



# Curating the “Third Place”? Coworking and the mediation of creativity



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## ABSTRACT

Coworking spaces (CWS) and the associated practice of coworking, have emerged in numerous forms and various urban contexts to critically challenge traditional concepts of the workplace and location of creative work, while simultaneously confronting the way in which creative workers interact with and relate to each other as well as with space and to place. Heralded as a solution to increasingly atomised work patterns, CWS are imagined and presented as spaces of serendipitous encounter, spontaneous exchange and collaboration. Nonetheless, little is known about how coworking positively supports workers and how coworking relates to wider urban transformation processes has been largely un-researched. This paper contributes to a critical discussion through empirical analysis of a project aimed at establishing new creative CWS in city-centre locations across SE England. The study adopts a novel approach using Q-methodology. Motivations for coworking and benefits (or dis-benefits) of co-location are assessed, as is the extent to which coworking facilitates interactional effects and wider neighbourhood interactions. In particular, the role of the CWS manager as “mediator” is explored. Coworker benefits relate primarily to peer-interaction and support rather than formal collaboration. While CWS managers play a key connecting role, also ensuring coworker complementarity and compatibility, the coworker profile (motivations, needs, experiences) ultimately influences outcomes. The study cautions against the use of CWS as “quick fix” urban renewal tools, with little indication that the benefits of coworking reach beyond immediate members or that linkages are easily established between coworkers and local (resident or business) communities.

## 1. Introduction

Coworking spaces (hereafter CWS), and the associated practice of coworking, have emerged in numerous forms and in various (urban) contexts to critically challenge concepts of the workplace and the location of creative work, while simultaneously confronting the way in which creative workers interact with and relate to each other as well as with space and to place. Heralded as a solution to increasingly atomised and precarious working patterns within the creative industries (McRobbie, 2016), CWS are considered as preferential alternatives to home working or to semi-public “Third Spaces” (Oldenburg, 1989; Florida, 2002)<sup>1</sup> such as cafés or libraries, particularly for young entrepreneurs and independent creative professionals. As Spinuzzi (2012: 401) asserts, for these so called boundaryless workers the irony is that; “the freedom to work anywhere often means isolation, inability to build trust and relationships with others, and sharply restricted opportunities for collaboration and networking.”

As “a collective, community-based approach to the organisation of cultural and creative work” (Merkel, 2015: 124), coworking has engendered “high expectations concerning the improvement of the

socio-economic conditions of workers” (Gandini, 2015:193). CWS are both imagined and presented as spaces of opportune encounter, open knowledge sharing and spontaneous collaboration (Schmidt et al., 2014; Merkel, 2015). Indeed, they have been termed “serendipity accelerators” (Moriset, 2014:8). Although the uncritical acceptance and “celebratory framework” surrounding coworking has being questioned (Land et al., 2012; Gandini, 2015) very little is actually known about coworking or its purported effects. Despite the global proliferation of CWS, only a handful of academic studies exist and as Gandini (2015) notes, there is little evidence to indicate whether coworking empowers independent creative workers, or whether it reifies particular (precarious) working practices. Whether, or indeed how, coworking leads to forms of positive (social) interaction, knowledge sharing and exchange and/or to mutually beneficial collaborative activity is far from clear. What evidence there is suggests that spontaneous exchanges among coworkers are not actually very common (Spinuzzi, 2012; Fuzi et al., 2015; Merkel, 2015; Parrino, 2015) with coworkers typically “working alone, together” (Spinuzzi, 2012). Instead, evidence points towards encounters requiring active mediation or “curation” by CWS managers (Merkel, 2015: 139; Capdevila, 2013; Parrino, 2015) but

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<sup>1</sup> Contrasting with first places (home) and second places (work).

there has been little systematic analysis.

Further, attention has focused on the internal dynamics and benefits of coworking for creative workers. How coworking relates to wider urban transformation processes has been largely un-researched (Moriset, 2014). In particular, whether coworking ameliorates urban socio-spatial disadvantage by helping anchor local cultural production and support for neighbourhood-based development, or augments inequalities now associated with “creative city” and “creative class” strategies (Florida, 2002/Florida, 2005) has received scant attention, especially in the context of “ordinary” cities.

This paper adds to the emerging body of research on coworking by attempting to shed light on three interlinked questions: First, (how) does coworking support independent creative workers (i.e., what are the motivations for and benefits (or dis-benefits) of coworking)? Second, do benefits accrue between coworkers and wider neighbourhood communities (i.e., does coworking facilitate interactions between creative workers, local residents, businesses or organisations that might support neighbourhood development)? Third, do different organisational/management approaches influence (or not) these outcomes? More specifically, what is the role of the CWS manager?

Rather than their physical design, the complex social functioning of CWS forms the focus of investigation. Results from an empirical analysis of ReCreate, an EU-funded project designed to establish creative industries focussed CWS in small-cities across SE England, are presented and discussed. The study was exploratory, adopting a novel methodology: Q-methodology, supplemented by participant surveys, site observations and CWS manager interviews. The research allowed for insight into the early stage development of different coworking “communities” and the effects of different organisational/management approaches adopted. This research is timely, not least because coworking is entering mainstream urban policy discourse with “top-down” CWS interventions emerging as part of urban “place-making” strategies (Moriset, 2014). Also, independent workers now represent; “the fastest growing group in the EU labour market” (Leighton, 2015: 1). According to Leighton (2015) the decade to 2013 saw numbers increase by 45% to 9 million, a rise that; “represents a major shift in the nature of work and ways of working.” (Leighton, 2015: 1).

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 defines and contextualises coworking, differentiating it from other emerging workplace models; Section 3 reviews coworking in relation to associated urban literatures; The study context and research methodology are described in Sections 4 and 5; and in Section 6 research findings are presented and discussed; Conclusions and some thoughts for future research are offered in Section 7.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. The rise of coworking: the new “Third Space”?

Coworking is rapidly becoming a global, predominantly urban, phenomenon particularly among autonomous creative workers, freelancers and micro-businesses. It is described as; “a practice involving shared physical workspace and (often) intentional cooperation between independent workers” (Waters-Lynch et al., 2015: 2; see also Capdevila, 2013; Spinuzzi, 2012). Offering a “Third Space” (Oldenburg, 1989; Florida, 2002)<sup>2</sup> somewhere between the structure of a traditional (office-based) workplace and a coffee shop (Botsman and Rogers, 2011: 169), CWS aim to combine the informal (social) and the formal (productive, functional) elements into a work environment that claims to encourage a range of beneficial interactions (opportunities for socialisation, peer-support/mentoring, professional networking, idea/

knowledge sharing and collaboration (Clifton et al., 2016)).

The rise of coworking is attributed to several interlinked conditions (see Waters-Lynch et al., 2015; Clifton et al., 2016) namely; structural changes occurring within (urban) labour markets, including a shift to “knowledge-intensive” work and an acceleration in contingent forms of working (including the “freelancer economy”); and advances in internet and digital technologies which have fundamentally altered the spatial distribution of work (home working, remote and mobile working, etc.). These trends have, it is argued, led to increasing individualism and social isolation of workers (McRobbie, 2016).

Since 2007/8, CWS have proliferated from an estimated 75 worldwide, with numbers reaching 10,000 by end of 2016 and an estimated one million workers now using these spaces (Foertsch, 2017). In Europe, particularly high numbers of CWS are found in the major cities of Berlin, Barcelona, London, Paris, Amsterdam and Milan (Eurofound, 2015). Although it is in the inner areas of major, often termed “creative” cities that concentrations of CWS are typically found (Moriset, 2014; Merkel, 2015), coworking has spread to other types of location including small-cities and semi-urban locations (Fuzi et al., 2015).

### 2.2. Defining coworking

Coworking is, nonetheless, a nebulous term. It was first coined by Bernard de Koven as; “working together as equals” several years before the first “official” CWS opened in 2005 at Spiral Muse in San Francisco (Foertsch and Cagnol, 2013).<sup>3</sup> Coworking has socio-political foundations, its origins are as a “movement” and “philosophy” (Gandini, 2015: 196) built around the cornerstones (values) of: “collaboration, openness, community, accessibility and sustainability” (Coworking.com, n.d.). Many CWS demonstrate a strong ideological affiliation to this way of working (Colleoni and Arvidsson, 2015), often defining themselves as part of the global coworking community. Coworking has also been described as the physical manifestation of the “open source movement” (e.g., Lange, 2011) and the sharing peer-to-peer “collaborative economy” (Botsman and Rogers, 2011; DeGuzmann and Tang, 2011) as well as showing strong affiliation with (urban) D.I.Y. cultures (Merkel, 2015; Waters-Lynch et al., 2015). As Foertsch and Cagnol (2013) point out, CWS also have strong antecedents in (historic and contemporary) artist workspaces and collectives (also Jones et al., 2009; Moriset, 2014).

As a self-organised, non-competitive, values-driven and communitarian means of addressing work and labour insecurities (Leforestier, 2009; Lange, 2011; Merkel, 2015) coworking, as originally conceived, was less about physical space/design and more an informal means of organising people who shared similar attitudes and values and who wanted to adopt a loose commitment to a shared way of working (e.g., Jones et al., 2009). As Merkel (2015: 124) points out; “this ‘collaborative approach’ is always underlined as a distinctive feature that sets coworking apart from other forms of shared, flexible work settings.” Similarly the theme of “community” is strongly espoused in much of the coworking discourse, with the (social and collaborative) emphasis often framed as “joining a coworker community” (Spinuzzi, 2012; Capdevila, 2013; Gandini, 2015; Waters-Lynch et al., 2015).

CWS have also been conceptualised as serving important place-making and neighbourhood renewal functions (Capdevila, 2013; Moriset, 2014; Merkel, 2015). Emerging as small-scale, independent and (often) not-for-profit initiatives, typically founded and run by local entrepreneurs for use by local workers, many CWS demonstrate; “strong identification with and commitment to their local surroundings” (Merkel, 2015: 134; Lange, 2011) acting as semi-public spaces and

<sup>2</sup> Conceptual differences between “Third Spaces” and CWS are outlined by Moriset (2014) and Waters-Lynch et al. (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Foertsch and Cagnol (2013) trace CWS to 42 West 24, New York (1999); Schraubfabrik (2002) and Hutfabrik (2004), Vienna; LYNfabriikken (2002), Aarhus, Denmark; and The Hub (2005), London.

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