

Oproep BWMSTR Label 004
Living and Working: How To Live Together



Organizations do not all have the solutions ready, but they recognize that an office as a sum of individual workplaces with people hardly using them, is no longer efficient; office space will be reduced in 2020 to 0 m².

Erik Weldhoen, 2014

Although Erik Weldhoen's prediction is perhaps exaggerated, the decline of the office typology today is evident. Looking at major European cities, vacant office space becomes increasingly visible. Such a phenomenon can be explained as a consequence of the emergence of new forms of labor where the distinction between living and working is increasingly blurred. No longer organised by the traditional 9 to 5 schedule, contemporary forms of labor involve the entire life of workers and their spectrum of social relationships. Work but also living is thus more mobile, precarious and not containable within rigid typologies. This condition is even more acute for creative work. Here the distinction between the realm of living and the one of working seems to collapse into a common space. Yet cities continue to be developed around a clear distinction between workplace and housing, reinforced at the same time by a legal framework that considers living and working as two distinct domains.

The proposed research aims at addressing this problem by proposing the transformation of existing office buildings into innovative living and working spaces. The main goal is not to transform offices into housing units, but to transform the office into a place where living and working can coexist within the same space frame. We believe that the neutral open space of the office offers the possibility to imagine new flexible layouts where the traditional structure of the apartment can be redefined towards a more collective mode of living, intended both socially and economically. Due to our increasingly busy working schedules, domestic labor has become a burden that can be reduced by promoting the sharing of facilities and reduction of redundant domestic space.

This intuitive path of ideas comes to us in the light of the actual conditions of the neighborhood of Brussels where our own office is located, the European district. In the last 20 years this district has developed as the biggest concentration of office space within the city and today many of these premises are 'on rent' or 'for sale'. Even more dramatic that the European district will soon be the situation in business parks, large office clusters that surround many cities in Flanders and whose development has dramatically changed the landscape of this region. These types of office are in even greater need of transformation since their location makes them even less desirable than office space within the city core. It is difficult to imagine what will happen when such concentration of offices space will become a ruin of an obsolete way of working. How to transform them? And above all, how to use the opportunity of the transformation of office space into new typologies of living and working into new scenarios of how to live together? Through concrete architectural cases and design proposals, the research aims at answering these questions and to develop an initial concept note to be discussed among a network of interested people – an initial seed planted for a larger design research in the changing territory of Flanders.