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Article in *Area* · January 2017

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## **Socio-economic profile and working conditions of freelancers in co-working spaces and work collectives; evidence from the design sector in Greece**

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### Abstract

Third places, such as business incubators, co-working spaces and work collectives, represent a new ecosystem of collaborative working practices in the creative economy that alters significantly the spatial distribution of work and the notion of “workplace”. 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. The paper contributes to the critical understanding of these new geographies of workplace and working conditions that third places manifest. Using data from a large survey about the economics and the working conditions of Greek designers and from four interviews with freelancers in work collectives and facilitators of co-working spaces, the paper sheds light on the socio-economic profile and the working conditions of Greek freelance designers that use co-working spaces and work collectives as means of reducing precarious working conditions and personal-professional risks. The results show that designers in third places, in contrast to freelancers that use formal workplaces or work from home, work long hours with poor pay and a large proportion has no safety net, concerning social security. Third places can be enclaves of the shadow economy and of very specific precarious working conditions. On the other hand, third places help freelance designers become more embedded to business networks, both local and foreign, rather than working in isolation. By allowing the sharing of projects, business intelligence, resources and social time, third places appear to successfully counterbalance the pervasive immaterialization of labour. Networking effects between freelancers and self-employed that choose to work in third places usually result in greater opportunities for outsourcing and subcontracting and in more exports.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The digitization of the modern world and the growing importance of the creative industries has seen a global restructuring in business ecosystems, the working lives of millions of people and the spatial distribution of work. New hybrid workspaces (third places, Oldenburg, 1989) such as fab labs, hackerspaces and co-working spaces (hereafter CSs), offer freelancers, self-employees and entrepreneurs the ability to take advantage of both geographical and virtual proximity. This paper describes the economic (income) and social (age, gender, education) profile of those working in just such “third” places and examines the reasons third places are used, the benefits they offer and the level of satisfaction they provide according to functionality and working conditions (hours worked, social security-insurance, subcontracting-outsourcing relations) in contrast to working from home or from formal workplaces. Geographers have deeply been engaged in critically analyzing issues of immaterial labour, the alterations of “workplace” in the era of digital capitalism and the ways space enables or constraints creative and cultural activities in cities and regions (Gill and Pratt 2008, Valli 2015, Green and Livanos 2015). The paper is positioned among the literature of geographies of work (Herod 1997, Castree *et al* 2004, McDowell 2004) and offers some new interpretations for these new and hybrid workplaces and the ways that these workplaces alter the working conditions of freelancers through spatial proximity and collaboration. Moreover, the paper introduces the concept of the work collective (hereafter WCL), which shares many features with the

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank the editor and the two anonymous referees for providing very useful comments in earlier drafts of the paper.

CS. WCLs are usually formed by a small number of freelancers of the same occupation (designers, architects, artists etc), with diverse skills, in order to share the operating expenses of a conventional workplace (a shared studio/office) and benefit from the collaborative environment. WCLs have developed rapidly in the larger Greek cities as a reaction to the difficulties freelancers face in renting personal workplaces since the economic crisis.

The paper draws on a large survey (Creative Survey 2015) that took place between December 2014 and February 2015, on the economics and working conditions of Greek designers. The results of the survey on third places were discussed in depth through four personal interviews with freelancers that use WCLs and with directors of CSs in Athens and Thessaloniki, Greece.

## **2.The rise of co-working spaces and work collectives**

CSs and WCLs, along with other third places such as hackerspaces, fab labs and accelerators, owe their rise to digitization (Malecki and Moriset 2008) which has altered the spatial distribution of work and work-life and redefined the word “workspace” through the creation of new hybrid production (or working) spaces (Harrison 2004). Workers, especially freelancers and self-employed people that work in the creative and knowledge industry, negotiate their spatio-temporal boundaries between formal workspaces, home, non-places (such as airports and hotel lobbies, Auge, 1995) and third places (CSs, business incubators etc), and between work time and non-work time. Digital technology and mobile internet has allowed people to work through a laptop wherever they find broadband internet.

In parallel, the digitization of the modern world and the emergence of digital capitalism (Schiller 1999) has altered the business ecosystem, as firms become orchestrators in networks of outsourcing and subcontracting, rather than owners of skills and know-how (Gottfredson et al 2005, Moriset 2013). This has resulted in a geographic splintering of value chains and an increase in the numbers of self-employed people and freelancers, especially during times of economic crisis (De Propris 2013, Christopherson 2013) and has given rise to the phenomenon of “lone eagles”, coined by Burgess (1994) to describe entrepreneurs and freelancers, while Beyers and Lindhal (1996) used the same term for one-person proprietorships.

According to Young (1997), lone eagles are knowledge workers who can live and work anywhere, primarily because of advances in telecomputing technologies. At the same time, it seems less costly for firms to outsource particular parts of projects to freelancers than keep them in-house (Stanworth and Stanworth 1997). On the other hand, O’Connor (2007) suggests that the individual worker “doing it for oneself” is part of a wider cultural shift in the notion of labour away from routine and line management (also cited in Mould et al 2014). However, freelancing is highly problematic, as it is associated with high individual risks and can be difficult to sustain (Mitchel 2005, Gill and Pratt 2007).

This relatively new type of employment, which is well suited to a new type of capitalism, namely digital capitalism, exacerbates a tendency towards uncertain and precarious employment that has been unfolding over the last four decades (Beck 2000, Ross 2009). Contrary to widespread belief, precarity is no longer limited to the low-end service sectors, but increasingly affects everyone; “No one, not even those in the traditional professions, can any longer expect a fixed pattern of employment

in the course of their lifetime, and they are under more and more pressure to anticipate, and prepare for, a future in which they still will be able to compete in a changing marketplace” (Ross 2009, 2). Creative workers and artists hardly benefitted from the ‘stable employment’ post-war counter-revolution, and since its demise, are increasingly affected by rapidly deteriorating conditions (Bain and McLean 2013, Grant and Buckwold 2013, de Peuter 2011). In fact, given the prominence of the creative industry in current industrial policy or urban development debates, policy responses to the widespread precarity of the industry have been scarce, even in developed countries with long social protection traditions (Kong 2011, Murray and Gollmitzer 2012).

Working as a lone eagle has pitfalls, such as the sense of loneliness and isolation from the outside-world and a potential erosion of the boundaries between home and work life (Spinuzzi 2012, Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010). Working from home denies social and professional interaction, and freelancers may lose the benefits that geographic proximity could give with other co-workers or freelancers. The issue of geographical proximity is central to contemporary urban and regional studies (Amin and Cohendet 2004, Gertler 2008, Boschma 2005) and is associated with processes of spatial economic development. The spatial concentration and agglomeration of actors facilitates the exchange of knowledge, both through market and non-market relations. Thus proximity is crucial for the mobilization of knowledge that may result in the production of new and innovative products and services.

This problem of lack of proximity for lone eagles has seen the rise of third places, such as CSs and WCLs. Both offer the opportunity for lone eagles to detach work from home and also give the opportunity for knowledge exchange and “serendipity

production” (Moriset 2013). According to Moriset (ibid) “people are well aware that frequenting certain places increases the probability of fruitful encounters”. The spatial proximity that third places offer to freelancers increases their chances of finding new projects and marketing themselves in that new environment, acquiring new knowledge and being part of specific learning processes, gaining access to new resources and lowering their operational costs and personal-professional risks, therefore reducing job precarity.

According to deskmag.com (2015), there are about 7500 CSs around the world. CSs usually occupy a building and through monthly (or even daily) leases offer working spaces (a private or shared desk/office) and other resources to independent professionals with heterogeneous backgrounds. The resources offered usually include free WiFi, desks, offices and common/meeting/conference rooms, IT facilities, coffee and snacks. Some CSs also offer virtual companies, marketing/web design services and connections with venture capitals. Moreover, CSs offer the sense of a plug and play collegiality that fosters collaboration and network building between those that are willing to work away from home in an environment that closely resembles a traditional office in terms of working alongside ‘colleagues’, thus a more conventional working environment, but with the added benefits of informality, flexibility and openness (GLA 2014). The tenants of CSs benefit from a collaborative working environment that fosters knowledge sharing and creates a sense of community through the geographical proximity of the tenants. Geographical proximity facilitates interactive learning by strengthening other forms of proximity, such as cognitive and social proximity (Boschma 2005). However, the co-presence of workers in CSs does not necessarily lead to interaction and

knowledge sharing. Merkel (2015) argues that managers of CSs play a crucial role in creating a hospitable atmosphere, through social curation processes and strategies that include the organization of food events, talks and seminars (social strategy) and the proper design of CSs (e.g. social gathering spaces) in order to facilitate communication and encounters (material strategy). If done well, the face-to-face contact and collaboration in CSs usually advances the levels of trust between the tenants and leads to the creation of a local buzz (Storper and Venables 2004, Asheim et al 2007) and chances for serendipitous production. Finally, CS managers usually build networks and global pipelines (Bathelt et al 2004) with other CSs, in order to connect the knowledge buzz that is created in their CS with other national and international buzzes and offer new possibilities to the coworkers for intra- and supra-local collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Another way to build collaborative working environments is through the establishment of WCLs. These are usually formed by a small number of freelancers/self-employed people of the same occupation (designers, architects, artists etc), with diverse skills, in order to share the operating expenses of a conventional workplace (a shared studio/office) and benefit from the collaborative environment, instead of working from home or their own formal workplaces and/or instead of renting their time to a higher authority (Cornwell 2011). Usually the members that form a WCL are friends or operate through a common network of colleagues and have a degree of professional proximity. The members of a WCL not only share the bills of the workplace, but also share knowledge, skills, equipment, free time and personal networks. Members of a WCL can set common goals and



have mutual engagement in projects. Furthermore, there are advantages regarding the peer-negotiation of their spatio-temporal work lives and the peer-management of the WCL – they have absolute control of their time and they may negotiate/decide with their peers longer leave periods (e.g. a sabbatical from work or vacation time beyond their paid allotment) without fearing dismissal (ibid).

WCLs can also be seen as microclusters of creative production, where the entrepreneurial development of each participant is advanced through the different skills that the members bring to collective projects (Jacob, 2009). Moreover, working collectively in the arts and culture industries is common through different collective formats: artist cooperatives, occupied cultural spaces and artist-run centres that are governed via horizontal decision-making processes and are democratically controlled businesses, are termed institutions of “mutual aid” (de Peuter and Cohen 2015). From loft artist spaces in New York in the 1980s (Zukin 1989) to occupied cultural spaces in Italy (Bailey and Marcucci 2013), and the geographically clustered communities that Banks (2007) describes, these self organized spaces (or Do It Ourselves movements, as Bain and McLean (2013) highlight) aim to mitigate exploitation and alienation, and to reduce precarity.

However, WCLs can be seen as collective spaces that operate against individualism, that individualize risk (Gill, 2002) and corporatize creativity. In many cases, collectivism has an ideological basis and purpose, in opposition to the collaborations that are seen in CSs. Wilding, in an interview by Brett Stalbaum (2001), states the difference between collaborations and collectives: “collaborations are usually entered into on the basis of pooling expertise and for the purpose of getting a specific project done... ownership of the work redounds to each artist separately”.

On the other hand, “collective members usually share similar political goals and desires – though they may have different degrees of political radicality. Collective members also share the desire to work together and to count this process as centrally their “work.” Many collectives use only the group name for identification and don’t label individual parts of works produced with the name of the member who was responsible for making it”. This is a central political distinction between practices of collaboration and practices of collectivism and a central difference between WCLs and CSs.

Other minor differences stemming from the above distinction is that the working environment of a WCL is closed to outsiders and less transparent than that of a CS, and that the members of the WCL take decisions on the everyday matters of the collective in a communal manner (peer-management), whereas the decisions about the management of a CS is usually taken by the CS director/facilitator. Thus, the WCL is less spatially open and more democratic than the CS. Moreover, the members of WCLs usually have more formal connections between each other and sometimes WCLs can operate under a single brand name (but not a company), whereas the tenants of CSs do not usually know each other before entering the CS. Thus, WCLs usually specialize in a single industry, whereas CSs can be specialized, or can offer space for serendipitous production to diverse groups of professionals.

In Greece, a growing number of WCLs, especially in the creative industry, have been established in the last few years of economic crisis. WCLs can be seen as a collective response to the crisis, as for many freelancers, having a personal formal workplace is very costly. Moreover, in Athens there are more than 10 CSs (end of 2015) that offer

about 400 work-places to freelancers in the creative industry. The first CS was opened in 2010, while the majority of CSs opened in 2013-2014.

However, there is still much confusion about CSs and WCLs, in terms of the social and economic profile of their users/occupants, the differential qualitative and quantitative benefits they get from working in each type of space and the difference the type of space makes to their working lives. The analysis that follows sheds light on these topics.

### **3. Methodology**

The data was collected between 6/12/2014–6/2/2015 through an online questionnaire (Creative Survey 2015). The goal of the survey was to study the economics of the Greek design industry and the working conditions of Greek designers. The total sample were 813, 370 (46%) of whom were freelancers, who were then split into four distinct groups according to place of work, forming the basic units of analysis for this paper.

Table 1 here

The outputs of the analysis were then discussed through semi-structured interviews with four designers; two of them work in WCLs (Interviewees A and B) and the other two are directors of CSs (Interviewees C and D) in Athens, Greece. The goal of these interviews was to discuss the main findings of the survey on the socio-economic and professional profile of those that use CSs and WCLs as main workplaces, as well as the role of CSs and WCLs in the working lives of designers.

### **4. Results**

#### **4.1. Demographic and socio-economic profile**

Older designers (aged above 51 years) exclusively use conventional spaces (home or a formal workplace), while respondents from the youngest age group (18-30) clearly favour CSs. According to the deskmag.com Global Coworking survey of 2011, 'most coworkers are in their mid-twenties to late thirties, with an average age of 34'. In turn, WCLs tend to become the preferred type of space in the ages between 31-50 years.

In terms of income, Greek freelance designers earn on average about 9,389€ (net annual income). Owning a workplace seems to lead to a higher average income, while operating in a CS, a WCL or from one's home significantly lowers income. In fact, about half of those working in CSs and about 43% of those that choose to work in WCLs have an annual net income of less than 5,000€. The same applies to those working from home. Therefore, Greek freelance designers work in very precarious conditions, concerning their annual income. Moreover, only the designers that work from their own formal workplace seem to have an annual income above the average.

Table 2 here

The majority of those working in self-owned workplaces and those in CSs and WCLs work on average more than 40 h/w. In more details, 57,1% of freelancers in CSs work between 41-60 h/w, and another 7,1% work more than 60h/w. For freelancers in WCL, these numbers are 56,5% and 8,7%, respectively, while for those that have their own workplace, 48,4% work between 41-60 h/w and another 15% more than

60 h/w. Finally, 33,1% of those that work from home, work between 41-60 h/w and another 7,7%% more than 60 h/w. Along with the previous discussion on earnings, it seems that creative work in the Greek design industry usually involves quite long working hours with poor pay, something that has already been noticed in other studies (Gill and Pratt 2008). While 80% of those that have an annual income of more than 10,000€ work longer hours (more than 40 h/w), there is no positive correlation between hours worked and annual income.

About 40% of those that choose to work in CSs and WCLs have a master's degree. Given that Greek Universities do not offer master degrees in design, these people have studied abroad – mainly in the UK – and have experienced an international educational (and working) environment. Finally, 57.4% of the respondents in the two groups have a university degree as a minimum qualification, a figure which is slightly lower than that reported by Deskmag.com (2012), which stood at 65%.

#### **4.2. Reason to work in CSs and WCLs, pooling of resources and level of satisfaction**

Among the factors influencing the decision of freelancers to work in CSs (39,3% of responses) and WCLs (45,7%), ideology was the most important. According to the interviews with CS facilitators, this has no political connotation, as it usually reflects the need of the freelancer to move away from home and engage in a collaborative environment, which seems “the best way of doing business nowadays”. On the other hand, interviewees from WCLs stated that, in many cases, the decision to form a WCL has an ideological (political) background, as they believe WCLs form “an alternative way of doing business away from the corporatist relations that big firms imply” (Interviewee B). Through the formation of a WCL, the members believe they

have absolute control over their time and life, via the peer negotiation of every aspect of their working-life. Thus, two different explanations (non-political/political) arise through the same answer. As we highlighted before, using Wilding's quote, workers that choose CSs favour practices of collaboration, while they act as individuals. In other words, the personal economic goals of freelancers may colonize or sacrifice the social part of collaboration. On the other hand, workers in WCLs favour practices of collectivism, against individualization and the overall risk that individualization implies, especially in times of economic crisis. As Interviewee A stated "for many of us, the collective is a means of both economic, but foremost, existential survival during the last five years of increase neo-liberalization of every aspect of life".

That political distinction between CS and WCL is also supported by the following differences between the reasons for choosing CSs as opposed to WCLs. While for those that choose to work in a WCL the second most significant reason is to lower the economic cost of setting up a workplace (28,2%), for the CS respondents it was marketing opportunities (32.1%). These refer to the chances that someone has to market him/herself inside the collaborative environment of a third place and find new projects or subcontracting activities to work on, or alternatively, the chances for serendipitous production. In a similar vein, in the 2015 Deskmag.com global survey, networking features as one of the most important elements of coworking, as the average coworker made 3,6 new and useful acquaintances in 2 months. On the other hand, marketing opportunities were the least important factor for designers choosing to work at a WCLs (10,9%). The reasons why cost considerations were

rather unimportant to CS respondents became evident through interviews with CSs facilitators, where it was clearly stated that “CSs should not be regarded as the cheapest solution for freelancers, as it is not” (Interviewee C). And this seems to be true, as the average cost of renting an equipped office ranges from 450€ to 550€ per month, whereas an equipped office outside a CS can be found at half the above price.

As for what freelancers share in WCLs and CSs (multiple answers), the answers are very similar. In both WCLs and CSs, the majority of freelancers (over 80%) share projects, spaces (about 70%) and also technology and equipment for their work (60%) and leisure time (60%). By sharing resources, such as work equipment, freelancers lower their personal operation costs and can engage in more projects that demand more specialized equipment. Moreover, the fact that 60% of them also share leisure time means that co-working advances the spatial and social proximity of freelancers and produces a sense of community even outside formal working relations.

Overall, freelancers in CSs and WCLs seem satisfied with where they work, since 71,4% and 65,2% of workers in CSs and WCLs respectively, answered that they are either satisfied or very satisfied with their working environments. (Note that the level of satisfaction has no positive correlation with the levels of income, or any other variable.)

### **4.3. Social security, outsourcing and exports**

During this time of economic crisis in Greece, it is very common for a large proportion of the workforce (mainly freelancers) to be unable to pay their social security contributions. These people subsequently have no valid social security cards, cannot therefore invoice their customers and thus are forced to work in the shadow economy. It was striking that 53,6% of freelancers in CSs, 38,1% of home-workers and about 20% of freelancers in WCLs and formal workplaces have no social security. However, during the interviews, another striking finding partially explained the big numbers of uninsured freelancers: the facilitator of a CS in Athens stated that “it is common in CSs to have someone that can invoice customers, so that those that do not can use his invoice capability” (Interviewee D). This means that CSs can be working places of the shadow economy, where a large proportion of the workforce does not have social security and uses that of others to invoice their own customers. The same also applies to WCLs, as another interviewee highlighted, but less extensively. These findings reveal that third places can be enclaves of the shadow economy, where collegiality extends to sharing personal invoice resources, among other things, leading to reduced transaction costs to the designers involved.

Moreover, workers in CSs and WCLs tend to cooperate more with others in specific project-based works – in fact, they have about 20% more chance of cooperating with other firms and freelancers for specific projects. It seems that working in CSs and WCLs fosters collaboration more often than working in other more isolated environments (such as home and formal workplaces). Thus, serendipitous production can be evident in CSs and WCLs, as the informal networks that are developed through the flow of incomers (especially in CSs) and the spatial proximity



of freelancers in third places can trigger cooperation, initially, in the form of outsourcing/subcontracting for specific projects. A facilitator of a CS stated that “CSs can be seen as an isolated market where demand and supply is usually covered internally... if one has a specific demand, let’s say someone needs an IT developer for a project, they will initially look at the pool of developers here (CS), and probably they will know each other, or at least they know their work” (Interviewee C). It seems that spatial proximity in CSs fosters trustworthy relations between freelancers of the same or different occupations that can eventually lead to professional collaborations. This collaborative environment in CSs is generated through their open nature and the mobility of freelancers. The same does not seem to apply to WCLs, as they are less open to outsiders and operate as an informal cooperative. However, WCLs are more democratic than CSs, as decisions are taken in a communal manner, and the “ideological proximity” of the WCL members seems to foster trust between them and also act as a brand for the outsiders. An interviewee from an internal designer’s/architect’s WCL highlighted the fact that “potential customers are attracted by the form of our WCL and want to support our venture, and we also have a lot of collaborations with other WCLs... for example there is a photographer’s WCL in Thessaloniki; we have done some projects with them and we are both very happy to work together, not only because there is good cooperation in the projects, but especially because we know how things work in a WCL and we want to support such attempts” (Interviewee A).

Finally, the survey looked into the relations of freelance designers with foreign clients. On average, 52% of Greek designers have international clients. Through the

interviews it was clearly stated that the competitive advantage of the Greek design industry is the lower wages of Greek designers compared with other European countries (such as Germany, the UK and France). Greek designers find new projects from the international market through their international networks and crowdsourcing, as well as international contests. In the survey, 60% of those that chose to work in a CS made some revenue from foreign clients, while the respective shares of those that worked in their own formal workplaces was 57,8% and those in WCLs about 54%. A CS facilitator acknowledged the power of international networks in finding new projects and stated that he has made several attempts to connect the CS that he manages with other CSs and large companies in Europe and the USA, in order to provide clients with opportunities for collaboration with firms abroad. In doing so, he has joined a European network of CSs, funded by the EU, and through that network he co-organizes international events. By providing direct links to foreign knowledge bases, the CS facilitator has constructed a global pipeline that works both ways; on the one hand, international clients can commission freelancers [and firms] that are hosted in his CS and, on the other hand, freelancers [and firms] of the CS can visit other CSs in Europe and expand their professional connections and learn new trends from the global digital industry.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

Third places (in our case CSs and WCLs) are the manifestation of a new ecosystem of working practices that are emerging after the gradual collapse of the stable employment paradigm that was one of the main features of the Keynesian welfare state – which, we should note, Neilson and Rossiter (2008) correctly view as the

exception, since it extended to a rather small group of predominantly white males living in the western developed world – with precarity being the rule.

Along with deregulation and privatization, the last four decades have been a period of increasing flexibilization of labour markets, featuring instable income, lack of a safety net, erratic work schedules, uncertainty about continuing employment, the blurring of work and non-work time and the absence of collective representation (de Peuter 2011, 419). Cultural and creative work appears to be particularly susceptible to precarious conditions (Shorthose and Strange 2004, Bain and McLean 2013), which have given rise to various responses, from the antiprecarity movement (de Peuter 2011), and the creation of ‘local, non-capitalist and collectivist spaces’ (Bain and McLean 2013, 94), to the collective spaces discussed in the present paper. Furthermore, such practices point to a shifting focus in economic (particularly labor) geography towards acknowledging the role of labor in the ability of contemporary capitalism to ‘actively produce economic spaces and scales’ (Herod 1997; 24).

We have found that third places deal with some of the facets of precarity. Specifically, third places help freelance designers become more embedded in business networks (in terms of collaborations or customers), both local and foreign, compared with working in isolation, as lone eagles. By allowing the sharing of projects, business intelligence, resources and social time, third places appear to successfully counterbalance the pervasive immaterialization of labour. This is also reflected in the relatively higher level of job satisfaction reported by those working in third places.

On the other hand, since third places do not – in general – seek to reconstruct the archetypal Fordist firm, which, along with the state, was mainly responsible for the workers' social security, their impact on the provision of an effective safety net is negligible.

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