

The nature of work is changing. Recruitment, retention, innovation, and productivity now require not just coffee, but also yoga, not just printers, but also art installations.
—WeWork (2018)

While precise data is hard to find, recent worldwide surveys estimate that more than 1.7 million people will be working in over 19,000 coworking spaces by the end of 2018, with the numbers rising to 3.9 million users by 2020 and 5.1 million by 2022. This trend mirrors the current economic shift from the corporate office work culture of the 20th century to today's growing freelance and entrepreneurial tendencies. This new type of space, its sudden appearance analogous to the growth in manufactories in the 19th century, can be read as an economic tool as well as an architectural trope, where design is mobilized to create a peculiar sense of place and to organize and manage resources.

Surrounded by a veneer of novelty, today's coworking space—a for-profit development with possible origins in 1990s European hacker culture, the shared

artist's studio, and early phases of industrialization—appears as an artful assemblage of already existing models. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, during the initial stages of industrialization, first in Great Britain and later in North America and other parts of Europe, craftsmen and guild members brought their personal tool chests to the workplace, an arrangement not so different from that of freelancers today, who carry their laptops and smartphones to various locations. It was also common for skilled workers in textile factories to rent the machinery and part of the premises, the cost of which was then deducted from their earnings. While workers could originally take the products with them, this practice was eventually discontinued to avoid competition. During the second half of the 19th century, the practice of internal contracting became dominant in the United States; a manufacturer could hire different contractors who would then compete against one another under the same roof. Contractors were given raw materials and machinery, but were responsible for the control and

productivity of their workers and for meeting requested quotas. This model was further consolidated as in-house production of both manufacturing and services became the dominant organizational structure for corporations. In relation to this evolution, coworking spaces can also be understood as an attempt to reimagine labor conditions and, in their promotion of practices that enhance the segmentation of work and workers, a vestige of certain historical precedents.

The term “coworking” was coined in 2005 by Brad Neuberg, a software programmer based in San Francisco. Originally, the idea was that a group of freelance professionals or entrepreneurs would share a space and other facilities—such as conference rooms, printers, coffee and lunch areas, as well as opportunities for socializing. This setting combined the stimulation and conviviality of the office with the autonomy and freedom of the independent contractor. While Neuberg placed emphasis on the idealistic objective of sharing ideas and resources and evoked the notion of “community,” an amorphous entity that would coalesce through workshops and yoga classes, the initiative also had a strong penchant for generating profit from its inception. In 2005, Neuberg paid \$300 per month to use a feminist commune in San Francisco, Spiral Muse, two days a week and was allowed to retain all revenue from subletting portions of the space to fellow coworkers. Although Neuberg himself did not

prosper from this concept, the model ballooned. Today it is possible to register the surge and consolidation of large transnational corporations that directly manage hundreds of real-estate assets that have been converted into coworking spaces.

De facto coworking spaces are oftentimes used as highly sophisticated real-estate operations that, using a peculiar narrative around labor, generate returns. As a series of cascading took place at the end of the 20th century surrounding notions of work, caused by shifts in production and technological innovation, took place, coworking appeared as a convenient solution to recycling assets and guaranteeing profit. These changes caused the number of employees at large companies to shrink, often through the massive externalization of tasks to contractors; as a result, the demand for leasing or acquiring factory or office space has plummeted. The tenant is no longer a single company but, instead, a multitude of workers who operate individually. The types of leases are hence fragmented and reduced so as to multiply the streams of small payments. While in classic industrial systems the relation between capitalists and workers was binomial (capitalists pay and own the means of production, workers put in intellectual and physical labor, and capitalists extract surplus value), coworking spaces reflect a subtler triangulated scheme in which the coworking companies skim a portion of the income directly from the individual

workers or small companies who aren’t actually employed by them.

In this way, coworking operations have strategically identified an in-between, aspirational, niche clientele located above the unskilled workforce and below the established companies that can afford an autonomous real-estate strategy. They are, in relative terms, both very expensive (you can get all that they offer for free at your local public library) and extremely cheap (no office can be rented for such a low price). They also vary widely in their identity and trajectory, from individual nonprofit and local initiatives (Catapult Chicago), to international networks with an accent on community and social entrepreneurship (Impact Hub), to large transnational franchises (WeWork). They range in size, from the small corner within a café, occupied by 10 people, to eight-story buildings, and they respond to the different contexts in which they pop up: a coworking space in Mumbai differs from one in Helsinki. In recent years, they have also tended to become larger, while the quota of freelancers has been substituted with small companies that have moved their employees to these shared offices.

In order to attract customers, coworking spaces do not just offer space, a good location, furniture, and equipment; they also aim to convey something impalpable, an atmosphere of possibility—selling a lifestyle where work and leisure mingle and where occasional encounters might stimulate mutual success. You don’t just rent to use the place; you become a

“member,” and by paying, you share space and time with similar users who made the same choice in hopes of achieving similar benefits.

Within this narrative, architecture and design play a crucial role. The coworking space tries to fulfill several functions simultaneously. It is an office—however, it is deprived of a strong hierarchical organization. It is an informal meeting place, akin to a café or a bar—yet it also needs to feel like a private club that is selective with its clientele. It is, at the same time, a hybrid of other typologies: the public library, the hotel lobby, the open-floor office, the cafeteria, and the now-almost-extinct cyber-café.

In the majority of cases, the design of these spaces is focused on the interior, as they occupy preexisting buildings. Whether shabby chic (using recycled wood and exposed concrete inside a former warehouse) or catering to a posher audience (resorting to slick marble surfaces and polished steel inside grandiose 19th-century heritage buildings), the predominant spatial feature is the control of sight: desks and workstations are arranged in vast open areas so as to make members in the space visible to passersby. These customers become an ironic sort of merchandise on display. Because of the simultaneous need to show the space as a whole while fragmenting it into smaller sellable units, the general layout is based on the logic of the 1970s open-floor office. Compared to the regimented management of time in conventional factories and offices, this workplace reflects a loose

type of self-organization that, since the affirmation of the “creative industries,” has become the dominant expectation of what all office life should be; markers that point to each person’s capacity to manage their own time—sofas for a break or a nap, kitchen areas with counters and tables full of free nibbles, small gatherings of lounge chairs and low coffee tables, and the ever-present Ping-Pong table—are cunningly scattered around. It is still work, but the burden should not be too high. The choice of furniture, details, and materials is reminiscent of the aesthetics of those contemporary boutique hotels that chase a median level of comfort and uniform visual coordination, although what is truly crucial are the controlled temperature, the generous provision of electric sockets, and good Wi-Fi. In order to increment revenues, different mechanisms for managing visibility are offered; meeting rooms, available for an extra price, are located where everyone can see them. Similarly, areas for long-term or membership subscribers are often separated, yet not entirely hidden from those rented hourly or daily. This careful management of perks is in many ways analogous to the strategies employed by airline companies, cruises, or holiday resorts; they prudently generate envy while allowing you, for a bit more money, to advance from gold to platinum membership. And should you wish to open a coworking space or learn how to make yours more profitable, slideshows with charts, which can then be customized to attract investors, can easily be downloaded

from specialized consulting companies for anywhere between \$29 to \$59.

In the course of August 2018, six authors visited coworking spaces in their respective cities. Sometimes they purchased a daily subscription, sometimes they were offered a free tour. They worked, drank coffee, roamed, and took snapshots with their phones. Their one-day-long experiences are here depicted as vignettes that try to encapsulate the volatile nature of such places, where “vibe” is as important as electricity and layout. Coworking spaces the world over—Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Hong Kong, London, Montreal, and Paris—reveal a world that is at once identical yet always particular.

FIG Projects was founded by architects Fabrizio Gallanti and Francisca Insulza in 2003. *FIG projects* explores the boundaries between architecture, urban research, and the visual arts, and promotes interdisciplinary initiatives. Wide-ranging in nature, *FIG's* practice extends from architectural explorations and urban studies to writing and curatorial projects.

Second Home Spitalfields, London



It’s fair to say I approached Second Home Spitalfields with my guard up. My last visit, when I attended a rather posturing “anti-panel discussion,” had prejudiced me unfairly against its (overwhelmingly photogenic) inhabitants.

Led through the building—a palimpsest of East London’s pragmatic mutations in the service of labor—by a beatific guide-cum-community manager, I ticked off the hallmarks of the “creative work space” typology: exposed concrete, clusters of artfully distressed chairs (I tried to count the different types, quickly reaching the limits of my midcentury furniture knowledge), and the perfect amount of mixed and matched physical and human capital.

The lack of corners and orthogonal space is also notable: perhaps architects SelgasCano, who designed the place and maintain its design direction, took a pledge against straight lines. Yet, the meandering, deliberately irrational circulation of Second Home Spitalfields fits with a certain kind of dynamic freethinking and sparky creativity, which is further underlined in an extensive complementary schedule of entrepreneurial meet-ups and holistic well-being classes. And note the “madcap” material palette: in the top-floor offices, sound baffling is provided by hundreds of inverted cloche hats, made of felt and fastened to the ceiling like a field of udders.

Crouching behind an obliging clump of *Monstera* and *Philodendron*, I tried to shake off my impostor-syndrome rictus. Tried and succeeded. Before long, I was tap-tap-clicking as happily as I would be if I were on my own couch—in other words, I was “in the zone”—and much more happily than I would be if I were in my airless, windowless, departmentally allocated academic office.

Blame—or praise—the alchemy of a space where it’s okay to rest your flip-flopped feet on the curated furniture: the faultless internet, the handy tea counter, the ultimately domestic setup, in other words. That’s what it is. It is like a second home, but with more consistent catering, cooler roommates—camaraderie subbing in for responsibility—and invisible cleaning fairies. Nota bene: if you’re of the age when roommates are an anathema, you might want to cringe behind the *Monstera* a wee bit longer. —Shumi Bose

Workshop17, Cape Town



“Target Market: Horse racing fans who want to buy a fraction of a horse!” The proposal is written in red marker on a wall in the “ideas lounge” of Workshop17 (W17), a coworking space in a retrofitted portside warehouse in Cape Town’s Victoria & Alfred Waterfront mall development. The members-only recreation room is empty, so I opt for W17 Café. This freely accessible space, located on a mezzanine level, is a crucial junction point. The café’s users are a mix of foreign tourists, drawn to the neighborhood by the ground-floor arts and crafts stalls, and young entrepreneurs brainstorming ideas. Their fashions are uniformly weather predictive: winter rain is expected and, with it, respite for a drought-wracked city. Three 20-something men huddled over Apple devices deliberate over an “income wall.” At another table, two men discuss their “rebate structure” on a conference call. These entry-level “community” members pay \$39 to \$47 per month to receive uncapped Wi-Fi, free parking, and discounted use of W17’s eight variously scaled meeting rooms, 250-seat event hall, and punching bag in the lounge. Top-end “full” members, who pay \$232 to \$276 per month—a reflection of the prohibitively high cost of data in South Africa—access all these benefits, in addition to gaining entry into the “glass box,” a split-level work space opposite the café. Perks here include 24/7 access, printers, quiet (no music), and a view of the dry dock, where a diver in Jacques Cousteau gear moves to inspect a Norwegian fishing boat. The mood noticeably shifts after five o’clock in the evening, when the retail precinct below shuts down. Five men in sober work shirts drink Heineken at the café’s blond-wood desk. A truculent red-winged starling on a scavenger mission momentarily appraises them, and then flies off. —Sean O’Toole

Hive CoFarm, Hong Kong



After a 40-minute drive from downtown, I take a left onto Tin Yuet Road and open my window—I don't need air conditioning anymore. I pass the Blessed Villa's serene ponds, through the farm fields, coasting by the Dextra Pacific Plumbing Ltd. warehouse on the right and a tiny scenic fishermen's village on the left. Within a few minutes, I find a dirt road that leads me into the land of Hive CoFarm. Just across the bay is Shenzhen.

One of nine locations in Hong Kong and 17 in Southeast Asia, this Hive CoFarm is as boutique as the company's other coworking spaces, where the design by the in-house architecture team is "tailored to the concept and site." Agriculture plots, fishponds for fish farms, and water ponds for other water- and ecology-related projects provide space for "start-up" pilot schemes that focus on hydroponics, aquaponics, agritech, and Internet of Things projects. If you also need desk space, you can rent a container office with electricity and internet, located on a concrete plot of your choice. If your business is taking off or if you have a great look, you might appear in *Hive Life*, the online lifestyle magazine for members and other interested publics.

Here, the coffee machines and the common areas of urban coworking spaces are replaced with a "community garden" for members who want to "engage in growing, gardening and farming." Because the CoFarm is far from the city, members are also encouraged to use the company's urban coworking locations for in-town meetings and presentations.

In Hong Kong, forms of coworking have reached both the rural and the digital, while notions like community and nature have been appropriated to drive further attraction in its wildly competitive market. But it's the fresh air, soil, water, and the potential for developing a rural community that promise a viable future for the CoFarm.

—Merve Bedir

Crew Collective & Café, Montreal



Located in what was until 2010 the main hall of the headquarters of the Royal Bank of Canada, Crew Collective & Café is accessible by a grand stone staircase that leads to a vast open area, occupied by numerous and quite cramped desks. The long row of the cashiers' windows, in their splendid display of marble and brass, creates a spectacular background for an elongated bar. While in line for coffee, I notice an area of less crowded tables behind glazed walls. It costs 30 Canadian dollars for a digital key and daily access to another zone that is nonetheless under the same intricately decorated vaulted ceilings that reverberate the sound of every plate cling and the espresso machine's whiff of steam. The noise is loud, but the relatively young and well-dressed clientele doesn't seem to care, as most are wearing headphones and are immersed in screens. The layout feels like an onion in which access to the layers becomes increasingly expensive as you leave the center. At the core is the café, followed by two spaces for daily users and then, further outward, an airier and better equipped area for monthly customers. This last room, dubbed the "Collective," features a giant Nespresso machine and people clustered around large desktop screens.

Every table is identified by a circular sticker that carries an alphanumeric code and says that beverages and food can be ordered online and delivered; no need to interact with the baristas. The edge of this outer strata is marked by gilded and soundproof boxes, where very serious-looking people are having meetings, although they all just seem to be looking at their laptops. Perhaps they are just deciding what to get from the organic tea menu from the Crew Collective & Café's website.

—FIG Projects

Station F, Paris



A visit to Station F in the middle of August confirms that even France's new entrepreneurial generation populating the "world's largest startup campus" still conforms to the time-honored practice of summer vacation. After checking the online schedule, I discover that the first available date for a tour of Station F is in September. Moreover, the complex, imagined by its creators as an "incubator of an entire ecosystem of start-ups," is not visitor- or user-friendly; a guided tour is the only way to access the main spaces, for which a magnetic ID card is needed for entry. However, I was able to see a fair amount of the activities inside thanks to the two generous public passages that traverse the stunning and beautifully restored 1920s concrete railway hangars that host the campus.

The site's 366,000 square feet are subdivided into three areas named Share, Create, and Chill. The first is a space of encounters and exchanges: it includes an auditorium, a creativity room, fab labs, 60 meeting rooms, a post office, lawyers' offices, and government bureaus. Create hosts the start-ups, with 3,300 workstations distributed across 20 international programs and companies (including Facebook and Microsoft). In both Share and Create, the central naves, with dramatic skylights, are left unencumbered, supposedly remaining open to collective activities and events, while the lateral naves and mezzanines are densely filled and furnished with diverse programs. Chill functions as a huge eatery that is allegedly accessible to the public 24 hours a day. In fact, it closed at 4:30 p.m. the day I visited. Here, the original rails and docks, together with two wagons, are left in place to remind the users of the superb concrete structure's original function. After 4:30 p.m., among the rare customers left in the "artsy" eatery is a young professional with an orange briefcase, her high-heeled feet crossed daintily under the table, typing away on a laptop. In the words of my Parisian student, "Très chic indeed."

—Alessandra Ponte

Area Tres (A3), Buenos Aires



I entered the A3 El Salvador office—located on the ground floor of a massive, modern, concrete, and just-finished building full of tropical plants, double-height ceilings, and fancy lamps—wondering if I was dressed properly for my imaginary investor meeting. Instead, what I found was that the one-day pass I had granted access only to the coworking space's other branch, A3 Soho, and so I walked the 650 yards that separate the two offices to the neighborhood of Palermo. The Soho chapter is at the neighborhood's core, where it all began, where there's no room left. It's inside a failed gallery that remained empty for a decade and is finally seeing life after the area became overcrowded and Starbucks moved in. It is in a weird postmodern building with a pink stone balustrade and twisted floors. And in a far corner, there is a small, plain sign marking the entrance for A3.

Inside is a refurbished, typical Palermitan space: a narrow and long plot 28 feet wide, with thick exposed-brick walls and iron columns, faces a cute worn-down patio covered in ivy, with an old barbecue and trendily trashy sofas. Big windows, full of sun, relaxed atmosphere. Very young people wearing track pants and a Jewish guy wearing a kippah sit, all with their laptops opened, a mix of Macs and PCs. It is a conscientiously customized space—it really looks and feels like Palermo, a place where everything is, in some measure, from somewhere else.

I overhear three graphic designers discussing a presentation: "Let's show them both options so they get to discard one, and let's make sure they choose the good one." Later on, they eat by their laptops, next to me. So I eat with them, my meeting still a fantasy.

—Ana Rascovsky