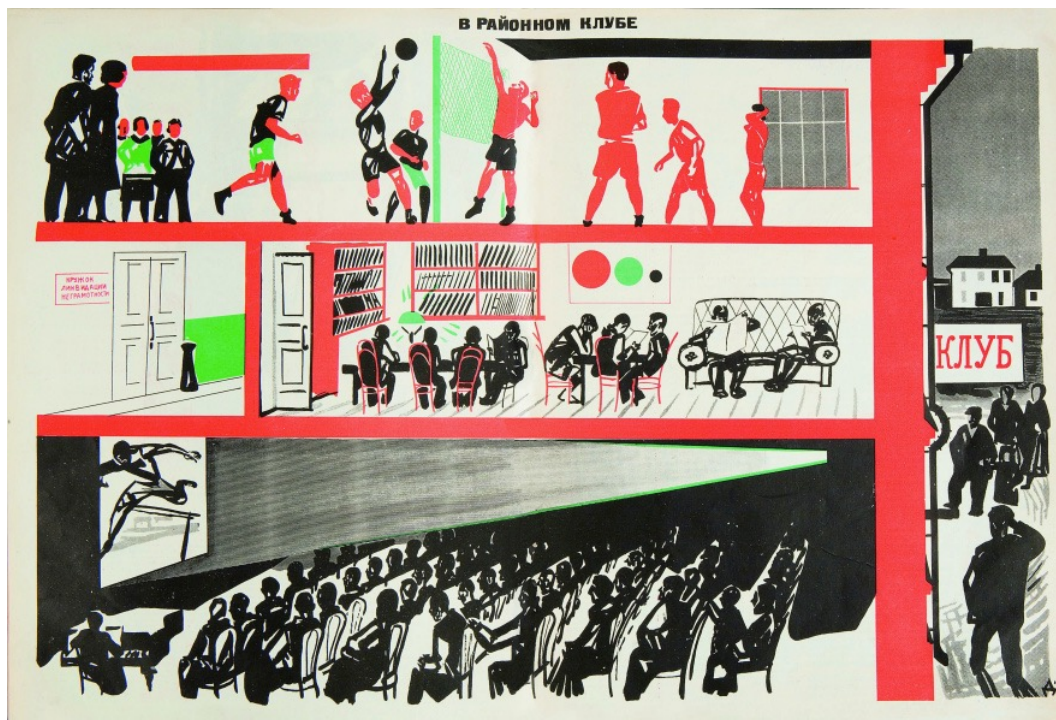History & Theory Research Seminar: "Critical Histories of the Workplace"
Term 4, Fall 2016
Master of Interior Architecture, Research and Design

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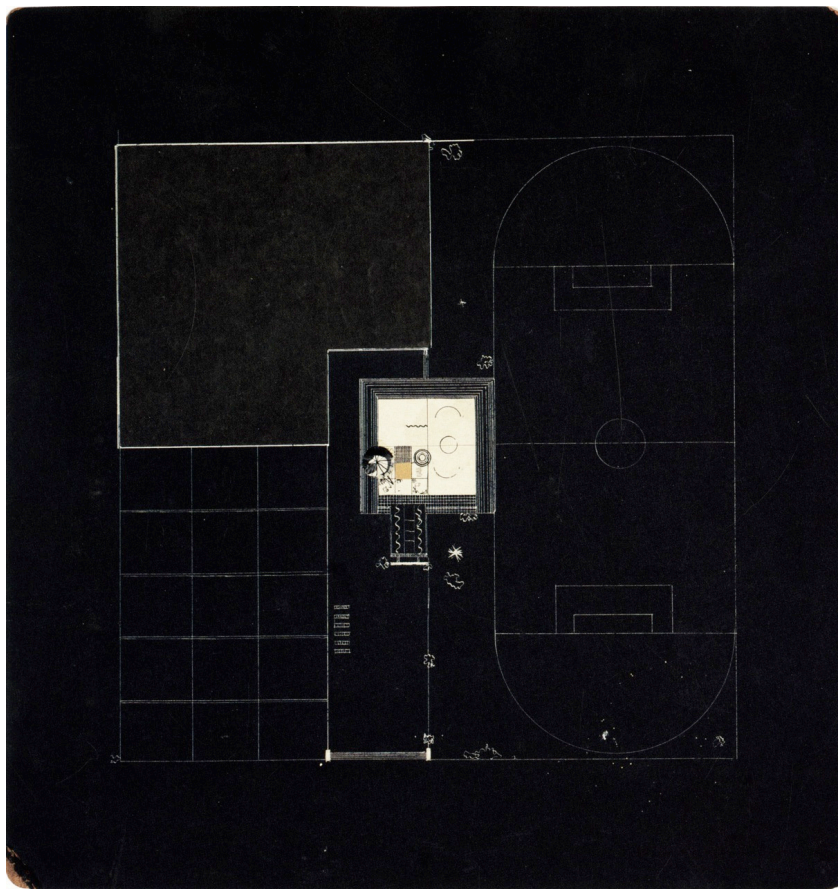Organized labor and the social significance of it occupying physical spaces

The term "organized labor" refers to an association of workers that within a union aim to improve workers' conditions, rights and benefits, also known as Trade Unions. Trade Unions emerged during the 18th century with the spreading of the industrial society and have achieved many of the work conditions we now take for granted, such as the eight-hour work day, the work-free weekends, minimum wage and paid leaves. Within the context of the workspace, one can attribute to the unions the characteristics of a countermovement opposing a current set of rules, in the sense that they were ways of collectivizing and generating political action for the well being of workers. A particularly interesting example in the history of trade unions is that of Russia under the Soviet Union, for the central role they held within the society.

Drawing visualizing the activities within a workers' club in the Soviet Union (Deineka, 1927)

Either in a traditional union structure or in the form of workers' clubs (run by the trade unions), these spaces provided a physical platform for the exchange of knowledge, culture, political ideas and opinions. Anatole Kopp describes very accurately the importance of the club within the society, "it (the club) corresponded to a conception in which the home tended to become merely a place for the individual to rest, while life in all its social and cultural aspects developed in collective centers and collective forms…" (Kopp, 1970)

The purpose of the workers' clubs was to "provide workers with orientation on issues of political struggle and to introduce them to a different type of aesthetic experience and practicing art in the form of seminars, lectures and workshops." (Vilensky, 2009) It also aimed to turn its occupiers into active participants rather than passive consumers of the space. Many Soviet architects dealt with the typology of the workers' club, one of the most innovative ones was Ivan Leonidov and his proposal for the Club of New Social Type.

Ivan Leonidov's proposal for the Club of New Social Type, 1928 (Leonidov, 1928)

In his design, Leonidov included facilities catering to cultural, physical and social activities such as a sports hall, zoo, library, planetarium, areas for mass gatherings, "corners devoted to disseminating social and political work" (Leonidov, 1929) and more. When asked whether the workers were to rest in his club, Leonidov answered, "there is no such thing as absolute rest. Whatever a person does he gets tired. But one can get relative rest from one kind of work by engaging in another. A person's working day, cultural development and leisure can only be organized by taking the

processes of work as a starting point." (Leonidov, 1929) With this statement one can understand the centrality of the worker and work as a notion in general within the Soviet Union. However, considering the way the political system of the Soviet Union was operating, one might argue that unions and social clubs were possibly also used as means of propaganda and tools for implementing specific views and ideas of the state in its citizens.

Though Soviet Workers' Clubs focused on a broad spectrum of activities, the social and political spaces were at the core of their programs. Another example of physical political space, which focuses more on the social exchange of opinions and ideas, is that of the Parisian cafes during the 19th and 20th century. These cafes functioned as meeting places and were referred to as "the social clubs of the French working class". (Pearl and Pearl, 1927) As W. Scott Haine states, "cafe space and cafe sociability made possible the growth of a "proletarian public sphere" and helped foster "a latent class consciousness" that on occasion had political consequences." (Haine, 1996)

DISCUSSING THE WAR IN A PARIS CAFE.
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"Discussing the war in a Paris café", Illustration depicting the vibrant, heated atmosphere of the cafes at the time (Barnard, 1870)

It has to be made clear that the examples mentioned above refer to different regimes and economical situations than what we are facing today, yet the workers' need for physical space to regroup and collectivize with a political purpose still remains relevant. Especially now that the physical workplace increasingly disappears, and is being submerged within the domestic environment, our homes become our offices, our beds become our desks, it is very crucial for our society to maintain the notion of the group over the individual. The rise of the relatively new phenomenon, freelancing, which refers to a self-employed way of working with no long-term commitment to a specific employee, has attributed a far more impermanent and autonomous position to the worker within the larger social sphere. Bjarke Skærlund Risager on a conversation with David Harvey discussed that "there has been a decline in class struggle in favor of "new social movements" for individual freedom." (Risager and Harvey, 2016) There lays the controversy of the freelance way of working since individual freedom entails the distancing from collectivized workplace environments.

The idea of the group, the class-consciousness, has faded away in the rise of the individuality of the freelancer and in consequence the spaces groups used to occupy seem to become increasingly irrelevant. As Maerten Prins puts it, "it is very individually focused (on entrepreneurial spirit of the current generation of twenty-somethings). That will last as long as the economy is on the rise, but when we are in a decline, this will crumble. They are all individuals who are trying to get by, through relying only on themselves. Company-Me, generation cut-and-paste, freelance-generation: they all refer to the same phenomena. That is a contortion, because now it is the time to get active as a group." (Prins, 2015) Our detachment from the way of working on which unions were born and built around marks such organizations obsolete and unable to cater to the ever changing demands of the modern worker. Thus as we have shifted from a collective mode of working to a more individual one, so have our ways of grouping and socializing with a prime example the transition from physical to virtual ways of communicating, over the Internet. However, is this enough to maintain a strong, shared institution on which face-to-face encounters are no longer necessary?

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