

. . . my “beeping” job . . .

The revolution began with a beep that meant nothing or everything. More than fifteen years ago, in my first fusion of home and office work began and ended with the beep of a Reuters wire machine installed along with two bulky phones next to the couch in a 600 square foot apartment in Jerusalem. This ubiquitous beep didn't distinguish between the announcement of a bank failure in Thailand, an upset in a cricket match or ten dead in a suicide bombing on the other side of town. As my work was to cover the Israeli Palestinian conflict for NPR, the Reuters beep could never be turned off. It was constant like the bombs that went off in my dreams. My Jerusalem office was to be a perfectly integrated fusion of life and work. It was more like a military coup, where my life was on the run, grabbed like so many cold sandwiches between shootings, Army counterattacks, and deadlines. It was 1987. Revolution was afoot in Israel, Palestine, and perhaps most radically of all in the workplace.

Today, workplaces are in a state of unprecedented flux. Work has all but ceased to be a place. My beep-

ing Reuters machine has become a telephone and been shrunk to the size of a fashion accessory. Its reach has been extended to satellites. In what were once solid walls separating home and office, technology has created uncountable virtual windows allowing work to proceed independent of time or place. The distinctness of residence and workplace merge at an intersection called “the worker” who, moment to moment, must decide to ignore or act on anubiquity of buzzes, beeps, rings, pages, and digital heralds of e-mail. In this world a beep means nothing or everything. Work seems to be where the electronic heart is. Where is home? That's another story.

Workplaces are today a personal Rorschach image signifying the idealization and reality of the modern worker. Exploring the modern workplace is to engage in an archeology of the present moment to reveal an essential matrix of culture and economic priorities. Workplaces signify a worker's degree of ownership of a task as in a carpenter's very personal arrangement and choice of tools versus the factory floor where



. . . by John Hockenberry . . .



John Hockenberry is a correspondent for Dateline NBC, the author of the memoir *Moving Violations: warzones, wheelchairs, and declarations of independence*; and the novel *A River Out Of Eden*. He lives in Brooklyn, New York with his wife and two sets of twins: three girls and a boy.

my “beeping” job, continued

the only personal space is a locker for storing one’s non-work identity to be retrieved at the end of the shift. Workplaces also signify the stake a community may have in the work done. Traditional banks that look like castles and monuments in the center of town versus hole-in-the-wall ATM machines that seem more like extensions of depositor’s wallets.

Offices are still constructed out of tools, furniture and space but technology has allowed workers and employers a greater degree of collaboration in blending the personal and the shared. In the modern economy work-saving technology bends time but it blends place. A factory assembly line worker with a cellphone on his or her belt retains a connection to home and family

shop revealed who he was. His reverence for restoring old clocks, his skill in resuscitating any machine, was in the smell of the air, the feel of the tools. His sense of thrifty organization was in the carefully labeled coffee cans of nuts and screws. The nearly finished grandfather clock that stood near the front door, the long ago painted toy chest for the little girl who would be my mother, all communicated that his shop was an extension of home. It was also an escape, radio and hotplate were the creature comforts of a man at home in a refuge of his own making.

But even to a child this musty garage simmering with magical warmth, communicated my grandfather’s deep dissatisfaction with his day-job as

couldn’t have been more different from the workshop where my Grandfather could make anything happen.

From the personalized wheelhouses of New England fishing boats to the single factory towns with their reverence for a corporate benefactor in the architecture of city buildings and worker housing, each workspace tells a story of the point of work and the place it holds. Workplaces delineate a hierarchy of status doled out in the coinage of office space, windows, proximity to the boss, details as meaningful as the actual work itself.

“work-saving technology bends time but it blends place”

unmediated by the punchclock or the shop foreman, a connection unimaginable at the beginning of the industrial age.

The first person I sized up by exploring their workplace was my grandfather. His garage shop evoked an impossibly ancient dedication to meticulous, patient work undistracted by anything. There was no phone. To get his attention my Grandmother would have to call Grandpa from the back porch of the house. Everything about his work-

a middle level executive. His day-job office was filled with pictures of handshakes with more senior company men, unknown to me but clearly important to Grandpa. I recall the place as a bittersweet shrine to moments symbolizing a career on the rise that in the end were reminders of advancements that never materialized. It



my “beeping” job, continued

In modern, job-centered America it is the offices which often retain a meticulously worked out expression of identity while home life reflects the more generic chaos of a weigh station between shifts. The tensions of home and workplace are in

Egyptian embassy in Iran. A rather large man responsible for my temporary visa sat in a giant space at a vast, empty, flight-deck of a desk. We spoke only pleasantries, I noticed his shimmering brown suit. Behind him was a small door

infant squeeze toys, a ball that will play a song if touched, a stuffed yellow hippo and two colorful toy trucks. I am working away knowing that when the sun comes up, there will be two hungry three-year olds to demand a briefing on what daddy



constant flux as people pause to try and nail down their identities while striving to advance.

There is a richness to this work/life dialogue that one appreciates by observing other cultures. In India and the Middle East work dominated lives as much if not more than in America, yet its purpose seemed sublimated to an outer identity. Spectacular offices or even ergonomic offices were rare. The norm was tiny spaces stacked with papers and bad telephones. Homes were typically orderly where each artifact celebrated the milestones of the family within. Quitting time was observed with almost religious piety.

I recall one particularly revealing office within an office at the

to another tiny office, which opened twice during our meeting revealing a thin, poorly dressed and extremely frazzled clerk doing the actual paperwork for my visa and thousands of others it seemed. The large man's workspace projected no work, only authority while the clerk's space which was dark, windowless, and completely subject to the whims of the inhabitant of the larger office, projected only work and no authority whatsoever. They had no personal quality like the languid immovable quality of Cairo itself.

The workspace where I am writing this is dark right now. It's early morning. I'm at a desk stacked with books, phone, and computer. On the floor beneath me are some

is doing. I'll also expect to hear two babies squealing out their interest in breakfast. There is nothing more urgent than a crying baby or an inquiring three-year-old. In the confrontation between life and work, life has made a roaring comeback since my days in Jerusalem.

One thing is certain. I prefer the voices of kids to the sound of a Reuters machine beeping.