both historical trends in home-based work and recent attitudinal survey data on preferences for teleworking suggest that factors of gender, family life cycle stage, and occupation all affect the choice to work from home. Women, particularly those with young children, are likely candidates for the co-workplace. A recent survey of almost 600 municipal employees in a southern California municipality found that women were more likely than men to rate the advantages of teleworking highly. Family-related and stress reduction factors were more likely to motivate women than men to opt to telework. Workers in clerical and administrative occupations were more likely than professional and managerial employees to identify the family-related and personal benefits of teleworking (Mokhtarian, Bagley, and Salomon 1998). Although Quentin and Ursula and other professional workers have been among the first to experiment with co-workplace telework arrangements, the co-workplace is a concept that can support decentralized work by many other types of workers, including industrial and clerical homeworkers. Particularly when located close to family support services like child care, the co-workplace can make telework a supportive work option for teleworking parents of young children. The co-workplace is particularly well suited to the needs of women struggling to balance their employment and their family responsibilities.

Of course, not all teleworkers suffer with the co-location of home and workplace – nor are all teleworkers candidates for the co-workplace. Indeed, home-based telework is a popular work option for many, and many more would welcome the opportunity to telework from home. The convenience, comfort, and opportunity to escape the interruptions characteristic of central office workplaces make many teleworkers enthusiastic supporters of home-based work. Many teleworkers and their managers find that the home workplace increases productivity and morale. For some, however, the co-location represents a source of stress. A co-workplace has the potential to reduce that stress.

The co-workplace is one response to the increasing tension between work and the personal lives of many North American workers. As technological innovation reinvents office and home, the boundaries between these two domains become blurred. For example, bringing additional
Putting Work in Its Place

Putting Work in Its Place

phone and data lines into the home may facilitate telework, but they may also expand work hours at the expense of time with family and leisure. Similarly, when office furniture and office functions move into the home, work activities take up space and time in what was previously understood to be a refuge.

Another example of blurred boundaries between work and family comes at the workplace program and policy level, where there are numerous examples of workplaces accommodating workers’ family obligations. While some of these, such as maternity- and paternity-leave programs and flexible work scheduling and job-sharing, may give employees more time away from work, others deliver family-related services directly from the workplace. For example, some employers provide information and referral services to help with family-related issues, and a minority of workplaces include on-site child-care services. Workers struggling to balance competing work and family demands may even benefit from workplace-based concierge services, one of which is aptly called “Get a Life,” that offer dry cleaning services, take-out meals, and other services. But such blurring of boundaries between work and non-work settings may make it more difficult, rather than easier, to keep work in its place. Rather than being family supports, some of these innovative alternative work arrangements and programs, telework included, may result in longer hours of work.

Discussions about the permeable boundaries of homework inevitably turn to the issues of pets and work attire, both of which figure prominently in the popular literature about the home-based work option. While boundaries between workplace and home may be increasingly permeable, pets belong clearly on the home side of the divide. They appear to represent companionship—an alternative to loneliness—without the demands made by young children. The issue about clothing concerns whether casually dressed workers take their work as seriously as their more formally dressed colleagues do. The underlying questions relate to how a work environment influences the work process. A recent survey of home-based teleworkers cited in Fast Company, a publication about the new economy’s impacts on work and life, reported: “One-third of American telecommuters say they work barefoot; 15 percent claim that they always wear shoes when they work ... nearly 50 percent of surveyed telecommuters prefer working with a pet dog or cat nearby; 10 percent report that they talk to their pets when they feel lonely” (Chadderdon 1998). Although cats may have limitations as supportive colleagues, there’s been no proof that a worker has to be wearing pantyhose or a tie in order to be productive. In fact, in a book aptly
titled Work Naked, management consultant Cynthia Froggatt (2001) argues against dress style, hours of work, or other traditional office constraints as influences on the productivity of home-based workers in the knowledge industry. These issues of productivity and traditional office constraints, and their relationship to the symbolic and structural boundaries between employment and the rest of life, are explored throughout my research too.

Quentin’s on-site office complex, described in the opening of this chapter, serves as a focal point for members of his co-housing community. Joint ventures, problem solving, and networking reinforce informal ties among neighbours. New forms of housing and emerging community-planning trends suggest that North Americans may have a renewed interest in strengthening local community ties. For example, subdivisions with a New Urbanist style typically feature dwellings built in close proximity to one another, with transition zones between public and private realms in the form of front porches and pedestrian pathways to promote social interaction among neighbours (Kunstler 1998). Co-housing developments are a more dramatic manifestation of this trend (Vizard 1997). Co-housing, a concept imported from Denmark first to the United States and subsequently to Canada, involves residents in the design and management of communities that combine private residences with shared community facilities (McCamant and Durrett 1993; Fromm 1991, 2000; Mawby 1996).

Writer Malcolm Gladwell (2000) makes the provocative suggestion that it is at the level of contemporary office design, rather than community planning, that we see the only really successful examples of the built environment contributing to a sense of community. Today’s employers, he writes, have an incentive to promote creative work, and advances in office design make it possible to create “diverse, vital spaces that foster creativity and serendipity” (60). According to Gladwell, all the best features that Jane Jacobs, the celebrated urbanist, described in the 1960s in her New York West Village neighbourhood – the features that made it a real community and a social environment – can be found in new office workplaces.

Common areas and facilities can have both symbolic and practical value in establishing a sense of community. Some designers of social housing and multi-family housing have considered ways to use the built environment to promote social interaction among neighbours. For example, common areas can serve as physical referents for the community ideal (Rodman and Cooper 1993). A quality housing environment can create a balance between the privacy needs of families and
individuals, and their need for community (Pearson 1993). A review of American housing initiatives quoted New York City architect Amie Gross on the importance of such a community/privacy balance: “One of the goals of good housing is creating a sense of community. But residents should be able to participate or not, as they please” (Pearson, 91).

According to some housing experts, interest in community is more typically a women’s issue. Swedish housing researcher Birgit Krantz (1990) examined what she terms that country’s “new generation” of models of collective housing, and observed how they provided “an alternative approach to living and work” (78) – an approach that she believes particularly relevant to the needs of women. “Feminine” values, Krantz believes, recognize people’s need for “daily social renewal” (78). Krantz felt that the built environment could support social interaction. She claims, “spatial closeness ... helps people to meet and organize; low-rise and high density as a characteristic of building configuration might support the idea of closeness more than widespread high-rise blocks of apartments” (79). While collective housing provides premises for common use, Krantz observes that such amenities could be provided in any kind of multiple housing form (79). A co-workplace fostering interaction among neighbours would be one such amenity.

While it is possible that just moving the workplace into the home will increase neighbourliness, there is disagreement in the telework literature about the community-level impact of the growing numbers of home-based workers. Some telework boosters claim that their presence increases the amount of social interaction because homeworkers patronize local businesses and meet with neighbours during daytime weekday hours (Flynn 1999). There are claims that, as homeworkers’ neighbourhoods stop being merely “bedroom communities” for commuters, those neighbourhoods will become safer by virtue of what Jane Jacobs calls more “eyes upon the street” (1961, 35). Based on a survey of some one hundred home-based workers, Ahrentzen describes how, in order to avoid feeling trapped at home, many homeworkers made sure they got outside daily for walks, runs, business meetings, or other “work breaks” in the neighbourhood. These homeworkers regularly used neighbourhood shops and services, including libraries, copy shops, and post offices as sources of social contacts (Ahrentzen 1997). Earlier research by Mackenzie, a feminist geographer, documented the ways female homeworkers – child-care and craft workers in small communities in British Columbia and Ontario – were “redesignating their neighbourhoods as workplaces, assessing the local and wider communities in terms of the demand for their product or service and in terms of facilities to assist
their work” (1986, 93). A contrary pattern is described by Gurstein (1995, 2001), whose surveys of Canadian homeworkers found no significant increase in their levels of neighbourhood interaction.

American urban planners Lois Goldman and Benjamin Goldman suggest that the development of telecentres in residential neighbourhoods would be one way to strengthen and support communities, particularly in low-income urban areas: “US telework centers offer access and the promise of community revitalization to economically isolated inner-city residents” (1998, 211). Although my interests here are not limited to telework centres, the co-workplace models examined in this book can serve as a catalyst for local community economic development in various contexts. As an incubator for small enterprises, the co-workplace can nurture start-up economic ventures with a network of supports and services from the local community.

The local economic development potential of neighbourhood telework centres extends beyond low-income areas. For example, the growing new media industry, while global in its product, tends to be quite local – and urban – in its production. This pattern was noted in a recent American study of labour market issues in the new information economy: “The New York new media professionals in this study (as well as those in Los Angeles and San Francisco) tend to live in neighborhoods close to where they work ... These patterns of behavior begin to tell something about the central importance of the local neighborhood, district, or city in the new information economy. The importance of places – such as New York’s Silicon Alley or San Francisco’s Multimedia Gulch – in an industry known for its ability to transcend space and time is one of its interesting ironies” (Batt et al. 2001, 45).

Landry (2000) makes a similar observation about the importance of locality on the basis of an international review of the best urban planning practices to encourage creative innovation. He concludes: “Even in a cyberworld there is the renewed importance of locality resting mostly on a set of ‘untraded’ interdependences ... that are built at local level leading to a combination of organizational, technological and individual learning that happens by agglomerating activities tightly in a location. Thus globalization and localization do not exclude each other” (140). Landry also stresses the importance of public facilities for encouraging creative processes in a city – particularly “creative spaces at affordable prices” (123). Providing local neighbourhood telecentres equipped with the required telecommunications infrastructure can be one way for local communities to foster the development of the growing new media industry.
Environmental benefits provide another incentive for bringing the workplace closer to workers’ residences. A co-workplace near home can result in reduced emissions from automobile commuting – particularly if workers can journey to their co-workplace on foot or by bicycle. As Gurstein (1996) notes, twentieth-century cities have been planned to separate home and work. Locating work near homes may contribute to the development of more liveable and sustainable communities.

This book examines home-based work through time. Beginning with an overview of historical and recent patterns of home-based work, it pays particular attention to the connections between gender and work at home, and examines both the positive and negative aspects of telework and other home-based work arrangements from the perspective of home-based workers. The project also reviews a variety of existing models of telework facilities, including satellite offices and telecentres, drawing lessons about their more and less successful aspects. The potential market for co-workplaces is discussed based on expressed views of workers in various work arrangements. While the co-workplace, per se, does not yet exist, various existing models can point the way; existing case studies form the basis for a new co-workplace model. The most successful aspects of these case studies are combined to plan six prototype models of co-workplaces. I also consider the steps and resources required to implement co-workplaces. (A description of the methods used in this research is included in Appendix A and copies of the research instruments appear in Appendix B.)

The Co-Workplace offers a critical examination of the social implications of home-based work arrangements. In considering the social impacts of the increase in home-based telework, I use the language of “officelessness” rather than the “alternative officing” label adopted by many advocates of flexible work. While this language indicates an approach to the subject different from that taken by telework boosters, this book does not reject the idea of the home as workplace. It addresses both the positive and the negative aspects of working outside the conventional office setting. A review of research on telework – including my own – indicates that many teleworkers find that working remotely increases their own control of work schedules and helps them to balance their work with the rest of their lives. This book presents a balanced view of work at home, describing its advantages and its risks, and investigating a community-based alternative intended to support its inherent strengths.