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Glorifying and scapegoating narratives underlying activity-based workspaces in higher education

Bernadette Nooij
Department of Organizational Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Claire van Teunenbroek
Department of High-tech Business and Entrepreneurship, Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences, Universiteit Twente, Enschede, Netherlands, and
Christine Teelken and Marcel Veenswijk
Department of Organizational Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Abstract

Purpose – Our study centered on activity-based workspaces (ABWs), unassigned open-plan configurations where users' activities determine the workplace. These workspaces are conceived and shaped by accommodation professionals (APs) like managers and architects and are loaded with their ideas, ideals, norms and values; therefore, they are normative and hegemonic. Previous research has largely failed to consider how APs' spatial conceptions materialize in the workplace. To address this omission, we adopted a narrative approach to study APs' impact during the conceptualization stage.

Design/methodology/approach – The data were collected via a 10-year at-home ethnographic study at a Dutch university, including observations, interviews, documents and reports. Studying the researchers' organization allowed for a longitudinal research approach and participative observations. The data focused on the narrative techniques of APs when establishing an ABW.

Findings – In introducing ABWs, APs resorted to two principal narrative strategies. Firstly, the ABW concept was lauded as a solution to a host of existing problems. Yet, in the face of shortcomings, lecturers were often blamed.

Originality/value – Despite the considerable influence of APs on both the physical layout of workspaces and the nature of academic labor, there is little insight into their conceptions of the academic workspace. Our research contributes a novel perspective by revealing how APs' workspace conceptions drive the narratives that underpin the roll-out of ABWs and how they construct narratives of success and failure.

Keywords Activity-based workspace, At-home ethnography, Implementation, Lefebvre, Professional narratives

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

We present a distinctive and significant at-home ethnographic study conducted over a span of ten years. Analyzing this rich dataset, we delve into the narratives of architects and

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managerial actors who are instrumental in creating activity-based workspaces (ABWs) within the higher education (HE) sector. ABWs, providing users with varied workspaces tailored to their activities include unassigned open-plan offices, and eliminate traditional individual offices (Kingma, 2018). These spaces have witnessed widespread adoption in higher education due to their efficiency and the anticipated enhancement of educational quality and support for evolving educational practices (Nooij *et al.*, 2023). Architects and managerial actors, henceforth referred to as accommodation planners or APs, have been at the forefront of a growing discussion in recent decades about implementing ABWs in HE (Muhonen and Berthelsen, 2021; Nooij *et al.*, 2022; Van Marrewijk and Van den Ende, 2018; Van Sprang *et al.*, 2013).

ABWs emerged from evolving work dynamics, starting with early 20th-century cubicles, transitioning to 1960s open-plan offices, and adapting further with late 20th-century digital technologies (Kingma, 2018). While ABWs promise to enhance flexibility and productivity by aligning with dynamic work processes, there is a lack of scientific evidence to support these claims (Blok *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, the current scholarly narrative on ABW reflects a one-sided view of the concept, as observed by Nooij *et al.* (2023).

Previous research on ABWs has extensively focused on the viewpoint of users. For example, user expectations influence the workspace experience; if user expectations are unmet, they may develop a negative view of a workspace (Nooij *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, Muhonen and Berthelsen (2021) state that although the classification of lecturers' activities is changing, much individual work remains unsupported by ABWs. Although ABW design aims to enhance informal lecturer–student interactions, they may instead formalize these relationships (Sandström and Nevgi, 2020; Van Marrewijk and Van den Ende, 2018).

The insufficient attention given to the perspectives of APs toward ABWs (Nooij *et al.*, 2023) presents several issues for our understanding of ABWs. First, space is conceptualized before it is (re)built and used. Second, conceptualizations contain ideas about the organization that are communicated and materialized through space's shape, design, and structure (Hillier and Hanson, 1984). Third, a constructed workspace reflects and narrates the desired organization (Dale and Burrell, 2008). Finally, spatial transformations are narratives of change through which actors construct stories about success and failure (Vaara, 2002). Thus, it is vital to reveal how APs theorize ABWs and what they wish to accomplish in transforming workplaces.

The described issues align with Lefebvre's spatial theory (1991), proving a useful lens for studying ABWs (Nooij *et al.*, 2023) that highlights the spatial conceptualization preceding materialization. Thus, our research concentrates on the "conceived space" – the initial phase of spatial development, represented in drawings, models, maps and calculations. These representations of space do not emerge from nowhere – they are loaded with underlying ideas, ideals, norms and values. In our case, the conceived space represents APs' ideas about what should happen in the spaces they design and construct – for example, how they should be used. Consequently, the conceived space is a space of normativity and hegemony. It is not neutral but an important source of power relations and, therefore, socially produced (Lefebvre, 1991; Watkins, 2005). The culmination of the above considerations leads to our primary research question:

RQ1. What narratives and narrative techniques do APs employ in introducing activity-based workspaces in higher education?

Over 10 years, we conducted an at-home ethnographic study at Randstad University of Applied Sciences (RUAS, a pseudonym), allowing for an in-depth exploration of long-term processes (Alvesson, 2009), in our case, the production of spatial transformation. At-home ethnography refers to a specific type of ethnography in which researchers study the organization where they are employed. Using a narrative research approach, we examine the

complex nature of conceived space. Narratives are pivotal in driving organizational change (Vaara *et al.*, 2016), necessitating thorough exploration and analysis. We define them as thematically organized stories that convey meaning, reflecting individual perspectives and shaping organizational roles and future visions (Veenswijk, 2006). Our analysis exposes how APs' narratives reveal their ideas, legitimizing changes. Furthermore, it uncovers the social construction of success and failure, aspects often neglected in business and organizational studies (Vaara, 2002).

To illuminate how APs conceive the space they implement, Carlsen (2014) proposes four questions to construct and analyze the narratives that surround a change process: (1) What is the problem and its root causes? (2) How is the problem addressed? (3) What are the challenges? (4) What are the expected outcomes? We use these questions as a guideline to reconstruct APs' spatial narratives in order to gain an understanding of their conceived space.

Lefebvre's spatial theory underscores how social, cultural, and historical influences shape our perception of the world. This approach aligns closely with social constructionism, in which the world around us is understood as socially constructed. Our research also reveals aspects of social constructivism, as knowledge and understanding emerge actively through interactions among participants, including the researcher. Therefore, we argue that our research perspective is both social constructionist and social constructivist.

The article unfolds with a discussion of the conceived space and narrative theory, followed by an exploration of our methodology. Subsequently, we present our findings and main project narratives, interpreting these narratives in the discussion section before concluding our study.

2. Narrating conceived space

2.1 The conceived space

Lefebvre (1991) argues that built space is not an objective materiality but a representation of existing power relations. A building has multiple layers of meaning. Further, beyond its materiality, it is a medium of social relations. In his spatial theory, Lefebvre combines three dimensions of space: conceived space (representations of space), perceived space (spatial practices) and lived space (spaces of representation). The conceived space is conceptualized by APs and articulated through plans, drawings and models. It is the foundational stage of spatial development, absorbed with APs' ideas, beliefs and assumptions about users' behaviors, needs and desired organizational structure (Dale and Burrell, 2008). As such, conceived space encompasses APs' visions for the built environment, like lecturers' performance and spatial arrangements intended to influence behavior.

Analyses of conceived space focus on ideologies underlying constructed environments, which are retained in maps, structures, plans and prescriptive documents; these create an abstract or mental space. The conceived space not only reflects APs' visions but also manifests their control over the environment, often reinforcing asymmetrical power dynamics through the spatial arrangements they impose in organizational settings. Lefebvre (1991) considers this dominance problematic: abstract constructs can lead to ideas of idyllic spaces that manipulate users' experiences and practices (i.e. their lived and perceived space).

Built space begins as an abstract concept that is actualized through its physical manifestation (Lefebvre, 1991), and it is imbued with meaning via its form, structure and function (Hillier and Hanson, 1984). Form and structure embody the formal characteristics of a building and its topology, which is based on hierarchical and social structures. A function is inscribed in the use of the building and maintained by prescriptive language about ordering and describing activities about, for example, rules of use. These types of languages are hegemonic because they aim to order and control users' spatial practices.

In practice, APs aim to shape organizational processes and user behavior by transforming space (Roskams and Haynes, 2021; Sandström and Nevgi, 2020). For example, many

organizations have adopted flexible workspaces to increase spatial efficiency or employee collaboration (Muhonen and Berthelsen, 2021; Roskams and Haynes, 2021; Sandström and Nevgi, 2020). In other words, APs conceptualize space as a way to steer the organization in a desired direction. Therefore, APs' conceived space is based on the idea that applying a new or adjusted organizational ideology will lead to positive action or tangible outcomes (Lefebvre, 1991). The language of APs is critical in communicating and shaping their strategic visions, making it essential to study both their understanding of the workplace and their representational language.

2.2 Spatial narratives

To communicate their ideas, motives and ideals of new workplace concepts, APs use and create narratives and storylines that become central to a project (Veenswijk, 2006). Narratives give meaning to situations and have performative and descriptive functions (Boje, 1995; Vaara *et al.*, 2016) crafted to instigate change and envision a better future within the organization. Normative narratives within an organization have a mobilizing character as they intend for people to do something about a particular situation (Veenswijk, 2006). Their primary aim is to tell a story to trigger a change process within a chosen audience; therefore, narratives involve an interplay of a storyteller, an audience, and a context.

Analyzing the narratives that APs consciously and unconsciously deploy in launching new workspaces reveals the lenses they use to ascribe meaning to events. As APs initiate and steer the spatial transformations, the organizational narratives they construct are an instrument of control. We focus on APs' organizational workspace narratives during a spatial transformation process, arguing that narrators engaged in organizational change reinterpret and reassign their responsibility for success and failure, applying narrative techniques to the stories they tell (Vaara, 2002). These narrative techniques involve using words to convey particular messages (van Ooijen *et al.*, 2019), which results in the distinction of two narrative techniques – glorifying and scapegoating – that APs apply to socially construct(ed) conceived space. Glorification, as Carlsen (2014) explains, elevates concepts, actions, events or groups, creating heroes and highlighting heroic actions within the narrative. On the other hand, as Vaara (2002) articulates, scapegoating attributes failures to external sources, be it another group, an individual, an event or even a concept. Both techniques involve simplification, and scapegoating occurs by attributing problems to a single source, glorifying by idealizing a person, group or concept.

3. Methodology

3.1 Procedure and process

Conducting at-home ethnography (AHE), we studied a setting to which we have unfettered access, assuming a participant role often equal in hierarchy to others within the organization (Alvesson, 2009). This approach, blending research and work, accommodates the lengthy nature of (re)building space (Peltonen, 2011) and aligns well with our research objectives.

The first author, intrigued by a notification on the RUAS portal announcing the development of a new accommodation master plan (AMP), envisioned its potential use as a case study within her lectures. She followed the AMP, and her involvement deepened. A turning point was the acquisition of a grant from the Dutch Research Council (DRC), providing an expanded scope for dedicated research. As an employee, she established trust, enabling access to meetings, working groups and interviews with APs. The research's approval by the RUAS research board facilitated inclusion in project communications and subsequent invitations to AMP-related events. The study underwent annual assessments by the RUAS research board and the DRC, providing consistent oversight without swaying the

study's content. Participant feedback was solicited during evaluation meetings, enhancing trustworthiness. The coauthors acted as "critical friends" throughout the study; the second author played an important role in the development stages of the paper, particularly in shaping and refining the methodology. In addition, the third author reviewed the empirical data and introduced a new organizational approach to enhance clarity in presenting this section. The fourth author provided a new framework for the theoretical reflections and addressed several crucial "red threads" to improve the overall structure of the paper.

The AHE led to a decade of research into RUAS' ongoing spatial transformation. The first author integrated her research and teaching to align with the curriculum's natural rhythm. The process involved dynamic phases, allowing her to prioritize teaching or research as needed. This approach fostered reflective distance and fresh perspectives on the research project. Table 1 provides key events of the refurbishing process, detailing the first author's engagements in research and teaching (see Table 1).

Year	Key development events	Activities
2011	Development and Approval of Accommodation Masterplan (AMP)	- Evolving communication around AMP - Collecting documents - Teaching (100%)
2012	Tender for Executive Architects and Start of Refurbishing	- Tender participation and observation - Kick-off meetings, workshops - Site visits - Data analysis - Teaching (100% early, 95% later)
2013	Design Stage Pilot Bachelor's Program X	- Building group member - Data analysis - Teaching (95%)
2014	Construction and Delivery for New Workplaces and Faculty A	- User interviews for pilot programs - AP interviews - Participant observation - Data analysis - Teaching (95%)
2015	Design and Construction for Bachelor's Program A	- AP interviews - Opening attendance - Research proposal writing - Internal scholarship application - Teaching (95%)
2016	Refurbishing Project Evaluation and Redesign/Re-refurbish Pilot Bachelor's Program X	- External evaluation - AP interviews - Re-building group member - Data analysis - Teaching (80%)
2017–2022	Design and Construction Faculties B, C, D, E, F and (including Covid-related delays 2019) Finalizing Refurbishment project	- DRC-scholarship activities - Participant observation - Building group member - Data analysis, writing - Teaching (60% until 2022, 100% in 2023)

Table 1.
Summary of key development events and researcher's activities from 2011 to 2023

Research strategy		Number	Participants/Type of meeting	Data process
Observations	Meetings and gatherings	61	17 building meetings, 20 team meetings, 16 workshops, 2 architect selection meetings, 3 participation meetings, 3 site visits	Transcriptions and notes
	Presentations and speeches	13	Architects (4), project leaders internal and external (4), CEO (1), program managers (4)	Transcriptions and notes
	Participative observation	Numerous		Field notes (arranged by date)
	Informal conversations	Numerous		Notes taken during and after informal conversations, many recorded and transcribed
Interviews	In-depth (1.5 h)	7	CEO (1), architects (2), project leaders (2), Director of Facility Management department (1) Faculty Director (1)	Transcriptions
Documents			AMP, policy plans, minutes, email, newsletters	Thematically coded

Table 2. Overview of applied research strategies, participants, and data processing

The data collection spanned from 2011 to 2023, producing a rich volume of written data that exhibited redundancy, indicating data saturation and internal validation (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Notably, similarities in the coding of the first author's involvement in the 2013 pilot project and the 2019 activities confirmed data saturation, with no new codes emerging in the latter year (Miles *et al.*, 2014) (see Table 2).

3.2 Research strategy

The first author employed triangulation methods, including observations, interviews and document analysis. Verbatim transcriptions were made for recorded interviews, meetings and observations. She obtained informed consent consistently from participants, introducing herself and seeking permission for recording, photography and note-taking before actively participating in events.

3.3 Participant observation

The first author actively participated in activities related to the AMP, taking on roles that ranged from passive observation to complete participation. Observations extended to various

	DSHE 2021	RUAS 1996	RUAS 2012	RUAS 2021
Funding	11 billion			
# of institutions	57			
Employees	100,000	1,200	1,531	2,600
Students	820,000	12,000	22,000	24,000

Table 3. Background information on DSHE and RUAS

settings, including meetings, gatherings, presentations and speeches, totaling 71 events and three external company visits.

Notes were jotted down during the day and expanded upon in the evening, compiled chronologically and enhanced with transcribed informal conversations, emails, articles and photographs, creating comprehensive "thick" field notes analyzed with ATLAS.ti. To structure observations, following the example of Spradley (1979) a format (see Figure 1)

Observation protocol

Date:

INTRODUCE YOURSELF

ASK CONSENT

Space

Provide a comprehensive description of the venue and setting. Note any relevant environmental factors and their potential influence on the event.

Make photograph

Objects
Catalogue and explicate the objects utilized during the event, emphasizing their function and significance.

Objectives of the Event
Define and analyze the intended outcomes of the event. What are the goals? explicit and implicit?

Nature of the Events
Furnish a detailed narrative of the event's progression. Highlight the following:
- Presentations: presenters, outline the content, and critique the delivery method.
- Meetings: Detail the facilitation of the meeting, including the chairperson's approach, and attach the agenda and minutes for context.
- Activities: Which activities are undertaken? Discussions, workshops, and their alignment with the event's objectives.

Temporal Context
Record the event's duration and its temporal relationship to the overarching process or timeline.

Participants
Document the attendees, noting their roles, contributions, and dynamics within the event, including late arrivals and early departures.

What about me?
Reflective Analysis:
- Emotional Response: What did I feel, experience preceding, during, and subsequent to the event.
- Role and Reflexivity: describe my role within the event, what did I do, how did I react? Reflect

Figure 1.
Observation protocol

was developed to ensure that no elements were ignored. Photos of the settings were taken when possible, as these activated memories when elaborating on the notes (Pink, 2015).

Seven in-depth narrative interviews, each lasting approximately 1.5 h, captured the personal views of key professionals and executive architects. These narrative interviews provided a platform for respondents to freely express their ideas on spatial transformations related to higher education.

Further, crucial organizational narratives were deciphered from policy documents, elucidating the interconnection between past events and future actions within the AMP (Ameel, 2020). The first author analyzed policy plans, reports and drafts related to the AMP, resulting from the internal planning process and inputs to project planning. These documents reflected the official story of the spatial transformations and written organizational narratives (Ameel, 2020).

In her capacity as a participant observer, her roles varied in terms of involvement, encompassing interactions with both individuals and activities, ranging from minimal to substantial engagement. During instances of passive participation, she observed events like faculty renovations and public presentations, maintaining a low profile, making her a discreet bystander focused on unobtrusive observations. When actively participating, she immersed herself in events like selecting the executive architect or attending design workshops of other departments. Through such active involvement, she learned from others, which helped to expand her perspectives. The highest level of involvement was complete participation, wherein she assumed the role of an ordinary participant. This role was adopted most frequently, especially given her dual roles as a researcher and lecturer. In this capacity, she actively engaged in meetings both as a participant and an observer, contributing to discussions.

Continuous reflection is an essential aspect of AHE – it boosts self-awareness, elevates data quality and maintains ethical and methodological rigor. To support this practice, the first author maintained a diary for daily reflections. This process led to improved research methods, such as refining observation formats, and a deeper understanding of ethical aspects like consent. For instance, on one occasion, she recorded an event without asking for consent. Later that day, as she wrote in her diary, she felt great discomfort for violating ethical considerations, so much so that she removed the recording and never recorded anything without explicitly asking the participants.

3.4 Analysis

After several close holistic readings to gain an understanding of transcribed recordings, the texts were coded in an open manner. As themes began to surface, a thematic code tree was constructed to guide subsequent analyses. In examining the spatial change processes, the research team utilized Carlsen's (2014) analytical questions as a framework, employing them to construct the narratives presented by APs. We focused on: (1) What are the problems and their causes? (2) How can ABWs be implemented? (3) What are the challenges? (4) What are the expected outcomes?

To answer these questions, we produced a series of reports on individual refurbishment projects, wherein we analyzed APs' narratives. Eleven reports were constructed in which quotations from interviews, minutes of meetings, fieldnotes and organizational documents were combined. We noticed that APs constructed "us-them" narratives to explain success and possible failures. We then analyzed the four narratives on narrative scapegoating and glorifying techniques (Vaara, 2002), which APs applied to socially construct the conceived space.

4. Settings

4.1 Overview of the Dutch higher education system

The Dutch Higher Education System (DSHE) consists of 57 institutions with 100,000 staff members who provide education to around 820,000 students. The annual funding for this sector from the Dutch state budget amounts to 11 billion euros. For an overview, see Table 3. The DSHE is legally anchored in the Higher Education Act 1992. The sector is funded by government contributions, which are provided as a lump sum, allowing the boards to consider how to use these funds for research, education and social services. Funding depends on the number of students enrolled and the number of degrees awarded. This funding method encourages a strong focus on students, who need to be recruited and served as customers, leading to competition within the sector and forcing institutions to offer high standards in educational quality, services and physical representation.

4.2 Randstad University of Applied Sciences: a snapshot

Randstad University of Applied Sciences (RUAS, a pseudonym) is one of the 13 largest universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands and named after the densely populated Randstad region in which it is located. It provides education in line with its strategic core principles, which emphasize a student-centered, environment-focused, innovation-driven and quality-oriented approach, leading to officially recognized higher education degrees.

The RUAS campus offers a wide range of academic and non-academic facilities and services for students, including access to a library, accommodation, sports facilities, financial support, scholarships, study abroad and exchange programs and administrative support.

The growth of RUAS up to 2012 resulted in an increasing need for space, which led to the rental of external office space for services.

The main RUAS building is approximately 90,000 m^2. In 1996, it was occupied by 13,000 students and 1,200 lecturers. By 2022, it was accommodating more than 22,000 students and 2,000 lecturers. The current renovation of the main building is based on the AMP and prepared by the Facility Management Department (FMD) in collaboration with an architectural consultancy that helps organizations develop accommodation strategies. In 2012, the AMP was approved by the Executive Board and the University Council, and the roll-out began.

After two years of renovation, a sense of discontent pervades the school environment. Several departments and programs have expressed dissatisfaction with the renovations, and their complaints were casually dismissed with a "get used to it" attitude. In a speech delivered by the CEO, the response is framed as follows: "It's natural to experience friction and discomfort, but in the end, adaptation will occur. Stay focused on your goals" (CEO, opening speech, 2014).

The turning point came with the publication of an article in the national newspaper *NRC* (Rengers and Huygen, 2016) about another university's move to a new building and the subsequent widespread dissatisfaction among users. In response, the CEO of RUAS decided to stop the project and initiate a comprehensive evaluation, a process that will take a year. After this evaluation period, the project was restarted. While the basic principles remain unchanged, the collaborative design process has undergone changes. It is now characterized by structured and regularly scheduled meetings, and to ensure transparency and engagement, a designated communications officer produces a monthly newsletter to keep stakeholders informed of the ongoing redevelopment.

5. Findings

Here, we present the narratives structured according to Carlson's guiding questions and APs' use of glorifying and scapegoating techniques.

5.1 The problem and its causes

In advocating for renovation and the introduction of ABWs, APs identified two key issues: limited space efficiency and the need for more modern didactic methods. These issues were formally communicated through the AMP and a promotional film on the RUAS portal and remained unchanged throughout the AMP roll-out.

Occupancy measurements revealed a significant daily under-utilization of space, quantified at 20,000 m^2 within the building. The severity of this inefficiency was highlighted in a meeting where one project manager remarked: "You should be aware that we have a daily vacancy of thousands of square meters. I understand that, as a lecturer, you're not tied to your desk all day" (Building meeting, October 2017). This comment subtly suggests a link between vacancy and educational practices, implying that the issue lies with the lecturers rather than the FMD's strategies.

In several kick-off meetings, architects and project managers presented red and green diagrams to illustrate the paradox of space scarcity and vacancy. In 1996, a lot of office space was created because each employee was offered an individual workspace. Today, 70% of office spaces are vacant for many hours of the day. Despite this, office space was being rented off-site to accommodate central staff functions such as Facility Management, Corporate Communications and HRM. In addition, curricular space was under-utilized due to changing teaching methods. For example, occupancy measurements showed that many 35-seat classrooms were being used by as few as five people. Simultaneously, students and lecturers lacked small, enclosed rooms for tutoring (Fieldnotes, kick-off meetings, 2013, 2014, 2016).

In arguing for the refurbishment, the AMP cited financial prudence. The project manager consistently has asserted that "resources should be used more effectively rather than on under-utilized spaces. We don't want to spend money on bricks; we want to spend money on education" (Kick-off meetings, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2019, 2021). This juxtaposition of "money and bricks" with educational value subtly undermines the significance of their role in the transformation, ostensibly to gain trust by prioritizing academic investment over architectural expenditure. The FMD director and project managers also used a moral money argument, arguing that RUAS received its money from taxpayers: "It is public money, so it is our duty to use it sparingly and responsibly" (Interview FMD Director, November 2015). This argument places the organization within a wider societal framework. It links RUAS to debates about public organizations wasting money and facing financial cuts.

However, not all APs shared this financial focus. The CEO felt that the focus should be on improving lecturers' collaboration, which would lead to better educational practices. In a meeting (November 2016), he stated, "It is not for the money that we want spatial change. We are a rich university; we have enough money. I want to make my lecturers happy." Many in the audience, however, rolled their eyes. He continued, "I'm convinced that when you have a good workspace, you are more productive and a better teacher. That is why we are doing this." Then, many people began to nod as the meeting continued.

The AMP said that although the education at the university was sufficient, it needed to be improved and modernized. The AMP, the FMD, the supervising architect, the project managers, the newsletters and the promotional film emphasized that interdisciplinary collaboration between programs, lecturers and other staff would improve education. They believed that students and lecturers should also be encouraged to bond more. They argued that lecturers' silo-thinking and anti-social behavior were encouraged by the private and small offices they used. At a kick-off meeting (December 2012), the architect told his audience that "when you share a workspace with others, you get inspired, so there will be less silo-thinking and more collaboration between users and innovative projects. We know this because we also work in an open-plan office." Workspaces were therefore identified as a root cause of the lack of innovative educational practices in the institution.

5.2 How are ABWs addressed?

APs supported ABWs as a remedy for the inefficient use of space and outdated teaching methods, suggesting that ABWs would reduce vacancies by requiring fewer workstations as users would close a workstation when leaving for several hours. They argued that open-plan offices would encourage communication and teamwork, particularly between lecturers, and break down siloed approaches. The CEO stated: "They are not interested in collective ownership of the curriculum and keeping it up to date in order to serve students, the field, or society well . . . most lecturers stick to their outdated didactics and remain focused on their own small fields of expertise" (CEO interview, October 2016). The ABWs were proposed to act as catalysts that would correct the current lecturer practices.

The involvement of users in the design of workspaces was deemed crucial. "You are involved in the design; that's what makes this process so special. You must understand that this is not common practice, as I know from previous projects," remarked one architect at the launch of the pilot (June 2013). The collaborative approach was considered so special that the ABW concept was named The Randstad Way of Working, which communicated RUAS' desired identity as an exceptional university that cares for its employees.

A formal project structure was crucial, according to the FMD director, with a steering committee, including himself and faculty directors, retaining ultimate control. Training was introduced to adjust user behavior to new workspace norms. The necessity for such regulation became apparent during a meeting, where the project manager announced that "HRM will teach you how to do your work when you start occupying the new workspaces," causing some participants to gasp. Subsequently, there were heated discussions at the water cooler, and some colleagues noted sharply, "We apparently can't do anything right at all. We need HRM, who've never seen a student in their lives, to tell us how to work" (Fieldnotes, December 2014). This interchange revealed friction between the intended ABW policy and the perceived autonomy of lecturers.

5.3 Challenges

Project leaders, program managers and architects regarded improper space utilization as a potential hazard. The newly designed spaces were intended for specific activities, and any deviation from these designated functions was deemed undesirable. Advocating for accountability among users, APs proposed that colleagues should actively hold those not adhering to activity-based working norms responsible for ensuring professional space utilization. The CEO, in an opening speech, underscored this sentiment, stating, "If your colleagues do not behave appropriately within these rooms, hold them accountable. That is your responsibility as users. We created beautiful environments; you have to make it work" (CEO, opening speech, 2015). See Figure 2, Plate 1 for the maps and an overview of lecturers' new workspaces.

Both the CEO and the FMD expressed concern about the disobedient behavior of the lecturers, which has posed a significant and continual threat to the project. This resistance is seen as a reluctance to adapt to modern teaching methods, jeopardizing the intended change through activity-based working. The CEO made particular reference to the authority issues of many lecturers, noting: "They have significant challenges with the authority of others. Ironically, they themselves sit on a throne in the classroom and are reluctant to give up their autonomy" (October 2016).

The prospect of lecturers increasingly working from home was also perceived as a risk to the AMP. Directors and managers emphasized the importance of lecturer visibility and proposed establishing rules if remote work becomes more prevalent. During a program's team meeting, a manager articulated, "The primary objective isn't to promote more remote work but rather to emphasize working right here at RUAS, where our students are. If we

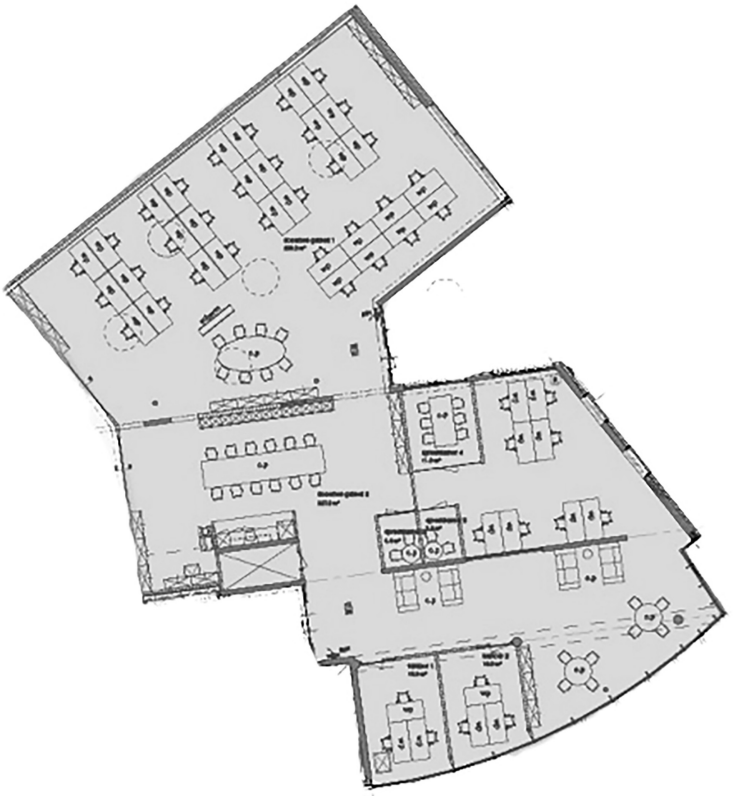

Figure 2.
Drawing of new workspaces

Plate 1.
The new workspaces

notice individuals opting increasingly to work from home, we will not hesitate to establish guidelines. We'll assess who can potentially work remotely, considering factors such as their FTE" (Curricular manager, team meeting, September 2015).

The challenges highlight the assumptions of APs in creating flawless environments, including a notable detachment in taking responsibility for usability. The burden of usability is placed on lecturers, who are expected to adapt their behavior.

5.4 Expected outcomes

APs expected that the ABWs would positively impact space efficiency, which the FMD director also intended, claiming, "The AMP is designed to end the paradoxical vacancies and shortages" (December 2015). During a meeting in which some lecturers expressed doubts about whether the design would interfere with their program's identity, an architect declared, "Don't worry, we'll make you a place where you feel at home, a place where you belong. A place where you and the students want to be" (Team meeting, January 2014). The sense of belonging he referred to should lead to user satisfaction as the FMD Director, architects, and project managers expected users to choose the campus as a place and increase the time they spent there. The FMD Director stated, "We want and expect users to be here, to meet each other, to stay longer" (December 2015).

The assumption that more extended stays indicate satisfaction is consistent with the findings of Willis (2013), who argues that increased use of physical assets indicates satisfaction. In addition, APs also had expectations about the plan's impact on educational practices. The CEO, FMD Director, and program managers expected increased collaboration to transform lecturers into instructors and coaches, allowing students to work independently or in small groups on assignments. They argued that "in the bachelor's degree programs, the curriculum should be the joint responsibility of lecturers and the team." Consequently, autonomy should shift from the individual to the team, which would be a positive development.

However, the CEO and FMD expressed some reservations about the success of ABWs. They were concerned that lecturers might resist changing their teaching practices, leading to the stagnation of the project's goals. The FMD director blamed this resistance on staff tenure: "I hope it will work out. But not many people around here are willing to change. I see people working here for over 30 years, doing the same thing day in and out" (FMD, November 2015). A project leader echoed this statement when he told the lecturers, "You can't go on working the way you're used to. You have to finally start working collaboratively" (building meeting, October 2016). In case lecturers were not willing to change, the CEO stated: "If they remain resistant to change, we have to consider drastic measures, like resignations" (CEO, fieldnote, September 2016). Lecturers' behavioral change was assessed as essential, meaning reluctance would lead to action.

5.5 The dual tactics of glorification and scapegoating: discussing success and failure

5.5.1 Envisioning a bright future. The APs attributed the expected success of the ABWs to the foresight and precision of their planning efforts. The FMD Director echoed this sentiment, stating: "We took our time and carefully studied user requirements to create the AMP and decide on the ABW concept. So, we asked program managers and students for their input to create an alignment between supply and demand." This narrative portrays APs as conscientious and responsive to the needs of the RUAS community.

However, this glorification subtly shifts in the face of resistance. The narrative bends to put the onus back on the users. One project leader deflected, "You may be against the ABW, but the ideas are based on user input. This is what your colleagues want. We just made plans out of it." More pointedly, the CEO addressed the audience at the opening of a renovated

department: "This was your decision. This is what you wanted. So, when the going gets tough, remember why you wanted this, the values you want to realize" (CEO, May 2015). Such statements serve to lionize APs while subtly setting the stage for potential scapegoating should plans falter.

Simultaneously, APs argued that the implementation of ABWs would better match supply and demand. They used objective terms to describe success in terms of matching, user density, and reduced vacancy, although they do not mention measurable targets. For example, the promotional film stated that "ABWs will save money that will benefit education" (Promotional film 2014). However, it remains to be seen how much money will be saved or how it will benefit education. Later, the newsletters stated that "the savings will benefit FMD projects" (newsletter 2018), thus contributing to education only indirectly. In some cases, when users made specific requests – for example, to visually convey the essence of their program through spatial arrangements – project leaders often refused, citing the previously emphasized responsibility to taxpayers: "Remember, this is the taxpayers' money … not ours" (Building meetings 2014–2021). This moral standpoint adds a layer of complexity to counter-arguments, making them difficult to challenge. Implicitly, it suggests that those who question AP decisions may be acting immorally.

Failures in the application of the ABW concept by users were framed as "violations." As one architect pointed out, "A potential threat to the project is a deviation from expected behavior—talking, eating, or laughing where it's not appropriate. As lecturers, it's your responsibility to set the rules, stick to them, and encourage others to accept them" (Team meeting, 2016). Here, the scapegoating becomes explicit; it is not the concept that is flawed but the behavior of the lecturers. This attitude was also adopted by program managers. For example, if lecturers had problems concentrating in the open offices due to noise, the problem was not rooted in the physical office but in the rules that lecturers agreed upon to make the offices work. As one manager explained, "If we follow the rules, we can make it work" (Curriculum Manager, team meeting, 2016).

Consequently, lecturers were expected to regulate the use of the space themselves. When spaces seem inadequate, lecturers should adjust their practices to fit the concept; the concept does not necessarily have to fit the practices of the users. For example, during a meeting with four lecturers and eight APs, the topic of open classrooms emerged. An architect explained how teaching should unfold: "Look, right here, you start with a short instruction, and then you let them work." A lecturer interjected: "That's not feasible. It's already a challenge to get students' attention in a closed classroom. We are dealing with challenging literature that requires concentration. I need a closed classroom." A fellow lecturer nodded, and the architect asked, "What kind of lecture are you giving?" The lecturer hesitated, wondering what that had to do with anything. "Well, come on," he insisted. "My field is service management," she revealed. He laughed and exclaimed, "Oh, especially that lecture should be given in the open classroom. Yes, it will be perfect. You just need to tweak your teaching a bit." The APs chuckled and nodded in agreement while the lecturers remained silent (Field note, December 2015). This example highlights the prioritization of space over usability and suggests that adapting teaching methods to the changing physical environment is essential.

5.5.2 Implementation: The facade and the reality. Throughout this process, a collaborative design strategy was glorified, presented as a benevolent approach by management to create user-friendly spaces. The notion of "the Randstad Way of Working" was proposed not just as a concept but as an embodiment of workplace freedom. As one architect stated, "You (lecturers) are involved in the project because we want to create spaces that suit you best" (building meeting 2016). However, this perceived freedom was circumscribed by the boundaries of the project and the underlying spatial policies of the APs. The project

manager's comment at a kick-off meeting in 2019 captured this duality: "You can do whatever you want. I don't care. Six rooms, twenty? Within the boundaries of the AMP, you are free to create the rooms you need."

While collaborative decision-making was praised, the power dynamics remained unchanged. At a kick-off meeting, a lecturer asked, "Do we have a budget to work with and the freedom to choose what we need within those limits?" With raised eyebrows, the project manager replied, "Feel free to ask for anything you need; the final decisions are ours." Further, the architects and the CEO continued to glorify their role by pointing to past successes with ABW, thus reinforcing their competence. The CEO said, "I have implemented ABW before. It was a great success" (Interview CEO, 2016).

However, in the event of failure, the blame was shifted to users, represented by lecturers. After a troubled pilot, architects questioned the input of the bachelor's program: "We started the pilot with this particular bachelor's program because the field you teach is related to architecture. Why didn't you give us the right input?" Even though APs spearheaded the collaborative design, they attributed any failure to user representatives, whom they scapegoated for the shortcomings.

5.5.3 Improving education: The ideal and the deficit. The narrative around ABWs assumed that the new approach would catalyze interaction and collaboration, thereby improving education. Lecturers' presumed reluctance to change their didactics was met with the suggestion that such change must be "forced" through environmental design. The CEO and FMD Director expressed the need for a new archetype of educator, one who is socially engaged and adaptable.

The CEO revealed the board's image of a glorified teacher who would be highly educated, change-oriented, socially engaged, would not shy away from confrontation with dissenting students and would be focused on the personal development of students. This ideal teacher avoids a hierarchical relationship with students and is accessible, available, and obedient to their supervisor, discussing life's big questions with their students and making their education a life-changing experience. This teacher acts professionally and is accountable for the quality of education. Unfortunately, according to the CEO, this type of teacher was rare at RUAS. He declared, "We need a new breed of teacher. The existing educators must adapt, moving beyond the mindset that their individual domains reign supreme. They need to summon the courage to hold each other accountable, refusing to tolerate underperformance" (Interview, October 2016).

The architects, along with the FMD Director and CEO, saw contemporary students as navigating an outdated educational landscape dominated by the authority of the lecturer, shaping a university experience that is largely beyond their control. This conceptualization frames students as a uniform, eager, but subservient collective under the influence of the lecturer. Although glorified, students' agency was often overlooked in these discussions, despite APs' claim that their primary focus was on student welfare, stating: "We are doing this to create a better education for our students," preferring a "lecturer-coach" approach to the "sage on the stage" (Project Manager, conference, 2017, 2020).

In contrast, national student evaluations suggest that the existing quality of education is satisfactory, although the APs' stories tended to portray successful educators as rarities. Despite positive national student ratings, APs' narratives often portray effective educators as anomalies, attributing systemic failures to lecturers' reluctance to embrace inclusive, globally aware teaching. This narrative problematizes the student–lecturer dynamic and paints a picture of lecturers as introverted and resistant to change, indifferent to students' needs and global perspectives. When failures occur, lecturers are often blamed for not effectively integrating global citizenship into their teaching and for a perceived lack of interest in societal issues. According to the CEO, "Most lecturers don't care. They are not morally aware or

interested in society." Thus, in scenarios where ABWs failed to improve the quality of education, the lecturers were to blame.

The ABW initiative is part of a broader institutional and societal vision that emphasizes the role of higher education in cultivating a moral compass in students. This approach is in line with the idea that universities are instrumental in shaping ethically aware professionals, as highlighted by Cheng *et al.* (2020). As a result, all undergraduate programs are required to integrate the strategic theme of global citizenship into their curricula. The FMD Director stated: "We have chosen this theme . . . lecturers [are] to embed it in all modules, which will help students to develop into responsible citizens."

Moreover, the discourse on ABWs suggests that encouraging interaction and collaboration can improve educational standards. Thus, leaders at RUAS proposed redesigning the environment to "force" didactic development, countering the perceived resistance of lecturers. The CEO envisioned an ideal educator as "highly educated, change-oriented, [and] socially engaged," engaging students in transformative education, in contrast to the current, more traditional faculty (CEO interview, October 2016).

5.5.4 A new tone. Following the 2016 evaluation, the refurbishment team's messaging gradually softened, and previously ambitious targets regarding improving education and collaboration were scaled back in conversations with users. Although narratives of AP's, the AMP and project documents did not change, newsletters shifted the focus to shared space use. "It's not so much about collaboration as it is about sharing space and how we should do it," the newsletters now said, adopting an inclusive "we" that included both the refurbishment team and future users, moving away from the divisive "we/they" narrative and implying a shared desire for the refurbishment.

6. Discussion

This ethnographic study offers insights into how different narrative techniques constitute and influence management-imposed spatial arrangements. We studied the spatial change from Lefebvre's perspective of the conceived space (1991) revealing how managerial actors and accommodation professionals socially construct storylines of success and failure using glorifying and scapegoating narrative techniques. Narrators are optimistic about their activities and input regarding the transformation project and glorify their plan-making, implementation processes, and expected outcomes. Regarding failure, users—in our case, lecturers—are scapegoated, which means that APs are pessimistic about their abilities to steer the organization in the desired direction, which is in line with the findings of Vaara (2002), who argues that managerial actors explain success and failure in self-serving ways.

Most AP narratives contained notions of discipline, implying the need to change users' behavior to make the spatial transformation successful. This view aligns with Lefebvre's notion of the conceived space, in which the hegemonic class executes power over the users of the space they create (Kingma, 2018; Lefebvre, 1991). APs perceived the ABW as a remedy to address vacancy problems and enhance interaction between faculty and students. According to their rationale, by sharing workspaces, overall space utilization would be optimized. While this concept appears logical on paper, research contradicts its efficacy. Studies have found that implementing shared workspaces and open-plan offices leads to increased remote work, diminishing the likelihood of in-person meetings and causing more absenteeism (Muhonen and Berthelsen, 2021; Nooij *et al.*, 2022; Sandström and Nevgi, 2020).

Within APs' narratives, an idealized image of an educational institution emerged, wherein space played a pivotal role, and users' behavior was seen as a condition for achieving the promised glorified future. Despite collaborative design practices where users have some influence, the idealized activity-based workspace concept remains untouched and

unquestioned. This contrast underscores the limited agency and influence afforded to users in the narrative construction and implementation of spatial transformations. More specifically, negative results were attributed to users' behavior rather than the design of the spaces. The dissonance between APs' glorified narratives and users' limited influence raises questions about the genuine participatory nature of collaborative design in the context of spatial transformation (Woolner, 2010). This discrepancy highlights the gap in understanding and communication between APs and users in shaping the envisioned educational institution.

The success of ABWs hinges on user compliance, expecting them to adhere to prescribed space usage and adjust their behavior to enhance education and foster innovation through collaborative space utilization. It is noteworthy that lecturers were often portrayed as resistant to change and proponents of outdated educational practices, a narrative contradicted by evolving educational methodologies and consistently high student satisfaction rates with lecturer quality in National Student Enquiries. Additionally, APs suggested they could comprehend educational processes and lecturers' activities. However, they simplified education to instructing students to fit their ideas of an ideal classroom.

In the HE literature on ABWs, users generally criticize the concept, centering around the redesigned workspace's perceived inadequacy in supporting academic processes. The challenges primarily stem from the open-plan office arrangement, which is noted as a significant obstacle to concentration due to close proximity to others (Muhonen and Berthelsen, 2021; Nooij *et al*., 2022). Additionally, the placement of most ABWs behind closed doors creates a noticeable distance between faculty and students (Nooij *et al*., 2023; Van Marrewijk and Van den Ende, 2018), contradicting the intended aim of fostering closer interaction. Lastly, the difficulty in having private conversations with colleagues and students leads to a decline in face-to-face interactions, increasing some employees' feelings of loneliness and causing a declining commitment (Nooij *et al.*, 2022).

7. Conclusion, limitations and suggestions

7.1 Conclusions

Our study examines how accommodation professionals use narratives to construct perceptions of success and failure in the context of spatial change in higher education. These narratives often frame APs as agents of successful change, while failures are attributed to users, mainly lecturers, who are accused of clinging to outdated didactics. Such scapegoating is in stark contrast to the original aims of the project, which were to bring spaces into line with contemporary teaching practices.

The findings highlight the significant influence of APs' narratives on the development of physical workspaces and, consequently, on users' work processes. The enthusiasm for implementing ABWs in higher education, partly explained by the dominant role of APs in spatial transformation processes, persists despite the challenges documented in the literature (Muhonen and Berthelsen, 2021; Nooij *et al*., 2022; Sandström and Nevgi, 2020).

In this project, the methodology used introduces an innovative approach, integrating longitudinal research, participant observation among stakeholders and an insider ethnographic perspective.

Longitudinal research: The inclusion of longitudinal research in this study adds a distinctive layer to workplace ethnography. As our study spans a decade, it enables the study of complex organizational projects and provides insight into the evolving social and spatial dynamics of the workplace. This temporal perspective enriches our understanding of organizational processes and the lasting effects of interventions over time.

At-home ethnography: Integrating an insider's ethnographic perspective adds authenticity and depth to the study. As an employee, the researcher has privileged access to nuanced facets of the workplace and decision-making processes. Established trust with stakeholders facilitates an intimate exploration of intricacies, revealing tacit knowledge, informal practices and subtle nuances that are often overlooked in traditional outsider perspectives (Alvesson, 2009).

Participant observation: By actively immersing itself in the experiences of managers and architects, the study captures a range of perspectives. This participatory element fosters a holistic understanding of how individuals in different roles navigate and contribute to the organizational environment, providing valuable insights into the complex social dynamics at play.

In conclusion, our analysis highlights the central role of APs' narratives in shaping the workspace and influencing users' adaptation to new educational environments. The findings are particularly relevant for stakeholders in higher education, where the dominance of APs in spatial transformation processes is evident despite well-recognized setbacks (Nooij *et al.*, 2022). By employing a longitudinal AHE, our research provides a nuanced perspective on the evolution of the academic workplace and contributes valuable knowledge that can inform future spatial and organizational developments.

7.2 Limitations and suggestions for practitioners

Our findings are limited to one organization where we conducted an ethnographic at-home study. Due to the method's flexible approach, the findings cannot be extrapolated to other contexts (Van Maanen, 2011). However, the goal was to understand APs' construction of the conceived space. The analysis reveals that APs initiate and influence spatial transformations and strive to change educational processes within higher education. Therefore, we suggest that practitioners carefully explore their own assumptions and ideologies concerning users' work processes when planning to introduce ABWs.

Further, we suggest that higher education institutions include at-home ethnographies in their research tools to uncover insights into the (unintended) consequences of change and create optimal work environments for all employees. Doing so would help prevent recurring errors and ensure optimal adjustments without a cycle of unclear reasons for changes.

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Corresponding author
Bernadette Nooij can be contacted at: bernadettenooij@gmail.com