

Collaborative Workspaces: Shaping the Future of Work, Innovation, and Sustainable Development

Interview to Ignasi Capdevila

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Ignasi Capdevila obtained his PhD at HEC Montréal and the HDR (post-doctoral degree) in the University of Strasbourg. He is currently an Associate Professor at PSB Paris School of Business in Paris, France. He holds three engineer diplomas, and an Executive MBA from ESADE Business School. He is currently an associate researcher of MOSAIC, the Creativity & Innovation Hub at HEC Montreal, at BETA (University of Strasbourg) and at the Chair NewPIC (PSB Paris School of Business). His research interests include localized knowledge dynamics, knowledge communities, creativity and innovation management in organizational and urban contexts. Ignasi is currently working on the innovation dynamics in collaborative spaces (like coworking spaces, Fab Labs, makerspaces, hackerspaces, etc.) and on the knowledge dynamics and creative and innovation processes taking place in cities and creative industries.

1. Can you make a brief portrait of the evolution of new working spaces in recent years?

First of all, the so-called new working spaces, that usually include spaces such as coworking spaces, makerspaces, living labs, etc., do not reflect a totally new phenomenon. There have always existed spaces or work contexts where individuals shared knowledge, resources and tools. That is part of the human nature. However, it is true that in the last 10-15 years, there has been an explosion of new collaborative spaces of different types. In the last years, we have observed that the phenomenon has changed: many spaces have integrated large networks, either in large for-profit corporations or in more bottom-up community-driven networks. There has also been a higher professionalization and marketization of working spaces like in the case of big corporations like WeWork or IWG (formerly Regus). The expansion of this phenomenon has also achieved greater interest from a territorial perspective. Whereas, in a first wave, spaces were mainly opening in urban areas, in the later stage we are experiencing, more and more spaces have been emerging in rural and peripheral areas. In my view, this has been due to the increasing diffusion of concepts like coworking, co-living, etc., and the understanding that these spaces can improve the local economic development of deprived areas while enhancing social cohesion.

2. What are the key factors that drive the emergence of innovative and collaborative working environments in different territories?

I really think that the factors influencing the emergence of such spaces are related to the needs, goals and ambitions of the different stakeholders on the territories. For example, in the case of for-profit spaces in urban areas, critical factors might be the identification of a critical mass of potential

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users (like entrepreneurs, freelancers, or digital nomads). Also, the availability of spaces and the prices of the real estate. Many coworkers prioritize central locations with good connections. For public spaces or more community-driven initiatives, the need to find contexts of interaction for a certain community can also be an important aspect, as well as the will to find spaces to gather a large diversity of local actors. In rural areas, it may be more complex, as the lower density of potential users, larger distances, longer transportation times, and less-developed infrastructures constitute potential obstacles to implement new spaces. In my research in rural areas in Catalonia, the main key factors were based on the needs stemming from the territories, and the idea that spaces of interaction and collaboration could reinforce the economic and social local networks. From this view, collaborative spaces may be seen as policy tools to enhance progress just like other public services, such as libraries or initiatives to develop local entrepreneurship.

3. Are there any location-specific challenges or opportunities that arise when developing working spaces in different regions?

Yes, of course. Each region or territory has its own specificities, and the decision to open a new working space has to respond to those characteristics. Also, its implementation has to take specific needs and objectives into consideration. In some territories, the goal might be that local entrepreneurs get more visibility or collaborate in a closer way; elsewhere, the goal might be to create a space to cluster the different local actors around a certain industry or domain. When opening a new working space is limited to using an otherwise empty space, it can be a risky endeavor, doomed to failure. A very important thing to understand is that it is all about the users and the community that can potentially emerge by co-localization and face-to-face interaction. The physical space may actually have a minor importance. Lively collaborative communities can emerge and develop with just punctual meetings, with no need for a fulltime-dedicated space. Indeed, there have been cases, mainly in villages, that have opened a space following this trend, because it is fashionable or something the municipality is committed to, disregarding an initial serious reflection about its goals and usefulness for local actors. These spaces that respond to punctual fads, without clear goals, tend to rapidly disappear.

4. How have these new workspaces in remote or non-traditional locations been promoting true innovation and collaboration, and boosting the development of these territories?

This is a very interesting and important question, because it deals with the real impact of these spaces. Even though there is a great hope and general interest by policy makers about the positive impact of these collaborative spaces in rural or peripheral areas, there is still a lack of understanding how these spaces actually contribute to innovation and economic development. I think that much of their impact is hard to quantify. In many cases, it is not a direct impact that can be immediately measured. It is not about how many new products or services were developed, or even about how many new business opportunities were created. I believe it is much more subtle and its consequences more extended in time. When it comes to networking and knowledge exchange, you never know when that new contact or that new piece of information will be helpful for your project or work. But for sure, the accumulation of opportunities of meeting new people, and the frequent interaction will bear fruit, sooner or later. Humans, as social animals, accomplish their projects, both personal and collective, thanks to others. And physical co-location is important for that. Take, for instance, the current policies by large tech companies that are asking employees to return to their offices, after the transitory period of the Covid-19 pandemics and the fever of fulltime remote work.

Also, when we ask about innovation in collaborative spaces, we tend to think about 'classic' innovation, in a more R&D sense, linked to new product development. I believe we have to think about innovation in a larger sense. For instance, in maker and hackerspaces, there are many innovative projects that imply low-tech solutions. Or there are documented cases in Fab Labs in Africa and in other regions that have developed imaginative solutions to everyday problems. Also, think about innovation in the workplace. Coworking is not just about sharing a workspace; in fact, and more importantly,

coworking is a new way of working, based on collaboration, sharing and creating communities. In that sense, coworking is a type of innovation by itself.

5. What impact does the growth of remote work have on the evolution, transformation, and location of working places? Expectations were high after the pandemic, have the new workspaces taken hold over traditional workspaces?

Remote work has been around for a number of years now. Actually, the rise of coworking spaces is partially due to the fact that they allow professionals to work out of their employer's offices. However, the pandemic has shown that many types of work, not only tech jobs, could be done remotely. During the lockdown, traditional firms suddenly discovered that they could continue to work in a more or less regular way with their employees working from home. In a way, the sanitary crisis accelerated the development of remote work, and made it more visible as a real alternative to established ways of working. In addition, companies realized that remote work could imply lower rent costs and an opportunity to rethink the use of their offices. However, introducing long-lasting changes was not that easy. Collaboration among peers increases when people meet and informally interact. "Zoom fatigue" appeared, as well as demotivation, a sense of loneliness, dissatisfaction at work, etc. Any big change requires time, and the current trend seems to be related to hybrid models that combine temporary remoteness and colocation.

The growth of remote work, like other current trends such as the gig economy or the projectification of work, is aligned with the development of collaborative workplaces. Also, companies start to consider coworking spaces as workplaces that offer a high flexibility of use and the possibility for employees to work near their homes, while reducing their office costs. Furthermore, research has shown that space users gain in quality of life and work satisfaction, enabling a better balance of work and family life. The rise of remote work in coworking spaces also had impact on the location of spaces, allowing a higher expansion out of urban areas. I do not think it is a reality in all countries yet, but there is some evidence that shows that coworking in rural areas is developing. We should be cautious, however: after the pandemic, there was a general belief that we would experience an important effect of urban exodus, and people would massively leave the city centers and move to the countryside. Nevertheless, this did not happen in a large extend. Most economic activities still take place in urbanized or industrialized areas. Even the big high-tech companies, initial supporters of remote work and work-from-anywhere approaches, are now asking employees to come back to the offices, rediscovering the beneficial effects of co-located work, in terms of efficiency, innovation, team-work, control, etc.

6. Aren't these new workspaces just reproducing the digital gap between digital skilled workers and those workers, often in essential services, who can't work remotely and flexibly?

The digital gap is real and, as in any societal change, there is always the risk of leaving a part of society behind. However, the advent of information technologies and digital work has also democratized a large group of means of production. Anyone can access information online, learn with free content from the most reputable sources, meet online with people from anywhere in the world, etc. But there is also a dark side. Digital work has created a new proletariat, a large group of professionals that, despite being highly educated in some cases, suffer from very unstable jobs and precarity.

7. How does the development of new working spaces align with territorial strategies related to sustainable development?

That is a very important and timely question. Actually, I believe that the development of new working spaces can benefit sustainability and reduce environmental impacts of work. The creation of

networks of spaces scattered in the territories may help to implement remote work and consequently to minimize transportation-related emissions. By providing the necessary infrastructure and technology support, new working spaces can enable employees to work remotely, reducing the need for daily commuting and associated environmental impacts. Also, in many cities, old and underused buildings are rehabilitated as new shared working spaces, allowing a reused of existing buildings, respecting historical sites, and benefiting urban regeneration. Furthermore, many spaces are very engaged in environmental and social causes. For instance, the Impact Hub network supports projects with social impact and joins efforts to fight against global problems. In addition, many of the policies advocating for the development of new working spaces (for instance in France, with the support to Third places), try to bolster projects that are integrated with the surrounding communities and that contribute to the local economic development. For instance, promoting walkability, social interaction, and a sense of place can enhance the overall sustainability of a region.

8. How do you foresee the future of working places? What trends or developments do you anticipate?

I do not want to be too speculative, but I think that there are some current trends that will contribute to shape the future of workplaces. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of remote work, and it's likely to continue as a prominent trend. More companies may embrace remote work or hybrid work models, allowing employees to work away from the offices. I even believe that work can be totally decentralized like the open-source communities have showed. I also think that to provide flexibility will be a key aspect to attract and retain talent. Companies will offer real flexible schedules to their employees. To do so, tasks and work objectives will have to be very explicit and quantifiable. Project-based work is in line with these new modes of working. The gig economy is expected to grow, with more people choosing freelance or contract work over traditional employment. Online platforms will continue to connect businesses with freelancers, providing opportunities for specialized talent on-demand. Technology will also play a crucial role. Even though virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and other immersive technologies are still in an early stage of development, they could enhance remote collaboration experiences, making it feel more like working together in the same physical space. Remote coworking is a trend that is gaining traction, for example. Finally, I think that companies and the workers themselves will focus on the employee well-being and mental health. Strategies like wellness programs, flexible work arrangements, and mental health support services will become more prevalent. Nevertheless, I think there are still big challenges to overcome, like the precarity and instability created by the gig economy, finding work-life integration or the reduction of the inequalities created by the increasing push on adaptation forced by the rapid advancements in technology and predatory capitalistic work practices.