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# CAMEo

## CUTS #10

# Creativity, Co-Working and Sense of Place in Collaborative Workspaces

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# Creativity, Co-Working and Sense of Place in Collaborative Workspaces

Fabrizio Montanari, UNIMORE

Collaborative spaces and co-working environments are the focus of this edition of CAMEo Cuts. Fabrizio Montanari reflects on findings from his current empirical research in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy, where a rich network and ecosystem of co-working spaces, labs and incubators exists to provide workers with new opportunities for creatively collaborating, as well as working singly, or in more conventional productive modes. The detail of collaborative spaces reveals a mixed-use, mixed-economy of work environments where creating a dynamic community and sense of place may not be as straightforward or as predictable as is often imagined. His research reveals how diverse and complex the idea of 'collaborative' work can be, and suggests ways forward to obtaining a more nuanced understanding of the specifics of contemporary co-working.



## About the author

Fabrizio Montanari is Associate Professor of Organization Studies at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, where he is Scientific Coordinator of OPERA, a Research Unit specialized in the study of creativity and innovation. He is also Adjunct Professor at Bocconi University, Research Affiliate at ASK Research Center, and Scientific Advisor for Fondazione G. Brodolini. He has been Visiting Scholar at Boston College, and Visiting Professor at Copenhagen Business School, Johannes Kepler University of Linz, University of Leicester, and WU Vienna. He is currently conducting research on the effects of different networks' characteristics on creativity, focusing on how the contextual fabric of the network (such as its organizational or spatial setting) influences the shape and activity of creative and innovative ecosystems. His work has appeared in such journals as *Journal of Economic Geography*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization Studies* and *Urban Studies*.

# Creativity, Co-Working and Sense of Place in Collaborative Workspaces

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## Introduction

In the last decade, there has been a proliferation of research on new environments of *shared working*, *co-working*, and *collaboration*. These terms describe ways of gathering together people from different contexts “who do not necessarily work for the same company or on the same project”, but who do work “alongside each other, sharing the working space and resources” (DeGuzman & Tang, 2011, p. 22). In this essay, I will refer to these spaces generically as *collaborative spaces*, meaning hybrid forms of organising that include a wide array of work settings such as co-workings, innovation hubs, fab-labs or incubators. I use this term since collaboration represents one of the central and stable attributes of these working environments. Indeed, collaborative spaces have the primary aim of creating a physical and social atmosphere able to support face-to-face interactions, an ethos of exchange, and a sense of community, which in turn could sustain co-creation and cross-fertilisation processes (e.g., Garret, Spreitzer & Bacevice, 2017; Schmidt & Brinks, 2017). To achieve this goal, collaborative spaces provide their users (typically freelance workers, entrepreneurs, citizens, companies, etc.) access on a stable or temporary basis to different tools and services (at times even including industrial equipment such as 3D printers or laser cutters) as well as, ideally, to a stimulating working environment.

It is interesting to note that such spatial work settings are not entirely new. For example, in the nineteenth century, Thomas Edison had already designed an open floor laboratory (the Invention Factory) dedicated to the development of creative ideas (Israel, 1998). Similarly, in the 1970s and 1980s, the Homebrew Computer Club, an informal gathering that hosted meetings between people from very distant fields such as hippie anti-war activists or Stanford graduated engineers, represented “a hotbed of people and ideas that would play a central role in the birth of the personal computer revolution” (Giuffrè, 2013: 144). Moreover, in the 1980s, the sociologist Ray Oldenburg theorised the importance of the so-called “third places” – i.e. spaces that lie in between the domestic home (the “first place”) and the productive workplace (the “second place”) – in sustaining the development of informal social relations through their inclusively sociable atmosphere (Oldenburg, 1989).

Whereas the idea of collaborative spaces could be traced back to previous experiences and conceptualisations, it is only recently that we have witnessed a real proliferation of this kind of work setting on a global scale.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, collaborative spaces have become a social and economic phenomenon, pervasive in the life of many cities, including smaller-sized ones. The reasons that could explain such diffusion

are different yet intertwined with each other. Among these, it seems noteworthy to highlight the following:

1. *The importance of being creative:* The emergence of the so-called knowledge economy has sparked the 'third industrial revolution', in which "work shifted and became devoted more to tasks requiring discernment, creativity, judgment and initiative" (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Isaac, 2016: 5). In such a context, individual knowledge in general (and creativity in particular) represents a critical resource that companies need to access in order to develop the aesthetic and symbolic features of goods and services that attract consumer attention (Amabile, 1996; Scott, 2010).
2. *De-materialisation and de-spatialisation of work:* Advances in telecommunications and information technologies have changed the way people are able to perform work, often reducing the demand for fixed, heavy machinery, increasing rates of de-materialisation, and allowing for greater flexibility in when and where people work. Indeed, many knowledge workers nowadays do their jobs outside the organisation's classic physical and temporal boundaries (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Isaac, 2016; Spinuzzi, 2012),<sup>2</sup> thus contributing to a much more blurred separation between spheres of domestic, productive, and social life (Gold & Mustafa 2013; Gregg, 2017).
3. *Need for urban regeneration:* The emergence of the knowledge economy has also left cities with a "heritage" of former industrial plants and neighbourhoods that have been abandoned because of de-

industrialisation and outsourcing trends. For instance, several former industrial cities – such as Liverpool, Bilbao, Milan or Glasgow – have tried to reconvert their economies towards more service-based activities since the late 1990s, while also trying to figure out new uses and opportunities for abandoned industrial areas often located in the central zones of the urban fabric (Garcia, 2004).

Collaborative spaces have been depicted as a potential solution to these challenges. They represent, in fact, specific "third places" that offer opportunities for socialisation and community building, thus contributing to avoiding the drawbacks of remote working and excess virtualisation.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, they offer an opportunity for policy-makers to give new life to abandoned buildings, as they are proposed as important tools for urban policies aimed at creating breeding grounds for creativity and innovation. Finally, they are meant to support the creativity of individuals, groups and organisations, as proximity and physical design facilitate face-to-face interactions and knowledge exchange, thus triggering relational dynamics conducive to creativity (e.g. Capdevila 2015; Oksanen & Ståhle 2013; Toker & Gray, 2008). As far as this latter issue is concerned, it is interesting to note that even more traditionally-minded companies have begun to show interest in collaborative spaces, for example allowing their employees to attend them as a key opportunity to facilitate interactions with people from other (even distant) contexts and increase their exposure to alternative viewpoints and new perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

The supposed creative benefits of collaborative spaces are consistent with a

stream of research that has emerged recently in the management field conceptualising “creativity as a facet of the social world” (Koppman, 2016: 292). Drawing on the idea that creativity is a socially-constructed process enacted by individuals by means of their social networks (for a review, see Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017), several scholars have particularly advocated the need for “collaborative atmospheres” that facilitate serendipitous encounters with other people, information exchange, social networking, and collaboration (e.g., Adler, Heckscher & Prusak, 2011; Chesbrough, 2003).<sup>5</sup>

Being an emergent phenomenon, however, there are still few publications dedicated to collaborative spaces and, in particular, to the localised creative dynamics that take place in them. Moreover, some studies have provided contradictory results on the effective ability of collaborative spaces. For example, the ‘open’ offices and shared or ‘hot desks’ that often characterise collaborative spaces do not always support information exchange and face-to-face interactions; on the contrary, they can produce negative outcomes such as noise, difficult interactions, and increased coordination costs (Fayard & Weeks 2007; Pearce & Hinds, 2018). Moreover, bringing together different actors with diverse backgrounds is not enough to sustain collaboration and create breakthrough innovations (Skelcher, Mathur & Smith, 2005); in fact, these processes also require a set of organisational conditions that could actually (and lastingly) support their development, diffusion and exploitation.

Such mixed evidence calls for further empirical studies that could help to better understand both how collaborative spaces work and the organisational conditions that are more

conducive to generating creative outcomes. In the next section, I will present some preliminary results from research funded by the Research Fund (FAR) of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia focusing on the investigation of collaborative spaces’ features perceived by users as more effective in supporting their activities and in sustaining collaboration. In particular, I will present the first stage of the research, which was aimed at mapping and analysing diffusion and the main features of collaborative spaces operating in the Emilia Romagna region, Italy.

## **Collaborative spaces in Emilia Romagna: An overview**

Before presenting the results, it seems appropriate to provide a brief description of the investigated context and the adopted methodology. Emilia-Romagna is one of the wealthiest and most industrialised Italian regions, with a GDP per capita of €34,000 (the fourth highest among Italian regions) and more than 400,000 companies (almost 10% of total Italian companies). This strong industrial presence has been paralleled over the years by strong investments in innovation. For instance, Emilia Romagna ranks as the second Italian region for expenditure on R&D activities and for the number of innovative start-ups per 1,000 inhabitants (ISTAT, 2014).

As far as the methodological aspects are concerned, we have adopted a multi-step approach resulting firstly in a desk analysis aimed at identifying the collaborative spaces operating in the region. More specifically, desk analysis was conducted between March and April 2018 through a search on Google using keywords such as “Province name + collaborative space”, “Province name +

incubator”, “Province name + innovation hub” and so on. These keywords yielded a first dataset of 110 spaces located in the nine provinces of the region. Then, we further analysed the collected cases by looking at their official websites, engaging in phone calls with their managers, and triangulating data with other sources (databases, reports, etc.). Research team members shared and commented on interpretations until we reached a consensus on the collaborative spaces to be included. At the end of the process, the dataset consisted of 67 collaborative spaces. Subsequently, we selected five cases on the basis of their relevance and representativeness.<sup>6</sup> We investigated these cases by combining different qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews with managers and users of each collaborative space (in total, 60 interviews), direct observation, and archival documents (official communication, articles in newspaper and magazines, etc.).

Findings confirm that collaborative spaces represent a recent and pervasive phenomenon that involves also small and medium-sized cities. Indeed, results show that there has been an increase in the number of spaces from 6 to 67 in the last five years (see Figure 1). Moreover, collaborative spaces do not concentrate only in Bologna, the administrative capital and the most densely populated city of the region. On the contrary, they are rather evenly distributed among different provinces, with similar concentration rates if compared to the population of each province. In addition, it is interesting to note that, whereas the majority of collaborative spaces are located in the provincial capitals, 12% are hosted in small towns with less than 70,000 inhabitants. The reasons for such a

diffusion in small urban settlements could be traced to the presence of local industrial districts (for instance, the pottery district in Sassuolo or the pharmaceutical one in Mirandola), which provide the opportunities of “empty buildings” to be potentially used for the development of a collaborative space and also foster the interest of local policy-makers and other relevant stakeholders (companies, trade associations, chamber of commerce, etc.) in such initiatives. This result confirms also the idea that collaborative spaces are often proposed as important tools for urban policies aimed at tackling unemployment, disengagement, and economic stagnation. In line with such “political use”, it is not surprising that almost the entirety of the investigated collaborative spaces receives some kind of public support, which could range from direct funding to free use of buildings, and represents a sort of *conditio sine qua non* for the early stages of their life cycle.

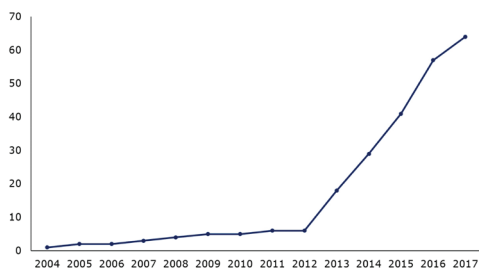


Figure 1 – Evolution in the proliferation of collaborative spaces in Emilia-Romagna

Findings highlight the presence of five main categories of collaborative spaces (see Table 1): co-working spaces (40% of the total), incubators (27%), science parks (18%), cultural hubs (10%), and fab labs (5%). In general, despite their small scale (58% have

a maximum of 20 users), the vast majority offer a wide array of services, activities, and facilities in order to satisfy diverse needs and work habits of different users. As a result, they typically aim to offer flexible space design in the form of combinations of open space with shared tables, meeting rooms and “private” offices, and spaces aimed at fostering informality and sociality (e.g. lunch rooms, libraries, cafés, spaces for cultural events). In addition to spatial flexibility, almost all collaborative spaces offer temporal flexibility allowing their members to access the space 24/7, so that they can work at whatever time fits their desired schedule.

CATEGORY	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS
Co-working spaces	Shared working spaces, also offering a mix of services and activities, which range from cultural and networking events to incubation and training activities
Incubators	Focus on services and activities (e.g. financial and managerial support, networking with stakeholders, experts and funders) for the emergence and the development of start-ups
Science parks	Established by the Emilia-Romagna Region with the goal to foster collaboration among universities, start-ups, companies and public actors, and with a focus on ICT and technological innovation
Cultural hubs	Focus on cultural activities (e.g. events, workshops, exhibitions, performing arts) and on supporting artists and creative workers
Fab labs	Focus on granting open access to digital infrastructures and equipment; in most cases, established by local communities of digital makers seeking a physical space for both collaborating with one another and enlarging their community

Table 1 – Different types of collaborative spaces in the Emilia-Romagna Region

## How users enact space and time in collaborative spaces

The design of the physical environment represents a key factor for the effective operation of collaborative spaces. More specifically, it consists of a complex system of spatial and material elements, whose configurations serve important functions such as reflecting the collaborative space’s identity, sustaining social interaction among its users (not only internal, but also external), and providing various stimuli that create a unique atmosphere.

As far as the first element is concerned, the case of *Polveriera*, a social incubator based in Reggio Emilia, offers some interesting insights. As we can see in Pictures 1a and 1b, the building itself is designed with the aim of communicating the core values of the space: collaboration, informality, sense of community, and focus on people. In this regard, the transformation project of an abandoned military armoury into the new social incubator was centred on the idea to build a new public square that would have been open not only to users, but also to the whole neighbourhood. Thus, founders of the collaborative space and managers of the Municipality agreed on creating a pedestrian area and demolishing the existing walls that obstructed the view of the square from the surrounding streets. The collaborative space presents other interior and exterior elements that are designed purposefully to communicate the identity of the space. Besides the large internal open space that is consistent with the idea of openness, the main entrance and some windows of the building also exhibit ‘key words’ that express the core values of the space, arrived at through discussion amongst the space’s users and inhabitants. In this case, the goal is to communicate the collaborative



space's identity to visitors and potential users from their first encounter with the structure, while also being consistent with the bottom-up approach that the founders of *Polveriera* want to adopt in implementing their activities.



Polveriera, Reggio Emilia

The layout of a collaborative space also serves to sustain social interactions among its users and audiences. In this regard, results confirm, firstly, the importance of providing meeting points (coffee machines, kitchen areas, etc.) at strategically central locations or offering “collaborative architecture” (shared tables, lounge areas with couches, conference rooms, etc.) as means of sustaining face-to-face interactions and other social dynamics that foster knowledge exchange, facilitate workflows, and eventually support the generation of new ideas (see also Doorley & Witthoft, 2012). In addition, results provide interesting insights into how the physical environment is often designed to increase the opportunities to engage in interactions with external audiences such as neighbours, local associations, and citizens. For example, in the case of *Kilowatt* – a social incubator and co-working space in Bologna – managers have thought to dedicate spaces for enhancing engagement with external audiences since the very beginning of their operation. To this goal, they opened not only a café that people could attend and use to socialise, work or study, but also a greenhouse specifically dedicated to citizens willing to participate in gardening activities. *Kilowatt* also has an intense agenda of cultural events that are targeted at different audiences: primarily students and professionals, but also children and senior citizens. The ultimate goal, therefore, is not only to provide present users with cultural stimuli or to attract potential new ones, but also to involve public citizens who might just enjoy attending the space, thus making it an important social and cultural venue for the neighbourhood.



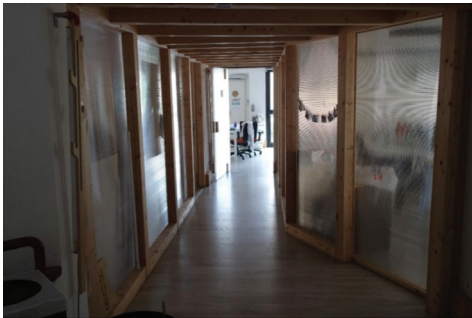
Kilowatt, Bologna

The presence of an active cultural programme and agenda also contributes to the diffusion of a widespread perception of a unique environment that can stimulate social interactions, creativity, and well-being. For example, interviewed users stated that they appreciate aesthetic elements of furniture and architecture such as window views, inspiring colours, and artworks (see also Dul, Ceylan & Jaspers, 2011). Moreover, they positively evaluate the possibility to listen to and meet highly reputed professionals who are invited to give lectures or seminars in a collaborative space. Besides being important from a training viewpoint, these events represent key occasions for identity creation processes. Indeed, when users attend and appreciate such events, they make sense of the collaborative space as an important hub that is able to attract other professionals (from the same or other industries) with whom they like

to interact, thus increasing the perceived sense of community and spreading the idea that the collaborative space is “a place to be”.

However, flexibility, openness, and sharing do not always characterise collaborative spaces; on the contrary, they can also present some internal boundaries as their users might not be keen on collaboration and social interactions. In one of the investigated cases – the *Impact Hub* of Reggio Emilia – freelance workers and employees of two small start-ups hosted in the collaborative space appreciate the opportunity for serendipitous encounters with people from outside their own team or organization, but employees of another company, which is also based in the collaborative space, are rather focused on establishing rules and norms for themselves. Accordingly, they are not interested in the temporal flexibility offered by the collaborative space in terms of 24/7 access, but rather work according to traditional office hours (from 9am to 6pm). The presence in the collaborative space of this category of users, who deliberately decided to work remotely rather than commuting to the headquarters office (about 40 miles away), raises some issues that contribute to establishing internal boundaries limiting social interaction, information exchange and potential cross-fertilisation. Indeed, whereas collaborative spaces are meant to foster collaboration and a sense of community, some users might prefer to live in isolation without developing links with other “co-workers”. In these cases, it would not be enough for a collaborative space to offer quieter zones to facilitate concentration or enclosed spaces for privacy or confidential work. In our case, in fact, such users negotiated how to design and manage their own sections of the physical environment, thus creating a sort of “space within the space”. For example, they obtained the authorisation

from the managers of the collaborative space to raise both plexiglass walls dividing their area from the open space and internal glass partitions acoustically isolating different rooms. As we can see in Pictures 3a and 3b, partitions isolate offices from one another and create a rather dark aisle between offices, which looks completely different from other areas of the collaborative space.



Impact Hub, Reggio Emilia

## Conclusive remarks

In sharing the first results of the FAR research project, my aim is not to advance solutions for the development of an ideal collaborative space, but to offer some insights on a relevant contemporary phenomenon and stimulate the debate on the social and cognitive dynamics that actually happen in these spaces. To this regard, I would like to conclude this essay by focusing on the important role that spatial and material elements play in collaborative spaces.

As highlighted in the previous section, the physical environment of a collaborative space

consists of a system of spatial and material elements, whose configurations are far more complex than the stereotyped images that people might have in mind when thinking of this kind of space (related, for instance, to aspects such as fancy furniture, glass walls, or a cosy and glamorous on-site café). Through workspace and building design, in fact, collaborative spaces organise work activities, shape users' interactions (both within the space itself and with one another) and communicate their core values to internal and external audiences. Thus, the design of interior layout and external building is important as both contribute to satisfying users' functional work needs. However, it also has other key implications in terms of how users make sense of the collaborative space and enact other cognitive processes related to learning, perception, and cultural identification.

Whereas this result is in line with the recent studies on the role of material objects and artefacts in the life of organisations (e.g., Boxenbaum et al., 2018; Carlile et al., 2013), it suggests some further insights on how the physical environment could sustain identity processes. Indeed, spatial and material elements affect not only the central features that individuals perceive about a collaborative space's identity, but also the related emotive, cultural and social value. To better understand this point, it is helpful to refer to the work of architectural theorists who highlighted the relevance of cognitive elements in the dynamics of a city's identity (Lynch, 1960; Norberg-Schultz, 1970). In particular, they suggested that elements of urban landscape (spaces, buildings, etc.) become central to identity processes when they acquire over time emotive, cultural and social value, which contributes to sustaining their perception as central "places" of the

*genius loci* (or “character”) of the city that the inhabitants have in mind. Similarly, the development of a collaborative space’s identity could be conceived as the result of collectively-shared perceptions about its “character” or *genius loci*. In this respect, both users and owners are constantly engaged in shaping and negotiating processes, which are related not only to work space design (uses, functions, physical facilities, etc.) but also to defining what a collaborative space *means* – i.e. creating a sense of place. Material elements and artefacts are key elements through which people both make sense of the physical environment in which they act and give sense to it, affecting others’ perception and, eventually, imbuing them with emotive, cultural, and social value.

The next steps of the FAR research project will be dedicated to deepening the understanding of how spatial and material elements sustain the development of a sense of place in collaborative spaces, and its potential impacts on the creative outcomes generated by users. Indeed, it is plausible to expect that people might produce more creative outcomes in a collaborative space when they perceive a sense of place that is either strongly based on core values such collaboration, sharing and reciprocity or embedded in the local social and cultural context. In the former case, the belief of being in a “collaborative place” (i.e. a space where collaborative behaviours do actually take place) could “push” people to be more keen on interacting and communicating with others, also sharing sensitive information without being afraid of opportunistic behaviour of the counterparts or discussing their ideas without fearing a risk of ridicule – all elements that support creativity (Biscaro & Montanari, 2017; Perry-Smith & Mannucci, 2017). In the other case, when a collaborative

space is perceived to be strongly embedded in the traditions, practices, and values of the local context, individuals could imaginatively appropriate these immaterial and symbolic resources in order to create products and services that represent the place’s character (Molotch, 2002; Scott, 2010).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For example, whereas the first co-working space was opened in San Francisco in 2005, estimates assessed such spaces as being in the order of 15,000 units– exceeding one million worldwide users – in 2017 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/554273/number-of-coworking-spaces-worldwide/>).

<sup>2</sup> For example, some studies estimate that nowadays about 1.5 billion people work “virtually” from spaces and sites of their choice, relying on rich electronic connections (Johns & Gratton, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, a survey conducted on more than 200 U.S. co-workers confirms that the most common reasons people seek out a co-working space have to do with belonging to a community and chances for social interaction (Spreitzer, Garrett & Bacevice, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Some companies, including Google, SAP and Barilla among others, have created internal collaborative spaces to be used by employees and external users. These kinds of spaces offer companies an opportunity to connect their employees with external talents and help them to temporarily bracket their own emotional attachment to established organisational routines and norms (see also Cartel, Boxenbaum & Aggeri, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> See also Melissa Gregg’s (2017) work (‘From Careers to Atmospheres’) published in CAMEo Cuts #3.

<sup>6</sup> The five cases allowed us to take into consideration different typologies of collaborative spaces in terms of activities (from co-working spaces to incubators for ICT innovation) and dimensions of the city in which they operate (from the largest one (Bologna) to smaller ones such as Reggio Emilia or Parma). Finally, they include both spaces resulting from the regeneration of former industrial areas and projects starting from scratch.

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