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**'Freelance isn't free.' Coworking as a critical urban practice
to cope with informality in creative labour markets**

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7 **'Freelance isn't free.' Co-working as a critical urban practice to cope with**
8 **informality in creative labour markets**
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14 ***Abstract:***
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18 For more than a decade, co-working spaces have proliferated in cities worldwide. The paper
19 discusses co-working as a critical urban practice because these spaces give support to the rising
20 number of freelance workers in culture and creative industries. Freelance workers are an
21 'invisible' workforce whose impact often remains 'hidden' (Mould et al. 2014), who are not
22 sufficiently protected through social welfare regulations and do not enjoy the same social
23 entitlements as employed workers. This paper uses the concept of informality to highlight
24 ongoing informalisation processes of employment relationships as well as informal working
25 practices in creative labour markets. It discusses the emergence of co-working as a practice of
26 collective self-help and self-organisation to cope with and to potentially overcome the
27 informality, uncertainty and risks associated with independent work. It argues that co-working
28 can be seen in line with other practices of informal urbanism that become more prevalent in
29 European and North American cities due to the lack of affordable housing, the retrenchment of
30 the social welfare state and the imposed conditions of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck 2012).
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37 **Keywords:** informality, informal practices, cultural work, creative work, freelance work, co-
38 working, creative cities, culture and creative industries,
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Introduction

'Freelance isn't free' – the slogan for a successful campaign of the New York-based Freelancers Union to promote a bill in the New York City Council to impose civil and criminal penalties on non-payments for freelancers exemplifies the unregulated character of freelance work in contemporary labour markets (see Freelancers Union 2015). Especially in cities, we see a significant shift towards freelance work, (solo) self-employment and microbusinesses that remain under-researched and overlooked in urban studies (Mould et al. 2014; Bögenhold and Klinglmair 2016; Houston and Reuschke 2016). For example, 15 percent of London's overall workforce already work as a freelancer or as self-employed without further employees (Wickham 2013: 2). In this paper, the concept of informality is used to interrogate contemporary urban labour markets and the rise of freelance work. More specifically, it will discuss the emergence of co-working and co-working spaces – understood as flexible, shared and community-oriented workspaces where freelancers can rent a desk for a fee (Spinuzzi 2012) – as a critical urban practice that has developed to cope with the prevalent informality, uncertainty and risks of independent work. This paper draws on research in critical creative labour studies as this research field has widely addressed the challenges and complexities of a freelance work situation. Moreover, many freelancers working in co-working spaces belong to occupational groups within the culture and creative industries sectors (Spinuzzi 2012; IPPR 2016; Waters-Lynch and Potts 2016), or what Scott (2008) identified as the 'cognitive-cultural economy' of cities. However, not all freelancers who are working in co-working spaces are creative workers.

The main argument of this article is that an informality-based reading of co-working helps to understand the current rise of co-working spaces in cities and the forms of collective self-organisation expressed through co-working. Co-working spaces give visibility, and a voice, to freelance work as it often remains hidden or invisible – whether in official employment statistics, in economic development policies, public discourse or in its doing as it is mostly performed at home (Mould et al. 2014). Co-

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3 working will be examined as a new social practice of self-help and self-organisation that
4 denotes new ways of organising everyday work practices for freelancers. These shared
5 workspaces answer to the individualised worker's demands for autonomy, recognition
6 and social belonging, but might also encourage moments of solidarity and enact
7 political mobilisation. Responding to the editors' call for 'transcending the othering of
8 informality', the article presents an empirically informed account of co-working as a
9 critical practice of self-help and self-organisation based on a study of smaller grassroots
10 spaces. The following analysis aims (1) to highlight the specific informal work situation
11 of freelance workers in culture and creative industries and (2) to discuss co-working as
12 a critical urban practice.
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21 The article is grounded in qualitative research with twenty-five semi-structured
22 interviews conducted with co-working hosts in Berlin, London and New York since
23 2012. All of the interviewees were freelance workers themselves who set up co-
24 working spaces or worked as their hosts, shared similar demographics regarding age
25 (30-45) and education (postgraduate degrees), and approximately half were male and
26 half female. The main aim of the research is to interrogate their social and material
27 practices to facilitate communication, community and collaboration among coworkers.
28 But interviews also focused on the background of the hosts, their motivations to open a
29 shared workspace, the development of their spaces as well as why and how coworkers
30 work in their particular spaces. The transnational focus of the fieldwork emerged
31 because these three cities had a proliferation of co-working spaces in the late 2000s
32 and provided a rich empirical contexts to study the variety of spaces. The interviews
33 have been anonymised, transcribed and thematically coded for the analysis (Flick
34 2014). Additionally, the article builds upon secondary data such as empirical studies,
35 reports, websites, and newspaper articles and is informed by participant observations
36 and informal talks with co-working hosts and coworkers during more than fifty events
37 and visits in co-working spaces over the course of the past six years. This secondary
38 data is used to contrast the interviews and to facilitate a deeper understanding of the
39 phenomena of co-working. The following discussion focuses on grassroots spaces
40 where freelancers initiated a shared workspace 'to find a more social way of working'
41 (Julie, Berlin 2012, personal interview). Most of these spaces seat between 10 and 40
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3 coworkers, yet some have grown to over 100 members or opened additional spaces in
4 their respective cities.
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11 **Informality in urban studies**

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15 For more than 40 years, the concept of informality has been widely used in urban
16 studies to understand unregulated or illegal economic activities, housing settlements,
17 land ownership, infrastructures, forms of governance or the organization of social life
18 in cities of the global South, mostly among the urban poor (see for an overview Roy
19 2009; McFarlane 2012; Lombard and Meth 2016). As McFarlane (2012: 89) has noted,
20 very often informality is merely used as a 'descriptor' to denote specific practices
21 unregulated by the state despite informality's powerful role in 'constituting the urban',
22 and in 'revealing processes which are evident in most cities' (Lombard and Meth 2016:
23 159). In recent years, a new relational approach has emerged that examines the
24 relationship of informality and formality as a 'type of valuation and negotiation'
25 (McFarlane 2012). The approach aims to transcend the dichotomous epistemology of
26 formal-informal with its essentialist and normative assumptions (e.g. informal labour as
27 poor people's work practices or the slum as always informal settlements and, hence, as
28 underdeveloped). Moreover, it conceptualises the formal and informal as two distinct
29 but entangled practices (see McFarlane 2012; Varley 2013; Davis 2017; Pasquetti and
30 Picker 2017). The research focus then shifts towards 'specify[ing] the conditions under
31 which the persistence or expansion of informality will or won't serve as a mechanism
32 for strengthening citizenships claims or ensuring state accountability' (Davis 2017: 317)
33 in different contexts and analysing how 'the state [...] also produces, practices and
34 prospers form urban informality' (Lombard and Meth 2016: 163). What follows from
35 this relational approach is to interrogate how formal and informal practices relate to
36 each other and what kind of spaces these practices produce. However, with a strong
37 focus on the global South in informality research, the term has less been applied to
38 cities in the global North to examine various forms of informality in areas such as
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3 housing, economic activities or employment relationships. Only recently, scholars
4 began to discuss informality as an 'integral and growing part of cities in the developed
5 world' (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014: 1). In exploring economic informalities of
6 freelance creative work, this paper aims to contribute to this growing body of research
7 and examines one specific socio-spatial consequence, the rise of co-working spaces.
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12 In this paper, informality is used, first, to comprehend the contemporary nature of
13 creative labour markets with the rising number of freelance workers who do not fit into
14 established social welfare regulations, cannot afford to join private healthcare and
15 pension schemes, lack collective labour representation and who are subject to multiple
16 economic insecurities (McRobbie 2016). Here, informality can be seen an outcome of
17 the continuous flexibilisation, casualisation and political deregulation of employment
18 relationships (see Ross 2006; Castells 2009; Kalleberg 2009; Arnold and Bongiovi 2013).
19 Informality is also an effect of the dominant project-based production mode in culture
20 and creative industries (Mould et al. 2014) as well as of specific characteristics of these
21 sectors (Gill 2014a). It is important to note that informality is not interchangeable with
22 precariousness, understood as 'all forms of insecure, contingent, flexible work – from
23 illegalized, casualised and temporary employment, to homeworking, piecework and
24 freelancing' (Gill and Pratt 2008: 3). Precariousness is an important dimension
25 constituting informality in those sectors, but this paper wants to emphasise the specific
26 informal working practices (i.e. unregulated, non-standardized) that affect all workers
27 in these sectors and make it especially difficult for freelance workers to attain and
28 retain work contracts. Creative industries labour markets have characteristics that can
29 be described as informal, for example, in relation to employment relationships (i.e.
30 temporary freelance contracts), labour market access (i.e. opaque network-based
31 recruitment), governance structure (i.e. non-hierarchical, project-based) and working
32 cultures (i.e. 'bulimic work patterns' (Gill and Pratt 2008: 17) and the various forms of
33 non-paid labour). This characterization is not to suggest that culture and creative
34 industries sectors would be part of the 'informal economy' (Castells and Portes 1989)
35 but rather to emphasise how specific features of these sectors and existing conventions
36 and norms informalise the labour conditions. And, how in consequence workers
37 experience their working conditions as informal, marginalised and, thus, particularly
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3 challenging and vulnerable (see, e.g., Nixon and Crewe 2004; Umney 2016).
4 Furthermore, the informal practices serve to stabilise certain characteristics of the
5 sector: Informal recruitment reinforces the 'homosocial reproduction' (Alacovska 2017:
6 378) of culture and creative industries as a white, male, middle-class dominated sector
7 of employment (Eikhof and Warhurst 2013). While hiring temporary contract workers
8 permits companies to withdraw from their social responsibilities (e.g. in paying for
9 specialised skills and social benefits) and to keep firm sizes small.
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16 Second, co-working itself can be understood as an informal urban practice with its
17 roots in collective forms of self-help and self-organisation that arose from the
18 dissatisfaction with the freelance work situation. As Pradel-Miquel (2017: 209) notes,
19 informal urban practices refer to a 'set of non-regulated social practices that allow
20 marginalized groups to create mechanisms to cover their material and immaterial
21 needs'. The emergence of co-working comes out of different material and immaterial
22 needs of freelance workers and can be interpreted as a response to the informal work
23 conditions. While designated co-working spaces emerged in 2005 (Deskmag 2013a),
24 shortly before the financial and economic crisis in 2007-2008, those spaces have
25 proliferated since as the recession and the subsequent austerity policies have
26 exacerbated working conditions for creative workers in cities (Avdikos and Kalogeresis
27 2017). Even though the culture and creative industries as a whole sector have been
28 resilient in the economic crisis (De Propriis 2013; Pratt and Hutton 2013), freelance
29 workers got profoundly affected through cuts in cultural budgets, welfare provisions
30 and the continuing casualisation of labour in these sectors (Bain and McLean 2013; de
31 Peuter 2014; McRobbie 2016). Additional pressures come from the financialisation of
32 rental housing (Fields and Uffer 2016) that make it more difficult, especially in early
33 career stages, to maintain a flat and an office, production space or showroom. Hence,
34 the proliferation of shared and collaborative oriented workspaces can be read as a
35 reaction to the consequences of the economic crisis and austerity urbanism. For
36 example, Avdikos and Kalogeresis (2017: 1) observe for Athens, Greece:
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52 Collaborative workplaces emerged after the gradual collapse of the stable
53 employment paradigm that was one of the main features of the Keynesian welfare
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3 state and as a response to precarious working conditions that were augmented
4 during the recent economic crisis and the subsequent recession.
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6 As a form of urban critique the concept of informality 'allows to understand and
7 critique complex processes and politics at the urban scale' (Lombard and Meth 2016:
8 170). More specifically, it can expose the material challenges of everyday life and its
9 associated politics in contemporary cities with their enduring social inequalities,
10 especially under current conditions of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck 2012) and the global
11 housing crisis (Aalbers 2015).
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20 **The rise of informal urban practices**

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23 As a consequence of the growing social inequalities in neoliberal economies, the
24 recession and subsequent austerity measures in cities (Peck 2012), current research
25 examines the rise of informal urban practices such as informal housing and squatting
26 (Vasudevan 2015), informal work practices (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014) or the
27 emergence of new 'urban solidarity spaces' (Arampatzi 2017). Furthermore, the
28 multifarious forms of informal urban interventions that reclaim and repurpose urban
29 spaces, often unauthorised, such as urban gardening (Ghose and Pettygrove 2014),
30 urban repair (Douglas 2014), pop-ups (Harris 2015) or co-housing (Tummers 2016) are
31 interrogated. These varied forms of self-organised, micro-spatial urban practices are
32 discussed as 'Do-It-Yourself Urban Design' (Douglas 2014) or 'low budget urbanism'
33 (Färber 2014). What characterises these practices is their self-organised, improvised
34 character, their primary social and cultural valuation of urban space and that they point
35 to potential political strategies and forms of activism. For example, Tonkiss (2013) has
36 coined the term 'makeshift city' to emphasize urban practices 'that work[s] in the
37 cracks between formal planning, speculative investment and local possibilities' as 'self-
38 managed and improvised urban interventions and occupations as a type of interstitial
39 urbanism that goes to work in margins both physical (at urban edges and infill sites)
40 and conceptual (mediating 'public' and 'private' use or different scales of urban
41 practice)' (p.313). These interventions 'are concerned with the politics and practice of
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3 small incursions in material spaces, the possibilities they open up and the forms of
4 sociality they might entail' (p. 313). Even though their impact might be limited, it is
5 crucial to investigate and defend those practices as Tonkiss' (2013: 323) argues:
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9 This is an urbanism of minor practices, small acts, ordinary audacities and little
10 anti-utopias that nevertheless create material spaces of hope in the city. (...) If a
11 notion of critical urban practice is to remain meaningful, then it seems important
12 to defend the spaces in which it becomes possible even if temporarily, and only
13 ever imperfectly.
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15 The *critical* potential of co-working lies in its capacity to challenge the neoliberal
16 politics of individualisation in creating a shared space where alternative modes of social
17 relations and economic conduct among freelancers can be mutually developed and
18 experimented with (see Bain and McLean 2013; Avdikos and Kalogeresis 2017; Umney
19 2017). However, as Gandini (2015) rightly points out, co-working characterises a
20 'contradictory nature'. On the one hand, co-working exemplifies the adaptability of
21 freelance workers as entrepreneurial subjects and rather reinforces the norms of
22 neoliberal subjectivities. On the other hand, co-working holds the potential that 'these
23 workers recognise themselves as a new 'class' of knowledge professionals sharing the
24 same economic interests' (Gandini 2015: 202). Acknowledging this contradiction, or as
25 de Peuter et al. (2017) argue the 'ambivalence of co-working', this article foregrounds
26 the progressive social and political possibilities of co-working. It interrogates the
27 everyday practices of co-working in co-working spaces and how it facilitates mutual
28 awareness and support, fosters coworkers to negotiate a shared space and enables
29 new social relationships. Moreover, a 'contradictory nature' characterises most
30 informal urban practices: they can be co-opted and commercialised while others can
31 elude these pressures and stand for radical social change and resistance. Rather than
32 engaging in a dichotomous logic of 'opposition versus co-optation' (see Elwood 2006),
33 this article adopts an approach that regards them as 'spaces of possibility' (Massey
34 1994, 2005) enacting multiple and heterogeneous roles, relationships and trajectories
35 (see Cornwell 2012; Cumbers et al. 2018). In her relational approach to space, Massey
36 (2005: 9-11) has proposed to understand space as relational, heterogeneous and
37 processual. Approaching space as the product of intersecting social relationships,
38 constituted through interactions (9), allows to understand the productive role of
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3 spaces, where 'distinct trajectories coexist' (9), and their co-constitutive role in the
4 construction of political subjectivities (10). As everyday meeting places, co-working
5 spaces bring together diverse coworkers and help to shape their interactions and social
6 relationships. Therefore, they can be perceived as 'places where the ongoing tensions
7 between neoliberal commodification processes and alternative sets of social relations
8 are played out, though never completely resolved' (Cumbers et al. 2018: 4).
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18 **Informality in creative labour markets**

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22 Culture and creative industries have been heralded as a model for future work. And,
23 despite ample evidence for its unequal distribution of opportunities for workforce
24 participation, employment in these sectors has been promoted politically (see, e.g.,
25 Eikhof and Warhurst 2013; McRobbie 2016; O'Brien et al. 2016) under the notion of
26 'openness, egalitarianism, and meritocracy' (Gill 2014b: 509). A central feature of
27 creative labour markets is the rise of freelance workers (see Creative Skillset 2012; De
28 Propriis 2013). Freelancers can be defined as 'skilled professional workers who are
29 neither employers nor employees, supplying labour on a temporary basis under a
30 contract for services for a fee to a range of business clients' (Kitching and Smallbone
31 (2008, p. v) cited in Mould et al. 2014: 2438). In some occupational groups, the
32 proportion of freelance workers is more than 50 percent (e.g. editing, content
33 development, see Creative Skillset 2012). Workers often chose freelance employment
34 for reasons of autonomy and self-actualisation and have learned to internalise the risks
35 associated with freelance work (Neff 2013). However, for many freelance work is not a
36 choice but a necessity, enforced through the deregulation and organisational
37 restructuring in these industries (Christopherson and Storper 1989; Ekinsmyth 2002)
38 and the technological advancements in information and communication technologies
39 (Liegl 2014; Mould et al. 2014).
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3 The working conditions and subjective experiences of freelance workers are the main
4 focus of critical creative labour studies that have developed in the last decade (see,
5 e.g., Banks 2007; Banks et al. 2013; Conor et al. 2015). In this body of research,
6 informality emerges a key characteristic of creative labour markets and everyday
7 working conditions: whether in the working cultures that blur the lines between work
8 and non-work, the informal governance structures of the labour market with informal
9 network-based recruiting practices, verbal contracts and negotiable payments without
10 minimum standards or erratic work hours in short-term project work, the lack of social
11 security or benefits entitlement, such as sick pay or maternity pay, or the absence of
12 collective labour representations. For example, Gill (2014a: 16-17) argues:

21 The principle of informality is not just a feature of working *environments*, but also
22 – crucially – of *hiring practices*, which largely exist outside formal channels and are
23 enacted through contacts and word of mouth. [...] It is the informality in those
24 working cultures that makes existing inequalities ‘unmanageable’ (falling outside
25 the purview of legislative instruments and apparatuses designed to ensure equal
26 opportunities and pay).
27

28 Grugulis and Stoyanova (2012: 1312) observe: ‘The sector is an unusual one since the
29 absence of professional licences to practice and the dominance of project work, often
30 staffed at short notice, mean that social capital is a key feature of the labour market.’
31 To maintain employability, Currid (2007) has shown how workers mingle in bars, clubs
32 and restaurants in New York City to build up new industry contacts. Neff (2005) focused
33 on after-work events in the digital media sector, Lloyd (2006) on the role of coffee
34 shops in Chicago’s Wicker Park neighbourhood and Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011)
35 highlight the ‘pub cultures’ among media workers. This mandatory after-work sociality
36 discriminates against workers with childcare responsibilities, especially woman, or
37 workers with less financial means to participate in these forms of sociality. Eikhof and
38 Warhurst (2013: 500) conclude: ‘The informality of social capital obscures the “old boys
39 networks” that women and other workers from ethnic minority and working class
40 backgrounds find hard to access.’
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50 Creative work is characterised by ‘blurred boundary lines between ‘formal’ and
51 ‘informal’ work’ (Hutton 2016: 156) as these work activities are often overlapping,
52 complementing or even depending on each other. Besides monetised labour
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3 practices, creative work comprises of a great variety of non-monetized forms of labour
4 such as volunteer work, gift exchange, in-kind labour, favours, internships or working
5 for free in 'no budget' productions. This unpaid work is undertaken 'to get a foot in the
6 door' at the beginning of a career but also to maintain employability throughout a
7 professional career (Bain and McLean 2013; Wreyford 2015; Fast et al. 2016).
8 Especially, 'involuntary "volunteering"' (Hutton 2016: 155) has become a norm for
9 inexperienced workers.
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16 Another reason for the proliferation of freelance work in culture and creative industries
17 is the project-based production model that relies on alternating temporary contract
18 workers (Grabher 2004; Mould et al. 2014). In consequence, employers do not feel
19 responsible for freelancers' training or social security protection. It is the workers'
20 responsibility to care for 'their own development and training, pensions and social
21 security' (Ekinsmyth 2002: 239). Additionally, freelancers need to perform different
22 kinds of 'invisible labour' (Crain et al. 2016) to keep themselves in the highly
23 competitive labour market. Invisible labour refers to different types of unrecognized
24 work such as cultivating social media presences for self-branding purposes (Arvidsson
25 et al. 2016), networking (Currid 2007) and unpaid labour as an intern (Frenette 2013) in
26 anticipation of future employment opportunities (Duffy 2016), to build social contacts
27 (Siebert and Wilson 2013) and to learn practical skills (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2011).
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38 Yet freelancers fulfil crucial roles in the project-based production model of culture and
39 creative industries in 'stitching together the sector as a whole' (Mould et al. 2014:
40 2437). They operate in complex 'project ecologies' (Grabher 2004) between firms,
41 organizations and in collaboration with other freelancers (Watson 2012). But freelance
42 work often remains invisible – whether in official employment statistics (Mould et al.
43 2014), in governmental policies to support culture and creative industries or in its doing
44 as it is mostly carried out at home (Taylor 2015). Only recently it has become more
45 visible (i.e. in coffee shops, public libraries) due to the expansion of information and
46 communication technologies that enable workplace mobility, the detachment from
47 conventional places of work and changed significantly where, when and how people
48 work (Felstead 2012; Liegl 2014; Martins 2015). Mould et al. (2014: 2442) conclude:
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3 'freelance work has a *role*, but no *place*', such as office or factory work, and therefore
4 freelancers lack the feelings of belonging through work. Additionally, it has been
5 argued 'by taking initiative and responsibility for (their own) economic production'
6 (Mould et al. 2014: 2442), freelance workers embody the neoliberal subjectivity of the
7 'entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling 2014) or 'enterprising self' (McRobbie 2016).
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12 As a response to the social and economic challenges of freelance work, a wide range of
13 shared, flexible workspaces where freelancers work next and with other freelancers,
14 have emerged as a bottom-up organisational practice. Working in a shared workspace
15 has become a strategy to minimise individual risks and uncertainty (Waters-Lynch and
16 Potts 2016), to get access to industry-specific 'know-how', for professional
17 development and networking as well as to meet their needs for meaningful social
18 encounters, recognition, identity-formation and belonging to sustain a freelance
19 livelihood.
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31 **Co-working and co-working spaces**

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35 Managed and shared workspaces are not an entirely new phenomenon and their
36 historical roots, at least, date back to the early 1970s with the rise of shared artist
37 studios (see for the UK, e.g., Marsh et al. 1989; Green and Strange 1999; Montgomery
38 2007). Designated co-working spaces emerged in the mid-2000s and have grown
39 rapidly since then. According to the 2017 Global Co-working Survey, the number of
40 spaces rose worldwide from 600 in October 2010 to 13.800 in 2017 with more than a
41 million people working in shared workspaces (Deskmag 2017: 3). Co-working spaces
42 differ from older models of shared, managed workspaces in their short-term rent of
43 desks (per day, week, month), their open floor plan design and subsequently their
44 flexibility and continuously changing social composition. However, the practice of co-
45 working is not tied to specific co-working spaces and can be enacted in different spatial
46 settings such as private homes (i.e. coordinated through intermediary platforms such
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3 as Spacehop, Vrumi, Officeriders) or during temporary meetings ('Jelly') in coffee
4 shops, offices, churches, hotel lobbies, underused restaurants or in public spaces.
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6 Moreover, there is a growing diversity of open workshops/open creative labs (Schmidt
7 et al. 2014) that facilitate the 'making of things', such as fab labs, maker spaces or
8 repair cafés (see Workshop East 2015 for London).
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12 With the ongoing proliferation of co-working spaces, two main developments can be
13 observed. On the one side, co-working is increasingly seen as an untapped market for
14 profit-driven development and financial investments as there is a growing
15 commercialization of co-working through globally operating serviced-office firms and
16 real estate developers (e.g., Regus, Workspace Group, WeWork, and The Office Group).
17 Commercial co-working providers establish workspaces for several hundred or even
18 thousands of coworkers (e.g., WeWork Moorgate in London hosts 3000 people, see
19 IPPR (2016: 16)). Additionally, private companies set up incubators and accelerators for
20 high-growth start-ups in the digital sector, often as part of their open innovation
21 strategies (see, e.g., Johns and Gratton 2013; Ferm 2014; Schmidt et al. 2014; NLA
22 2016). The latest iteration of this commercialisation of co-working is the introduction of
23 'co-living spaces' exemplified by The Oak in London and WeWork's first co-living space
24 in New York (Greene 2017).
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36 On the other side, there is a continuous rise of bottom-up initiatives with smaller co-
37 working spaces driven by the idea of 'commoning' resources and providing a shared
38 space for collaborative work, meeting and exchange (Schmidt et al. 2014; Avdikos and
39 Kalogeresis 2017). Most of these grassroots spaces emerge now on the peripheries of
40 inner-cities, some in suburban or even rural areas (Upham 2017). And, often those
41 spaces are supported through public support or operate as non-profits (Virani et al.
42 2016). For example, 42 percent of London's open workspaces are operated by a charity
43 provider, another 12 percent through social enterprises and 8 percent by educational
44 institutions, local authorities and cooperatives (IPPR 2016: 15). With cities like London
45 having more than 130 co-working spaces (GLA 2014; NLA 2016), these shared
46 workspaces create new social-material infrastructures for freelance work whose
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3 primary purpose is to coordinate and facilitate an alternative organisation of work and
4 socially meaningful encounters for those workers.
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7 The spread of co-working spaces sparked a growing body of empirical research that
8 examines co-working and situates it within different academic debates. From a
9 sociology of work perspective, scholars discuss co-working as a coping strategy with the
10 precariousness of freelance work (Moriset 2014; Merkel 2015; Garrett et al. 2017).
11 Economic geography examines the dynamics of knowledge exchange within co-working
12 spaces (Parrino 2013) and their role as innovative micro clusters and intermediaries
13 (Capdevila 2013, 2015) or as creativity and innovation labs (Schmidt and Brinks 2017).
14 From an economic perspective, co-working spaces are interrogated as a new business
15 model for office provision (Salinger 2013) and for supporting entrepreneurship
16 (Bouncken and Reuschl 2018).
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27 **How do coworking spaces help to cope with informal labour conditions?**

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31 Among co-working hosts, it is widely acknowledged that co-working is not just about
32 working 'alongside each other' in a flexible and reasonably priced office space. Instead,
33 the practice of co-working is rooted in creating new collaborative and supportive
34 relationships with other freelancers; it aspires to cultivate cooperation instead of
35 competition among the coworkers. Many spaces promote a normative-cultural model
36 of co-working, as put forward in the Co-working Manifesto (2014), that explicitly argues
37 for mutual aid, collaboration and community-led strategies and has been signed by
38 more than 1.700 co-working spaces worldwide. However, not all spaces refer to the Co-
39 working Manifesto but instead use cultural values they want to enact within their co-
40 working community. Nevertheless, community and collaboration are two central values
41 of co-working that run through all interviews and informal talks.
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50 Besides a work environment with the appropriate technical equipment (e.g., high-
51 speed broadband, printer, meeting rooms, kitchen), freelancers are mainly attracted to
52 shared workplaces because of their lack of social contacts and for professional
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3 development reasons. A freelance worker, who works as the host in her co-working
4 space, explains:

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7 I see it as an investment in a professional work environment. Often, I ask myself
8 why do I pay 200 EUR a month, but it is definitely worth it. It keeps me sane.
9 Freelance work is my second choice. But with a child at home, I cannot work those
10 brutal shifts in the radio station anymore. So, here, at least, I do have colleagues.
11 My work as a radio journalist used to be done in a team but has become so
12 compressed through technology that I am doing everything on my own now and
13 just send a file to the radio station. You know, to respond to those shifts we need
14 to create new structures of work to compensate. (Anna, Berlin 2012, personal
15 interview)

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18 As the main motivations for co-working, interview partners highlight the social isolation
19 of the home office, the many distractions and problems of self-motivation in
20 independent work, the lack of attachment and informal meetings with colleagues and
21 the preference for socializing with other freelancers sharing the same challenges and
22 problems and finding a supportive cultural community that helps to stabilise a social
23 identity as a freelance worker (see DeGuzmann and Tang 2011; Spinuzzi 2012). Co-
24 working helps to establish mutual support structures in which freelance worker can
25 find recognition, support and can perform their work in a professional environment —
26 many explain that working from home was not just lonely and boring, but also
27 questioned their professional identity and lacked the experiences of colleagues they
28 can relate to (see Sennett 1998; Garrett et al. 2017).

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31 I think just by being around other professionals challenges you. (Isaac, New York,
32 2012, personal interview)

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35 We are all writers, so we can understand what everyone is going through. (Sarah,
36 New York 2012, personal interview)

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39 Moreover, many freelancers practice co-working as 'boundary work' (Warhurst et al.
40 2008) to create a structured office day with established routines and to separate their
41 work from private life. Getting access to valuable industry-specific 'know-how' (e.g.
42 through workshops, events and exchange with each other), recognition among peers
43 and accumulating social capital are further motivations:

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46 Our space gives people the chance to be part of a professional network and
47 community. So, you get the benefits of a traditional office with colleagues in the
48 sense that coworkers learn from each other but also can chit-chat. But there is no
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3 pressure or responsibility to answer to other people. There is an openness to
4 interaction, but no pressure. (John, New York, 2012, personal interview)
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6 Through co-working freelancers expand their professional network, find support for
7 work-related questions and, eventually, increase their productivity (Spinuzzi 2012;
8 Deskmag 2013b). Moreover, co-working can reduce information and search costs for
9 freelancers in matching processes for new collaborators or projects (see Waters-Lynch
10 and Potts 2016: 12):
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15 We try to connect people from the same sectors to make sure they know each
16 other and can share contacts and resources. (Ellen, London 2012, personal
17 interview)
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19 Co-working helps freelancers acquire social capital for the project-based mode of
20 production and its associated 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001). For example, de Peuter
21 et al. (2017: 10-13) consider co-working spaces as the stages for the 'performance' of
22 this type of sociality. As Wittel argues, network sociality is 'based on individualization
23 and deeply embedded in technology, is informational, ephemeral but intense, and it is
24 characterized by the assimilation of work and play' (2001: 71). Distinctive for network
25 sociality is that social relationships are 'produced, reproduced and [...] consumed'
26 (p.72) and increasingly perceived as social capital, as an economic resource for
27 professionals in the urban post-industrial contexts. However, co-working spaces are not
28 just the stages but also places where network sociality can be learned as it presupposes
29 certain sociable attitudes, behaviours and norms (e.g. trust, forms of reciprocity). One
30 skill to be learned is how to make effective use of these social contacts to get new jobs
31 and contracts:
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42 We run monthly workshops where coworkers share contacts with each other. So,
43 we can all see who knows whom in the industries and discuss together how they
44 can be approached. (Ellen, London 2012, personal interview)
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47 Sometimes in these types of spaces, you start to get the usual hierarchical and bad
48 psychology when humans get together. But we haven't seen it. I think it's because
49 we strip away ego and the fact that all of them are from such diverse industries
50 they all have to give each other the same level of respect. No one is really an
51 expert and everyone taps into each other's expertise. (Ellen, London 2012,
52 personal interview)
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3 Sharing contacts, learning how to approach potential new clients and employers,
4 especially in other professional fields, learning from each other and learning to respect
5 each other's work are crucial resources for freelance workers to navigate the
6 informality of creative labour markets. More specifically, helping each other getting
7 access is the most valuable resources facilitated in co-working spaces, as the network-
8 based recruitment practices in these sectors necessitate knowing who to contact and
9 how to present oneself. Many spaces even bring in potential employers, clients or
10 agents:
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17 Twice a month we got agents here to introduce their work, and they have already
18 signed many of our writers. (Sarah, New York 2012, personal interview)
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20 An important resource for freelancers' professional development, and to cope with
21 informality, provided through co-working is learning, training and skill enhancement
22 (see Grugulis and Stoyanova 2011). It is enabled through peer-to-peer learning as well
23 as workshops, classes or public events that answer to specific needs and requests from
24 coworkers (e.g., workshops on new software). General Assembly, a co-working space
25 that evolved around educational classes for creative professionals, even has its own
26 hiring team that mediates jobs for people who take classes:
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33 When you graduate from a course, we already have a bunch of jobs on hand you
34 can apply to. (Paula, New York 2012, personal interview)
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36 However, as one host emphasises:
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39 Open, honest communication is what people value most here. (John, New York,
40 2012, personal interview)
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42 Having a social atmosphere in which coworkers can be open and honest with each
43 other facilitate relations of trust and encourages exchange among coworkers. While
44 the discussion of professional development reasons foregrounds the instrumental,
45 economic motives for freelancers to join a co-working space, Garrett et al. (2017)
46 emphasise that coworkers are interested in social connections as a value in itself and,
47 thus, a different mode of sociality. According to Garrett et al. (2017), coworkers' main
48 interest lies in creating strong social bonds with the 'explicit purpose of social
49 belonging' (p. 822). In using Simmel's (1949) distinction of 'pure sociability' and
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3 'association' (understood as instrumental forms of sociability driven by ulterior
4 motives), they analyse how coworkers co-construct a sense of community at work.
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6 They conclude that coworkers value most 'being together to enjoy each other's
7 company' (p. 837). This finding can be supported with data from the Global Co-working
8 Survey (see Deskmag 2013b, 2018) that shows high retention rates for coworkers after
9 one year in a co-working space and where coworkers foreground 'a sociable
10 atmosphere' and 'a community' as the main reasons in their decision for a specific
11 space. The emergence of rather strong social bonds are also echoed by a host:
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18 We are not a place where people can meet venture capitalists. We are more like a
19 small family hostel, and people come because they want that intimate
20 atmosphere. It is the most crucial point for our coworkers. All we do is lunch
21 together every day. And, people even come to lunch when they are not working
22 from the space. (Julie, Berlin 2012, personal interview)
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24 Furthermore, being part of a co-working community helps freelancers to narrate,
25 negotiate and make sense of their professional identity and working conditions. For
26 example, Butcher (2016: 94) observed:
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30 [...] that co-workers typically positioned their communal ways of working against
31 conventional views of other types of work created through neoliberal and
32 bureaucratic organization. To co-workers, their working 'community' seems
33 postmodern, more humanistic, fluid and sustainable than working in a factory,
34 office or retail space.
35

36 As the community-based approach is a distinctive feature of co-working spaces, hosts
37 play a crucial role. They care for individual coworkers' needs as well as the community.
38 In describing their work as 'conducting', 'mothering', 'community-building' and 'social
39 gardening', hosts indicate a considerable amount of emotional labour (Hochschild 2003
40 [1983]) in their hosting activities:
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46 We manage the space together. My partner is mama bear who is good with the
47 emotional stuff, and I am papa bear who has all those fundraising contacts and
48 knows who is hiring and can connect people or at least try to. But we also look out
49 for people. If we see someone upset, getting crazy over a project, or detect that
50 something is not right, we sit them down with a coffee and offer an ear. (Paula,
51 New York 2012, personal interview)
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53 For some people, it is like a second home, so we try to make it as pleasant as
54 possible. (Sarah, New York 2012, personal interview)
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3 Hosts embody a hospitable attitude (see Dikeç 2002), aiming to create a welcoming and
4 inclusive social space for interactions among the different coworkers through talking to
5 the coworkers, attending to their needs, asking for their specific interests and
6 connecting them with other coworkers:
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10 My role is to be the social connector. Even if there is no professional reason, I try
11 to bring people together where I know they can help each other out. What people
12 value most is to learn about things that are outside of their narrow focus. And that
13 makes them reflect on their own work. (John, New York, 2012, personal interview)
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16 Hosts explain that sharing meals is the most efficient way of gathering coworkers and
17 therefore organise a variety of regular events such as breakfast or lunch meetings
18 where new members are introduced, specific projects discussed and coworkers can
19 help each other out. However, there is no obligation to engage in these social events:
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23 You can be social but also be not social here. (Sarah, New York 2012, personal
24 interview)
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26 We have many desks with teleworkers who have clear work tasks from their
27 companies and do not engage in social events and are rather disturbed by it.
28 (Anna, Berlin 2012, personal interview)
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31 As those quotes highlight, coworkers have various expectations and needs. And, often,
32 coworkers only look for an aesthetic-affective workplace to be productive (see Liegl
33 2014) and to get their work done:
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37 All our coworkers want, is coffee and Club Mate. (Peter, Berlin 2012, personal
38 interview)
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40 Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge that co-working spaces can enact multiple
41 forms of sociality and that the emergent communities in each space might differ from
42 each other (see Spinuzzi 2012). Nevertheless, co-working attends to different material
43 and immaterial needs that freelance workers lack in their individualised, independent
44 project-based work. Co-working provides a form of social re-embedding (see Giddens
45 1984) for freelancers, fulfils a need for social belonging and stabilises professional
46 identities as coworkers give each other recognition and validation. Furthermore,
47 freelancers learn from and with each other, whether in self-organised workshops, in
48 giving help or in exchanging contacts, which eases navigating the informal practices in
49 creative industries. While most spaces have community hosts to facilitate interaction
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3 among coworkers, many rely on a bottom-up culture fostering a collective sense of
4 responsibility among coworkers:
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7 We prefer when coworker organise themselves, make suggestions and then try to
8 enable and support their ideas whether regarding events, furniture or
9 collaborative projects. (Julie, Berlin 2012, personal interview)
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11 In sharing a workspace, freelancers develop mutual awareness and start to recognise
12 that they share similar challenging working conditions that can foster feelings of
13 solidarity and be a triggering point for collective action:
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17 We all sit in the same boat in regard to our economic conditions. (Anna, Berlin
18 2012, personal interview).
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23 **Co-working as a critical urban practice beyond individual workers needs?**

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26 With its roots in improvised self-help and self-organisation out of different material and
27 immaterial needs of individualised and informalised freelance workers, co-working
28 raises the questions whether it can be considered a critical urban practice. Hence, if co-
29 working spaces constitute a social space where shared space, differences, resources
30 and values between coworkers can be negotiated, social interdependencies recognized
31 and economic alternatives imagined and experimented with. For example, one of the
32 founders of Berlin's *Supermarkt* explains in an interview:
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39 It happened very early that Supermarkt became a place for people who wanted to
40 explore alternative forms of working together and maybe even making business
41 together, developing certain forms of value creation together. So, in that sense, it
42 was the contrary of a space where you can go and consume but rather a space
43 where the value emerged out of everyone's contribution. We have not intended
44 this. [...] But as it happens very often with spaces, they are shaped by the people
45 using it. [...] And very slowly the space moved into the direction of becoming an
46 activist space for people that were seeking economic alternatives [...] and a
47 common political voice as well. (Sollfrank 2017)
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49 As the Supermarket, some co-working spaces have become platforms on which
50 alternative economic relations are negotiated or even established, such as organising in
51 worker-based ownership structures (Sandoval 2016; Avdikos and Kalogerisis 2017).
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53 There are a growing number of workspaces that have been established as or transform
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3 into cooperatives (e.g., Ecto in Montreal, Make Shift in Boston). Many spaces are
4 operated as social enterprises (e.g., Indycubes in Wales, The Trampery London, The
5 Center for Social Innovation in New York). These ownership models are often chosen to
6 secure the premises on a long-term basis (as most co-working space operators are
7 renting their space), to give coworkers ownership and decision-making rights, to enable
8 mutual funds for sick or maternity leave for members (see Conaty et al. 2016; Avdikos
9 and Kalogerisis 2017) or to fulfil broader social and economic community development
10 goals in neighbourhoods (e.g., The Camden Collective in London). Increasingly, spaces
11 offer childcare services, recognising the challenges of combining parenting with hyper-
12 flexible, project-based work. In Canada, several co-working spaces developed an
13 affordable health insurance scheme, the Co-working Health Insurance Plan (COHIP
14 2017), which is accessible for freelancers through membership in one of Canada's co-
15 working spaces. Many spaces support new forms of political representation for
16 freelance workers. The European Freelancer Rights movement (Freelancers Europe
17 2014) has spread through their promotion in co-working spaces. For example,
18 WeWork's support has given the Freelance Isn't Free Act in New York an additional
19 push (see WeWork 2016). Moreover, there are many co-working spaces, such as the
20 Supermarkt in Berlin, the worldwide network of Impact Hubs, Hive at 55 in New York,
21 that provide a discursive platform for how freelance work can be supported through
22 governmental policies or organized through new legal instruments and where union
23 memberships, new forms of social security, paid internships, universal basic income or
24 alternative forms of economic organization are discussed (Cagnol 2013; de Peuter and
25 Cohen 2015). In enabling reflexivity, in developing a 'critical language for engaging with
26 inequality' (Gill 2014b: 524) and in creating an open, inclusive social space that enables
27 sociability, co-working provides opportunities for cultivating and sustaining ideas of
28 solidarity and alternative forms of organisation that go beyond the individual worker's
29 needs.
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50 However, not all grassroots spaces become activist and politicised environments where
51 a progressive critique is developed, voiced and alternative economic relations are
52 tested. In fact, many co-working spaces, especially globally operating co-working
53 chains, commercialise and formalise co-working into a professional, high-end and
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3 exclusive service and glamorise the individual culture of entrepreneurship with their
4 invocations of the 'do what you love' ethic (e.g. prominently displayed at the entrances
5 of WeWork' facilities). And, thereby, promote and sustain the individualism and
6 entrepreneurialism in neoliberal employability agendas (McRobbie 2016). In light of the
7 commercialisation, co-working's potential for progressive critique is increasingly
8 questioned (Gandini 2015; Butcher 2016). It is pointed out that co-working appears to
9 be more about the enticing 'atmosphere of sociality' (Liegl 2014: 174) than the active
10 engagement in the 'co-construction of community' (Garrett et al. 2017). For example,
11 in discussing emerging labour politics in creative industries, de Peuter and Cohen
12 (2015: 308) suggest that co-working spaces can become 'institutions of mutual aid' and
13 'strive to achieve more than enable cultural workers to better manage in precarious
14 conditions' (p. 309):

24 Co-working spaces [...] catering to independent workers demonstrate that,
25 although the flexibilization of labour exacerbates competition and exploitation
26 ("the law of mutual struggle"), it can also give rise to cooperation and association,
27 confirming the persistence of the "law of mutual aid".

29 In using Kropotkin's (2006 [1902]) 'law of mutual aid', they stress the potential of co-
30 working in eliciting informal mutual aid that 'fosters social bonds and common ground
31 that might serve as conditions of possibility for collective action' (p.14). More recently,
32 de Peuter et al. (2017) provide a more nuanced view and emphasise the 'ambivalence
33 of co-working' in deepening neoliberal subjectivities and reinforcing labour flexibility
34 where 'individuals continue to shoulder the costs of social reproduction' (p. 15). As the
35 biggest obstacle to develop mutual aid, they regard labour mobility among coworkers.
36 On a moderate optimistic note, they suggest, this obstacle could be overcome through
37 cooperative structures and in linking up with other 'mutual aid-oriented labour politics'
38 (p.17), such as with unions and urban commons initiatives; as several spaces already
39 do.

48 An underlying problem in this debate is the conceptualisation of the freelance worker,
49 his scope of agency and subject position, and therefore the sociological theorisation of
50 labour and the position of the worker under capitalism (see, e.g., Banks 2007; Taylor
51 and Littleton 2012 for the discussion of cultural workers). Most research applies a
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3 Foucauldian governmentality perspective (see Rose and Miller 1992; Foucault 2003;
4 Dean 2010) and analyses coworkers as ‘reproducing a neoliberal logic of self-managed,
5 competitive and hardworking individuals’ (Sandoval 2016, p. 55). This approach leaves
6 little theoretical scope for workers’ agency and conceptualises workers’ subject
7 position as only constituted through their work. Yet, little is known how the social
8 relationships formed in co-working spaces influence coworkers and, thus, how subject
9 positions might change through co-working. Massey (2005: 10) highlighted that spaces
10 and identities are co-constitutive and relationally constructed, and therefore spaces
11 play an active role in the constitution and reproduction of social identities. This
12 proposition is echoed by the host of Berlin’s Supermarket: ‘as it happens very often
13 with spaces, they are shaped by the people using it. [...] And very slowly the space
14 moved into the direction of becoming an activist space.’ (Sollfrank 2017).
15 Acknowledging the co-constitutive relation of spaces and identities, one could ask, how
16 does co-working and its spatiality shape the individual coworker? Does co-working
17 confirm, deepen or challenge the self-enterprising professional? Does co-working give
18 rise to a new subject position? Therefore, interrogating subject formation processes
19 (see Cornwell 2012; Hoffman 2014), and their relational construction, might be a
20 fruitful research approach to scrutinise co-working’s potential for progressive forms of
21 work relations and collective political action.
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41 **Conclusion**

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44 The paper explored how co-working and co-working spaces emerged as a practice of
45 self-help and self-organisation out of a lack of supportive structures for independent
46 workers. It discussed informality as a key aspect of working conditions for a growing
47 share of freelance workers in cities that further disrupts the notion of informality as a
48 ‘problem’ of cities in developing countries (see Roy 2005, 2009; Lombard and Meth
49 2016). An informality-based reading of co-working highlights, first, the multiple
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3 insecurities in which freelance workers find themselves in contemporary urban labour
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7 Second, it exemplifies, how freelance workers out of lack of public provision and
8 regulation (e.g., concerning training, labour market access, social security or working
9 conditions) and active state deregulation (e.g. through the liberalization of creative
10 industries) developed co-working as a form of self-help and self-organisation to meet
11 their needs for meaningful social encounters, recognition, identity-formation, meaning
12 and belonging as well as for professional development to navigate the ‘pervasive
13 informality of creative work’ (Alacovska 2017: 378). Co-working balances the workers’
14 needs for autonomy with mutual support for the downsides of freelance work. While
15 the cultural and creative sector is celebrated in neoliberal urban development for its
16 continuous growth and economic contribution, coping with informality has become
17 everyday normality in sustaining a freelance worker’s livelihood. Those workers move
18 on a daily base between formal and informal work arrangements — whose difference is
19 often determined by a lack of political regulation but more so through ingrained
20 conventions, customs and cultural principles in these sectors. The article proposed to
21 examine co-working in line with other practices of informal urbanism that become
22 more prevalent in European and North American cities due to economic
23 transformations, the lack of affordable housing, the retrenchment of the social welfare
24 state and the imposed conditions of ‘austerity urbanism’ (Peck 2012).
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39 Third, an informality-based reading of co-working demonstrates how formal and
40 informal practices relate to one another (McFarlane, 2012, p. 90) and how co-working
41 helps to stabilise current governmental policies. Co-working as a practice of self-
42 organisation for freelance workers is increasingly subsumed into the promotion of
43 entrepreneurship and an ‘entrepreneurial, self-regulated, motivated and individualized
44 workforce’ (McRobbie 2016: 67). As creative workers have been celebrated in creative
45 city strategies (see Pratt 2008) for their self-entrepreneurial attitude, co-working and
46 co-working spaces are now increasingly embraced and supported by city governments
47 as new intermediaries in entrepreneurial growth agendas (see, e.g., GLA 2014) without
48 acknowledging and addressing the underlying causes, contradictions and problems.
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3 Furthermore, co-working is formalised into a professional, high-priced service due to its
4 growing commercialisation through international real estate companies and is now
5 celebrated, embraced and supported by city governments. Co-working becomes co-
6 opted in urban growth agendas as part of their entrepreneurial strategies and culture-
7 based redevelopment initiatives (see IPPR 2016; NLA 2016). In fact, many smaller co-
8 working spaces depend on additional funding as, for example, in London where the
9 majority of spaces relies on donations or temporary public funding. Many spaces,
10 however, see their complicity as pragmatic because it enables them to have lower user
11 fees or offer workspace for free so they can have a broader social reach in the
12 neighbourhood as commercialised spaces. Nevertheless, co-working finds itself in a
13 contradictory situation now: the self-organisation of freelance workers is increasingly
14 enabled, supported, commercialised and formalised through cities and internationally
15 operating office providers into a standardised service. In glossing over the social and
16 economic downsides of freelance work and self-employment, the popularisation and
17 commercialisation of co-working releases governments further from its responsibilities
18 of appropriate political regulation.
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31 As more and more workers need to take care for their own economic production, an
32 informality perspective can be used to critique the growing socio-economic inequalities
33 in cities. More specifically, it can highlight the material challenges of everyday life in
34 cities as was done here with the specific informal work situation of freelance workers in
35 culture and creative industries that led to a new practice of collective self-organisation.
36 There is a need to re-think urban economic development and planning practices to
37 understand these new forms of work, their labour conditions and socio-spatial
38 consequences, especially as the scarcity of affordable housing becomes more severe
39 and puts additional pressures on individual livelihoods. The article focused on freelance
40 workers in culture and creative industries who mainly populate co-working spaces, yet
41 there is a rising number of freelance workers in other economic sectors in cities (e.g., in
42 construction or education, see for London Wickham 2013). Moreover, in academic
43 research on co-working, there is a need to understand better the different emerging
44 communities within the spaces, what constitutes and sustains them, their inclusionary
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3 and exclusionary practices as well as the urban spaces this practice produces to
4 scrutinise its political potentials.
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