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Abstract

The aim of our study of office buildings is to see how spatial and social systems interact. In our cases in progress, we on one hand study similar spatial configurations used by different organisations, on the other hand different spatial configurations used by similar organisations. In this way we will be able to understand to which degree similarities and differences depend on spatial and social properties respectively. Our aim is to develop descriptive methods and define new categories for office buildings based on possible usage concerning the patterns of interaction and individual work. After the pilot case, comprising 200 workstations, another four sites will be studied during coming years. The organisations to be studied are an insurance-company, the Internal revenue and a telecom-company, each case consisting of 100-200 workstations.

The basis of our studies is that communication between co-workers is of vital importance for the progress and prosperity of the organisation. For the individual, the office is also the place for distributing knowledge and interaction with others, not only the place for defining and reporting the work tasks. Concurring with Space Syntax-theories, the spatial configuration defines the playground for this important interaction. This potential grows or diminishes depending on the location in the spatial system of different generators of activity such as copy rooms and coffee-machines. The degree of open plans and the density as well as the existence of wireless telecom-systems also affects this potential for interaction.

Previous studies have shown differences between the interactions within teams and between teams. In principle, the first is claimed to have a more reproductive function where as the former is supposed to be more productive. The decisions concerning type of management, the division of labour and the location of units within the configuration are here of importance for the relations to occur within and between units.

Individual work versus interaction

In our research we distinguish between interaction and individual work. Interaction is broken down into planned versus spontaneous interaction. The mix of interaction and individual work is an important issue in our study. Individual work is roughly broken down into routine and concentrated activities. Our aim is to understand

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whether the interactions and individual activities put conflicting requirements on the spatial configuration. If so, which are the strategies for the staff members to handle them?

Methods used

The spatial configuration is analysed with Space Syntax-methods. The social system, i.e. the organisation and work activities of the office is surveyed by means of interviews, observations and private logbooks and questionnaires. The social network analysis comprises questions regarding various private contacts within the workplace, on professional, personal and business matters. The observations follow the “snapshot” and the “gateway”-methods so as to register the movements and activities of the staff. The activities of individuals are surveyed with logbooks showing time dedicated for interaction contra individual work as well as time spent on routines contra intellectual activity. E-mails and telephone calls are also logged.

Our aim is to develop, analyse and define descriptive methods for office buildings in terms of their spatial capabilities related to functional outcome within office organisations.

This knowledge will facilitate for property developers to define the “usability” of office buildings towards their clients. It will also help tenants to specify their needs of the built environment provided by the property developers. Descriptive methods of this kind should make it possible to appraise the potential for “usability” for office buildings. This will also contribute towards more substantiated choices by architects for the form of office buildings.

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