Merkel, J. (2015). Coworking in the city. Ephemera, 15(2), pp. 121-139.

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 15(1): 121-139

Coworking in the city

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abstract

In the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis of 2007 and 2008, a new type of collaboratively oriented workplace has emerged in cities. These coworking spaces and the associated practice of coworking exemplify new ways of organising labour in project-based and largely freelance occupations as found in the cultural and creative industries. But coworking spaces are not just flexible shared office spaces for creative professionals 'working alone together' (Spinuzzi, 2012). Coworking promotes a collective, community-based approach to the organisation of cultural and creative work where a particularly important role is accorded to the coworking host, whose activities are described as a curatorial practice aimed at creating a collaborative atmosphere and social relationships. Coworking spaces can therefore be regarded as a new form of urban social infrastructure enabling contacts and collaborations between people, ideas and connecting places.

Introduction

Starting with the financial crisis of 2007/2008 and subsequent global recession, there has been a sudden rise of collaborative, shared working spaces – so called coworking spaces – in cities worldwide. *Deskmag*, an online journal for coworking, claims that there were more than 2500 spaces around the world by the end of 2012. Their number has grown significantly from 730 reported coworking spaces in February 2011. In Berlin alone, there are now over 70 coworking spaces, out of 230 in Germany (Deskmag, 2013b). While this phenomenon is predominantly developing in cities, it is not confined to the global north of Europe or North America. There are spaces emerging in Africa, Asia and South America, too.

In this article, coworking refers to the practice of working alongside one another in flexible, shared work settings where desks can be rented on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. The term coworking space designates particular spaces created to facilitate this kind of coworking. Since almost every form of labour could be described as coworking alongside colleagues, and companies could therefore be described as coworking spaces as well, both terms will be restricted to working alongside one another in flexible, shared work settings in this article. Coworking will be examined as a new urban social practice that characterises new ways of organising labour and enables mutual support amongst freelancers and self-employed persons. As flexibly rentable, cost-effective and community-oriented workplaces, coworking spaces facilitate encounters, interaction and a fruitful exchange between diverse work, practice, and epistemic communities and cultures. Even the names of these workspaces play with the conjunction of community, space, and the emergence of new ideas to indicate new orientations, practices, and processes in knowledge generation, e.g. Affinity Lab, Agora, Betahaus, Buero 2.0, Camaraderie, Cluboffice, Common Spaces, COOP, Creative Density, Hub, Makespace, Seats2Meet, ThinkSpace, or Toolbox.

So far, coworking has mainly been discussed by the practitioners themselves in blogs, conferences or wikis, and presented as an utterly positive work experience. Since the phenomenon only emerged recently, there is as yet little critical understanding and social-scientific analysis of coworking, its assumed effects, and how it relates to cultural, economic, political and social transformation processes in cities (see, for example, Lange, 2011; Spinuzzi, 2012; Moriset, 2014). This article is based on a research interest in coworking and coworking spaces that evolved while I was using coworking spaces myself in the empirical fieldwork for my Ph.D. My experience with these spaces showed that coworking hosts play a crucial role in enabling interaction amongst coworkers. In some spaces I felt like an anonymous customer, just like in a coffee shop, whereas in others I was immediately introduced to other coworkers, invited for lunch and evening events, and asked for my specific skills and interests. This discovery inspired me to explore how coworking hosts, usually the owners or operators or in some cases professional community managers, experience, understand and interpret their work, as well as the social and material practices and strategies they use to enhance and facilitate interaction, creativity and productivity amongst coworkers in a coworking space. The study design is explorative and inductive and focused on the question how coworking hosts facilitate collective work. The empirical evidence included here is based on twenty-five semi-structured interviews conducted with coworking hosts in Berlin, London and New York since the summer of 2012. These particular cities were chosen because of the density and variety of coworking spaces on offer for freelancers there, making them more likely to provide rich cases for empirical investigations of this

phenomenon. Half of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Because of time constraints, many hosts preferred informal interviews and preferred to invite me to a tour of their coworking space, a shared subway ride, an evening event or a quick coffee somewhere, making proper documentation impossible. In these situations, I took notes at the time and wrote field reports immediately afterwards. I coded the material according to the questions and recurring themes in the interviews. In addition to this, several online sources such as blogs and websites about coworking, coworking handbooks written by practitioners, and in particular media interviews with hosts are treated as documents and used as secondary sources to support, contrast and contextualise findings from these formal and informal interviews (see Prior, 2003). All names and other identifying details have been changed for this presentation.

The article is structured as follows: First, a brief review situates coworking as a social practice in contemporary forms of urbanism and discusses coworking as a strategy of coping with structural changes in cultural labour markets and particular features of freelance work. Then the specific role of coworking hosts is discussed as they play a crucial role in stimulating exchange among coworkers and in building a community around coworking in the city. The notion of curating is introduced to explore the social and material strategies used by coworking hosts to enable and facilitate interaction and collaboration amongst coworkers. In the final part, coworking spaces are then examined as a new type of urban sociomaterial infrastructure enabling networks of communication across people and cities.

Situating coworking in contemporary forms of urbanism as a social practice

Ever since the beginning of the twenty-first century, culture and creativity have been regarded as key economic resources in urban development. Culture and creative industries, in particular, have been promoted as the new urban growth sectors (Krätke, 2011). Even though most sectors of the culture and creative industries proved to be rather resilient to the economic crisis of 2008 (Pratt and Hutton, 2013), artists and freelance creatives have been seriously affected by the recession and subsequent introduction of austerity measures (Peck, 2012) in cities and countries that dramatically changed social and cultural policies. Additional pressure for these professionals arose from the constant 'upgrading' and 'reurbanisation' of cities through gentrification processes. Thanks to the growing inflow of investments into premium housing and office buildings in cities, the global urban strategy of gentrification has served to significantly increase rents overall, forcing low-income residents out of inner cities areas and

making it difficult for creative professionals, especially in the early stages of their career, to obtain and maintain a flat, let alone an additional office or production space in the city (see Lees et al., 2008; Bain, 2013).

While coworking spaces have emerged as a bottom-up, and to start with often improvised, solution to the recession and structural changes in urban labour markets, they are also related to current attempts at renegotiating urban commons in a process of negotiating shared spaces, resources and values (Ferguson, 2014). Similar to the proliferation of community gardens, neighbourhood councils, and artistic interventions that reclaim and re-appropriate urban spaces as 'sites for active and democratic engagement' (Ferguson, 2014: 15), coworking might also be interpreted as an emancipatory practice challenging the current neoliberal politics of individualisation (see Lazzarato, 2009). As a collective, community-based approach to the organisation of cultural and creative work, it might be able to provide an alternative space for the free exchange of ideas, while enabling support networks and promoting the negotiation of shared spaces, resources and values amongst coworkers.

Coworking spaces can be described as new because they differ from older models of shared office space (self-organised or not) in their short-term letting of desks (per day, week, month) and consequently their flexibility, mobility and constantly changing social make-up. Coworking is furthermore presented as culturally embedded in the discourse and practices of collaborative consumption, the 'sharing economy' (Botsman and Rogers, 2011) and the open source movement (Forlano, 2009; DeGuzmann and Tang, 2011). Coworking is hence not just about working 'alone together' or 'alongside each other' in a flexible and mostly affordable office space. It is also underpinned by a normative cultural model that promotes five values: community, collaboration, openness, diversity, and sustainability. This 'collaborative approach' is always underlined as a distinctive feature that sets coworking apart from other forms of shared, flexible work setting such as satellite offices, hot desks, coffee shops or business incubators. These coworking values are therefore perpetually promoted in self-descriptions of coworking spaces:

> IndyHall is not about the desks. The desks are a vehicle for being a more effective worker and a more active contributor to your city. By putting a community's best interests first, we've created a work environment focused on openness, collaboration, community, sustainability, and accessibility. The common thread is this: we all know that we're happier and more productive together than alone. (IndyHall, 2014)

In this paper, I will consider coworking from a social practice perspective (Schatzki et al., 2001). By engaging and participating in coworking, coworkers

obtain a practical knowledge and shared understanding of this particular activity and consequently sustain, reproduce and also change it over time. The definition of what coworking and its particular 'doings and sayings' mean is therefore subject to constant renegotiation by its community of practitioners, the coworkers, who engage in this 'organised collection of activities' (Schatzki, 2014: 17) and can therefore fluctuate between coworking spaces. A crucial role in facilitating coworking as a collaborative approach and translating coworking values into the space seems to be played by the coworking hosts, who will be the subject of the next chapter.

The practice of coworking is also no longer confined to coworking spaces, but may be performed in other places or physical arrangements. Some of these take the form of 'jellies' (weekly or monthly meetings in coffee shops, rented spaces, or occasionally organisations like Space, a provider of artist's studios in London that hosts coworking jellies). In other cases, companies open up their offices for temporary coworkers (e.g. Flavorpill or the now defunct Loosecubes in New York City). Emerging in parallel to coworking spaces are a variety of makerspaces, fablabs and hackerspaces. These spaces are community-based, too, but aimed at grassroots manual or digital fabrication in self-directed projects (Smith et al., 2013).

As coworking evolves and becomes more common as a social practice amongst freelancers worldwide, the latter are subjected to an increasing differentiation intended to cater to specific professional groups and their needs. There are now dedicated coworking spaces for musicians, for writers and for social entrepreneurs, or even spaces that combine childcare facilities with coworking. The ongoing expansion of coworking can be described as a decentralised yet highly reflexive global movement. Coworking hosts and enthusiastic coworkers come together at barcamps and international conferences to discuss and promote coworking. There are even visa programs where coworking spaces collaborate internationally, so that coworkers can travel and use other spaces with their membership cards.

The current proliferation of coworking spaces has several causes and roots. First, coworking spaces can be described as a bottom-up solution or collective strategy for coping with structural changes in the general labour market and in the organisation of work, particularly in the labour markets of the creative industries (Christopherson, 2002; Gill and Pratt, 2008). The spaces accommodate work practices that are typical for mobile, project-based, freelance and self-employed work which could be carried out 'anywhere' with a computer and Internet access. Working in a shared workspace is a strategy for minimising individual risk as coworking spaces match the flexibility and financial situation of their workers

with specific resources for sustaining freelancers and self-employed persons in a highly competitive and volatile job market (Merkel and Oppen, 2012). It is hence no surprise that the proliferation of coworking picked up speed after the economic crisis of 2008, even if the first coworking space to be called that, 'Spiral Muse,' had been established in San Francisco in 2005 as a reaction against business centres considered 'unsocial' for freelance and self-employed professionals (e.g. hot desk offices that only provide business services), and against the unproductive working life in home offices (DeGuzmann and Tang, 2011; Deskmag, 2013a).

Given the long-standing study of artists in the sociology of work, an impressive body of research has emerged that explores labour conditions in creative industries, and in particular the freelance work situation of creative professionals, exposing a 'very complicated version of freedom' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010: 4) where the freelance situation is often more of a constraint than a voluntary choice. Current research highlights the characteristics of creative work such as precarious employment with low and sometimes non-existent wages, multiple jobs, extensive emotional stress and dense social networking, a blurring of the distinction between private and professional contacts, identity investments, and self-exploitation (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Neff, 2005). Freelance and self-employed professionals moreover need to master the financial, organisational and social aspects of their work life on their own, as well as their occupational training (Merkel and Oppen, 2012).

A commonly cited reason for freelancers to seek coworking spaces is to escape the boredom and frustration of working alone and constantly mixing the spheres of work, leisure and home. By using a coworking space, they establish a structured day at the office and draw a line that distinguishes their work from their private life, enabling them to balance the two (Neff, 2005; Warhurst et al., 2008; Wittel, 2001). Coworking can also be a strategy for compensating the loss of social contact with colleagues. The definition of coworking in the coworking wiki, an online platform for the coworking movement, for example states:

> The idea is simple: independent professionals and those with workplace flexibility work better together than they do alone. Coworking answers the question that so many face when working from home: 'Why isn't this as fun as I thought it would be?' Beyond just creating better places to work, coworking spaces are built around the idea of community building and sustainability. Coworking spaces agree to uphold the values set forth by the movement's founders: collaboration, community, sustainability, openness, and accessibility. (Coworking Wiki, 2014)

The third global coworking survey (Deskmag, 2013b) reports that 58 % of coworkers used to work at home before they joined a coworking space.

Interaction and communication are among the most frequently cited reasons for joining a coworking space. Coworkers claim that 'social interaction' (84 %), 'random encounters and opportunities' (82 %), and 'sharing of information and knowledge' (77 %) are the features they like most about their coworking space.

Another reason for the emergence of coworking spaces is provided by the new information and communication technologies spawning a growing number of remote workers and employees working from home in mobile, project-based, freelance and self-employed jobs (Spinuzzi, 2012). The Freelancers Union (2012) in the US reports that 13 per cent of the American workforce (21.1 million people) are now working as fulltime freelancers and an additional 32 million as part-time freelancers. In other words, a third of the total American workforce is engaging in contingent forms of labour. Although the introduction of new information and communication technologies originally inspired fears about the 'death of the city' (Pascal, 1987), selected urban centres have shored up an increasingly unequal concentration of accumulated capital, economic resources and technological innovation, ensuring a greater geographical clustering of economic activity and less equal distribution than ever (Sassen, 2001). Apart from that, working in front of a screen all day creates a new need for face-to-face encounters, lending cities a new importance for human interaction as densely populated places. The coworking space *WeWorkLabs* in New York, for example, refers to itself as a 'physical social network' (WeWorkLabs, 2012). The constant growth in the number of remote and freelance workers has been accompanied by new strategies for coping with the disadvantages of this work situation. While coffee shops and organised coworking meet-ups became a preferred workspace for many remote workers over the past decade, coworking spaces have emerged as a new and more appropriate solution:

> The irony of being able to work anywhere is that there isn't anywhere designed for people who can work anywhere, so a movement formed around that and that is the coworking movement. (Tony Bacigalupo, cited in Jackson, 2014: Chapter 5)

Working in a coworking space furthermore provides freelancers with opportunities for appreciation and recognition from their peers. The social networking in a space can be used for critical feedback concerning one's work, but also for building a reputation (Becker, 2008). Besides the social advantages of coworking, there is also a financial incentive for freelance or self-employed professionals to rent a desk in a shared office space temporarily, rather than their own office space. The current rent increases in cities make it increasingly difficult to even get or maintain an office space in addition to one's flat, forcing ever more people into home office or alternative solutions. Indeed, many coworking hosts explained that the idea for a shared office space emerged when the economic crisis hit in 2008 and jobs dried up, forcing them to give up their

office space or rent it out to other freelancers. Coworking consequently appears as a cost-effective alternative that holds a promise of improving the business, making new partners, and increasing productivity and support.

Curating social relationships: The specific role of the coworking host

While coworking spaces provide physical proximity and a 'plug and play' infrastructure for flexible workforces, most coworking hosts claim that the physical proximity and simultaneous presence of coworkers will not necessarily lead to interaction, collaboration or relational closeness in the sense of common interests, shared values, worldviews and interpretation frameworks (see e.g. Ibert, 2010). It appears that only 'being there' is not enough because coworkers often just work alone alongside each other without much interaction or cross-fertilisation (Spinuzzi, 2012). While research on the geographies of knowledge creation claims that spatial closeness can increase the likelihood of certain types of relationships and learning (Bathelt et al., 2004), coworking spaces demonstrate that just providing a space and shared context is not sufficient. What is needed instead is social animation, engagement and 'enrolment' (Callon and Law, 1982) into participating in the distinct social practice of working together collaboratively. Hosts are therefore called upon to create different modes of enrolment within the spaces to facilitate encounters, interaction, collaboration and mutual trust amongst the coworkers.

My analysis of interviews pointed to two types of host, differentiated by how they understand and interpret their own activity: the 'service provider' and the 'visionary'. While the service provider concentrates on the work aspect associated with facilitating a good work environment and providing attendant services, the visionary host is more concerned with enabling the 'co' aspects of coworking such as communication, community and collaboration among the coworkers. These hosts are usually also the founders and/or managers of the space. They embody and practice the coworking values in their daily activities and feel responsible for the coworkers in their space. Hospitality is their major concern. Since coworking is strongly associated with cultural values of collaboration and sustainability, these hosts consider it their main responsibility to care for coworkers and enable a lively community within the space, but also beyond it. These hosts describe themselves as the nurturing 'mother of the space' (Julie, Berlin 2012), as a 'conductor' (Ellen, London 2012), or 'social gardeners' (Peter, Berlin 2012), terms which indicate a considerable amount of affective and emotional investment (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 159-99) in their hosting activities. Julie, a freelance graphic designer who runs a small coworking space in Berlin with a partner, for example explains:

> We are like a small family hostel with all the responsibilities for the well-being of our guests. But, we are not pushing it. (Julie, Berlin 2012)

As the quote indicates, Julie and her hosting partner prefer to have coworkers organise themselves, to let them make suggestions, and then try to facilitate the realisation of their ideas, e.g. concerning events, furniture, or collaborative projects. It is important to them to participate in neighbourhood events and offer their premises as an exhibition space for local artists. Anna, a freelance journalist in a Berlin coworking space, has meanwhile taken on the responsibilities of a host in a more self-determined manner because the actual operator is more interested in the space as such than in engaging the people within it:

> Well, I demanded that because at our two social events we had last year so much was already happening between the coworkers. The thing is, if you do not do anything, nothing will happen. Just the fact that people sit in a space together does not lead to new ideas and projects. You have to stimulate and facilitate exchange, otherwise there is no added value of coworking. (Anna, Berlin 2012)

Ellen, a theatre producer and consultant in London, has established a coworking space dedicated to supporting creative processes while drawing on her own experience as a coworker in other coworking spaces:

> Most coworking spaces are just literally a congregation of people that come and go for work. But there is not a conductor propelling them to go from point A to point B or looking at the process how people come up with ideas and implement them and execute them. While there might be some 'learning by osmosis', we are helping our members to understand and facilitate the creative processes behind. (Ellen, London 2012)

In contrast, Peter, a computer scientist with a consultancy background who runs a coworking space in New York with more than 400 members, claims:

> It's all about relations. Above all, we want to build up a great community. We have our town hall meetings once a month where we make our big decisions together and everyone has a say in the space. We want people to feel like in a residency, to feel like they have ownership. (Peter, New York 2012)

Hosts use different social and physical strategies to animate and stimulate interaction and collaboration among coworkers. Socially, they initiate events and regular meetings, or develop formats for introducing coworkers to one another such as blogs where new members are presented and can meet, or bulletin boards at the entrance where members can put up a profile or search for help and specific skills. Or hosts get members in the coworking spirit just by talking, connecting, recommending, and caring in their daily work. They report that eating together, such as having lunch together or clearing the fridge on Fridays, has proven to be the most effective socialisation mechanism. Additionally, there

are organised talks by members, as well as seminars and courses. Educational programmes are a common feature of almost every space. These courses and peer-to-peer learning groups cater to the coworkers' interests and needs, but are usually also accessible for the larger public, without requiring a membership card. To enable more synergies, a growing number of spaces select their coworkers according to their skills and thus their 'fit' with other coworkers. The usual model is nonetheless the drop-in coworking space that allows spontaneous daily, weekly and monthly passes.

The physical design of the coworking space, with its open floor plan, arrangement of tables to enable eye contact between coworkers, or actual location of social areas (kitchen, meeting rooms, sofa corner) play an important role in turning it into a collaborative space. The design has an influence on the flows of movement in a space and the interaction patterns between people (Dorley and Witthoft, 2012; Sailer and McCulloh, 2012). Almost all hosts have explicit ideas about its effects on the coworking space, and describe how they trained themselves in designing collaborative spaces while still trusting their aesthetic know-how, and how they watch coworkers' behaviour in the space while rearranging it constantly.

> I wanted to create a homey atmosphere conducive to work purposes. Not a white office space with cheap Ikea furniture and neon light that might appeal to everyone. But it's a work in progress. I rearrange all the time. (Julie, Berlin 2012)

> The space is purposefully designed for having a diversity of options to work. And you can see throughout the day people gradually moving from their desks towards the sofas. Or, in the morning the breakfast bar is very crowded because everyone wants to stand a bit and enjoy a coffee while reading or talking. (Sarah, New York 2012)

> For some people it is like a second home, so we try to make it as pleasant as possible. It is a creative writing space so we keep everything conducive to the process. (Andrea, New York 2012)

> Aesthetics is so important. It gives people pride and encourages them to come to work here everyday. (Peter, New York 2012)

In addition, whiteboards with scribbles, rounded table corners or transparent conference rooms serve as visual clues and openings for communication and collaboration among the coworkers. Hosts believe that particular wall colours or strategically placed plants affect the interaction potential of a space, thus turning coworking spaces into highly symbolically structured or curated spaces. As one coworking host explained to me:

> We use a lot of yellow in the space because it releases dopamine, which is good for motivation and cognition. (Ellen, London 2012)

The host's activities can be analytically described as a form of curating or as a curatorial practice. While the terms curating and curatorial practice originate from the art world, both have undergone significant symbolic transformations in the past, having essentially improved their social and cultural value in all the arts (Krzys Acord, 2014). The aspect of caring and selecting has long been a primary task of museum curators. In recent years, the role of mediating between the artist and public by making visible 'that which is compiled in a state of becoming' (von Bismarck, 2012: 48), and by engendering 'dialogue by bringing artists, places and publics together' (Puwar and Sharma, 2012: 40) has come to the fore in curatorial activities. The use of the terms curator or curatorial practice is no longer limited to the person of the curator in the art world. There is a growing body of literature that emphasises curating as a form of cultural intermediation between the production of cultural goods and the production of consumer tastes in cultural and creative industries (see Hracs et al., 2013, for example). This may include fashion bloggers who lay down spring's latest must-have items and call themselves curators, record storeowners who select and strategically place new music for their customers, or organisers of design festivals pooling and presenting a selection of artefacts (Williams, 2009; Moeran and Pedersen, 2011; Potts, 2011).

Curating is introduced here as a distinct concept because it is primarily aimed at establishing relations by assemblage rather than value formation and the legitimisation of cultural goods, as is the case in cultural intermediation (Maguire and Matthews, 2012; O`Connor, 2013; Taylor, 2013). The Swedish curator Maria Lind for example describes contemporary curating as follows:

> Today I imagine curating as a way of thinking in terms of interconnections: linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories, and discourses in physical space like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns, and tensions. (Lind in Wood, 2010: 53)

Following Lind, the social and material activities of coworking hosts can be understood as curatorial practices, as the intentional creation of interconnections between people, ideas, objects and places within a new context and narrative. The host's activities of curatorial practice can be summarised as *assembling* and *arranging* (people, spaces, objects), *creating* and *signifying new meanings* (collaboration, community, sustainability, openness, and accessibility), *reframing* (work differently), *caring* (enabling community) and *exhibiting* (the work space and its community), all in order to create new work-related and social experiences in the city.

There is also a second aspect of curating that is helpful in understanding the activities of coworking hosts. As curators, they act as 'cultural entrepreneurs'

(Swedberg, 2006) who spin stories and new meanings from their own activity, the coworkers and the specific space. Lounsbury and Glynn use the term 'cultural entrepreneurship' to denote aspects of entrepreneurial activity which manufacture meaning by rendering the 'unfamiliar familiar' (2001: 549), using metaphors or analogies. Cultural entrepreneurs not only leverage social and cultural dynamics to come up with novel combinations, but also embed their activity in narratives and stories 'to reduce the uncertainty typically associated with entrepreneurship' (*ibid*.: 546).

The hosts are moreover themselves an embodiment of post-Fordist labour conditions. Following Luc Boltanksi and Eve Chiapello (2006), Marchert (2012) claims that curators meet all the criteria for a project-based polis:

> His abilities, from pure organizing skills to the knack for marketing himself and others, in other words, are highly socially desirable and breathe the 'new spirit of capitalism'. (Marchert, 2012: 32)

Coworking hosts are usually freelancers, too, who need to hold other jobs besides their hosting activities, because running a coworking space is rather fragile as a business model, with many hosts struggling to keep their spaces going. By curating a coworking space, hosts take on the role of a catalyst and enabler, thereby creating new forms of urban sociomaterial infrastructure where people can meet, exchange ideas and work.

Thinking ahead: Coworking spaces as urban infrastructures

Coworking spaces, often featuring more than 200 fluctuating coworkers, are sites of random encounter. They throw together a diverse set of actors who then need to negotiate a shared space. They therewith provide a good empirical angle on the question of 'how the company of strangers can become a basis for identity formation and collective creativity' (Amin, 2012: 37). These strangers can develop interpersonal ties, but do not necessarily have to. Thanks to their openness, flexible rents and high fluctuation rates, coworking spaces resemble cities in their specific set of social structures and in how people behave in a public place, apart from the crucial fact that they have to pay to get into most coworking spaces. The concept of 'urban encounter' (Valentine, 2008; Watson, 2006) comprehensively captures the different meanings this form of randomness can imply: from fleetingness via interaction potential right through to encounter as a transformative experience. These encounters can feature several dimensions with various social effects. They can be visual, aural, dramaturgic or performative, communicative or interactive, just like encounters in a public space.

Following AbdouMaliq Simone's suggestion to extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people's activities in cities, coworking spaces can be understood as a new type of urban sociomaterial infrastructure whose main purpose is to coordinate and facilitate an alternative, community-based organisation of labour. Simone uses the notion of infrastructures as 'platforms' for action and coordination, describing them as 'complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices (...) a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city' (2004: 408). Coworking spaces organise interaction within them but also with one another, enabling networks of communication, and can thus provide a platform for economic, political and social action.

Coworking spaces act as interfaces with the creative milieu in the city and beyond. Cohendet, Grandadam, and Simon (2010), for example, define three different strata in their 'Anatomy of the creative city', each of which meets the functions required for developing a creative milieu, and whose interaction shapes the dynamics of creativity in cities: 'underground' (skilled individuals), 'middleground' (epistemic communities and communities of practice) and 'upperground' (institutions and organisations). Coworking spaces, being part of the 'middleground', could be considered as an intersection of these strata, mediating between the 'underground' of creative individuals and the 'upperground' of companies and organisations:

> An active middleground translates, transforms, and confronts local ideas with knowledge and practices issued from different parts of the world. It is a node of multiple connections of varying intensity and geographical distance. Spaces are necessary to nurture the middleground, to activate the cognitive role of local places, to widen the local buzz to other communities, to strengthen the global pipelines, and to help bring the local underground to the surface. (...) These spaces provide various lanes through which different communities establish permanent informal interactions with each other in order to confront ideas and to tap creative practices from other domains of knowledge. This reveals a complex maze of creativity (or forum), home of myriads of knowing communities, which promote creativity in diverse activities and modes. (Cohendet et al., 2013: 1704)

This intermediary function of coworking spaces is most clearly apparent in the proliferation of start-up scenes in cities (see, for example, Foord, 2013 and Nathan et al., 2012, on the newly emerging digital cluster in London's East End). In this respect, coworking spaces provide crucial coordinating functions for young start-up entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, and potential public policy interventions in cities. Most self-organised peer-to-peer learning groups in start-up scenes are organised by way of coworking spaces, and take place in them. And many coworking spaces turn into 'pre-incubators', occasionally accommodating more than a hundred tech start-ups (see Moriset, 2014, or Capdevila, 2013, on coworking spaces as microclusters). This makes coworking spaces hubs of

knowledge production and knowledge dissemination, providing situations of knowledge exchange along with professional project contexts (Grabher, 2004) and the informal gatherings in nightclubs, bars and restaurants that create the 'buzz' of a city (Currid, 2007; Storper and Venables, 2004) for creative professionals.

Coworking spaces can coordinate social and political action by gathering different interest groups. For example Berlin's *Supermarkt*, a coworking space located in a former supermarket in the district of Wedding, which is providing a platform for new social and political activists' grassroots movements and a coworking space for meet-ups, international conferences, and workshops (Supermarkt, 2014). *Supermarkt* places itself in a discursive space revolving around alternative forms of organising and brings people and ideas together, locally as well as globally. One recurring topic at *Supermarkt*, for example, involves critical reflection on freelance work situations and potential forms of self-organisation, such as supporting a newly created freelancers movement (Freelancers Europe, 2014).

Furthermore, coworking spaces serve as interfaces with the local community and the surrounding neighbourhoods. Most coworking spaces show a strong identification with and commitment to their local surroundings, engage in community work or provide a gathering space for community meetings at night. Often a café is used to make these spaces and their activities visible in the neighbourhood and accessible for everyone. But given current urban restructuring processes and the growing pace of gentrification in cities, coworking spaces also need to face their ambivalent role of being 'pioneers', raising the symbolic value of a particular area and becoming victims of gentrification processes at the same time (Lees et al., 2008). Many spaces are located in inner cities areas that are now being subjected to significant 'upgrading' and 'redevelopment'. This situation creates an uncertain future for them: they either need to become more entrepreneurial or to raise their fees, which could result in young freelancers with less income being unable to afford them, thereby undermining their openness.

Conclusion

The proliferation of coworking as an urban social practice highlights alternative ways of organising labour in the city of the twenty-first century. While the self-organised, bottom-up character of this phenomenon and its spread after the economic crisis suggest a collective cost-saving practice, the flexible rents and cost-effectiveness of sharing a coworking space is only one of several reasons driving freelancers and coworking hosts. Escaping the social isolation of the

home office, being among likeminded people facing the same challenges and problems, gaining access to valuable knowledge and recognition, and enlarging one's professional network are also strong motivations for freelancers to engage in coworking. As a social practice, coworking shares some social (community), cultural (sharing) and economic (saving) motivations with saving practices such as car sharing or airbnb. But coworking differs from and points beyond practices of 'low-budget urbanism'. Coworking is deeply embedded in the distinct production logics of cultural and creative industries with its project-based organisation and knowledge dynamics required for constant innovation (see, for example, Capdevila, 2013). It presents a strategy for coping with the insecurities and precariousness of creative labour conditions by means of a collective, community-based approach to the organisation of cultural and creative work. However, as the empirical research illustrates, coworkers frequently just work alone together without much interaction, mutual support or community orientation, which gives coworking hosts a special role in translating the coworking values into the space and in facilitating team play.

This paper has applied the notion of curating to an analysis of the daily activities of hosts in facilitating encounters, interaction, collaboration and mutual trust among coworkers. Coworking hosts assemble and create relations and meanings, and endeavour to stimulate new work experiences amongst freelance professionals. As a result, coworking has enabled new forms of solidarity and cooperation among freelance professionals, but also beyond that. How coworkers perceive this curatorial work has not been the subject of this empirical investigation and needs further research. The objective was to highlight that coworking spaces are not just shared office spaces but highly curated. The essay sketched out some of the multiple potentials of these spaces for providing a sociomaterial infrastructure that enables networks of communication across a diverse set of people within and across cities, and a platform for new economic, political, and social action.

The growing diversification of spaces claiming to be coworking spaces, from hackerspaces and fablabs to pre-incubators and companies or organisations claiming to introduce coworking as a means to stimulate random encounters and creativity amongst their employees, suggests a need for future research paying attention to the commonalities and differences between diverse types of coworking space. Additionally, more research is needed to examine in greater detail what constitutes coworking as a social practice, what are its particular 'doings and sayings', and the material arrangements in which it is performed (Schatzki, 2014). At this moment in time, we lack the systematic and in-depth socioscientific analysis of coworking and its assumed interactional effects, exchange processes, or reciprocity rules in sharing or collaborating required to

fully comprehend and understand the extent in which these shared workspaces change the organisation of labour in cities, represent an emancipatory practice, and where the additional potentials (innovations, new economic activities or political activism) of these new urban sociomaterial infrastructures might lie. In addition, there is also a need for more systematic research on how coworking relates to and engages with contemporary processes of urban transformation.

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