

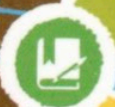
# STIR

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FEARLESS CITIES  
COMMUNITY BANKING  
RECLAIMING COWORKING



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# Coworking and Co-operation: A Union in the Making

by Greig de Peuter

Illustration by Robbie Cathro

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IT'S AN ETHOS that is embedded in open-source culture: "take this idea, steal it, and make it your own." In 2005, this is what the founder of an inaugural coworking programme, operating out of a San Francisco feminist community space, told visitors. Skipping to 2017, international coworking franchise WeWork boasts a market value of \$20 billion, which surpasses Twitter's market capitalisation. Reclaiming coworking is a project whose time has come.

Coworking spaces offer access to a desk, shared office amenities, professional events, and contacts that may lead to paid gigs. The average coworking space is a who's who of the creative-class precariat: freelancers, self-employed, and micro-startups in media, technology, and communication services. Inside a decade, coworking shot from curiosity to industry. Today, there are roughly 10,000 coworking spaces worldwide, conferences devoted to the practice, and rival apps for managing coworking spaces.

Radical analysts of work will find plenty to dislike about coworking. Users typically fork over a fee to a private business, shouldering the costs of flexible production, buying back access to resources recoded as perks by lean capitalism (like a desk or workplace community), and, in the process, sponsoring a fresh zone of profiteering. And when gig-getting is the incentive to join, coworking spaces fuse social interaction and commercial opportunism.

Critics will also see a largely regulation-free workplace. Absent unions and a formal employer-employee relationship, coworking spaces lack the conventional footings to, say, enforce equity policies. Paradoxically, coworking cements what it's a partial defence against: the fragmentation of employment into so many projects, the rise of compulsory entrepreneurship, and the restructuring of firms according to an outsourcing model.

Coworking makes capitalism's flexible labour regime – a driver of inequality – work better.

Coworking's prototypes were mostly informal, frequently free, occasionally linked to activism, and certainly peripheral to the market. One of New York City's premiere coworking programmes, for example, runs out of activist-artist space Not An Alternative. And "jellies", or ad hoc work-togethers, are zero-cost gatherings in homes or cafés. Coworking is a classic tale of the market capture of innovation from below.

As part of collaborative research on collective responses to precarity in cultural and creative industries, my colleagues and I have been observing the coworking trend and interviewing coworking space members, founders, and advocates over the past few years. Rather than surrender it to private business or dismiss it as a skill of neoliberal exploitation, coworking is better grasped as contested. It assists growing numbers of independent workers in navigating precarious employment. The question is whether coworking spaces can do double-duty, or, help sustain livelihoods and advance economic alternatives. One path to push back against coworking's capture by corporate capital and to move beyond the pressures of individualisation on coworking members is co-operativism.

## Co-oping coworking

"Bringing people together to collaboratively create a better workplace that we want is based on values and needs – and that calls for a co-operative model", says co-op advocate Ela Kagel. If we take the co-operative principles, values, and identity statement upheld by the International Co-operative Alliance as a benchmark, coworking spaces and the co-op model appear to make a good match. For one, co-ops form in response to "common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations" –



and coworking arises from the unique needs (for workspace, sociality, and networks) and aspirations (to retain independence) of self-employed workers.

Independents put the co-op value of “self-help” into practice when they band together to start a coworking space to mitigate their work-related challenges. Ostensibly member organisations, many coworking spaces effectively adhere to the principle of “voluntary and open membership”. Coworking spaces often pride themselves on being member-driven, a potential hinge to the co-op cornerstone, “democratic member control”. And co-operativism’s guiding “concern for community” echoes coworking advocates for whom “community”, or the fostering of social bonds between members, is coworking’s highest virtue.

On key measures, co-ops and coworking are complementary. This doesn’t make coping coworking inevitable, or easy. Spotty

awareness of the co-op model is one challenge. And some operators who considered the co-op model, but ultimately took a pass on it, regret lingering perceptions of co-ops – more “hippy” than “business” – that are unlikely to win over prospective members that identify as entrepreneurs.

Another obstacle is members’ mobility. Coworking spaces bend to independent workers’ erratic incomes, volatile schedules, and footloose ways, offering memberships ranging from monthly to daily. Coworking’s draw, reflects one coworking space operator, is its “flexibility”, whereas “co-operatives require commitment. They require people who say, ‘I am going to commit to this for a long period of time’, and take on some responsibility, which is a little counter to where they are right now.”

The churn that defines network capitalism’s labour economy undercuts the combination of time, camaraderie, and trust that traditionally



underpins workers' efforts to organise. But the obstacles to co-oping coworking are not insurmountable – not least because co-operativism's kernel, mutual aid, is intrinsic to coworking.

Mutual aid flows from recognition that collective not competitive strategies are necessary to survive adverse material conditions. That their circumstances reflect the wider restructuring of employment and welfare is hardly lost on coworkers. Says one, a media freelancer, "people end up going into self-employment or freelancing partly through choice, because they want to create their own careers, and partly because, what's the alternative option?" Recent research by the Creative Industries Federation finds that virtually half of the UK creative industries workforce is freelance.

To co-operativise coworking is to politically scale the mutual aid already present in the practice. Splitting the cost of office rent across a pool of people who'd be unable to afford it individually is coworking's mutual-aid baseline. Coworkers further support each other by countering the isolation of working alone from home, providing informal feedback on work, or collaborating on projects.

Coworking ups its mutual-aid game by tackling the protections gap faced by members without access to the entitlements tied to being in "standard employment". Activists in Berlin, for example, have used coworking spaces to promote a freelancer rights movement. And coworking spaces in Canada have partnered on a health insurance programme for members. Admittedly, these initiatives are currently rare, but they indicate interest in mobilising coworking infrastructure to better support independent work.

The co-op model's prospects in coworking are brightened by the sector's apparent openness to different organisational forms. From small outfits run by solo operators to vast facilities led by property developers, coworking is a service usually sold by conventional businesses. There are, however, several coworking spaces that are non-profit organisations, municipally supported projects, or Community Interest Companies.

A small but growing number of coworking spaces are structured as co-ops. Differing in size, age, and niche, examples of coworking co-ops include Cowork Niagara, Créagora, ECTO,

Espace Koala, and the Sackville Commons Co-operative in Canada; Nido Coworking and Childcare in the US; Indycube, OpenSpace Co-operative, and Workplace Co-operative 115 in the UK; L'Alveare in Italy; Coopérative Pointcarré in France; and VillageOffice in Switzerland.

In the case of Montréal's ECTO, it was seen as only logical for people "sharing" a space to also "govern" and "own" that space, says cofounder Samantha Slade. Early members, Slade adds, were drawn to ECTO by its "co-op values." Distinguishing itself from "lone-ranger, individualistic entrepreneurship", ECTO, which has about 200 members, is formally organised as a solidarity co-operative. Member participation, says cofounder Yves Otis, is "now just part of the culture". Otis speaks of ECTO as an exercise in "collective organisational development", where "learning to be with others and find solutions to different problems that arise" is paramount. At ECTO, "first" he says, "we are human".

For Canada's Cowork Niagara, incorporating as a co-op "came almost at the very end" of its formation, explains cofounder Trevor Twining on the podcast *Coworking Weekly*. In 2012, a group of independents began weekly meetups at a café. They'd work, talk projects, and serve as sounding boards. Proving their ability to work together, the group decided to open a space. When outside funding interest imploded, the core group's aversion to a business model that would put power in someone else's hands solidified. Says Twining, "I wanted to have a structure that inserted this idea of shared ownership and community right into our DNA, so that it could never be extracted or, basically, compromised." A meetup participant, who was active in a food co-op, flagged the fit between the group's values and the co-op model: it "aligned with everything we were trying to do structurally", reflects Twining.

Launched in 2014, Cowork Niagara now has roughly 200 members. A shared ownership structure, Twining emphasises, gives everyone a stake in improving the space, and creates an institution "that's going to last beyond you". But democratic control is key. "At its essence, what becoming a co-operative business means is that every member is an owner in the business, with an equal say in its operation." The people using the space also manage it and steer its development. Cowork Niagara does

not hide its co-operative economic principles, its website declaring, “We’re here to serve you and all our members, not to maximize shareholders’ wealth.”

Independents self-organise to open coworking spaces because existing worker organisations do not do it on their behalf. Unions have a mixed record of supporting nonstandard workers, coworking’s base. Coworking co-op Indycube leads the way in showing that unions have a place in coworking, and that coworking is a site where unions can reach and support freelancers. Started in Wales in 2010, Indycube has around 30 locations, with more in the pipeline for the UK. Indycube converted to a co-op in 2016. “We’re mutualising”, they announced on a blog, “simply because we want to give indycube back to the community.”

A much-needed link between co-ops and unions, Indycube and the Community union combined forces in June 2017 to launch a benefits programme for independent workers. “Our partnership with Community”, according to Indycube founder Mark Hooper, “will give self-employed workers a collective voice and access to support and services that would normally be out of their reach.” Indycube Community members pay £10 per month for access to Indycube spaces, legal support, discount insurance, and an invoice factoring service to facilitate timely client payment.

### Mutual-aid accelerator

Amid fluid labour market conditions, coworking is one response to the need for infrastructure to support self-employed workers. By adopting a co-op model, coworking spaces commit to serve members’ needs first, keep surplus within a community, and give workers a voice in shaping the environment in which they work.

Co-oping coworking also begins to confront deeper political-economic challenges, namely, the need to envision and advance alternative relations of production within which to generate, organise, and control wealth. From this perspective, co-operativising a coworking space is not an end goal but a transitional move.

Mainstream startup or “accelerator” culture is rooted in self-exploitation, IPO-centrism, extractivist venture capital, social inequalities, and competitive individualism. What might be called a mutual-aid accelerator would work against these tendencies. This is less a matter of

exercising radical imagination than of naming already-moving currents.

A mutual-aid accelerator would retain much from the coworking concept, from connecting dispersed workers, to sharing amenities, to peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. Unlike “social enterprise”, it would explicitly forefront experiments oriented to systemic economic alternatives anchored in shared ownership and collective governance.

As a physical space, a mutual-aid accelerator could adopt a multi-stakeholder co-op model, while tapping governance insights from commons initiatives and housing co-op traditions. Membership would encompass associative union status, extending protections akin to Indycube Community. To combat social exclusions that pervade creative industries, it would privilege supporting projects that counteract gender and racial inequalities within these industries, and, like the L’Alveare and Nido coworking spaces, fold in childcare.

A mutual-aid accelerator would source from, house, and incubate co-ops. As it stands, coworking members periodically join forces to pitch for larger projects, a practice that a mutual-aid accelerator could formalise in freelancer co-ops. Seeding co-ops requires embedding co-operative development support from co-op associations and finance support from credit unions. Ultimately, a mutual-aid accelerator would amplify co-operation among co-operatives, or solidarity economics. Initiatives that gesture in this direction include LabCoop in Barcelona and Open Co-op in Amsterdam. Access to affordable space could be aided by partnering with city governments, which, rather than compromise co-operativism’s commitment to autonomy, could plug coworking co-ops into the contemporary politics of municipalism:

From time-squeezed independent workers to crowded urban coworking markets, efforts to link coworking and co-ops face major challenges. Yet as shown by the examples I’ve touched on, coworking co-ops are not impossible – nor are they a panacea. Co-oping coworking is one tactic among many to advance worker-centred alternatives to precarious employment and the capitalist sharing economy. Next time, rather than “take this idea, steal it, and make it your own”, perhaps the advice might be, “socialise this idea, circulate it, and make it common”.

