

The Evolution of Non-traditional Workplaces: From Third Places to Hybrid Places



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Abstract Recent socioeconomic and technological developments with significant impacts on work organization and labor relations, along with changes in the work/life relationship, have driven the emergence and rapid growth of new working spaces (NeWSps). Starting with a review of the multidisciplinary literature, we seek to identify and understand the various categories and related concepts arising from non-traditional workspaces and their evolution. Concepts such as “third place” as an alternative to home (“first place”) and workplaces of production (“second place”) refer to environments that facilitate informal social relations and provide a sense of community. Alongside the emergence of third places for work, discussions about hybrid places are arising as a spatial concept that combines two or more predefined NeWSps typologies, either with each other or with inherently tourism and hospitality infrastructure. The typologies presented serve as analytical tools to improve the understanding of this growing phenomenon, foster its diversity and integration, and contribute to future research on NeWSps and their socioeconomic implications.

1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, significant changes were driven mainly by globalization dynamics and the expansion of digital technologies in knowledge-based economies. These have had a profound impact on the nature and way work is organized and how it has become more flexible and mobile, allowing people to work virtually anywhere [31, 58, 70]. In addition, recent global crises, such as the 2007–2009 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, have underlined the importance of exploring alternative workspaces beyond traditional office-based environments.

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New working spaces (NeWSps), such as coworking spaces, fab labs, and makerspaces, among others, are expanding worldwide and have been researched and analyzed by various scholars and experts [2, 9, 13, 23, 34, 57, 60, 67, 68, 73], among others). Considering that the notion of NeWSps is initially linked to openness, collaboration, and social interaction [13, 66], this chapter starts from Ray Oldenburg's "third place" concept. The "third place" represents an alternative to the home ("first place") and conventional workplaces of production ("second place") that highlights the importance of informal gathering spots where people can engage in casual social interactions, build community connections, and foster a sense of belonging. [72]. Further studies are expanding this discussion through other relevant debates and proposing new terms. One of the revised notions is "hybrid spaces" and/or "hybrid places" (interchangeably used in NeWSps literature), denoting the convergence of physical, social, and/or digital elements within a spatial context or through their interaction [15, 24, 38, 86, 96].

In summary, this chapter aims to identify the most common typologies and concepts used in the vast and recent NeWSps literature, which are not mutually exclusive and can overlap and interact in various ways. They are subject to constant change and evolution, reflecting the dynamics and adaptive nature of these spaces. Thus, without pretending to be exhaustive, this review confirms the importance of a permanent reflection on the constantly ever-changing typological diversity, for a better understanding of new practices and work relationships, and life situations, particularly in the context of the digital transition and the gig economy.

1.1 Working in Non-traditional Ways and Places

The development of new types of work environments as an alternative to conventional office spaces is driven by ongoing changes affecting the world of work and our lives.

Social science theorists have used the concept of "third place" to present different perspectives about space beyond the binary discourse (see, for instance, [28, 65]). The work of sociologist Ray [71, 72] has been widely explored by academics and practitioners to discuss the desire for more community-oriented and socially-oriented work environments [2, 11, 67]. "Third places" are characterized by regularity, informality, enjoyment, and a voluntary nature, ranging from libraries and coffee shops to community centers [72]. Besides, "third places" are less socially homogeneous than homes or workplaces, promoting encounters with others and enabling individuals to have temporary contacts with people from various backgrounds and experiences [71]. Similarly to the general features of "third place", Montanari et al. [66] identified four defining features that are common to all types of collaborative workspaces, i.e., variety (diverse users), flexibility of use (freedom in access, infrastructure, and services), autonomy (freedom to interact), and collaborative ethos.

Several scholars extended the discourse by incorporating additional typologies for places, such as Morrison's concept of the "fourth place" [68], see also, [8, 83, 96]. Since the development of the knowledge economy, "the combination of elements of

the first, second, and third place in new social environments implies the emergence of a new category of place, the fourth place” ([68], p. 2). In the knowledge economy, the advent of the fourth place points out the significance of “tacit knowledge, social interactions, networks, and the spatial dimension of innovations in the knowledge economy” ([68], p. 6).

Both concepts embody the shift toward increasingly flexible and non-traditional working environments, predominantly centered around trust-based communities [1]. They blend work and social interaction, promoting collaboration and knowledge sharing while addressing the community’s desire for a sense of belonging and leisure. Several authors described common features and attributes of the spaces that help to design typologies of NeWSps according to their disciplinary perspectives (e.g., [9, 47, 52, 84]). These typologies provide a framework for understanding the common and distinctive characteristics of the different spaces and allow us to point out the ongoing changes in work practices and relationships. In addition, they also inform research, policies, and practices by identifying gaps and trends.

The most commonly used dimensions to define new types of work environments are summarized in the following table:

These dimensions are not mutually exclusive and can overlap, and in practice, they can overlap and interact in various ways. Although they share common socio-spatial and technological characteristics, many of the NeWSps have several backgrounds and operate under different designations. However, under the same umbrella of NeWSps, there are a plethora of practices that have emerged in recent years that depart from the original ethos as shared spaces for work, learning, and social interaction.

Hence, to improve the understanding, design, management, and research of these spaces, Table 2 presents a non-exhaustive attempt to identify key categories of NeWSps (on this topic, see also the chapter by Micek et al. in this book [A Taxonomy of New Working Spaces](#)).

The various types of NeWSps listed here are structures of production, socialization, and support [5]. In addition to access to physical and digital infrastructure and resources, they present similar dynamics of sharing and engagement between people from diverse professions, qualifications, and experiences, similarly to Oldenburg’s “third place” concept [72]. They can be seen as localized innovation and creativity environments that involve professionals, businesses, and communities of interest through formal and informal meetings for learning and collaboration.

Generally, NeWSps can differ in scale and in the services and equipment offered, and can be distinguished based on the following:

- (i) Scope—the level of specialization of the NeWSps, ranging from specialized to multipurpose
- (ii) Premises—the type of environment that NeWSps provide, which can range from community building and professional/personal satisfaction to experimentation and entrepreneurship
- (iii) Access—the level of access and membership required to use NeWSps, ranging from a free entrance or flexible membership to formal application procedures.

In practice, many of these categories are used indistinctly or combined with each other and may not correspond to community-oriented work experience but to conventional office leasing models. A growing number of operators, some working globally, have adopted these designations as labels in offices that are subleased to different companies and provide various value-added services and facilities.

In addition to the typologies mentioned above, it is also necessary to consider the separate typological group of “new informal workspaces”, such as cafes or public gardens, used sporadically and in particular by digital nomads. Finally, there is an increasing trend toward hybrid types, which will be described in detail in Sect. 3.

1.2 New Trends in Living and Working

As already mentioned, there have been significant changes in labor markets and working arrangements which reflect an increasing trend toward more flexible and diversified working arrangements in terms of contracts, working hours, workplaces, etc. (e.g., [3, 31, 41]). Furthermore, the global recession and austerity policies that followed have reinforced this trend, leading to an increase in remote, project-based, freelance, and independent workers. The rise of the gig economy, in which people work as independent contractors or freelancers, has also contributed to this trend.

More recently, the restrictions for the Covid-19 pandemic imposed a massive shift of employees from offices to the home environment, in many professions and sectors [6, 46]. However, the difficulties of separating professional activity from private life, the lack of social interaction, and the requirement of greater flexibility of employees in terms of working forms and places have led to rethinking the spatial configuration of work and to adopt new forms of work and decentralized work environments (e.g., [42, 66, 93]). Many organizations are adopting hybrid work models, which may imply the possibility for their employees to work remotely at home or elsewhere during part of the week or for some periods [21, 55]. In addition, some companies are rethinking their physical spaces, redesigning their premises so as to incorporate “third places” as areas of collaboration, innovation, and community building, as well as technology infrastructure supporting connectivity and collaboration among employees.

Furthermore, during the pandemic, hotels and short-term accommodations were hit hard and started offering “work-from-hotel” or “workation” packages [62, 78, 85]. As a result, the hospitality and tourism industries—and many governments—are increasingly attentive to the needs of a growing segment of remote workers and digital nomads. Thus, new models that combine shared spaces of life and work are growing in popularity. One of the most used concepts is coliving. Coliving is a housing arrangement with an all-inclusive and flexible rental, where residents not only share amenities and common areas for living, working, and interacting. Community managers are not only responsible for administrative tasks but also for offering support, connection, and collaboration, for example, by organizing events among residents [18, 20, 91].

Table 1 Main defining criteria for defining NeWSps typologies. *Source* elaboration by the Authors

Dimensions	Attributes
<p>PHYSICAL <i>functional and spatial features, resources, and activities</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Architectural layout of the workspace • Availability of shared spaces (e.g., workstations, meeting rooms, and communal areas) • Facilities, and equipment • Adaptability of the workspace to different activities • Proximity of different work areas
<p>SOCIAL <i>community-oriented and social nature</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of community and belonging among the users • The inclusiveness of the workspace community • Opportunities for collaboration, knowledge sharing, and learning • Networking events and social activities
<p>ORGANIZATIONAL <i>practices and processes</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control over schedule and work environment • Types of agreements • Membership models • Managerial strategies • Governance models • Business support services
<p>DIGITAL <i>technologically-mediated practices and infrastructure</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility and hybrid modes of work (physical and online) • Hybrid solutions and dynamic work environments • Digitally and face-to-face mediated interactions • Opportunities to do mobile, semi-mobile, and office-based work practices • Availability of high-speed internet • Digital tools and platforms to facilitate collaboration and communication

Hence, the above circumstances significantly have impacted the spatio-functional, social, organizational, and digital dimensions used to define NeWSps categories, as presented in Table 1. As a result, new types of NeWSps of an increasingly hybrid nature are emerging, designed to support various activities and users, often combining different features and functions and responding to new lifestyles.

1.3 *Is Hybrid a New Trend?*

The term “hybrid” generally refers to a combination of two or more distinct entities, often intended to produce a new and improved version of the original components.

Table 2 Main categories of NeWSps. *Source* elaboration by the Authors

Types	Predominant distinctive characteristics	Key authors
Coworking spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared, flexible, and collaborative office spaces and amenities • Sense of community • Membership on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis • Users with diverse profiles and objectives (from freelancers to remote workers and firms of different sizes) 	<p>[94] [12] [74] [33] [61] [9] [67] [34] [80]</p>
Makerspaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small workshops • Craft and hardware supplies and tools to experiment and develop ideas (e.g., 3D printers, laser cutters, audio and visual devices, software, and electronics) • Community of makers rooted in the DIY and hacker movements • Valuing open-access and decentralized forms 	<p>[92] [43] [39] [92] [10] [77]</p>
Fab labs (shorter for Fabrication Laboratories)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical workshops • Open access to advanced digital fabrication and prototyping (e.g., CNC and laser cutter machines based on a commons-based peer production approach) • Individuals, mainly architects, designers, engineers, and students • Could require certification or training to use specific technical equipment • Supported by the Fab Foundation and generally attached to a university, company, or foundation 	<p>[35] [82] [87] [26] [95]</p>
Hackerspaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-run spaces • Under the DIY ethos and hacker ethics (openness, decentralization, sharing knowledge and skills, etc.) • Programmers and developers collaborating on software and hardware projects 	<p>[53] [22] [49] [64] [59] [51]</p>
Incubators and accelerators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal application processes • Startup companies selected based on their potential for growth • Incubators—space and resources for early-stage companies • Accelerators—intensive and time-based networking and mentoring opportunities, especially regarding market interactions and access to business capital for competitive companies 	<p>[37] [75] [56] [19, 40] [54]</p>
Living labs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User-centric and open innovation environments • Collaboration between researchers, companies, government agencies, and citizens/users • To co-create and test new products, services, or policies in real-world settings • Founded mainly by public entities 	<p>[30] [32] [45] [17] [29]</p>

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Types	Predominant distinctive characteristics	Key authors
Creative hubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared infrastructure or venue • SMEs, micro-businesses, and talents in the cultural and creative sector • Networking, business or project development, and community engagement 	<p>[25] [36] [79] [76]</p>
Innovation hubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecosystem to accelerate innovation and support entrepreneurship • To build a community of innovators and entrepreneurs • Implemented at the regional/municipal level or as a sectoral cluster 	<p>[16] [27] [48] [69] [81]</p>

The discourses on hybridization or hybridity have varied interpretations in different disciplines [24].

As discussed earlier, the NeWSps realm can be interpreted through the “third place” and “fourth place” concepts, where hybridity is implicit [96]. Moreover, Morisson’s fourth place concept (2019) is already in a hybrid circle, since it contains home-work-leisure together, by its nature.

Regarding the NeWSps typologies, the concept of “hybridity” can refer to the combination of different categories (Table 2) and/or other attributes that characterize the spatial-functional, social, organizational and digital dimensions (Table 1). For example, elements/spaces/equipment/events/activities of a coworking space can blend with those of a makerspace or fab lab, to create a space that supports collaborative work and creative production. Consequently, from a social perspective, users can also become hybrid and diverse.

Those known as “socio-cultural hybrid spaces” also fall under this category. They are often found in old industrial building (re)use contexts and as part of urban regeneration strategies that aim at combining affordable workspace and social support [86].

Any NeWSps typology that joins together or merges with other categories of business (e.g., coffee shop, hotel, etc.), sometimes in unusual combinations, can fit into “hybrid categories” since they combine different activities, functions and/or spatial configurations [94]. They can also offer a “living” dimension to work, as in the case of coliving spaces that also include coworking facilities [62]. These hybrid models respond to the spread of lifestyles, such as digital nomadism, that combine remote work with leisure travel [4, 14, 89] and hybrid tourism products called workcation and/or coworkation [90]. Other forms of spaces integrated with living may not be completely recognized as NeWSps, but their fourth placeness and hybridity are clear. “Collective spaces” in residential settings that include collaborative living and working environments are among such spaces [50, 88].

Another example regarding this topic is that of “social learning spaces” such as university hubs (analyzed in this book by Migliore, Tagliaro, Hua, and Shaumann) or multi-functional public libraries that mix social, spatial, and digital resources [7,

23]. These spaces offer ever more collaborative workspaces and other facilities in addition to their traditional functions.

Furthermore, hybrid NeWSps also place importance on time features, including the diverse utilization of spaces based on duration (such as occasional or regular users) and the variety of activities conducted at different times throughout the day [15, 24, 63].

Apart from hybrid workplaces, “hybrid work” is also discussed widely in relation to the changes in work patterns at the intersection of virtual and physical environments [44]. It incorporates a mix of online and in-person labor digital technologies that has grown, especially due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. Before the pandemic, remote working was often seen as an advantage for a few employees and sectors. Still, the pandemic forced many companies to adopt remote working and gave the impetus to digitizing services and functions to maintain business continuity [31]. Moreover, this model is only possible if the location supports digital technology and has good internet access, highlighting the reciprocity between the digital and functional qualities of the space.

In addition, hybrid urban typologies, which bring together urban functions such as residential, social, and recreational ones, and related interactions with working functions, are increasingly analyzed in urban planning [24].

The concept of “hybridity” has become increasingly relevant in the context of labor as new forms of work and workplaces emerge. Apart from socio-spatial viewpoints, hybrid working, recognized more in its digital aspects, has existed for several years but in the past, it was not as prevalent as it is today. Unintentionally or intentionally, the debate on “hybridity” and NeWSps, in all its mentioned dimensions, stems back to the advent of the concepts of coworking space and virtual office.

2 Conclusions

The concepts and categories listed in this chapter are a starting point to reflect on the current nature of work and its adaptation to dynamic circumstances, in particular, those of technological evolution and recent disruptive events, as well as its adaptation to the needs and expectations of workers.

Ray Oldenburg’s concept of third place is helpful in describing the spaces between the home and traditional offices that facilitate social interaction, community building, and social support [72]. This common basis is manifested in several physical, social, organizational, and digital dimensions, as pointed out in Table 1. By considering these dimensions, researchers and practitioners can better understand the characteristics and needs of different types of workers and work environments and develop more effective strategies and solutions to provide workers with flexible, adaptable, and collaborative work environments.

NeWSps have become increasingly diverse, giving rise to different categories of workplaces under various labels or that merge different categories of spaces or activities. Thus, combining activities, functions, and spatiality of the spaces, may

add a new type or reveal a mixed type of NeWSps; in other words, a blended or a hybrid model which has not yet been comprehensively studied. Hybrid places (with solo and multiple facets) and hybrid working are key concepts for understanding the changing nature of work and workplaces in the twenty-first century. Combining virtual spaces with physical ones, the home with office spaces, or other spaces, such as cafes, certainly produces new practices, relationships, and challenges.

The distinction and construction of categories have become increasingly complex as NeWSps have proliferated, requiring constant review. Therefore, it is essential to understand whether they maintain their previous meaning and significance, identify the concepts that support new types and practices, and how they reflect changes in how we work and where, in the face of new dynamics.

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