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# 'All the good spots are already taken': the visual properties of interior social sceneries

JAKUB MLYNÁŘ ⓘ, HIMANSHU VERMA ⓘ, HAMED S. ALAVI ⓘ AND DENIS LALANNE ⓘ

*This article provides an ethnomethodologically informed ethnographic investigation of visually recognisable aspects of shared work spots in co-working office rooms. We focus on the phenomenon of holding a place in such environments, and document the participants' practices which constitute distinguishing between empty and taken places. Our investigation leads to a conceptualisation of designed and ad hoc places, noting that objective assessments of rooms' occupation status are problematic. We propose the notion of markers of presence, i.e. the material objects and their configurations, which participants use to indicate to others that a certain place is taken. Finally, we identify an observation area within the office space which participants recurrently use to assess the availability of work spots. We conclude by pointing out that rather than being tied to static features of material objects, the evidently visible occupational status of shared work spots is dynamically re-produced in participants' ongoing courses of action.*

## INTRODUCTION

We spend our mundane lives dwelling in physical environments. This simple observation has enormous implications for social life, and as Erving Goffman poignantly noted, 'we can participate in social situations only if we bring our bodies and their accoutrements along with us' (1983, 4). Thus, in order to properly emplace and position our bodies and belongings, in and as part of practical courses of action, we routinely do all sorts of things with regard to places: looking for places, taking places, holding places, changing places etc., and these activities constitute a fundamental aspect of a vast number of social scenes in everyday life. Thus, in our society, people may temporarily occupy certain segments of cultural space for a provisional residence of their bodies and belongings (see Figure 1). We call this phenomenon [holding a place] (for the use of brackets see Garfinkel 2002, 135–139), and it constitutes the primary subject matter of this article.

[Holding a place] is a ubiquitous and ordinary phenomenon: so much so, that it has even been institutionalised in the formal practices of reservation, for instance on a train or in a restaurant. Yet we can pose a number of fundamental and strictly empirical questions: What does a [place] consist of as a visible and witnessable phenomenon? What makes for a [taken place] and an [empty place]? How are [places] made evaluable and countable? While looking for answers to these questions, we aim in this paper to provide an ethnomethodological respecification

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FIGURE 1.   Four examples of [holding a place] – lakeside, buffet restaurant, library, train (photos: authors).

(Garfinkel 1991) of a phenomenon which has elsewhere been called 'human territoriality' (Sack 1986) or 'territories of self' (Goffman 1971).

Ethnomethodology appeared as a unique approach in sociology in the 1950s and 1960s in the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967, 2002; Garfinkel and Sacks 1970) and his colleagues. From the first formulations of ethnomethodology's principles, it was clear that Garfinkel's project stood in sharp contrast to mainstream approaches in the social sciences, proposing 'the most radically empiricist kind of methodological study in which among other things the actual rules of daily sociological perspective and practice are investigated and clarified' (Garfinkel and Rowan 1955, 8–9). Ethnomethodology's distinctive attitude therefore lies in the detailed study of endogenous maintenance of local social orders and their sequential organisation from within. Developing the social phenomenology of Schütz (1962), Gurwitsch (1964) and Merleau-Ponty (1965), ethnomethodology aims to show 'how members concert their activities to produce and exhibit the coherence, cogency, analysis, consistency, order, meaning, reason,

methods – which are locally, reflexively accountable orderlinesses – in and as of their ordinary lives together in detail' (Garfinkel 1991, 17). Ethnomethodological and conversation analytic (henceforth EM/CA) studies demonstrate that – and *just how* exactly, in lived praxis – we 'inhabit each other's actions' (Goodwin 2018, 1). In EM/CA studies, human interactions and scenes of social life are not analysed by invoking social macrostructures or individual mental processes (see Lynch and Bogen 2005), but rather by studying the 'essentially anonymous' (Schegloff 2010, 40), intersubjectively shared 'organizational objects' (Garfinkel 1975) which members of societies themselves produce and maintain in interaction. Ethnomethodology is therefore 'concerned only with what is indeed presented in the world, only with what is indeed realized by people, only then with what is indeed real in the world' (Rose 1992, 341).

In the past five decades, the prevailing EM/CA research practice has been detailed transcription and analysis of audio and video recordings of naturally-occurring social activities. However, it should be noted that video or audio recording conceived as 'data' is not, in principle,

the necessary condition for an adequate EM/CA study (Lynch, Livingston, and Garfinkel 1983, 207; Sacks 1992, 28), since one of the fundamental premises of this approach is that 'such issues as method, theory, epistemology and the like' should not be established *a priori* 'without recourse to the situations and phenomena such matters are to apprehend' (Button 1991, 6). In this article, we use still photographs and on-the-spot observations as documents of local praxis and materials for ethnomethodological investigation. This is in line with the reconceptualisation of sociology as a 'natural observational science' (Sacks 1989, 29) and ethnomethodological procedures of observation and self-reflection (Francis and Hester 2004, 35–53; Bjelić 2023), recovering the everyday methods of order production for the purpose of analysis. Our paper begins with a discussion of visibility as an ethnomethodological phenomenon, then turns to routine visibility of places, as well as their possessability as social objects, and finally moves on to an empirical study of an occupancy status of work spots as places which are routinely visible for participants as either taken or available.

## SOCIAL SCENERIES AND THEIR MUNDANE VISIBILITY

The social competence in everyday courses of action grows from members' routine ability to make practical sense of the complex sceneries around us 'at a glance' (Sudnow 1972, 259). These social sceneries consist of configurations of bodies and objects, and the *gestalt contextures* (Gurwitsch 1964, 134) which they constitute. Moment by moment, in order to act in the social world, we make sense of the 'mundane accomunicable signs' (Baccus 1986, 8) which are made publicly available, and thus witnessable and visible, by members of society to each other.

EM and CA have long scrutinised the sequential organisation (e.g. McIlvenny 1996; Tuncer 2015; De Stefani and Mondada 2018; Drury and Stokoe 2022; Mondada 2022) and visually available order of (semi-)public spaces (e.g. Carlin 2003; Hester and Francis 2003; Watson 2005; Smith 2017, 2019, 2021; Due and Lange 2019). These studies specify how talk-in-interaction and recognisable bodily conduct is reflexively embedded in public spaces and how people, activities and places are routinely categorised within such environments. Our study contributes to this broader field of research by studying a largely unexplored aspect of shared spaces, following from a feature inherent to them: that segments of these spaces can be claimed by anyone who has an access to them, and that this can be done through various practices involving visible constellations of material objects.

This paper also builds on the central finding of EM/CA studies which demonstrate how the mundane visibility of social sceneries as what-they-are, in their observable *haecceity* (Garfinkel 1991), is a central requirement for skilful participation in social activities. For instance, entering a New York City street at night, we may witness two individuals participating in a mutual intercorporeal engagement (see Meyer, Streeck, and Scott Jordan 2017). The observable and visible features of their local embodied practices allow us, at a brief singular glance, to categorise their activity as that of [making out] (in contrast to, e.g. [one individual harassing the other]; see Figure 2). It is this taken-for-granted ability, which we master as competent members and daily observers, which allows us to act properly on the grounds of the



FIGURE 2.   The mundane visibility of social sceneries (photo: Erick Prince, http://www.minoritynomad.com).

practical sense which we attribute to other people's actions and appearances in real time, here and now. Therefore, once we categorise the ongoing street activity with some level of certainty as [making out] and not [fighting], we can walk by inattentively (rather than intervening or calling the police). In this sense, the enterprise of ethnomethodology can be formulated as 'finding how it is that people can produce sets of actions that provide that others can *see* such things' (Sacks 1992, 119; italics added).

Apart from the mundane visibility of activities as recognisable courses of action, such as [making out] or [walking across the street] in Figure 2 (see Sudnow 1972, 269–272), we also rely on our ability to recognise the traces of action as physical evidence of people's past conduct in space (see also Bjelić 2023). Such traces are for us the 'leavings of an Other' (Eberle 2013, 122) or 'disembodied evidence' (Waksler 2010) of the other's presence; as Streeck (1996, 365) puts it, 'things remain on the scene as indexical monuments to prior interactional arrangements'.

In order to make sense of objects and their constellations, people use the documentary method of interpretation (Garfinkel 1956, 1967), which finds an underlying pattern in regularly observable single instances and interprets these instances as instances of the pattern. A footprint (see Figure 3) is an archetypal example of the sense-making work that people perform in attributing visible features of a physical environment to the presence and behaviour of others. A walking person – unseen, but assumed – is an underlying pattern providing sense to the singular footprints as observable instances in space. Furthermore, the orientation of the footprints, as well as their number, size, depth and sequence, allows us to infer not only the categorical
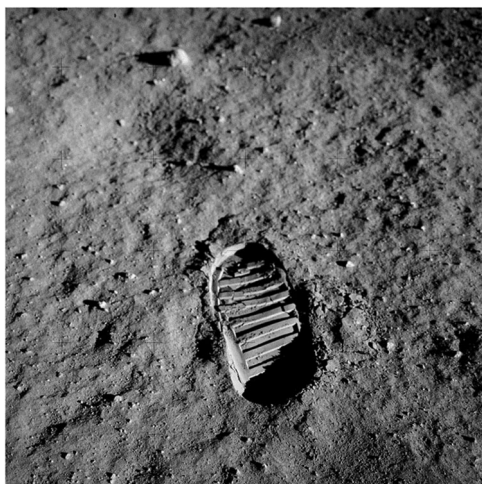
attributes of the foot as part of a person's body (e.g. gender and age), but also the features of her action – in this case, the direction and speed of her spatial movement (Krishan 2008). We see the print of a shoe, as well as any other observable physical evidence of a person's presence and conduct, in indexically synecdochical relation to the producer as a person: 'She was here, and she walked this way.'

In the lived world, visible traces of action and presence do not occur only in singular forms, but also – and perhaps more frequently – in constellations and layers, or, as Hester and Francis put it, in 'relational configurations' (Hester and Francis 2003). Objects are often seen as traces of a certain activity or presence only within, and as part of, the gestalt contextures which they mutually constitute. For example, see Figure 4, which displays the improvised bed of a homeless person in an urban environment. In addition to being traces of activities (sleeping, eating), the objects in this social scenery are also visible as marking the spot as claimed – i.e. making it recognisable as a location to which someone may expectably soon return. Taken alone, each of the objects constituting the scenery, such as the cardboard, piece of clothing or empty plastic bottle, would indeed be a trace of action and past presence, but would not independently suffice as a marker of the occupational status of the place, i.e. the fact that this particular segment of space is currently occupied. Each



FIGURE 3.    An iconic photograph of Buzz Aldrin's footprint on the Moon in 1969 (photo: Wikipedia).



FIGURE 4.    A homeless person's impromptu bed (photo: authors).

singular object acquires its pertinence as a visibly place-holding object only in the local relational configuration. It is precisely this socially consequential feature of material objects which will be the central focus of the remainder of this article. Before we proceed to the analysis, however, it is necessary to discuss the routine mundane visibility of places as visually delimited meaningful segments of space.

The concept of place, defined in contrast to the concept of space, has a remarkable tradition of use in the social sciences. The terminological distinction of place and space seeks to capture the apparent absence of meaning in many physical locations of contemporary urban environments. A public place is a location that is socially meaningful, while public spaces lack the symbolic value and seem to be semantically void (Jacobsen and Chatterjee 2001). Furthermore, public spaces often have features of non-places, which are physically embedded in urban areas but lack social context and meaning (Augé 1995).

In this article, we are using the word 'place' in a more restricted sense: in the next section, we focus on shared work spots as specific examples of places. 'Place' as we use it in this article is 'a place' as members' phenomenon, i.e. a segment of space which is, to the involved participants themselves, more or less clearly delimited from its environment: places are countable, describable and practically observable. A place is a social scenery: a materially-visually available gestalt in space. It gains its recognisability and meaningfulness from the situated social practices that establish this particular place, and are, in turn, facilitated by its social objectivity. As a produced social or organisational object (in Garfinkel's sense), a place is also accountably claimable by members and routinely visible to members – two crucial features of work-spots which we will consider in the following sections of this paper. We focus on place-holding practices as they are available in and through stable visual configurations of material objects, and our subject of study is the routine recognisability and recurrent visibility of [holding a place] in a 'hot-desking' shared

office – an environment where such practices are centrally and routinely relevant for the participants.

## THE EXPERIMENT: DESIGN, SETTING AND METHODS

From the 18 April to 18 May 2017, we conducted an observation during an experiment in an academic office environment. The broader framework of this environment was the Smart Living Lab, which is an 'inter-disciplinary, interinstitutional platform that combines several lines of research related to construction technologies' (EPFL Fribourg 2016), a 'platform for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration and advanced research on buildings and homes of the future' (Overney 2014). It is located at the Blue Factory in Fribourg, Switzerland and brings together researchers from the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, the School of Engineering and Architecture in Fribourg and the University of Fribourg.

In 2016, the first experimental study of the use of space (i.e. occupancy rate and patterns of movement) in the Smart Living Lab employed a pervasive sensing method which recorded the occupancy information in different rooms (Verma, Alavi, and Lalanne 2017). Among other findings, the researchers learned that the mean occupancy rate of the rooms was just slightly above 20%. Therefore, a follow-up study was conducted in 2017, exploring the possibilities of densification in office interiors with a view to achieving greater efficiency in the use of space.

Figure 5 outlines the timeline and schedule of the experiment (see also Alavi et al. 2018). In the first phase of this study (four weeks in March 2017), we examined the occupancy of the original offices. The second phase was marked by the introduction of two newly furnished rooms (on 18 April and 1 May), which were created through participatory co-design methodology together with the future occupants. All of the participants signed an informed consent document in which the purpose of the experiment was explained:
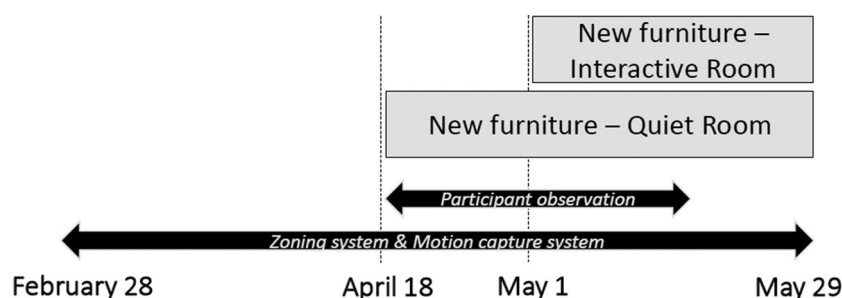


FIGURE 5.   Timeline of the experiment and observation.

'To study the usability of the two office spaces which afford for different sets of activities. One office will be remodelled to foster collaborative work, whereas the other office will afford focused individual work. This experiment is meant to evaluate the re-design of these two office spaces in terms of their successful support of the intended activities.' The main goal of the experiment was to collect data on indoor mobility (presence and absence, as well as relative positions in each of the two refurbished rooms) and the quality of the interior environment (noise, temperature and $CO_2$ levels). The researchers also collected informal feedback from the participants. As a result, two quantitative studies were carried out, unveiling space use behaviour profiles and the impact of visual privacy on workspace choice (Verma, Alavi, and Lalanne 2017; Alavi et al. 2018).

In this article, however, we will not report on the results of this experiment as such. The information provided in this section serves primarily as the context for our ethnomethodologically informed observational study, which was conducted over the duration of the experiment. The first author of this study, who conducted the observations and collected photographic materials, joined the project after it began, so its research design was already fixed. The fact of the experiments' existence was taken by him as an opportunity to examine *in situ* the place-holding practices in an office environment. He inquired into the possibility of collecting video recordings as part of the experiment, but it was not possible to introduce such procedures in this particular project, the informed consents already having been signed and research approved.

The team of researchers then agreed to assume the most non-invasive approach, using photography to capture the naturally occurring visual gestalts, and fieldnotes to retain the temporally unfolding character of these gestalts as consequential social objects, without informing the office inhabitants in advance of the precise topic of interest of the observational ethnographic research. Given that ethnomethodological studies do not demand specific methods of 'data collection', as EM does not subscribe to the idea that 'a set of special research techniques are required to obtain data relevant to its investigations' (Hester 2009, 243), we consider our decision to work with photographs and fieldnotes to be methodologically adequate. Recently, Bjelić (2023) took a similar approach in his ethnomethodological study of recognisably displayed ownership of things found on the street, conducted in parallel with and independently from our own work described in this text. He explains his procedure of collecting relevant materials: ' … when the displayed thing made me aware of its presence, I would use my phone in a laissez-faire manner to take a picture' (Bjelić 2023, 6). Nevertheless, as we also discuss in the concluding section, the findings of this paper could be further detailed, verified, specified and challenged through video-based analysis, which provides further access to production details of everyday social conduct and the public displays of members' orientations.



FIGURE 6.   Quiet Room (bottom right with yellow labels) and Interactive Room (bottom left with blue labels) in the interior space of the Blue Factory.

Regarding the schedule of the experiment, new furniture in the Quiet Room (henceforth QR) was introduced on 18 April, and two weeks later the newly furnished Interactive Room (henceforth IR) was opened to the participants. Our observation, which provides the grounds for the following section, started on 18 April, focused on the QR for two weeks and afterwards extended to the IR as well. This means that from 1 May to 18 May, our observation alternated between the two rooms. Figure 6 shows the location of both rooms in the interior of the building.

The design of the QR and IR was the work of *atelier oï*, taking into account some of the principles of participatory design. The office occupants (and later-to-be experiment participants) were invited to take part in the creative process by participating in the evaluation of the proposed room layout setting and discussions of the future design. As the names of the rooms suggest, each one was designed to facilitate different kinds of activities: the design of the QR was to support concentrated individual work, whereas the design of the IR was to enable collaborative work and meetings as well as stimulate interaction. In other words, the idea behind the QR and IR corresponds to the distinction between sociofugal and sociopetal spaces: the former type discourages social interaction and keeps people apart, while the latter stimulates social interaction and brings people together (Osmond 1957; Sommer 1967; Hall 1990, 47). The figures below show the interior design as floor plans (Figure 7) and photographs (Figures 8 and 9) from the first days of the introduction.

Over the course of the experiment, participants from four different teams were supposed to conduct their daily work-related activities in the two rooms. Given that a 'clean desk rule' was enforced – all tables had to be clean at the end of the day –, there were lockers and shelves in both rooms available to store shared and individual belongings in. These two rooms also provided the spatial environment and setting for our observations, to which we will turn in more detail in the following section.

## (HOLDING A PLACE): EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS

Figures 7–9 document the default setting of the unoccupied QR and IR on the day that the rooms were introduced to the experiment participants. It is immediately noticeable in the photos, and at the same time centrally relevant for the topic of this text, that the rooms are visibly and for all practical purposes 'empty', even though they are not literally empty in the strict meaning of the word. Each room-as-it-was-designed, with all its available furniture and equipment, provides the background for the phenomena of interest in this paper. Floor plans of the rooms and/or photos can be routinely evaluated for the number of evident places which they are designed and built to provide (see Figure 10): i.e. the QR evidently provides 15 potential places (Q1 to Q15) and the IR evidently provides 20 potential places (I1 to I20). The word 'potential' is important, since – as we will see below – the practical logic of the room use does not always follow the laws of mathematics or formal logic. However, the notion of a place as something that can be either 'empty' or 'taken' seems to be crucial for participants in their shared office behaviour. They observably orient to the availability-status of the places during courses of action such as [looking for a place], [taking a place], [holding a place] etc.

### Designed Places and ad hoc Places

At this point, we can pose the seemingly simple but important question: what does [a place] (i.e. [a work spot]) signify in the studied environment? In the shared
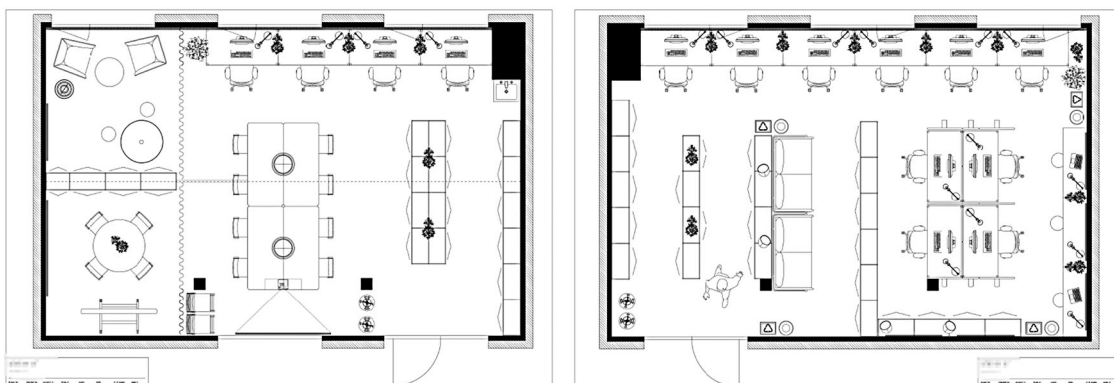


FIGURE 7.   Floor plan of the Interactive Room (left) and Quiet Room (right).

FIGURE 8.    Photos of the Interactive Room when unoccupied.



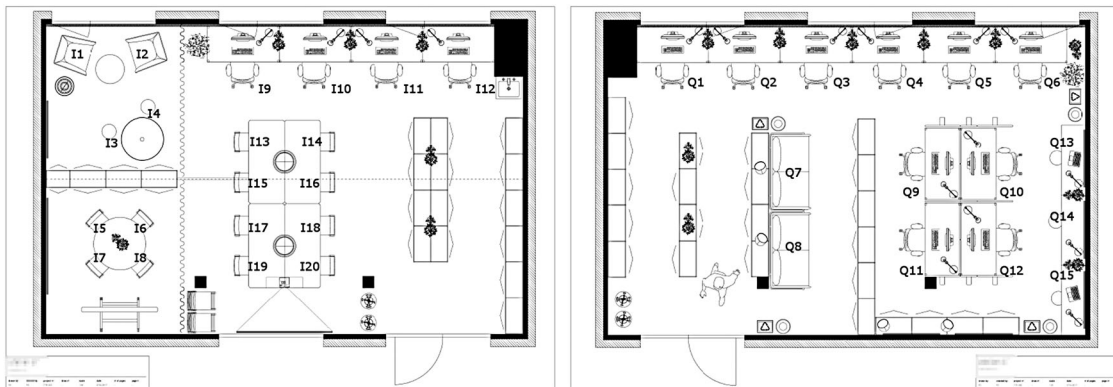FIGURE 9.    Photos of the Quiet Room when unoccupied.

FIGURE 10.   Floor plans of IR and QR with descriptive codes.

office rooms, a place typically consists of a space for one person at a table plus a chair, or more generally, a place for work is actually a composition of a place for positioning the worker's body and a place for positioning the necessary work tools. The office rooms were designed in a way to provide places for work in this basic sense: i.e. what may be called the *designed places*. It is only in this sense that we can speak of a precise number of potentially available places in a specified segment of interior space. However, for some purposes, just one of these two basic components may suffice as a place. In our study, we observed participants repurposing the available furniture and technical devices in different ways, including the creation of *ad hoc places* which were not part of the room design, and therefore cannot be precisely counted in advance, and in some sense are often not *visible* before there is a practical requirement for such a place. Indeed, the way the rooms' interior was designed proposed and invited certain ways to use it, but the very act of taking a place can reflexively constitute a segment of space as [a place]. In other words, people's conduct may create a place where there was no place to be seen before, transforming the interior, and perhaps also re-designing it for other occupants (or themselves in the future).

For example, two participants used the lower storage lockers in the IR as an improvised work spot for a short meeting, placing a laptop and other materials on the top of the locker and standing next to it. At this moment, according to our field notes (from 5 May), tables I13–I16 were pulled up and covered with various belongings; there were also two participants sitting and talking together at table I18/I20. The occupation of the room as well as the precise location of this *ad hoc* place is illustrated in Figure 11. The distinction between designed and *ad hoc* places is not only analytical: participants orient to it, at least in certain social situations (e.g. sitting on the floor in a full train might be
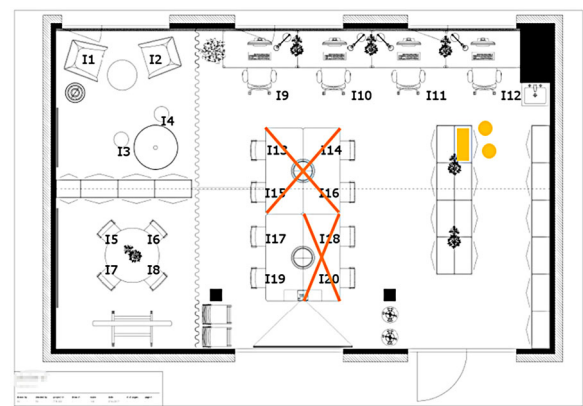


FIGURE 11.   Emergence of an *ad hoc* place when places I13–I16, I18 and I20 were occupied.

acceptable, but sitting on the floor in a full restaurant might not).

Resulting from the previous observations is the fact that the number of 'really' available work spots in a given shared office can hardly be objectively assessed, as it depends on the current room occupancy and presumably a number of other criteria. Our study confirms that some places which are 'empty' from a formal point of view, such as places next to already occupied work spots, may not be seen as available by the participants. However, people did not necessarily position themselves in order to maximise personal distance. During the periods of observation, it was possible to clearly identify attractive places – in fact in close proximity to each other – which were almost always taken first, and only with growing room occupation density were the lesser-preferred places taken. For instance, according to our field notes from 25 April, a new participant arrived at the QR at a moment when places Q7, Q9 and Q12 were already taken, and after monitoring the occupancy of the room, positioned himself at place Q8 (i.e. next to another participant, rather than at one of the empty places Q1–Q6 along the

windows). To summarise, on the one hand, places can emerge out of necessity in specific segments of space where they have not been consciously designed. On the other hand, some of the designed places can also become virtually (practically) non-existent, in the sense that they are not going to be occupied – until there is no other choice.

## Markers of Presence

By markers of presence, we understand material objects and their configurations which people use to signify to others a specific [taken place]. The strongest and most persuasive marker of presence is the actual presence of someone at a work spot. At the same time, from the very beginning of the experiment, we observed that participants routinely used their belongings as material place-holders for extended periods of time (when going for a break, coffee, lunch, meeting etc.). In other words, people employ various practices in order to make it obvious to others that a certain place is already taken. 'Things become situated symbols,' points out Streeck (1996, 266), they 'speak and "make us do"… with their affordances and through their locations' (Caronia and Mortari 2015, 416). Each desk, once left unattended, conveys a message from the previous occupant: 'I will (or will not) come back to this place soon.' Others are expected to see, i.e. recognise, understand and respect such spatial appropriations.

The availability of [a place] is signified by the default composition, as it was created and set by the room designers. It is known and recognised as such by the participants. What is this setting, in our case? As noted above, the minimal default composition is a table and a chair. In many cases, but not all, it also includes a table lamp, (less often) a plant, a fixed computer screen or a sensor placed on the table (used for data collection during the experiment). All this equipment belongs to the class of *non-place-holders*, meaning that it won't typically prevent participants from taking the place themselves by placing their belongings there, taking a seat and starting their work. This default composition of an [empty place] provides the ground against which the variety of individual modifications becomes visible as the figure of a [taken place].

Furthermore, there is the significant class of *place-holders* or *markers of presence*. During our observations, participants often arrived at the shared office (QR or IR) with all their belongings, went on to identify an available and appropriate place, then reserved it by leaving their belongings there (or even prepared the complete working arrangement such as running laptop) and left

the place for a while (in order to attend a meeting, etc.), returning again later. One such instance occurred, according to our field notes from 19 April, when a participant arrived at the QR (place Q11) at 9:47, placed his bag, laptop and thermos bottle on the desk, and then left the room, returning eight minutes later to sit down and start working. Such observations were recurrent and common. They resemble behaviour in university cafeterias as documented by Minami and Yoshida (1993), who note the practice of 'putting one's possessions on the table or chair and leaving one … member at the table while waiting for others' (37)

The usability and visibility of certain material objects as place-holders seem to rely on their configurationally emergent properties. A useful distinction can be appropriated from the early work of Harvey Sacks, who distinguished two categories of objects with regard to their possessability: *possessables* and *possessitives*.

> A 'possessable' is something that anybody can come to own. If you find it and you want it, it's yours. A 'possessitive' is specifically something from those classes of things, of which, seeing one, you see something that is owned by somebody. (Sacks 1992, 607)

Sacks also coins the notion of *generative possessitives*, highlighting that some possessitives can be 'used to acquire other property':

> You claim something by putting a possessitive on it. You put a book on a table in a cafeteria, people take it that somebody's using that table. You can play games by seeing what sorts of objects you can put down there that do not interfere in other people's sitting at that table, and come to a differentiation at boundaries of the two classes. (Sacks 1992, 385)

In the case of our study, the material objects used routinely in the two shared offices as generative possessitives were various tools for academic work: notepads, pens, printed documents, open laptops, mice, folders and books, but also objects such as plastic bottles and thermoses, cups, keys, bags, backpacks, jackets, scarves or personal toolboxes (i.e. the plastic boxes which the participants received on 1 May, with the opening of the IR). There seems to be a class of *dominant markers*, such as a laptop in the case of the Smart Living Lab experiment (or a backpack on a train seat). The defining feature of dominant markers is that they are by themselves sufficient for claiming a place. On the other hand, *supplementary markers*, such as an empty plastic bottle, notepad or a pen, can add some force or certainty to the dominant marker, but they would not typically be

sufficient by themselves. Furthermore, in some cases, the constellation of the objects on the table may itself indicate a longer absence, typically with the laptop noticeably missing, leading to what may be called a *residual constellation* of belongings (see Figures 12 and 13). The status of a particular spot is inferred 'from its inherent phenomenal coherence between material, spatial, linguistic, and other particularities' (Bjelić 2023, 24), but often tentatively, with a possibility of change over time through personal encounters. This can be illustrated by an event observed on 5 May, at 13:20. Participant A arrived at the QR, and after checking its occupancy, took a place, Q12, which was marked by a closed notebook in the left corner, the personal box, thermos bottle and a keyboard with a name sticker. At 13:45, Participant B comes in and walks to place Q12 (occupied by Participant A but marked previously by Participant B's belongings). Participant B tells Participant A that it is all right for him to stay at the spot

for now, leaves the room again, and returns 12 min later, upon which Participant A leaves place Q12 and Participant B resumes her work at Q12.

Most of the objects were placed on the table top at a specific work spot, but also on the adjacent chairs (jackets and scarves, see Figures 14–16) and even on the floor (backpacks and bags, see Figures 14 and 16), properly positioned towards the table and/or chair which comprise the place. These different components of an office work spot (i.e. chair, table and floor) are seen as belonging together, and it was typically sufficient to mark either of the components to claim the whole work spot.

Apart from these objects, we also observed other kinds of markers of presence signifying that a certain place was occupied, even though the participant occupying the place was currently elsewhere. Typically, the position of the chair is one such marker. This is an example of the
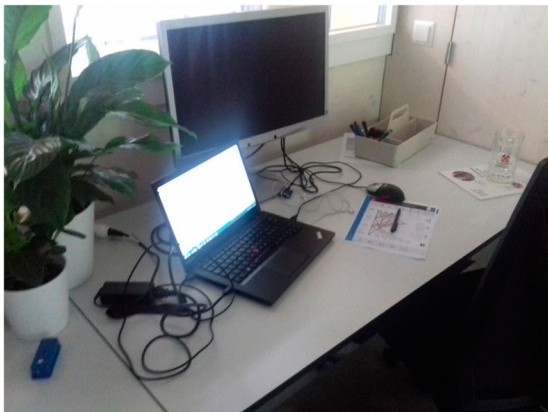


FIGURE 12.    Standard constellation of objects (places I12 and I16–I17).
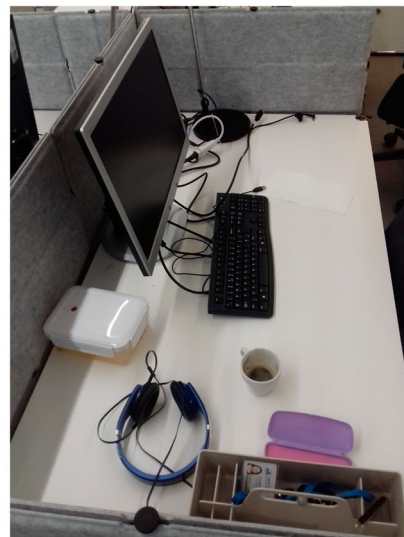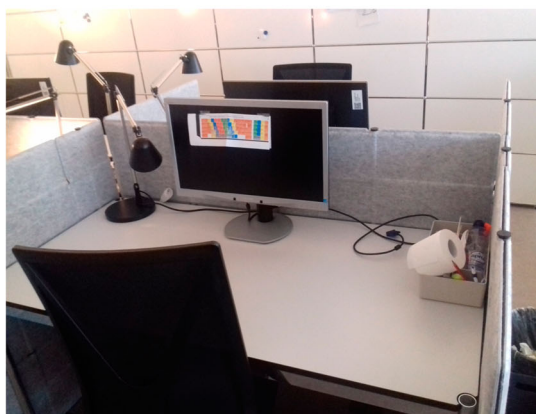


FIGURE 13.    Residual constellation of objects (places Q10 and Q9).

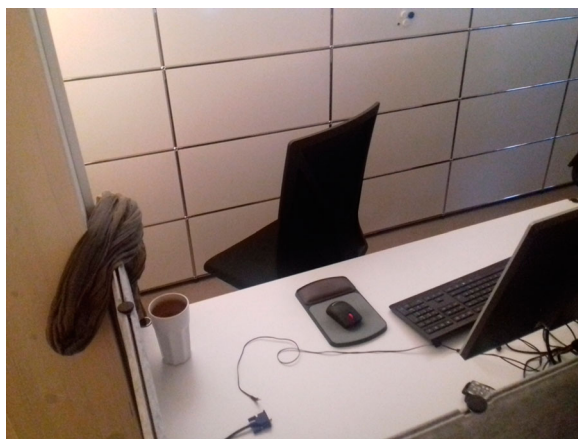FIGURE 14.    Jackets on chairs (places Q5 and Q12).
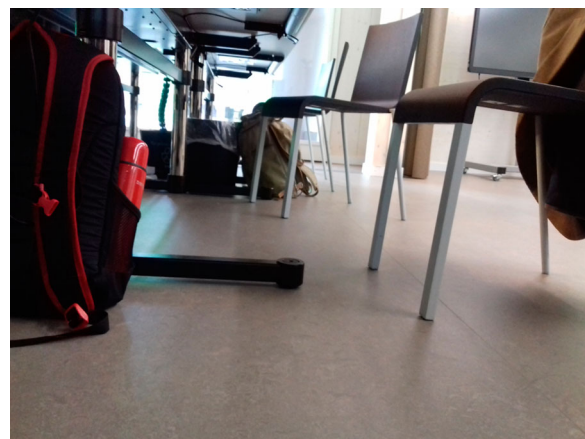


FIGURE 15.    Scarf on the hedge (place Q11).



FIGURE 16.    Two backpacks on the floor (places I13/I15).

phenomena which are '"seen but unnoticed", expected, background features of everyday scenes' (Garfinkel 1964, 226); in fact, we only fully noticed it during the last week of our observations, but many of our photos – taken before the actual noticing by the researcher – document this recurring phenomenon. At the same time, it is obviously related to the office chairs having wheels, as it is actually not a purposeful appropriation, but rather a lack of putting things back in their default position, see Figure 17 (but also Figures 14 and 15).

The desks in the QR were equipped with table lamps, turned off by default. The room itself being considerably dim, a shining lamp therefore became yet another mark of presence which we observed in the QR (see Figure 18). The IR, on the contrary, was significantly more brightly lit and the lamps did not seem to have this purpose at all.

By themselves, however, the chair position and table lamp status as markers of presence do not seem as powerful. Their significance is mostly that they add to the overall 'be right back' constellation of the specific place as part of the room interior. They can be seen as clues, making the availability status of a certain place visible from a larger distance.

In his discussion of possessables and possessitives, as we saw above, Sacks notes that one can 'play games by seeing what sorts of objects you can put down there that do not interfere in other people's sitting at that table, and come to a differentiation at boundaries of the two classes' (1992, 385). Our observations, however, show that the distinction might not be entirely clear-cut and that the boundaries are often obscure, at least for a period of time, until something decisive happens. How a
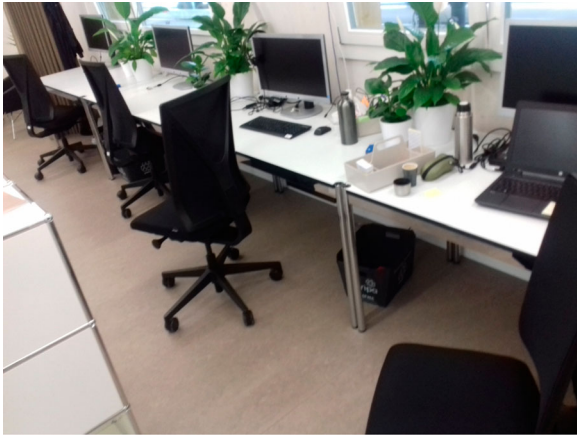
FIGURE 17.   'Be right back' chair position (compare 'taken' places I11/I12 with 'empty' places I9/I10).



FIGURE 19.   Intervention at work spot Q8 (bottle of iced tea).

blank notepad at place Q10 and a pen at place I12 at different times. The participants either ignored these objects or moved them slightly aside (to another piece of furniture nearby, away from the place) and occupied the work spot themselves. This might display the participants' orientation towards the *wait-and-see* property of social interaction (Garfinkel 1967, 3, 47). Objects which might belong to the class of generative possessitives are often *spatially postponed*, i.e. put aside, outside of the spot but close enough to be found when someone comes looking for that particular belonging, or even reclaims the place. Whether the objects actually belong to the class of possessitives or possessables – in other words, whether a specific object is an 'abandoned' object or a 'place-holding' object – is in some borderline cases a problem for the participants which remains to be solved only by what happens next. With this example, we see an instance of 'the essentially unfolding, developmental character of scenes' (Sudnow 1972, 261).

## Observation Area

As described in the previous sub-section, the participants relied on markers of presence in order to evaluate the availability status of places, i.e. to properly distinguish between places which were empty and those which were taken. In order for someone to contemplate possessing an object, it has to be *visible* in the surrounding world – for, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us, 'the world is what we see and … nonetheless, we must learn to see it' (1965, 4). Therefore, while doing the activity of [looking for a place] – which includes aspects of 'looking's work' (Garfinkel 2002, 210) or 'visible searches' (Drew and Kendrick 2018) –, participants have to become practical observers. This gives rise to the problem of scanning the room and identifying (potentially) available places as quickly as possible, because the presence of someone looking for a place



FIGURE 18.   Shining lamp in the QR.

material object is seen with regard to its potential ownership is not a stable feature of the thing, but the 'normative differentiation between "possessables" and "possessitives" … always depends on context' (Bjelić 2023, 7). Our own 'games', i.e. several interventions with commonplace objects, indicate that some material objects *by themselves* – without the whole contextual constellation of the 'taken place' – do not unambiguously and explicitly claim 'this place is currently taken' or 'I will be right back'. For instance, over the last few days of our observations, we placed a half-full bottle of iced tea at place Q8 (see Figure 19), a

might be a disruptive element for people already working in the room. In this regard, our observations uncover an important difference between the QR and IR. The design of the IR allowed a very simple assessment of the room occupation at a glance, even without entering the room. The room was full of light, providing a good view of the environment through the glass door and the window next to them. All places in the IR were immediately visible to participants entering the room. On the other hand, the design of the QR, which provided a somewhat isolated environment for individual focused work, at the same time obstructed a similar at-a-glance assessment of the room occupation. According to our field notes, participants had to not only enter the room, but were recurrently observed to walk to a specific area in the room which provided the possibility of scanning all the places. The location of this specific *observation area* in the QR is displayed in Figure 20.

The observability and recognisability of [empty places] and [taken places] is the basis of the accountability and describability of these places as such. As Baccus notes, 'observational availability refers to the accountable features of a phenomenon. These … are the "data" from which the account (analytic or practical) is produced and to which it, the account, is reflexively referential' (1986, 4). Observation is consequential in and as practical action, for the shared office space as a segment of the lived world is 'primarily not a field of observation, but rather the scene of action' (Gurwitsch 1961, 6). Based on the observable visual character of work spots acquired by a glance, the activity of [taking a place], [looking for another place], [further examining an ambiguous place], etc., may commence. For instance, on 17 May, according to our field notes, a participant left the IR at 15:06 to look for a work spot in the QR, only to return one minute later, reporting with slight disappointment: 'All the good spots are already taken.' At that moment, in fact, there were only three people present in the QR, and three
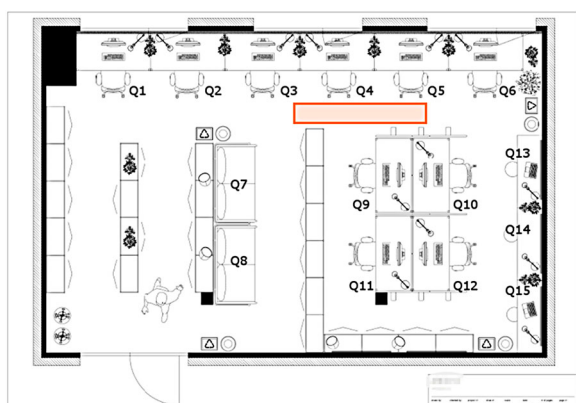
other places reserved by markers of presence, leaving nine designed places potentially available. Still, this participant's utterance makes sense in its context, pointing to the complex and marvellous 'obviousness' of our practical knowledge as members of society. The utterance displays the speaker's orientation to the duality of [empty space] and [taken space], which is methodically accomplished by the practices which lead to the emergence of the social sceneries depicted above and analysed in previous subsections.

## SEEING SPOTS: CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Alfred Schütz noted that 'the world we live in is a world of more or less well circumscribed objects with more or less definite qualities, objects among which we move, which resist us and upon which we may act' (1962, 7). Among such meaningful worldly objects are also 'places' in the sense utilised in this article. The founder of ethnomethodology, Harold Garfinkel, included the aspect of 'taking and holding places' in his study of lecturing's work, conducted together with David Sudnow in the 1970s.[1] Indeed, for students, taking and holding a place is a crucial part of lecture attendance. Garfinkel writes that 'to say that they are taking their {Places} makes noticeable {They do not wander around in going to places}' (2002, 229). However, Garfinkel and Sudnow did not in their observations provide a detailed study of [place-finding], [place-taking] and [place-holding] practices in their phenomenal details. Similarly to our own study reported in this paper, Garfinkel and Sudnow relied on in-situ observation to obtain insights into the local organisation of the setting based on their own competences, making visible the taken-for-granted social practices. The embodied and sequential details of members' orientations to places, illuminating the actual work of [place-finding] and [place-holding], can be recovered and identified by such methods, but they could be further specified through careful analysis of video materials, permitting 'reflexive preservation-configuration of phenomenal features for analysis' (Mondada 2006).

The unproblematic mundane character of such activities arises from the visibility of places and their recognition as places, and it is enabled by human ability to visually (or otherwise) estimate the occupancy status of visible places. As one of Garfinkel's students wrote: 'One notion of visibility is that real-worldly objects have to "reside" somewhere in the world where one could go looking to find them. This residence is not a "place" in the real world, but is the constituted sense of an object as accountably locatable in the world, either physically or

FIGURE 20.    Observation area in the QR.

through knowing how to look via some technical operation' (Baccus 1986, 5). The fact that we are able to *see-in-the-world* various objects, such as [empty places] or [taken places], make sense of them and incorporate them seamlessly into our courses of actions, is not a naturally given fact. It is rather a procedural, methodical accomplishment of the acting members of society, who constantly do work in order to achieve and maintain the 'object constancy' (Mehan and Wood 1975, 11–12) of meaningful social objects for all practical purposes.

Studies of work and workplaces have been a central part of EM and CA since Garfinkel's and Sacks' ground-breaking work (Garfinkel 1986, 2022; Rouncefield and Tolmie 2011). These studies also underline the centrality of material objects (such as screens, documents, computers, and writing utensils) for office work, show how they are embedded in office environments as part of the work-related activities (Travers 2001; Hartswood et al. 2011; Weilenmann and Lymer 2014), and how their ownership implicates specific identities, rights and obligations (Suchman 2005; Day and Rasmussen 2019). They demonstrate that a practical objectivity of material work-related objects is itself constituted and reaffirmed within the work praxis (Macbeth 1992; Hindmarsh and Heath 2000; Kawatoko and Ueno 2003; Hazel 2014). As Hindmarsh and Heath note, '[t]he sense of the object is … indexical, as it cannot be retrieved apart from the interactional context in which it is encountered' (2000, 557). Moreover, as part of the work, objects are also made *instructably visible*: 'objects cannot only be intended/meant/oriented, but … the ways in which they are appreciated can also be taught' (Koschmann and Zemel 2014, 359). Within this broader domain, our article shows that in addition to their central relevance to specific jobs and tasks at the office, material objects can also be consequential as traces of action and indicators of possibly continuing future work, in the spatial organisation of shared offices where activities and workers fluctuate from one place to another.

We have also outlined the notion of *markers of presence*, specifying and illustrating how it is based on the property of generativity of 'possessitives' – objects visibly owned and utilised by somebody else – used as dominant spatial markers. Thanks to this property, people see places with various levels of availability in shared office interiors, whenever there is empirically some constellation of material objects in space. The configuration of objects as [an empty place] or [a taken place] is not intrinsic to the objects or their relational configuration. It is grounded in the situationally available and recognisable meaningfulness of the social

scenery at hand in its appearance. In assessing this appearance, people do not perceive singular and separate objects distributed in space and 'analyse' their mutual positions one by one. Instead, they see the configuration of objects which belong together – in other words, they see a gestalt (Fele 2008; Lynch and Eisenmann 2022), a place which can be taken (or not). As Goffman notes: 'When, for example, a book is left on a newspaper, individuals will perceive that the newspaper is not to be taken, because the book and the newspaper will be understood to "belong together"' (1971, 42). Thus, in our case, when a participant places a bag on the floor next to a table/chair, it is not only (and arguably not even in the first place) the floor which is claimed, but rather the chair and table to which it is properly positioned (see Figures 11 and 13). The significance of material objects as markers of presence is established and maintained temporally: one can occupy a place to 'be on the lookout' for another attractive spot, and the status of a spot can also change over time – e.g. over the course of the week – even when its material configuration remains unchanged.[2] The practice of holding a place with the use of markers of presence is therefore restricted and bound by its specific environment of occurrence. Its transferability to other environments is an empirical question, although some working conjectures have been formulated on the basis of our empirical findings above. The observed practices are not simply 'determined' by the environment, but they also reflexively constitute the nature of this environment as a shared office – they constitute its *shared-officeness*.

In this article, we focused on the practical details which make [places] visible as [empty] or [taken] for competent members of the local populations which inhabit particular social settings, such as shared offices. In such environments, staffed by stable and familiar populations, material objects incorporated in sceneries obtain their sense through categorically inferential properties (see Fitzgerald and Housley 2015; Smith 2021), since things left on desks may recognisably belong not just to 'someone' but to specific 'ones': friends, bosses, adversaries and often very specific individuals.[3] Given the circumstances of the study, this paper can only point in this direction as an important avenue for further research. The findings also have broader implications for the design of shared office spaces, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has profoundly transformed work schedules and requirements for physical presence in offices. Topics to be addressed by future studies include identification with a shared space and the role of digital tools in this context.

An [empty place] in a shared office (or a similar semi-public space) is not necessarily a desk which is empty and clean: it may already have plants, lamps, keyboards, plugs, cables and monitors on it, as exemplified in our study of the Smart Living Lab. Yet, we still take it – under given conditions – that it is available for our 'temporary jurisdiction over space' (Roos 1968, 77). As competent and skilled members of society, we can employ the important skill of routinely evaluating such places for their availability. Indeed, practical knowledge of the place-holding practices was a crucial resource which we used during our observations and in taking the particular photographs which we used afterwards for visual analysis as simulations of the embodied glancing that is conducted by people in shared spaces. Nevertheless, many relevant aspects of the visual properties of interior social sceneries and other related phenomena remain to be potentially recovered and described using other methods of inquiry.

Previous observational studies of the use of space have employed concepts such as 'space appropriation' (Fischer 1997) or 'spatial markers' (Becker 1973), and relied heavily on practical members' knowledge on the side of the experimenters as observers. In this paper, our aim was to explore some of the basic phenomenal features of such a natural attitude towards the world. Our empirical observations from the Smart Living Lab experimental setting demonstrate that common courses of action, such as [holding a place] or [looking for a place], are occasioned concepts which gain significance in temporally developing and reflexive social interactions, incorporating relevant features of a surrounding spatial environment. In other words, 'visuality is a characteristic of practice rather than of a material object' (Popova 2018, 24) and 'what is seen … is exhibited (and becomes ascribable) in various activities involving the manipulation, observation or inspection of things' (Nishizaka 2019, 285). Developing this point of view, our observations have shown that the evidently visible occupational status of shared work spots is practically re-produced in participants' ongoing courses of action.

## NOTES

[1] The study was initially conducted thanks to Garfinkel and Sudnow's participation in a project co-organized by Edward Rose; see Mlynář (2022) for details about Garfinkel's collaboration with Rose in the early years of ethnomethodology.

[2] We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this valuable insight.

[3] Again, we are indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this trajectory.

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