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

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'Freelance isn't free.' Co-working as a critical urban practice to cope with informality in creative labour markets

Abstract:

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

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Introduction

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

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

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working will be examined as a new social practice of self-help and self-organisation that denotes new ways of organising everyday work practices for freelancers. These shared workspaces answer to the individualised worker's demands for autonomy, recognition and social belonging, but might also encourage moments of solidarity and enact political mobilisation. Responding to the editors' call for 'transcending the othering of informality', the article presents an empirically informed account of co-working as a critical practice of self-help and self-organisation based on a study of smaller grassroots spaces. The following analysis aims (1) to highlight the specific informal work situation of freelance workers in culture and creative industries and (2) to discuss co-working as a critical urban practice.

The article is grounded in qualitative research with twenty-five semi-structured interviews conducted with co-working hosts in Berlin, London and New York since 2012. All of the interviewees were freelance workers themselves who set up co-working spaces or worked as their hosts, shared similar demographics regarding age (30-45) and education (postgraduate degrees), and approximately half were male and half female. The main aim of the research is to interrogate their social and material practices to facilitate communication, community and collaboration among coworkers. But interviews also focused on the background of the hosts, their motivations to open a shared workspace, the development of their spaces as well as why and how coworkers work in their particular spaces. The transnational focus of the fieldwork emerged because these three cities had a proliferation of co-working spaces in the late 2000s and provided a rich empirical contexts to study the variety of spaces. The interviews have been anonymised, transcribed and thematically coded for the analysis (Flick 2014). Additionally, the article builds upon secondary data such as empirical studies, reports, websites, and newspaper articles and is informed by participant observations and informal talks with co-working hosts and coworkers during more than fifty events and visits in co-working spaces over the course of the past six years. This secondary data is used to contrast the interviews and to facilitate a deeper understanding of the phenomena of co-working. The following discussion focuses on grassroots spaces where freelancers initiated a shared workspace 'to find a more social way of working' (Julie, Berlin 2012, personal interview). Most of these spaces seat between 10 and 40

coworkers, yet some have grown to over 100 members or opened additional spaces in their respective cities.

Informality in urban studies

For more than 40 years, the concept of informality has been widely used in urban studies to understand unregulated or illegal economic activities, housing settlements, land ownership, infrastructures, forms of governance or the organization of social life in cities of the global South, mostly among the urban poor (see for an overview Roy 2009; McFarlane 2012; Lombard and Meth 2016). As McFarlane (2012: 89) has noted, very often informality is merely used as a 'descriptor' to denote specific practices unregulated by the state despite informality's powerful role in 'constituting the urban', and in 'revealing processes which are evident in most cities' (Lombard and Meth 2016: 159). In recent years, a new relational approach has emerged that examines the relationship of informality and formality as a 'type of valuation and negotiation' (McFarlane 2012). The approach aims to transcend the dichotomous epistemology of formal-informal with its essentialist and normative assumptions (e.g. informal labour as poor people's work practices or the slum as always informal settlements and, hence, as underdeveloped). Moreover, it conceptualises the formal and informal as two distinct but entangled practices (see McFarlane 2012; Varley 2013; Davis 2017; Pasquetti and Picker 2017). The research focus then shifts towards 'specify[ing] the conditions under which the persistence or expansion of informality will or won't serve as a mechanism for strengthening citizenships claims or ensuring state accountability' (Davis 2017: 317) in different contexts and analysing how 'the state […] also produces, practices and prospers form urban informality' (Lombard and Meth 2016: 163). What follows from this relational approach is to interrogate how formal and informal practices relate to each other and what kind of spaces these practices produce. However, with a strong focus on the global South in informality research, the term has less been applied to cities in the global North to examine various forms of informality in areas such as

housing, economic activities or employment relationships. Only recently, scholars began to discuss informality as an 'integral and growing part of cities in the developed world' (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014: 1). In exploring economic informalities of freelance creative work, this paper aims to contribute to this growing body of research and examines one specific socio-spatial consequence, the rise of co-working spaces.

In this paper, informality is used, first, to comprehend the contemporary nature of creative labour markets with the rising number of freelance workers who do not fit into established social welfare regulations, cannot afford to join private healthcare and pension schemes, lack collective labour representation and who are subject to multiple economic insecurities (McRobbie 2016). Here, informality can be seen an outcome of the continuous flexibilisation, casualisation and political deregulation of employment relationships (see Ross 2006; Castells 2009; Kalleberg 2009; Arnold and Bongiovi 2013). Informality is also an effect of the dominant project-based production mode in culture and creative industries (Mould et al. 2014) as well as of specific characteristics of these sectors (Gill 2014a). It is important to note that informality is not interchangeable with precariousness, understood as 'all forms of insecure, contingent, flexible work – from illegalized, casualised and temporary employment, to homeworking, piecework and freelancing' (Gill and Pratt 2008: 3). Precariousness is an important dimension constituting informality in those sectors, but this paper wants to emphasise the specific informal working practices (i.e. unregulated, non-standardized) that affect all workers in these sectors and make it especially difficult for freelance workers to attain and retain work contracts. Creative industries labour markets have characteristics that can be described as informal, for example, in relation to employment relationships (i.e. temporary freelance contracts), labour market access (i.e. opaque network-based recruitment), governance structure (i.e. non-hierarchical, project-based) and working cultures (i.e. 'bulimic work patterns' (Gill and Pratt 2008: 17) and the various forms of non-paid labour). This characterization is not to suggest that culture and creative industries sectors would be part of the 'informal economy' (Castells and Portes 1989) but rather to emphasise how specific features of these sectors and existing conventions and norms informalise the labour conditions. And, how in consequence workers experience their working conditions as informal, marginalised and, thus, particularly

challenging and vulnerable (see, e.g., Nixon and Crewe 2004; Umney 2016). Furthermore, the informal practices serve to stabilise certain characteristics of the sector: Informal recruitment reinforces the 'homosocial reproduction' (Alacovska 2017: 378) of culture and creative industries as a white, male, middle-class dominated sector of employment (Eikhof and Warhurst 2013). While hiring temporary contract workers permits companies to withdraw from their social responsibilities (e.g. in paying for specialised skills and social benefits) and to keep firm sizes small.

Second, co-working itself can be understood as an informal urban practice with its roots in collective forms of self-help and self-organisation that arose from the dissatisfaction with the freelance work situation. As Pradel-Miquel (2017: 209) notes, informal urban practices refer to a 'set of non-regulated social practices that allow marginalized groups to create mechanisms to cover their material and immaterial needs'. The emergence of co-working comes out of different material and immaterial needs of freelance workers and can be interpreted as a response to the informal work conditions. While designated co-working spaces emerged in 2005 (Deskmag 2013a), shortly before the financial and economic crisis in 2007-2008, those spaces have proliferated since as the recession and the subsequent austerity policies have exacerbated working conditions for creative workers in cities (Avdikos and Kalogeresis 2017). Even though the culture and creative industries as a whole sector have been resilient in the economic crisis (De Propris 2013; Pratt and Hutton 2013), freelance workers got profoundly affected through cuts in cultural budgets, welfare provisions and the continuing casualisation of labour in these sectors (Bain and McLean 2013; de Peuter 2014; McRobbie 2016). Additional pressures come from the financialisation of rental housing (Fields and Uffer 2016) that make it more difficult, especially in early career stages, to maintain a flat and an office, production space or showroom. Hence, the proliferation of shared and collaborative oriented workspaces can be read as a reaction to the consequences of the economic crisis and austerity urbanism. For example, Avdikos and Kalogeresis (2017: 1) observe for Athens, Greece:

> Collaborative workplaces emerged after the gradual collapse of the stable employment paradigm that was one of the main features of the Keynesian welfare

state and as a response to precarious working conditions that were augmented during the recent economic crisis and the subsequent recession.

As a form of urban critique the concept of informality 'allows to understand and critique complex processes and politics at the urban scale' (Lombard and Meth 2016: 170). More specifically, it can expose the material challenges of everyday life and its associated politics in contemporary cities with their enduring social inequalities, especially under current conditions of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck 2012) and the global housing crisis (Aalbers 2015).

The rise of informal urban practices

As a consequence of the growing social inequalities in neoliberal economies, the recession and subsequent austerity measures in cities (Peck 2012), current research examines the rise of informal urban practices such as informal housing and squatting (Vasudevan 2015), informal work practices (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014) or the emergence of new 'urban solidarity spaces' (Arampatzi 2017). Furthermore, the multifarious forms of informal urban interventions that reclaim and repurpose urban spaces, often unauthorised, such as urban gardening (Ghose and Pettygrove 2014), urban repair (Douglas 2014), pop-ups (Harris 2015) or co-housing (Tummers 2016) are interrogated. These varied forms of self-organised, micro-spatial urban practices are discussed as 'Do-It-Yourself Urban Design' (Douglas 2014) or 'low budget urbanism' (Färber 2014). What characterises these practices is their self-organised, improvised character, their primary social and cultural valuation of urban space and that they point to potential political strategies and forms of activism. For example, Tonkiss (2013) has coined the term 'makeshift city' to emphasize urban practices 'that work[s] in the cracks between formal planning, speculative investment and local possibilities' as 'self-managed and improvised urban interventions and occupations as a type of interstitial urbanism that goes to work in margins both physical (at urban edges and infill sites) and conceptual (mediating 'public' and 'private' use or different scales of urban practice)' (p.313). These interventions 'are concerned with the politics and practice of

small incursions in material spaces, the possibilities they open up and the forms of sociality they might entail' (p. 313). Even though their impact might be limited, it is crucial to investigate and defend those practices as Tonkiss' (2013: 323) argues:

> This is an urbanism of minor practices, small acts, ordinary audacities and little anti-utopias that nevertheless create material spaces of hope in the city. (…) If a notion of critical urban practice is to remain meaningful, then it seems important to defend the spaces in which it becomes possible even if temporarily, and only ever imperfectly.

The *critical* potential of co-working lies in its capacity to challenge the neoliberal politics of individualisation in creating a shared space where alternative modes of social relations and economic conduct among freelancers can be mutually developed and experimented with (see Bain and McLean 2013; Avdikos and Kalogeresis 2017; Umney 2017). However, as Gandini (2015) rightly points out, co-working characterises a 'contradictory nature'. On the one hand, co-working exemplifies the adaptability of freelance workers as entrepreneurial subjects and rather reinforces the norms of neoliberal subjectivities. On the other hand, co-working holds the potential that 'these workers recognise themselves as a new 'class' of knowledge professionals sharing the same economic interests' (Gandini 2015: 202). Acknowledging this contradiction, or as de Peuter et al. (2017) argue the 'ambivalence of co-working', this article foregrounds the progressive social and political possibilities of co-working. It interrogates the everyday practices of co-working in co-working spaces and how it facilitates mutual awareness and support, fosters coworkers to negotiate a shared space and enables new social relationships. Moreover, a 'contradictory nature' characterises most informal urban practices: they can be co-opted and commercialised while others can elude these pressures and stand for radical social change and resistance. Rather than engaging in a dichotomous logic of 'opposition versus co-optation' (see Elwood 2006), this article adopts an approach that regards them as 'spaces of possibility' (Massey 1994, 2005) enacting multiple and heterogeneous roles, relationships and trajectories (see Cornwell 2012; Cumbers et al. 2018). In her relational approach to space, Massey (2005: 9-11) has proposed to understand space as relational, heterogeneous and processual. Approaching space as the product of intersecting social relationships, constituted through interactions (9), allows to understand the productive role of

spaces, where 'distinct trajectories coexist' (9), and their co-constitutive role in the construction of political subjectivities (10). As everyday meeting places, co-working spaces bring together diverse coworkers and help to shape their interactions and social relationships. Therefore, they can be perceived as 'places where the ongoing tensions between neoliberal commodification processes and alternative sets of social relations are played out, though never completely resolved' (Cumbers et al. 2018: 4).

Informality in creative labour markets

Culture and creative industries have been heralded as a model for future work. And, despite ample evidence for its unequal distribution of opportunities for workforce participation, employment in these sectors has been promoted politically (see, e.g., Eikhof and Warhurst 2013; McRobbie 2016; O'Brien et al. 2016) under the notion of 'openness, egalitarianism, and meritocracy' (Gill 2014b: 509). A central feature of creative labour markets is the rise of freelance workers (see Creative Skillset 2012; De Propris 2013). Freelancers can be defined as 'skilled professional workers who are neither employers nor employees, supplying labour on a temporary basis under a contract for services for a fee to a range of business clients' (Kitching and Smallbone (2008, p. v) cited in Mould et al. 2014: 2438). In some occupational groups, the proportion of freelance workers is more than 50 percent (e.g. editing, content development, see Creative Skillset 2012). Workers often chose freelance employment for reasons of autonomy and self-actualisation and have learned to internalise the risks associated with freelance work (Neff 2013). However, for many freelance work is not a choice but a necessity, enforced through the deregulation and organisational restructuring in these industries (Christopherson and Storper 1989; Ekinsmyth 2002) and the technological advancements in information and communication technologies (Liegl 2014; Mould et al. 2014).

The working conditions and subjective experiences of freelance workers are the main focus of critical creative labour studies that have developed in the last decade (see, e.g., Banks 2007; Banks et al. 2013; Conor et al. 2015). In this body of research, informality emerges a key characteristic of creative labour markets and everyday working conditions: whether in the working cultures that blur the lines between work and non-work, the informal governance structures of the labour market with informal network-based recruiting practices, verbal contracts and negotiable payments without minimum standards or erratic work hours in short-term project work, the lack of social security or benefits entitlement, such as sick pay or maternity pay, or the absence of collective labour representations. For example, Gill (2014a: 16-17) argues:

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

Grugulis and Stoyanova (2012: 1312) observe: 'The sector is an unusual one since the absence of professional licences to practice and the dominance of project work, often staffed at short notice, mean that social capital is a key feature of the labour market.' To maintain employability, Currid (2007) has shown how workers mingle in bars, clubs and restaurants in New York City to build up new industry contacts. Neff (2005) focused on after-work events in the digital media sector, Lloyd (2006) on the role of coffee shops in Chicago's Wicker Park neighbourhood and Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) highlight the 'pub cultures' among media workers. This mandatory after-work sociality discriminates against workers with childcare responsibilities, especially woman, or workers with less financial means to participate in these forms of sociality. Eikhof and Warhurst (2013: 500) conclude: 'The informality of social capital obscures the "old boys networks" that women and other workers from ethnic minority and working class backgrounds find hard to access.'

Creative work is characterised by 'blurred boundary lines between 'formal' and 'informal' work' (Hutton 2016: 156) as these work activities are often overlapping, complementing or even dependending on each other. Besides monetised labour

practices, creative work comprises of a great variety of non-monetized forms of labour such as volunteer work, gift exchange, in-kind labour, favours, internships or working for free in 'no budget' productions. This unpaid work is undertaken 'to get a foot in the door' at the beginning of a career but also to maintain employability throughout a professional career (Bain and McLean 2013; Wreyford 2015; Fast et al. 2016). Especially, 'involuntary "volunteering"' (Hutton 2016: 155) has become a norm for inexperienced workers.

Another reason for the proliferation of freelance work in culture and creative industries is the project-based production model that relies on alternating temporary contract workers (Grabher 2004; Mould et al. 2014). In consequence, employers do not feel responsible for freelancers' training or social security protection. It is the workers' responsibility to care for 'their own development and training, pensions and social security' (Ekinsmyth 2002: 239). Additionally, freelancers need to perform different kinds of 'invisible labour' (Crain et al. 2016) to keep themselves in the highly competitive labour market. Invisible labour refers to different types of unrecognized work such as cultivating social media presences for self-branding purposes (Arvidsson et al. 2016), networking (Currid 2007) and unpaid labour as an intern (Frenette 2013) in anticipation of future employment opportunities (Duffy 2016), to build social contacts (Siebert and Wilson 2013) and to learn practical skills (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2011).

Yet freelancers fulfil crucial roles in the project-based production model of culture and creative industries in 'stitching together the sector as a whole' (Mould et al. 2014: 2437). They operate in complex 'project ecologies' (Grabher 2004) between firms, organizations and in collaboration with other freelancers (Watson 2012). But freelance work often remains invisible – whether in official employment statistics (Mould et al. 2014), in governmental policies to support culture and creative industries or in its doing as it is mostly carried out at home (Taylor 2015). Only recently it has become more visible (i.e. in coffee shops, public libraries) due to the expansion of information and communication technologies that enable workplace mobility, the detachment from conventional places of work and changed significantly where, when and how people work (Felstead 2012; Liegl 2014; Martins 2015). Mould et al. (2014: 2442) conclude:

'freelance work has a *role*, but no *place*', such as office or factory work, and therefore freelancers lack the feelings of belonging through work. Additionally, it has been argued 'by taking initiative and responsibility for (their own) economic production' (Mould et al. 2014: 2442), freelance workers embody the neoliberal subjectivity of the 'entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling 2014) or 'enterprising self' (McRobbie 2016).

As a response to the social and economic challenges of freelance work, a wide range of shared, flexible workspaces where freelancers work next and with other freelancers, have emerged as a bottom-up organisational practice. Working in a shared workspace has become a strategy to minimise individual risks and uncertainty (Waters-Lynch and Potts 2016), to get access to industry-specific 'know-how', for professional development and networking as well as to meet their needs for meaningful social encounters, recognition, identity-formation and belonging to sustain a freelance livelihood.

Co-working and co-working spaces

Managed and shared workspaces are not an entirely new phenomenon and their historical roots, at least, date back to the early 1970s with the rise of shared artist studios (see for the UK, e.g., Marsh et al. 1989; Green and Strange 1999; Montgomery 2007). Designated co-working spaces emerged in the mid-2000s and have grown rapidly since then. According to the 2017 Global Co-working Survey, the number of spaces rose worldwide from 600 in October 2010 to 13.800 in 2017 with more than a million people working in shared workspaces (Deskmag 2017: 3). Co-working spaces differ from older models of shared, managed workspaces in their short-term rent of desks (per day, week, month), their open floor plan design and subsequently their flexibility and continuously changing social composition. However, the practice of co-working is not tied to specific co-working spaces and can be enacted in different spatial settings such as private homes (i.e. coordinated through intermediary platforms such

as Spacehop, Vrumi, Officeriders) or during temporary meetings ('Jelly') in coffee shops, offices, churches, hotel lobbies, underused restaurants or in public spaces. Moreover, there is a growing diversity of open workshops/open creative labs (Schmidt et al. 2014) that facilitate the 'making of things', such as fab labs, maker spaces or repair cafés (see Workshop East 2015 for London).

With the ongoing proliferation of co-working spaces, two main developments can be observed. On the one side, co-working is increasingly seen as an untapped market for profit-driven development and financial investments as there is a growing commercialization of co-working through globally operating serviced-office firms and real estate developers (e.g., Regus, Workspace Group, WeWork, and The Office Group). Commercial co-working providers establish workspaces for several hundred or even thousands of coworkers (e.g., WeWork Moorgate in London hosts 3000 people, see IPPR (2016: 16)). Additionally, private companies set up incubators and accelerators for high-growth start-ups in the digital sector, often as part of their open innovation strategies (see, e.g., Johns and Gratton 2013; Ferm 2014; Schmidt et al. 2014; NLA 2016). The latest iteration of this commercialisation of co-working is the introduction of 'co-living spaces' exemplified by The Oak in London and WeWork's first co-living space in New York (Greene 2017).

On the other side, there is a continuous rise of bottom-up initiatives with smaller co-working spaces driven by the idea of 'commoning' resources and providing a shared space for collaborative work, meeting and exchange (Schmidt et al. 2014; Avdikos and Kalogeresis 2017). Most of these grassroots spaces emerge now on the peripheries of inner-cities, some in suburban or even rural areas (Upham 2017). And, often those spaces are supported through public support or operate as non-profits (Virani et al. 2016). For example, 42 percent of London's open workspaces are operated by a charity provider, another 12 percent through social enterprises and 8 percent by educational institutions, local authorities and cooperatives (IPPR 2016: 15). With cities like London having more than 130 co-working spaces (GLA 2014; NLA 2016), these shared workspaces create new social-material infrastructures for freelance work whose

primary purpose is to coordinate and facilitate an alternative organisation of work and socially meaningful encounters for those workers.

The spread of co-working spaces sparked a growing body of empirical research that examines co-working and situates it within different academic debates. From a sociology of work perspective, scholars discuss co-working as a coping strategy with the precariousness of freelance work (Moriset 2014; Merkel 2015; Garrett et al. 2017). Economic geography examines the dynamics of knowledge exchange within co-working spaces (Parrino 2013) and their role as innovative micro clusters and intermediaries (Capdevila 2013, 2015) or as creativity and innovation labs (Schmidt and Brinks 2017). From an economic perspective, co-working spaces are interrogated as a new business model for office provision (Salinger 2013) and for supporting entrepreneurship (Bouncken and Reuschl 2018).

How do coworking spaces help to cope with informal labour conditions?

Among co-working hosts, it is widely acknowledged that co-working is not just about working 'alongside each other' in a flexible and reasonably priced office space. Instead, the practice of co-working is rooted in creating new collaborative and supportive relationships with other freelancers; it aspires to cultivate cooperation instead of competition among the coworkers. Many spaces promote a normative-cultural model of co-working, as put forward in the Co-working Manifesto (2014), that explicitly argues for mutual aid, collaboration and community-led strategies and has been signed by more than 1.700 co-working spaces worldwide. However, not all spaces refer to the Co-working Manifesto but instead use cultural values they want to enact within their co-working community. Nevertheless, community and collaboration are two central values of co-working that run through all interviews and informal talks.

Besides a work environment with the appropriate technical equipment (e.g., high-speed broadband, printer, meeting rooms, kitchen), freelancers are mainly attracted to shared workplaces because of their lack of social contacts and for professional

development reasons. A freelance worker, who works as the host in her co-working space, explains:

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

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

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

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

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

> Our space gives people the chance to be part of a professional network and community. So, you get the benefits of a traditional office with colleagues in the sense that coworkers learn from each other but also can chit-chat. But there is no

pressure or responsibility to answer to other people. There is an openness to interaction, but no pressure. (John, New York, 2012, personal interview)

Through co-working freelancers expand their professional network, find support for work-related questions and, eventually, increase their productivity (Spinuzzi 2012; Deskmag 2013b). Moreover, co-working can reduce information and search costs for freelancers in matching processes for new collaborators or projects (see Waters-Lynch and Potts 2016: 12):

We try to connect people from the same sectors to make sure they know each other and can share contacts and resources. (Ellen, London 2012, personal interview)

Co-working helps freelancers acquire social capital for the project-based mode of production and its associated 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001). For example, de Peuter et al. (2017: 10-13) consider co-working spaces as the stages for the 'performance' of this type of sociality. As Wittel argues, network sociality is 'based on individualization and deeply embedded in technology, is informational, ephemeral but intense, and it is characterized by the assimilation of work and play' (2001: 71). Distinctive for network sociality is that social relationships are 'produced, reproduced and […] consumed' (p.72) and increasingly perceived as social capital, as an economic resource for professionals in the urban post-industrial contexts. However, co-working spaces are not just the stages but also places where network sociality can be learned as it presupposes certain sociable attitudes, behaviours and norms (e.g. trust, forms of reciprocity). One skill to be learned is how to make effective use of these social contacts to get new jobs and contracts:

We run monthly workshops where coworkers share contacts with each other. So, we can all see who knows whom in the industries and discuss together how they can be approached. (Ellen, London 2012, personal interview)

Sometimes in these types of spaces, you start to get the usual hierarchical and bad psychology when humans get together. But we haven't seen it. I think it's because we strip away ego and the fact that all of them are from such diverse industries they all have to give each other the same level of respect. No one is really an expert and everyone taps into each other's expertise. (Ellen, London 2012, personal interview)

Sharing contacts, learning how to approach potential new clients and employers, especially in other professional fields, learning from each other and learning to respect each other's work are crucial resources for freelance workers to navigate the informality of creative labour markets. More specifically, helping each other getting access is the most valuable resources facilitated in co-working spaces, as the network-based recruitment practices in these sectors necessitate knowing who to contact and how to present oneself. Many spaces even bring in potential employers, clients or agents:

> Twice a month we got agents here to introduce their work, and they have already signed many of our writers. (Sarah, New York 2012, personal interview)

An important resource for freelancers' professional development, and to cope with informality, provided through co-working is learning, training and skill enhancement (see Grugulis and Stoyanova 2011). It is enabled through peer-to-peer learning as well as workshops, classes or public events that answer to specific needs and requests from coworkers (e.g., workshops on new software). General Assembly, a co-working space that evolved around educational classes for creative professionals, even has its own hiring team that mediates jobs for people who take classes:

> When you graduate from a course, we already have a bunch of jobs on hand you can apply to. (Paula, New York 2012, personal interview)

However, as one host emphasises:

> Open, honest communication is what people value most here. (John, New York, 2012, personal interview)

Having a social atmosphere in which coworkers can be open and honest with each other facilitate relations of trust and encourages exchange among coworkers. While the discussion of professional development reasons foregrounds the instrumental, economic motives for freelancers to join a co-working space, Garrett et al. (2017) emphasise that coworkers are interested in social connections as a value in itself and, thus, a different mode of sociality. According to Garrett et al. (2017), coworkers' main interest lies in creating strong social bonds with the 'explicit purpose of social belonging' (p. 822). In using Simmel's (1949) distinction of 'pure sociability' and

'association' (understood as instrumental forms of sociability driven by ulterior motives), they analyse how coworkers co-construct a sense of community at work. They conclude that coworkers value most 'being together to enjoy each other's company' (p. 837). This finding can be supported with data from the Global Co-working Survey (see Deskmag 2013b, 2018) that shows high retention rates for coworkers after one year in a co-working space and where coworkers foreground 'a sociable atmosphere' and 'a community' as the main reasons in their decision for a specific space. The emergence of rather strong social bonds are also echoed by a host:

> We are not a place where people can meet venture capitalists. We are more like a small family hostel, and people come because they want that intimate atmosphere. It is the most crucial point for our coworkers. All we do is lunch together every day. And, people even come to lunch when they are not working from the space. (Julie, Berlin 2012, personal interview)

Furthermore, being part of a co-working community helps freelancers to narrate, negotiate and make sense of their professional identity and working conditions. For example, Butcher (2016: 94) observed:

> […] that co-workers typically positioned their communal ways of working against conventional views of other types of work created through neoliberal and bureaucratic organization. To co-workers, their working 'community' seems postmodern, more humanistic, fluid and sustainable than working in a factory, office or retail space.

As the community-based approach is a distinctive feature of co-working spaces, hosts play a crucial role. They care for individual coworkers' needs as well as the community. In describing their work as 'conducting', 'mothering', 'community-building' and 'social gardening', hosts indicate a considerable amount of emotional labour (Hochschild 2003 [1983]) in their hosting activities:

> We manage the space together. My partner is mama bear who is good with the emotional stuff, and I am papa bear who has all those fundraising contacts and knows who is hiring and can connect people or at least try to. But we also look out for people. If we see someone upset, getting crazy over a project, or detect that something is not right, we sit them down with a coffee and offer an ear. (Paula, New York 2012, personal interview)

> For some people, it is like a second home, so we try to make it as pleasant as possible. (Sarah, New York 2012, personal interview)

Hosts embody a hospitable attitude (see Dikeç 2002), aiming to create a welcoming and inclusive social space for interactions among the different coworkers through talking to the coworkers, attending to their needs, asking for their specific interests and connecting them with other coworkers:

> My role is to be the social connector. Even if there is no professional reason, I try to bring people together where I know they can help each other out. What people value most is to learn about things that are outside of their narrow focus. And that makes them reflect on their own work. (John, New York, 2012, personal interview)

Hosts explain that sharing meals is the most efficient way of gathering coworkers and therefore organise a variety of regular events such as breakfast or lunch meetings where new members are introduced, specific projects discussed and coworkers can help each other out. However, there is no obligation to engage in these social events:

> You can be social but also be not social here. (Sarah, New York 2012, personal interview)

> We have many desks with teleworkers who have clear work tasks from their companies and do not engage in social events and are rather disturbed by it. (Anna, Berlin 2012, personal interview)

As those quotes highlight, coworkers have various expectations and needs. And, often, coworkers only look for an aesthetic-affective workplace to be productive (see Liegl 2014) and to get their work done:

> All our coworkers want, is coffee and Club Mate. (Peter, Berlin 2012, personal interview)

Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge that co-working spaces can enact multiple forms of sociality and that the emergent communities in each space might differ from each other (see Spinuzzi 2012). Nevertheless, co-working attends to different material and immaterial needs that freelance workers lack in their individualised, independent project-based work. Co-working provides a form of social re-embedding (see Giddens 1984) for freelancers, fulfils a need for social belonging and stabilises professional identities as coworkers give each other recognition and validation. Furthermore, freelancers learn from and with each other, whether in self-organised workshops, in giving help or in exchanging contacts, which eases navigating the informal practices in creative industries. While most spaces have community hosts to facilitate interaction

among coworkers, many rely on a bottom-up culture fostering a collective sense of responsibility among coworkers:

> We prefer when coworker organise themselves, make suggestions and then try to enable and support their ideas whether regarding events, furniture or collaborative projects. (Julie, Berlin 2012, personal interview)

In sharing a workspace, freelancers develop mutual awareness and start to recognise that they share similar challenging working conditions that can foster feelings of solidarity and be a triggering point for collective action:

> We all sit in the same boat in regard to our economic conditions. (Anna, Berlin 2012, personal interview).

Co-working as a critical urban practice beyond individual workers needs?

With its roots in improvised self-help and self-organisation out of different material and immaterial needs of individualised and informalised freelance workers, co-working raises the questions whether it can be considered a critical urban practice. Hence, if co-working spaces constitute a social space where shared space, differences, resources and values between coworkers can be negotiated, social interdependencies recognized and economic alternatives imagined and experimented with. For example, one of the founders of Berlin's *Supermarkt* explains in an interview:

> It happened very early that Supermarkt became a place for people who wanted to explore alternative forms of working together and maybe even making business together, developing certain forms of value creation together. So, in that sense, it was the contrary of a space where you can go and consume but rather a space where the value emerged out of everyone's contribution. We have not intended this. […] But as it happens very often with spaces, they are shaped by the people using it. […] And very slowly the space moved into the direction of becoming an activist space for people that were seeking economic alternatives […] and a common political voice as well. (Sollfrank 2017)

As the Supermarket, some co-working spaces have become platforms on which alternative economic relations are negotiated or even established, such as organising in worker-based ownership structures (Sandoval 2016; Avdikos and Kalogeresis 2017). There are a growing number of workspaces that have been established as or transform

into cooperatives (e.g., Ecto in Montreal, Make Shift in Boston). Many spaces are operated as social enterprises (e.g., Indycubes in Wales, The Trampery London, The Center for Social Innovation in New York). These ownership models are often chosen to secure the premises on a long-term basis (as most co-working space operators are renting their space), to give coworkers ownership and decision-making rights, to enable mutual funds for sick or maternity leave for members (see Conaty et al. 2016; Avdikos and Kalogeresis 2017) or to fulfil broader social and economic community development goals in neighbourhoods (e.g., The Camden Collective in London). Increasingly, spaces offer childcare services, recognising the challenges of combing parenting with hyper-flexible, project-based work. In Canada, several co-working spaces developed an affordable health insurance scheme, the Co-working Health Insurance Plan (COHIP 2017), which is accessible for freelancers through membership in one of Canada's co-working spaces. Many spaces support new forms of political representation for freelance workers. The European Freelancer Rights movement (Freelancers Europe 2014) has spread through their promotion in co-working spaces. For example, WeWork's support has given the Freelance Isn't Free Act in New York an additional push (see WeWork 2016). Moreover, there are many co-working spaces, such as the Supermarkt in Berlin, the worldwide network of Impact Hubs, Hive at 55 in New York, that provide a discursive platform for how freelance work can be supported through governmental policies or organized through new legal instruments and where union memberships, new forms of social security, paid internships, universal basic income or alternative forms of economic organization are discussed (Cagnol 2013; de Peuter and Cohen 2015). In enabling reflexivity, in developing a 'critical language for engaging with inequality' (Gill 2014b: 524) and in creating an open, inclusive social space that enables sociability, co-working provides opportunities for cultivating and sustaining ideas of solidarity and alternative forms of organisation that go beyond the individual worker's needs.

However, not all grassroots spaces become activist and politicised environments where a progressive critique is developed, voiced and alternative economic relations are tested. In fact, many co-working spaces, especially globally operating co-working chains, commercialise and formalise co-working into a professional, high-end and

exclusive service and glamorise the individual culture of entrepreneurship with their invocations of the 'do what you love' ethic (e.g. prominently displayed at the entrances of WeWork' facilities). And, thereby, promote and sustain the individualism and entrepreneurialism in neoliberal employability agendas (McRobbie 2016). In light of the commercialisation, co-working's potential for progressive critique is increasingly questioned (Gandini 2015; Butcher 2016). It is pointed out that co-working appears to be more about the enticing 'atmosphere of sociality' (Liegl 2014: 174) than the active engagement in the 'co-construction of community' (Garrett et al. 2017). For example, in discussing emerging labour politics in creative industries, de Peuter and Cohen (2015: 308) suggest that co-working spaces can become 'institutions of mutual aid' and 'strive to achieve more than enable cultural workers to better manage in precarious conditions' (p. 309):

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

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

An underlying problem in this debate is the conceptualisation of the freelance worker, his scope of agency and subject position, and therefore the sociological theorisation of labour and the position of the worker under capitalism (see, e.g., Banks 2007; Taylor and Littleton 2012 for the discussion of cultural workers). Most research applies a

Foucauldian governmentality perspective (see Rose and Miller 1992; Foucault 2003; Dean 2010) and analyses coworkers as 'reproducing a neoliberal logic of self-managed, competitive and hardworking individuals' (Sandoval 2016, p. 55). This approach leaves little theoretical scope for workers' agency and conceptualises workers' subject position as only constituted through their work. Yet, little is known how the social relationships formed in co-working spaces influence coworkers and, thus, how subject positions might change through co-working. Massey (2005: 10) highlighted that spaces and identities are co-constitutive and relationally constructed, and therefore spaces play an active role in the constitution and reproduction of social identities. This proposition is echoed by the host of Berlin's Supermarket: 'as it happens very often with spaces, they are shaped by the people using it. […] And very slowly the space moved into the direction of becoming an activist space.' (Sollfrank 2017). Acknowledging the co-constitutive relation of spaces and identities, one could ask, how does co-working and its spatiality shape the individual coworker? Does co-working confirm, deepen or challenge the self-enterprising professional? Does co-working give rise to a new subject position? Therefore, interrogating subject formation processes (see Cornwell 2012; Hoffman 2014), and their relational construction, might be a fruitful research approach to scrutinise co-working's potential for progressive forms of work relations and collective political action.

Conclusion

The paper explored how co-working and co-working spaces emerged as a practice of self-help and self-organisation out of a lack of supportive structures for independent workers. It discussed informality as a key aspect of working conditions for a growing share of freelance workers in cities that further disrupts the notion of informality as a 'problem' of cities in developing countries (see Roy 2005, 2009; Lombard and Meth 2016). An informality-based reading of co-working highlights, first, the multiple

insecurities in which freelance workers find themselves in contemporary urban labour markets.

Second, it exemplifies, how freelance workers out of lack of public provision and regulation (e.g., concerning training, labour market access, social security or working conditions) and active state deregulation (e.g. through the liberalization of creative industries) developed co-working as a form of self-help and self-organisation to meet their needs for meaningful social encounters, recognition, identity-formation, meaning and belonging as well as for professional development to navigate the 'pervasive informality of creative work' (Alacovska 2017: 378). Co-working balances the workers' needs for autonomy with mutual support for the downsides of freelance work. While the cultural and creative sector is celebrated in neoliberal urban development for its continuous growth and economic contribution, coping with informality has become everyday normality in sustaining a freelance worker's livelihood. Those workers move on a daily base between formal and informal work arrangements — whose difference is often determined by a lack of political regulation but more so through ingrained conventions, customs and cultural principles in these sectors. The article proposed to examine co-working in line with other practices of informal urbanism that become more prevalent in European and North American cities due to economic transformations, the lack of affordable housing, the retrenchment of the social welfare state and the imposed conditions of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck 2012).

Third, an informality-based reading of co-working demonstrates how formal and informal practices relate to one another (McFarlane, 2012, p. 90) and how co-working helps to stabilise current governmental policies. Co-working as a practice of self-organisation for freelance workers is increasingly subsumed into the promotion of entrepreneurship and an 'entrepreneurial, self-regulated, motivated and individualized workforce' (McRobbie 2016: 67). As creative workers have been celebrated in creative city strategies (see Pratt 2008) for their self-entrepreneurial attitude, co-working and co-working spaces are now increasingly embraced and supported by city governments as new intermediaries in entrepreneurial growth agendas (see, e.g., GLA 2014) without acknowledging and addressing the underlying causes, contradictions and problems.

Furthermore, co-working is formalised into a professional, high-priced service due to its growing commercialisation through international real estate companies and is now celebrated, embraced and supported by city governments. Co-working becomes co-opted in urban growth agendas as part of their entrepreneurial strategies and culture-based redevelopment initiatives (see IPPR 2016; NLA 2016). In fact, many smaller co-working spaces depend on additional funding as, for example, in London where the majority of spaces relies on donations or temporary public funding. Many spaces, however, see their complicity as pragmatic because it enables them to have lower user fees or offer workspace for free so they can have a broader social reach in the neighbourhood as commercialised spaces. Nevertheless, co-working finds itself in a contradictory situation now: the self-organisation of freelance workers is increasingly enabled, supported, commercialised and formalised through cities and internationally operating office providers into a standardised service. In glossing over the social and economic downsides of freelance work and self-employment, the popularisation and commercialisation of co-working releases governments further from its responsibilities of appropriate political regulation.

As more and more workers need to take care for their own economic production, an informality perspective can be used to critique the growing socio-economic inequalities in cities. More specifically, it can highlight the material challenges of everyday life in cities as was done here with the specific informal work situation of freelance workers in culture and creative industries that led to a new practice of collective self-organisation. There is a need to re-think urban economic development and planning practices to understand these new forms of work, their labour conditions and socio-spatial consequences, especially as the scarcity of affordable housing becomes more severe and puts additional pressures on individual livelihoods. The article focused on freelance workers in culture and creative industries who mainly populate co-working spaces, yet there is a rising number of freelance workers in other economic sectors in cities (e.g., in construction or education, see for London Wickham 2013). Moreover, in academic research on co-working, there is a need to understand better the different emerging communities within the spaces, what constitutes and sustains them, their inclusionary

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and exclusionary practices as well as the urban spaces this practice produces to scrutinise its political potentials.

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