1. What can the coworking movement tell us about the future of workplaces?

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One of the unintended consequences of modern capitalism is that it has strengthened the value of place, aroused a longing for community. (Sennett, 1998, p. 138)

INTRODUCTION

Here is the picture [Photo 1.1] of what coworking means to me. I actually took this when I first started working there and was in awe of this new place. It’s the door that you see right before you walk into New Work City. It has the logo and some fun quotes about coworking on it. It is so happy and colourful, funny against the industrial background of this metal door you find after going up some rickety stairs in a random building on Broadway. You see this, and then you open the door to this beautiful big space with so many busy and productive people. So coworking is like this surprise, exciting world you just walk into, with great colourful ideas and a sense of community. (Interviewee 1, 2014)

This chapter studies today’s work-life by exploring the relatively new phenomenon of coworking. For this purpose the chapter links three streams of research. First, the concept of office space has undergone a major shift since the 1970s, and today open-plan and flexible office space designs have become a dominant trend (Davis et al., 2011; also see Blakstad, Chapter 2 in this book). Coworking spaces mainly rely on the open-plan concept, yet they serve different purposes than company offices. Second, as a result of the globalization of economy and the widespread use of technology and the Internet, new ways of working have emerged and challenged the traditional definitions of where, how and for whom we work and how we get paid (Sennett, 1998; Castells, 2000; Ehrenreich, 2001). Third, leadership has recently been conceptualized as plural – not only individual managers but also groups are creating leadership (Denis et al., 2012).
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These three streams of research can be useful in studying coworking – sharing a workspace with other members. Here (Photo 1.2) is the coworking space where I wrote this chapter (when I was not working from home, in a café or the university). Being employed by a university and having a remote work contract allows me to complete my research work – mainly reading and writing – anywhere, and I have chosen the Bat Haus in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

Apart from being associated with physical coworking spaces, coworking, Spinuzzi (2012b) argues, can be understood ‘as part of a larger movement

Source: Sabina de Matteo; with permission.

Photo 1.1 Entrance to New Work City, a coworking space on Broadway, New York
toward distributed work and perhaps a way to examine and predict further work trends’. An interviewee in Strauss’s (2013) research claims that the coworking movement ‘is teaching corporate America a lot about how people interact, what makes them effective at creation and is really defining the future of how companies interact with each other on a deeper level’. Yet as popular and widespread as it is in 2014, coworking spaces would have been difficult to find even five years ago.

The empirical materials for this study were collected through participant observation (150 days spent in the Bat Haus), research diary entries (30), interviews (10) and reviewing the literature on coworking spaces and the coworking movement. The key questions in the context of this book on leadership, spaces and organizing are: What kind of phenomenon is coworking? How does it inform leadership studies?

In this chapter I first introduce coworking as seen from the perspectives of spaces and people and as a movement. This is followed by a short review of plural leadership theories – an approach that fits with coworking, as is argued. Next the chapter presents three organizations whose

Source:  Author’s own photograph; with permission.

Photo 1.2 The Bat Haus follows the open-space office design
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workplace design and leadership practices show similarities with coworking principles. To conclude, this chapter critically discusses coworking in the context of new work and the new sharing economy in which the idea of sharing physical commodities and services has expanded into various kinds of peer-to-peer models. The chapter contributes to discussions on workplace design, plural leadership approaches and the concepts of new work.

COWORKING: SPACES AND PEOPLE

Were human beings meant to spend most of their time awake in cubicles called offices? More precisely, do modern white-collar workers need to sit in an office the whole day in order to get their intellectual capacity to work? Most researchers and writers exploring new office designs, work concepts and coworking disagree with the traditional definition of work as going to the office from 9 to 5. However, the office has been a central part of developed countries’ post-industrial work imagery in the twenty-first century (Davis et al., 2011). It is no surprise then that the office and the associated behavioural and organizational patterns – the office culture – have even become a source of comedy, as shown in the UK television series The Office (featuring Ricky Gervais), the US film Office Space (1999) and Scott Adams’s popular cartoon character Dilbert, who with his colleagues is trapped in a windowless office landscape filled with cubicles (and, by any standards, absurd leadership). Despite the normalization of the office and what it represents, Jones et al. (2009) in their book I’m Outta Here! claim that coworking is making the office obsolete. This is an interesting notion from the developers of the coworking movement because coworking spaces tend to be some kind of an office. On the other hand, the traditional concept of office work is undergoing change, as will be discussed. What then is coworking?

Coworking space refers to a workspace that has shared desks, a good Internet connection, usually at least one open-plan space, a common kitchen area and meeting facilities. One can join a space on a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly basis. Often there are no dedicated spaces, desks or chairs, and one can/must choose anew every morning: Where do I sit? With whom? For nomads who do not need a fixed office but seek a more professional work environment than the home or a café or want to avoid the risk of becoming isolated as solo workers, coworking offers a viable, affordable option.

Yet, working with others and sharing space and tools with them are nothing new under the sun: artisan and artist communities have existed in
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varied forms for hundreds, if not thousands of years, Jones et al. (2009) remind readers. The corporate world has also toyed with these concepts, as a 1971 report on IBM’s experiment with the non-territorial office shows:

Under this concept, not only are all office walls removed, but most desks and other permanent stations are eliminated as well... All work is performed at laboratory benches and large round tables, and an individual may choose to work anywhere in the area that suits him or [is] convenient. (Allen and Gerstberger, 1971, p. 2)

These principles well describe today’s corporate practices and the coworking spaces, too. In contrast to the corporate world’s planned change initiatives and corporate objectives, though, many coworking spaces originate from casual working events called ‘Jellies’. These are informal meetings where (somewhat) same-minded people gather to work together in someone’s home, a coffee shop or an existing office. Participants bring their tools (for example, laptop, pens, paper) and the space provides wireless Internet, chairs and the company of other people in a similar situation. What is their similar situation? The common user groups of coworking spaces are freelancers, entrepreneurs, start-ups and micro-enterprises. As one of the main motivations for coworking many users mention the professional setting (compared to a home or café) and the community.

According to a Deskmag (2013) study some 2500 coworking spaces exist in 81 countries, while the number of coworking spaces and coworkers more than doubled from 2012 to 2013. Considering that the term ‘coworking’ with its current meaning was coined in 1999, that the first official full-time coworking space was established in 2006 and that the first peak in Google searches for the term occurred in October 2007 (Spinuzzi, 2012a; Deskmag, 2013), the coworking movement and industry are in a notable growth stage.

Apart from users, interest in coworking spaces is shared by stakeholders, including ‘coworking space operators, facility managers, real estate pundits as well as city councils representatives, public development agencies, universities or startup incubator managers’, as the organizers of Coworking Conference Europe (2013) describe their approximately 350 participants.

A first-hand reason for the growth of coworking requires looking at its benefits: from the perspective of individuals it offers a more professional environment than the home, as well social connections and a community, and it allows start-ups to keep fixed costs down and to create networks (Strauss, 2013). Sometimes labelled the ‘unoffice’, the coworking model ‘integrates flexible office space with possibility to interact with other workers and clients’ (Spinuzzi, 2012a, p.412). The unoffice combines
unlimited use of office space with features (meeting rooms, networking, new people) that one does not usually have at home or in a café.

One can differentiate among various kinds of coworking concepts. First, Jellies represent a pre-form of coworking spaces as they are based on the pure interest in sharing a workspace. Second, there are traditional coworking spaces where one can pop in at any time and pay a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly fee. These tend to attract a pretty diverse customer base with broad demographics, ranging from artists, graphic designers, coders and researchers to private entrepreneurs and micro-businesses. Third, there are more specialized spaces that market themselves as hubs for specific groups of professionals, such as writers, artisans and information technology and tech start-ups. Fourth, there are invitation-only spaces that are aimed at stimulating high-growth start-ups; they allow new small companies to inspire and connect with one another and offer value chains. In the search to finance operations and benefit from innovations, universities have also increasingly employed this concept of connecting people, ideas and business proposals (compare Welch, 2012). Finally, there are coworking spaces that come close to being office hotels by offering a combination of private office spaces and free communal space (compare Bacigalupo, 2011).

Coworking spaces also have negative features. Blog articles and commentaries frequently mention problems such as a lack of privacy, noise, the inability to establish a common culture and many overcrowded and dirty spaces (for example, Leforestier, 2009; Murphy Paul, 2012; Duffy, 2014). These complaints match some disadvantages linked to open-plan offices: ‘Open-plan offices in general have been associated with less persistence at challenging tasks, lower motivation, higher stress and blood pressure’ (Kim and De Dear, 2013; see also Taylor and Spicer, 2007 for a review).

Academic research on coworking spaces and coworkers is still extremely limited. Spinuzzi (2012a) and Hurry (2012) relied on interviews (Spinuzzi: 17 interviews, Hurry: 5 interviews) and written sources but not primarily on observations. In addition to these methods this research involved participant observation. I also conducted 10 interviews at two coworking spaces.¹

Coworking is based on a juxtaposition of ‘working alone together’ (Spinuzzi, 2012a). The end users are pretty divided: instead of working from home or cafés, about half only want a more productive setting while the other half also seek community. In my interviews many users attest that ‘work opportunities do arise’, and my observations confirm this. In opposition to constant or nomadic movement most users do not consider moving out in the near future (Deskmag, 2013).
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COWORKING: MOVEMENT

To understand coworking better, it is essential to look at the larger picture of work-life and see how coworking is part of that shift and movement. Sociologists including Manuel Castells (2000) and Richard Sennett (1998) argue that work-life is changing from long-term employment to constant shorter-term projects. Coworking can be regarded as a consequence of the new capitalism in which the ‘virtues’ of flexibility, downsizing, low loyalty and part-time work offer benefits and disadvantages for individual workers (Sennett, 1998). Spinuzzi (2015) uses the term ‘projectification’ to describe the shift from stable departmental organizations to project-based organizations, and in this respect, for many coworkers their job is ‘projectified’. In Sennett’s (1998) explanation the meaning of work has changed: ‘The word “job” in English of the fourteenth century meant a lump or piece of something which could be carted around. Flexibility today brings back this arcane sense of the job, as people do lumps of labor, pieces of work, over the course of lifetime’ (p. 9). A growing class of people in short-term jobs find that their work identity is created in horizontal shifts between project work of various natures, rather than by following the vertical career ladders of their parents’ generation (Standing, 2011).

My interviewees confirmed that the majority of independent coworkers have several occupations and multiple sources of income. An illustrative example is an interviewee who holds part-time jobs as a production assistant in a film crew, as a laboratory assistant in a photo studio, as an independent freelance wedding photographer, as a webpage designer and as painter and sculptor.

According to a 2011 study (MBO Partners, 2011), the independent workforce in the United States numbers 17.7 million and is projected to reach as high as 24 million by 2018. By 2020, so the MBO (2011) survey projects, around half of the private workforce will have worked from the position of an independent worker. This trend will continue because these workers ‘want control over their lives, including the ability to determine when, where and what type of work they do’ (ibid.). That study argues that the steady growth of the independent workforce can be regarded as a structural change in employment. Working independently is based on freedom, and Edelberg (2010) argues that it is precisely freedom that leads people to coworking spaces:

Freedom in the labor market carries a high price. Lack of competition and social interaction may lead to professional isolation and sustained loss of creative and innovative capacity. In order to forestall these threats a new work mode has emerged – coworking, whereby a group of
professionals hired individually by different employers share workspace and benefit from a common logistics and technology platform. (Edelberg, 2010, abstract)

Coworking apparently fits today’s economic landscape in which more and more independent workers need some sort of professional work setting. Taking this development in the number of independent workers into account offers an explanation of why coworking refers not only to physical spaces but also to a movement, a global community of people, and to a verb, to cowork (Jones et al., 2009). Summarizing various sources on the nature of the coworking movement, Coworking Wiki asserts that the community aspect is at the core:

Coworking is not only about the physical space, but about establishing the coworking community first. Its benefits can already be experienced outside of its spaces, and it is recommended to start with building a coworking community first before considering opening a coworking space. However, some coworking spaces don’t build a community: they just get a part of an existing one by combining their opening with an event which attracts their target group. (Coworking Wiki, n.d.)

Coworking Wiki emphasizes that coworking spaces ‘are about community-building and sustainability’. Other sources reassure that ‘the goal[s] of the co-working spaces [are] to create a sense of community among users’ and to bring ‘the social back into the workplace’ (Leforestier, 2009, p. 5). While other, similar kinds of spaces (rental offices, start-up incubators) are directed at businesspeople, coworking, Bacigalupo (2011) argues, attracts ‘people who do something they care about’ and creates communities of practice.

There seems to be an inherent need for community building in these days of independent working and of flexible capitalism. Sennett (1998) observes: ‘One of the unintended consequences of modern capitalism is that it has strengthened the value of place, aroused a longing for community’ (p. 138). In a survey on coworking, participants regarded community as the main benefit of a coworking space and the three most important features as the atmosphere, community feeling and collaborative environment (Global Coworking Blog, 2007). All my interviewees also viewed the social aspect of coworking as an asset. Interestingly, this trend supports the argument for a movement from independence to interdependence.

A writer in the first issue of a newly established (2014) e-journal New Worker Magazine asserts that the concept of coworking is not fully realized without the community aspect: ‘Realize you are choosing this lifestyle and workstyle. Make it worth it. If you’re just using a coworking space
as a space to work, you’re missing the point’ (Segreti, 2014). Anticipating (and socially constructing) this ethos, one of the early coworking spaces, Citizen Space in San Francisco, came up with values that many sources identify as coworking principles: collaboration, openness, community, accessibility and sustainability (Coworking Wiki, n.d.; Jones et al., 2009; Leforestier, 2009; Pachego-Vega, 2013).

Elaborating upon these values reveals more about the nature of coworking. First, collaboration is the key value, indicating a diverse group of people with varied sets of backgrounds and knowledge. Openness refers to an open flow of ideas and an attitude of sharing, giving and reciprocity. Community emphasizes mixing together like-minded people with different backgrounds. Accessibility means having opportunities to interact both physically and mentally. Sustainability is important ecologically, economically and socially; it applies to keeping the structure financially and socially sustainable and making ecologically responsible choices.

Jellies, too, start from the platform of interactions: ‘People come to Jelly for the purpose of working alongside others, sharing ideas, and meeting new people – it’s much more interactive and concentrated in that respect because people come with the intent to interact’ (Gupta, in Jones et al., 2009, p. 14). What makes Jelly a pre-form of coworking is that, if people see the need and desire to further organize these meetings, they can found a coworking community or space. As organic gatherings based on organic growth, Jellies represent the basic ideology of coworking in a nutshell. Jones et al. (2009, p. 3) contrast the ideals of coworking and the Industrial Age in Table 1.1.

There is some evidence that those who choose coworking subscribe to coworking values, rather than corporate values (Spinuzzi, 2012a; Bacigalupo, personal communication, 12 December 2013; Strauss, 2013). My interviews also confirm that in today’s work-life there are many opportunities to live an independent existence outside big corporations. Advocates of the coworking movement do not hold employer–employee relations in high regard due to the idea of dependency:

If you work for someone, you depend on that person, and that can lead to unhealthy relations. I think there are a lot of people who love to have the security and structure of a traditional job, but I think a lot of people don’t feel like they were conscious agents in choosing their path. Eventually you need to make money to live, and a traditional ‘job’ was the only visible path. That leads to potential for all sorts of resentment and bad feelings. (Bacigalupo, personal communication, 12 December 2013)

Traditionally (as in Hegel’s dialectics of master and slave relations) workers have been defined by their master (company owner, manager),
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thus their identities originate from that dependency relation. In an interview, however, Bacigalupo (ibid.) explains the core of this movement through the terms ‘dependent’, ‘independent’ and ‘interdependent’. Not being dependent means being free of traditional work relations restrictions, but in addition to having freedom, independent workers also have responsibility. Joining a coworking space is a voluntary choice and, when associated with the social aspects of coworking, indicates that the value of interdependency is taken seriously. Interdependency means accepting dependency relations, this time formed by choice – out of mutual respect and acceptance, not obligation.

Turner (2006) traces some of the community-based coworking ideals to 1960s’ communal idealism. While computers in the 1950s to 1960s were largely associated with the military, control and the Cold War, from the late 1960s to the early 1970s a counterculture that adopted personal computing as a tool for personal liberation arose in the San Francisco Bay area. This ‘digital utopia’ (exemplified in the Whole Earth Catalog counterculture magazine) foresaw that linking individuals together by personal computing would empower ‘humans in their day-to-day lives and, in that way, would change humanity’ (Cornelissen, 2013, p. 704). Blended with hippies’ communal ideals of living and working together and flower power, this movement influenced many early tech enthusiasts, including Steve Jobs (Turner, 2006; Isaacson, 2011; Cornelissen, 2013).

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<tr>
<th>Table 1.1</th>
<th>Ideals of coworking and the Industrial Age</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Corporate values</strong></td>
<td><strong>Coworking values</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>We are your employer</td>
<td>You are my client</td>
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<tr>
<td>You will come to my office</td>
<td>I will set my own hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You will stay in your cube</td>
<td>I will work where it fits me best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to other coworkers distracts you from your work</td>
<td>Talking to other people energizes my work, helps me collaborate and solve problems and is essential for my social well-being</td>
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<tr>
<td>You will work on whatever project we put in front of you</td>
<td>I will work on projects that are meaningful to me</td>
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<tr>
<td>You will put in face time so I know you are working and not messing around</td>
<td>I will work until the project is completed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Your work and your life outside work are separate</td>
<td>My work and my life are intertwined</td>
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*Source:* Jones et al. (2009).
Virtual communities such as MySpace and Facebook have challenged the definition of community, as belonging and not-belonging have become more difficult to define and a lack of physical or face-to-face meetings makes the degree of emotional ties unclear (Reich, 2010). One of my interviewees compared the coworking movement to the ‘open source movement’ in which ‘people are doing things for free to contribute to something meaningful’.

On the other hand, not all coworking spaces create communities. In my materials three coworking proprietors I interviewed raised the concern that movement is driven by the coworking industry in which business-people do not necessarily emphasize movement and participants thus get only a little taste of movement. On a more positive note it was mentioned that the coworking industry brought coworking from a niche to the mainstream and created access to the movement for a larger population.

Despite consisting of a loose collection of members, the spaces tend to be central to the coworking movement and features such as localism – understood as working in a local community and contributing to the local economy (Pachego-Vega 2009) – make these more physical communities. The interviews conducted in this research support the view that the physical place, collaboration and sometimes location play crucial roles in determining the success of a coworking space.

COWORKING THROUGH THE LEADERSHIP LENS

Following the community-based ethos of coworking, I will not dwell on the numerous definitions of leadership but concentrate on plural leadership. In the twenty-first century a shift has occurred in leadership theories. Leadership has long been studied as a quality of an individual, but the post-heroic theories consider leadership as a plural phenomenon (Denis et al., 2012) based in the mundane activities and relations of members of an organization (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Hosking, 2007; Carroll et al., 2008; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010; Grint and Jackson, 2010) and encompassing any leaderful actions by organizational members (Raelin, 2011). Effective leadership, in this perspective, does not need to consist of heroic explicit actions but can be subtle and informal (Karp, 2013). These post-heroic leadership theories (Crevani et al., 2007, 2010; Avolio et al., 2009) define leadership as constructed in a process, as a continuation of social activities, rather than as a momentary action (for example, showing assertiveness, taking leadership), and they thus subscribe to process ontological approaches (Chia, 1997; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Wood, 2005).

Plural leadership examines leadership not as a property of individuals
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and their behaviours but as a collective phenomenon that is distributed or shared among different people, potentially fluid and constructed through interaction (Denis et al., 2012). Already in 1954 Gibbs argues for leadership that is ‘probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group’ (quoted in Denis et al., 2012, p. 212). This ethos is described well in Mabey and Freeman’s (2010) words ‘as a distributed and interdependent set of practices enacted by all rather than specific traits possessed by figureheads at the apex of a hierarchy’ (p. 513). From the four research streams on plural leadership resulting from Denis et al. (2012), ‘producing leadership through interactions’ (p. 215) comes closest to the reality of coworking.

Applying plural leadership to coworking spaces means locating leadership in the members of the space. We first need to be clear about the context. Leadership in coworking spaces is a two-fold issue: practically all members are part of other groups outside the physical space, so plural leadership touches both external networks outside the coworking community and the internal ones within the physical space. The focus here is on aspects of internal leadership within the coworking space community and how independent workers relate to (plural) leadership. The first question this focus raises is, what kind of phenomenon is leadership in coworking spaces?

From the internal perspective, leadership traditionally would be attached to anyone who officially runs the place (for example, the proprietor, hired help). However, from the plural leadership perspective, many other informal leadership actions take place on the level of members’ activities. The interviews indicate that, even if the proprietors organize events and play a crucial role in creating a specific atmosphere, members also organize events or meetings and the informal organization creates a sense of place, as the following interview excerpt shows:

What happens when no one [of the owners or assistance] is there? Lots of people walk in and out. When the post guy comes, some people pick the post up, and some not. Some people ignore new people entering the space; some give guidance. It is tacit leadership: I step forward and take a little bit of responsibility. In my first coworking space part of responsibility of being [a] coworker was to open the door for the buzzer. You let that person in and talk about the space. If no official is there you took that responsibility. This little responsibility made a huge impact. The difference is that between service and community. As soon as people stop feeling [that] it is service and see it as community, they start to behave differently. (Interviewee 2, 2014)

This kind of thinking is very much in line with plural leadership: when there is not one person at the apex of things, some responsibilities are intentionally left for members to attend to. This requires that those who
run the space truly subscribe to coworking values and approach these from the plural leadership perspective.

Another example of coworker ownership initiatives is cotivation, which started in the New York-based New Work City. Cotivation is a weekly meeting of members who want to accomplish something and to discuss with the group what is holding people back from achieving their tasks (Bacigalupo, 2013). In the Bat Haus where I cowork, the weekly social hour on Thursday evenings is an initiative of members too.

The main organizing principle behind these initiatives is a decentralized form of leadership: the participants/members share the responsibility for the social life in their space. The spaces that more resemble office hotels do not necessarily encourage these kinds of activities, let alone expect clients to ask for it: after all, they pay for these services. Whether one joins a space with the attitude of a client or a member seems to contribute to participation in plural leadership. It remains to be seen what directions leadership in coworking will take in the future. The four coworking principles described earlier match the post-heroic understanding of leadership as a collective task. Notably, the rise of post-heroic leadership research has coincided with the emergence of the coworking phenomenon.

CASES: COWORKING PRINCIPLES IN BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS

As noted, organizations have experimented with flexible office solutions for a long time. Here I look at a few company practices and coworking principles that coincide in modern organizations. In the Netherlands and Finland, Microsoft has reorganized its open-plan offices according to the so-called ‘new way of working’. The physical office space is divided into different kinds of places that one chooses according to personal needs and likings, and no one – not even the chief executive officer (CEO) – has a designated workspace (Meerbeek et al., 2009). In the interior of the offices Microsoft has created spaces with various looks and feels. For instance, Bistro is a café-like environment for relaxing and casual meetings, the Beach a working room with groovy background music and large windows overlooking the sea, the Library is dedicated to quiet work and has a ban on talking, and the Playroom a creative and colourful space with toys, Lego and gym balls (Photo 1.3). At the heart of this re-design is a concept called ‘presence work’. In opposition to teleworking this concept emphasizes cooperation instead of distance. ‘We wanted to focus on the idea of trust; that people are present even when they are not close by’, the Microsoft marketing communications manager explains. The
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The process of designing the space at Microsoft was based on participative design principles (compare Meerbeek et al., 2009).

The way Frantic, a small Finnish tech company with approximately 50 employees, figured out its relocation to new office space reflects the same principles. Frantic formerly had a long space, physically divided into two ends connected by a kitchen area and meeting rooms in the middle. Keen on getting rid of the silos that this structure endorsed, the company moved to a (smaller) space consisting of one large room. In the middle there is a long table for coworking and the space allows small teams to gather on the sides and talk without disrupting others too much (Photo 1.4). The relocation was highly anticipated and the workers had both negative and positive experiences. The move to new, higher, lighter, more modern open space changed the working culture, people communicated more, and cooperation became smoother. The new space, even if smaller, is not much cheaper, but at the same time the company’s financial results have improved, according to interviews, due mainly to improved cooperation among employees (Salovaara, 2014).

The sales manager at Technopolis, a company offering office-space-related services, confirms that there are two trends in workplace design: ‘tribes’ and ‘one café’. The term ‘tribes’ refers to free-floating, self-managed,
usually project- or interest-based teams that can meet and work anywhere. The office space is planned to allow the tribes to meet – an arrangement well known to anyone familiar with current office design. The ‘one café’ trend stands in opposition to an earlier practice of designing several café corners (small café areas with a coffee machine) throughout the office. The new trend is to build only one, larger café that can also be used for corporate meetings and events. When the departments had their own cafés, sales, marketing and accounting departments tended to remain separated in their silos. The benefit of connecting these silos is that only one set of information spreads throughout the office, instead of several, sometimes conflicting ones (ibid.).

On the other hand many spaces do not support this kind of group work. In this research’s interviews a university professor complained of how buildings’ metal exteriors, long corridors and closed doors evoke a sense of researchers ‘in their ivory towers, distanced from the real life’ (ibid.). The layout of the offices within departments also supports the university hierarchy: professors have the most spacious offices, which are located
first along the corridor. My university’s School of Management has a full floor of space – but apart from one cramped space in the corridor outside the department doors there is no space designed for students.

Telecommunications company Telenor, a Norwegian formerly state-owned telephone company, boasts buildings with glass-and-metal architecture, open-space design and open-plan offices. Despite the positive image of open-plan offices, the research on them reveals mixed reactions:

[The open-plan office layout is commonly assumed to facilitate communication and interaction between co-workers, promote well-being at work and workplace satisfaction, and to enhance team-work effectiveness. On the other hand, open-plan layouts are widely acknowledged to be more disruptive due to uncontrollable noise and loss of privacy. Enclosed private offices clearly outperformed open-plan layouts in most aspects, particularly in acoustics, privacy and the proxemics issues. Benefits of enhanced ‘ease of interaction’ were smaller than the penalties of increased noise level and decreased privacy resulting from open-plan office configuration. (Kim and De Dear, 2013, p. 18)]

As the design of modern office buildings is meant to serve various organizational and human resource purposes, architecture alone is less able to respond to these needs (Heerwagen et al., 2004). The drawbacks, to some degree, might stem from the architecture’s focus on the physical structure, not productivity or organizational goals. This focus is often reflected, for instance, in architectural pictures of buildings; they usually do not include people but only physical constructions. I share an impression with Shortt (2013), who says that in her observations most workplace discussions are about functional and physical aspects of space while emotions and the people side of things remain marginal topics in workplace research. Applying Lefebvre (1991), Taylor and Spicer (2007) distinguish among planned, practised and imagined space and note the drawback that architecture and space design often identify themselves chiefly with the planned structures, not those practised or imagined.

In designing new, attractive workspaces companies seek a delicate balance between employee motivation and profits. Sometimes this leads to conflicting ideologies. For instance ‘[f]irms like Apple are new age in their imagery and old school in their business practices’ (Heller, 2013, p. 70). As much as communication is the at the core of new company practices an anecdote about Amazon’s then CEO Jeff Bezos tells how he seemingly became irritated and called ‘for teams to communicate less with each other, not more’ (ibid.). Even if Bezos’s point was that small customer teams should respond directly to the client...
and that internal communication ‘is a sign of dysfunction’ (ibid.), the story shows more than anything how manager centred some high-tech companies still are.

How do coworking values match with organizational practices? At Microsoft, collaboration, openness and access to information are valued. In the refurbished office, employees can also feel a bit like a tribe that has managed to conquer the space and to turn it into their home turf. At Technopolis the manager clearly emphasized that, in the midst of changing workspaces and mobile work ‘every man needs his own turf’ (Salovaara, 2014). On the other hand the creative manager at Frantic asserts that despite the fears, the company has experienced an unexpected growth spurt since relocating to the new, open office space (with the purpose of breaking up silos and increasing communication) and has been forced to seek extra space in the same building. Open office space clearly has benefits and disadvantages.

Overall, this short overview challenges Jones et al.’s table above that places corporate and coworking values in opposition. The same new principles can be adapted to corporate practices too (and are sometimes piloted by companies, as in the IBM example from 1971).

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

As the amount of distance work and virtual teams increase, workers seem to long for physical relations and communities. Coworking spaces are a pioneering way for humans to interrelate to one another as the coworking movement emphasizes its community-building aspect. Coworking seems to address some basic human needs that people working independently desire.

A shared workspace that also fulfils social needs is not new, but the concept of plural leadership might offer a way to analyse the internal dynamics of coworking spaces and community building. Leadership produced through interactions paves the way for more participatory practices in coworking spaces. As pointed out, there are different kinds of coworking spaces supporting the coworking movement to varying degrees. The coworking movement, it seems, will accept plural leadership more readily than traditional forms of leadership, whereas in most business-like spaces plural leadership is neither an issue nor a desired feature.

The coworking movement shares features with the sharing economy (for example, sharing cars, bikes, apartments) (Sacks, 2011), open source movement (in software programming) (Lerner and Tirole, 2001), Occupy movement (Piven, 2012), crowdsourcing and crowd funding (Mollick,
2014) and the maker movement (Ohanian, 2013; Hatch, 2014). These movements favour the bottom-up approach over top-down leadership approaches. In general, these movements support a shift from the idea of individual ownership (independence) to a form where possible collective uses (interdependence) instead of possession is important and thus suggest a move from competition to cooperation (Malone, 2004).

At the same time, most if not all visionary sources anticipate that the uses of office space will change. Office design is no longer ruled by fixed relationships between groups of office workers located in specific buildings in predetermined places; instead there is talk about multi-use and networked offices (Duffy and Tanis, 1993; Duffy, 2013). While work-life is expected to become less centralized and more mobile and flexible, the future office will be more of a place for cooperation instead of working alone – a hub instead of an individual retreat. This pattern closely resembles the basic idea of coworking, where the reason for going to work is not to sit alone behind closed doors but to connect with others. Even in traditional environments such as universities, turning faculty groups into communities of caring scholars has been shown to have positive effects (Heinrich, 2010).

A desk to work at and a café with an Internet connection are easy to find, but a random discussion with a half-stranger does not fulfil the human emotional need to connect with others. There is something very intriguing at the heart of coworking: in a very old-fashioned way it brings people together, yet coworking spaces function only in today’s world of endless virtual connections.

NOTE

1. At the time of writing this chapter the research project is ongoing and more interviews will be conducted.

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