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MA European Urban Cultures POLIS
Master's Thesis

Work & The City
Developments in Urban Working Culture
An Exploratory Research about Coworking Spaces in
European Cities and their Impact on Urban Working Culture

Summary

This thesis touches the subject of contemporary developments in urban working culture. It applies concepts from labour studies and urban studies in order to map the interaction between the spatial representation of work organisation and the urban fabric. Two cases, the Hub and the Betahaus exemplify network structures and community building spanning over different cities in order to produce a specific socio-cultural and economical atmosphere for cognitive-cultural enterprises and freelancers. The argument follows along the lines of contemporary discourses of precarious work versus normal work relationships, spatial representation of labour and the city as a socially and economically constructed entity.

Key Words

coworking, urban forms of work, economic base of contemporary cities, networks, social entrepreneurship

“Seeking to serve a culture of laptop-armed digital nomads and frustrated telecommuters, coworking combines the mingling of a techie-friendly coffee shop with the functionality of rented office space.”¹

Thanks to all the POLIS people and every one that contributed to this thesis.

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1 Introduction

Is the individualization of labour and work mirrored in urban forms of labour organisation, like in coworking spaces? Is there something like a new urban working culture that transcends paid labour, leisure work and social networks? Are coworking, barcamps and meetups – all being buzz words, antagonisms to office factories, conferences and hobby clubs – forms of niche expressions in a competitive environment of transnational corporations or an inevitable development of all forms of urban labour organisations?

Although coworking spaces seem to follow a strong practical financial logic, this is not the only benefit resulting from their use. The meaning acquired through social contacts with similar workers, the reflection on projects, the ability to get social gratification after successful endeavours, et cetera can be an important step to work in shared spaces. This can be seen as bouncer or buffer towards the confusion that people experience through the weak ties that flexibility demands. Sennett describes those weak ties under the umbrella of “No long term!” (2007) and stresses its negative effect on people's biographies and life cycle (1998).

But why do these people need a special space for their work? And why would people pay for the services provided there? Also, why are some of these spaces successful and how do they measure their success? Is the whole idea of networking services not a simple, and in a long term sense non-lucrative hype? Why does the worker seem to have a need for localized contacts with other professionals, but needs a services provider to facilitate and institutionalize the contact? And do these contacts follow a certain logic concerning the cities in which similar spaces are established or are being planned?

This research is not intended to answer all of the above questions, but rather draw a map of the underlying issues. Drawing from research based in different fields such as behaviour studies, network theory, anthropology of work, cultural studies about identity, sociological architecture and many more, I intend to approach these questions from multiple perspectives.

1.1 Research Goal & General Research Questions

Ultimately, the goal is to find out if coworking spaces are just another manifestation of economical prerogatives or indeed a synthesis of these with a certain life style and culture of work that has been established in the course of changes in the political economy. A subset of hypotheses can be deduced: The attitude towards work and work relations in coworking spaces and associated forms of work organisations stabilizes precarious forms of monetary labour. Therefore it transcends the separation of work and leisure time, reassures weak ties, and adds to individual social and cultural capital in dynamically ever changing ways. Yet this is a very pessimistic, partial view on the matter since there is a trend of people quitting the so called normal work relationships, socially secured forms of employment, to restart or enter a certain career and life style that the image of on-the-edge working spaces seem to deliver quite successfully. Yet there is a generation growing and being socialized into a flexible working environment, never having experienced the amenities and dreads of a “nine-to-five” job. Both these working life situations can be described as precarious, but there is a tremendously important ingredient which seems to be overseen by most of polemic discussion about the new “yuppie offices”. This leads me to the transcending hypothesis that the users and operators of coworking spaces with their manifold forms and profiles usually use these spaces based on an economically and professionally secured background, carrying own networks and know how into these spaces and by flexible use creating a new form of networked *glocal* community. Being essentially business-like ventures, coworking spaces therefore are not spaces of societal change and progress, but a continuously changing breeding ground for ever faster cycles of transformation of resources. Reproducing the forefront of businesses in a highly engineered sector of the economical and cultural sphere of society, they are by no means instruments of social inclusion, but transparent public labs of yet another circle of the sophistication of the division of labour.

A general research question will try to synthesize the following subset: work culture, framework of the political economy, representation in the spatial fabric of the city, lifestyle & attitude of workers.

1. Why do people decide to work in this environment? What are the factors of economical and socio-cultural justification?

2. What makes these spaces successful and how do they measure their success?
3. Do workers have a different understanding and experience of different organisational patterns of work?
4. Why does the worker seem to have a need for localized contacts with other professionals, but needs a services provider to facilitate and institutionalize the contact?
5. Do these contacts follow a certain logic concerning the cities in which similar spaces are established or are being planned?
6. What stabilizes the system of uncommitted project based working relations in the absences of formalized trust and fraternity?

This research is aimed towards a better general understanding of work form organisations. Hence it is directed to an audience of academic background that tries to understand work in urban contexts and its spatial impact. Coworking spaces seem to be a growing and continuous trend, hence their analysis could help to critically assess their function in a wider economical context of the city, as well as their impact on worker's professional biographies, their experience in a non-linear career planning, and their social, work-based networks. Also, this research might be of interest for people working in this configuration to reflect upon its impact on their life and to understand the dynamics of their decisions, voluntarily or compulsory.

Since the approach to the research field I have chosen follows an exploratory logic, this research has to be seen as a “trial & error” project. Due to the nature of the data and methodology this thesis will be the basis of further research, rather than a finished piece of work.

This thesis is divided into functional chapters. I will start with a short introduction to the relatively new concept of coworking in order to help the reader understand some basic descriptive concepts. The following part concerns the discussion of relevant theoretical concepts, breaking down the impact of the contemporary political economy, work and urban culture and organization of labour

in individual categories. I then switch to the description of research methodology and data gathering in order to transcend the reader towards the actual field research. Due to the exploratory character of the research I will then present the results with heavy reliance on quotes from the interviews. During the concluding chapter I will try to distillate some strings of the findings so far.

2 What is Coworking – a Description

In the latest twist of capitalist society towards a flexible mode of accumulation, economic relationships in the urban fabric tend to be relying on social networks, project bound contract relations, high rate of mobility and sets of highly skilled, highly specialized work profiles.

Thus the urban arena seems to be the place of physical manifestation of this change in the organization of labour. This can be exemplified on growing tendencies of office sharing, flexible rent and usage systems and provision of networking services.

Contrary to the idea of a worker being completely independent of place, a certain profile of highly mobile, highly skilled freelancers seems to realize the necessity of daily meeting and organisational structure, which they seem to find in coworking spaces, barcamp conferences and thematic meetups.

Coworking as a term has been theorized mainly in the information technology branches of the academics. A definition of a coworking facility in abstract terms is given by Wagner and Thoma:

In a typical co-working design and development environment, usually a complex and structured piece of information is exchanged among several systems where every system performs certain tasks on the joint information to refine or improve it. This complex joint information forms an information-cluster that needs to be properly defined and handled by all involved systems. [...] The co-working facility supports the access and update of federated information-clusters. Each system is represented as a node in a federated network. Every node manages its local information, consisting of both private information that cannot be accessed by other nodes, and semi-public information that can be retrieved by other authorized nodes. Authorized nodes accessing remote information can

restructure (derive) this information and merge it with their private and semi-public information. To manage the joint information in a cooperation team, a cooperation workspace is needed to be defined as an information-cluster. Different parts of the information represented within the cooperation workspace corresponds to parts of the semi-public information defined by different nodes. Each authorized node in the team will then be able to access the information in the cooperation workspace as if it is stored locally at that node. Namely, both the physical and logical distribution of the joint information among the nodes is totally transparent to its user. (Wagner & Thoma 1996, p.447)

This highly idealized and abstract definition can nevertheless give some insights to the underlying ideologies and logics which are pursued by founders and users of coworking facilities in the context of this paper.

Coworking spaces could be seen as a radical form of company organization in which the specialized departments of production, research & development, accounting and management are being loosely connected by providers of networking services. “Place making” fosters community building and is therefore a way out of a precarious status. Then again the dependency on privately owned and managed coworking spaces can be deceptive in providing false impressions of stability.

Precisely, coworking spaces are working environments which are flexibly let out on hourly, daily or indefinite terms. They provide usually space for single-person-enterprises, freelancers, or very small companies which do not necessarily rely on a specifically designed working environment or office space, but typically carry their tools around with their mobile computers and similar compatible, adaptable tools. Though depending on specific spaces such as meeting rooms, pleasant reception atmosphere and relaxation spaces, these entrepreneurs are usually not able to finance and sustain such an infrastructure. Furthermore, coworking spaces and their organizers provide a “natural” professional network of business contacts, resources of expertise and meaningful relationships.

Another way of finding a proper definition is by taking a closer look at the inside knowledge of media references. Certainly, the *wikipedia* article on coworking gives some hints:

“Coworking is a style of work which involves a shared working environment, sometimes an office, yet independent activity. Unlike in a typical office environment, those coworking are usually not employed by the same organization. Typically it is attractive to work-at-home professionals, independent contractors, or people who travel frequently who end up working in relative isolation. Coworking is the social gathering of a group of people, who are still working independently, but who share values, and who are interested in the synergy that can happen from working with talented people in the same space.”

Lukas de Pellegrin and Carsten Foertsch started a local survey in Berlin and, later in the same year, extended it to a global level. (2010) They reached 661 coworkers in 24 countries. Their approach has to be considered with the implications of an architectural emphasis. Still it is very informative about habits and working culture in general. Their most interesting findings can be considered for this research. Coworking then is generally a “Western”, post-industrial, urban phenomenon, with a tendency to include big and, slowly, smaller cities. Their type of coworker is mainly male, in his mid twenties to early thirties, academic background with middle to high income. He is project- and team oriented, highly flexible. Although they interpret their findings with a tendency of ameliorating coworkers' work environment by moving into coworking spaces, they do not consider wider implications of the economical system, nor do they question the ambivalent character of precarious work and an avant guard working space, the seemingly unproblematic “flat” hierarchies and the utter exposition to market forces and a “totality” of work presence.

3 Theory

This chapter will explore the fundamental concept that are touching the subject of this thesis. The first part will clarify the macro context of culture and the contemporary political economy. I will connect effects of the political economy with features of its spatial representation.

I will then approach the term of work and labour and clarify its meaning for my topic. The main problematic features of contemporary work will be sketched out, specifically the contrast between the modern concept of normal employment relationships versus precarious work and specificities of the German and Western European labour market.

The following part concerns the possibilities of work for social inclusion. Here I will try to connect concepts of worker identity, mainly informed by Richard Sennett's work, and perceptions of workers to understand the categories in which coworking can be placed. I will shortly mention relevant concepts of Cybergeoisie and Protosurps.

3.1 The Concept of Culture

“Ways of working have altered, as short-term jobs replace stable careers; mammoth government and corporate bureaucracies are changing form, becoming both more flexible and less secure institutions.” (Sennett 1999, p.14)

This quote raises the background against which a culture of work needs to be sketched out. When I talk about culture in regard to work in urban environments I follow the argument of Mike Featherstone (Featherstone & Lash 1999). Culture does not encompass coherence or order – especially not in individual identities – as cultural production and dissemination increases. Globalisation does not homogenize and unify culture, but produces new places where culture “clashes”. These places are regardless of national boundaries. Also, they do not exhibit the characteristics of the national myths of the modernist project². However, they can be discovered in urban arenas.

While citing Friese and Wagner (in Featherstone & Lash 1999, pp.101-115) Featherstone promotes culture as product of “the diverse and often incompatible range of cultural practices people engage in.” (1999, p.1) Structures and systems³ – concepts used especially in the sociology – have a weakness in confirming stability and coherence where contingencies and uncertainties dominate. This seems paradox when talking about places in cities that are yet defined in geographically and spatially consistent terms. However, if I can connect the cultural practices of coworking with the spatial stabilities of coworking spaces, I hope to understand their importance for the workers based on a procedural character inherit in those places. A true reflexivity between practices and location

2 Cf. Latour 1993.

3 Cf. also Silva & Bennett 2004.

might emerge, which in effect will help to further a transdisciplinary understanding of work and work in cities as a whole.

3.2 The Contemporary Political Economy

The amount of work done on the changes of political economy during the last approximately four decades is overwhelming. It is neither necessary nor possible in the course of this thesis to discuss its extensive history. Overcoming narrow neoclassical economic concepts of rational choice to describe individual action in the economy, and evolutionary container concepts to understand the establishment of urban space, the city should be described as the outcome of social and economic factors intermingled. Only then can we understand the system of coworking in its economical dimension and its social implications. Thereby the contemporary political economy - as it is seen by a number of commentators - is consequently described as producing and being produced by cities and its actors.

3.2.1 The Concept of the Urban in Conjunction with the Political Economy

Defining the city as a scientific category in regard to urban studies with all its facets, interests and questions involved, seems almost like a provocation. It is certainly a challenge best matched by referring to the existing discourse on that matter. Allan J. Scott is able to profoundly focus his definition already in the light of this theses, when he states that

"[...] the city is a distinctive spatial phenomenon embedded in society, and therefore expressing in its internal organization something of the wider social and property relations that characterize the whole. [...] modern cities share in common [...] their status as dense polarized or multipolarized systems of interrelated locations and land uses. [...] cities are always sites or places where many different activities and events exist in close relational and geographic proximity to one another." (Scott 2008, pp.4-5)

Starting off with such a broad category - which he also claims to be most likely the only uniting thing among scholars - he then particularizes the matter furthermore. The city in capitalism then can be describes as "an agglomerated system of multifarious phenomena (transport facilities,

factories, offices, shops, houses, workers, families, ethnic groups, and so on) integrated into a functional whole by a dominant process of production and accumulation." (Scott 2008, p.19)

He stresses that the search for proximity by urban actors is driving forward the urban development and its ever more so finely grained division of labour. This competition for proximity entails

"[...] an intra-urban land market that results in powerful processes of locational sorting so that different parts of the city come to be marked by different specialized types of land use. The same processes induce the piling up of diverse activities at selected points of high gravitational intensity, with the greatest density invariably occurring at and around the very centre of the city." (Scott 2008, pp.5-6)

Obviously, the economic factor is predominant in this definition, but it does not restrict the city to a container, administratively drawn and fragmented. It is certainly not only a geographic unit that relays national structures and policy. It resembles a social and economical construction, which is at the same time locally bound in divers usage and oriented in a interurban competition of a global scale. The digitalisation and the division of work can be seen in this context as the main drivers of development. Scott's perspective of political economy is hence marked by the urban systems of economic relations which is characterised by:

1. The networks of specialized but complementary units of production that typically lie at the functional core of any urban area of significant size.
2. The multifaceted local labour markets that tie the production space and the social space of the city together into a functioning whole.
3. The learning and innovation effects that almost always emanate from the numerous socio-economic interactions that occur within the local production system and its associated labour market.

(Scott 2008, p.28)

Based on this idea of the connection between the urban and the political economy, Scott proclaims the raise of the cognitive-cultural capitalism⁴. He embraces the notion of cognitive-cultural as result of the growing importance of scientific knowledge inputs, continuous innovation, product multiplicity and differentiation, the provision of customized services, symbolic elaboration, etc. (Scott 2008, p.64)

This form of economic system overruns the old division between white and blue collar work and continuously reorganizes work in cities between on the one side high-level problem-solving and creative tasks, and on the other side everything else supporting this genre. It includes managers, professional workers, business and financial analysts, scientific researchers, technicians, skilled craftworkers, designers, artists, et cetera. The reason for this agglomeration of Scott's cognitive-cultural economy in certain urban settings is the ability of its protagonists to stabilize insecurities inherent in the organisational logics of the contemporary political economy, by means of the size and density of the urban milieu:

"These features of the cognitive-cultural economy alone are calculated to encourage a significant degree of locational convergence of individual producers and workers in selected urban areas, not only as a way of reducing the spatial costs of their mutual interactions but also as an instrument allowing them to exploit the increasing-returns effects that flow from the risk-reducing character of large aggregations of latent opportunities." (Scott 2008, p.13)

The urbanite experiences life and work in the resurgent city as being a subject to high levels of risk, with welfare provisions and union organisation declining, the full stress is passed on to lower tier workers. Mass mobilization and collective action is subdued in technocratic, professionalized agencies of public authorities, the conflict inside the city around issues of impact of planning actions subsides in the background, political action is only stimulated by identity-based claims, and has replaced popular agitation around issues of economic justice. Today's claims are the concern of city administration, insofar they vibrate around property owners, investors and business to rise

⁴ Scott is certainly not the only one to proclaim this; many other authors have done so under different names, cf. Hesmondalgh, Florida, Sennett, et al.

competitive advantage of the locational policy. Still endemic urban tension breaks out periodically. Since cities that are emerging or stable nodes of the cognitive-cultural economy do become increasingly generators of wealth, they acquire a degree of economic and political autonomy unmatched during Fordist times of nation state frameworks and international organisation of economies. So "[t]he paradox of the resurgent city is the escalating contrast between its surface glitter and its underlying squalor." (Scott 2008, p.17)

3.2.2 Spatial Representation of Work and the Dually Networked Enterprises

Drawing from theories of the post-Fordist city in an American context, the authors Dear and Flusty portrait the contemporary type of production in cities as *flexible production*, which itself is

"[...] a form of industrial activity based on small-size, small-batch units of (typically subcontracted) production that are nevertheless integrated into clusters of economic activity. Such clusters have been observed in two manifestations: labour-intensive craft forms; and high technology." (Featherstone & Lash 1999, p.72)

Cities that are centring such a clustered development can be called technoburbs, following Fishman's line of thought (1989). Recursively, this development is not necessarily all enclosing, but can be observed (all in the line of post-modern fragmentation) in specific spaces in the city. Coworking spaces have the effect of materializing post-modernity in urban space. With their presence in derelict industrial and commercial centres, coworking spaces can stabilize physical structures by reinventing usage of space during or after a crisis of market reconfiguration. Their physical presence generates safety capital for the workers therein: a space providing social security, security of work identity and security of social and cultural capital in a Bourdieuan sense. Organized by private capital, all economic risks included, these work environments mirror state-side non-interest in supporting avant-garde ideas of work organisation, least they are not aware of them.

Certainly, coworking spaces will not drastically change our image of the work in the city as a whole – let alone there ever was or is a city as a whole. Their presences is just too minor in comparison to

still existent modes of production – factory quarters, central business districts, even office centres with connected commercial shopping spaces. Also, their public visibility is not as transparent and centralized to be called mainstream. Nevertheless, for a specific group of working people, this configuration does quite obviously materialize their idea of work in space.

In contemporary work research, companies of the new media initiatives, cultural entrepreneurs and similar can be categorized in three groups: (Mayer-Ahuja & Wolf 2005, p.70)

1. Start-ups with management or operational involvement of founders, a straightforward client base, settled trajectory of relations in terms of client to service provider, with selective cooperation.
2. Subsidiary enterprises, founded to unlock potentials in new markets, usually following the blue print of the holding company's organization structure with the advantage of an extended client and distribution network.
3. “Network enterprises” that are based on the project oriented cooperation of a flexible number of legally and economically self-sustaining companies.

Considering the business model of coworking spaces, the last category of “network enterprises”, conceptually borrowed from Castell's theory of the network society (2010, p.115) “Flexible forms of management, relentless utilization of fixed capital, intensified performance of labour, strategic alliances, and inter-organizational linkages” (Ibid. p.467) are all characteristics of coworking organisations, their internal logics, as well as the logic of their users. Hence these places can be typologically categorized as *dually networked enterprises*. No matter how strong the image of a non-conformist, non-competitive workspace is constructed by founders and users alike - coworking spaces are a business model in contemporary capitalist societies, hence they bow to its inherent ways of value creation and consumption. Yet their advantage in operational time and turnover of resources compared to traditional companies is tremendous. The ability to connect the offered space, the business concept and the involved users – no matter if they are companies, students,

artists, eventually they all pay for the space – with virtual and real places on a global and local setting, pronounces their avant-gardist position in the flexible regime of accumulation.

3.3 The Concept of Work

3.3.1 History of Work

Drawing from a wide scope of research on the history of work, Manfred Füllsack (2009) points out the main aspects of work in our contemporary understanding. Firstly, work is an endogenous product of history, aim and end of work is a result of work itself. Thereby, contemporary forms of work can only be understood in their historic context (Ibid. p.10). Secondly, work as process of ridding ourselves of unsatisfactory aspects of life and economic scarcity is arguably efficient, but as a matter of fact generates constantly new circumstances which themselves inherit new unsatisfactory aspects and scarcity, hence work inevitably generates new work (Ibid. p.11). Thirdly, people tend to underestimate value, productivity, relevance and seriousness of work carried out by others. This generates problems in comparability of work products and socially acceptable organisation of work. The more division of labour a society produces, the more effort it needs to put into the integration of the thereby generated distinctive perspectives on values. Fourthly, contemporary work is becoming precarious. This process as a result of the establishing of a flexible regime of accumulation (Cf. the work of Harvey, Sennett, Kocka & Offe, et al.) is perceived by workers as a deregulation of work, accompanied by dismantling of social security systems and the like, fought for by unions, social democrats and “the Left” in general. While this trinity is nowadays forced to fight the complex processes of globalisation based on ideological prerogatives and entertain its traditional membership base of workers in so called standard employment schemes (“Normalarbeitsverhältnissen”) throughout the Western industrial world, it simultaneously neglects the growing numbers of workers that already do live and work under such flexible conditions. The traditional welfare state is powerless as well, since it has been established to solve a complete different set of problems in the first place. Workers in flexible regimes are hence fighting two fronts. Their experience does not connect to the struggle of effective social security laws or protection from exploitative employers. It is much rather coined by the experience of an unpredictable life course in terms of education, job, career and family life. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of life styles leaves

little space for a strong, durable articulation of mass interest. Quoting Füllsack, this leads to the following situation:

“The perceptions of scarcity, which are basis for all work, have themselves been diversified socially, cut short in their continuance and hence effectively individualised.” (2009, p.102 translated from German by this author)

3.3.2 Precarious Work versus Standard Employment Relationship

Mayer-Ahuja defines precarious work as a relative condition to the standard employment relationship in a society. It is an atypical, but not necessarily quantitatively minor form of work. Precariousness includes the shortfall of material standards, of legal standards defined by work and social legislation, collective labour agreements or labour-management contracts and of “normal” managerial standards of worker's integration (little involvement into a collegial structure, constricted representation in working and union interest groups). Hence precarious work does not imply poverty, disfranchisement and isolation, but a relative loss in those categories compared to workers in the contemporary dominant standard employment relationship. (Mayer-Ahuja 2003, p.15)

The term standard employment relationship (“Nomalarbeitsverhältnis”) is a peculiarity of the German historical discussion regarding work and economy in the post-war era. It was introduced by Ulrich Mückenberger, having published an essay about the “Crisis of the standard employment relationship” in 1985. It encompasses a very broad, accepted catalogue of ideal attributes of formal work, according to Günther Schmid (in Kocka et al. 2000, p.269) and Mayer-Ahuja respectively:

1. dependent, indefinite, full time work for a single employer outside the household and leading to a certain pride regarding the own position and connection to an employer / a production
2. stable compensation of job performance regarding time, professional status and family situation

3. company organisation of work with a tendency to life-long employment
4. de facto irredeemable contract, generous social security in case of job loss or early retirement

The quantitative importance of this kind of work relationship can be traced back to the 18th century proto-industrialisation in the countryside, the growth of the cities due to the industrialisation in the 19th century and the unhasty growth of the connected service sector. Thus dependent employment grew steadily and, although never absolute, can be regarded as the “normal” form of securing a livelihood in the 20th century. Additionally it shall be noted that standard working time and a bundled system of social security has been historically connected to this normative term of “Normalarbeit”, hence fortifying the concept. An important leitmotiv of this historical development is the continuous emphasis on male domination of the reference frame. (Mayer-Ahuja 2003, pp.35-40)

Why am I looking into the sector of non-standard employment? Part of the transformation processes of reconfiguration of political economies in Western Europe is a tremendous decrease of socially secured and accepted standard employment relationships. The miscellany of Kocka and Offe (2000) include a profoundly detailed analysis of this process. In particular, Warnfried Dettling's and Günther Schmid's accounts are helpful to grasp the German situation.

Their main points to further the discussion on alternative forms of work organisation include the already mentioned diminishing of full time, non-temporal, socially and legally secured, contractual and institutionalized work; the rising presence of a female workforce due to a growing orientation of women towards non-household work; a worsening gap between people that are socially included by work, and those that are not. ((in Kocka et al. 2000, p.205)

Basic driver of Dettling's argument is the “good life” in its only possibility as *vita activa*, the active life. But the most important aspects from a scientific point of view is the mentioning of societies and economies – the plurals of those categories that we tend to see monolithically and uniform. While

opening the view towards the parallel existence of different categories of work, one can instantly live with the idea of standard employment as a glitch of history.

Historically speaking, Schmid (2000, pp.269-270) refers to the four main processes and events, in particular the collapse of the Bretton-Wood system in 1973 (deregulation of global financial markets), the oil and energy crisis of 1973/74, the growing migration from economically excluded societies, and the advances in gender equality. Although he does not unconditionally proclaim the end of dependent employment, he claims its decline in favour of “free” employees who then sell their capacity by target agreements, contracts of service, et cetera to many but one client rather than employer. This goes along with constant friction of qualification and network adjustment. Supporting this change, Schmid draws from observations made while researching labour markets of artists and publishers (Haak & Schmid 2001) This labour market is characterized by uses of networks, oriented on contemporary fashion and styles. Demands on this market are fluctuating and organized in projects which are communicated by the protagonists themselves. Teamwork is common, and teams are not necessarily coherent. This demands for a big resource base on contacts, mostly regionally present. Routines in all aspects of work are perceived as boring and can block the ability to compete with others. Though this is very similar to developments on the general labour markets, this “creative” work can barely be standardized. In lieu of that, references, networks and recommendations – or reputation – is necessary. Like in the academics, the connection to a single contractor is hence hindering the growth of reputation. (Kocka et al. 2000, pp.283-285)

Schmid also sketches out ways of securing these flexible work relationships. He mentions professional networks, but also networks of family, friends and neighbours as a main aspect of securing stability, connected with combinations of part time dependent employment and teaching activities. He criticizes the effect of “winner-take-all” attitudes of these markets. Politically speaking, he calls for a general societal support due to the specific character of long term commitment of artists (and “creatives” in general, ed.): Social security as co-financier, tax benefits for sponsors, solidarity inside the “creative market”, where high income earners get taxed progressively into a general fond for “creative” support, finally a tax-based basic financial security. (Kocka et al. 2000, pp.286-287)

Putting this very interesting profile of the “creative labour market” (which Schmid admittedly only researched in terms of artists and publishers, ed.), he does not generalize everybody to become a creative, like populist scientists such as Richard Florida still seem to hope. The workplace of the future, though, is more “artsy” and

“more self-determined, competitive, changeable in the nature and scope of employment, to a greater extent project- or team-oriented, increasingly in networks and less integrated into companies, with diverse and changing work tasks, fluctuating remuneration or compensation, and combined with other sources of income or unpaid self-employment.”
(in Kocka et al. 2000, p.287 translated from German by this author)

The academical argument on the “Normalarbeit” is lead by the critique of the disciplining character of powerful socio-political regulations, meaning i.e. the conditioning of workers towards a continuous employment position, thereby restricting individual freedom or the submission of the individual under a - until present - barely contested company regime of direction. “Atypical” work relationships, in a reversed argument, do not free the worker of those disciplinary measures, but only strip the individual of the embedded security systems, though. It is up to the reader to judge which form is more repressive, given the fact that under both regimes, the worker is still forced to sell his workforce on an unequal market, being double free in a Marxist sense. (Mayer-Ahuja 2003, pp.43-44)

Mayer-Ahuja points out that an analysis of the underlying mechanics of precariousness need to happen in order to put precarious work and life organization in context. Otherwise this would suggest a general ability of people to act despite an external societal framework. Hence this would support a neoliberal credo of individualism, thereby blurring an analysis of societal realities. (Mayer-Ahuja 2003, p.16)

3.3.3 Autonomous versus Heteronomous Commitment

Approaching the field of workers usually attracted by coworking spaces, and claiming to describe contemporary developments of urban working culture, I find myself in a a tricky situation. The time

span of “contemporary” neglects historical context, thereby inducing that the observations made during the case studies are disconnected from earlier developments. Hence it is useful to check studies done in similar environments, like the work of Nicole Mayer-Ahuja and Harald Wolf (2005 et al.). They analysed forms and autonomous versus heteronomous commitment in work relationships in the sector of internet service providers in a German context. Although they looked in detail at companies with self-sustained physical and virtual infrastructure - and networked companies had a minor role in their samples, respectively freelancers were not included at all - their findings concerning the overall branch specific developments for the information technology sector can be taken as point of reference nevertheless. They conclude that the process of “professionalizing” and “normalization” that happened in many of the service economy during the 1980s and 1990s happened in similar ways in the information technology branches though temporally compressed:

“ [...] the rapid sequence of phases of expansion, crisis and consolidation over less than a decade and associated changes in [economic] context, specifically including staff reductions, organizational rationalization and the transformation from a seller's to buyer's market for services and work force, have left deep marks.” (Mayer-Ahuja & Wolf 2005, p.106 translated from German by this author)

This leads to a set of changes over time which contradicts common clichés of the information technology branch as unorthodox, creative, free minded workers in informal settings, including: less chances of quick changes of employment and professional reorientation, insecurity of employment in company departments while withstanding concurrent rising need of security due to family situation and age. More importantly, the ambivalence of autonomous commitment are clear-cut: during the heydays of internet companies, high identification with and motivation on work can be judged as expression of self-conscious and self-determined commitment to an exciting field of work. Nowadays, due to technological shifts, pressure from labour market and sales pressure result in “normalized” employment profiles with closed hierarchies, division of labour procedures and the inherent restrictions on individual shaping of work. Heteronomous forms of commitment are certainly gaining in importance. It has to be pointed out that this process is not covered by a parallel

intensification of and buffering by a uniting “working culture” in the companies themselves, but by a steady intensification of the above mentioned “normalization”. The flexibility of the worker here means pretty much the coming to terms with heavy workloads, which in return demands energy as a result of uncoordinated, non-standard procedures therein.

Concluding these elaborations it has to be stated that the subjective attitude towards work and the creation of a personal culture of work (in companies) is framed by a shift from a personal understanding of oneself as “problem solver” towards a sense of being part of the problem the company itself has to solve. Hence the employees in that study displayed a growing attitude of being keen on negotiating favourable conditions and prices for their work force, as well as securing benefits. Mayer-Ahuja and Wolf are deducing not necessarily a collapse of a collective belonging to a “creative community” or the demands on high professional quality, but a growing pressure to adjust according to social and economic changes. They predict at least a growth of conflict if this pressure is not ventilated accordingly. The authors do point out a need of stronger representation of workers in these companies, while carefully avoiding precise mentioning of ways to do so. For this thesis, I will refer to their analysis of the economical framework, but will have to adjust tools of representation in a “non-company” environment.

This brief excursion into the deep realms of academic work on labour in the German context leaves many fields open for discussion, and puts forward a myriad of interesting options of furthering this study. However, it is my intention to sketch out some of the main discourses that try to grasp the niche of workers relevant to coworking spaces in a formal way. It can be stated that there is a strong and stringent interest in contemporary discussions about their organisation of work and life, although the empirical data is rather thin.

Although the above sketched discussion concerns a very specific subject, it still touches the subject of urban work, giving a broad context of worker's realities in a historic setting. It can be stated that atypical work relations have been established and promoted on all levels of the political economy, setting the surrounding for contemporary work in coworking spaces. This includes flexibility of legal, social and economical restrictions. Most importantly it diminishes the argument for a

expansion of personal self fulfilment and freedom of labour expression via less restricted forms of organization.

The term precariousness is indeed commonly used in reference to low qualification employment in the service sector. Mayer-Ahuja directs her categories of questions towards the structural conditions, meaning “What is precariousness and how is it made?”, rather than “How is precariousness perceived and how is an individual life organized thereafter?”.

Concerning the work relations in coworking spaces in the urban environment, which are typically involving high skilled service provision, it would be interesting to ask the second set of questions related to the theme of how coworking facilities help to organize a precarious individual lifestyle.

3.4 The Concept of the Urbanite

Sennett points out that the urban virtues have not changed since the analysis of Simmel et al. Today it is only the city giving the possibility of a place where people can learn to live with strangers and, seemingly, people can learn to live with the strangers inside of them.

3.4.1 The Conjunction of Worker and Urbanite

Sennett considers the transformation of the modes of production were brought about through changes in institutions and bureaucratic structures for more flexibility and less rigidity. The organisations have moved from the Weberian triangle of rational corporation to a winner-takes-all centre-periphery team and project based organisation. This means that sheer effort of the worker on the workplace is no longer followed by reward, only the winner in a project competition gets paid. There are no more democratic institutions to represent worker's demands, but a small centred group of managers distribute resources, tasks and information. They are also the ones judging solely the results, set up the rules of production, and finalize the decisions. In this context, advancements in information technology made the direct control of the whole work process possible, whereas earlier hierarchical structures tended to modulate and evolve commands given from the top management to the production floor. Although nowadays the flexible project teams are free to respond to the manager demands, and they are free in the ways of solving the task, however, this

freedom does not include the choice of tasks in the first place. The apparent new freedom actually comes with a consolidation of a competitive environment inside the work organisation. This atmosphere is culturally supported by the mantra of "No long term!". It redefines time dimensions to inconsistent careers. These new careers are not any more absolved in one organisation, but driven by erratic changes and project teams, tied together by tasks, only to result in constant shifts in working associates. Fraternity between workers is eroding and although people work harder and under more stressful conditions, their relation to colleagues seem strangely superficial. (Sennett 2005)

This regime of flexibility and indifference as Sennett describes it for the organisation of work, is also reflected in the construction of the city and by reflexivity, in the identities of the urbanite. There are three factors characterising this dialectic relationship: physical attachment to the city, standardization of the urban environment, relations between family and urban work.

Physical attachment to a place in the city is diminishing because of high rates of mobility. That counts for mobility of the lower tier of the economy. While the upper tier is traditionally highly mobile, its members tended to stick within the circles of a company as identity sponsor. Other authors such as Zukin argue that the loosening of this anchor in a corporation is being captured by gentrified neighbourhoods with specialized services for the economic and urban elite.

Standardization of the urban environment is reflected in office building being neutrally designed inside and are interchangeable in the economic centres of the cities in the global network. The same counts for areas of gentrification. Attachment to a place becomes dispelled. The *flaneur* of Benjamin does not encounter alterity, but uniformity. Shared history and collective memory is vanishing: "The space of public consumption attacks local meanings in the same way the new workplace attacks 'ingrown' shared histories among workers." (Sennett 2005, pp.117-118)

Relations between family and urban work are the not so visible part, compared to the above. The discrepancy between "family values" like commitment, long term binding and solidarity and the opposite demands of flexible working conditions demand an even stronger engagement and resources on the adult life structure.

A last point Sennett is stressing is the non-rule of elites. He argues that contemporary economic elites want to operate the city, but avoid the urban political realm and concludes that “[p]aradoxically, in the city this restless economy produces political disengagement, a standardisation of the physical realm, new pressures to withdraw into the private sphere.” (2005, p.120)

3.4.2 Social Inclusion through Work

A tremendous adjustment seems to restructure not only the office environment, but also the social activities apart from revenue generating work. A culture of fusing professional aspects with leisure activities, thus creating a new interpretation of “hobby” could be seen in the way workers spent time to discuss professional issues.

Social inclusion, following Sennett's ideas (Sennett 2000), works in terms of mutual recognition between “people who are aware of each other as legitimately involved together in a common enterprise.” (Ibd. p.1) Sennett argues that contemporary capitalism denies people this kind of experience, hence alienating each other from another. Social inclusion is generated by a three way method: mutual exchange, exchange displaying elements of rituals, rituals that generate witnesses as judges of an individual's action. Flexibility means the all time presence of occupation with work. A contemporary working person in an urban environment does not strictly distinguish between job and home. Disorder in Sennett's sense might be the organisational structure of coworking. It provides the equilibrium under which freelancers can provide themselves with the identity of a independent, self-sustaining, self-actualising personality in an orderly framework of spatially fixed flows of resources in technology, social capital and professional networks.

As a result of the developments of today's political economy towards a system of flexibility, Sennett characterizes contemporary working culture in three categories

1. Time - how to manage short term relations while being mobile in terms of geographic location, but even more so in terms of work orientation in projects with ever-changing

colleagues. The geographical mobility was empirically contested by Hans Bertram (in Kocka et al. 2000), but for job mobility this can still be regarded as factual.

2. Talent - how to develop new skills in an environment that demands eternal learning, rather than specialized craftsmanship. Craftsmanship is defined "[...]doing something well for its own sake. Self-discipline and self-criticism adhere in all domains of craftsmanship; standards matter, and the pursuit of quality ideally becomes an end in itself." (Sennett 2007, p.104)
3. Surrendering the past – The idea of a past service and accomplishments providing security or guarantees in an organisation do not count in flexible institutions.

“The new institutions, as we have seen, are neither smaller nor more democratic; centralized power has instead been reconfigured, power split off from authority. The institutions inspire only weak loyalty, they diminish participation and mediation of commands, they breed low levels of informal trust and high levels of anxiety about uselessness. A shortened framework of institutional time lies at the heart of this social degradation; cutting edge has capitalized on superficial human relations. This same shortened time framework has disoriented individuals in efforts to plan their life course strategically and dimmed the disciplinary power of the old work ethic based on delayed gratification.” (Sennett 2007, p.181)

Sennett proposes three categories to anchor worker's identity in this environment – narrative, usefulness, and craftsmanship.

3.4.3 Cybergeoisie versus Protosurps

Dear⁵ and Flusty (in Featherstone & Lash 1999, p.74) acknowledge the rise of flexible economies and their impact on city dwellers. They talk of a group - not class - below those overseeing and exercising power. This is a result of the complicated, globally bifurcated social order that constantly reproduces competing actors, the *cybergeoisie*, part of which are the freelancers, maybe to be found

5 Cf. also Dear 2000 and *Los Angeles School*.

in the coworking spaces, “[...] pitted against each other globally, and forced to accept shrinking compensation for their efforts (assuming a compensation is offered in the first place).” (Ibid. p.76)
 Yet the authors regard them as the lucky ones, since they provide the

“[...] indispensable, presently unautomatable command-and-control functions. [...] They may also shelter members of marginal creative professions, who comprise a kind of paracybergeoisie. The cybergeoisie enjoy perceived socio-economic security and comparatively long-term, horizons in decision-making; consequently, their anxieties tend towards unforeseen social disruptions such as market fluctuations and crime. Commanding, controlling and prodigiously enjoying the fruits of a shared global exchange of goods and information, the cybergeoisie exercise global coordination functions [...]”
 (Ibid. p.76)

Or do the coworkers already belong to the *Protosurps*, the

“[...] marginalized 'surplus' labour providing just-in-time services when called upon by flexist production processes, but otherwise alienated from global systems of production (though not of consumption). Protosurps include temporary or day labourers, fire-at-will service workers, and a burgeoning class of intra- and inter-national itinerant labourers specializing in pursuing the migrations of fluid investment. True surpdom is a state of superfluity beyond peonage – a vagrancy that is increasingly criminalized through anti-homeless ordinances, welfare-state erosion and widespread community intolerance [...]”
 (Ibid. p.76)

Although the dichotomy of cybergeoisie versus protosurps seems dystopian and simple, I can see lines along which founders and operators of coworking spaces would nicely fit into the former category whereas coworking users fit into the latter. This little branch of the theoretical approach shall not be further explored here. However, it informs the overarching idea of urban identities of a possible future scenario under certain social and economical conditions.

3.5 Work and Physical Representation

3.5.1 The Structural Influence of the Built Environment

Reviewing the literature it is astonishing how little the built environment and the physical organisation of work in this contemporary economy has been accounted for. Acknowledging that, Chris Baldry argues that buildings are “cultural artefacts which directly and indirectly represent sets of socio-economic priorities and values through the way space is enclosed and configured. [...] work buildings are essentially structures of, and for control.” (1999, p.2)

The work building does have certainly a foremost functional appearance. It houses the technological infrastructure and protects the capital of an organisation. Its spatial condition structures services that can be offered. In coworking terms, it should ease the fusion of a flexible use, high turnover of users, semi public space, project character, easy access.

“The building also influences behaviour through the messages it sends – the semiotics and symbolism of the built environment or [...] as a form of non-verbal communication.” (Ibid., p.3)

Baldry uses three components to analyse the built environment:

1. fixed factors: physical structure, appearance, layout of the building
2. semi-fixed factors: furniture, décor, interior design
3. ambient environment: temperature, air quality, lightning conditions

As Baldry describes traditional settings of office environments specifically, there is a physical representation of difference in hierarchy. Actual working space grows accordingly to the position of a worker between rank and file and seniority. While seniority is usually not restricted in intruding and using other workers' space, thereby exercising control over space, it is the opposite for the lower ranks. Services like canteens and employee restaurants are not obviously segregated, but are usually put close to their users and in great distance between hierarchies (e.g. the top floor restaurants for the management and the basement canteen for the clerks in a high rise office building). Semi-fixed factors enclose for example the order of desks, the way they are lined up. The style and quality of

furniture, accessory, all the details, can point to the hierarchical position of the owner/user inside an organisation. Personalisation, the degree of adjustments a user is able to make to this semi-fixed environment tells a great deal about the atmosphere inside a given structure. The ambient environment is usually neglect as well. It is a steady part of architectural review, but fails to show up in sociological studies. However, these factors seem to affect worker's behaviour the most: thermal comfort, air quality (humidity, internal and external pollution), noise control, lighting, spatial comfort, privacy. (Baldry 1999)

3.6 Conclusions

Culture is a dynamic, diverse and ambiguous concept. Its dimensions can only be understood by analysing individual practices in defined localities. In this case, the object of interest is the cultural practice of workers in coworking spaces.

The city is a place for urban actors, such as users of coworking spaces, in search of proximity. This pushes urban development, digitalisation and finer division of labour which in turn reinforces the need of proximity. The emerging system is an agglomeration of a multitude of physical, social, economical and cultural activities which are functionally integrated by processes of production and accumulation. A coworking space generally bows to these capitalist principles, no matter which ideology or cause is the glue of its community.

Contemporary cities, in one aspect, focus their efforts to encourage economical development increasingly on and around the needs and conditions of cognitive-cultural production. Reducing risks and exploiting increasing-returns effects, the actors in this milieu tend to aggregate in delimited localities. However, a growing number of urban dwellers, or urbanites, is being alienated as an effect of the growing level of socio-economical risks generally, and the domination of identity-based political action, which is in opposition to popular agitation around concerns of urban justice, be they economically, socially, culturally or otherwise based.

Coworking spaces stabilize physically, as well as socially constructed elements of the city, especially in a post-industrial context, with building capital being derelict, and socio-economic insecurity

being on high levels. They generate security by principles of a networked enterprise which associates itself with the space and the network. Thereby they leave intact the fragmented, highly specialized work identity of its members whilst giving them the opportunity to affiliate with a group of people by cultural, social and economical practice in the physical realm of the coworking space as well as the virtual realm of the coworking community.

Work is a social, historical process which reproduces and strengthen itself, while it constantly diversifies. This division of labour, being a social process, creates socially different worker identities which do not necessarily hold similar values about the product of work. A mediation process between different kinds of work is becoming more necessary. Finally, work is becoming ever more precarious, which leads to a open or suppressed struggle for securing work relations, careers and life courses generally. Coworking spaces hence can be understood as spaces where such struggles occur respectively such subtle stabilisation of precarious situations created.

Precariousness is a relative category, usually measured in the degree of corrosion of material standards, of legal standards defined by work and social legislation, collective labour agreements or labour-management contracts and of “normal” managerial standards of worker's integration in reference to the settled mainstream standards of a given society. This is a historic process in most of the Western European political economies. A common development is the flexibility of labour markets, network organisation of professionals, team- and projected orientated production. These processes occur in large companies as well as the sectors of the economy commonly established by freelancers and self-employees. While categorizing work in atypical and normal work relationships, an objective analysis has to be aware of the ambiguous character of both of those categories.

Analysis of working relationships are necessarily historical. The differentiation of autonomous and heteronomous commitment can be an analytical category to look behind a worker's own perception of social independence and economical equality in the workspace. Coworking spaces can be judged in as far they facilitate autonomous or heteronomous commitment. In fact, a correlation between worker's attitude and day-to-day reality is a certain measurement of the inclusive or exclusive

character of a coworking space. Nevertheless, the influence of the work environment onto the final product or service should not be overestimated.

Rather pessimistic ideas of eroding physical attachment to the work, standardization of the working environment and dissolution of relations between family configuration due to developments in the urban working environment have been a strong theme along critical scholars, such as Richard Sennett. These observations which are related to shifts in established life cycles should be compared then to workers which only have been socialized in the contemporary flexible environment. The dynamics of this contrast can be informing and explain changing or “new” attitudes of younger workers which have never experience a career system and a community structure such as Sennett describes. *Narrative movement* , the fact that events in time are connected and experience accumulated by the individual, are counterproductive in post-modern work environments. Understanding how people make sense of their life course in coworking spaces, and in how far these places support such a narrative, is one aspect of this research. This is intertwined with the experience of being useful. The reflexive networks, the spatial embedding of social enterprises in exchange with lone freelancers could be a day-to-day justification of one's own project in a competitive market environment. Finally, is a recurring importance of craftsmanship inherent in work organisation of coworking spaces? How workers live up to their own standards of creation, respectively to the standards displayed by their profession might be negotiated in such spaces as well.

Sennett's work can be criticized in ways of reproducing dichotomies of good and bad, new ways and old ways, etc. and their romanticizing. As an ethnographer, his experience might also be dramatically unrepresentative. Furthermore, Sennett continuously blends out structuring effects of gender perspectives. However, the detailed description of his account, and the historic dimension seem intriguing enough to be useful in order to further this paper's research in a practicable way, considering the scope and time frame of the whole project.

Baldry's three factors of the built environment – the fixed and semi-fixed factor, and ambient environment - are being experienced by the user holistically. As Baldry gathers evidence from

different studies concerning office and factory environments, I will try to point out the obvious differences compared to coworking spaces. I do not believe in a spatial determinism as rejects Baldry. However, it is striking that the three main factors proposed by Baldry et al. are so profoundly neglected in coworking spaces, and specifically turned around. It is one minor path of this research to determine the reasons of these circumstances.

3.7 Conceptual Research Model and Researching Question

One thing the elaborations in the preceding chapter have shown is that the analytical consideration of coworking spaces is embedded in a multitude of theoretical concepts reaching from culture, the urban, the work and the spatial issues. Coworking spaces, apart from being a physical place, are socially constructed and therefore have to be placed in a wider concept of urbanity, rather than only looking at their inherent implications of economical and social factors. If separated from the rest of the city, their impact on urban working culture might easily be overestimated and idealized in terms of economical and social inclusion and urban justice.

Considering the developments in the political economy, these spaces are both a logical development in the structural organisation of work and glocal representations of double networked enterprises, spatially limited and virtually connected with other spaces in their own, as well as similar networks. Proof of this can be found by researching founder's and operator's motives, personal backgrounds, their conceptions of work and the city, their personal experience and visions.

Considering the developments in urban forms of work, especially the rise of cultural-cognitive industries, and the character of work relationships therein, coworking spaces are an ideal field of research as well, because of their sharp local delimitations. Proof of this can be found by researching the worker's motives and expectations of choosing such spaces, their personal experience of work, their life cycles and networking techniques, and the social and economical status achieved.

This confirms the initial set of questions, which will now be discussed based on the research outlined further down: How does the concept of coworking and its spatial representation, exemplified by the cases of the networks of the Betahaus and the Hub mirror changes in urban

working culture and urbanite's life style of working and living in the city? Can coworking spaces therefore be regarded as instruments of economical and social inclusion in a wider urban context?

4 Methodology

This chapter will outline and explain the methodology used to research the above discussed questions. I will introduce research strategy and design, explain and describe the population sample, the instruments, and the interpretation of the gathered data.

The preconditions of this research are both complex and diverse in two ways. Firstly, the topic of work and labour in its urban form and representation are considerably new to myself. Secondly, the spatial representation of flexible forms of labour in non-corporate contexts has been barely researched generally, and its form of coworking in particular. Therefore the main points of this methodology will be the acknowledgement of its exploratory character and a transparent documentation to the greatest possible extent.

The strategy and design for this research are of mixed nature. Techniques involved are semi-structured interviews, online and offline surveys and desktop research. After reviewing the literature, a set of specific questions emerged, covering the personal background of the subjected people, the views on work, location and space, and the city. Considering the different views and attitudes of users and operators of coworking spaces, a divergent set of questions has been constructed accordingly. Generally, the research is of a qualitative nature.

While initially focusing on a comparison of two networked coworking spaces in two urban settings (the Hub Brussels and the Betahaus Berlin), I have given up on this halfway through the project time due to different reasons. Mainly, there was no return of surveys from the users of Berlin and Brussels at all, so hence this part shifted to strong input from the Betahaus Zurich, which is the only source in the final interpretation of user data. However, conceptually more interesting was the extension of the field, especially regarding the Betahaus, since the one in Zurich is only in the initial testing phase of the concept. Therefore it seemed feasible to include expert interviews with both the places. Luckily, the survey of users in Zurich gives a glimpse towards this side, but certainly has to

be extended and routinised in further research. Finally, all Hubs and Betahouses in European cities have been approached. The details of the data gathering will be discussed below.

The ideal sample consists of two major groups, and a minor group. Firstly, there are the people that are using the coworking spaces. Both case networks use a similar systems of membership status and usage policy. This group is easy to define. Secondly, there are the people involved in organisational structures and employees with salary positions providing the propagated services. Due to their position their access to background knowledge is more extensive. Thirdly, there is people not directly connected to the coworking spaces, but with own agendas concerning this research topic. Those could be other researchers, journalists, administrators, activists. They might be able to provide an external view on the respective spaces and the field in general.

Due to the numbers in the different groups, semi structured interviews would not always be feasible. However, a strategy of online survey and personal survey should help to reach out for all the involved actors. It has to be noted that online and offline survey involve different interviewers and are hence subject of different survey conditions. This has to be discussed.

The measurement of the key factors in this research will be based on answers of the data gathered. Categories of measurement are the degree of success of the business model and the ideology behind the concept of the particular space, the actual definition and adaptation of coworking, the communication and networking methods between the involved actors, the perception of work, the physical and abstract placement in the city and the interaction with the urban surrounding. Other minor categories will emerge during the discussion of the results and will be mentioned as deemed necessary.

5 Data gathering, processing and analysis

The approach to the field started in July with a series of Emails to both the Betahaus Berlin and the Hub Brussels. While the contact of Hub Brussels directly invited me to an interview, the contact in Betahaus Berlin defeated an interview appointment, but helped me introduce my research during a weekly public gathering of members and non-members with the focus of a few expert presentations

and a general getting to know each other atmosphere. This is called betabreakfast and is held in all four Betahouses at the same time. Although I was able to introduce my research on two occasions, put out flyers with the research and was listed in the weekly newsletter, I was unfortunately not able to receive any survey data by Betahaus Berlin users. Nevertheless, two expert interviews, based on lead questions in four main categories could be held thereafter. A short trip to Brussels in the following days gave me the chance to hold a similar interview there, but here as well I could not get a hold of survey data. Whilst focusing on Brussels and Berlin, I realized the necessity to open up the focus to other branches of both of the networks.

Certainly acknowledging the distorting impact in the case of the urban environment, I opted for the more interesting part of the possibility to compare, firstly, the established Betahaus in Berlin and the one in the process of founding in Zurich, and to broaden the intellectual reference point of the case of the Hub Brussels with some more insights from the example of the Hub Zurich, both of which have a similar situation of being quite established and with a leading role in the former case, and being quite new with some heavy impact ideas for the whole network in the latter case.

All five interviews with the founders, respectively operators have been held inside the working environment during normal working hours. While focusing on the theoretically formulated questionnaire, I was forced to reconsider the intensity of certain categories in certain cases. That leads to some methodological black holes in the data set, but is mostly due to schedule issues of the informants. Hence the decision on which categories and questions to focus was subjective, personal and circumstantial.

All interviews have been transcribed in a fashion of writing down the spoken word with the least necessary adjustments on grammar and orthography. Comments and explanation of names have been added in brackets {}. Although names have been mentioned throughout the interviews, the informants are being held anonymous due to formal reasons of the methodology. All interview partners agreed on being contacted in case of further inquiry.

The gathered survey data is very ambiguous in a double sense. Firstly, there have been ten respondents, all exclusively from the newly found Betahaus Zurich, which at this point had a core

client stock of 80. Hence the data is heavily biased, and can certainly not suffice to draw critical generalizations for the whole Betahaus, let alone the network in other cities. For this reason I decided to include the data only in a descriptive way, since it is the only information at hand regarding users of coworking spaces. However, this data did influence my own reflections upon the interviews, and hence should be at least subject to a critical revision of this thesis.

6 Results

6.1 Description of the sample

6.1.1 The ideal cases

The decision for a research case is based on theoretical, as well as practical considerations. Being a research accessible environment, the case provides a communicative gatekeeper, comprises a great deal of the considered attributes and reflects ideally all the above mentioned theoretical issues. Being a well recognized example of its kind in the coworking community, it inhibits a flagship role or is at least reasonably respected as representative. A statute or manifesto that expresses a holistic approach to work and life style can be helpful in describing the cultural identity of the case. These points have to be confirmed before any on site research.

The ideal case study would include an established coworking space, preferably with branches / network hubs or nodes in more than one city. Not only being flexible in renting contracts and payment plans, it should also provide an assemblage of various technological, entrepreneurial and social services. These should include, but are not limited to:

1. physically separated, architecturally remarkable structure
2. technological infrastructure such as different kinds of desktop spaces, a virtual working environment, connectivity to the internet, spaces for non-individual work related activities
3. entrepreneurial networking into manifold professional fields, different geographical locations, different milieux

6.1.2 Betahaus

The first Betahaus is a coworking space in Berlin Kreuzberg, Germany, established in January 2009. It has capacities for about 200 users in a mix of full time and part time usage of working places. Additionally there is a café, meeting rooms, a quiet rest & relax room, a workshop called Open Design City and a tool workshop. Users have unlimited internet access, can rent lockers, can ask for economical consultancy. The Betahaus arranges a start up competition called betapitch, in which promising entrepreneurs can present their ideas and win exclusive rights to workspace and the consultancy capacities of the operators. There is a weekly networking event called betabreakfast every Thursday, which is held parallel in all Betahouses. Additionally, there is a myriad of occasionally organized social events, professional workshops and seminars, and networking events, also in collaboration with other coworking spaces of the respective cities.

The scope of welcomed clientèle is rather broadly defined:

“The Betahaus aims at people who are looking for a flexible working space in a collaborative work environment. Many Betahaus users do freelance work but are fed up with sitting at home alone and working on their project in isolation. Others are looking for synergies in order to be able to master bigger projects. Again others have just founded a start-up and require a flexible opportunity for growth.” (betahaus website 2011)

The open and transparent working atmosphere in the Betahaus can also be deduced from the description by the website, but is stressed as well by the users and the operators. Details and overhauling concepts are mentioned, like the sustainable character, the place as a fulfilment of the founders' personal quest for a working environment suitable for their needs, the comparison to the work in a library, the casual shift between café, meeting rooms, workshop for different needs during the workday.

All these descriptions sketch a place of flexibility, informality, spontaneity, cast together – apparently, by a presupposed common sense understanding of how a work environment is supposed to be in the first place.

Currently established coworking spaces are located in Berlin, Hamburg and Cologne. Zurich is at this moment (summer 2011) in the initial testing phase, called betaphase.

Informants for the Betahaus Berlin are two of the founders, both male, 31 years of age, with academic background.

6.1.3 The Hub

The Hub is a network of self-sufficiently organized economic incubators, which currently connects people in 28 different cities world wide. European cities are host to 17 Hubs. Originally a classical franchise project, the founding Hub is situated in London Islington, United Kingdom since 2005. At the moment, the network is in a transition phase, which restructures the one person franchise to a network driven franchise with an annual, democratic general assembly as a final instance of decision making.

The leading philosophy behind the Hub network is a normative concept of social entrepreneurship. The Hubs are incubators in which coworking is a means to an end, rather than the cause of the concept. They aim to support individual entrepreneurs and project-oriented groups to further their business ideas by providing workspaces, based on coworking principles, but also economical consultancy and a wide heterogeneous network of members, which extends behind the coworking typical membership based on workspace and infrastructure rentals like in the Betahaus concept.

Besides an ethic of strong, localized networks, the Hub global network idea is being pursued with verve, especially as part of the contemporary transition period. While internally rotating the place of the annual general assembly, and strong informal interlinks between different Hubs, a virtual formalisation is being installed by an online platform which shall include former localized virtual services as such. One founder of Hub Brussels is heavily involved in this restructuring process, but input and influences are coming from all Hubs accordingly.

Hubs are formally organized according to the decisions of their founders and the legal possibilities of the host countries. Possible forms are shareholder societies, clubs, cooperatives and other forms of non-profit and for-profit organisations.

Hub Brussels, founded in 2009, is a shareholders owned cooperative. Most shareholders (called *careholders* in the internal vocabulary) are also members of the Hub. The founders which are not any more involved in the day-to-day activities are major shareholders as well. Minor ones are for example local social banks. However, the maxim is to continue the Hub as majority member-owned business, aiming at a profit of about 3-5% annually.

Hub Zurich, founded in 2011, is a club (“Verein” German, legal structure), therefore fully non-profit. All founders are involved in day-to-day activities, or work as hosts respectively.

6.1.4 Research design versus real life environment

It is a truism that academic researchers commonly clash with the “real life environment” once they go into the field to actually test their theories. This certainly counts for this research project. In the course of the first approaches and contact search I was confronted with a heavily structured environment. In the case of Betahaus Berlin, the first contact person, one of the founders, has been helpful in terms of offering the distribution of a link to the online survey on their weekly newsletter, as well as a continuing invitation to the general “network breakfast”, an event organized by the coworking space in order to introduce new users, outsiders and old users with each other. Compared to the amount of work places and users (at the time of the study 200 working places and 200 paying users) the participation seems quite low, averaging around 15 persons per event. Turnout of surveys was zero from the beginning on. The threshold to directly contact users is high. A user or company catalogue has not been provided, and there is no possibility to link users with companies due to the nature of most user's informal status as self-employed. The most striking detail was the reluctance to provide expert interviews. The reason for this is the sheer number of interview requests the founders get by media and academia. The further research has been then adjusted accordingly. Finally, two founders agreed to be informants.

The public space of the Betahaus, specifically the café, did not prove to be an easy interface to users, since the approximate length for the interview was discouraging. The users in the café usually did not consider alternatives in appointments. Furthermore, most of the clients of the café were not paying users of the coworking space, but worked aside from that in this particular space. However,

it can be stated, that this experience clarified an important strategy of the Betahaus to redefine work space as private in the coworking area and public in the café area. Interchange occasionally happened when users of Betahaus kept working in the café and vice versa. Since this transition function of the different spaces of the house has not been part of the research, informed details can not be provided yet, but might well be part of further studies. Finally, the impact of investigation, inquiries and groundwork of other professionals in this field should be considered in the future, before deciding about the case study.⁶

A whole other story presented itself regarding the Betahaus Zurich. Being the source of all the survey data gathered, Betahaus Zurich became more interesting as a place to actually visit. Once contact was established to one of the founders, I realized that the character of the betaphase facilitated the research field. Although there has been a strong media interest in the beginning as well, users and founders yet have not been “overrun” by investigative enquirers, hence lowering the threshold of research. The sense of a mission is strongly felt with the founders themselves, a note which also facilitated the interviews in Betahaus Berlin finally. The possibility, though, to have first hand insights into the difference between established node and “soon-to-be” node of a coworking network finalized the extraordinary character of the comparison. This image has proven to be true during the excursion day to Zurich and the comparable talk in Betahaus and Hub, where a bit of a similar situation prevailed due to the young character of Hub Zurich, being opened officially only in the spring of 2011.

The fact that the Hub has a full time host service also helped in getting in touch with an otherwise disconnected research field. Short, informal conversations could be held throughout the day, although the tight schedules of other hosts in other cities inhibited short notice scheduling while being there.

⁶ The Betahaus in particular, has been and still is a major reference in the German coworking scene, as well as the German media, as can be seen by the illustrious list of press reviews in the Appendix.

6.2 Results of the Research

6.2.1 The Business Model

Both networks consist of nodes that accept a central business model. The Betahaus model can be subsumed according to one informant:

“Okay, if you break it down economically it's important, naturally, like in all businesses that you rise your sales and lower your costs. We earn money with coworking, that means we rent out work spaces. We earn money with gastronomy, and we earn money with events. That is the core business. Furthermore, the company Betahaus is doing consultancy work, quite a bit, holds presentations, etc.” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.2. Translated from German by this author.

„Betahaus offers flexible workspace, mainly for creative freelancers and small start-ups. So you come when you want and leave when you want and pay only for the time that you are here, that is actually the business model. And all that is embodied by the open rooms which cultivate exchange“ Betahaus informant 5, transcript p.79. Translated from German by this author.

The enterprise is depending on a constant revenue stream generated by letting out office infrastructure, gastronomy, and event management. The secondary revenue is generated by consultancy work in very broad categories. There is a strong sense of economical sustainability of the concept.

“[...] our commodity [...] is the community and the ideas that flow through here and hence our source of income is the different possibilities to participate in this flow of ideas and people” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.19. Translated from German by this author.

This informant stresses the fluid aspects of the business model, mentioning concepts of community, ideas, later creativity, and the chances for the business model to profit by participating in that stream.

The business concept of the Hub is not as easy to put in simple forms. This is due especially to the heterogeneous legal construction of the individual Hubs:

“So some Hubs are NGOs, some Hubs are cooperatives, some Hubs are for-profit-businesses. In some countries there is a special category for social enterprises ähm so the Hub, we as the Hub {Brussels} are a social enterprise, we are a cooperative so we aim to make profit, we have shareholders, we aim to pay the share holders dividends [...]” Hub informant 3, transcript p.48.

However the legal structure, revenues is being generated primarily via membership tariffs, rent for meeting rooms, and workshop / seminar fees. This being the main economical concept, the content of the work is to provide incubator conditions for start-ups in social entrepreneurship. This is a more clear category to work with, which is due to the strong embedding of the “social” idea in the underlying ideology of the place. This is lacking in the Betahaus. All of the informants are aware of the problematic inclusion of non-statistical factors in the business model, but rather than hiding this fact, they promote the idea of abstract, transforming concepts as part of their business idea. They do not try to fuse this aspect of the non-material layer into the calculation of the business plan. However, the importance of tapping into this flow of ideas via communication principles of low threshold access to other users and operators is a fundamental part in all of the analysed spaces. Hence the broad categories of success for the Hub, i.e.:

“The entrepreneurial side is: We break even, we make enough money to pay the bills, pay the salaries and be sustainably viable in an economic sense.” Hub informant 3, transcript p.66

“[...] I think, for me, romantically, the success factor of the Hub is when businesses appear out of it. [...] And as a social enterprise, yeah, we are aiming to break even and make

money, yet we are aiming for the social objective of empowering other social entrepreneurs. So, the money aside, that for me is the success factor. Do we have a dynamic community?” Hub informant 3, transcript p.65-66.

The Betahaus concept, being a more straight forward enterprise idea with a less ideology driven idea has also a clearer focus on the numbers, expressed by the informants:

“Our success is measured by the users' profit of the concept and hence their attitude to pay for the place [...] if they have the feeling they work better and more successfully here then the readiness to pay is higher. So it is only successful as an economic enterprise, if ideas do not only evolve here, but are also financially viable.” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.34. Translated from German by this author.

However, success is being qualified as partially idealistic, but always depending on the financial restraints of the idea. Both are necessary, idealistic and material success of the business, in order to be sustainable. The conflict emerging out of this for the individual worker in terms of blurring lines between work and leisure, between autonomous and heteronomous commitment and the associated implications of “overburning” for an idea in order to reach this level of success is apparent:

„I still believe [...] there is an ideal value and an ideal success. But this is unlasting and connected to an economic success, not necessarily linear – you can have temporal ideal success without the economical success – but I think you only get happy if this converges mid-term. This is also typical for the people working here, if you don't watch it you easily reach your ideal borders. That is even a specific problem in Berlin or a core problem of the creative industries in general [...].” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.13. Translated from German by this author.

6.2.2 The Ideological Concepts of the Particular Spaces

The spaces create their identity based on concepts drawn from different sources. Betahaus focuses strongly on the concept of “beta” which implies a continuing beta phase similar to a testing phase of

products and services derived from information technology vocabulary. The Hub's main driving principle is the facilitation of social entrepreneurship:

“[...] as the principle of beta implies one thing came after the other. We were certain about creating a spatial concept for working places, but that this would as well be a good event location only came later.” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.3. Translated from German by this author

„We can't define exactly what is social entrepreneurship, and we don't have a demand to do so. We usually explain to people how we understand the concept and either people identify with that or not. [...] Mostly we say it is the application of business methods and principles to solve social and ecological problems.” Hub informant 4, transcript p.71. Translated from German by this author.

There's also a delineation by describing other places' alleged concept:

“[...] the original aspiration of the Hub, which was strongly focused on social entrepreneurship was maybe a bit too much closeness between the coworkers” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.3. Translated from German by this author.

Coworking as a term is generally seen as non-sufficient to describe activities of the spaces detailed and profoundly. However, it is genuinely used to help communicating the spaces' concept and to unite different interpretations:

“We don't classify ourselves as coworking space. We [...] are a lot more than that. The thing that makes us different is this sustainability thing, the fact that we are hosted [...]” Hub informant 3, transcript p.61.

“[...] the network aims to breed enterprises. Hence we call ourselves rather an incubator, than a coworking space.” Hub informant 4, transcript p.71. Translated from German by this author.

“For us coworking is a means to an end, and the end is the boost of social entrepreneurship. It is stronger with us in Zurich than most of the other Hubs, since we already had a strong background in this. We actually got to the Hub via social entrepreneurship while others got to social entrepreneurship and issues of sustainability via the concept of coworking.” Hub informant 4, transcript p.71. Translated from German by this author.

“[...] coworking is not a fixed term in Switzerland [...] we have to define ourselves with coworking, because that is a term which will help us delimit ourselves from others; which will give us an identity [...]” Betahaus informant, transcript p.103. Translated from German by this author.

6.2.3 Concept of Coworking

Coworking, conceptually reflected mostly in Betahaus, follows a logic of a change in the meaning of specific societal values:

“[...] what constitute this space here is actually a broad societal alteration, facilitated by the internet, through which constellations of values have been shifted in a way, and values such as openness, transparency, shareism [...] and collaboration [...] have been rearranged.” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.22. Translated from German by this author.

It goes on that out of this self-evidence, groups of people are gathering based on social and professional principles alike, and yet not under semi-formalized project groups inside an existing corporate hierarchy. This rearrangement challenges dichotomies like work- and leisure time, public and private sphere of work, professional and social contacts, etc.

“They lose their meaning and become blurred. That brings problems, signs of overload, etc. But what forms anew and forms a kind of stability, that is what we are in right now. And that is most likely described by the term coworking [...]” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.22. Translated from German by this author.

One of the most stringent concepts represented by operators is the apparent absence of competition between coworking spaces and between users working in the spaces:

“Theoretically, on the surface, there is, you know. [...] But then I think, when you experience both of them, you realize that they offer a lot very different things [...] there's a lot of things that we do differently, and we don't do that to differentiate ourselves, to give ourselves a market advantage. We do that because the community want that. We don't do that as a member attraction tool sort of thing.” Hub informant 3, transcript p.62.

„[...] when I was in Betahaus Berlin, or other coworking spaces, between the users, although they do the same thing, there's little of an attitude of competition. So, you help each other out even. And what I found exciting that this goes on also between coworking spaces. They see each other as part of a family, rather than competition.” Betahaus informant 5, transcript p.97. Translated from German by this author.

“How this is going to change once big franchises will step into the scene, that I don't know. That's another feeling, because this will be another level [...] here we are as a coworking space operator community. And like we boost the community inside our space, we are likewise connected with other spaces, exchange information on a collaborative level [...] but that only works as long as you share the same values and as long as there is trust.” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.32. Translated from German by this author.

„[...] a coworking space is pretty much like a café. You can't patent the concept. Everybody could come along, opening up a coworking space. And it is still a movement which grows and grows and Berlin is maybe now at a point where the market is saturated and maybe now competition starts. Now it's the time when it's decided what is a good coworking space and what is bad coworking space.“ Betahaus informant 5, transcript p.97. Translated from German by this author.

The issue of a non-competitive environment in a market-driven productive environment seems at first glance paradoxical, but can be explained by a strong commitment to above mentioned values:

“Here's an atmosphere in which people believe [...] if you give out things, information the chance of Feedback that helps you on, that you get this back and that chances for that are higher than taking and stealing it from someone. This atmosphere is dominant here and that's why [...] people believe in working together, and nobody walks through here like this {mimics a person guarding its affairs}. This one will also be isolated.” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.32. Translated from German by this author.

“[...] in Zurich such a concept is like a small cultural revolution, because it doesn't work like the people from here. [...] they work like: 'Hm, that's mine, not yours.' and: 'I work alone and you are my competition.' And we were aware of that when we started, but yet with the ulterior motive, that everybody has this inner need to be more open. [...] Certainly there are people here in Zurich, but they have no place to call home to work and live like they want to.” Betahaus informant 5, transcript p.95. Translated from German by this author.

The Hub stresses the hosted environment over the coworking, but also mirrors a development of shift in entrepreneurial and working values such as in the Betahaus:

“[...] the job of the host is to be a match maker and is to connect people to other people with like minded projects who you, or who you think would be a great kind of collaborator or partner [...]” Hub informant 3, transcript p.58.

“[...] we stress things like, you know, social responsibility, we stress collaboration, we stress interaction, we stress community building and if people aren't interested in engaging in a community, you know, and they're just looking for a simple coworking space then they suddenly realize that the Hub isn't the space for them [...]” Hub informant 3, transcript p.59.

The implications of coworking spaces on the traditional views of working culture as expressed by scholars such as Richard Sennett is intriguing. While the focus of popular discussion mourns the confusion that workers experience via the transition between different forms of work organisation,

it fails to acknowledge life circles that are only grounded in the contemporary system, as expressed by one informant in the Betahaus:

“[...] in this coworking movement you realize somehow that [...] many people are disappointed by their work, I believe [...] so, if you've already worked for ten years in this way, then this is kind of a movement to get 'a second chance' [...] This spirit is present here, too, but is outweighed by the attitude of [...] not getting into a standard employment relation in the first place, but do something new right away [...].” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.24. Translated from German by this author.

6.2.4 Coworking as a Spatial Concept

The actual spaces of the case studies have usually been found by chance via the initial founding network. First of all, the interview partners stressed the uniqueness of the places, and occasionally connect the physical appearance with the inside working culture:

“[...] you shoot past the meaning if you call it a coworking space, because if you take 90 per cent of all coworking spaces world wide they wouldn't look like this one.” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.29. Translated from German by this author.

“So they are looking to connect, they are looking to network, they are looking to attend interesting events, and they're also looking to be stimulated and inspired and which is why they come here, because this does not look like their you know their home office in any way shape or form.” Hub informant 3, transcript p.50-51.

“[...]you know you're in a Hub instantly. [...] for some Hubs it's so important to have a very high level of design [...] for other Hubs [...] maybe it's that more community atmosphere [...].” Hub informant 3, transcript p.52.

Hard facts for all places is the need for working space, event space and recreational space. The flexibility of the rooms reflects the concepts accordingly. Betahaus Berlin and Hub Brussels also

stressed the chance to expand inside the house. The simultaneity for work, events, meetings, etc. needs to be given:

“[...] we tried to separate the rooms that you can work and have events at the same time.”

Hub informant 4, transcript p.73. Translated from German by this author.

6.2.5 Entrepreneurial Role Model versus Precarious Work

“[...] ideal success requisites your idealism for something and that you 'catch fire' for something, but if you 'burn' constantly, you'll wear out. That means, I think it is difficult in this moment to keep the balance. Because all these things are a lot of fun, but with all the insecurities and all this love for freedom, you still are in need of a certain degree of security” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p 14. Translated from German by this author.

Operators of coworking spaces had strong socio-economical security networks at hand before they started their project. Most of them have an academical degree. They are rooted in the milieu of the cognitive-cultural industries. They brought existing networks into the enterprise, and had the cultural means to communicate their ideas.

“[...] you can get unemployment insurance by choice, so in case you go bankrupt you still get some unemployment money [...] what I do personally is to work as a freelancer [...] and that provides me some security, so that I feel I don't give up on my actual profession.”

Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.12. Translated from German by this author.

“I've saved some money, first of all, and secondly, I would have gone to Berlin with my girlfriend, and that would have given me extra security. She would have gotten a job and so. [...] Maybe that's a self-confident attitude of mine, but maybe also a bit naive. [...] I follow the principle that if you need money somehow it always works out. There's always a way.” Betahaus informant 5, transcript p.83-84. Translated from German by this author.

In all cases, entrepreneurial activity was not born out of economical necessity, it was a voluntary decision. This does not imply that this move is free of material restrictions and environmental

influences as in how the spaces had been established. On a personal, individual level, however, the protagonists certainly acted with little restraint, following a positivist image of hands-on entrepreneurs as it is been promoted in the contemporary wider discourse on societal role models.

“[...] I know people that earn a lot of money, and I know people who earn little money. But if you ask me, really I don't have the impression that most of the people here suffer [...] I believe also [...] that it is partially a luxury decision to be able to work here [...].”

Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.17. Translated from German by this author.

6.2.6 The Locality in the City and Urban Concepts

The location of the spaces is heavily depending on the image of the precinct, the infrastructural conditions, as well on the connectivity to public transportation, bike access, and genuine closeness to the perceived city centre and living neighbourhoods. Perceived centres in Berlin were mentioned in terms of districts, Kreuzberg, Neukölln, the informal Kreuzkölln, Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte. Zurich's relevant precinct is Kreis 5, a derelict industrial area, in redevelopment schemes since years; another is Kreis 3 which houses a relevant milieu of the audience and customers of the cognitive-cultural economy in Zurich. The city is also heavily geographically structured by the surrounding hills, the Zurich lake and grows along the river Limmat. Hence the overarching concept on the side of the city is to densify the centre around the main station in order to dampen urban sprawl. This goes along with an attitude of locals not to consider working far away from their home place and not behind the hills, which is not considered to be a part of the city centre.

„[...] we looked at where the dynamics in the city are, where things are happening, what is a cool place to work, because you don't only work on your table, but also in the area [...].“

Hub informant 4, transcript p.68. Translated from German by this author.

„[...] Zurich, not being a big city though has a strong local effect, most of our clients are from this neighbourhood [...] we feel, because of this effect, that it is extremely valuable to be in this specific neighbourhood of Zurich, because for example we get a lot of them from the creative branches situated around here, and they extremely appreciate to live near by

the Betahaus.“ Betahaus informant 5, transcript p.85. Translated from German by this author.

The Betahaus Berlin stresses a semi-public space, the café, as necessity to bridge the slight disadvantage of second-row placement.

“Workspaces are upstairs, so you have to get in contact first of all.” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.4. Translated from German by this author.

“[...] second floor backyard just doesn't do, but an open house with a semi-public space such as the café, you have a very low-threshold interface to the city [...]” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.29. Translated from German by this author.

Although most of the dynamics in the urban environment consider issues of infrastructure and locality, as mentioned above, some aspects of urbanity perpetuates also certain images of the coworking space, such as an alleged transitory character of the precinct, the size of the city, the people living in the nearby neighbourhood. These images tend to be diverse and might be a backward reflection of aspired images for the coworking space:

“So, Moritzplatz is just great now, because this is pretty much in Kreuzberg and between Kreuzberg and Mitte one of the last derelict areas. [...] Moritzplatz will develop more, whilst other places of the city are readily planned yet, and for Betahaus a place that changes fits the concept.” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.5. Translated from German by this author.

“This is still Kreuzberg. Even if it is as gentrified as other parts of Germany or Berlin, you still have to fancy living and working in such a precinct. [...] Hence the people here, I believe, are in a certain way more relaxed than many others, cause they feel like getting involved with unfinished things and to be involved in designing these things, no matter if they earn 5.000 Euros a month or 500.” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.9. Translated from German by this author.

“I think Brussels is a very artistic different place, and I think that's kind of reflected here in the Hub, cause I find that Brussels is always divided between the EU institutions and than the more artistic kind of communities [...]” Hub informant 3, transcript p.54.

6.2.7 Community versus Network

All places stress their character as a community, though the reflection upon this term is quite shallow. Hence the meaning can only be understood in the individual context. All coworking spaces tend to confuse community and network.⁷

Due to the size and the age of the Hub network, a community building process is more relevant here, but needs to be delimited from the organisational network structure. Locally you have strong signs of community, i.e. the complementary currency system, the trust of the time management, the engagement in social activities in the member circle in Hub Brussels. This docks in an abstract sense on the global network via the embracing ideology of social entrepreneurship.

“A Hub can never be founded by an individual, because it's an oxymoron. We are talking about community and co-creation space, so it cannot be one person.” Hub informant 3, transcript p.56.

“No Hub opens its doors with no members already. So a lot of them embark on community building, so they shape the spaces to the people that are working in here.” Hub informant transcript 3, p.41.

“[...] these four people {the co-founders of Hub Brussels} coming from different nationalities, different ages, different backgrounds, different professional backgrounds, they brought their networks.” Hub informant 3, transcript p.42.

⁷ An excursion is necessary here in order to clarify both terms. Although not specifically distinguished in the theoretical chapter, for now I rely on Bastian Lange's brief and remarkable quotation of Wittel's understanding of both. Community therefore inherits stability, permanence, coherence, locality, context, integration, rootedness, involvement and a certain shared biography, whereas networks are short-termed, intensive forms of collectivization, informational in character, sustained by media and information and communications technology. They are based on individualization rather than community. (Cf. Lange 2007, p.97)

“It's up to them when they use their time. We're entirely based on trust.” Hub informant 3, transcript p.50.

“[...] you get that support of people being in the same situation as you, and people go: yeah i know it's difficult, but it's great, isn't it?`at the same time. look, and we are all kind of here and we are all kind of doing this and you got, it's that instant understanding [...]”
Hub informant 3, transcript p.51.

The Betahaus network is currently in the process of perpetuation of the network of users into a community. Although they do not implement many formal ways of community engagement tools, it seems that the socio-economical benefit for users - especially start-ups leaving due to space restraints and associated people not in need of a working space - is exceeding the cost. A recognized membership status becomes valuable on top of the working environment.

“[...] It is extremely important who is doing that. It's just like a bar, operated by the owner. The guy behind the bar is the most important person. You go there because of him, and then around him a community evolves [...]” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.23-24. Translated from German by this author.

“[...] we had and still have many ideas but were not certain if this works out in the first place [...] out of the coworking then a community grew which in turn made it possible to plan things further, like the tool shop [...]” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.5. Translated from German by this author.

“[...]now we could have a membership for 10 Euros without a desk and nothing and people pay that. Two years ago they would have taken us for nutty.” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.32. Translated from German by this author.

“[...] what works best is really, and what is most important - and I strongly believe that a place like this only functions like this - is that you live this concept, that you are here, that

you give a face to all of this [...]” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.16. Translated from German by this author.

6.2.8 The Networking and Cooperation between Places

The Betahaus network mainly relays the vision and concepts of Berlin. The network's ideology is inherit in this relationship:

“The influence of Berlin is that all of us working on this here, work with the vision of Berlin. That means we have been to Berlin, or we've got to know the Betahaus Berlin and were thrilled and approached this thing in Zurich with this idea.” Betahaus informant 5, transcript p.80. Translated from German by this author.

The networking towards other cities works for both Betahaus and Hub, in a similar fashion: the effort and engagement of a local interest group that wishes to establish a coworking place is necessary in order to spread the network.

“[...] and during the workshops we would say 'Okay, actually this single place by itself - that is not so interesting, because more important is the network of these spaces' [...] And then instantly the question arose: 'Would you do that somewhere else?' And our answer was: 'Yes, of course, we might not have a concept yet, but let's talk if you think that would make sense somehow' And this is how Cologne and Hamburg happened.” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.31. Translated from German by this author.

“[...] for me I've made the decision, because I am from Zurich. It's like hearing about a cool idea, and you don't try to establish that idea in a city you don't know. If you know the city, you can fairly well provide mediation service for this product, and that is very necessary.” Betahaus informant 5, transcript p.89. Translated from German by this author.

Additionally, the Betahaus founders rely on gut feeling towards the applicants and readily distributed images of cities for their sense making:

“Concerning Hamburg and Cologne [we] had an excellent feeling towards the people, above all we also had the feeling that those city have a “lighthouse character” which seemed to us like logical steps: Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, also on the part of the audience, where we had confidence about knowing the people living there and the kind of people that might come to such a coworking space.” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.5.
Translated from German by this author.

However, the Hub has strong formalities once a group claims interest in setting up a new places. A feasibility study, two advocating Hubs, and a final vote of the network's general assembly are necessary to start the process. Their contacts are also informal due to friendships and external network connections. Exchange programs and complementary external funding also tie Hubs together:

“[...] now there's a whole framework set up to support new Hubs. And you get a sister Hub who is another Hub in the network. Either it's geographically linked to you or economically linked to you. And they can advice you and help you and support you in that process.” Hub informant 3, transcript p.51.

“[...] we've very close relationship with Amsterdam ähm mainly because, ähm because of personal connections. People were very familiar with the Amsterdam founding team when we were founding Hub Brussels. Also, geographically we're very close and we actually work on a number of EU funded projects together. [...] We're also close to the guys in London, obviously, geographically [...] but I mean, personally, I have you know, I have friends in many other different Hubs who I can call upon [...] We equally have a member exchange program [...]” Hub informant 3, transcript p.57-58.

“[...] during the work-up phase we got a lot of support from Vienna, because those are old study colleagues of Michel {co-founder Hub Zurich} via the AISEC student network. [...] Milan, because it is geographically close. And of course Amsterdam, too, because I am coming from Holland. [...] since we've opened, we are a sister Hub of the Hub in Dubai [...]” Hub informant 4, transcript p.70. Translated from German by this author.

“[...] without the international story behind it all, we wouldn't have started all of this. Well, it attracts, this network. [...] And I believe the international contacts will be the next step. Generally, the people are strongly locally organized [...]” Hub informant 4, transcript p.75-76. Translated from German by this author.

The cooperation between different spaces depends on the character of the network. The young Betahaus network strongly depends on fixed, formal communication between the organisational departments of each house, and frequent visits to Berlin in order to perpetuate the vision and the concept. The shared external imagery suggest a reliance on and an effort to develop the brand Betahaus further on. Other shared services are necessary in order to keep communication easy and costs low:

“Right now there's a jour fixe in certain business area [...] We also do get togethers every couple of months. [...] we work together on the online platform and share the website, social media as well. [...] We use the same accountant, the same accounting system, etc.” Betahaus informant 1, transcript p.7. Translated from German by this author.

“[...] we exchange content and that is more intensive within the Betahauses, but also happens with other coworking spaces. And the Betahauses should be only locations of a network which is not depend on the fact that it is in Hamburg, Berlin or Cologne” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.31-32. Translated from German by this author.

„Well, I see the future of the cooperation mostly like, well, I'd like to push that, mainly because I see it as added value for our users, that they are a part of an international network.“ Betahaus informant 5, transcript p.90. Translated from German by this author.

6.2.9 Clash with Formalities

A wider circle has to be drawn to include the external relations which the spaces are entertaining, regarding connections to administrative and political authorities, as well as other businesses. A general approach to communicate basic concepts and methods is the invitation of prospect partners

into the spaces and the combined work under these conditions. This is especially important for the Berlin Betahaus, having most of the experience of the case studies in this sense. However, difficulties are usually growing out of a institutionalized approach of external partners and the necessary application of the beta-concept, which clashes with formalized prerequisites like planning of infrastructure and architecture and the fluidity of spatial and conceptual usage by the users.

“[...] we've made it our principle when asked for a cooperation, saying: 'Okay, but forget the architect, let's just start with the space as is and the people that will move in their participate.' If they can't do that, then it doesn't work out for us. You can't just put something finished there. [...] That's the general problem why it's difficult. There are call for tenders, and you have to have architects in the room, but then it's already half-way wrong, or at least half-way different than us, and then we usually can't help out.”

Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.39. Translated by this author.

Apart from spatial concepts, this is problematic for the businesses inside the spaces in terms of applying for public funding with projects characterized as fluid or in development:

“It is damn hard in Germany with certain ideas [...] where you can't even explain yourself in the beginning, but you need time first. You don't get any money for that, so you have a bank, parents or you hold on to social welfare. If you have some know how, you might get a start up grants. Or you are a student for whom there is 'EXIST' {public start up grant for students}, but even that is not really directed to people that want to go straight 'hands on'” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.37. Translated from German by this author.

“There are support programmes to which we applied, which had so much mandatory stuff, that we had to say: 'If we do it like that we can't guarantee that it will work', because it was so important to us that we could change our mind along the way.” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.39. Translated from German by this author.

When it comes to the adaptability of coworking concepts, external partners seem to generally underestimate the non-material, community building efforts of these spaces:

“They come here, ask for the concept and tell you: ‘That’s easy, just put up some office tables in a big room. Well, but they never plan for a budget for the work with the people.’”

Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.37. Translated from German by this author.

Prototyping for city promotion and regeneration strategies on the side of the authorities are not usually clashing naturally with the concepts, but do not seem to be a major driving force of the spaces. It does not seem that operators would rely on their part to promote these concepts.

“[...] they like the idea that this here exists, without their money and they use it as showcase for Berlin. City administration of other cities, the business development drops by to get some ideas, or some universities to establish something alike there.” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.38. Translated from German by this author.

“So, we’ve been asked a couple of times to ähm consult or to collaborate on things with them. It’s only at the very beginning of the project. [...] They’ve been here at the Hub, they understand exactly who we are, and basically they they think that this is the key to helping there in Wallonia or one of the keys to helping there. So, they obviously need us to be involved, because they don’t have a clue about what it really means. They just really, really want it.” Hub informant 3, transcript p.66-67.

6.2.10 Critical Acclaim towards Coworking

All coworking places experienced only little critical reaction towards their business model or their concept of work. Hub Zurich and Brussels and Betahaus Zurich have been confronted with negative remarks about the feasibility of the social character of the hosted enterprises, which is claimed to be a misunderstanding of the underlying principles and a disbelief in the profitability of it. The informant of Betahaus Zurich also blames a strong local culture of competition to be a cause for initial scepticism.

“[...] it's more being a lack of understanding of what is this social enterprise movement rather than a criticism of people wanting to work in these different ways.” Hub informant 3, transcript, p.65.

“[...] in Switzerland the concept of coworking and social entrepreneurship are relatively new. [...] we are in between traditional for-profit and the social entrepreneurship, non-profit-world and nobody really understands us” Hub informant 4, transcript p.74.

Translated from German by this author.

One Betahaus Berlin informant mentioned reactions mainly from media implying a general critic of the precarious character of businesses inside coworking spaces and the camouflage of this in coworking spaces. Another subtle line was the allegation of the banality of their kind of work

“A classical issue is the public-law media intellectual approach, claiming: 'It's all precarious and a place for people who don't find a job.’” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.36. Translated from German by this author.

This mainstream critique changed over time, and consequently the attitude shifted.

“That changed over the months, or two years to: 'Okay, the working world will change and all of us won't have standard employment relations any more. First like: the poor people, don't have a fixed job.' and then: 'What models are there actually? [...] Oh well, look, there are talented people that are not available for the big companies any more.' [...] So there are actually people working here. And partially they might 'have nothing to eat' or have to apply for social welfare, because they have an idea that they want to push through – not because they can't get a job.” Betahaus informant 2, transcript p.36. Translated from German by this author.

6.2.11 Impressions from Users

As mentioned earlier, the results from the user survey have been disappointingly few. However, they do open up a small insight and might at least be mentioned here for reasons of completeness.

The sample consists of ten respondents, three of them female. Age range comprises 24 to 54 years, with a tendency towards mid thirties. Except for one they are exclusively single. A high level of education with occasional career changers, most of them show a continuity between formal education, description of profession and other self-references. All see themselves as freelancers, some added start-up in founding. All are experienced in working in different places, while the choice of home office is still dominant. Due to the pilot character of the space, the services used are not as widespread as in other spaces. The cooperation between users is on a thin level, yet it is present. The image of Betahaus does not yet compete with the image of the personal brand and a community feeling is yet not dominant. Still - not to be naturalistic about it - some users stress tendencies of an evolving community, hence it can be assumed that this is what they aim for as well while working in the space. While half of the people is not in need of external service suppliers, already three noted that they use occasionally services provided by other coworkers. Asked for a change of working style, inspiration and projects, already half of the respondents affirmed a positive influence of the work environment. This is also reflected in the response about reasons for motivation in the space, where most of the answers tend to be positive towards the space as a specific locality of work, a working atmosphere and other people working in it. Interestingly enough, most of the respondents are coming from a background with a former employment situation which usually has been financially more attractive. This is also reflected in the seven people choosing to change something in the course of their career. Correlating to that most are in a comfortable position to choose the jobs they want to work on. A personal freedom and self-realization is important for half of the respondents. Reasons to work in the Betahaus support the ideas of the operators, namely less distraction from non-work influence, a positive environment associated with work.

7 Discussion and conclusions

The intended research goal as stated in the beginning was to clarify certain developments in contemporary urban working culture, mainly why people are deciding to establish and use coworking spaces, and how these spaces are conceptually and ideologically connected to each other and their urban environment. I implied that those places stabilize precarious work relationships.

While focusing on the theoretical discourse on work and urban culture, I tried to lay out current threads of the discussion. Touching major issues like the macro effects of political economy, all the way down to the micro effects of the spatial representation of work in the city, I hoped to visualize the complexity of the issues at hand and the necessity to approach coworking spaces from different angles. Although the final outcome of my research is very marginal and heavily impressed by the opinions and topics on the side of the operators, I still believe in the necessity to broaden the research field in order to place coworking in a wider socio-cultural and economical context.

However, certain findings can be stated as being reflected in the data. The data for the two case networks has shown that coworking as a concept is mainly used to communicate a wide array of activities. Critical external opinions seem to be rooted in the novelty of the concepts and a related necessity for transparent, adjusted communication. All informants claim to see this as one of the focal points of their image and public relations campaign, and judge this to be a fundamental challenge for their future work. While originally representing a specific way of organizing work, it is pushed to include also a specific set of values to distinguish a network-based community in the case of the Betahaus, whereas it represents only a means to an end for the Hub. In the former case this can be regarded as a real shift in working culture under which groups of workers with heterogeneous backgrounds find hook up points to connect to each other, bridging gaps between their professions. However, these workers represent only a certain faction of the urban environment's population, who need to inhabit a very specific set of values and norms in order to participate in these spaces, least to speak of certain socio-cultural and financial resources.

Relating to urban issues, and in particular the adaptability of coworking concepts in contemporary cities, it is striking how little reference has been made by the informants to wider frameworks in terms of influence towards governments and administration. All of the visited spaces have stemmed their concepts and places by themselves, with little to none engagement of local urban stakeholders apart from their direct economical and social networks. It is in turn this individual effort, mirrored in entrepreneurship and glocal networks which represents in my opinion contemporary urban culture. This leads me to the conclusion that this form of localized, spatial organisation of work in

networks or communities has an exclusive character and is not appropriate to ease tensions in the urban fabric.

In terms of networking spaces between different urban settings, it is striking that most of this is based on personal meaningful relationships, and secondly only by marginal images of the candidate cities. Adding to this is the obvious advantage of regional proximity and established lines of mobility along which these networks thrive. Although with the wider Hub network a strong tendencies of formalisation is apparent, this is more likely to the complexity to organize a global network, rather than the need for a compatibility towards external partners and networks. Finally, although all informants praise the possibilities of an international network, it is the majority of the users that seems to be more interested in enforcing local involvement before acting out the international links. These places can certainly only appear in an urban setting that has the conditions prepared and shares their set of values. It seems impossible to impose a working environment in an environment lacking those conditions, just so those could evolve naturally as an effect of the former.

A further research into the matter needs to address the structured field more sufficiently. The approach to the users is difficult, the gatekeepers of the spaces are necessary to be convinced of the necessity and the benefits of an interaction with the users in such a strong way. However, it is inevitable to conclude the thesis topics in detail by thoroughly examining the user side. Unfortunately, this has not been successful in this endeavour. As mentioned before, this thesis should be judged under the assumption to measure a field of research under constant dynamic development, whose actors are constantly adjusting their conceptual directions in a heavily structured societal environment. However, due to their access of many different resources, it seems that these working spaces will enjoy a quite bright future, if not only because they so successfully embrace niches and trends that can only be found in the city today.

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9 Appendices

9.1 Images of the Different Cases

9.1.1 Berlin Betahaus



Image 1: Betahaus Berlin Building



Image 2: Betahaus Berlin Café



Image 3: Betahaus Berlin Open Design City & original Coworking Space



Image 4: Betahaus Berlin Machine Shop



Image 5: Betahaus Berlin Meeting Room



Image 6: Betahaus Berlin Main Working Space

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9.1.2 Brussels Hub



Image 7: Hub Brussels Main Working Space



Image 8: Hub Brussels Second adjacent Working Space



Image 10: Hub Brussels Meeting Room 1



Image 9: Hub Brussels Meeting Room 2

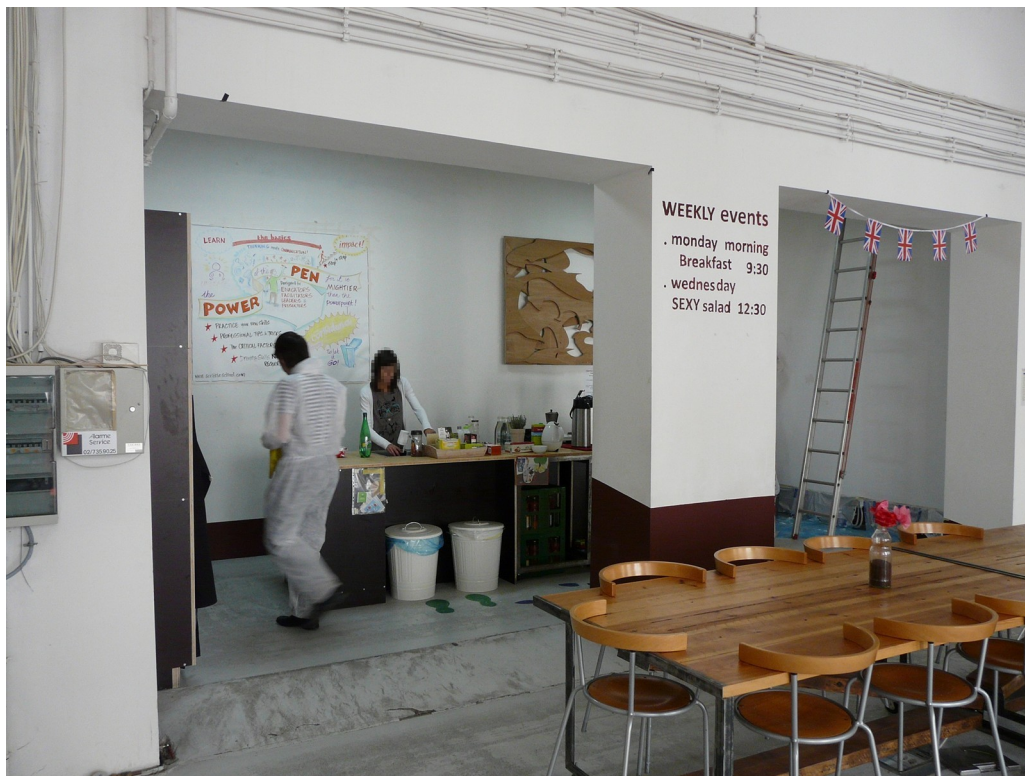


Image 11: Hub Brussels Kitchchen

9.1.3 Zurich Betahaus



Image 12: Betahaus Zurich outside



Image 13: Betahaus Zurich Main Working Space



Image 14: Betahaus Zurich Kitchen



Image 15: Betahaus Zurich Relax Corner

9.1.4 Zurich Hub



Image 16: Hub Zurich Working Space



Image 17: Hub Zurich Event Space