New furniture, but no new spirit:  
When collaborative workspaces don’t work (as planned)

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The past few years have seen the coming of age for collaborative workspaces. Those spaces offer (freelance) workers and entrepreneurs shared desks and open-plan spaces, with common facilities as wifi, printers, kitchen, and meeting rooms. They also offer seminars and recreational activities, building communities for their members. The reasons workers join a collaborative workspace include the desire to break from isolation, the search for collaboration, networking, as well as the need for discipline and a more professional place compared to working-from-home. More and more entrepreneurs, freelancers and "creatives" embrace the idea of collaboration and community, and consider collaborative workspaces “the best place to work”(Ropo et al, 2015). Enthusiastic proponents explain how these new workspaces may revolutionize the way we work.

Corporations try to capitalize on this spirit and invest large sums, both monetary and emotional, to convert traditional office spaces into collaborative work spaces. The advantages seem manifold: reduced costs for office facilities by introducing shared desks, accelerated digital transformation, increased creativity and innovation through an office design that facilitates collaboration.

But not all spaces work as planned. Newly designed workspaces remain empty as workers resist them and prefer to work from home, reducing the possibility for spontaneous innovation and collaboration the corporations are hoping for (see examples in Figure 1 and 2).
When comparing the collaborative spaces that are on the one hand set up for freelancers and on the other by large corporations for their employees within the corporate building, the material artifacts are similar in both, suggesting that the relation between place and work practices is not determined by the artefacts that are present and how they are arranged - aspects on which discussions often focus.

Instead, in order to understand how new workplaces are related to changing working practices, we need to see place as enacted in practices in which both material and social aspects play a role, going beyond the view of place as a container (Massey, 2005) - constellations of artefacts, coworkers and practices contribute to what the workplace becomes. As organization studies undergo a spatial turn (Vasquez & Cooren, 2013), new perspectives emerge on workplace design and use, foregrounding work practices, materiality, embodiment, emotions, power relations. Such perspectives treat space and people as ongoing
phenomena that are interrelated and co-constructing each other in complex ways. These perspectives hence deepen the knowledge needed in order to understand workplaces, practices, and organizational development as integrated (Ropo et al, 2015).

So far, research has only partially studied how work practices are affected by, as well as are enacting, place. For instance, the focus of activity-based offices is activities seen as entities separated from one another, and thus possible to perform in specific places. If we instead consider work as carried out in practices, activities are integrated in practices with normative, aesthetic and collective dimensions, they are not "just entities" (Diedrich et al, 2013). Underlying the development of activity-based offices is thus a view on activities and places treated as entities that can be defined in principle (ostensive ontology) and therefore possible to define and design (Strum & Latour 1987). However, this does not take into account that activities and places may develop quite differently compared to how they were originally defined and designed. An alternative is to consider places and work as emerging and enacted in practice (performativity), in use (ibid); and to lean on sociomaterial perspectives to understand the social and material dimensions as inherently inseparable and shifting assemblages emerging through practice (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Ashcraft et al 2009, Jarzabkowski and Pinch, 2013). Such a sociomaterial and performative view leads to another understanding of spatial and work practices since it remains open to how these emerge over time in actions and interactions involving both people and artefacts. Place can be considered as bounded space, relationally constructed with its "boundedness" socially produced, and always contested (Massey, 2005). Places are re-produced in the convergence, meeting, clash, entanglement of heterogeneous trajectories. Such an understanding of space and place also sheds light on multiplicity and political aspects leading to resistance and tensions (Vasquez & Cooren, 2013).

In this project, we build on studies that have started to inquire into space and place as enacted in sociomaterial practices, for instance studies of coworking and plural leadership (Ropo et al, 2015), of coworking and joint learning (Mitev & De Vaujany 2013) and of agencement and the becoming of a gendered space (Katila & Kuismin, 2016).

By empirically exploring and comparing collaborative workspaces set up by corporations for their employees versus collaborative workspaces for freelancers in Sweden and Switzerland, we try to understand 1) How are collaborative workspaces constructed and enacted? Which artefacts, people and practices become entangled and are re-produced in these processes and how? And 2) What kind of agency do collaborative workspaces enact
through the sociomaterial entanglement of artefacts, people and practices? And what kind of agency do the workers have who decide to work or not work in those allocated spaces.

We discuss our findings with reference to literature that links space and identity, as is the case in Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial theory as well as in the work of human geographer Raffestin (2012). Organizational scholars have started to apply those theories to show the ways in which employees and workers co-constitute those places by either embracing or resisting them (e.g. Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011; Hancock & Spicer, 2011), providing opportunities to reflect on agency, identity regulation, control and surveillance in contemporary workplaces.

References


Jarzabkowski, P & Pinch, T J (2013) Sociomateriality is ‘the New Black’: accomplishing repurposing, reinscripting and repairing in context. M@n@gement, 16(5), 579-592.


