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**Where is Place in the History of Work? Worksites,
Workspaces, and the Home-Work Nexus**

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Worksites, Workspaces, and the Home-Work Nexus[†]

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Abstract

The location of work has received renewed scholarly and public interest since the increase in working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this survey we explore how historians have discussed the location and circumstances of work as well as the distance and relationship between home and work, and we consider why analysis of workplaces in historical research has been limited to few dimensions and questions. We propose a terminological distinction between worksites, which are the geographical places of work, and workspaces, the physical surroundings in which work occurs. Beyond a limited set of examples that we discuss, worksites and workspaces have received relatively little sustained attention in historical research on work and labour. We survey contemporary research on changing worksites, the impacts of new travel-to-work patterns on quality of life, and the effects of workspace arrangements. We then highlight three workplace-related topics that have attracted interest from historians: the transition from home-based work to factories during industrialization; the history of commuting; and the locations of women's work. We observe that interest has emerged in response to fundamental changes in work, but that there is much scope for further investigation. As the current moment contains similar shifts, we suggest directions for research into historical patterns of work that can contribute to the contemporary debate over the effects of remote working and changing workspace arrangements.

JEL Codes: I31, J22, J32, J81, N31, N32, N33, N34, O14

Keywords: workplaces, work environment, working from home, commuting, history of work, wellbeing

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Section 1: Introduction

There is fresh interest in the relationship between homes, locations of work, and travel-to-work following the dislocation of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated shifts to increased working from home (Barrero, Bloom et al. 2023). Changes to the surroundings of standard white-collar workplaces through the rise of co-working spaces, 'hot desking', and open plan offices have also drawn new attention to the importance of work environments for productivity, work experience, and the quality of employment (Kim and de Dear 2013, Bernstein and Turban 2018, Robelski, Keller et al. 2019). However, there is little long-run research on these topics to contextualise recent developments and few attempts to consider social and economic implications in historical perspective.

While it is well-known that most work in the pre-industrial period was outdoors and much indoor work occurred within or close to workers' homes, the scale and pace of subsequent shifts is uncertain. In particular, studies of shifts in worksites have rarely considered the implications of travel from home to work for time use and wellbeing. Within labour history, changes to the work environment have been presented as a backdrop for more dramatic events such as industrial action. Much previous historical research has taken more interest in topics such as regional industrialization, the history of specific firms and their structures, or the history of building design for architects and engineers, with work and workers at most a minor element of the analysis. We focus here on work and workers in view of the extensive present-day research that shows the importance of employment experience for quality of life (e.g. Clark, Cotofan et al. 2024, Green, Lee et al. 2024).

Various strands of historical and geographical literature imply a U-curve of working at home over the last 300 years in current high-income countries. One well-known *longue durée* history of work states that '[t]he separation of workplaces and home—of working hours and free time—remained the exception for most of human history' (Komlosy 2018). Another noted scholar argues that the widespread introduction of waged work entailed 'going to work for someone else in their workplace, factory or office' (Lucassen 2021). In this formulation, the distance between residence and occupation increased from a very low level in, perhaps, c. 1600 up to the late 20th century, when commuting technology enabled the growth of suburbs and increasingly long travel-to-work distances and times. Thereafter, improving communications technology has gradually eroded the number of days worked outside the home for some cognitive occupations, and COVID-19 provided a stimulus to this shift. However, a lack of longitudinal data has prevented an empirical test of the U-curve hypothesis.

We organise our discussion of the historiography of workplaces around what we argue are two important change-points in their history, and one long-running scholarly debate. The two change-points are the rise of factory work in the Industrial Revolution, and

the increase in commuting in the late 19th and early 20th century. The volume of contemporary discussion of both phenomena suggests that they were sufficiently important and dislocating as to attract comment from observers at the time, and both have received attention from scholars. There has also been long-running interest from historians in the relationship between women's work, whether paid or unpaid, and its location within or outside the home. We note, however, important limitations within these existing strands of scholarship.

One challenge for research in this area is the lack of specialist terminology and overlapping terms used in related but distinct studies. The co-location or separation of residence and work (the 'home-work nexus') has implications for living conditions and wellbeing, and the physical surroundings of work—whether in a home, outdoors, or in a specialised workplace—also shape the experience of labour and quality of life. To distinguish between these two separate features of the geography of work, we propose and employ here a terminological and conceptual distinction between *worksites* and *workspace*.¹ A *worksites* can be identified with map coordinates and compared, for example, to the location of a worker's residence and other social gathering points or amenities. By contrast, a *workspace* is the physical surroundings of work, including the architecture (if indoors), air quality, machinery or implements, and lighting. Many disparate *worksites* may have similar *workspace* characteristics. We group these two terms under an umbrella term, *workplaces*, which we use when referring to both concepts. In a similar vein, we use *homes* as an umbrella term for *residential locations* (corresponding to our proposed term *worksites*) and *residential spaces* (the counterpart of *workspaces*).

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 introduces scholarship on recent trends in working-from-home and commuting, as well as their implications for time use, wellbeing, and productivity. It then discusses evidence for the importance of workspace arrangements from management studies, organizational psychology, and occupational health. Section 3 presents our three examples in which past workplaces have appeared in scholarly debates, and suggests explanations for the limited consideration of worksites and workspaces in historical studies. Section 4 proposes new research directions on our topics of interest and suggests how such studies can contribute to contemporary discussions, and Section 5 concludes.

¹ We depart here from the terminology used in the seminal text of Sundstrom & Sundstrom (1986) because "workplace" is used in various fields that discuss these issues to discuss the location of work as well as the interior of a structure in which indoor work occurs.

Section 2: Recent Research on Workplaces and Working from Home

The disruptions to work patterns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are the main proximate motivator of research on worksites. We begin by surveying this most recent evidence before considering broader research on the effects of such shifts, and then discussing relevant elements of the literature on workspaces.

While there had been a long-term but consistent increase in ‘teleworking’ or working from home (WFH) in the 2000s and 2010s, the pandemic was a major shock. It produced a ratchet effect that has reorganised the locations of work for many white-collar employees, particularly in high-income countries. For example, WFH increased from 7% of paid workdays in the United States in 2019 to 28% in mid-2023. There is substantial industry-level heterogeneity, with information workers (at 2.55 days per week) working from home about four times as much as employees in hospitality and food services. Rates are higher for more educated workers, e.g. 20% for those with no college education and 34% for workers with a four-year degree (Barrero, Bloom et al. 2023).

Changes to commuting time and patterns can be expected to have an impact on perceived quality of life. A substantial literature identifies impedance, the feeling of being blocked or prevented from attaining a goal, and the control and predictability of journeys as determinants of commuting stress (Novaco and Gonzalez 2009). While the presence of travel-to-work is not *per se* wellbeing-reducing, increased commuting time has been found to reduce life satisfaction (Tao, van Ham et al. 2023).

Studies of time use following WFH shifts focus on cognitive workers and unsurprisingly show reduced total time spent commuting (Rüger, Laß et al. 2024). Time use within the household may also be affected by home working. In one study, women were willing to accept larger income reductions than men in order to work from home and to reduce their commuting time (Nagler, Rincke et al. 2024). A large multi-country study found that workers could save about an hour per week in hybrid WFH, with the time savings reallocated to additional work and some caregiving (Aksoy, Barrero et al. 2023).

While the long-term effects of potentially reduced commuting are yet to be observed, increased WFH could reduce inequalities in labour force participation and wellbeing. The labour force participation of married women was lower in US cities with longer commuting times, and grew more slowly in cities with larger increases in commuting time from 1980–2010 (Black, Kolesnikova et al. 2014). These gender differences of commuting are but one example of time use inequalities. In the United States, there was also Black-White commuting time gap of 49 minutes per week in 1980, but this declined to 22 minutes per week by 2019 (bunten, Fu et al. 2024). The recent rise in WFH has been further linked to higher employment for disabled workers (Bloom, Dahl et al. 2024).

In addition to changes in commuting, the conditions of WFH are variable and shape worker wellbeing. One important determinant of perceived quality of life for WFH employees is choice in when, where, and how they work at home. When workers can clearly separate home and work activities, they are likely to experience more benefits from such arrangements (Kossek, Lautsch et al. 2009). For the professional workers who were sampled in that study, the *option* of WFH did not improve wellbeing, only the workers' *control* over WFH organization and conditions did so.

There are mixed results for the effects of WFH on productivity. One experimental pre-COVID study of WFH found positive impacts (Bloom, Liang et al. 2015). In general, hybrid work seems to have higher productivity than completely remote employment. However, there is some evidence that longer commuting times, which, as shown above, are a likely result of WFH opportunities, are associated with higher absenteeism and lower productivity (Ma and Ye 2019), while active travel may have a positive productivity effect for some workers. As pointed out by Barrero, Bloom et al. (2023) in their survey of studies in this area, by removing commuting, even if output remains the same, workers and society can perceive an increase in productivity because the total labour time input for market goods or services has been reduced, while the employer observes no change in output per paid time.

The literature on workspaces has not seen the same new COVID-related interest, but it contains valuable insights for research on labour and quality of life. A classic work on the multifarious ways in which the design of a work environment shapes work experience is Sundstrom and Sundstrom (1986). The importance of workspace for sociologists and other social scientists interested in the labour process and work experience was articulated by Baldry (1997), (1999), but, as discussed below, these perspectives have had little influence on historians.

The rise in WFH since the COVID-19 pandemic has spurred new research on the home workspace. During the pandemic itself, many home offices were poorly prepared for extended WFH, resulting in poor posture that caused ergonomic problems such as back pain, as well as insufficient activity (Kotowski, Davis et al. 2022, MacLean, Neyedli et al. 2022, McKee and Hedge 2022, Milaković, Koren et al. 2023). Dimensions considered in this literature include desk and chair design, temperature, and lighting, which shows that the planning and accommodations of workspace shape worker experience and quality of life.

In recent decades management and organizational psychology have been the main fields examining workspaces. Research has focused on developments such as the open-plan office (Hedge 1982, Davis, Leach et al. 2011), and 'hot desking' (Millward, Haslam et al. 2007). Workers generally report negative reactions to a lack of privacy in open-plan settings and there is little evidence that such arrangements improve productivity or collaboration. One

survey found that there is contradictory evidence and no straightforward ‘best’ arrangement of workspaces, at least in white-collar work settings (Elsbach and Pratt 2007). Nonetheless, a wide variety of studies show that physical environments impact both worker experiences and economic activity in workspaces (Ayoko and Ashkanasy 2020).

Section 3: Worksites and Workspaces in Historical Research

This section considers three areas of historical research that have discussed worksites, workspaces, and the home-work nexus. We suggest that these three research areas have emerged from the general neglect of workplaces in historical scholarship as a result of either, in the first two cases, perceived discontinuities in the history of work or, in the third, particular interest in the home-work nexus for women. By contrast, other aspects of worksites and workspaces, including the workplaces of male workers, have received little attention. We also note limitations within the existing areas of study.

3.1: The Factory Shift in the Industrial Revolution

The most famous example of historical shifts in worksites is the centralization of work in workshops and then factories during industrialization. This shift occurred at different times in different countries and, because manufacturing was never a majority occupation in any large economy, it did not impact all workers and households. However, contemporary discussions suggest that the shift from ‘putting-out’ industries, commonly manufacturing work such as spinning or knitting that was carried out at home or in another residence, to a factory setting was nonetheless important. This development forms the downslope of the posited U-curve discussed in Section 1.

In addition to typical concerns of contemporaries about autonomy and occupational safety (Nuvolari 2002), qualms about the morality of workers, especially women, who left home to work in factories have also been discussed by historians (Dublin 1979).

Quantitative economic historians have been primarily interested in the location of industrial establishments and the determinants of location choice. This is a long-running literature, with scholars from Hammond (1942) and Robson (1953) up to Crafts and Wolf (2014) examining the locations of textile factories during industrialization. Most explanations focus on factor prices: energy costs in the proximity to coal or water power, transport costs, and labour costs. Recent studies have been particularly interested in the role of railroads (Atack, Haines et al. 2011, Tang 2014, Berger 2019).² The availability of skilled labour (Carlson

² There is also an older literature, e.g. Pred (1964).

1981) has also been considered as a subsidiary of labour costs. Occasionally the centripetal impetus of technology has been examined (Rosenberg and Trajtenberg 2004). Residential locations and the home-work nexus are only tangentially and obliquely involved in these analyses through labour supply.

While work in the factory remains an object of interest for labour historians, advocates of a renewed study of factory work such as Akgöz, Croucher et al. (2020) do not promote *workspace* studies. The articles that follow in the special issue that they introduce are illustrative (Akgöz 2020, Bonfiglioli 2020, Lilja 2020, Serri 2020). The studies take little interest in the physical design of workspaces, the importance of which we have established above, or in the home-work nexus. This is common in labour, business, and economic history: a factory may be briefly introduced as a setting, but it only serves as the stage for an event or historical process. This is not a new scholarly turn, as the traditional literature on workers' control also neglected workspace design (Montgomery 1979).

In contrast, historians have shown more interest in residential spaces during industrialization. Contemporaries such as Engels expressed concern with the poor state of housing, and various industrializing societies saw government and private investigations of sanitary conditions (e.g. the British Health of Towns Report and Jacob Riis' studies of tenements in New York). These topics were taken up by social and economic historians in the 20th century (Hopkins 1986, Rodger 1995). More recently there have been detailed microstudies of residential architecture in growing industrial cities and smaller mill communities (Timmins 2013, Harrison 2017, Lilley 2017).

A large majority of existing research on historical workspaces has been conducted by architectural historians or industrial archaeologists. Studies have focused on the design of structures, how they incorporated power transfer mechanisms and new machinery, the slow improvement in fireproofing and lighting, and aesthetic or cultural dimensions of factory-building (Giles and Goodall 1992, Williams and Farnie 1992, Calladine and Fricker 1993, Williams 2013).

3.2: The History of Commuting

Consideration of the relationship between work and residence recurred in the early 20th century with the advent of modern commuting practices. Commuting was facilitated in part by improved transport technologies (primarily railroads, trams, and automobiles), and as commuting times rose, the separation of residence and work increased. While commuting enabled access to a wider variety of suburban housing stock, it also impacted workers' time use.

The most detailed evidence for long-run changes in work-residence distance before the mid-20th century is found in Pooley and Turnbull (1999). They used a survey of workers, retired people, and family historians to capture changes in travel modes, distances, and times in Britain from the 1890s to the 1990s. Their study showed a secular increase in both commuting distance and time over this period, which fits the U-curve hypothesis outlined in Section 1, and they also identified gender differences in commuting distances and speed. Women had shorter-distance but longer-duration commutes than men in the late 19th century, shifting to shorter-distance and shorter-duration by the late 20th century. In both periods, men used faster commuting modes. As expected, walking was the main mode of transit for almost 60% of commuters in the 1890s but fell to less than 8% in the 1990s, while the automobile or van rose from 0% to nearly 53%. Regrettably there has been little comparable work to mirror this study in other locations, and, despite the extensive outreach, the authors acknowledged issues of representativeness, particularly in the early part of the sample.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence for a technological explanation of this part of the U-curve—as it descended to its nadir—is from the work of Hebllich, Redding et al. (2020). They show that increased transport connections in London during the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly by rail, were associated with depopulation in the centre. Even so, they only have individual-level commuting data from 1921, the end of their study period. Smaller-scale research on the UK has also focused on London and shows similar trends or cross-sectional findings that fit the broader U-curve hypothesis, with transport infrastructure again proposed as the main causal factor (Abernethy 2015). Quantitative economic history has only briefly and recently considered the *effects* of transport-induced suburbanization for labour markets (Seltzer and Wadsworth 2024).

There has been somewhat more research on other aspects of suburbanization in the United States: infrastructure spending on car-based mobility has been found to cause increased centrifugal development, producing suburbanization (Baum-Snow 2007). However, as in Britain, commuting railroads had already begun to expand the housing stock available to workers in US cities in the late 19th century (Hovinen 1985), and this history has perhaps received less attention than the canonical automobile-based developments. Overall, there has been much more discussion of US suburbanization by social and urban historians (Warner 1962, Binford 1985, Jackson 1985, Ebner 1988) than economic historians and labour historians.

While the development of commuting in the 20th century led to increasing attention to commuting stress and accident risk (Novaco and Gonzalez 2009), these aspects have hardly been considered by economic historians discussing changing quality of life. For example, changes in commuting time were not incorporated into Crafts' (2022) assessment of changes in lifetime working hours from the 1930s to the 2010s. There is case study evidence of gender variation in commuting in these early decades (Miller 2018), fitting with the evidence of Pooley & Turnbull, but the topic has otherwise been little explored.

This limited literature suggests that there are many further avenues to explore differences in mobility by place, diverse economic and infrastructural drivers of suburbanization, and various economic and social effects. In particular, there is scope to examine these topics in quantitative terms that have been neglected by social and cultural historians.

3.3: The Locations of Women's Work

Changes in workplaces have long been understood to have a particularly profound effect on women's work. It is assumed that preindustrial work patterns allowed women to combine income-generating work with the unpaid housework and family care work that they were also expected to carry out (Clark 1919). The movement of paid work to non-domestic worksites meant that women had to choose one form of work or the other, and societal expectations encouraged married women to concentrate on unpaid work within the home (Tilly and Scott 1987). This gave rise to a gender division of labour between male breadwinners and female homemakers (Horrell and Humphries 1997, De Vries 2008). The changing location of work also affected female servants, the most common form of waged employment for women in preindustrial and nineteenth century Britain (Schwarz 1999). Servants lived with their employers and worked within the household economy. In the preindustrial economy female servants combined income-generating work for the household, such as agriculture and spinning, with domestic chores and childcare (Mansell 2024). In the urbanised, industrial economy of the nineteenth century, the work of female servants became more purely domestic, concentrated in housework and care work.

Claudia Goldin observes that economic development causes women's paid work to decrease before later rising, creating a U-shaped curve in female labour force participation – a trend that particularly affects married women's work. She concluded that 'the downward portion of the U' was caused by rising male incomes and 'a change in the locus of production from home to the factory' (Goldin 1995). De Vries notes that married women's employment outside the home across north-west Europe fell significantly between the mid nineteenth century and the early twentieth century (De Vries 2008). Like Goldin he points to rising male incomes, but also new priorities of health and comfort that required an improved domestic environment and higher standards of housework: these goals were achieved through women's increased unpaid work within the home (see also Bourke 1994).

More recent research has complicated this account. Studies of preindustrial work show that the majority of women's preindustrial work was actually located outside, or in other people's houses, rather than within their own homes (Whittle, Hailwood et al. 2025). Reassessment of nineteenth century evidence indicates that women's work did not decline as

markedly as census data suggests, although the increasing stigma of married women working outside the home and/or generating income led it being hidden in official sources such as the census (Humphries and Sarasúa 2012). These debates confirm the importance of gathering evidence about the exact location of workspaces to understanding changing patterns of women's work and how families combined paid and unpaid work, while also highlighting the lack of such evidence in studies of work that consider the period after 1700.

3.4: Neglect of Place in the History of Work

While the debates above are important parts of economic and labour history, outside of these research areas historians have shown limited interest in workplaces and their second-order effects on economy, individual quality of life, and society.

The neglect of the spatial location of work is all the more surprising given the much heralded 'spatial turn' in history from the 2000s onwards. Influenced by the writings of Lefebvre and Habermas, social and cultural historians have shown an increasing sensitivity to the dimension of space, for instance examining urban public spaces and the organisation of domestic space. Work located within the early modern home has been a particular focus (Whittle 2011, Flather 2013, Hamling and Richardson 2017, Pierik 2023). These approaches have not been taken up in labour history and economic history, particularly for the period since 1800, making discussions of long term change difficult.

One potential explanation for the neglect of worksites and workspaces is the lack of long-run data. We began the research that led to this paper by attempting to locate materials to track shifts in worksites from the pre-industrial period to the present in Britain. There are few candidate sources: government sources only periodically collected this information, and hardly ever before the 20th century. Descriptions of work in court records hold some promise to explore long-run developments because of their common survival. They have also been used extensively by one of us to analyse work tasks and the division of labour for an earlier period (Whittle and Hailwood 2020). However, collecting such evidence in sufficient quantity is very time-consuming, and findings are influenced by changes in crime and legal systems. Firm-level records and evidence from individuals (such as memoirs and diaries) do not survive in large representative samples.

It is also likely that historians may have strong and reasonable preconceptions about workplaces and how they have changed. Work sites separate from residential locations proliferated in the period of industrialisation and urbanization from the late eighteenth century onwards. For industrial units such as factories and steel-mills, the technological advantages of centralised production are typically cited. Yet similar changes also occurred in tertiary sector work with the rise of shops, offices and banks that were separate from

residential spaces; this trend that remains largely unexplored and unexplained in the historical literature.

The neglect of workspace study also may be the result of labour historians considering the prosaic aspects of space less important than the issues of community, class consciousness, and identity. These areas have been the focus of the 'new' labour history since the 1960s.³ However, one of us has shown that simple descriptions of work can reveal much about the social and economic past (Whittle and Hailwood 2020, Whittle 2024). In a similar vein, we argue that the seemingly mundane aspects of workspace, such as interior dimensions, distance from colleagues, lighting, ventilation, and opportunities for surveillance, can shape many aspects of labour experience and contribute to variables of interest for macroeconomic historians, such as productivity.

Section 4: New Directions for Historical Workplace Research

Much as the episodes of historical transition just discussed draw attention to changes in the locations of work, our current moment, discussed in Section 2, invites the investigation of historical parallels. Moreover, the limited historical study of workspace, in combination with recent interest in the quality of jobs (International Labour Organization 1999, Green 2006, Findlay, Kalleberg et al. 2013, Cazes, Hijzen et al. 2015) should draw the attention of economic historians and labour historians back to the environment of work.

We hope that the terminological and related conceptual distinction we proposed in Section 1 between worksites and workspaces will be taken forward in the literature. At the moment, there is relatively little connection between studies of travel-to-work in geography, the economic geography and economic history of factory locations, and the few investigations of labour experience by labour historians that touch on workspace.

The expanding use of economic geography methods in economic history opens the potential to explore worksites in much more detail. A long-run perspective would be particularly valuable to evaluate the proposition discussed above that technological developments were the main driver of centripetal forces in the industrializing period (Lucassen 2021) and centrifugal forces in our own time. Testing and explaining our hypothesised U-curve of home working is but one possible topic of study: the literature and gender and racial inequalities in commuting time discussed in Section 2 merit historical consideration. Such research could consider the origins and development of these inequalities,

³ There has also been interest in migrant workers and circular migration for labor (for a survey see Hanagan 1998). However, these studies emphasize periodic, longer journeys and rarely engage with the *daily* transit from residence to workplace that we emphasize here.

and examine their implications in different contexts. The positive impact of WFH on work opportunities for disabled people may renew the debate over the posited disemployment effects of industrialization (Brendan 1999, Blackie 2018).

The fact that commuting has been largely ignored by economic historians may raise questions about the accuracy of long-run studies of changes in time use (Crafts 2022). If present-day workers experience an improvement in labour productivity from WFH that is not captured by firms (Barrero, Bloom et al. 2023), then the downslope of the U-curve likely incorporated the opposite effect: as workers had to travel further from home to work, their total time input required to work rose, over and above any change in their working hours as observed by employers. In addition, the subjective wellbeing effects of the rise of commuting have been entirely neglected in historical research on quality of life.

The scarcity of sources discussed in Section 3.4 remains salient: census and population register data cannot be easily and reliably linked to data on worksites. Therefore, economic historians, perhaps in conjunction with historical geographers, will have to embrace a wider range of sources, and perhaps begin from a local or firm level (e.g. Green 1988). Evidence of company housing, firm-provided transport, and city or town social surveys, although not representative, may provide entry points to address these questions.

Workspaces research could be an entirely new area of economic and labour history. Both historical and contemporary research shows the importance of physical workspaces (Bartrip 2002, Bronstein 2008, Green and Mostafa 2010, Belloni, Carrino et al. 2022), and there are various fruitful avenues to investigate. The most obvious is occupational safety, which is well-discussed (Fishback 1986, Aldrich 2006). The environment of work has received less attention, and primarily in recent years by social historians as prelude to its eventual regulation (Mills 2010, Moses 2018, Greenlees 2019) rather than to understand characteristics of the space itself. While worker autonomy has been considered by labour historians for many decades (Montgomery 1979), the importance of the physical workspace in shaping levels or dimensions of control has not been the focus of this literature. This is particularly surprising as historians of labour process have taken an interest in machinery design (Braverman 1974, Edwards 1979), but frequently without embedding an apparatus in the surrounding architecture.

As noted above, some scholars (Akgöz, Croucher et al. 2020) have argued for the continuing historical study of specific types of workspace. We suggest that economic history and historical geography would benefit from a broader range of workspace studies, and research that focuses on workspaces instead of only using them as a backdrop. Such studies could exploit comparisons between different workspaces in the past and their implications

for work experience.⁴ These comparisons may be helpful to understand both the traditional concerns of labour historians—the development of representative institutions, class consciousness, control of the labour process, community, and identity—as well as historical social science variables such as the task content of work, occupational safety, worker autonomy, and other dimensions of job quality and worker wellbeing. In addition, the second-order influence of these variables on productivity should be of interest to economic and business historians. Cohesive, comparable research on this topic would benefit from a workspace framework informed by contemporary studies.

Comparative historical workspace studies of primary and secondary sector employment could contribute to present-day debates about determinants of job quality (Berg, Green et al. 2023) and work meaningfulness (Nikolova and Cnossen 2020). The large recent empirical literature on work environments focuses on the arrangement of office work even though there are still hundreds of millions of workers in agriculture, extraction, and manufacturing.

Section 5: Conclusion

Present-day literature on wellbeing and job quality has demonstrated persuasively that workspaces shape work experience and quality of life. In a similar way, recent research on changes to worksites during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the distance between residence and place of work produces a variety of impacts on time use, worker productivity, the household division of labour, and subjective wellbeing. There may have been a U-curve of working-from-home over the past 300 years, as suggested in some labour history scholarship and proposed in our review of the literature here. The scarcity of quantitative evidence leaves this hypothesis unproven, and, more importantly, the causes and implications of such a shift have not been fully examined by economic, labour, and business historians or historical geographers interested in quality of life, work experience, and spatial aspects of management in the past.

We have argued here for the greater appreciation and analysis of worksites and workspaces in historical contexts. Detailed study of worksites, their distance and accessibility from worker residences, and the physical environment of work can contribute to a richer historical perspective on objective and subjective living standards and differences in labour market opportunities and time use by gender, race, and disability. Worksites and workspaces merit a much larger place in economic history, labour history, and historical geography.

⁴ The few example studies of this type include Biernacki (1995) and Stanziani (2014).

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