

# Workspacization of the City

## The New Capitalist Reappropriation of the Urban Realm

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### 1. INTRODUCTION: WORKSPACIZATION AND ITS PREDECESSOR

A new mega-phenomenon is electricizing contemporary capitalism and the discourses it influences, one of which is that on architecture and the urban realm. The phenomenon I am referring to is alternately called »workspace,« »workspace design,« or »workspace architecture.« Under the differing headlines, countless consultancy firms and other service providers are offering their help in making this or that workspace better, more human, or more efficient. »New work,« the concept proposed by Austro-American social philosopher Frithjof Bergmann in the 1970s, is experiencing a new surge in popularity.<sup>1</sup> Companies all over the world are promoting themselves as staunch drivers of this brave new world of work. Its proclaimed ideas: independence, creativity, communication, work from home, and, most of all, work only on projects that you as an employer actually »like.« There is a sense that people live to work but that work itself is roughly the same as »life.«

The promises the term »new work« carries certainly sound tempting – for subjects and corporations alike. The idea of a higher degree of choice for the subject in the professional world, a more self-aware management of one's own professional and personal endeavors, combined with an implied increase in economic productivity on a macro level, seems like a proto-capitalist dream come true. And whenever there is such a harmonistic vision of a brighter future ahead, unifying economy and culture, the field of architecture wants to have a part in that. Therefore, successful contemporary architecture firms are happily assisting the vision of a space that can be economically productive and culturally and individually enriching at the same time. Big architecture firms such as Gensler are carrying out their own extensive workspace research projects. Architects and designers have realized that there is an increasing demand for ever more elaborate concepts for

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**1** | See for instance Heiko Weckmüller: New Work. Sinnstiftung durch Arbeit. In: Personal Quarterly 1 (2016), pp. 46–49.

the spaces in which »new work« is taking place and aim at delivering these concepts.

Their ambitions come in handy, as the promoters of the »new work« revolution themselves are in the process of developing a spatial reconfiguration of what »new work« actually means. There is currently a thorough spatialization of the »new work« strategies going on.<sup>2</sup> The promises of »new work« are finding concrete designed and architectural expressions. In this process, the cityscape itself is being conquered. »New work« is turning out to be an inherently urban undertaking. It is this undertaking that this paper will concern itself with. Given the new interest in the world of work and its architectural ramifications, it seems to be the right moment to reflect on the spatial implications this rethinking of the world of work seems to bring about. This essay will do so, making the point that the imperatives of »new work« transform the ways in which we perceive the urban realm, and the ways in which we live both in and with the city. City space itself, it will be argued, is essentially becoming a tool in the generation of a still-capitalist regime of »new work.«

This endeavor seems all timelier as the current state of the world of work has been strongly impacted upon by the new coronavirus and the ways in which it calls into question how we work and live. The COVID-19 pandemic is currently forcing us thoroughly to rethink the spatial system of capitalist productivity. Hence, COVID-19 will serve as an undercurrent to my argument, even if the long-term effects of the virus on the social arrangement of the global capitalist society are by no means certain yet. Nevertheless, the impact of the pandemic on the workspace discourse and the ways in which it is already transforming our urban lives will be reflected here, based on what can be said at this point late in 2020.

I will first look at the new and highly mediated narrative the workspace orientation is based upon and explain why this narrative is an inherently urban one. I will outline the ways in which the principles of the new thinking on workspace are delimiting workspace design and discuss the strategic position of big tech companies such as Google in that process. From there, I will move to a critical engagement with the position of the worker, the subject, in the new »workspaced« city. This will be followed by a discussion of the ways in which this new »workspaced« city – and the workers within it – are subjected to a new regime of creativity; in this context, it will be asked to what degree this regime can be seen as one of liberation or of ideologization. This, then, will lead to a discussion of the relationship between the workspaced urban realm and the generation and employment of data within it.

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**2** | See Ruth Slavid: *New Work, New Workspace. Innovative Design in a Connected World*. London 2020.

## 2. WORKSPACE AND THE NEW WORKSPACE NARRATIVE

The workspace boom and the ways in which it relates to notions of the urban, and in which it is transforming what urbanity means, is significantly a media phenomenon. This does not, of course, mean that it is not »real.« It is real, but its reality is at the same time highly mediatized. Architecture and the mediatized reflection of architectural solutions have to be understood as essentially the same thing.<sup>3</sup> The architectural and urbanist translations of the new workspace philosophy are a topic with a high mediatization potential, with mediatization understood along the lines outlined by Couldry and Hepp.<sup>4</sup> First of all, the new workspaces themselves function as media, displaying the basic assumptions under which they make sense at all. The high degree of openness that contemporary office spaces (not exclusively, but most significantly coworking spaces) have, the architectural emphasis on teamwork and communication, the explicit playfulness many spaces exhibit, the many different micro-spaces a knowledge worker is architecturally invited to choose from in contemporary office buildings – all these are mediating displays of a certain philosophy that is the basis of the spatial regime at play here. Moreover, the fact that the concept of the coworking space is conquering our inner cities is functioning as a display of the new regime of capitalist flexibility and relaxed freelance creativity that is step by step displacing the old regime of rigid hierarchy and organization.

What is more, there are more and more books, magazine articles, websites, and blogs dedicated to this new kind of architectural work. The website [www.transformational-buildings.de](http://www.transformational-buildings.de), a cooperation between my current employer Euroboden and the architecture magazine *AD*, can be seen as a good example. The idea is essentially to create a think tank, looking for best practices in terms of future office design. My former employer, publishing house Callwey Media, has also started a workplace-oriented media initiative: the awards campaign and website [www.bestworkspaces.com](http://www.bestworkspaces.com). The whole award competition is about the innovative potential of currently opened workspaces, essentially asking whether the architectural settings created adhere to the imperatives of the »new work« regime. I was part of the jury during the initial months, which meant I had to evaluate the architecturally best new workspaces proposed every month, based on an elaborate scheme of complex and rather abstract categories.

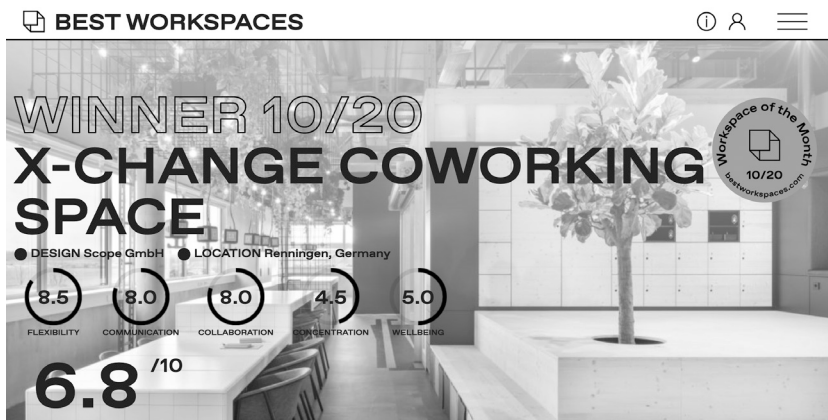
**3** | Alain Thierstein, Nadia Alaily-Mattar and Johannes Dreher have outlined how this works in a process model they develop in a book about star architecture: *Star Architecture's Interplays and Effects on Cities*. In: *About Star Architecture. Reflecting on Cities in Europe*. Ed. by eadem, Davide Ponzini and idem. Cham 2020, pp. 45–53.

**4** | For their concept of mediatization see for instance Nick Couldry/Andreas Hepp: *Conceptualizing Mediatization. Contexts, Traditions, Arguments*. In: *Communication Theory* 23 (2013), No. 3, pp. 191–202.

In terms of the mediatization of the workspace narrative, it was interesting to witness the high degree to which the jury process was mediatized. The whole evaluation process took place entirely digitally, implying that jury work at the same time meant mediatized work. New jury members were added frequently, which served as material for PR activities. In the end, what counted in terms of our jury work were almost exclusively the marks we generated, which were displayed almost instantly online in an appealing and dynamic way. The whole jury process seemed to have been optimized for the generation of mediatized data and for the ready communication of evaluation results. At the same time, the entire process was continuously accompanied by various press activities of the publishing house. It seemed as if the mediatization of the jury process was a media story in itself (or was transformed into one – by communicating about it).

The narrative of »new work,« and of the evaluation of spatial arrangements according to whether they cater to that narrative, has been a strong one ever since the second wave of the »new work« discourse started. However, that was before the coronavirus called into question a lot of what we take for granted in terms of today's cultural capitalist work regime. The pre-COVID-19 narrative about workplaces, the city and »new work« was clearly based on the assumption that »new work« is breaking down boundaries. Work is everywhere, and the new workers see no sense in defining completely workless spaces. Rather, they sit in cafés or lounge-style coworking spaces and are effortlessly productive, while at the same time engaging in a social, one could also say pseudo-urban, exchange with coworkers they hardly know (an interesting similarity to Richard Sennett's assertion<sup>5</sup> that cities are places where strangers meet).

Fig. 1: Opening page of competition platform »Best workspaces« (Source: Google)



<sup>5</sup> | For a discussion, see Werner Schiffauer: The City and the Stranger. In: Anthropological Journal on European Cultures 2 (1993), No. 2, pp. 67–82, here p. 67.

Fig. 2: At work in the café at Google (Source: Google)



In this imagery, the city is interpreted as an eternal office space. This notion has, of course, changed through COVID-19. Home office has, for a while at least, become the new normal, and boundaries to the outside world were part of what made it appealing. And even once employees return to their offices, the question remains to what degree the old nine-to-five office world will return. Most experts agree that it will not return at all.

Now, in terms of my key argument here – that the city and its mechanisms are, as it were, swallowed by the world of work – where is that argument left by the new developments initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic? The point I want to make is that it is made even stronger. Particularly as the classical notion of nine-to-five office work weakens, the idea of an urban way of productivity can offer the missing link between the imperatives of work on the one hand and the atmosphere of flexibility and permanent manageability that people expect from the spaces in which they choose to work on the other. Essentially, we have three distinct spatial spheres: the sphere of classical big offices; the sphere of home; and the third and arguably more ambiguous sphere of the new urban productive spaces, such as coworking spaces and their adaptations by corporations desiring innovation. Sphere 1 can be argued to suffer through COVID-19. Sphere 2, however, is less than inspiring in the long run. So the societal and economic focus will be on sphere 3. The new productive spatial regime needs new and more flexible spaces that offer something of an alternative to the classical office world. This is where flexible production spaces such as coworking labs etc. come in. Flexibility and individual manageability are a key part of what they promise. This holds true

for the real coworking spaces as well as for the new, urbanized workspaces offered by capitalist corporations. Big companies intent on keeping their employees within their premises will have to offer them something beyond the classical big office cubicle. They will have to offer an array of flexible spaces that give the impression that whoever engages in capitalist productive activity there, will have a high degree of choice and will essentially be able to renegotiate the spatial arrangements of his or her own office day at any time – not only in terms of working under conditions of COVID-19, but also in terms of a general permanent capacity for task-related spatial optimization. This narrative of ultimate flexibility is offered by a space that is itself flexible, open, and connected to the world outside – an urbanized office space; a space spatializing all the imperatives of »new work.« In this sense, the workspace movement initiated by key ideas of the concept of »new work« and triggered by certain new expectations of the generation Z can be argued to have actually gained momentum through the irritations we currently perceive under the header of COVID-19.

And then, there is yet another COVID-19-driven aspect that adds relevance to the takeover of city structures by the world of work. Arguably, a lot of what urban space is about – density, chance encounters, spontaneous exchange – is seen as dangerous in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, people still desire urbanity. Hence, a kind of weak urbanity, an urbanity with a safety net, will be looked for. This »urbanity light« is what clever office design can realize. In this sense, the urbanized office space, be it an office in the inner city or one pretending to be part of a city, might be the solution to creatives fearing COVID-19. »New work«-offices offer us cityness without the complexity of real cities.

Some contemporary office designs even claim to inhabit urban structure internally. The Australian infrastructure company Transurban, for example, recently realized such a city simulation. It had asked for an office space »that reflect[s] the modern cities it serves.«<sup>6</sup> The Australian architecture firm Hassell provided. »Across eight floors of a new building in Melbourne's Dockland areas,« the architects »created an ›internal streetscape,‹ arranging desks, booths, lounges and work bays into a ›village‹ formation. Tree beds are designed into the floors, with corridors mimicking a city footpath, while hanging plants layer upon the timber vaulted ceiling and blackened steel joinery.«<sup>7</sup> Simulated urban life for sure, but also an extension of what »urbanity« means.

6 | Office Design. The Latest Trends in Workspace Architecture. In: Wallpaper\*, December 4, 2019, online at [www.wallpaper.com/gallery/architecture/office-design-latest-trends-workspace-architecture](http://www.wallpaper.com/gallery/architecture/office-design-latest-trends-workspace-architecture).

7 | Ibid.

### 3. LIMITLESS WORKSPACE DESIGN AND GOOGLE URBANISM

The spiritual epicenter of the new workspace movement is, of course, Silicon Valley. Just as European media managers undertook pilgrimages to California some years ago to learn the business secrets of the digital behemoths Facebook, Apple and co., architects, designers and heads of Human Resources are now making their trips west to find out about the innovative new places of work that pop up there. They visit Apple's over-dimensioned »donut« designed by Norman Foster, or the new Facebook headquarters, Frank Gehry's controversial creation of the largest open floor plan in the world of office design. Both architectural projects are interpreted as showcases of what the future of work might look like. And again, they are, of course, media phenomena. Highly publicized, with an instant worldwide mega-presence on social media, these are buildings that function as media. And they do so not only as traditional architectural icons, but also as icons of a new way of thinking about work.

This holds true, even more so, for another complex of corporate architecture that is currently taking shape: the new Google campus, or rather, the new Google campuses. Google, respectively its parent company Alphabet Inc., has a new campus at its headquarters in Mountain View by Bjarke Ingels and Thomas Heatherwick in the works; what is more, it recently announced plans for a new spatially ambitious additional campus in nearby Sunnyvale.<sup>8</sup>

One could, of course, argue that building in Silicon Valley is the opposite of building in an urban sphere. It is true that the Valley is not part of a metropolis in the classical sense. One thing it does, however, is redefine what metropolis means, as the Valley continuously renegotiates whether it is actually part of San Francisco. The relationship between the metropolis San Francisco and Silicon Valley is a complicated one; some authors actually see San Francisco under siege by the logic of the Valley.<sup>9</sup> And yet, from my point of view, it would also be a misunderstanding to perceive the building activities there as part of a neo-rural movement. San Francisco and Silicon Valley are connected. And the Valley itself is engaging with what urbanity means in the digital sphere. The spatial activities of the tech giants could even be argued to be aimed at generating new ways of thinking urban and creating urban spaces in the absence of the restraints that classical urban centers bring with them. Or, as Margaret O'Mara writes: »Landscapes of office parks and campuses that rarely are considered ›cities‹ have become some of the most allur-

**8** | See Tim Nelson: Bjarke Ingels Group Unveils Designs for New Google Campus in Sunnyvale, California. In: Architectural Digest, January 4, 2018, online at [www.architecturaldigest.com/story/bjarke-ingels-group-google-campus-in-sunnyvale-california](http://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/bjarke-ingels-group-google-campus-in-sunnyvale-california).

**9** | See Rebecca Solnit/Susan Schwartzberg: *Hollow City. The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism*. London 2000.



ing sorts of urbanism, and are widely imitated.«<sup>10</sup> What is more, as we will see, Silicon Valley urbanism does not stop in the Valley by any means.

Also, the way in which tech companies build there does not always proceed by means of the isolated creation of architectural monoliths. Google's Mountain View project, for instance, has a degree of spatial integration to it – one, however, of internal integration. The new project is building on older Google architecture, it is essentially an extension of the »original« »Googleplex« that opened in 2013 and that has been the first major architectural intervention of the then young internet company. One could even argue that Google architecture »grows« iteratively – just like cities grow.

*Fig. 3: The original Googleplex campus (Source: Google)*



And the company seems to have learned in terms of architecture. The original »Googleplex« has often been criticized for the superficial way in which it creates a pseudo-urban life, with a lot of colorful applications, Disneyesque installations and an often hilarious neon imaginary. In terms of the new campus, this atmosphere has apparently become slightly more »earnest.« The architecture seems to be aimed at being more in line with the ambition of the architectural profession as a whole to create »real« solutions for a planet in crisis. Sustainability is

**10** | Margaret O'Mara: The Environmental Contradictions of High-Tech Urbanism. In: Now Urbanism. The Future City is Here. Ed. by Jeffrey Hou, Benjamin Spencer, Thaisa Way and Ken Yocom. London 2020, pp. 26–42, here p. 26.



key. Google seems to be trying to create an almost-urban office space that can function as a showcase for a future, sustainable urbanity.

And yet, the spectacular is never far away. One of its major (and clearly spectacular) architectural innovations is the idea of an artificial sky.<sup>11</sup> The ceiling is carried by »four enormous glass canopies, each stretched over a series of steel pillars of different heights.«<sup>12</sup> The artificial sky is no simple case of architectural simulation; rather, it is carried by the idea that the company can now create its own system of air regulation. This was deemed innovative even some years ago, and has presumably become even more relevant, but also more demanding, as a result of COVID-19, given the possibility and necessity of introducing a coherent strategy of safe air management.

As a whole, the idea of corporate space management in this complex is part of what one could call the company's »architectural identity.« This identity is connected to a high degree of spatial management capacity. The company demonstrates its capacity to modify space at will. Not only can it manage the air above the created spaces. It can also manage and alter the spaces themselves. The architects have developed a system through which Google can, in the case of altered spatial requirements, add, stack, or remove offices as necessary. Once again, Google office architecture here seems to be aimed at adapting certain mechanisms that we know from cities – in this case, the spatial adaptiveness. One thing, however, is clearly un-urban here: the question of who is in charge. The high degree of manageability of the complex provides the company with a new position of spatial power. In this sense, this is Google-powered pseudo-urbanity – a notion that will become very telling once we look at Google's architectural activities beyond the only semi-urban corporate headquarters and analyze how the company becomes engaged in city planning and building all over the globe.

Before we do that, however, one more observation: In order to be able to alter the spaces as outlined, the company has not only developed an ambition in terms of architectural innovation, but also in terms of innovation in the building industry. Alphabet Inc. has declared it is about to invent its own portable crane-robots, called »crabots.«<sup>13</sup> Essentially, this means that this is a company that is developing both an architectural strategy and at the same time the tools to carry out this strategy.

As a whole, the new buildings aim at making a visual impression, but it has to be an impression of gentleness. Their most striking aspect are different sloped roofs, forming ramps that Google employees are supposed to »use to travel out-

**11** | See Brad Stone: Big and Weird. The Architectural Genius of Bjarke Ingels and Thomas Heatherwick. In: Bloomberg Businessweek, May 7, 2015, online at [www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2015-05-07/google-s-new-campus-architects-ingels-heatherwick-s-moon-shot](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2015-05-07/google-s-new-campus-architects-ingels-heatherwick-s-moon-shot).

**12** | Ibid.

**13** | See *ibid.*

side between the building's levels,<sup>14</sup> as has been declared. This is presented by Google PR as an »inventive approach« which »allows for the integration of the park's natural qualities.«<sup>15</sup>

To sum up, what is interesting is the high degree of architectural and near-urban thinking the company seems to employ. Apparently, Google thinks that architecture and city planning are inherent qualities of the company, and that these qualities set it apart from other digital behemoths. Consequently, Google seems to be happy with other companies following their »best practice« example. The company obviously has the ambition of being an architectural innovator. »Housing is part of our thought process,« says Mark Golan, COO of Google's global real estate investments and development group. »A new mixed-use community where you have live-work capabilities, makes a lot of sense.«<sup>16</sup>

It has become obvious by now that while coming from the purely digital sphere, the tech company Google wants to have an impact on space, and on the workspace in particular. And this ambition is a worldwide one. There is, one can argue, a universal »googlefication« of the workplace going on.

*Fig. 4: Google office in Kuala Lumpur (Source: Google)*



**14** | Nelson: Bjarke Ingels Group Unveils Designs for New Google Campus in Sunnyvale.

**15** | Ibid.

**16** | Quoted in *ibid.*

Google does not stop at equipping its head office in the ultimate un-urban landscape, Silicon Valley. Google urbanism works on a worldwide basis, and the company is also involved in European city planning to a high degree, for instance with its European headquarters in London. In its projects all over the globe, the company seems to create a combination of all that it has learned by building in Silicon Valley. Sustainability is highly prioritized, but the colors are still deliriously bright, and the tables are always used for something playful. The implication: work is fun. The other implication: the fun must never stop. Do not look for identity or self-actualization outside your office. You work, therefore you are.

This ideology has a strong impact on the contemporary city. On the one hand, Google itself is building. On the other hand, other companies are following the models that Google continues to set. This works significantly through the communication activities of Google. Through these initiatives, the workspace narrative is globalizing. The image-conscious company has managed to create a global imagery that sets the standards for a workplace-related state of the art all over the world, especially in the major metropolises of the service economy.

What is more, if there is one spatial institution exemplifying the googlefication of the workspace, and the workspacization of our inner cities, beyond Google itself, then this is the coworking space. Architects are fascinated with designing coworking spaces in city centers these days. If there is an architectural award to be given out to office architecture, it is hard for even the most average coworking space not to win. Even traditional corporate headquarters accept the convention of having to integrate coworking elements into their spatial program today, and even more so into their mediatized reflection of that program (check Instagram, with some 650,000 entries on #coworkingspace).

But what do the coworking imperatives do to the worker? In how far is the story of an eternal space of creative freedom misleading? What we encounter here is what I call the »transparency paradox.« Transparency is key to the ideology of every coworking program. But how transparent, open and, most of all, free of hierarchies is the new coworking capitalism? Are all coworkers really the same? Are there really no limits in the mechanisms of cooperation? I doubt it. De Peuter, Cohen and Saraco see coworking as full of ambivalence.<sup>17</sup> For them, coworking arrangements are a response to precarity. They argue that a certain social and political ambivalence is intrinsic to the culture of coworking. And it is true: in the end, people still have to get paid. And we are still operating in a knowledge economy, which means that knowledge and networks are still power, which, in turn, means that they will be protected. Or do people really share groundbreaking business ideas or patents freely in coworking arenas today?

**17** | See Greig de Peuter/Nicole S. Cohen/Francesca Saraco: The Ambivalence of Coworking. On the Politics of an Emerging Work Practice. In: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20 (2017), No. 6, pp. 687-706.

## 4. THE NEW WORKER IN THE WORKSPACED CITY

If we are looking for a functioning metaphor for the kind of »new work« that arises from the imperatives of coworking capitalism, then it might be the »trans-media worker.« Capitalist productivity in the (largely urban) coworking economies is based on the permanent extension of what »media« is, and the permanent switch from one medium to another. Swedish media theorists Karin Fast and André Jansson call this the »regime of transmedia work.«<sup>18</sup> This regime, they argue, is increasingly dominating the old logic of mass media. They identify two agents that influence how we (co)work today: information and communication technology (ICT) on the one hand, and the urban coworking space industry on the other. Fast and Jansson discuss the ideological implications of the transmedia work discourse as produced by ICT companies and coworking spaces. They suggest that both streams of discourse work to legitimize transmediatization and develop a cultural-materialist critique of the promises made by coworking spaces. In this critique, they demonstrate how by constructing mobility, networking, and self-entrepreneurship as virtues in the new world of work, workspace capitalism steers transmedia workers into work in non-traditional workplace settings and new work modes. The technology discourse constructs an ideal urban worker who submits to the demands of the new work economy: flexibility, responsibility, proactivity, mobility, permanent productivity, eternal capitalist creativity, and so on.

Creativity is a key term here. It is the vaguely poetic glue over the workspacization of our living environments – and of urban life. The »creative city« has always been a tempting catchphrase for urban marketing. The term is intricately connected to the increasingly excessive use of urban space by the creative economy. And, thinking it further in economic terms, it has created its own mode of capitalist urban productivity. As Allen J. Scott observes, there is a creative field being constituted in contemporary cities.<sup>19</sup> The interventions of Google and the likes create a new creativity regime. Hence, cities large and small in many different parts of the world are most assuredly being transformed in economic terms into drivers of what Scott analyzes as a new cognitive-cultural economy. He points to the distinctive stratum of highly paid workers with much intellectual and affective human capital for whom the city is an economic playground; in the sense that it is the place where start-ups are founded, the city is the place for inner-economic modes of protest. The start-up is a way of protesting within the economic realm against the limits set by this realm. This is a brilliant way capitalism has found to preserve the mode of protest and opposition, while making it its very own principle.

**18** | Karin Fast/André Jansson: *Transmedia Work. Privilege and Precariousness in Digital Modernity*. London/New York 2019, p. 41.

**19** | See Allen J. Scott: *Beyond the Creative City. Cognitive-Cultural Capitalism and the New Urbanism*. In: *Regional Studies* 48 (2014), No. 4, pp. 565–578.

Of course, this ostensibly cheerful image of a capitalism of small oppositions is counterbalanced in our metropolises by the emergence of a low-wage service underclass and all that this implies in terms of the socio-spatial segmentation of urban life. The rising wealth of cities worldwide has to be seen in the context of a continually intensifying pressure on cities to assert their global presence and ambitions by means of vibrant visual images and branding campaigns emphasizing local attractions such as lifestyle, cultural facilities and historical heritage. This is why the coworking spaces, and their image, are of such importance for the work-spacization of the city to gain momentum.

Scott is searching for the social and economic forces rooted in the dynamics of cognitive-cultural capitalism. The primary theoretical challenge, he argues, is to reveal how these dynamics undergird the spatial and temporal logic of urbanization today. An exclusive focus on the creativity-generating capacities of the city, as such, misses much of what is most crucial in this challenge, namely the social and economic forces that bring specific modes of urban life into being in the first place. For him, and for me, too, the »creative city script« contains a lot of wishful thinking, not to mention an encouragement of top-down, leadership-style political recuperation and of regressive policy-making. So even if its time has come, the concept of creativity and of creative workspaces in economic and urban geography needs to be approached with caution.

What is interesting, however, is the difference in the perception of concepts such as »new work« in this overall framework of capitalist productivity. The »creativity regime« Scott addresses is essentially a system of creative exploitation, making the most of the workers' creative force. The key is that they are supposed to feel free while, in fact, performing according to the capitalist idea of productivity. This works through the notion of community: the coworker of today feels as part of a creative community, while thereby becoming a more effective production factor. In this context, an interesting empirical research has recently been carried out by economists Nick Clifton, Anita Füzı and Gareth Loudon.<sup>20</sup> They asked workers based in a coworking structure what motivated them in their choice to work there, and what was the result of their being engaged in coworking. The study essentially showed that what they first and foremost sought by being based in a coworking environment was social interaction. They wanted, it seems, a bit of urban or near-urban exchange when setting up shop in a coworking space. The result, however, was a different one: they became more productive in the capitalist sense of innovation. The authors found »that coworkers reported enhanced levels of innovation, despite this typically not being their explicit motivation.«<sup>21</sup> Cowork-

**20** | See Nick Clifton/Anita Füzı/Gareth Loudon: Coworking in the Digital Economy. Context, Motivations, and Outcomes. In: Futures (in press), online at [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016328717304901](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016328717304901). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2019.102439>.

**21** | Ibid.

ing, it seems, is simply a highly effective strategy for capitalism. And the urbanization of the world of work, the bringing-together of urban reality and capitalist production, seems to be an optimal way of ensuring that workers maintain a high degree of capitalist commitment, while not feeling the need to search for an urban reality outside of productive capitalist activity.

## 5. THE URBAN WORKSPACE AND THE EXPLOITATION OF DATA

At the same time, the new urbanized work environments are also highly digital ones. They are intricately connected to the notion of data. The new digital nomads work with data, they exploit data, but they also create data. Every online search is a step towards a new data set. Moreover, urbanized workplaces such as coworking spaces appeal to companies in terms of data-driven research. The new worker in the coworking environment can easily be researched – and they are; the most comprehensive of the many studies on how digital nomads work in coworking spaces is the annual »Global Coworking Survey.«

In a way, the notion of data generation through urbanized work brings us back to Google. For, the eternal workspace of the urban realm is not just anyone's workspace, it is Google's. Whoever your employer is, in the end you, in a way, also work for Google today. This is a particularly sinister twist in the workspacization of society. Whatever you do, you create data. And Google uses these data. Therefore, we are all freelance data miners for Google. The increasingly Google-designed stage settings undermine that. This is a new twist to the concept of immaterial labor. It is not just that you don't see the limits of the process of work. You also don't see the limits of the implications of work. Just as any journalist, in fact, works for Google today, because he or she creates content that will be promoted via Google, thereby generating advertising value for the company, so any office worker is part of the never-ending process of data generation that feeds into Google's business model.

At this point, it can hardly be surprising that Google also started its own initiative with the explicit goal of enriching urban planning and city-related decision-making through its own business subsidiary. Operating under the name of »Sidewalk Labs,« Google's parent company Alphabet Inc. has ventured deep into the field of city planning. Sidewalk Labs started outright urban and city planning initiatives.

However, this approach is not a trivial one. One of the most comprehensive city planning initiatives carried out by Sidewalk Labs has recently been abandoned by the company. The City of Toronto had awarded Sidewalk Labs the job to design a whole district on the city's waterfront, the Quayside. Many had seen Toronto's decision not only as a signal for a different model of professional practice, but also as a conceptual shift away from citizen to urban consumer. By engaging a private

technology company, one that collects data on its customers and resells them to third parties, Toronto's smart city pointed to a significant change in the understanding and practice of contemporary urban planning and design.

Eventually, the project was, however, cancelled. In May 2020, Sidewalk Labs announced that it would stop the Quayside project. Officially, they based their decision on the COVID-19 pandemic and the high degree of economic uncertainty. But was that the whole reason? The rhetoric around the cancellation did not at all sound like Google. After all, taking risks in a positive way is part of its corporate culture. Rather, it seems that the pandemic has provided the company with a reason to stop a project that proved more complex than previously anticipated. City planning, Sidewalk Labs seems to have come to realize, is simply more complex and often more contradictory than developing purely digital products or more generally engaging with the purely virtual sphere. Cities, it seems, have their own degree of ambiguity and complexity. Managing this requires competencies that even a company like Google apparently finds difficult to build up internally, or to acquire externally.<sup>22</sup>

And yet, we should not see the abandonment of the Toronto project as a renouncement of the idea of Google engaging in city planning altogether. The company is eager to learn, and this is exactly what Sidewalk Labs seems to be intent on doing now. In this sense, we can expect the conquering of the urban space by Google to continue. It makes perfect sense that Tierney (2019) argues for the overall urban operation of Google and other tech companies to thoroughly change what we understand as city.<sup>23</sup> She makes the point that these activities can essentially be seen as an effort to transform the city into a site of »disciplinary disruption.«<sup>24</sup> Her principal concern is with the transformation of personal and environmental data

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**22** | In the public discourse, the project was largely discussed as an experiment of a data-driven enhancement of what an urban realm is, or what it can be. However, Sidewalk Labs had understood early on that when Google starts becoming involved in urban planning, then the expectations are high, also regarding purely architectural categories. The question would certainly have been put up to what degree the innovation-based company finds a way for this new area of the city to be innovative beyond the use of data, e. g. in terms of its architecture. Sidewalk Labs brought together architecture firms Heatherwick and Snøhetta, who developed an architectural concept based on a material often seen as synonymous with construction-based sustainability: timber. The development was to be built entirely from mass timber. Indeed, the extensive use of modular cross-laminated timber and glue-laminated timber was a chief selling point of the design. See Mike Yorke: Op-ed. The Upshot of Sidewalk Labs' Canceled Toronto Project. In: *The Architect's Newspaper*, June 19, 2020, online at [www.archpaper.com/2020/06/the-upshot-of-sidewalk-labs-canceled-quayside](http://www.archpaper.com/2020/06/the-upshot-of-sidewalk-labs-canceled-quayside).

**23** | See Thérèse F. Tierney: *Toronto's Smart City. Everyday Life or Google Life?* In: *Architecture\_Media\_Politics\_Society* 15 (2019), No. 1, online at [www.scienceopen.com/document?vid=665c1905-950b-4bbe-ac52-570d5a796535](http://www.scienceopen.com/document?vid=665c1905-950b-4bbe-ac52-570d5a796535).

**24** | Ibid.



into an economic resource. Seen through that particular lens, she rightly argues that Google-driven smart city planning creates urban spaces that have internalized relations of colonization, whereby the economic objectives of a multinational technology company take on new configurations at a local level of human (and non-human) information extraction – thereby restructuring not only public land, but also everyday urban life into a zone of unmitigated data generation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This essay has engaged with the relationship of the current trend of »new work« and the transformation of city space. »New work« has been argued to have developed spatial imperatives that are displayed in the urban realm. City space has been shown to be altered in shape and social functionality through the architecture and design principles the new workspace discourse promotes. This workspacization of the city and the effects it has on the human subject in the urban sphere have been outlined as a trend as a trend that is enforced, rather than weakened by the COVID-19 crisis.

In this discussion, the workspacization of the city has been presented as part of a larger process of a reinvention of capitalism in the digital sphere. While it is certainly a strong testimony to the scope of the forces of digital culture, the workspacization of the city is not its only, or even its key element. The digital transformation of culture does not end with the urban realm, and neither does it end with the notion of »workspace.« True, workspace is everywhere today – but it would hardly be surprising if the concept of the workspace itself were to vanish at some point. Capitalism has a strong tendency of naturalizing things. So it would not come as much of a surprise if the overwhelming success of the workspacization of the urban realm meant that at some point, there is no longer a non-workspace.