

Review: books

All Mixed Up

A rich and authoritative study of home-working raises important questions for architects, planners and politicians, says Ken Worpole

Right

Triple doorbell at Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre, Paris (1932), which included a ground-floor medical suite for client Dr Jean Dalsace.

Below

Workhome occupied by Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and Momoyo Kaijima of Tokyo-based architectural practice Atelier Bow-Wow — a single volume with a cabin-like bedroom at the top.



When we moved to a small terraced street in Stoke Newington in 1969, the sound of the city was the thrum of an industrial sewing machine issuing from many front rooms. Garment vans dropped off cut-pieces each morning, collecting finished dresses at night. Working from home, as Frances Holliss admirably demonstrates, is as old as the city itself, and again on the rise. Nearly 25 per cent of the UK working population now works at home for at least eight hours a week, yet we are building the smallest and least adaptable houses in Europe, other than a few pioneering schemes by architects such as Alison Brooks and Tony Fretton.

It's a basic human activity but complex in its social and architectural implications. Many home-workers adapt domestic spaces as required, often illegally, while a minority live at their workplace (caretakers, shopkeepers, funeral directors), separating public and private spheres as well as they can. The Japanese do this best, according to Holliss, who reproduces a remarkable axonometric drawing of a *machiya* layout, clearly demarcating the spaces from street entrance to the rear bedrooms in a narrow but deep plan, finely graduated.

At the illustrious Maison de Verre in Paris, which contained reception room, consulting rooms, laboratory, study, family living quarters and a service quarter, there were three circulation flows designed into the structure of the building – but the system relied on a triple doorbell to set the process in motion. The critical doorbell also features in the account of a vicar who keeps a chain on the door and a panic button close by, on call 24 hours a day, but never knowing what to expect when the bell rings. Vicarages are built to an approved layout, which carefully attends to the relationship between pastoral work and domestic privacy.

Most of the home-workers interviewed by Holliss muddle through, including the woman who makes jams in her shed, the hairdresser who runs a salon in the garage, the furniture-making family living upstairs on a light-industrial premises, and the many artists living in former factories.

In the early 1980s, sociologist Sharon Zukin analysed the emergent phenomenon of loft living in lower Manhattan, and developers' use of cultural cachet to boost prices. In the 1990s, some local authorities in this country introduced policies allowing new live/work developments, later revoking them once they realised that developers were making big profits building on cheaply zoned land, designing industrial-chic apartments which were often neither places of work, nor contributing to urban vitality.

'Beyond Live/Work' commandingly charts the long architectural history of buildings designed as places of work and home in the UK and elsewhere in the world, from weavers' cottages to Chelsea ateliers, from Victorian fire station barracks to the 1949 Los Angeles home/office of Charles and Ray Eames. Inflexible regulation in the UK means that three-quarters of the book's interviewees operate covertly or illegally, yet many are saving public money by caring for children, disabled family members and other dependents, even as they work. Rich in fascinating case studies, each is illustrated by photographs, plans, and a wide range of schematic layouts.

Holliss rightly concludes that cities designed to accommodate more flexible patterns of working and living – especially for women, who in some British cities now make up more than half the workforce – would look and feel very different to those we currently inhabit. Politicians, planners and architects have yet to acknowledge this, let alone do anything about it. Reading this book would certainly open their eyes. **A**

Beyond Live/Work: The Architecture of Home-Based Working
Frances Holliss
Routledge, 240pp, £110 (hardback), £30 (paperback)