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The role of proximity coworking spaces in the post-pandemic platform urbanism

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Abstract:

This article investigates how Community Workspace (CWS) managers in Milan conceptualize their role within urban governance and space. Based on qualitative interviews, it identifies three ideal-typical relationships with local institutions: beneficiaries, partners, and policy providers. These situated perspectives reveal how CWS navigate tensions between market logic, civic engagement, and territorial embeddedness, often positioning themselves as intermediaries between grassroots actors and public authorities. The article contributes to debates on platform urbanism by introducing the notion of CWS as Local Collective Cooperation Goods (LCCGs), highlighting both their democratic potential and the challenges of integrating private actors into post-neoliberal governance frameworks grounded in proximity and cooperation.

Keywords: Coworking Spaces; Proximity; Platform Urbanism; New Municipalism; Local Collective Cooperation Goods

Introduction

Since their diffusion in the first decade of the 2000s, coworking spaces (from here on CWS) acted for freelancers, entrepreneurs, small firms, and start-ups as a flexible solution that responded to the need to find a workplace and, at the same time to create a network of relationships, to share knowledge, and to generate collaborations for coworkers (Spinuzzi 2012, Merkel 2015). Within urban contexts, CWS attract policymakers' interest as efficacious tools for urban regeneration (Mariotti et al., 2021).

The transformations induced by the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated the spread of new trends in the organisation of work and lifestyle habits (Giles-Corti et al., 2023): remote work has become widespread after the pandemic, raising new challenges and opportunities in the relationship between workers, employers, and urban space. The diffusion of remote work during and after the pandemic has also reinforced the growing interest in sustainable and equitable urban development, such as chrono-urbanist models like the 15-minute city one (Moreno, 2020; Moreno et al., 2021). Indeed, forced remote working during the pandemic contributed to a sharp decline in pollution and gas emissions, the promotion of non-motorised transport means, and the rediscovery of neighbourhoods by their local inhabitants (Giles-Corti et al., 2023). This favoured a focus on proximity-based policies to reduce urban inequalities between neighbourhoods and promote sustainable mobility (ibidem).

In the city of Milan the 15-minute city model, which posits that every citizen should be able to access essential services within a 15-minute radius by bicycle or public transport, also prompted coining the concept of *near working*, to refer to remote working in a professional environment near one's home rather than within the domestic space (Comune di Milano, 2021b). The initiatives enacted to implement these principles at the time can be framed as an entrepreneurial municipalist (Thompson et al., 2020) approach to managing platform urbanism

(Barns, 2020), as they adopted proximity and local cooperation as leading political values (Krish, 2022).

Early research on CWS argued that the consequences of the 2008 economic crisis, such as economic structural transformations and difficulties faced by professionals and freelancers, were fundamental to the rise of a phase of explosive growth for CWSs (Gandini, 2015). In light of recent changes, the role of CWS as hubs for sharing workspaces aimed at meeting the needs of freelancers and individual entrepreneurs and as community curators no longer seems sufficient. In this context, observing coworking spaces as part of the broader transformation of urban environments offers an opportunity to explore whether and how CWS can be diverted from purely commercial development paths, aligned with neoliberal platform urbanism (Boyle, 2024), and instead become allies of alternative planning visions that valorise cooperation and proximity. This study makes two significant contributions based on empirical qualitative research, comprising 62 semi-structured interviews with coworking managers across 87 spaces in Milan between October and November 2020. First, the phenomena during the pandemic triggered CWS managers to rethink their role in the urban space, expanding their vision well beyond their traditional economic function. Second, this transformation of CWS nature makes them potentially natural components of wider cooperative networks, which, by definition, blend strict distinctions between public, civic, and market urban spheres (Nielsen and Papin, 2021).

The article will proceed as follows. First, the paper will set the context of the study by illustrating new municipalist models in the context of platform urbanism. Then, CWS will be contextualised in this debate, explaining reasons for their relevance and current neglect in the existing literature on the topic. The methodological section will first specify the significance of the city of Milan and its CWS ecosystem to answer the research questions, then specify the data collection and the data analysis process. The findings will demonstrate that coworking

managers thoroughly engage in reflections about the urban policies enacted by the local government and imagine new pathways in which their relationships with the Municipality could develop. They also seem widely influenced – knowingly or unknowingly – by a renewed attention to values of proximity and cooperation. Interpreting the findings in the conclusion section brings multiple relevant contributions to the literature. First, the coworking managers' accounts influenced by these latter phenomena foresee the emergence of a new coworking archetype that we label 'proximity coworking'. Second, coworking managers envision interacting with local governments on three different layers and scales of intensity. Third, CWS in the context of new municipalism governance projects can be conceptualised as Local Collective Cooperative Goods (Crouch et al. 2004; 2001), part of wider hybrid networks composed of actors of different natures.

The context: platform urbanism and hybrid governance models

One of the most notable contemporary outcomes of the post-2008 crisis economic restructuring has been the rise of digital platforms, which have deeply impacted the urban space too (Barns, 2020). Digital platforms, following Van Dijck et al. (2018, p. 4), can be defined as a digital architecture organising and intermediating interactions between end users, corporate entities and public bodies. They are economic actors operating within a capitalist logic (Srnicek, 2016): their intermediation process is not neutral but functional to the mass collection and commodification of data (Zuboff, 2019). Today, due to their ubiquity, platforms extend the logic of intermediation and platformised ecosystems to the urban space (Krish, 2022). The consequence is a restructuring of urban relationships and connections and a re-conceptualisation of their governance. The outcome of these processes has been termed 'Platform Urbanism', defined as 'a set of burgeoning ideas about how the increasing ubiquity of platform ecosystems is reshaping urban conditions, institutions and actors' (Barns, 2020, p.

19). Platform urbanism invites us to understand platforms and urbanism as consubstantial, mutually influencing each other's developments and contributing to a common transformative process (Mezzadra et al., 2024). This interconnection becomes particularly evident if we focus on some of the social issues manifesting more strongly in the urban space, which are deeply related to processes of platformisation (Stehlin et al., 2020), such as the gentrification processes reinforced by Airbnb, the diffusion of gig work (particularly in the delivery sector), and impact on local trade of Amazon (Mezzadra et al., 2024).

In turn, the threat posed by neoliberal platform urbanism and austerity has prompted several administrations to strengthen multi-actor alliances inside and between cities, leveraging the logic of exchange and mutualism to support city sovereignty (Nielsen and Papin, 2021; Russell, 2019), a strategy that has been termed overall "New Municipalism" (Thompson, 2021). New municipalism is an umbrella term under which a wide range of different typologies and variants have proliferated (see Roth et al., 2023 for an overview). These variants span from Rojava's democratic confederalism, aiming to replace the nation-state entirely, to much more gradual approaches such as *entrepreneurial municipalism* (Thompson et al., 2020) or *weak municipalism* (Béal et al., 2023), focusing more on innovative participatory tools and less on structured alternative political platforms. Despite the significant differences, all these approaches share some overarching values: decentralisation of power a politics of proximity (Krisch, 2022; Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2021). These values envision forms of reorganisation between urban infrastructures, work, mobility, and governance, re-territorialising space and reconfiguring citizenship (Franziska, 2020; Strüver and Bauriedl, 2022). For the sake of this article, we are not interested in new municipalism or any of its varieties *per se.* Rather, we are interested in how these common values can inform alternative governance models in the context of platform urbanism.Indeed, the concept of platform urbanism highlights the current power imbalance between digital platforms and urban space. However, the co-constitutive

relationship between platforms and other urban institutional actors (Barns, 2020) implies that the relationship between digital platforms and cities is not predetermined. For example, the Sharing Cities Coalition Declaration, inspired by new municipalist values, argued that platforms can serve the interests of citizens and communities instead of corporations and profit, if promoted or properly governed by public policies (Fuster Morell, 2018). This opens up the possibility that the logic of the platform can also become key in projects from below, led by urban coalitions shifting governance models beyond classic dualisms between the state and the market toward ideas related to the governance of the commons (Leitheiser et al., 2022). In this context, platforms would be employed for their potential as enablers of cooperation among proximate citizens, finalised to value co-creation with a focus on the community, not extracting data and capital at the expense of users and the urban space (Barns 2020). In addition, discussing the co-generative dynamics of platforms and cities, Sarah Barns observes that in the platform city "quaint distinctions between the 'built' and the 'digital' are collapsing, just as software makers are literally becoming 'city builders'" (Barns 2020, p. 15). This also opens the floor to considering more seriously the possibility of "platforms" that are not digital and the role they could play.

Recognising coworking spaces as platforms in the context of platform urbanism

A consistent academic literature now considers and defines CWS as "platforms" for their architecture and function (Coppola, 2023; Gandini and Cossu, 2021; Avdikos and Merkel, 2020; Merkel, 2019; de Peuter et al., 2017; Merkel, 2015). CWS follow the same principles of openness and collaboration with strangers to exchange goods and services, and the same logic of hybridisation between market exchange and reciprocity that characterises platforms (Avdikos and Kalogeresis, 2017). They intermediate networked sociality among market and civic stakeholders such as citizens, freelance workers and employees, SMEs, and associations (de Peuter et al., 2017), with the coworking manager and the architecture of the space being

key in organising and structuring how and among whom interactions take place (Merkel 2019, 2015). CWS also become platforms that intermediates 'value-sharing' practices, such as pick-up points for buying groups and meeting places for bartering objects (Blagoev et al., 2019), and knowledge circulation (Nakano et al., 2023). More in general, CWS are places of community-making and collaboration (Spinuzzi, 2012; Capdevila, 2013; Gandini, 2015; Merkel, 2015).

These elements all relate to Barns' (2020, pp. 116-117) theorisation of platforms as relational systems of value exchange, despite in the case of CWS, this system of relations remains predominantly offline. Furthermore, CWS role of intermediation has been found to potentially extend beyond the space itself, to the neighbourhood and the local area (Gandini and Cossu, 2021), which is also in line with the conceptualisation of platform ecosystems in platform urbanism (2020, p. 110). Highlighting the role of CWS as an offline platform is important and useful because it enables extending the boundaries of relevant actors to consider in the analysis of platform urbanism, especially when envisioning alternative governance models inspired by new municipalist values and led by urban coalitions from below.

Despite these premises, CWS's actual or potential contributions in these efforts have largely been ignored. A valuable exception is Coppola (2023), who recently analysed the relevant role CWS played in *Mares de Madrid*. This initiative took place in the Spanish capital between 2015 and 2019 from a progressive and neo-municipalist local government coalition. Furthermore, Coppola traces back how CWS have always played an important role in shaping the imaginaries of social innovation practices and new municipalist discourses (ibidem). This appears in line with a broader developing strand of research that acknowledges the role of CWS and new working spaces concerning issues of urban inequality, inclusion and exclusion processes, and wellbeing (Reuschke and Ekinsmyth, 2021; Rodríguez-Modroño, 2021), seeing them as potential sources for bottom-up regeneration (d'Ovidio, 2021). Public policies more

actively integrating CWS into their governance models could also play a key role in steering the development of CWS away from their integration into platform urbanism models based on data capture and capitalisation (Zuboff, 2019; Barns, 2020) and toward more socially conscious ones (Avdikos and Merkel, 2020).

Coppola (2023), however, also highlights how the CWS impact in the Mares de Madrid initiative – and the initiative itself more at large – experienced relevant setbacks, especially in connecting the CWS in peripheral areas with the neighbourhood and in the long-term institutionalisation of the alternative governance models enacted. These issues resonate with broader ones observed by the recent literature on new municipalist experimentations, related to the complexity of multi-scalar platform governance, the pervasive power of neoliberal mechanisms of urban governance, and the difficulty of consolidating new urban governance regimes (see, e.g., Bua and Davies, 2023; Janoschka and Mota, 2021). This call for a better assessment of the tangible and intangible assets needed to sustain the institutionalisation of alternative governance models, and how it is possible to conceptualise in a clearer and more structured way the role of CWS in them.

To accomplish this task, we resort to the concept of Local Collective Competition Goods (from now on LCCGs) as applied by Ramella and Manzo (2018, 2020) to FabLabs, which are similar in nature to CWS (Akhavan, 2021). This approach, derived from Crouch et al. (2001, 2004), suggests that local productive systems depend on both tangible and intangible assets, such as infrastructure, services, norms, and cognitive resources. LCCGs are *collective* because they are theoretically accessible on a non-competitive basis to all market actors within a local productive system. At the same time, they are *competitive* because they enhance the competitiveness of these actors beyond the local context. However, this external competitiveness is made possible through *cooperation* within the local productive system. According to Crouch et al. (2001, 2004), sustaining LCCGs requires durable governance

structures, composed of institutions with diverse leadership, to coordinate and maintain these resources over time. Thus, in this article, we tentatively analyse the potential role of CWS in platform urbanist governance models as LCCGs. This conceptualisation allows the recognition of the ambivalent nature of CWS, which are contemporarily economic entities contributing to the competitiveness of the local urban economy and collective and cooperative platforms. In this ambivalence lies their potential contribution.

Building upon this literature, this article connects the debates on platform urbanism and initiatives led by new municipalist values in post-pandemic cities with a novel assessment of the potential contribution that CWS can offer to them. Furthermore, this article aims to contribute to introducing the concept of spatial proximity into the debate, rethinking the CWS not only in terms of their presence in peripheral and non-peripheral areas (Knapp and Saway, 2021; Hölzel et al., 2022) but also in their geographic distribution within cities and the role they have assumed within neighbourhoods. To accomplish this, it will focus on two intertwined research questions: How has the pandemic prompted CWS to rethink their role in relation to citizens and other urban actors? How can CWS collaborate with local governments to contribute to urban governance models based on the principles of proximity and cooperation?

Methodology

The context of Milan

Globally, there are 41,975 coworking spaces in 2024, a number that continues to grow (Statista, 2024). In Italy, CWS are also increasing. According to the Italian Coworking Survey, there were 779 CWS in the country in 2020. Northern Italy remains the most densely populated area, hosting 60% of the total CWS, with Milan alone accounting for 16%. Lombardy is the region with the highest concentration, with around 200 spaces. The Central region follows with 20%, the South with 14%, and the islands with 6%. Regarding size, 57% of CWS are medium-

small (101–300 m²), while 24.9% range between 301 and 1,000 m². Only 9.5% exceed 1,000 m², whereas 8.4% are smaller than 100 m². Among European cities, Milan—with 127 CWS—ranks just below the significant hubs (Statista, 2022). Leading the list is London, which has the highest number of CWS (1,423), followed by Paris (301), Berlin (195), and Madrid (159).

Milan represents a significant case study for addressing the research questions. Since the establishment of a new centre-left government in 2011 – reaffirmed in the 2016 and 2021 local elections – the city has consistently worked to position itself as a sharing and collaborative urban environment (Salice and Pais, 2017; Bernardi and Diamantini, 2018). Milan was the first city in Italy to produce a document aimed at fostering a dialogue between the sharing economy and urban development (Comune di Milano 2014b). The result of collaborative efforts between the Municipality, scholars, and subject matter experts, this document was designed to stimulate a cultural reflection on sharing practices. It engaged citizens, institutions, civil society, the third sector, and the economic world, particularly in the context of Expo Milano 2015. It has also been part of transnational alliances associated with new municipalism approaches, the most relevant one being the *Sharing Cities Action Declaration* (2018) and the *Cities Coalition for Digital Rights* (2018). Over the years, the initiatives concerned different areas: public financing through a civic crowdfunding platform to co-finance citizens-led projects; infrastructures for network accessibility (the installation of free access points in open places); access to municipal data; participatory budgets; the promotion of sustainable districts; collaboration with Fablabs to facilitate entry to the city's commercial establishments (named *OpenCare project*); collaboration with citizen-led social streets. More recently, it has focused extensively on supporting the development of proximity economies (Comune di Milano, 2024a).

Among the number of mentioned initiatives, the local government has given special attention to supporting the development of a coworking ecosystem with diverse policies. Initially, it supplied vouchers to help freelancers rent a workspace inside a coworking space to

sustain the discovery of CWS and reduce initial uncertainty. It also supported the opening and development of CWS through grants, creating an 'official register of qualified coworking spaces' (Comune di Milano, 2021a; Comune di Milano, 2021b).

Overall, Milan configures itself as a city that is deeply involved in promoting and supporting collaborative practices in partnership with citizens, civic and private actors. Its governance, during the time under analysis, can be categorised as a form of '*entrepreneurial municipalism*' (Thompson et al., 2020), a strand of new municipalism governance standing in alternative to the neoliberal city model without embracing more radical social movements approaches to it (Roth et al., 2023).

Data collection and analysis

This article uses empirical material collected for a larger research project to answer the two research questions. The overall goal of the project was to explore the impact of the pandemic and social distancing measures on Milanese CWS; the strategies adopted to cope with and overcome this phase; the transformations likely to persist beyond the emergency; and the consequences for the relationship between CWS and the urban fabric of Milan.

The overall empirical material used for this research consists of 62 semi-structured interviews with the coworking managers of 87 CWS in Milan. Some interviewed coworking managers owned or were responsible for more than one coworking space, hence the discrepancy between interviews and CWS. The sampling strategy followed this process. First, the research team crossed the qualified register of the Municipality of Milan ("*Elenco qualificato dei Coworking a Milano*") with other independently collected lists of existing CWS. This work led to the identification of 127 CWS on the territory of Milan at the moment of the research, which constituted the initial sample of the study. Notably, this list also includes some business centres, a variant of CWS primarily dedicated to enterprises rather than freelancers.

However, only the business centres part of networks registered in the qualified register of the Municipality of Milan were included.

All the CWS in the sample were repeatedly contacted by mail and eventually by phone to schedule an interview. This made it possible to interview the coworking managers of 87 CWS, which constituted the final, adequate sample of the research. The interviews were carried out between September and October 2020 and focused on the period from the beginning of March to the end of September 2020. Due to the particular contingencies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, they were conducted over the phone or via video call. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were recorded. During the interview, the researcher also collected some descriptive data regarding the transformations in the coworking space during the lockdown through a questionnaire. In the case of companies with multiple CWS, the interview was carried out with one manager responsible for the entire network, but the descriptive data were collected for each location. The interviews were transcribed and analysed through coding, according to the standards of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), to identify the main themes emerging from the corpus of empirical material, guided by the aforementioned overall goals of the research project. The interviews were carried out in Italian. The research team has translated all the excerpts quoted in the paper into English.

The CWS object of the analysis constitutes a composite and representative landscape. Regarding the dimensions, 23 CWS are small (less than 10 workspaces or offices), 22 are medium (between 10 and 24 workspaces or offices), and 42 are large (more than 24 workspaces or offices). Still, 28 of these 42 large spaces are business centres. During the interviews, the research team also distinguished between 44 pure and 43 hybrid spaces, building upon Migliore et al. (2021). The pure spaces are the ones in which coworking activity is prevalent in the company's business model. The second group, hybrid spaces, is secondary compared to other entries.

How coworking managers envision CWS as active actors in urban governance

This section draws from the voices of the coworking managers, in particular their opinions on the existing policies for CWS (in the city of Milan), how they could develop, and their relationship with public institutions. A preliminary, significant result is that many of the interviewed coworking managers naturally consider the public sector - and in particular the local government – as an active urban institution and an interlocutor, independently from their opinion on whether and how it should intervene to sustain CWS and from their judgement of their previous actions. This suggests that by actively promoting public discourses and policies to support CWS (Mariotti et al., 2017), the Municipality of Milan encouraged CWS managers to expand their horizons concerning their relationship with other public and private actors. Thus, from the interviews, coworking managers appear – also in line with previous literature on the topic (Jamal, 2018) – not only as economic but also as civic and socially active members of the local communities, part of more extensive networked infrastructures. They advanced a varying and complex set of requests, contributing to outlining a complex policy framework oriented toward the design of new public policies to foster CWS development and rethink the relationships between local public actors and coworking managers. A tripartite policy framework emerges from their insights, shaped significantly by their experience of the pandemic's impact on mobility and neighbourhood-scale everyday life: public policies targeting CWS as beneficiaries, collaboration between CWS and public actors, and CWS as suppliers of public services.

The impact of mobility's limitations on coworking managers' perspectives

The novel but long-lasting trends that emerged during the pandemic significantly influenced coworking managers' perspectives on their relationship with the urban space and

other local actors. In particular, the pandemic has shifted significantly managers' attention toward the neighbourhood as a unit of scale, fostering their curiosity towards governance models founded on proximity. Indeed, the pandemic significantly reduced the mobility range due to the normative restrictions, especially in cities of Milan's size, where the perception of contagion risk is heightened by the use of public transport or the need to undertake long commutes to reach one's workplace. Coworking managers noticed a new influx of remote workers looking at CWS closer to their homes than in the past. This, conversely, brought them to look differently at their potential role within the neighbourhood in a much more positive way (more on this below). This shift in perspective has also led coworking managers to rethink the activities offered within their spaces, with a greater focus on local residents rather than just freelancers or remote workers. For example, some coworking spaces have introduced more flexible membership options, such as packages offering 10 visits in addition to the traditional monthly or annual subscriptions. In the case of smaller CWS, managers have developed activities in collaboration with other local businesses, such as theatres, small shops, or yoga classes, to create a stronger connection with the neighbourhood and better serve the community. This approach highlights a move towards a more integrated role for coworking spaces in fostering local engagement and supporting the neighbourhood's social fabric.

The manager of an extensive network of business centres testified how this phenomenon prompted a notable shift in the usage of their centres:

> We noticed an increase in the use of decentralised offices. Our customers returned more quickly after the lockdown in more peripheral offices than in central ones, which remained much longer deserted. (Large space, pure)

Further research is needed to assess if this re-balancement in the centre-periphery ratio of coworking centres' usage remained a temporary event or imprinted more durable effects. Still,

the rediscovery of the neighbourhood, particularly for CWS set in more peripheral areas, significantly influenced the imagination of coworking managers in new directions.

Public policies targeting CWS as beneficiaries

Given the time frame in which the interviews took place, the economic difficulties and the loss of revenues caused by the lockdowns were central to the interviews. Thus, not surprisingly, financial support was the commonest demand advanced by coworking managers to public institutions at the national or local level. The requests spanned from direct subsidies for compensating the losses to indirect forms of economic relief, such as tax exemptions or covering fixed costs (bills and rents). Some managers reported to have received help from the government. These measures were contingent and extraordinary in their nature, ascribable in the same logic that governed the demand and supply of subsidies to all the firms in the categories more exposed to the lockdown effects during 2020 and 2021, so of limited interest for the present research.

On the level of public policies dedicated to CWS, many coworking managers start from the qualified register with suggestions on improving or developing it as further proof that local government initiatives can have a multiplier effect. A first relevant request is a necessity for public actors to recognize the growing differentiation and specialisation occurring inside CWSs, which causes the existence of multiple typologies of CWSs with significant differences among them:

> What I noticed this year is precisely the diversity of the different coworking. We are an uncommon coworking, so it would be fitting to make it explicit [on the official register] and implement sub-categorizations of the various coworking typologies. For example, we offer spaces and tables for small and large businesses. To specify, it would allow freelancers to avoid wasting time in contacting us. (Large Space, Hybrid)

The managers' observations suggest passing from a static and passive approach - compiling a list and uploading it on the local government website - to a more dynamic and active approach, which requires further efforts to recognise which typologies of CWS are emerging, which of these distinctions are relevant, and how to concretely integrate them in the policies. Connected to this request, many coworking managers also suggest that the public actor act as a certifying authority for the quality of the services offered by a coworking space, helping them achieve these standards. In some of these cases, this also includes a request of commitment to promote and support those CWS that follow a specific ethical and value agenda and not a pure commercial orientation: in the words of one manager, 'those who try to stay within a frame of reference' (Small space, hybrid). See, for example, the project envisioned by the manager below:

> The register could become an app for booking and managing the workplaces in which the Municipality gives us the patronage of a value type. The Municipality sets a series of standards: do you pay for the meeting room by the hour or flat? What access hours do you have? If the Municipality made a selection of coworking spaces that work according to a precise code of ethics and values, it would be a big leap forward. (Medium space, hybrid)

Another common request is the design and implementation of policies through a more integrated approach. Stakeholders express the desire for local governments to take CWS into account when formulating policies, recognizing that these spaces can consistently represent added value as urban actors. The two excerpts below illustrate slightly different approaches to this: one is more explicitly self-interested in nature, the other one with a more synergic vision:

The two excerpts below slightly different approaches to this request: one is more explicitly self-interested in nature, while the other reflects a more synergistic vision.

> It could develop into creating more networks, becoming a central buying office, and helping with a basket of qualified and reliable suppliers with experience in coworking. (Large space, pure)
>
> To give an example on the ATM [the Milanese subway] website, why not add the link to the nearest coworking spaces in the area with the services they can offer? Thinking in an integrated way. (Large space, pure)

Collaboration between CWS and public actors

The public policies proposed by coworking managers, aimed at CWS, generally seek to improve and expand the set of policies established by municipal governments in previous years. In the past, the Municipality of Milan has enhanced the visibility of CWS by creating a qualified register (in 2016 and 2021) and funding vouchers for young freelancers seeking to subscribe to a workstation at a CWS (in 2013, "*Incentivi economici a favore di Coworkers")*.

However, as already argued, the pandemic has also favoured the development of innovative phenomena impacting CWS. As a side effect, this led coworking managers to re-think themselves as potential public actors and suppliers of services in addition to being 'simple' beneficiaries. Interestingly, demonstrating a high level of engagement with the latest developments in the urban governance debates, some coworking managers explicitly connected these visions with recent emerging approaches, such as the 15-minute city planning model, as in the comment below:

> It is as if this new logic of the 15-minute city should refocus our attention. Here in the neighbourhood, everyone knows us, but almost no coworker is from here. It would be useful to implement strategies targeted toward the area. (Medium space, Hybrid)

This ‘new logic’ ingraining among managers favours collaboration with the decentralised terminals of the local government and the conceptualisation of the CWS as potential hubs to serve not only coworkers but also the larger local community and neighbourhood.

> Since ours is a multifunctional space, it could also be helpful for local institutions. The municipality hall comes to mind for all the activities that cannot be carried out in the territory. (Medium space, pure)

When thinking of collaborating with the public administration, as in the case above, the first idea is to use the physical space for cultural events or social activities. However, in some cases, managers envision a web of interactions between the municipality halls, CWS and other local actors.

> It would be very nice if there could be an interaction with the municipality hall to get them to talk with the CWSs and make CWSs interact more with each other to activate new connections. We have an exhibition now, for example, of an association: it would be nice if the people of the area knew about it, at least more. If we could build a connection with the municipality hall, it would be very positive. (Medium space, hybrid)

CWS as a suppliers of public services

In some cases, reflections on how CWS could serve as potential nodes in broader, more complex networks of different local actors lead some managers to reconsider the possible nature of CWS. Proposals and suggestions related to this latter category reflect how CWS could expand beyond their traditional role as shared working environments to become suppliers of public utility services tailored to the specific needs of the local community. While CWS have long adopted hybrid structures, these configurations are typically limited to a commercial dimension: to pair the owner agency with the offer of sharing working spaces; diversify the

business model of the company offering multiple commercial services; and combine akin services like shared working spaces and serviced offices or maker spaces. Some suggestions by managers, instead, project the coworking space toward hybrid forms in which a commercial and non-profit nature can co-exist, pursuing cultural and social goals beyond the classic economic ones:

> Then perhaps a reflection that we have also started internally is seeing coworking as a neighbourhood service, certainly a workplace but also a place where other open proximity services are provided and dedicated to the neighbourhood. (Big space, hybrid)

This type of innovation finds more consensus among managers whose spaces already offer multiple services, as they are already used to thinking in a multifunctional way. One coworking manager defined this process as a re-conceptualisation of the very identity of the coworking space as a hub.

> The idea is that it [the coworking space] becomes a small hub. Where to give space to all the people and associations who want to change the neighbourhood. This neighbourhood is vibrant from this point of view. (Medium space, hybrid)

This conceptualisation - shared in its essence by many other managers - seems to envision a ‘proximity coworking space’ model, which continues to build its foundation on being a private company but also expands, assuming on itself some roles and functions traditionally played by community centres, social clubs, and alike.

The model of the proximity coworking space

The empirical findings, in answering the first research question, support the view that in the post-pandemic scenario, CWS managers' reflections significantly aligned with values of proximity and cooperation. Although they do not explicitly frame these values as an alternative

to neoliberal forms of urban development, these new perspectives emerge through their lived experience of the pandemic and contact with models such as the 15-minute city. Indeed, limitations to spatial mobility imposed by the lockdown favoured a rethinking of the proximity dimension. Furthermore, CWS managers demonstrated acknowledgement and reception of urban governance models centred around values of proximity and cooperation discussed in the literature review, fostering reflections on the potentialities they open in hybridising the relationship between public, civic, and market actors (Krisch, 2022; Nielsen and Papin, 2021).

In the specific case of Milan, furthermore, the historic active role of the Municipality in targeting CWS with different policies has played a role in favouring the imaginative thinking of CWS managers, highlighting the importance for local governments to assume a proactive role. Milan's experience is shaped by a combination of factors that make it somewhat unique, yet it also reflects broader trends observed in other cities. Its strong municipal engagement sets it apart, first through the lens of the sharing economy, efforts to give visibility to hybrid work and production spaces (such as coworking spaces and Fab Labs), and funding for initiatives promoted through civic crowdfunding; more recently, within the framework of proximity-based urbanism. The city's history of economic dynamism, urban experimentation, and policy-driven innovation has contributed to an environment where coworking has not only been a market-driven phenomenon but also an element of strategic urban governance.

The combined restriction to movements forced by the pandemic – bringing citizens to look closer to home – and the maturation of urban governance paradigms such as the 15-minute city led CWS managers to envision a new conceptualisation of the coworking space, which can be labelled a 'proximity coworking space'. The proximity coworking space is better defined as a conceptualisation because it remains an aspirational model envisioned by the CWS managers in an ideal context of support by and collaboration with the local government. The proximity characterising it is both territorial and relational. Territorial because it implies deeper

embedding in the neighbourhood. In this case, the pandemic acted as a trigger, leading users to appreciate the closeness of the CWS to home and prompting managers to view their area as a source of potential coworkers. Relational because it fosters stronger connections between the CWS and other local civic, commercial, or public actors.

Territorial and relational proximity imply relevant consequences for CWS. From a territorial point of view, the shift witnessed by managers during the pandemic from central to peripheral CWS is acquiring a permanent character (Mariotti et al., 2022). Greater attention to the immediate surroundings highlights the proximity of CWS, especially in peripheral and semi-peripheral areas, where they exhibit stronger territorial rooting. The growing presence of CWS in peripheral areas (Akhavan et al., 2021; Danko et al., 2022) supports this trend, suggesting that their distribution is shaped more by residential proximity than by social class dynamics. While territorial proximity draws attention to the urban dimension, it also has consequences at the internal organisational level. The centrality acquired by local users in proximity to CWS will arguably favour a more 'horizontal' and diverse user base, countering the recent rise to prominence of 'vertical' CWS targeting professionals in a specific industry (Marchegiani and Arcese, 2018). Relational proximity has consequences at the urban and organisational level as well. At the urban level, relational proximity encourages building new partnerships with civic, public, or commercial urban actors. This could lead to a transformation of the business model of proximity CWS toward hybrid forms of social entrepreneurship (Bandinelli, 2019). Such a social entrepreneurship approach has clear repercussions on internal organisational forms. As the coworking managers' accounts testify, the principles informing the proximity coworking model envision a conception of the CWS as a hub where commercial, social, and potentially even public functions could co-exist.

Contextualising the proximity coworking model in the wider debates on CWS and platform urbanism provides an answer to our second research question. Rather than

breakthrough departures from the past, the proximity coworking space showcases an acceleration of some pre-existing trends at new scales, with relevant implications for local governance models based on cooperation and proximity. CWS have already been observed to have strong bonds to their territory and to act as interfaces with the local community in the aftermath of the 2008 global crisis (Merkel, 2015) to foster knowledge exchange among their members (Nakano et al., 2023), and to constitute an ambivalent infrastructure exposed to the risks of commodification but possessing the potential for political collective action too (de Peuter, Cohen, and Saraco 2017). Still, the proximity coworking model promotes these elements as a primary goal. It displays commonalities but also differences compared to the 'resilient' CWS model observed before the pandemic (Gandini and Cossu, 2021). Similarly to the resilient model, proximity CWS are more engaged with their surrounding environment than 'traditional' neo-corporate CWS, combining commercial goals with social purposes. However, their narratives are not centred around an explicit opposition to "neo-corporate" CWS per se. Rather, broader ideas of proximity and cooperation with the surrounding environment and other local actors lead them. This brings them to exercise their imagination to conceptualise themselves and their spaces increasingly as hybrid platforms open to collaboration with other civic actors and the local public government in particular, and to become, in some cases, local nodes for the direct provision of public services.

As a result, proximity coworking emerges as a distinctly hybrid, middle-ground CWS model – integrating social objectives and attentiveness to the local environment, operating within market frameworks with public and civic actors. Against this backdrop, they can be conceptualised as LCCGs as hypothesised in the theoretical framework, but with some important adjustments. To begin, their status is unique: on one hand, they enhance the wealth of the local productive system as LCCGs; on the other, they are market actors themselves, benefiting from these collective goods. Still, if we had to state the LCCGs acronym in its full

form, CWS would arguably correspond more accurately to local collective *cooperation* goods. The shift of the primary focus from economic productivity to enabling platforms and from competition between cities to cooperation inside and among cities valorises the role of CWS as facilitators of internal and external cooperation. CWS can economically benefit from acting as an LCCG over local competitors due to the potential broadening of their customer base, but this represents a positive secondary effect and not the primary function of the LCCG towards the local ecology. The CWS infrastructural contribution would be manifold: it can also result in cultural, civic, social, or even political additions to the urban commons.

Conclusions

Urban narratives often highlight the importance of CWS, yet academic discussions around urban policies have largely neglected their significance. This article bridges this gap by exploring how CWS can be integrated into local governance strategies based on values of proximity and cooperation in the context of platform urbanism and how local governments can lead this process. The study provided insights into the coworking managers' views on the current policies of the local government and their ideas on how to improve the relationship between them. By interpreting the accounts of the coworking managers and using creative thinking, several valuable contributions are made to the existing literature.

From the findings, coworking managers envision three different typologies of the relationship between CWS and public administration (mainly the local one, but not only): CWS as beneficiaries of public policies; CWS as partners of local institutions; finally, CWS as providers themselves of public policies. The multi-scalar scene resulting from these accounts resonates well with the initial observation, advanced in the literature review, of CWS as non-digitally mediated platforms. As such, they position themselves at the intersection between public, civic, and market urban spheres (Nielsen and Papin, 2021): while they remain primarily market actors, they develop a strong propensity to network with other civic actors and to expand

as public services providers. While the accounts of the coworking managers do not explicitly posit themselves as an alternative to neoliberal capitalist urban development, their alignment with a politics of proximity and cooperation opens up significant opportunities to integrate them as a component of alternative platform urbanism designs in their quality of enabling platforms. However, as already noted, current literature lacks a theorisation of how CWS's role in public governance could be conceptualised and with which implications. In this context, the necessity of an active and durable local governance system (Crouch et al. 2004; 2001) becomes even more urgent. For these reasons, we advance an interpretation of CWS as Local Collective *Cooperation* Goods. Overall, this interpretation highlights the mutual benefits that CWS derives from becoming actively engaged with local ecosystems and for local policymakers to specifically target and sustain coworking managers' involvement. Interestingly, this development would possibly get city governments in the Global North more in line with developments in China, which is implementing a complex plan of public support for CWS with an emphasis on the creation of collective social goods (Luo and Chan, 2020).

Finally, the conceptualisation of CWS as LCCGs builds upon recent calls to bridge critical scholarship with policy engagement (Boyle, 2024) to strengthen the efficacy of alternative planning models and improve their realisation and consolidation (Bua and Davies, 2023). On the other side, it raises new critical political interrogatives regarding the boundaries beyond which collaboration with private economic actors like CWS (or other similar LCCGs) can be operated to democratise platform urbanism through proximity and cooperation, without losing the overall goal to effectively counter and provide an alternative to the neoliberalisation of planning policies (Roth et al., 2023; Davoudi et al., 2021).

In this context, we suggest that critical and new municipalist approaches should pay greater attention to the rapidly evolving forms of social infrastructure that CWS represent, as they increasingly shape the institutional and spatial dynamics of contemporary cities.

Recognizing their embeddedness and relational role could help rethink the conditions under which new forms of urban cooperation can emerge and stabilize beyond both technocratic and market-driven paradigms.

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