

The Lived Experience of Work and City Rhythms

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The Lived Experience of Work and City Rhythms: A Rhythmanalysis of London's Square Mile

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*This book is dedicated, with love, to the memory of Heather Höpfl, 1948–2014.
Thank you.*

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Preface

When I began to plan the first draft of this book, it was April 2020, and it was estimated that a third of the world's entire population was under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with families and individuals isolated in their homes and practising 'social distancing' (a pretty much unknown phrase pre-COVID) on the very few occasions when they were able to leave their homes. Perhaps, I thought, by the time this book is published, we will look back at this most surreal of times with a sense of distance and perspective. At the time of writing this introduction, however, in Summer 2021, we in the UK are slowly emerging from a year characterized by periods of lockdown. As we collectively reel from the shock of such sudden and disruptive change to our way of life, it may seem as if the notion of 'work place' has temporarily vanished. Would this book that I was just beginning to write be striking a nostalgic note, I wondered, before it had even seen the light of day? After all, for most of us non-essential workers, our work-places over the past year have been our kitchen tables, living rooms or bedrooms or, if we are exceptionally lucky, our home offices or studies. Often, these work spaces are shared with other family members, including children and domestic pets, and negotiations have been taking place as to who is working where, who needs uninterrupted time, who will look after the children and supervise home-schooling, how the domestic chores will get done and so on, without even factoring in the additional pressures of caring for others in the community or wider family and the time taken to shop for essentials. The places where we routinely worked only a year ago still seem distant to many of us, our familiar offices silent, the daily commute no longer taken and coffee shops where we would pause to gear up for the day ahead lie deserted. The rhythms of our daily lives were drastically altered in a very short space of time. The spatial rhythms have changed – we are having to work in domestic spaces and adapt to other people's use of the space – and the temporal rhythms have changed immeasurably too as we try to adapt to very different patterns in our working days. Those boundaries between home and work, so blurred over recent years due to smartphones and other technological advances, seem to have disappeared altogether. We have lost the ritualised behaviours of 'going to work', and the demarcations between home and work. Yet, some notion still remains of the places where we work as important to defining what we do. Talking to friends and relatives online, and seeing social media comments, people are talking readily and enthusiastically about what they do and relating it closely to where they 'normally' work. For example, one friend writes movingly about her job as a curator in a National Trust property, and how

much she hates seeing it empty; she identifies so strongly with it that it upsets her to think of it desolate and uncared for. I listen to another friend who works in a science park describing how much he misses the small daily routines which make up his working life – talking to the servers in his local coffee shop, the owners of the Italian deli where he buys his lunch, the people he meets in the gym, seeing the streets and landmarks he knows so well and which give structure to his day. For these people, *where* they work and *what* they do are symbiotic and mutually reinforcing. Of course, there are still people going to their normal place of work; not just the frontline health-care workers in the stretched-to-capacity hospitals, but delivery drivers, supermarket cashiers, police, postmen, teachers, refuse collectors; all the workers in all the myriad jobs which make up our essential services. For them, their place of work is currently both familiar and strange. Many of the rest of us are returning to work now, but for shorter and more infrequent periods of time.

Will the pandemic change the way we work, and the places in which we work, for good? In October 2020, it was claimed that nearly three quarters of City firms were reviewing how much office space they really need following the boom in homeworking during the pandemic. Many companies are now experimenting with new and less costly ways of housing employees (Makortoff, 2020). Such a recalibration may have profound implications on not only on working life but by extension on the life of our towns and cities. At the end of the first half of 2021, even with a vaccination programme well underway, it is still too early to say whether this change is absolute; a reasonable guess would be that homeworking will remain a significant part of our working lives, particularly if waves of varying strains of infection, with the need for regular and perhaps multiple vaccines, characterise the coming months. This raises many interesting questions relating to the power of place in our working lives and about how we work and are organised in different environments. Many of these questions have been explored in recent months (e.g. Parker, 2020), as has the potential change to urban environments (Morris and Hassard, 2020; Nathan and Overman, 2020; Reuschke and Felstead, 2020). In all probability, we will return for a significant part of our time, as we are already starting to do, whether it is to offices, schools, shops or restaurants, whether it is city centres or out of town retail parks. And those places will again take up a prominent role in our lives, helping us to define our working selves through *where* we work.

This book is an account of researching a place that means something to the people who work there. Examining what it means, and why, helps us to better understand this place which is the everyday workplace of thousands of people, and which exists in the public imagination as a particular geographical location, with a distinctive materiality, a distinctive culture and where distinctive behaviours are manifested. The people I interviewed who work within its bounds called 'an engine', a 'powerhouse', a 'hub', but also a 'monster', a 'casino' and 'hellish'; a place that is 'infinitely rewarding' but also 'a place where there is a lot of unhappiness'. A place set apart by its architecture, its culture, its practices and its rhythms. This is an account of researching the City; a distinct, global, yet peculiarly British, workplace.

Acknowledgements

Most importantly, I would like to thank all the interview participants quoted in this book, who so generously shared their time, thoughts and reflections with me. Their kindness is greatly appreciated. I thought I knew the City well, but spending time with these workers, who showed me hidden back streets, quiet squares and some fantastic coffee shops, was a re-education. Many of our conversations took place against a background of chatter, traffic noise and construction noise, yet they were all unfailingly polite and patient as I asked them to repeat things or to expand on a point, even as they were trying to grab something to eat or make the most of their only slot of free time in a busy working day. Their insights and reflections give this book its local 'flavour', and I am deeply grateful.

I would also like to thank my many colleagues and friends at the University of Essex for their constant support and help, first as I migrated from a non-academic role to studying for my PhD and then eventually to a Lectureship. They showed such willingness to help and would always take the time to explain something or just to check on progress; their kindness is so appreciated. In particular, I am deeply indebted to Melissa Tyler, for her unswerving professional support, encouragement and leadership but also for her company and friendship. I like to think that although she has most certainly seen me at my most frantic, panic stricken and despairing, she has also inspired me to work to the best of my abilities and to never forget to laugh along the way. Other people of particular note from Essex and elsewhere who helped me at various critical points along the way and who I must thank are Christian de Cock, Philip Hancock, Noelia-Sarah Reynolds, Dawn Lyon, Karen Dale, Ceri Watkins, Martin Parker, Mary Phillips and Chris Land. I am also grateful to the people I have met at universities and conferences where I have had the opportunity to present my research, including the University of York and the Centre for Work, Organisation and Society at the University of Essex and *EGOS; Gender, Work and Organisation*; and *International Critical Management Studies*.

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