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"Back to the Future": Making the Future Organizational Space from Experience to Imagination and Back

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Abstract
This article explores how the experience of organizational space shapes the enactment of imagined futures of work. While research on future-making emphasizes the value of imagining multiple distant futures, it has paid limited attention to how such futures are grounded in the spatial and experiential realities of everyday organizational life. Drawing on the emerging spatial turn in organization studies and using a longitudinal qualitative case study of a large Italian business association preparing for a major headquarters redesign, we examine how stakeholders engage with their future of work in the context of a major workplace transformation. Our findings identify three future-making trajectories — speculating, projecting, and realizing — each shaped by distinct spatial experiences and stakeholder positions. We also identify two recursive practices — criticizing and aspiring — through which imagined futures loop back to reshape perceptions of present space. We conceptualize this recursive process as unfolding within an emergent *in-between space*, a liminal and processual zone where imagined futures and lived spaces co-construct each other. By positioning space as both a medium and an outcome of future-making, we contribute to the literature on future-making by conceptualizing the spatial path dependency of future enactment.

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Introduction

The distant futures of work and their implications for organizational goal-setting have becoming increasingly important, particularly in light of recent transformations in the ways of working (e.g., the surge in remote work, the adoption of platform technologies).[1] Especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, organizations have been formulating diverse, ambiguous, and potentially conflicting imaginaries regarding how their employees will work and collaborate, as well as the locations where these activities will occur. These imaginaries are "distant" because they broaden the temporal horizon of organizational goals, requiring attention to futures that extend well beyond the bounds of conventional "strategic time."[2] It is acknowledged that the future of work will be influenced progressively by technologies such as artificial intelligence, digital mediation, and mobility, as well as evolving organizational spaces. However, existing literature typically conceptualizes the future of work as "a series of competing fictions"[3] that are difficult to translate into a "realizable course of action."[4] This is because organizations need to work toward a future with actors and technologies that do not yet exist[5] and often view such futures as highly unlikely; therefore, they have only a relatively small impact on present organizational practices or action plans.[6]

Although the future-making literature[7] underscores the importance of imagining multiple alternative futures as driving forces for change, it has overlooked how the spatial, day-to-day enactment of these imagined futures occurs.[8] Based on practice theory, Matthias Wenzel et al.[9] suggest that organizational actors "make" the future as a socially constructed category *in* the present. Nonetheless, current research has not sufficiently explored how spatially situated, mundane practices shape and constrain the actual enactment of distant future imaginaries. This is a significant gap, given that all organizational change is spatially situated and spatially consequential: change shapes, and is shaped by, how people experience the spaces in which they work.[10] To address this gap, we examine how day-to-day spatially situated experiences shape how organizational actors imagine, contest, and attempt to materialize the futures of work. We adopt a process view of space,[11] aligning with the so-called "spatial turn"[12] in organization studies,[13] and conceptualize organizational space as an active medium that participates in the construction of imagined futures. In doing so, we respond to recent calls to investigate the performative, iterative, and material dimensions of future-making.[14] We argue that the day-to-day experiences of the work(space) situate the enactment of "possible future trajectories of action."[15] Accordingly, our article asks: *How does the experience of space shape the enactment of idealized futures of work in a context of change?* We pursue this question through a longitudinal case study of an organization reimagining its headquarters in the context of flexible work transformations. Our unit of analysis is not the realized physical environment itself, but the process of transitioning, namely the future-making practices involved in shaping, contesting, and aligning concrete spatial alternatives with a distant future of work.

Our results show how diverse stakeholders — ranging from insiders to outsiders — envision, negotiate, and respond to imagined futures of work. By focusing on the enactment of these imaginaries through spatial experience,

1 Nicky Dries et al., "Imagining the (Distant) Future of Work," *Academy of Management Discoveries* 10, no. 3 (2024): 319–350, https://doi.org/10.5465/amd.2022.0130.
2 Miriam Feuls et al., "Putting Distant Futures into Action: How Actors Sustain a Course of Action toward Distant-Future Goals through Path Enactment," *Academy of Management Journal* 68, no. 2, (2024): 1–29, https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2022.0257.
3 Dries et al., "Imagining the (Distant) Future of Work."
4 Alice Comi and Jennifer Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts: An Ethnographic Study of a Design Project," *Organization Studies* 39, no. 8 (2018): 1056, https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840617717094.
5 Violina P. Rindova and Luis L. Martins, "Futurescapes: Imagination and Temporal Reorganization in the Design of Strategic Narratives," *Strategic Organization* 20, no. 1 (2022): 200–224, https://doi.org/10.1177/1476127021989787.
6 Ali Aslan Gümüsay and Juliane Reinecke, "Researching for Desirable Futures: From Real Utopias to Imagining Alternatives," *Journal of Management Studies* 59, no. 1 (2022): 236–42, https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12709.
7 For instance, Madeleine Rauch, "Between War and Peace: How Boredom Shapes the Enactment of Idealized Futures in Extreme Contexts," *Academy of Management Journal* 68, no. 3 (2024): 1–32, https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2023.0618.
8 Matthias Wenzel et al., "Future and Organization Studies: On the Rediscovery of a Problematic Temporal Category in Organizations," *Organization Studies* 41, no. 10 (2020): 1441–55, https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840620912977.
9 Ibid.
10 April L. Wright et al., "The Role of Space and Place in Organizational and Institutional Change: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Journal of Management Studies* 60, no. 4 (2023): 991–1026, https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12868; Tina M. Dacin et al., "Navigating Place: Extending Perspectives on Place in Organization Studies," *Organization Studies 45, no. 8 (2024): 1191–1212,* https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406241252944; Kathleen A. Stephenson et al., "Process Studies of Organizational Space," *Academy of Management Annals* 14, no. 2 (2020): 797–827, https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2018.0146.
11 Stephenson et al., "Process Studies of Organizational Space."

we shed light on the recursive relationship between imagined futures and the lived present. Our analysis reveals three distinct future-making trajectories — speculating, projecting, and realizing — each shaped by stakeholders' spatial positioning and institutional roles. We also identify two complementary practices, criticizing and aspiring, through which imagined futures loop back to reframe and reconfigure present space. These dynamics unfold within what we conceptualize as an *in-between space*: a liminal, processual zone where past attachments and future aspirations intersect, and where futures are not predetermined but incrementally made.

These findings bring three main contributions to the extant literature on future-making. First, we uncover the spatially situated and experienced nature of imagining distant futures. In accordance with a practice-based perspective recently proposed by Wenzel et al.,[16] we show how situated spatial practices enact the future of work imaginaries. This future retroactively affects the very experience of space through a mutually constituted relation. In short, we highlight the spatial path-dependency of enacting distant imaginaries.[17] Second, our study adds to research emphasizing the role of stakeholders and their daily interactions in organizations,[18] by recognizing their perspectives and orientations toward the future of work. Third, while existing studies refer to experimental spaces and times for envisioning futures[19] and to transitional zones between distant-future goals and existing solutions in the present,[20] the in-between space conceptualized in this work is a processual and experiential space emerging from stakeholder tensions.

Literature Review: Future of Work, Future-Making and Organizational Space

The future is constructed over time as we go along. In this sense, imagining the future of work is not merely speculative but an attempt to influence future expected outcomes.[21] Imagining the future of work is particularly challenging due to the complex and evolving nature of work tasks and practices. Throughout history, commentators and scholars have imagined and narrated future scenarios about work. For instance, following 9/11, there was a widespread belief that remote work would dominate the future and that homes would complement office spaces.[22] Similar reactions emerged during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic when many commentators forecasted the "end of the office."[23] Such predictions highlight the dual nature of future visions as a means of critiquing the present, often oscillating between utopian and dystopian perspectives, hopes and fears, and idealized or nightmarish worlds. The challenge of imagining the future of work derives from the increasing complexity that characterizes how work is organized both spatially and temporally.[24] In short, the future of work resists linear forecasting: it emerges from contestation, interpretation, and transformation of what is happening today.

In understanding these phenomena, recent scholarship in management and organization studies increasingly engages with the concept of future-making. Future-making is understood as "the work of making sense of possible and probable futures, and evaluating, negotiating and giving form

12 Scott Taylor and André Spicer, "Time for Space: A Narrative Review of Research on Organizational Spaces," *International Journal of Management Reviews* 9, no. 4 (2007): 325–46, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2007.00214.x.

13 Stephenson et al., "Process Studies of Organizational Space"; Tania Weinfurtner and David Seidl, "Towards a Spatial Perspective: An Integrative Review of Research on Organisational Space," *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 35, no. 2 (2019): article no. 101009, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2018.02.003.

14 Comi and Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts"; Rauch, "Between War and Peace"; Krista L. Pettit et al., "Transforming Visions into Actions: Strategic Change as a Future-Making Process," *Organization Studies* 44, no. 11 (2023): 1775–99, https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406231171889.

15 Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What Is Agency?," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 971, https://doi.org/10.1086/231294

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16 Wenzel et al., "Future and Organization Studies."

17 Ibid.

18 Comi and Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts."

19 Pettit et al., "Transforming Visions into Actions."

20 Feuls et al., "Putting Distant Futures into Action."

21 Dries et al., "Imagining the (Distant) Future of Work."

22 Andrew M. Laing, "Re-Thinking Corporate Real Estate After September 11th," *Journal of Corporate Real Estate* 5, no. 4 (2003): 273–92, https://doi.org/10.1108/14630010310812172.

23 Erik Brynjolfsson et al., "COVID-19 and Remote Work: An Early Look at US Data," (working paper no. 27344, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020), https://doi.org/10.3386/w27344.

24 Jeremy Aroles et al., "Mapping Themes in the Study of New Work Practices," *New Technology, Work and Employment* 34, no. 3 (2019): 285–99, https://doi.org/10.1111/ntwe.12146; Susan Halford, "Hybrid Workspace: Re-spatialisation of Work, Organisation and Management," *New Technology, Work and Employment* 20, no. 1 (2005): 19–33, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-005X.2005.00141.x; Fabio James Petani and Jeanne Mengis, "Technology and the Hybrid Workplace: The Affective Living of IT-Enabled Space," *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 34, no. 8 (2023): 1530–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2021.1998186.

to preferred ones."[25] The focus of future-making is on how organizational actors envision, debate, and materially enact future possibilities rather than merely predicting them.[26] This approach shifts the perspective on the future from being placed on an objective timeline to a lived experience continuously shaped by present actions and decisions. Central to this literature is the recognition that futures are not predetermined but emerge through relational and situated interactions among diverse organizational actors.[27] Krista Pettit et al.[28] further stress that future-making involves negotiating shared visions by exploring how strategic change unfolds through recursive cycles of imagining and doing, in which actors engage with uncertain futures in the absence of finalized plans. In this context of imagination, experimentation, and critical reflection about the future, actors continuously reevaluate and potentially transform their current practices.[29] Wenzel et al.[30] conceptualize this process as "path enactment": a recursive navigation of prospective and retrospective considerations, in which imagined futures inform present actions and vice versa.

However, despite extensive engagement with temporal and relational dimensions of future-making, the spatial dimension of future-making remains underexplored. While studies acknowledge the performative role of material artifacts[31] and the affective resonance of future imaginaries,[32] relatively little is known about how spatial experiences mediate the enactment of distant futures. Siavash Alimadadi et al.[33] argue that future visions do not exist in isolation; instead, they are deeply intertwined with the material and symbolic characteristics of the spaces where organizational practices unfold (i.e., the Palace of Westminster, in their case). Alice Comi and Jennifer Whyte[34] recognize four future-making practices—imagining, testing, stabilizing, and reifying—that helped shift the future from an abstract vision into a realizable course of action as reflected in the final design of the architecture project. Similarly, Pettit et al.[35] report how spaces designed for workshops shape the strategizing of the future of work. However, in their case, space corresponds to the space-time of the workshop, which is a moment separate from the organization's everyday activities. These spaces-times between regular organizational activities (i.e., liminal spaces)[36] are recognized as episodic spaces for experimenting with the future, but they are not integrated into everyday strategic decision-making.

Our study intends to bring the space back in.[37] We focus not on abstract design moments or isolated workshops, but on the physical workspace as the lived and situated context through which actors engage with imagined futures. Our premise aligns with the so-called *spatial turn* in organizational studies, which views space not as a static container but as an active agent that shapes and is shaped by organizational processes.[38] This perspective views space as fundamentally shaping how organizational actors perceive their roles, relationships, and activities. Interestingly, Kathleen Stephenson et al. elaborate a processual stance, suggesting that space, more than merely a material container, constitutes "a process that was produced not only through planning but also how organizational members inhabited, occupied, and even imagined it."[39] April Wright et al.[40] further advance this view by outlining four perspectives—functional, situated, experiential,

25 Jennifer Whyte et al., "Making Futures that Matter: Future Making, Online Working and Organizing Remotely," *Organization Theory* 3, no. 1 (2022): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/26317877211069138.
26 Comi and Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts"; Wenzel et al., "Future and Organization Studies"; Rauch, "Between War and Peace"; Pettit et al., "Transforming Visions into Actions." Feuls et al., "Putting Distant Futures into Action."
27 Feuls et al., "Putting Distant Futures into Action."
28 Pettit et al., "Transforming Visions into Actions."
29 Comi and Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts"; Rauch, "Between War and Peace."
30 Wenzel et al., "Future and Organization Studies."
31 Comi and Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts."
32 Feuls et al., "Putting Distant Futures into Action."
33 Siavash Alimadadi et al., "A Palace Fit for the Future: Desirability in Temporal Work," *Strategic Organization* 20, no. 1 (2022): 20–50, https://doi.org/10.1177/14761270211012021.
34 Comi and Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts."
35 Pettit et al., "Transforming Visions into Actions."
36 Mary Concannon and Donald Nordberg, "Boards Strategizing in Liminal Spaces: Process and Practice, Formal and Informal," *European Management Journal* 36, no. 1 (2018): 71–82, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2017.03.008.
37 Taylor and Spicer, "Time for Space."
38 Stephenson et al., "Process Studies of Organizational Space"; Weinfurtner and Seidl, "Towards a Spatial Perspective."
39 Stephenson et al., "Process Studies of Organizational Space," 800.
40 Wright et al., "Role of Space and Place."

and mutually constituted — that reveal the co-evolution of space and organizational change. In particular, they emphasize that change initiatives are spatially situated and spatially consequential: how people experience space on a daily basis can either catalyze or constrain change efforts.

The connection with future-making appears crucial here: if future-making involves positioning visions of the future within the material present, then it is expected that future-making *situates* (as discussed by Wright et al.)[41] organizational changes within the current spatial context or *imbricates* (as described by Stephenson et al.)[42] the significance attributed to the future with daily practices. In short, when workers imagine the distant future of work, they do so from within specific spaces — desks, corridors, meeting rooms — that evoke memories, frustrations, aspirations, and possibilities.

Method

This article reports on a longitudinal qualitative case study of imagining the future of work and workspace within a single Italian organization (hereinafter, the Company). We conducted a series of activities involving a diverse range of stakeholders, including employees at different tenure levels (e.g., clerks, managers, and executives), as well as architecture students. Our analysis is supported by observations gathered through prolonged field engagement and real-time data collection using multiple methods, as inspired by Pettit et al.[43] The analytical focus centered on the process of transitioning, which involves the future-making practices that shape, contest, and align concrete spatial alternatives with desired future scenarios. The Company is preparing for a major re-layout of its headquarters (HQ), driven by the need to accommodate more flexible work arrangements and a desire to rethink the use of office space. Our engagement aimed to support the organization throughout the conceptualization, briefing, and planning phases of the new office, and, together with various stakeholders, envision the future workspace within the broader context of future ways of working. We focus on the conceptualization and briefing phase, as this is the phase where imaginaries are most malleable and open to contestation. We expect that it is here that the relationship between future imaginaries and workspace experience becomes most visible. The overall process began at the start of 2022 and spanned a total of 2 years. At the time of writing, it is still ongoing. This article is based on work that was developed until September 2024. Our work does not cover the final implementation of the redesigned workspace but rather focuses on how future imaginaries are debated and materially expressed through visual artifacts.[44] Our research approach was iterative, involving repeated rounds of data collection and analysis. The method was inspired by the Immersion-Crystallization model.[45] This is an inductive, iterative method that has been adopted primarily in healthcare research offering the advantage of involving stakeholders at multiple phases of research development, including commenting on the results (i.e., member checking). This multi-phase process allows for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. In the context of our study, we adopted it to co-construct future spatial and work imaginaries through collaborative practices. This model

41 Ibid.
42 Stephenson et al., "Process Studies of Organizational Space."
43 Pettit et al., "Transforming Visions into Actions."
44 Comi and Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts."
45 Jeffrey M. Borkan, "Immersion–Crystallization: A Valuable Analytic Tool for Healthcare Research," *Family Practice* 39, no. 4 (2022): 785–89, https://doi.org/10.1093/fampra/cmab158.

aligns with future-making research, which has already adopted practices of stakeholders' involvement in the design of future spaces.[46] Our approach consisted of multiple phases, which we articulate in the paragraphs below, following an introduction to the research context.

Context of the Study

The Company is the largest business association within the General Confederation of the Italian industry. They represent over 6,800 member firms located across different territories in the Lombardy region (northern Italy). Overall, the members account for about 420,000 employed people. Their primary job is to support local firms in enhancing their operations and promoting sustainable development. Therefore, the Company is not merely a business association, but plays a crucial role as a historical, political, and economic institution capable of shaping the industrial and innovation ecosystem of Milan, the Lombardy region, and, more broadly, Italy. As such, the mission and vision of the Company entail continuous efforts to open its headquarters to citizens while reinforcing the symbolic and civic relevance of the institution.

The Company's headquarters (HQ) is located in the city center of Milan and hosts approximately 250 employees; it offers a wide range of services to its associated members. In addition, the company has five other local offices, which host a limited number of employees and are located in the surroundings of Milan.[47] In 2021, the executive committee initiated a transformation of work arrangements that involved the entire workforce, in light of recent changes in working practices induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. This transformation allowed employees to work flexibly 3–4 days a week at the HQ, with the remainder of the week spent working from home or other locations, depending on their tasks and team requirements. As a result, the employees profoundly changed how they used the HQ, to the point that the Company embraced the opportunity for a re-layout project. Without any intention to relocate from the current building and explore alternative locations, the Company sought our advice to align the new flexible work arrangements with the future office space layout. The main drivers of the re-layout were (1) optimizing space utilization, (2) aligning with the new flexible arrangements that required frequent video calls and hybrid activities with people working remotely, and (3) rethinking the future of work in the Company through new spatial arrangements. Broader implications were also considered in the way this organization imagines its spatial and organizational distant future, which can have ripple effects beyond its employees — influencing imaginaries and practices among associated firms, political actors, trade unions, and regulators.

The HQ Building

The HQ building was built in the 60s by the renowned architect Gio Ponti (Figure 1).

The building has six floors above ground and a Congress Center in the basement. The Congress Center was renovated in 2020–21 and is now open to the public for events, conferences, and public hearings, which reinforces

46 Comi and Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts."

47 The majority of the Company's employees (59%) are women. 33% of the employees are between 51 and 60 years old, followed by those aged 41–50 (28%) and 31–40 (23%). Regarding educational background, 37% hold a master's degree, 30% have a high-school diploma, and 20% possess a doctorate or master's level qualification. 64% of the Company's employees are clerks, followed by managers (22%), and executives (10%).

Figure 1
The external façade of the building. Photo by the authors.

the institution's symbolic and civic relevance. The upper floors are reserved for the Company workforce and were renovated in the early 2000s, when the fit-out was updated, the original furniture was substituted, and the main plants were replaced. With approximately 130 rooms, accommodating a total of 200 workstations, and 20 meeting rooms, the current layout features the typical organization of a standard office. Except for the basement and the top floor — reserved for executive meetings — all five intermediate floors have a similar layout (Figure 2). The layout is characterized by enclosed spaces, mostly private offices and a few meeting rooms, with windows facing either the street or a central courtyard. A ring corridor with doors opening on both sides connects the rooms.

Every floor has around 25 offices (from 1–4 people each). Each employee has their own assigned desk under a hierarchical arrangement in which single rooms are reserved for executives and managers, while clerks occupy offices shared by 2–4 people. Each floor is equipped with one large meeting room that seeks 18–20 people and two to five medium-sized meeting rooms that seat 8–12. Each floor also has one small service-break area with vending machines and two print areas. Level 5 has a slightly different layout, housing the Presidency, General Management, and a connection with level 6, which contains conference and meeting rooms. According to the Company's mission, the HQ frequently hosts institutional meetings of member enterprises, as well as meetings with relevant clients and partners such as unions, political institutions, public entities, and other associations. Therefore, the building is accessed daily not only by the Company's employees but also by a wide variety of users, including entrepreneurs, managers, technical experts, and consultants. People come here to attend daily meetings, seminars, training sessions, and conferences, among other activities.

Figure 2
Typical floor plan and photos of the interiors (from left to right: a shared office, the break room with copy and vending machines, and a meeting room). Images courtesy of Summer School students.

Data Collection

We collected different types of data. The process of data collection was conducted by three researchers (two of whom are the authors of this article). We used multiple data sources, including observations of workshops, interviews, focus groups, general site observations, and archival documentation such as Company presentations and organizational charts. To support these qualitative data, we administered two online surveys to the entire Company population: the first received 153 responses (a 60% response rate) and the second received 243 responses (a 98% response rate). The surveys provided baseline data on employees' perceptions of their current workspaces and their ideas for future work modes. The results of the two surveys served as input for the following activities, which engage various stakeholders. These activities involved both actors who would be directly affected by the redesign of the workspace (i.e., insiders) and others external to the process (i.e., outsiders, who were "distant" from being affected). We approached them at multiple points in time (see Table 1).

From within the Company, executives, managers, and clerks were invited at various stages to imagine and shape the future workspace through focus groups, interviews, and workshops. Throughout the process,

Table 1 **Overview of the data collection process.**

Time	Data collection method	Aim of the data collection phase	Time frame
June 2022	Survey first round (153 responses out of 253 employees); analysis of archival documents (company presentations and organizational charts)	Understanding employees' satisfaction with flexible work arrangements and current spaces. This contributed to compiling baseline data for the subsequent step and an understanding of the Company's values, activities, and meanings.	Present
July 2022	Workshops with 25 students and 3 executives	Producing spatial solutions (mood boards and cards) from baseline data.	Present to Future
April–June 2023	Survey second round (243 responses out of 254 employees)	Understanding the present and future vision of work. This contributed to the composition of baseline data for the subsequent step.	Present to Future
May 2023	Short interviews with 19 executives and managers	Exploring the future vision of work.	Present to Future
May–July 2023	Prototyping study with a student (master's thesis) and workshops with 25 students and 3 executives	Producing alternative spatial scenarios (mood boards and cards) from baseline data for the subsequent step.	Future
July 2023	Focus groups with 7 executives and 9 employees	Understanding employees' experience with present and future spatial scenarios.	Future to Present

they embodied the interests of those utilizing the building for the foreseeable future and, simultaneously, were accustomed to a specific workplace configuration for an extended period. Consequently, we discuss their profound attachment to the current modes of working and workspace arrangements, which serve as a valuable resource for exploring the dynamic relationship between organizational spaces and the process of future development.

From outside the Company, we engaged (1) participants of a Summer School focused on workplace design and management and (2) a graduate student working on a master's thesis related to workspace design briefing. Workshops conducted with students served as a basis for prototyping potential design solutions for the HQ (see next section). As outsiders, they will not be directly affected by the outcomes of envisioning a future of work and workspace; therefore, they are less likely to be emotionally invested in the physical space. Nevertheless, their involvement throughout the process was facilitated by initial engagement with employee survey data, site visits, and inputs from organizational actors. However, they lack direct experience of the space and do not perceive themselves as being directly influenced by its new configuration.

All phases of data collection received approval from the Company's human research ethics committee. The multiple phases of data collection are summarized in Table 1. Since future-making entails making sense of the future by leveraging present actions, each data collection phase focused on a specific time frame: either the present time, the future, or a transitional phase between the two.

In the sections below, we provide a more in-depth explanation of how we structured workshops with both insiders and outsiders, as well as focus groups and interviews with insiders.

Prototyping Workshops with Students

A series of workshops was organized with architecture and design students attending a Summer School on workplace design and management in July 2022 and 2023, each comprising 25 participants. These workshops aimed to support the prototyping of inventive spatial solutions based on the insights gained from the surveys. The students, working in groups of three to five people, were tasked with imagining how the future organizational space could meet employees' needs and preferences while also incorporating the latest trends in workplace design. The 2023 cohort worked independently from the outcomes of the 2022 group. Each student group was briefed on the previous activities and the data gathered up to that point. Namely, students from 2022 had the opportunity to work on the findings from the first survey, while those from 2023 developed their prototypes based on the results of the second survey and on the reports from short interviews conducted by the researchers with executives and managers. Figures 3–5 present some examples of the future scenarios developed by students. During the workshops, the students visited the Company's spaces and interacted with employee representatives to ask questions and clarify survey findings. To elaborate on future scenarios, the groups adopted several methods, such as analysis of present zoning and proposal of future zoning for one of the floors (Figure 3), a characterization of present and future user personas (Figure 4), and examples of scenarios for incremental spatial transformation for the HQ (Figure 5).

A similar task was assigned to an architecture student to elaborate on her master's thesis. As part of her master's study, she had sole responsibility for analyzing the survey data. Later, she produced three alternative scenarios for the future workspace of the Company based on her interpretation of the survey results, benchmarks, and references available in the literature on workplace design. The scenarios included three distinct layouts (Figures 6–8). All three scenarios assume an Activity-Based-Working (ABW) model with different space utilization coefficients and varied proportions of collaborative spaces compared

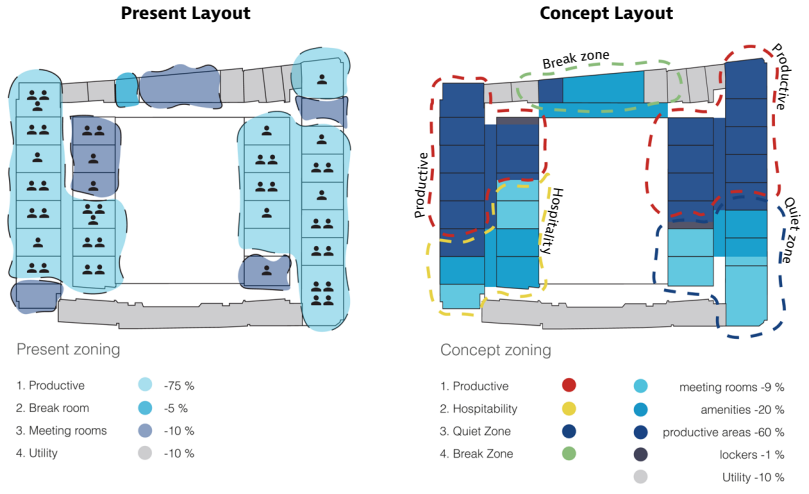

Figure 3
Examples of students' zoning analysis for the Company HQ. Image courtesy of Summer School students.

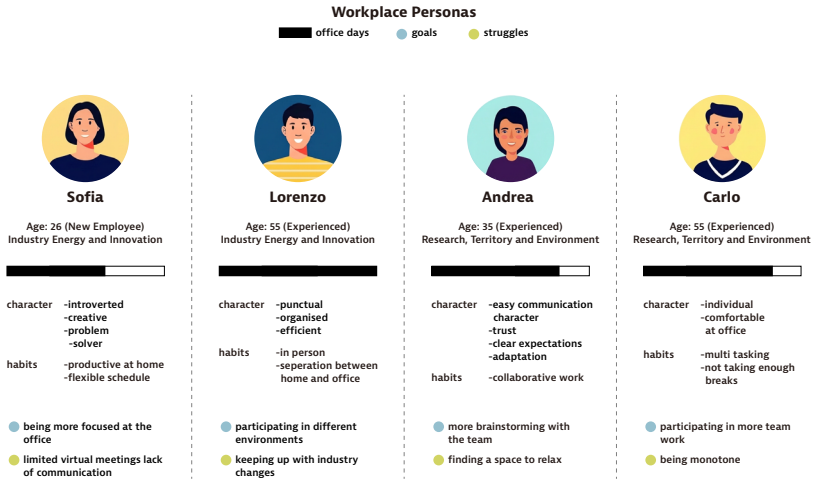

Figure 4
Examples of user persona analysis. Image courtesy of Summer School students.

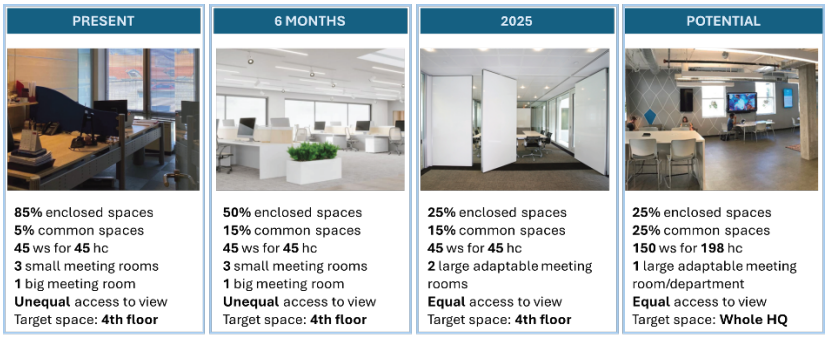

Figure 5
Examples of the spatial transformation process for the HQ. Image courtesy of Summer School students.

to individual workstations. The Activity-Based-Working model implies that, rather than having an assigned office desk, an employee can choose among a variety of work areas depending on the task and activity.[48] Literature reports that the Activity-Based-Working model can induce some tensions and paradoxes in the use of a few spatial elements.[49] While improving communication, interactions, and control of time and space, it can be found unfavorable for concentration and privacy.[50] The contentious aspects of these spatial solutions served as a catalyst for discussion during focus groups. Scenario I (Figure 6) assumes 100% of employees working from the office, with 224 workstations accommodated in a more open layout. Scenario II (Figure 7) assumes 80% of employees in the office, reduces the number of workstations to 186, and adds three support areas: an informal meeting space, a one-to-one meeting area, and a small meeting room. Scenario III (Figure 8) is based on 60% employee presence, with 148 workstations, and introduces five support areas: two informal meeting spaces, two one-to-one meeting areas, and one small meeting room.

Finally, we selected some of the scenarios produced by the students and used these to create cards featuring different spatial elements (e.g., phone booths, break areas, touch-downs, and spaces arranged for spontaneous, and informal

48 Anu Sivunen and Linda L. Putnam, "The Dialectics of Spatial Performances: The Interplay of Tensions in Activity-Based Organizing," *Human Relations* 73, no. 8 (2020): 1129–56, https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719857117.

49 Ibid.

50 Lina Engelen et al., "Is Activity-Based Working Impacting Health, Work Performance and Perceptions? A Systematic Review," *Building Research & Information* 47, no. 4 (2019): 468–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/09613218.2018.1440958.

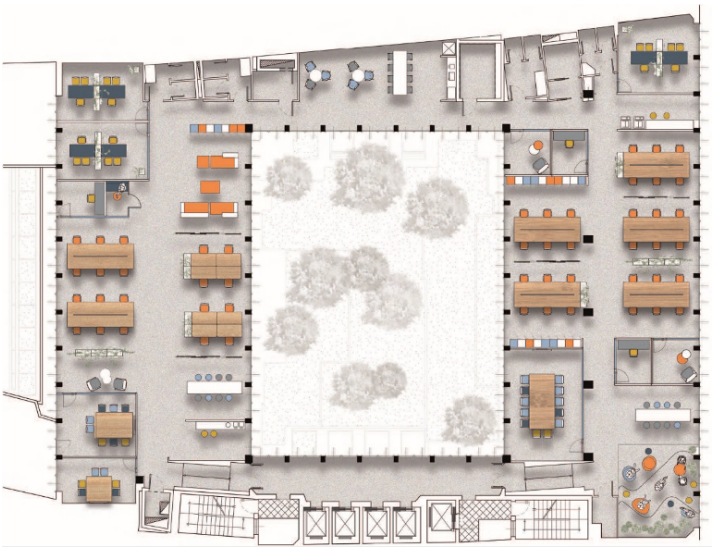

Figure 6
Scenario I, 100% of employees working from the office. Image courtesy of the student's master's thesis work.

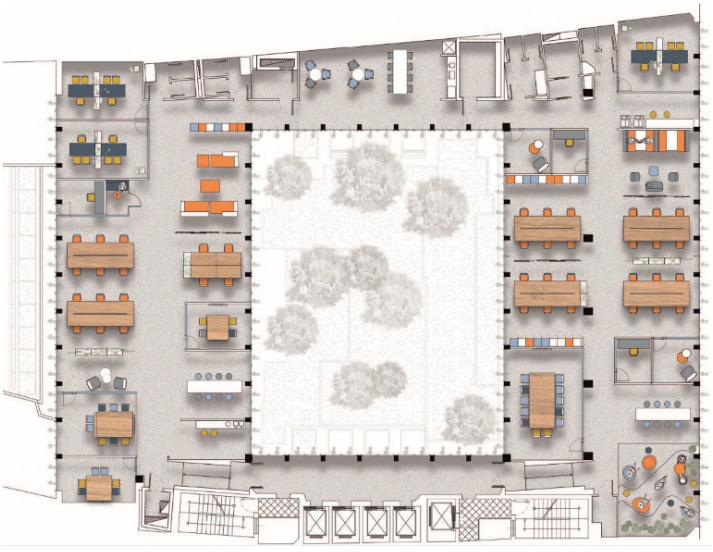

Figure 7
Scenario II, 80% of employees working from the office. Image courtesy of the student's master's thesis work.

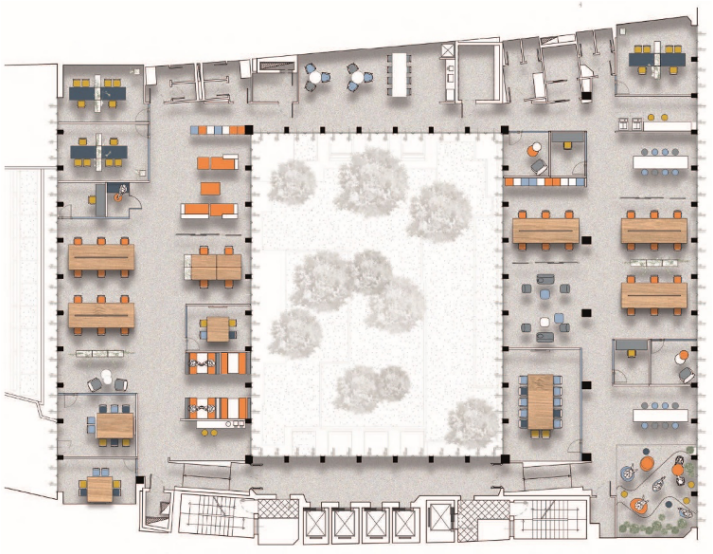

Figure 8
Scenario III, 60% of employees working from the office. Image courtesy of the student's master's thesis work.

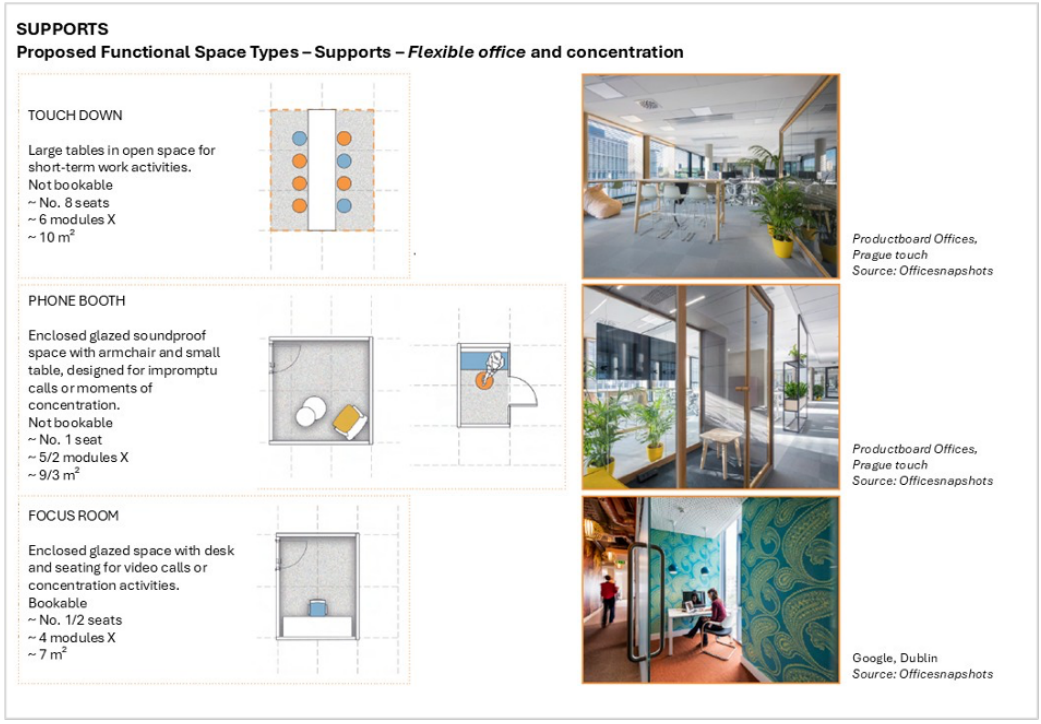

Figure 9
Examples of space cards used in the focus groups, developed by the authors based on students' work.

meetings) that would serve to envision the future workspace (Figure 9). These cards were used during the focus groups to stimulate new visions, starting from provocative spatial solutions that radically differ from the present space.

Focus Groups with Employees and Executives

Following the workshops with students, three focus groups were conducted with employees to collect their visions about the future workspace. We conducted these focus groups at the HQ. Our recruitment strategy was purposeful, aiming to include employees who varied in terms of gender, tenure, and affiliation with different business units. The three focus groups included participants based on their role in the organizational chart. The first two involved clerks, whereas managers and executives attended the third. First, this separation was functional in avoiding influences between people at different tenure levels and ensuring the possibility of freely sharing their ideas without fear of judgment or the need to respect specific power dynamics with superiors. Second, the separation reflected some of the questions to be discussed. The clerks were encouraged to reflect on their current and future approaches to working and undertaking both individual and collaborative daily tasks. Conversely, managers and executives were asked to share their visions for the future by reflecting not only on expected changes in their own work tasks and styles, as well as those of their groups, but also on prospective plans for the evolution of work across different business units. Each session included 6 to 9 people, following the recommendations by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke.[51] The discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes.

51 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Each focus group followed a similar pattern. First, we introduced participants to flexible work arrangements and workspace design trends and collected their forecasts on plausible futures and desirable ways of working. Then, we presented the three scenarios of a plausible future plan for the Company's office, prepared during prototyping sessions with the students (Figures 6–8). The participants were asked to imagine their future ways of working in these new spaces by speaking aloud to share their comments and articulate their reactions in written Post-it notes (Figures 10 and 11). In a

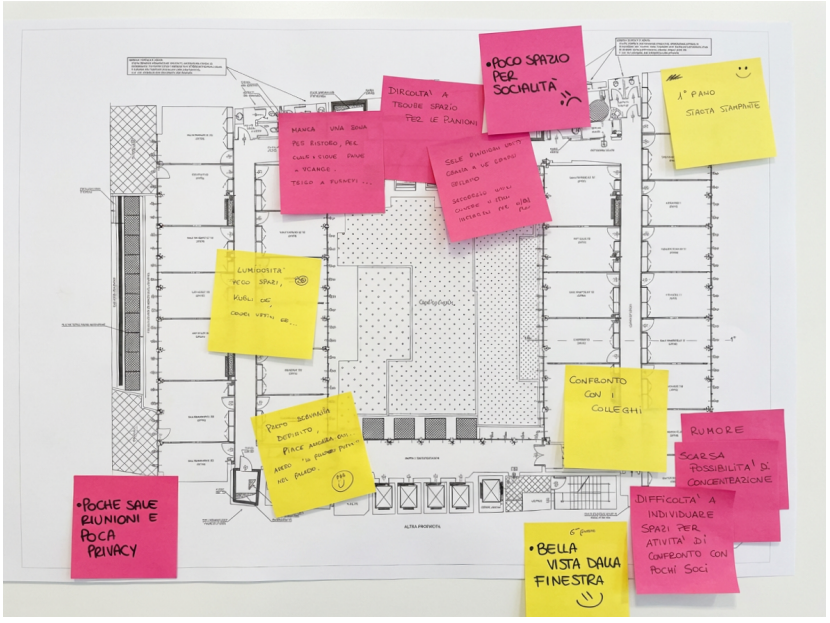

Figure 10
Comments from the focus group participants based on the current workspace layout. Photo by the authors.

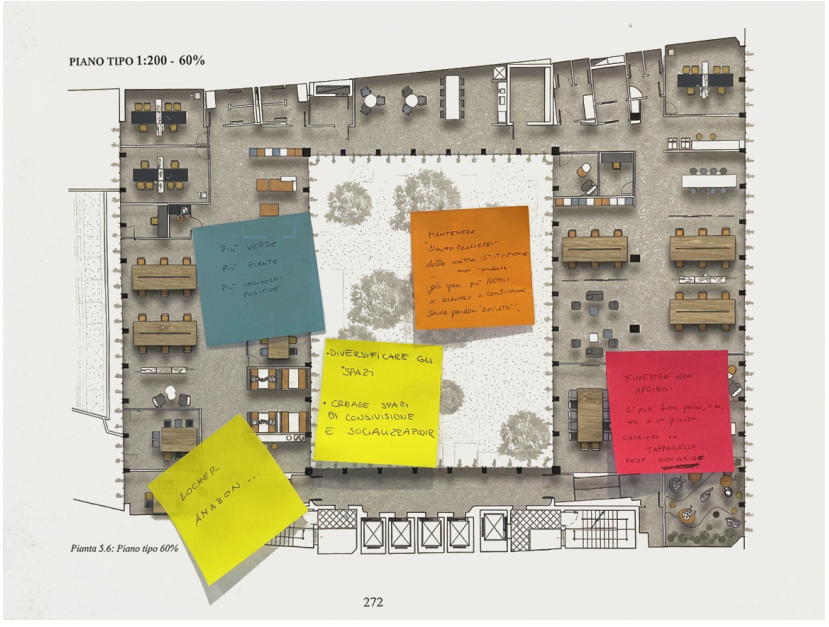

Figure 11
Comments from the focus group participants based on future workspace scenarios. Photo by the authors.

52 Borkan, "Immersion–Crystallization."

second moment, we distributed separate cards representing various spaces (Figure 9). The participants were asked to select the spaces they considered most suitable for accommodating their future ways of working and, again, discuss their ideas publicly to compare and contrast their viewpoints. All the discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Meanwhile, we took independent notes during the various activities without interfering in the discussion, except when further comments were necessary to clarify specific statements. We acted as workshop facilitators together with a third colleague.

Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using a combination of qualitative methods inspired by the Immersion-Crystallization process.[52] After data collection, we *immersed* ourselves in the data by examining it iteratively, whether it was students' projects or employees' quotes. Then, *crystallization* entailed suspending the examination and reflecting on the initial results to elucidate themes, patterns, and interpretations. We conducted these first two phases independently. Then, we came together for a discussion and comparison to further abstract the identified themes and find broader meaning in the data (*Creative synthesis*). We finally obtained *corroboration* through mutual examination. When sufficient consensus was reached, we brought our reflections to the focus groups and used those occasions for *member checking*. We analyzed the feedback provided by the Company's personnel, both individually and as a team, to arrive at the *final interpretation*, which resembles data saturation in other qualitative methods.

The final interpretation of all the data was included in a comprehensive written report, which we returned to the Company. In addition to the final report, the overall process yielded multiple outputs. These include (1) alternative floor plans developed by students, offering innovative perspectives on how space can be configured; (2) a portfolio of student projects that explored different design solutions and elements; (3) a design brief along with a set of guidelines, illustrating the link between specific activities and the spaces needed to support them; and (4) a synthetic document highlighting the divergent workspace experiences.

Results

Since the aim of our research was to uncover how experiences of space shape various future-making practices in the context of change, we focus our presentation of results on how different stakeholder groups express their visions of the future, illustrating the different transition processes involved, which have diverged and converged recursively. Below, we present our observations on how (1) the lived and perceived experience of the organizational space from different stakeholder groups shapes future-making trajectories; (2) imaginations about the future shape real, concrete space; and (3) "in-between" spaces situate along a path-dependent process between material presents and future imaginaries.

Table 2 **Emerging future-making trajectories from concrete space experience.**

Future-making trajectories	Stakeholder group	Workspace experience	Attitude toward future-making	Key contributions to future-making	Temporal orientation
Speculating	Outsiders (Students)	Detached from the present space.	Out-of-the-box	Creative and disruptive visions	Distant
Projecting	Insiders (Clerks)	Ambivalent. Fear of change and uncertainty between latent spatial needs and manifested expectations	Cautious	Latent desires, emotional resonance	Intermediate
Realizing	Insiders (Executives and Managers)	Attached to the present space. The status quo is connected to a present privilege	Pragmatic	Critical reflection, awareness of trade-offs	Near-term

Future Imaginations from Concrete Space Experience

The present physical workspace (i.e., how it is used and perceived) shapes the trajectory toward the imagined future. In this section, we illustrate how different future-making enactments are deeply grounded in different workspace experiences. We recognize three main enacting trajectories: (1) *speculating on disruptive futures*, (2) *projecting into evolutionary futures,* and (3) *realizing strategic futures*. These emerge from insiders' and outsiders' stakeholder groups. Some nuanced contrasts enable us to isolate the key contributions to the future from the two groups, as well as the key tensions between them. In fact, interpretations of their temporal orientation, as the distance between the present and the future (and how to get there), were often contrasting. Table 2 summarizes the multiple trajectories that encompass future-making enactment.

Speculating on Disruptive Futures: The Outsiders' Perspective

Students showed a creative and speculative attitude. Their future visions were open, collaborative, and flexible, and they differed significantly from the current spatial arrangements (some of the outputs are presented in Figures 4 and 6). We argue that they acted as "creative disruptors," which brought in outsider perspectives that pushed the boundaries of what the workspace could become. Some of their proposals challenged the Company's status quo, including radically open layouts and new uses of common areas.

Hence, young people demonstrated the ability to think out of the box. It is also intuitive that, as most of them are not familiar with the world of work, they can imagine a future of work independently of past experiences. Even though they had been exposed to multiple examples and cases during the Summer School and their university curriculum in general, their experience remains abstract and mediated by third-party narratives. However, not being personally affected by disruptive design proposals (meaning that they will not work for the Company in the near future) may have sparked their creativity and willingness to develop original solutions. Last, as they elaborated their solutions without members checking, their imaginations remained unaffected by employees' reactions. Their artifacts served as prototypes of the future, helping others envision alternative paths. For instance, one of the students' presentations was titled

"Work Where You Vibe!," which creates the expectation for a very engaging and playful atmosphere in the new spaces. Several groups imagined the renewed HQ as a coworking space where employees of the associated enterprises and the Company would work shoulder to shoulder every day. Others emphasized the potential of the new ways of working in the future HQ as a means to create more space for the local community by opening the building to socially relevant activities (e.g., neighborhood associations, non-profit groups, and places for multigenerational encounters).

Disruptive futures are valuable not because of their desirability or because they correspond to the best prospects for the Company (if such best prospects ever exist), but because they represent far, radically different visions of the future. These futures serve to provoke strong reactions among internal stakeholders regarding whether they find these visions, as well as the present, desirable or not. Essentially, they act as the primary catalyst for initiating the transition process.

Projecting and Realizing: The Insiders' Perspective

The views of insiders reflected a more cautious approach to futures, clearly interdependent with the present. Clerks, managers, and executives generally agreed on certain key elements. When interviewed in the focus groups, the insiders referred to the HQ as "*Palazzo*" (palace in Italian), echoing the distinctiveness and status that are recognized in the building.

These meanings attached to the Gio Ponti-designed building suggest that the HQ is not just an architectural setting but a symbolic artifact that is associated with identity, status, and the collective memory of the Company insiders. Indeed, during the whole change process, the idea of replacing it and moving to a new or different building was never considered. Implicitly, a plausible displacement evokes a latent form of loss in the insiders, which several participants indirectly expressed through resistance, nostalgia, and cautiousness. So attached they are to the actual present, that they expressed their refusal of alternative futures with statements such as: "There must be continuity over time […] because this is what others expect from this organization"; "We can't turn into Google!"; "We can't become an amusement park."

Nevertheless, the insiders' perspective revealed multiple facets about two distinct groups: clerks, on one hand, and managers and executives, on the other. Some diverging perspectives already emerged from the survey results. In particular, the survey reveals that a clerk is, on average, less satisfied with their job compared to a more senior colleague. If general job satisfaction is rated 5.2 on a scale from 1 (totally dissatisfied) to 7 (totally satisfied),[53] clerks reported a score of 4.8, compared to executives and managers who reported a score of 5.6. Interestingly, this measure is related to overall satisfaction with space.[54] This result suggests that clerks are more prone to change and to imagine a different work and spatial environment eventually. At the same time, managers and executives are more likely to accept a future that resembles the present. From the same survey, a vivid difference in the perception of the organizational culture[55] emerged among stakeholder groups. Managers and executives tend to have a relatively lower perception of control compared to clerks. In detail, the former scored −16.6 on a scale

53 Job Satisfaction was calculated through the Overall Job Satisfaction Scale by Brayfield and Rothe, made up of 5 items. See A. Brayfield and H. Rothe, "An Index of Job Satisfaction," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 35, no. 5 (1951): 307–11, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0055617.

54 b=0.38; p value=0.000.

55 For the calculation of Organizational Culture, the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) was used. This instrument conceptualizes organizational culture as an average score between two competing values: flexibility (+100) and formality (–100). Respondents were asked to distribute 100 points across 16 statements, each referring to a component of the scores related to flexibility and formality. The original framework was developed by Quinn & Rohrbaugh in 1981. Robert E. Quinn and John Rohrbaugh, "A Competing Values Approach to Organizational Effectiveness," *Public Productivity Review* 5, no. 2 (1981): 122–40, available at https://cuederconszer1978.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/part-323.pdf.

56 Pettit et al., "Transforming Visions into Actions."

from −100 (=full control) to +100 (=full flexibility), whereas the latter scored −32.2, which indicated a perception of a dominant culture more related to formality and control. Part of the motivation for these differences lies in the type of office to which the employees are assigned. Executives and managers who benefit from single offices tend to have a lower perception of formality, which is intuitive, due to the fact that the space isolates them enough to prevent the feeling of being controlled by others. Conversely, clerks who share the office with peers have less agency on how and when to protect their privacy and reclaim their own space and time when necessary. Further characterization of the two attitudes toward future-making emerged from our qualitative analysis, as described below.

Projecting into evolutionary futures. Clerks inside the organization engaged with future-making from an ambivalent position. While their lived experience of shared workspaces generated a desire for change, their imagined futures remained cautious and grounded in practical concerns. While engaging with future visions, clerks demonstrated to be somewhat doubtful when imagining the future of work and the workspace. Even though the focus groups were arranged without their senior colleagues, a certain degree of fear emerged when they shared their views. Quotes like "I am not sure if this is doable" or "Perhaps I cannot really say this" showed uncertainty as to whether their manifested needs could be truly met and whether their instances would have been taken seriously by the responsible people in the Company. Still, when invited to engage with speculative future scenarios, clerks began articulating abstract aspirations they had not previously shared. These distant visions provided a space to uncover latent needs and desires that would otherwise remain hidden. However, their responses to these visions (Figures 6–8) were also resistant, reflecting discomfort and skepticism. For instance, when commenting on the openness of plausible future layouts one clerk stated "It's positive to move away from the concept of 'mine,'" while another stated "It's important to consider that the workstations shouldn't be too spread out; otherwise, colleagues will be scattered across all floors, and you have to go 'hunting' for people." As Pettit et al.[56] suggest, such emotional responses can serve as productive frictions that surface temporal tensions. In short, they showed apprehension about rapid changes. This condition shaped the clerks' intermediate trajectory of *projecting*: a future orientation that blends aspiration with uncertainty and that is grounded in unresolved spatial tensions.

Realizing strategic futures. Executives and managers shared a skeptical and constrained outlook on future scenarios. Among the others, they were those who manifest a limited ability to disconnect from the present. Indeed, they demonstrated a strong attachment to the Company and the idea of being primary agents of its future. The Company's executives refer to the building as a "local landmark" and as "the house of the entrepreneurs" in Milan since it serves as a major hub and place for encounters, not only for most of the Company's employees but also for all the entrepreneurs in the Lombardy region that are affiliated with the Company. They expressed difficulty in imagining futures unmoored from the present and raised concerns over feasibility, especially regarding increased spatial openness. Their deep

institutional attachment and hierarchical position made them cautious about changes that might threaten established privileges, such as private offices, in the near future. The role of executives and managers is to make concrete decisions about the next strategic steps for the organization. They bear responsibility and accountability for the actualization of the future in practical terms, so that even if they possess a broader perspective on the strategic direction of the organization in the distant future, their temporal perspective is bounded to a closer future, linked to consequential actions. Nevertheless, engaging with alternative and distant futures allowed them to co-construct a space of shared reflection. Open discussion of trade-offs and exposure to peers' interpretations increased awareness of others' needs. This reflects a pragmatic stance aligned with *realizing*: a future-making trajectory that selectively integrates new ideas while safeguarding stability and existing privileges.

Concrete Space from Future Imaginations

The recursive interactions among the various stakeholders involved in the research process foster future imaginaries of work that did not remain abstract projections; instead, they actively shaped how participants reconsidered and redefined space in the present. In other words, we claim a recursive trajectory back to the concrete space, enacted through two complementary practices—*criticizing* and *aspiring*—which served as mechanisms for retroactively evaluating, problematizing, and reconfiguring the current spatial experience.

Criticizing. The practice of criticizing emerges from the perceived misalignment between future imaginaries and the current spatial experience. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with tangible features (e.g., lack of informal meeting areas, inadequate facilities for hybrid meetings, or overly proprietary spatial arrangements) that no longer embody the values or practices envisioned for the future. These critiques surfaced as concrete points of friction[57] between imagined futures and existing spatial forms.

Aspiring. In contrast, aspiring derives from the perceived alignment between their imagined futures and potential spatial forms. This practice reflects a proactive approach toward reconfiguring space to enable desirable values and experiences. This was evident in expressions of support for more flexible layouts, spatial configurations that balance openness with focus, or the introduction of warmer materials and socially engaging areas. Through aspiring, abstract visions became more immediate and actionable, as participants identified spatial elements that could transform the environment in line with their evolving needs.

Together, both criticizing and aspiring illustrate that abstractly imagining and concretely experiencing the future are spatially path-dependent. In particular, the "spatial grip" of these mechanisms surfaced from the statements and claims collected across the various activities involving stakeholders. We can recognize multiple spatial elements that constitute organizational space, among them. We took inspiration from Tania Weinfurtner and David Seidl[58] for aggregating them as meaningful spatial elements: *distribution*, *isolation*, *differentiation*, and *atmosphere*. Namely, *distribution* refers to spatial characteristics that describe the relation of positions within a space (e.g., layout). *Isolation* refers to the distinction between what can happen inside and

57 Feuls et al., "Putting Distant Futures into Action."

58 Weinfurtner and Seidl, "Towards a Spatial Perspective."

Table 3 **Empirical instances of practices that move from the future to the present, grouped by their spatial components.**

	Distribution in space *Relation of positions within a space*	**Isolation of space** *Differentiation of what happens inside a space vs. the outside*	**Differentiation of spaces** *Variety of spaces with different characteristics and structures*	**Atmosphere of space** *Affective and aesthetic qualities of a space*
Criticizing	"I wouldn't want everything to be open; there are too many of us, and it would be distracting." (Clerk) "The open space concept is the opposite of what we want to be." (Manager/executive) "The secretarial staff is difficult to place in an open space due to confidentiality issues." (Manager/executive)	"It's important to consider that the layout shouldn't be too spread out; otherwise, colleagues will be scattered across all floors, making it hard to find people." (Clerk)	"Losing individual space means it can no longer be personalized." (Clerk) "A less proprietary space somewhat compromises the sense of belonging." (Manager/executive) "Movable walls must not be difficult to move." (Clerk)	"Spaces shouldn't be overly creative; we need something more formal with more standard seating arrangements." (Clerk) "We don't want spaces that end up unused (like those in banks)." (Clerk) "We can't turn into Google!" (Clerk) "We can't become an amusement park." (Clerk)
Aspiring	"If office spaces could be more proximate instead, we would have much more room for meetings and gatherings." (Clerk) "My idea is more spaces for everyone but fewer closed offices." (Manager/executive) "Newer employees seem to find more flexible and shared workstations more natural." (Manager/executive) "Some spaces are more convenient to assign, but most can be multifunctional." (Clerk)	"For me, it's essential that the entire sector can meet 100% of the time […] to maintain greater peer-to-peer relations." (Manager/executive) "It's practical for sectors to be separated. Having an entire sector on one floor is very useful." (Manager/executive) "It's important to have at least an area-based allocation logic." (Clerk)	"Meeting rooms […] could also be multifunctional and used for relaxation moments." (Manager/executive) "Phone booths are positive if they are spacious and equipped for focused work, including space for a laptop." (Clerk) "Reconfigurable rooms are helpful, as I've seen in other collaborative spaces, where all rooms were fitted with movable walls and furniture." (Manager/executive) "Informal meeting spaces could be useful (even for external visitors)." (Clerk)	"Transparent, collaborative, and informal spaces are very interesting." (Manager/executive)

outside a space (e.g., the space-activity relationship). *Differentiation* refers to the variety of characteristics and structures that render spaces unique and different from one another. *Atmosphere* refers to the affective and aesthetic qualities of space.

Table 3 samples empirical instances that reflect the two main trajectories connecting abstractly imagining and concretely experiencing the space (i.e., *criticizing* and *aspiring*), as well as their material grounding.

In short, the current spatial context provides not only a material reference point for envisioning alternatives (as described in the previous section) but also sets the constraints and affordances through which future transformations are imagined and enacted. In the following sections, we delve deeper into this processual path.

Back to the Future: Toward an In-between Space

As our findings show, future-making unfolded through recursive movements between the lived experience of organizational space and the imaginaries of potential futures. Stakeholders' perceptions of the present shaped the types of future trajectories they engaged in—whether speculative, projective, or strategic—while their encounters with imagined futures prompted reflection, discomfort, and desire that reverberated back to redefine how the present space was perceived and discussed. In this loop, the future was not simply envisioned from a distance but used as a lens to reinterpret the present. In support of this argument, our observations show that while immersing in the activities proposed during the focus group sessions, participants described the current workspace as almost the exact reciprocal of the envisioned distant futures. The most frequently mentioned words when referring to future spaces were "hospitality," "representation," "privacy," "fun," and "liveliness." Conversely, some of the recurring words mentioned during the focus groups to describe the present workspace were (in no particular order): "formal," "institutional," "individual," "standardized," "closed," "cold," and "non-lived." One argued that the organizational space should be "less rigid to be perceived as more fun." Another said that "we must show that the environment is really lively." It is worth noting that the words chosen to picture the present spaces were all adjectives.

To some extent, this seems to manifest people's closeness to the space. When the space already exists and is experienced in a very practical and material manner, it tends to be described with adjectives that capture its concrete qualities. By contrary, the words used to describe the future were mostly nouns and corresponded to an abstract idealization of the future workspace. When a space has yet to be realized and can only be envisioned through imagination, describing it involves identifying its abstract foundational principles, which can best be conveyed through the use of nouns. These principles do not point to a precise future to be enacted but indicate a potential direction for action.

From this interplay, a third space begins to emerge, neither fixed in the present nor fully attached to the future imaginaries: an *in-between space*. This in-between space is shaped through iterative engagements. Rather than representing a compromise, this space is a liminal zone[59]—a site of ambiguity, transition, and experimentation. Participants did not envision the future as a radically distinct endpoint; rather, they constructed it through the tension between what they no longer accept and what they begin to desire. The in-between is thus not a static outcome but a temporally and spatially emergent zone, where imagination translates into partial, situated interventions. It is through this liminal space that future imaginaries begin to materialize, and present realities begin to bend. In this sense, we reinforce how abstract imagining and concrete experiencing of the future are spatially path dependent: stakeholders' ability to imagine radical alternatives was often anchored in, or constrained by, the spatial and symbolic grammar of the present. And yet, through collective sensemaking and design engagements, new spatial possibilities could be enacted. This evolving relationship is represented in Figure 12, which visualizes how imagined futures and experienced organizational spaces are mutually constitutive.

59 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909).

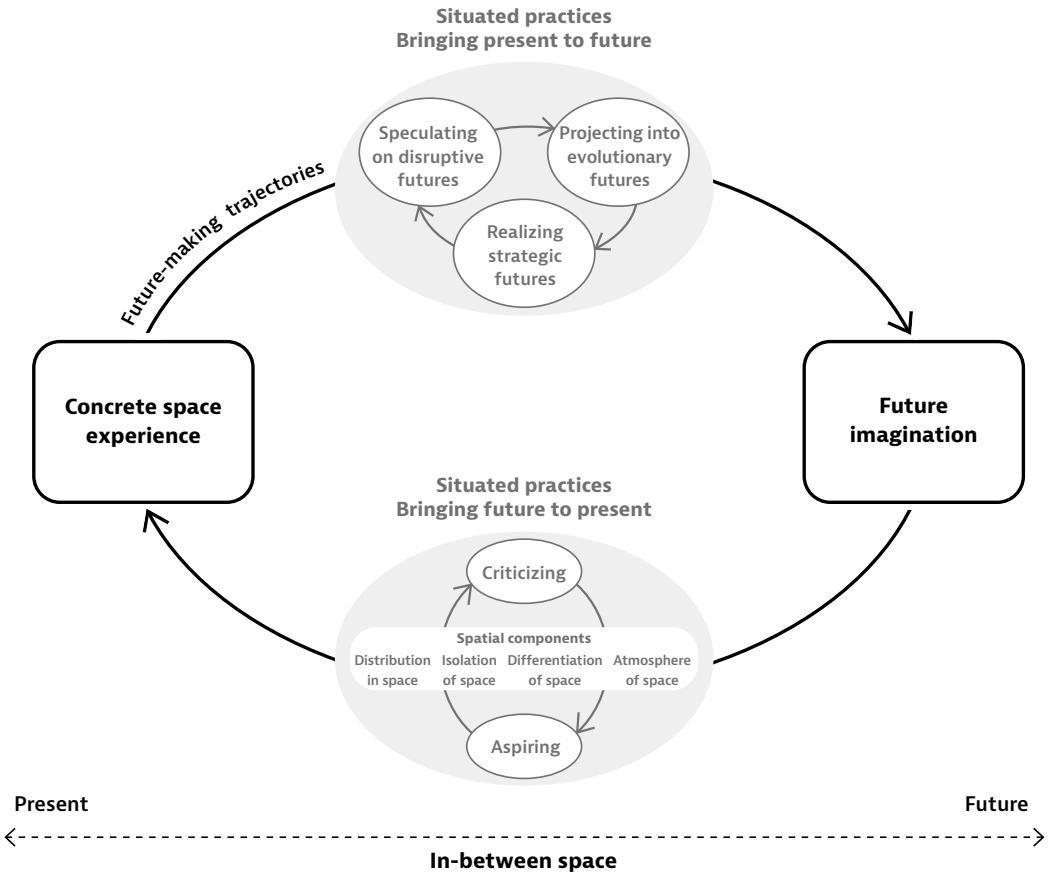

Figure 12
Process diagram: How concrete space experiences shape the enactment of future imaginations, and how future imaginations shape space experience in a context of change.

Discussion

This study explored how the experience of space shapes the enactment of idealized futures of work in a context of change. Drawing on a practice-based perspective on future-making[60] and taking inspiration from the process view of space,[61] this article enhances our understanding of how distant futures can become actionable within everyday organizational life by situating future imaginaries in lived spatial experiences.

Theoretical Contributions

Building on recent calls to understand how organizational actors engage with the future,[62] we focus not on the distant future as an endpoint, but on how imagining alternative distant futures of work becomes a resource for making sense of and act within the present workspace. Accordingly, we contend that the experienced workspace plays a specific role in conceiving the future of work. In particular, the physical space where people work influences how they perceive and respond to stimuli when at work[63] and is integral to both enacting and setting up future ideals.[64] In this study, we propose an empirically derived model (Figure 12) that explains how organizational

60 Wenzel et al., "Future and Organization Studies."
61 Stephenson et al., "Process Studies of Organizational Space."
62 Wenzel et al., "Future and Organization Studies"; Rauch, "Between War and Peace."
63 Jane Lê and Paul Spee, "The Role of Materiality in the Practice of Strategy," in *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice*, 2nd ed., ed. Damon Golsorkhi et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 582–97, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139681032.034.

space serves as both the grounding and the medium for the enactment of future trajectories. Through recursive interactions among stakeholders, we observed how lived spatial experiences—and especially the contradictions among them—conditioned the kinds of futures of work that could be imagined. These futures emerged through three distinct trajectories of future-making—*speculating*, *projecting*, and *realizing*. However, these imaginaries about the future of work did not remain abstract. They looped back into the present, reshaping how space was critiqued and envisioned through two complementary practices: *criticizing* and *aspiring*. We identified four spatial elements—distribution, isolation, differentiation, and atmosphere—through which this recursive dynamic took form. It is worth noting that our data does not capture the final implementation of redesigned workspaces; it instead focuses on how future imaginaries are articulated, debated, and materially expressed through visual artifacts. Crucially, this recursive dynamic did not converge into a fully resolved future vision. Instead, it gave rise to what we call an *in-between space*: a liminal and interstitial zone where stakeholders suspended certainty, tested alternatives, and explored partial commitments. This is not a compromise position, but a productive middle ground where past attachments and future aspirations intersect. It emerged not despite disagreement, but *through it*.

Our model supports (1) the argument that the potential correspondence between abstractly imagining and concretely imagining the future of work is spatially path dependent; (2) the role of multiple organizational actors in building imaginaries about the future of work, and (3) an original critical perspective concerning the function of liminal and interstitial spaces throughout path enactment. In the following sections, we discuss these three key aspects by illustrating how they advance literature in future-making.

First, this study uncovers how the enactment of distant future imaginaries is spatially situated and path-dependent. Our findings demonstrate that stakeholders' imaginaries of the future are deeply rooted in how they experience and interpret their current workspaces. While prior literature emphasizes the role of artifacts in making futures visible and tangible,[65] our findings show how the experience of space itself becomes a medium for working with and through the future of work. In doing so, we anchor future-making in the lived, embodied dimension of space. Specifically, we elaborate on the idea of path enactment in future making.[66] the dynamic interplay between present conditions and future imaginaries that recursively shape each other over time. Rather than viewing distant futures as unreachable endpoints, we show how they serve as provocations that invite critique and reveal what is no longer acceptable in the present. This contribution aligns with the literature focusing on enactment.[67] It explores how picturing idealized and distant future visions of "what could happen" helps shape workers' expectations and desires for what should happen in a closer future. Therefore, we advance the literature on futures by introducing a new element into the conversation on how futures can be made.

Second, our study analyzes different stakeholders' perspectives, revealing distinct orientations toward change. With this focus, we follow up on phenomenological research that emphasizes the "lived experience

64 Paula Jarzabkowski et al., "Constructing Spaces for Strategic Work: A Multimodal Perspective," *British Journal of Management* 26, no. S1 (2015): S26–S47, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12082.
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65 Comi and Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts."
66 Wenzel et al., "Future and Organization Studies."
67 For instance, Rauch, "Between War and Peace."

of practitioners"[68] and their interactions with their everyday activities in organizations. Outsiders not embedded in the day-to-day space of the organization were most willing to speculate on disruptive futures, offering radical alternatives unbound by current constraints. In contrast, insiders envisioned futures that were either evolutionary or strategic; each group negotiated their level of attachment to the existing spatial arrangement. This divergence underscores how spatial privilege and symbolic ownership affect future-making. Executives and managers, who often occupy private offices and hold institutional memory, exhibited stronger resistance to change. Clerks, more exposed to standardized and shared environments, were more ambivalent, revealing latent desires but also concerns over feasibility and control. These findings are consistent with those of Madeleine Rauch,[69] who underscores the significance of mundane work realities for shaping an idealized future. Namely, our findings highlight that responses among workers can be heterogeneous depending on the engagement of different professionals in future-making itself. The less responsibility and engagement people feel in how the future will come to happen, the freer they are to imagine radical and disruptive futures. Nonetheless, disruptive imaginaries do not necessarily correspond to the most desirable futures.

Third, this study introduces the concept of an in-between space — a liminal, processual zone that emerges through iterative engagements with the present and future. This space is neither a compromise nor a finalized design; it is a site of ambiguity, imagination, and negotiation. Participants did not envision the future as a radically different endpoint but constructed it through the tensions between what they rejected in the present and what they began to desire. This in-between space resonates with anthropological notions of liminality.[70] It offers a generative lens for understanding how organizations move from abstract visions to situated interventions, not in a linear sequence but through recursive and affectively charged interactions. Compared to other similar concepts in the future-making literature, such as the "gray zone" from Miriam Feuls et al.,[71] which refers to the unknown territory between distant-future goals and existing solutions in the present, the in-between space conceptualized in this work is an active testing zone that is crucial for uncovering real actions in the future. Unlike workshop-based "space-times,"[72] the in-between space is continuous and experiential, emerging through the ongoing entanglement of imagination and spatial practice. The in-between space that our process model uncovers aligns with the "interstitial spaces" developed by Santi Furnari in 2014.[73] However, while interstitial spaces describe occasional informal interactions among people from different fields who explore new ideas, our in-between space is not limited to informal or peripheral moments; it continually shapes the future.

Notably, by bringing insights from a process view on organizational space research[74] back into future-making, we position our article as a bidirectional bridge between the literatures on future-making and organizational space. This bridge might open interesting contributions to the organizational space literature and the understanding of space as a process to imagine the future.

68 Comi and Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts."
69 Rauch, "Between War and Peace."
70 Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage.*
71 Feuls et al., "Putting Distant Futures into Action," 306.
72 Pettit et al., "Transforming Visions into Actions."
73 Santi Furnari, "Interstitial Spaces: Microinteraction Settings and the Genesis of New Practices between Institutional Fields," *The Academy of Management Review* 39, no. 4 (2014): 439–62, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43699259.
74 Stephenson et al., "Process Studies of Organizational Space."

Implications for Design and Organizations

Our study offers several implications for design and organizational practices.

First, our results highlight the value of the briefing and planning phase in office re-layout projects for exploring how futures are constructed within organizations. The multiple simulations conducted during the focus groups and interviews using visual artifacts, collaborative prototyping, and scenario-based discussions became an elastic platform[75] onto which arguments and preconceptions would come to light about what future work could be. Future-making as a path enactment practice allows for expanding the foreseeable alternatives and situating them along a malleable trajectory. Therefore, we argue, future-making could be favorably incorporated into architectural design practices as part of the conceptualizing, briefing, and planning phases.

Second, our study suggests that a future-making approach benefits from the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the conceptualizing and briefing phase of a design project. Still, unlike the future-making approach adopted by Comi and Whyte,[76] in our case, the architects were left out of the process. We assumed their perspective would be shaped by technical feasibility, budgetary limits, and stylistic preferences, potentially narrowing the scope of distant futures of work. However, given their spatial expertise, we believe that architects could be valuable participants in future-making experiments. Expanding the stakeholder pool can further enrich the process. In the particular case of the studied organization, which operates as a business association within a broader ecosystem, the stakes of associated members are important to consider. On the one hand, associates have episodic access to the Company's workspace; therefore, they are likely to have developed a spatial experience that enriches the views of both insiders and outsiders with an additional intermediary perspective. On the other hand, the diversity of their respective business and organizational contexts could involve additional external factors in future-making, whose alignments and contradictions also depend on their experience of their own workspace.

Third, taking a path enactment perspective, this study yielded valuable insights into how multiple paths diverge, converge, or shift. As suggested by Feuls and colleagues,[77] this approach can prove helpful when addressing intersecting grand challenges. The future of work is expected to have significant societal, economic, and innovation implications. In this sense, exploring how future imaginaries of work intersect with broader future organizational goals is deemed crucial for organizations. In particular, we argue, imagined futures are not only about redesigning a specific workspace but also about envisioning new forms of working and organizing. As our case involves a powerful business association with wide visibility and recognition among local, national, and international institutions, its spatial futures hold symbolic and political value and would influence broader imaginaries about work, collaboration, and prestige among associated members and other private and public entities. Therefore, the spatial futures co-envisioned here have the potential to influence broader policy and industry imaginaries.

Ultimately, our findings also offer actionable insights for leaders, managers, and workspace designers navigating the transition toward a future of work that is a "fiction not a fact."[78]

75 Marianne Stang Våland and Susse Georg, "Reprint of: Spacing Identity: Unfolding Social and Spatial-Material Entanglements of Identity Performance," *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 35, no. 2 (2019): article no. 101049, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2019.101049.

76 Comi and Whyte, "Future Making and Visual Artefacts."

77 Feuls et al., "Putting Distant Futures into Action."

78 Dries et al., "Imagining the (Distant) Future of Work."

As work becomes increasingly flexible, hybrid, and technology-driven,[79] leaders and managers should treat the future not as a fixed endpoint but as a resource for continuously reimagining the present. Likewise, designers must recognize that the spaces they create influence everyday experiences and, in turn, shape organizational readiness for change.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While our study offers novel insights into how spatial experiences shape future-making practices, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this research is based on a single, in-depth case study of a business association preparing for a major HQ re-layout. While the case offers rich insights into spatially situated future-making, the findings may not fully capture dynamics present in other organizational forms, industries, or cultural contexts. Future research could explore how different organizational identities, cultures, and sectoral logics shape the recursive relationship between imagined futures and spatial experiences.[80]

Second, our study focuses on the planning and envisioning phase of the workplace transformation and does not track the final implementation of the redesigned workspace. Future longitudinal research could investigate how the in-between space we identified evolves as the imagined futures are translated into concrete spatial changes and how such changes are received, adapted, or resisted by stakeholders over time.[81]

Third, while we highlighted the role of outsider perspectives in expanding the range of possible futures, future studies could further examine how these perspectives interact with power dynamics and institutional constraints in shaping which futures are eventually enacted.[82] Additionally, given the increasing relevance of digital and hybrid workspaces, future research could explore how virtual environments interact with physical spaces in co-constructing organizational futures.[83]

Fourth, our findings also touch on the role of materiality[84] in the process of imagining and enacting distant futures through the material space. Although materiality was not the core focus of our theoretical lens, which primarily draws on organizational space concepts, our results suggest that how distant futures materialize in physical settings warrants further investigation. Future studies could adopt a more explicit material lens to explore how physical artifacts, spatial configurations, and sensory experiences influence both the scope and the direction of future-making practices.

Ultimately, future research could expand on our findings by examining how spatially situated perceptions of organizational culture are transformed through participatory future-making exercises. Given that our case organization represents a network of member firms, further studies could investigate how future-making practices influence, and are influenced by, broader organizational ecosystems.

Conclusions

This study advances understanding of how future-making unfolds as a spatially situated and recursive process within organizations. By examining how

79 Aroles et al., "Mapping Themes in the Study"; Marta Angelici and Paola Profeta, "Smart Working: Work Flexibility without Constraints," *Management Science* 70, no. 3 (2024): 1680–1705, https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2023.4767; Dries et al., "Imagining the (Distant) Future of Work."

80 Alimadadi et al., "A Palace Fit for the Future."

81 Pettit et al., "Transforming Visions into Actions."

82 Rindova and Martins, "Futurescapes."

83 Petani and Mengis, "Technology and the Hybrid Workplace"; Lena Waizenegger et al., "An Affordance Perspective of Team Collaboration and Enforced Working from Home during COVID-19," *European Journal of Information Systems* 29, no. 4 (2020): 429–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/0960085X.2020.1800417.

84 Lê and Spee, "Role of Materiality."

stakeholders imagine and contest future scenarios within the constraints and affordances of their current workspace, we demonstrate that organizational space is not merely a context for change but an active medium in the enactment of futures. By bringing together the spatial turn and the future-making turn in organization studies, we offer a grounded, processual perspective on how organizations can navigate the uncertainties of the future of work by working with and through their spaces in the present.

Declaration of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest involved in this article.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI- Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

While preparing this work, the authors used OpenAI to translate interview transcripts from Italian. All content was reviewed by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final published content.

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