

Co-workers and makers: New public policies and corporate strategies for the city

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Collaborative movements and communities—co-workers, makers, hackers, and fabbers— stir tremendous controversy because they expose all the paradoxes and contradictions of the ongoing transformations of work practices and capitalism. Work is being redefined by the growing number of entrepreneurs and freelancers while organisations are being transformed by a new work ethos. The ‘do-ocracy’ is establishing itself as the favoured organisational structure of the future, where individuals choose roles and tasks and execute them. Responsibilities and legitimacy go to people who *do* the work, rather than to selected executives.

These are all the issues dealt with by the [White Paper](#) recently published by the Research Group on Collaborative Spaces (RGCS), an academic network focused on coworkers, makers, and hackers, and how they contribute to emerging work practices. Our aim was to raise questions and make exploratory propositions on how to produce new harmonious and sustainable ways of working and living in the city. It sees third places and collaborative communities as very interesting levers and integrative units for public policies at the level of the city.

We believe the traditional divides between collaborative and ‘non-collaborative’ actors, private and public spheres, corporate strategies and public policies, citizens and politicians, need to be overcome. We are convinced entrepreneurs, makers, and their communities will increasingly play a political role, thus further transforming traditional political mechanisms.

How do collaborative spaces affect public policies and strategies?

Our [RGCS White Paper](#) condensed a set of 22 controversies about collaborative communities and movements in the city, what they are, how they evolve and transform work practices, and how they are included in public policies and corporate strategies. It is based on numerous workshops and discussions organised mainly in Paris, London, and Montreal between 2015 and 2016. Let’s explore three controversies:

1. Who needs space in the digital age? What purpose do collaborative spaces really serve?

In our increasingly digital lives, remote work has become so easy that many believe geography and distance will matter less and less. The figure of the 'digital nomad' has contributed to the widespread belief that space can be transcended. Flexible work stations and digital collaborative tools (Slack, GitHub) have indeed changed the way we now think of work and space. However the geographic paradox of our age is that the easier it is to work remote, the denser the most dynamic urban areas tend to become. Location is key.

Being physically connected to those you work with (clients, coworkers, suppliers) is more critical when work is 'project-based' rather than 'organisation-based'. Therefore co-working spaces provide a valuable opportunity to recreate the lost temporal-spatial unity. People who don't live in the city can enjoy moments of innovative frenzy while local workers can interact with external stakeholders and reach remote markets.

There are two types of collaborative spaces: 'location-based communities' attract entrepreneurs and freelancers looking for a 'third place' to work close from home whereas 'knowledge-based communities' specialise in one particular subject, thus attracting various actors interested in that subject. Location-based communities emerge in areas of high density while knowledge-based communities — makerspaces, fab labs, and hackerspaces — tend to create new communities around shared practices. Consequently, they are more likely to emerge in medium to large cities that have a large pool of creative and entrepreneurial individuals.

2. How do collaborative spaces contribute to urban innovation?

City policies aim to orchestrate economic development and innovation, and coordinate business ecosystems from different industries to create positive externalities that benefit the city at large and make it more attractive. This requires platforms that empower various actors to effectively cooperate and share knowledge.

Collaborative spaces provide such platforms. Their creativity and innovativeness can trickle down to their surroundings and benefit other actors in the area. Traditional companies can make good use of the spaces and train their employees to be more innovative. Co-working spaces can also help integrate outsiders — many foreigners use them to grow local roots abroad.

Collaborative spaces are either designed as platforms for local capability-building innovation or simply as a service for the area's inhabitants (with no explicit focus on impacting city ecosystems). Depending on the involvement of local authorities and companies, their impact varies. But they have often been found to contribute to an increased sense of political engagement.

3. What is the role of collaborative spaces in the field of education?

Collaborative spaces have played a key role in education. They have been transforming the way we think about education and training. Learning is no longer an institutionalised process with clear boundaries but a continuous process shared across communities. In that respect hackers and makers who value 'open' knowledge have served as pioneers.

Every educational institution aims to transform its methods, spaces, and processes as a result. Every university and school now boasts of a maker lab or a MOOC programme. The academic landscape has been transformed profoundly by the movements and communities that have made knowledge-sharing more open and community-based.

Many collaborative spaces have taken on a more active role in the field of education by offering a wide range of education and training programmes that *de facto* compete with traditional educational institutions (Mutinerie or Numa in Paris, Betahaus in Berlin). Other spaces (Schoolab in France) partner up with schools to create joint programmes.

Our seven propositions to make communities more open, sustainable and inclusive:

1. More emphasis should be put on **'infra-organisations'**, *i.e.* transparent platforms designed for independent entities to share identity and governance. 'Infra-organisations' provide infrastructural services without searching for the increasing returns likely to lead to a monopoly (Google). They benefit both citizens and entrepreneurs. The growth of each sub-unit is limited to the governance can remain highly collaborative. [Framasoft](#) in France best illustrates this new trend;
2. An **'inclusive label'** could be organised by collaborative communities and collaborative movements themselves: the label would work like a brand to signal a product's social and ethical quality (respect for the rights of workers and the environment) and be operated by a combination of public and private structures;
3. **Mega-spaces** could be opened in all cities to let expressions of creativity flourish: collaborative spaces can coordinate broader movements. The whole city could periodically be turned into an urban-planning 'hackathon' to mobilise a diverse set of individuals from a given area. Such involvement can strengthen the social fabric of a territory.
4. **Academic presence** in the city should be reinvented towards more urban and rural mobility. Academics could be made to serve and spread knowledge geographically and socially. Collaborative spaces can serve their mobility;
5. **Ephemeral labs** could be multiplied and supported by public authorities and private companies. Mobile labs or maker spaces can help revive rural areas and connect isolated communities together;
6. **Open innovation** should be made more open. Innovation involves numerous external and internal stakeholders. Why not push open innovation initiatives in the space of the city itself (e.g. with fablab trucks)?;
7. Finally, better **global digital infrastructures** should be developed for coworkers, remote workers, and nomads, which requires the support of public policies, at the national and EU levels.

In all cases, instead of looking at third places and collaborative spaces as objects for public policies and activism, our RGCS White Paper invites managers, politicians and citizens to look at them as active subjects in an integrative context so they can produce new public policies and strategies together. The line between consumers and producers is blurring. So is the one between politicians and citizens. The economic and political processes at the heart of the city ought to reflect those two trends.



Notes:

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Laetitia Vitaud is a speaker, writer and researcher, specialised in the future of work, organisations and consumption. She works with several organisations, including Switch Collective whose aim is to empower people to redesign their work lives, and the Consumer Goods Forum. She is a lecturer at Sciences-Po Paris and Université Paris Dauphine, and is the author with Nicolas Colin of a book titled "*Faut-il avoir peur du numérique?*" ("*Should you be afraid of digital?*") (Armand Colin, 2016). She lives in London.



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