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To cite this article: Ilaria Mariotti, Ignasi Capdevila & Bastian Lange (2023) Flexible geographies of new working spaces, *European Planning Studies*, 31:3, 433-444, DOI: [10.1080/09654313.2023.2179232](https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2023.2179232)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2023.2179232>



Published online: 14 Feb 2023.



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EDITORIAL



## Flexible geographies of new working spaces

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of new working spaces (e.g. coworking spaces, third places, makerspaces, fab labs) is a phenomenon reflecting a broader change in the current digital economy from predominantly traditional offices and hierarchical structures to a more fluid way of working based on projects, networks, and collaborations. The articles published in this special issue reflect on the flexible geographies induced by these new working spaces, focusing on a variety of perspectives relating to (i) location patterns and determinants of new working spaces and coworking spaces in both urban and rural areas; (ii) their economic viability, liveability, and competitiveness; and (iii) members' lifestyles and work-life balance.

### KEYWORDS

New working spaces; work-life balance; location; competitiveness; lifestyle

## Introduction

In the blurring boundaries between fragile corporate institutions and individualized forms of work, we can observe a growing variety of new workspaces expressing flexible geographies. This phenomenon results from the advent of information and communication technologies that allow more spatial and temporal flexibility, multi-functionality, and geographical mobility. In addition, new modes of working have emerged, such as the gig economy, favouring independent work, project-based labour, and remote work. These socio-technological changes in the work market have favoured the development of a variety of new workspaces that have emerged worldwide. Coworking spaces (hereafter CSs) (Avdikos and Kalogerisis 2017; Durante and Turvani 2018; Mariotti, Bednář, and Di Marino 2022), fab labs (Fleischmann, Hielscher, and Merritt 2016; Suire 2019), open workshops (Lange and Bürkner 2018), open creative labs (Schmidt 2019), and many other types of third places (Oldenburg 2002) represent not only new physical environments for work but also new ways of working based on collaboration.

These spaces have flexible institutional affiliations and can be either public or private. In the public sector, institutions and governmental bodies have launched collaborative spaces as public services within public libraries, universities, or schools, intending to facilitate social cohesion, the collaboration of diverse social groups, and local economic development. In the private sector, all major cities around the globe have seen the launch of coworking spaces, some with a clear community-driven orientation, and others as real

estate operations. In some cases, existing spaces like cafes, restaurants, hotel lobbies, train stations, and airport lounges (Fiorentino 2019; Di Marino, Lilius, and Lapintie 2018; Brown 2017; Bilandzic and Foth 2013) have been adapted for these more flexible ways of working. Furthermore, many organizations have introduced open workspaces in the company to provide attractive work environments that facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing (Lô and Diochon 2018), aiming to capitalize on the results of these 'creative hubs' for organizational purposes.

In a broader sense, these new working spaces challenge our academic thinking about workplace studies and related spatial patterns. Emerging workplaces present different socio-spatial and functional characteristics as well as different uses. On the one hand, third places (such as public libraries, cafés, or airport lounges) were not originally conceived to host work functions but are increasingly used as temporary workplaces for a limited time. On the other hand, CSs and makerspaces are designed explicitly as working locations for self-employed and freelance workers, who temporally use them for different purposes, either for individual work or collaborative activities.

These developments have occurred within rising spatial asymmetries regarding core-peripheral economic development, the bifurcation of youth unemployment, and modes of flexible self-employment that challenge spatial research. Indeed, individual work is framed by uncertainty and accelerated work risks. Digitization has introduced major work changes resulting in an enormous impact on limiting the duration of qualifications. Know-who beats know-how: networking and understanding the dynamics of work contexts seem at least as important as having the relevant skills and competencies. Driven by digital work, new working practices are becoming less dependent on geographical distance, location, and time and increasingly embedded in thematic collectives based on temporal proximity (Ibert, Hautala, and Jauhiainen 2015). In addition, a growing number of people are working outside regular working hours, often outside traditional offices, with an extensive use of new technologies (Ahrendt et al. 2020; Messenger et al. 2017; Botey Gaude et al. 2022), requiring the flexibility that new working spaces might provide.

This paradigm shift in work-location patterns requires a deeper analytical approach that we aim to fulfil with this special issue. With an awareness of the variety of new workplaces, the central focus of this special issue is on new working spaces, which are increasingly recognized as part of the entrepreneurial ecosystem of cities and urban regions and can be considered as 'permanent alternatives' to traditional workplaces.

Within this context, this special issue, which was planned and compiled before the COVID-19 pandemic, aims to explore three main issues: (i) location patterns and determinants of new working spaces and coworking spaces (CSs) on the urban and rural levels (Mariotti, Akhavan, and Rossi 2021; Coll-Martínez and Méndez-Ortega 2020; Marino et al. 2021); (ii) the economic viability, liveability, and competitiveness of CSs (Bednář, Danko, and Smékalová 2021); and (iii) coworker lifestyles and work-life balance.

## Location patterns and determinants of new working spaces

Large strands of the recent literature on new working spaces show that most are located in large urban areas in or around city centres with a concentration of skilled labour, knowledge, and innovation (Mariotti, Pacchi, and Di Vita 2017). CSs may constitute an integral part of the city's entrepreneurial ecosystem and contribute to its strength,

primarily due to the coworkers' characteristics (Bouncken and Reuschl 2018; Merkel 2015; Capdevila 2015). Nevertheless, developing literature shows a new wave of new working spaces emerging in remote, peripheral, and rural areas (Vogl and Akhavan 2022; Merrell et al. 2022; Fuzi 2015; Jamal 2018; Akhavan and Mariotti 2019). On the one hand, an increasing number of highly knowledgeable workers tend to work from remote locations where work is cooperative/collaborative rather than co-located (Bosworth et al. 2021); on the other hand, because these new working spaces tend to specialize in providing services to the traditional manufacturing and engineering system, they are mainly located in industrial clusters outside cities.

As Felton, Collis, and Graham (2010) said, the dense proximity cluster networks of the inner city are not the only environments where industries operate. Indeed, the literature has underlined that simple co-location may not necessarily lead to networking, interaction, and collaboration and thus knowledge creation, while community facilitators such as CS managers may play an important role in enabling more synergy to stimulate encounters and collaborations inside trust-based community-oriented environments (Fuzi 2015). As localized contexts of knowledge brokerage, new working spaces help establish knowledge-sharing practices and collaboration by enabling unexpected encounters (Jakonen et al. 2017), informal exchange, and frequent social interaction.

On the one hand, CSs, which offer multidimensional types of proximity (Mariotti and Akhavan 2020) – geographical, social, organizational, institutional, and cognitive (Boschma 2005) – and non-hierarchical relationships between coworkers (Spinuzzi 2012), facilitate socialization and, consequently, business opportunities through the exchange of tacit knowledge (Parrino 2015). By organizing open events and networking activities, CSs act as local anchors rallying the efforts of individual and collective business opportunities by establishing temporary partnerships and collaborations (Lange and Bürkner 2018). Therefore, such spaces can be seen as 'relational milieus' (Gandini 2015) that implement an open-source approach to working (Lange and Schüssler 2018) by providing the physical and relational mediation for networking activities required by independent workers (Capdevila 2018).

On the other hand, some of these spaces (such as makerspaces and hackerspaces) contribute to implementing new modes of production (Rayna and Striukova 2016; Garnier and Capdevila 2023) based on the transformation of digital data into physical objects by applying open-source principles to fabricate material objects (Gershenfeld 2012). Social manufacturing (Hamalainen and Karjalainen 2017) and other forms of 'Do-It-Together' modes of production are allowing the re-industrialization of city centres, thus transforming the geographies of manufacturing (Gress and Kalafsky 2015). While the potential of peer-production outside large firms (Garnier and Capdevila 2023; Rayna and Striukova 2016) might offer opportunities for drastic changes in the production of physical goods, the digitization of services allows the development of remote work and the exodus of employees and independent workers to rural areas, which was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lange et al. 2022; Mariotti, Bednář, and Di Marino 2022).

However, findings in the literature also reveal that there is little evidence for the socioeconomic effects of new working spaces in urban regions – or in peripheral areas – while the impacts on geography and spatial planning agenda have not yet been fully explored.

## The economic viability, liveability, and competitiveness of coworking spaces

Regarding economic viability, spaces can have different business models depending on their orientation and priorities. While commercial CSs try to maximize occupancy and ensure a steady stream of revenue from membership fees and additional services (Bouncken, Qiu, and Clauss 2020), other more community-oriented spaces prioritize the creation of a lively community, monetizing some services like training, coaching, or events to develop a sustainable model (Gandini and Cossu 2019).

In rural and peripheral areas, the rise of coworking is linked to the fact that the spaces represent platforms for social interaction and professional networking. As such, policy makers justify their expansion under the assumption that increasing local connections between dispersed agents will improve territorial socioeconomic development. From this perspective, these collaborative spaces could be compared to public services that, like public libraries or telecentres, deserve to be publicly funded (Capdevila 2022). CSs might maintain communication platforms and links between the creative ecosystem and public authorities. They might also play a pivotal role in developing resilient communities, specifically through economic and adaptive resilience, an aspect that wound up being crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bednář, Danko, and Smékalová 2021).

Research in the field has acknowledged the ability of coworking spaces to create positive and productive working environments. Coworking spaces can promote a sense of community and belonging (Garrett, Spreitzer, and Bacevice 2017), which can lead to increased job satisfaction and productivity. The research on creativity has also shown that a flexible and collaborative working environment can foster creativity and innovation (Schmidt 2019). CSs can be seen as working environments in which people not related by any hierarchical structure decide to work side by side to socialize and overcome isolation while collaborating and sharing knowledge (Merkel 2019). These informal forms of interaction may enhance community building and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, they might produce opportunities for cooperation and make it possible to strengthen new work connections or create knowledge spillover (Parrino 2015; Capdevila 2015). Ultimately, CSs can be seen as interesting experiments in the creation of enabling environments for the spread and exchange of tacit knowledge (Wijngaarden, Hitters, and Bhansing 2020), since geographical proximity allows workers to benefit from the local buzz just by 'being there' (Gertler 2003; Grabher et al. 2017).

In rural settings, this can extend to effects on community well-being as well, particularly because coworking spaces have the potential to bring together individuals with diverse backgrounds and knowledge bases (Merrell et al. 2022). Where coworking spaces develop and become embedded as part of the relational assets (Bosworth et al. 2023) of a local innovative milieu (Breschi and Lissoni 2001) or entrepreneurial ecosystem (Lange and Schmidt 2020), their impacts can extend value to members by improving the social and economic environment, providing a hub of activity to sustain local entrepreneurship and support for multiple community initiatives, and enhancing the branding and image of a place (Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021). The embedding role of coworking spaces resonates with narratives on the influence of social and community factors on rural entrepreneurship practices (Bosworth and Turner 2018).

## Coworker lifestyles and work-life balance

While research conducted before the pandemic suggested that working at home could enhance workers' well-being (Reuschke 2019), it also underlined the risk of loneliness and the lack of social contact that many self-employed workers suffered. Furthermore, remote work has also affected the feeling of organizational belonging and alienation from colleagues, reducing remote workers' engagement and productivity (Standen, Daniels, and Lamond 1999).

Based on the observation of an increasing deterioration of local communities and social cohesion, Oldenburg (2002) suggested that 'third spaces' (e.g. coffee shops clubs, public libraries, gyms, bookstores, and parks), as spaces of socialization between home and the workplace, could lead to new connections between locally dispersed workers. Following Oldenburg's perspective (2002), new working spaces have been described as third places offering opportunities for socialization and informal interaction, helping to overcome the feeling of loneliness and providing access to spaces for small-talk (often around coffee machines and in kitchenettes) and opportunities for sharing (such as courses and evening events). Social interaction might lead to companionship and integration and may also help workers in their professional activities by leading to new knowledge, increasing networking, developing professional collaborations, or accessing new business opportunities.

By allowing individuals to work in a dedicated space away from home, these spaces facilitate the separation of activities, improving work-life balance (Merrell et al. 2022). Social interaction has also been tied to improved time management, mental health, and well-being (Kovács and Zoltán 2017).

Professionals who find themselves struggling between work tasks and family obligations tend to seek more flexible conditions that help them tackle conflicting situations (Cochis et al. 2021). In addition, such conditions enhance their social lives and create further career opportunities (Gerdenitsch et al. 2016). Coworking spaces are thus perceived as optimal workplaces by working parents, where they can find stability and scale their social networks (Orel 2019). Moreover, continually evolving user interactions resulting from effective mediation mechanisms allow these individuals to find emotional support, increase productivity, and exchange knowledge (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Isaac 2016).

The expansion of coworking also responds to changes in the lifestyle of millennials (Buchnik and Frenkel 2021). In urban settings, coworking spaces have become particularly attractive to independent workers, freelancers, digital nomads, start-uppers, or even employees from large companies working remotely (Chevtaeva and Denizci-Guillet 2021). These users, mostly from the millennial generation, prefer to find meaning in the workplace and tend to combine work, leisure, and entertainment, blurring the separation between activities. From a spatial perspective, the implication is that these professionals choose to work in urban areas that are dense with amenities and cultural offerings. From this perspective, coworking spaces meet their requirements from a spatial point of view, since they tend to be located in central vibrant areas. In addition, the spaces are adapted to flexible uses, often with 24/7 access and adaptable physical spatial distributions.

In rural areas, coworking spaces also meet the needs of emerging lifestyles. Such spaces, like in urban areas, represent social agoras and platforms for knowledge

sharing and collaboration, adapted to the needs of freelancer and remote workers that opt to move to the countryside (Fasshauer and Zadra-Veil 2016).

### Summary of the contributions

The papers in this special issue were written before the COVID-19 pandemic, although they anticipated some trends experienced during this external shock. For instance, regarding the location of new working spaces, the findings support the trend of the renewed attractiveness of suburban and peripheral areas for these new working spaces (Mariotti, Akhavan, and Rossi 2021).

The paper by Pavel Bednář, Lukáš Danko, and Lenka Smékalová, entitled ‘Coworking spaces and creative communities: making resilient coworking spaces (CS) through knowledge sharing and collective learning’ aims to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the economic viability, liveability, and competitiveness of coworking spaces before the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper focuses on the sharing economy among cultural and creative industries (CCI), which plays a pivotal role in developing deprived areas and communities through culture-led regeneration. Within this context, the authors analyse the role of coworking spaces in developing communities to increase their social resilience, mainly through sharing and living. They also explore the way in which new workplaces gain insight into the community–organization–space nexus, along with knowledge interactions and creativity in communities. To reach this goal, in-depth interviews with seventeen founders/managers and seventeen entrepreneurs/coworkers were carried out in nine European cities (Berlin, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Linz, Riga, Stockholm, Tallinn, Trenčín, and Warsaw). The results of the qualitative analyses indicate that CSs positively promote CCI in cities by establishing and developing a local ecosystem, which stimulates knowledge sharing and co-creation through joint projects organized by creative entrepreneurs and experienced managers. In addition, the CSs have retained the creative classes and tourism by organizing frequent cultural and creative events and collective learning in new working spaces. As a result, the authors state that the characteristics of CSs make them an effective tool for maintaining communication platforms and links between the creative ecosystem and public authorities, thus enhancing culture-led urban regeneration and economic development.

In the paper entitled ‘The Location of Coworking Spaces in Urban vs. Peripheral Areas’, Ilaria Mariotti, Mina Akhavan, and Federica Rossi explore the location determinants of the 549 CSs located in Italy in 2018, an issue that the literature has neglected. The authors refer to the following categories of location determinants: (i) traditional location factors; (ii) environmental, social, and institutional context; (iii) policy framework; and (iv) information costs. The empirical analysis concerns: (i) descriptive statistics and exploratory spatial analysis to investigate the geographical distribution of CSs and (ii) econometric analysis (zero-inflated negative binomial regression) to explore the location determinants of CSs. The results confirm that coworking spaces are mainly an urban phenomenon because such areas are knowledge-intensive places for creative people. CSs are more liable to be located in NUTS4 municipalities with higher urbanization economies, innovation, a higher share of skilled labour, and entrepreneurial vivacity (e.g. capital cities of metropolitan areas). In addition, the analysis shows that even suburban areas close to major cities attract CSs, as do peripheral and inner areas, albeit to a

lesser extent. Inner areas, defined by the Department for Development and Economic Cohesion in Italy, comprise the so-called intermediate, peripheral, and ultra-peripheral areas, which encompass 53% of Italian municipalities and 23% of the Italian population. The attractiveness of peripheral and inner areas for CSs, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, may contribute to fostering their development, since work has become less dependent on distance, location, and time. Indeed, the pandemic has severely affected CSs in metropolitan areas (due to the population density, congestion, and higher mortality and infection rates), making suburban and peripheral areas more attractive (see Mariotti, Di Matteo, and Rossi (2022) for Italy; Brail and Kleinman (2022) for Toronto, Canada; Ramani and Bloom (2022), and Althoff et al. (2022) for the US; Delventhal, Kwon, and Parkhomenko (2022), for the Los Angeles metropolitan area; Gurrutxaga (2021), for Spanish regions).

The paper entitled 'Agglomeration and co-agglomeration of coworking spaces and creative industries in the city' by Eva Coll-Martínez and Carles Méndez-Ortega investigates the location determinants and the effects CSs generate on the urban context. Indeed, the exponential growth of CSs may have positive or negative effects on the urban economy. They can be a strategic tool to facilitate the development of creative cities, or they can induce speculation in the real estate market (Moriset 2013), leading to gentrification and increasing inequalities. The focus of the paper is Barcelona, one of Europe's most important creative hubs in terms of the knowledge-based, creative, digital, and sharing economies, and it is the city with the highest number of CSs in Spain. For the purposes of the paper, the authors carry out a quantitative analysis using geographical information systems (GIS) and Kd functions of agglomeration and co-agglomeration. Kd functions provide the density of firms using a distance-based approach to determine the distribution of bilateral distances between firms from the same activity and/or different activities. The result is that the main location determinants of CSs are: (i) proximity to the centre, where there are greater chances of meeting customers and suppliers, (ii) proximity to urban amenities, and (iii) the image of the location. Moreover, they co-agglomerate with firms that are most related to creative industries. These results are relevant for policy makers developing and framing urban policies in Barcelona. Indeed, the colocation of CSs with creative industries may strengthen the interaction of creative workers with more technological and scientific professionals that may also enhance the city's capacity for innovation and sustainable economic growth.

Mina Di Marino, Antti Rehunen, Maija Tiitu, and Kimmo Lapintie, whose paper is entitled 'New working spaces in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area: understanding location factors and implications for planning', focus on new working spaces (NWS) in the Helsinki metropolitan area to understand location factors and implications for planning. Helsinki represents an interesting case due to its growing trend of working outside the office in NWSs such as CSs, public libraries hosting CSs, and cafeterias. The authors analyse the key role played by multifunctional urban districts (which consider mixed land use around the NWS, variety of services, and job locations) in attracting NWSs and the different travel mode opportunities and public transport these districts offer. There were 86 NWSs in Helsinki in 2019, which typically provided a workstation, related facilities, and meeting rooms. The results show that NWSs tend to be located in neighbourhoods with good access to public transport, proximity to university



campuses, and a concentration of knowledge-intensive jobs. In addition, they are mainly located in multifunctional centres (defined on the basis of the density of people, jobs, and diversity of services) in the core and sub-centre pedestrian zones. These patterns, including the location of workplaces, should be embedded in planning agendas for more sustainable urban development.

The last paper, ‘The lifestyles of millennial coworkers in urban spaces: the case of Tel-Aviv’ by Tsipi Buchnik and Amnon Frenkel, examines the unique features of coworkers, their lifestyles, and work-life balance. This study focuses on Mind-Space, one of the largest coworking spaces in Tel Aviv, which hosts about 850 coworkers, either self-employed or working at 250 small companies and start-ups. The results of an online questionnaire distributed among the entrepreneurs working at this CS, systematic interviews with managers, and exploratory interviews with community managers shed light on the understanding of the role of CSs in the ecosystem. Factor and cluster analyses are run to identify the types of users and the related leisure activity patterns offered by the CS.

The findings suggest that this type of work environment enhances work-life balance due to the shared sense of community within the space. As the authors state, ‘coworking spaces are work environments that provide a personal, defined workspace amongst a community of people while providing the possibility to work independently’ (Buchnik and Frenkel 2021, 2). The results also show that millennial coworkers do not distinguish between leisure and work hours and choose to live in the city centre to take advantage of entertainment, culture, and leisure while working nearby, which matches their preferred lifestyles. At the same time, these millennial coworkers show a variety of lifestyles. This research helps decision-makers understand the unique needs of this profile of workers, whom they are interested in attracting to the city.

## Acknowledgements

Support from COSTAction CA18214 ‘The geography of New Working Spaces and the impact on the periphery’, which is funded by the European Union (<http://www.new-working-spaces.eu>, <https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA18214>) and the CORAL ITN Project (Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 955907) (<https://coral-itn.eu/>)

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)

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