

THE PUBLIC OFFICE

A VISION OF OPEN AND RENT-FREE
WORK AND MEETING PLACES



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REPORT, PROJECT PART I

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1 About the project

1.1 Project implementation

The project: The Public Office, Part I, was initiated and managed by Anders Jacobson and Johan Thelander, of Hybris Konstproduktion AB. Meetings were held with a number of actors in the fields of cultural policy, public administration, urban development and architecture. Further discussions with artists, entrepreneurs, academics and students have taken place in open contexts, such as workshops and festivals.

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1.2 Purpose and disposition of the report

This report is the result of the first part of the long-term development project The Public Office, run by Hybris Konstproduktion AB.

The report provides a background to the idea of The Public Office, and discusses it in relation to social issues such as public meeting places and changes in the labour market. The report aims to serve as a basis for the further development of the project, and as a primary reference during the project's second phase, which takes place at The Swedish Museum of Architecture in Stockholm, autumn 2012. During this second phase, invited guests, such as politicians, civil servants, urban developers, architects, librarians and artists, will use the material to discuss, develop and problematize the concept and test its political viability.

2 The Public Office – a summary

The vision of The Public Office is comprised of open and rent-free work and meeting places, where citizens have the opportunity to engage in work and further education. The foundation of the idea is the creation of free and democratically available structures for work, where people's time and skills can be shared and enriched.

The concept of The Public Office is an infrastructural proposal and a political vision that seeks to meet the changing needs of the labour markets, characterized by a growing number of people working freelance or from their homes, as well as an increased mobility and flexibility in the work. The Public Office is a proposal aiming to provide greater security, stability and productive development in relation to these new situations and needs.

One aspect of the increasingly mobile work situation that is rarely addressed adequately, is the widespread "workplacelessness", which means that many people today lack access to the community, stability and skills development that workplaces can offer. This report highlights the opportunities and values that can be generated by creating accessible places where people with varying skills and experiences can come together to work alongside each other.

Public places for meetings and exchange of knowledge can facilitate new knowledge, networks and local communities. The Public Office, as a local and diverse meeting place, has the potential to promote business development, improve working conditions, skills development, social inclusion and local development.

This report proposes an organizational model where Public Offices are primarily initiated by local actors, individually or jointly, and that they can apply for conducting the activity on behalf of the public sector. It should also be possible for a municipality or municipal institution, such as a library, to initiate and run a Public Office.

The Public Office may take the form of long-term initiatives, but can also be a temporary projects which activate and stimulate a location for a shorter period of time. The methods of funding The Public Offices may vary depending on location and context, however this report suggests that the core funding should be public.

3 Starting points and perspectives

3.1 Basic starting points

In order to situate the project's ambitions, we will introduce three basic ideological positions, which frame the Public Office concept.

Cooperation

Through cooperative approaches and strategies, we can achieve a more sustainable society. The sharing of resources and knowledge leads to a more efficient, productive and sustainable use of resources. Cooperative approaches have great potential to nurture social and political participation, knowledge and community.

Commons

Social infrastructure that is a prerequisite for equality and democracy should be provided by the public sector. Integration and equality is promoted when people are given equal conditions and opportunities to move, work, meet, access information, healthcare and education.

Diversity

To enable social diversity, many different types of specific activities and locations must be encouraged, rather than searching for a generic style "one-size-fits-all".

3.2 Changes in the labour market

The contemporary labour markets are changing, and today there are obvious trends towards a growing proportion of freelance workers, short-term employees and one-person firms. Individuals and businesses are more geographically mobile than ever before, and with new communication technologies, work can be done at any time and from anywhere.

As a result of this, work is increasingly carried out from homes, cafes, libraries and so on. This "workplacelessness" means that many people today lack access to the community, stability and skills development of a

workplace¹. This situation calls for new types of political analyses and initiatives.

In many industries, long-term employment is a distant memory, and there are significant differences in the securities and benefits between the employee and the entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs are cherished in the political discourse, but there are few substantial efforts to improve the precarious situation that it implies to "do-it-yourself".

The increased amount of small businesses and freelancers can at best lead to a greater variety of activities and at worst a negative competition that has implications for both quality, working environment and social security.

Running your own business or working freelance, with the flexibility and mobility that it can imply, is for many people a desirable situation. This work situation is often characterized by a strong commitment and a great possibility to influence how, when and where the work is conducted. At the same time, this freedom can lead to more complicated and precarious aspects such as uncertainty regarding future ventures and income, the feeling of always having to be available, more time spent on administration and budgeting, and a precarious existence in relation to the social support structures.

In this context, we believe that The Public Office has great potential to be stabilizing, strengthening, and productive in numerous respects. For many people, having a workplace would also make it easier to separate work from personal life; to be able to go to – and leave – a workplace, can contribute to better concentration and efficiency. Another important aspect, is that The Public Office can provide a common context for people who often feel that they must do everything themselves. There is considerable knowledge and information that is currently lost, that "escapes", in that there is no functioning forum for sharing.

Belonging to a community could be understood as essential for constructing an image of oneself as capable of influencing ones own situation and a larger context. Many freelancers admit to a sense of lack of belonging, and a difficulty in establishing oneself in new environments. This is especially valid for graduates, job seekers, people

¹ It is difficult to say exactly how widespread the "workplacelessness" is, and according to Statistics Sweden (Statistiska Centralbyrån) and the Work Environment Authority (Arbetsmiljöverket), there are no current statistics on the issue.

who have recently arrived in a new country or city, or who for other reasons lack access to relevant networks.

Working side by side, without necessarily working on the same project, is a good way to build skills, exchange information and access feedback, advice and support. In a time when most professionals spend much of their time behind a computer and in digital environments, it is important to stress the significance of a spatial community; to take a break together with others, to discuss current issues as well as business and project ideas.

3.3 Public meeting places and the right to work

In the contemporary welfare state, public spaces are provided, protected or subsidized – spaces where people can meet, sit down, take a walk, engage in educational and cultural activities etc. – without requiring a financial transaction in a direct sense. These spaces and places form an infrastructure that promotes equal opportunities for knowledge, culture, leisure and mobility.

Public places have the potential, through their availability, to create environments where a variety of people can feel welcome. The idea of The Public Office suggests that the opportunities provided to citizens through The Right of Public Access, public schools, libraries, cultural centres etc., should also cover the spatial and physical aspects of people's working lives, given the development of labour markets and changes in the forms of work outlined above. In this situation, it is relevant to apply formulations of equal rights to work and fair working conditions:

*"The right to work is not an unconditional right to a job, but an obligation on states to take measures designed to eliminate unemployment. Everyone has the right to just and favourable conditions of work, including remuneration that is reasonable and sufficient to provide families with an existence worthy of human dignity, and to equal pay for equal work. In addition, everyone should have secure and healthy working conditions and opportunities for promotion."*²

² See: Right to work (www). Quote from the Swedish government website on Human Rights, <http://www.manskligarattigheter.se/en/human-rights/what-rights-are-there/right-to-work>. Published 17 April 2012, retrieved 12 July 2012.

3.4 Public meeting places in local development

Many cities and municipalities have realized the need for different types of forums and meeting places, a need that is created in part by the increased mobility of people and businesses. Many municipalities are actively working to identify and develop strategies to create different types of contemporary meeting places. These venues are considered by many to be crucial for developing the local environment and make it more attractive.³

The ability to work in close proximity to one's home could be an argument for city districts and municipalities that want to develop local participation and increase the quality for residents. In the longer term, Public Offices could thereby help to reduce the currently increasing commuting-time, thus reducing environmental impact.

The urban environment requires different types of milieus that create conditions for meetings and social interaction. Since the working life of many people today is characterized by social interaction and professional networking, it seems relevant to develop accessible, social meeting places for work. Thus The Public Office could assist people and businesses that are new to a city or city district, to more quickly find community and build connections.

Many municipalities and city districts are working hard to attract businesses and companies to establish themselves. A structure of Public Offices is in this respect, based on the use of the flows and activities that already exist. In many neighbourhoods, there are large numbers of entrepreneurs, businesses, cultural workers, NGOs and activities that are not visible, because the work is carried out in homes or in cafes. Local Public Offices would provide a framework that can be filled by existing local businesses, which in turn would stimulate the local environment by becoming visible, by coming together, and by interacting. The Public Office thus has the potential of functioning as a catalyst for opportunities for collaboration and innovation amongst a shared community setting.

³ See Mötesplatser i Stockholmsregionen – Rapport 2:2010, published by Regionplanekontoret Stockholms Läns Landsting (Office of Regional Growth, Environment and Planning) 2010.

4 The vision of The Public Office

4.1 What is a Public Office in practice?

A Public Office is an open and rent-free work and meeting place in which citizens have the opportunity to engage in work and further education.

The foundation of The Public Office consists of an open workplace with free access to the internet, electricity, and basic office equipment. Separate meeting rooms and computers on loan can be reserved free of charge. The Public Office can be used for regular or temporary work.

The Public Offices may have one or more employees, who welcomes and introduces users to the site and its functions.

Print, copy, phone and fax, as well as access to lockers, mobile drawer units or storage spaces can be provided as 'Pay-Per-Use' services.

In direct connection to The Public Office there should be a staffed cafe where the user can pause, socialize and make connections. The cafe can be run in cooperation with existing local cafes, bakeries and so on.

Opening hours are proposed to be 8:00 to 22:00 on weekdays and 10:00 to 18:00 on weekends.

4.2 User groups

Since The Public Offices are proposed to be public places, they are by definition open to all. The analysis underlying this proposal is essentially based on the increased proportion of freelance and precarious work⁴ and a vision of social inclusion through workplace communality. Earlier in the report we have discussed the ways in which The Public Office would constitute support for freelance workers, short-term employees and entrepreneurs. In this section, we will discuss additional user groups that would also benefit from The Public Office. The great potential in terms of users, is precisely the possibility of diversity.

⁴ See Precarious work (www). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precarious_work. Published 8 June 2012.

- People with employment working flexible hours or from home may find important values in having access to a nearby site dedicated to work, and in the opportunity to meet other people.
- Being unemployed and looking for work involves a lot of administration. For job seekers, being in an environment where others are working could have motivational effects, while at the same time offering practical opportunities to establish new professional contacts and develop one's professional skills. The Public Office has the ability to reduce the segregation implied in being outside of the labour market.
- NGO's and non-profit associations are important parts of a local community. Conducting social and non-profit activities involves work requiring professional knowledge and a relevant work situation. Allowing social, non-profit or NGO activities to coexist with other professional and commercial activities should have positive effects on the level of knowledge and exchange of ideas, as well as regarding participation in civil society. The local civil society is also a fundamental factor in developing and spreading a greater local and democratic engagement within a community, and The Public Office would put this commitment into contact with various types of activities.
- People who study can have an enriched experience by coexisting in professional environments. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to students' future establishment – or parallel activities – in the labour market.
- Homeless people need to regularly be in contact with authorities, have opportunities for job training, as well as access to meaningful activities and community. In this respect, The Public Office can function as a welcoming place for people who otherwise are excluded from professional environments and social contexts in which they can meet enterprising individuals. The open commons which The Public Office constitutes, proposes that the community needs more places in which people from different community groups can coexist, see each other, and interact.
- In many respects, our contemporary society is suffering from a strong age segregation. People of all ages are engaged in various types of projects, and most often thrive in the company of others. Many pensioners testify to a great shift in self-image when there is suddenly no job to go to, and a sudden lack of context. Similarly, active young people are often directed to exclusively youth-related activities, such as sports or youth centres.

The Public Office has the potential to be a place where people of different ages can partake in projects, discussions or daily administration together.

4.3 Ownership forms and guidelines

In order to achieve a variety of environments, activities and approaches, we advocate a mix in terms of forms of organization and modes of operation.

We believe it is important that policy-makers encourage and welcome initiatives where independent players are commissioned to design and run activities, such as The Public Office. Our proposed model is that The Public Offices are run by local actors, individually or jointly, and that they can apply for conducting the activity on behalf of the public sector. The operators form and develop activities based on an analysis of the local contextual needs and possibilities.

It should also be possible for a local government and municipal institutions, such as libraries and culture centres, to initiate and run Public Offices, as well as property and housing companies. In most cases it should be possible and beneficial to find forms of cooperation between local actors from civil society, NGO's, businesses, property companies and municipal services.

Suggested guidelines

- the Public Offices shall respect human rights, and strive for equal opportunities for all user groups and individuals
- basic access and activities shall be free of charge, open to the public and not restricted to certain groups
- the openness of the site is regulated, similar to libraries, through clarifications on respectful conduct, such as prohibition against discrimination, violence, threats, drugs and alcohol
- activities are to be designed in close dialogue with the local civil society, businesses and cultural life, and the site's users shall be offered opportunities to make proposals for activities and functions
- the Public Offices shall have staff with the capacity and skills to welcome and assist users, and who are able to evaluate and develop the daily operations and business form

- the premises must be suitable for persons with disabilities
- activities shall be designed according to local needs and opportunities, and engage in context-specific efforts to ensure both general accessibility and exchange, as well as a good working environment
- activities shall at every level, consider aspects of sustainable development and long term use of resources
- a diversity of staff and decision-making bodies should be sought; in terms of sex, gender identity or gender expression, ethnicity, religion or creed, culture, functionality, sexual orientation and age
- the Public Offices are to facilitate and help all users to meet, support and allow each other to use the site and its functions.

4.4 Forms of funding

How each individual Public Office is financed will likely take different forms, but the idea is based on the existence of a public commitment that enables the operation. In some places it will be possible to produce revenue, set up local partnerships with businesses, etc.. We also see opportunities for housing companies and property owners to gain interest in leasing premises inexpensively or lending them for free for periods of time, while other situations will require a comprehensive public funding support.

This means that the proposal, to achieve a broad impact, requires a political condition where financial support for The Public Office can be applied for in a similar manner as activity support for cultural businesses. The support structures need – to a greater extent than is currently the case for cultural activities – to guarantee serious long-term planning to secure professional operation.

Reasonably, the primary financial responsibility should be placed on local/municipal authorities, with support from the state policy level. It is also possible to envisage that the project is initiated from the state level, in the form of a governmental investigation or an official commission of cooperation between relevant authorities and agencies.

4.5 Form and content of the activities

The aim is that the different Public Offices in total can provide a variety of environments that can attract different user groups, and in this regard it is important to grant the offices a significant degree of freedom to develop specificities.

The activities should be rooted in local and context-specific needs and opportunities. Some Public Offices may have regularly organized activities, and conduct specific activities based on an analysis of the context, while other offices may invite users to self-organize events such as lectures, reading groups, etc.. In some contexts it may also be advantageous to coexist with, or host, other types of activities run by local players, such as clothing and tool libraries, free stores, networking initiatives and so on.

The idea of The Public Office is essentially about taking advantage of existing flows and resources; people's movements in a specific area, entrepreneurs and employees working separately in their homes, the voluntary sector and municipal activities. We therefore see an advantage for local development if a substantial share of the Public Office employees and decision-making groups etc., reside in the area. This is to promote stronger local ties as well as to facilitate encounters between different cultural groups in a particular area.

5 Suggestions for forms of operation

In this section we discuss three main suggestions for forms of operation.

5.1 Establishment of The Public Office as a new institution

The Public Office can be established as a new local institution in urban development projects. Where residential and commercial buildings are planned, The Public Office can be included to increase the area's appeal as a workplace and living environment. The forms of this planning can be achieved through cooperation between the municipality, the urban developer, housing companies, local civil society and businesses, existing libraries or cultural institutions, and so on.

The offices should not require new or specific buildings, but may, for example, be planned on the ground floor of a new block of flats or in other types of available 'Mixed-Use' spaces.

5.2 Use of temporarily available spaces

The Public Office can be housed in spaces that are empty for a period of time. In many cities there are sites of various size and function that remain unused for a number of years, awaiting a new tenant, renovation or political decision.

This strategy, using the unused spaces, holds great potential especially in terms of using existing resources and activating sites that might otherwise spread a sense of desolation and decay. This strategy proposes that temporary initiatives have positive and long-term impacts on a neighbourhood and its inhabitants.

Some unused sites would probably need renovation in order to accommodate a public workplace, but the solution as a whole should be beneficial for the users, property owners and local communities. We therefore consider the proposal of accommodating The Public Office in temporarily unused spaces to be promising for a wide range of stakeholders to invest in.

5.3 Expansion of the mandate of existing institutions

Since many aspirations and approaches regarding The Public Office coincide with public libraries, there is reason to inquire into possibilities of incorporating The Public Office in the library structure. To some extent, libraries are already offering places to work and study. However, we believe that The Public Office needs a greater volume and a specific architecture and structure to provide an effective public workplace.

According to this proposal, the public libraries would be granted an extended mandate; to house Public Offices adjacent to the existing library spaces. In practical terms, this could mean that libraries receive support to expand or develop their facilities and operations. Existing structures for library cards, internet access and user information administration can also be used by The Public Office.

It is also possible to envision The Public Office being housed in other types of public cultural institutions; culture centres, performing arts venues, museums and so on. Public cultural institutions, especially the ones devoted to the performing arts, tend to have big surfaces, such as foyers, used only at certain times of the day, which could be activated to a much greater extent.

6 The Public Office as a political issue

As a political issue, we believe that The Public Office primarily covers the following policy areas:

Labour

The Public Office has great potential to become a concrete initiative towards job creation and networking, as well as for professional learning and skills development. As the opportunities to work are increasingly dependent on social structures and informal networks, the Public Offices – forming an infrastructure of public workplaces – is an effort to democratize opportunities for work. As a public workplace, The Public Office also has the opportunity to become part of greater integration support initiatives and processes.

Culture

It is a generally accepted political description that members of the arts, culture and the creative industries produce important values – economic as well as social and cultural –, constituting a cornerstone in the descriptions of knowledge and creativity as future markets⁵. However, there are political inconsistencies in how this thesis operates in practice, since few substantial – in relation to the magnitude of the matter – political actions are made to strengthen the "creative core" of the creative industries theories, i.e. the artists and cultural workers. The Public Office would be a tangible and productive effort to strengthen the working conditions and development opportunities of artists and cultural entrepreneurs.

Business

The Public Office would make positive impacts on businesses, as "scattered" competencies and energies can connect, interact and be shared. There are many contexts in which individuals alone perform tasks that would benefit from being organized cooperatively, or depend on personal contacts with people who have the know-how for example regarding information about taxes, budgeting, employer liability, billing, procedures

⁵ See David Karlsson, *En kulturutredning: pengar konst och politik* (David Karlsson & Glänta Produktion 2010 p. 101).

when applying for business development support and cultural support, searching for relevant business contacts and so on. When people with different skills work in the same space, these support processes are helped considerably. Furthermore, The Public Office is expected to constitute a creative and heterogeneous environment that should be able to produce added value for local businesses as well as increasing knowledge levels regarding entrepreneurship.

Education

One of the fundamental ideas of The Public Office is to enable cooperative knowledge processes. We don't primarily expect that all users will collaborate and spontaneously co-organize different events, but co-working with other people in a work community permits an organic professional development in terms of human resources and proximity to other knowledge, experiences and networks.

6.1 The issue of competition with existing businesses

The idea of The Public Office has been met with questions regarding competition problems. A criticism sometimes brought forward, is that The Public Office would make it difficult for existing players who lease workspaces on a commercial basis.

The conclusion of this report, regarding the question of possible distortions of competition, is that all types of public investment affects, facilitates and interacts with different markets. In the end, these are political decisions concerning which infrastructure the community should provide all citizens.

7 The continuation of the project

The next phase of The Public Office project – The Public Office, Part II – takes place 30 October-30 November 2012, in cooperation with The Swedish Museum of Architecture in Stockholm. Over five weeks, a project space in the museum will function as a Public Office. The room is thus open to the public, and those who come to use the office are welcome to work independently or in groups, study, organize lectures, conversations, exchange ideas, make contacts and so on.

The site becomes a base for our further work on the concept of The Public Office, along with invited guests and interested users. We will invite politicians and civil servants, researchers, architects, city planners, artists and representatives of libraries and housing companies. The project period will include lectures, discussions, think tanks, reading groups and meetings, which will explore the concept's potential and political viability.

The project's second phase is invited to be part of the EU project *Special Issue*, with partners in France, Serbia, Spain and Turkey. Special Issue focuses on the publication of discursive practices in the arts sector, and is coordinated by Les Laboratoires d'Aubervillier, Paris.

Project manager for Part II is Johan Thelander.

8 Contact

Please contact Hybris Konstproduktion AB if you have any questions, feedback or ideas.

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