

History & Theory
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**Lost values
of the manual labor:**

**a reflection on the past material
condition through a spatial
experience of Olivetti-Underwood
Factory worker**

The dominant world economies have entered the phase in which the services and data manipulation to a large degree have replaced the manual work (Hardt, 2000). As the informatization and the offshoring of production overseas have continued, more and more people have experienced the shift from the physical labour to the immaterial work. The introduction of the industrial workers to the bureaucritized and informatized reality has continued to reduce their sense of autonomy but the general feeling of vagueness followed by this change is not related to the lack of control over the performed labour exclusively. The reflection on the Olivetti-Underwood Factory in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania through the presumed experience of a worker is an attempt to understand what has been lost in the shift from the material work towards the separation from the *“hard, substantial reality of things”* (Lears, 1981).

Olivetti-Underwood Factory is certainly not a typical representation of the factories of its time. It was commissioned by Adriano Olivetti, an owner of the Olivetti company, who was exceptionally sensitive towards the working standards in his factories as well as to the social issues in general (Merelli, 2015). The building was designed by Louis Kahn, which was also unique since famous architects hardly ever undertook the factory projects (Rykwert, 2001). Nevertheless, a project of a factory building is constrained by concrete organisational requirements and therefore the supposed individuality of an architect or commissioner is to a certain extent limited by the practical necessities of the production process (Zimmerman, 2014). Unusual as it is, Olivetti-Underwood Factory still represents many common qualities and principles of the factory typology in general. This particular example delivers perhaps an idealized vision of the material world it was a part of.

Olivetti-Underwood Factory, 1969

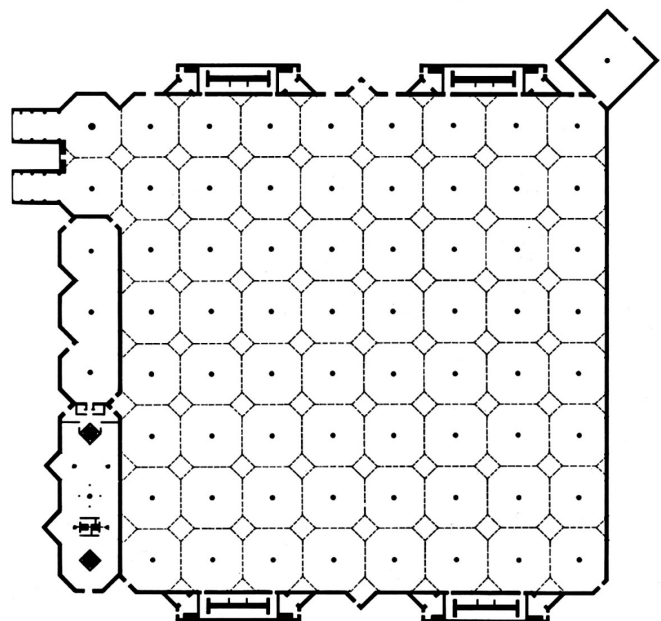
photograph: Ezra Stoller



Olivetti-Underwood Factory was designed to adapt to the continuous rearrangements of the production setup as a reaction to the changing market demands (Fabrizi, 2016). The concrete structure worked as a frame for the evolving processes inside. Despite responding to the requirements of flexibility and change, the building appeared as permanent. Unusual for this type of architecture use of pre-stressed concrete as well as the monumental geometry of the construction resulted in a very present environment. According to Hannah Arendt, people perceive the world as permanent and therefore reliable according to the things that continue to last around them (Crawford, 2009). If the spatial elements of the environment are regarded as *things*, one might assume that the workers inside Olivetti-Underwood factory experienced the feeling of stability as if the place surrounding them was meant to last despite the rapid market changes. This sense of lasting and ease was also supported by the specific for the factories logical and objective spatial order. The arrangement of the factory space was determined by the material reasoning. The set up was based on the specific demands of the production of goods. The position of the workers in the space was dictated by their responsibilities and skills related to the fabrication process. Their role in the creation of the product was specific and tangible. Alexander Kojève wrote:

“The man who works recognizes his own product in the World that has actually been transformed by his work: he recognizes himself in it, he sees in it his own human reality, in it he discovers and reveals to other the objective reality of his humanity, of the originally abstract purely subjective idea he has of himself.”

In the space of Olivetti-Underwood Factory, one’s role within the production process was not only a reference point leading to recognition of oneself in the world in the existential sense but it was also a literal, spatial experience. Due to the open structure of the building, the workers had a visual overview of the whole production line and of their specific part within this broader context. The awareness of the particular role in the production provided a non-negotiable understanding of oneself in the context of the produced goods. In the factories of Olivetti company, the employees were given much more control and freedom over the performed labour than in many other factories of its time (Merelli, 2015). Therefore, one’s position in the production process was not only an assigned role but also an autonomous responsibility on the way to the final product. The workers experienced visually their relation to the produced good but also to the others



Olivetti-Underwood Factory
floorplan

working in the factory. The performed labour brought the feeling of belonging. The role in the production process constituted the position in the working community and further in the society (Crawford, 2009). If the space influences the social relations, the Olivetti-Underwood Factory fostered a non-hierarchical community. Due to the modular, repetitive structure of the building and evenly distributed daylight through the space, no single act of production was privileged, no role was more important than the other. Spatially each act of production seemed equally crucial in the process of creation. In this utilitarian space, every worker was equally dependent on the physical environment with the various tools it provided. The act of work was fully bound with the factory space. Therefore once outside the factory, it was impossible to continue working. The limits of the working day were concrete. Being dependent on the physical environment was actually liberation once outside of the factory.

The shift from the material labour to the world of abstract work has led to the reduction of fixed definitions and concrete understanding of various aspects of life. Introduction into an abstract reality has affected the way of working but above that it has also influenced a perception of oneself, a relation to others, the understanding of space and time. The human of an informatized and service oriented economy is no longer bound to any specific social role or responsibility. The stability and belonging seem as limitations in the reality of multiple choices. The labor and life of an abstract worker is based on a non-linear development and is no longer a continuous and predictable process (Oltamari, Grisci, 2013). The decline of the material work has reduced the limits connected to the physical space. With the replacement of all working tools with the single one – a computer, a worker is no longer dependent on the physical space of a factory or its equipment (Hardt, 2000). This condition of flexibility and obsolescence of belonging became a spatial concept of the spaces of labour today (Saval, 2014). What might be seen as a process of liberation from the limitations of materiality can also mean a confusion in the environment where everything seems undefined and elusive. A relative-ness of today's state might be a reason for a continuous sense of the "vague feelings of unreality" (Lears, 1981).

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