Unplugged - "Place as spatio-temporal events": Empirical evidence from everyday life in a coworking space

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Abstract. Sergot and Saives pointed out how Massey's relational approach to the notions of space and place allows a better integration of the spatial and temporal dimensions of organizational phenomena. This paper shows empirically how activities are embedded in the organizational space as constituted and transformed through day-to-day activities. The increasing number of coworking spaces opening worldwide offers an interesting framework to discuss the meaning of space and the importance of physical co-localization for different businesses in the digital era and open innovation paradigm. We use a case study of a coworking space to show the intertwining of spatial and temporal dimensions in the everyday life of an inter-company workplace.

Massey's (2005) relational approach to the notions of space and place allows a better integration of the spatial and temporal dimensions of organizational phenomena (Sergot & Saives, 2016). Given that space is now recognized as an integral part of organizations' strategy (Chabault, Loubaresse, Saives & Sergot, 2016; Dameron, Lê & LeBaron, 2015), and as being of growing importance in recent years in research in management and organization studies (Dale & Burrell, 2008; de Vaujany & Mitev, 2013; Hernes, 2004; Kornberger & Clegg, 2004; van Marrewijk & Yanow, 2010; Warf & Arias, 2009), it seems important to show empirically how activities are embedded in the organizational space as constituted and transformed through day-to-day activities (Clegg & Kornberger, 2006).

On one hand, most existing works on space and organization mainly analyze intra-organizational relationships within single large companies. There seems to be a lack of studies on small firms' everyday life experience of physical co-presence. On the other hand, the increasing number of coworking spaces opening worldwide offers an interesting framework to discuss the meaning of space and the importance of physical co-localization for different businesses in the digital era and open innovation paradigm. This is why we decided to use a case study of a coworking space to show the intertwining of spatial and temporal dimensions in the everyday life of an inter-company workplace.

In the first part, we discuss Massey's definition of place as spatio-temporal events. In the second part, we illustrate mutual relationships between space and organization based on an ethnographical study of one of the first French coworking spaces, called "La Ruche" ("The Beehive"). We particularly focus on one specific spatio-temporal event at La Ruche. On this basis, we identify a number of methodological issues and

promising research themes to build on Massey's relational approach of space and place, and to better understand the phenomenon of coworking.

PROXEMICS, SPATIO-TEMPORALITY, AND EMBODIMENT

According to the ontological perspective mentioned above, spatial design and social behavior interact: Workspace and workplace are socially produced, and at the same time produce social relations. This is based on the conception of space as a social process, as introduced by the cultural anthropologist Hall (1966). He coined the term "proxemics" to define individuals' reactions and behaviors according to the type of place they are in or the ways that they use it—called "proxemic behavior" or spatial behavior. This line of thinking conceptualizes how meaning is attributed to space, and how space influences perceptions and interpretations. Hall distinguishes between two types of spatial organization, associated with spatial behaviors determined by cultural conventions: "fixed-feature" spaces and "semifixed-feature" spaces. The fixed organization of space refers to space planning and organization involving permanent features, such as walls and doorways: "basic ways of organizing the activities of individuals and groups" (Hall, 1966: 97). According to Ciborra and Lanzara (1994), we can speak of a "formative context," where workers routinely engage in their business activities. The semifixed organization of space contains moveable features, such as furniture and partitions. For instance, moveable screens may be arranged to mark out territorial boundaries. Hall's main idea about this kind of spatial organization is that a small change in the arrangement of place may have huge consequences for relationships. The flexibility of semifixed space (Steele, 1973) allows for a variety of places in a "context-making" process (Ciborra & Lanzara, 1994). Being able to customize place—meaning being able to organize and move materials and furniture easily—is crucial for creating new partitions in real time depending on the nature of the desired interaction. Thus, Hall and Massey, despite their distant disciplinary perspectives, share common views on the openness and multiplicity of space production, as well as the fact that it involves no predetermined process.

Hall and Massey both posit that space is constituted through social and material interactions. They do not hesitate to emphasize the role of human and non-human actors. However, Massey's approach is more dynamic, as she insists more explicitly on the spatializing process, where time and place are indivisible dimensions. She thus defines places as "spatio-temporal events" (Massey, 2005: 131; Sergot & Saives, 2016). Some recent works have also highlighted that activity is likely to constitute an "event" or a "field of events" (Hernes, 2014; Schatzki, 2010). Those views can be completed with Merleau-Ponty's (1996) focus on embodiment. If one considers that all perceptions and experiences of space and time are mediated through bodies, "the chance of space" (Massey, 2005: 111) relies not only on the "here and now" but also on "a body."

In this paper, we take space, place, time, and body into account simultaneously by offering an empirical illustration of Massey's conception of place and space A coworking space seemed to be a very relevant context in which to observe the "localized encounter of diverse individual trajectories which will disperse immediately after" (Sergot & Saives, 2016: 339). As a shared inter-company workplace, a coworking space can embody the practice of living and/or working together. Basing our work on an ethnographic approach to studying the spatial and social day-to-day life of a coworking space in situ, we describe the importance of the spatial and

temporal dimensions to understand how interactions emerge and may transform such an organization. Firstly, we present several examples of relationships between space and organization in one of the first French coworking spaces, which communicates about its spatial design loudly. Second, we focus on one specific spatio-temporal event that plays a central role in La Ruche's collective life.

A COWORKING SPACE AS SPATIO-TEMPORAL EVENTS

This illustration is taken from the author's doctoral fieldwork (2011–2013) at La Ruche, one of the pioneering coworking spaces in France, launched in May 2008 (Fabbri, 2015). La Ruche is located in northeastern Paris. First, it is a physical open space measuring 600m², with around 80 workstations, six meeting rooms, and one kitchen. Second, it is an organization run by three full-time employees, a not-for-profit start-up that provides a workplace and shared services (e.g. Wi-Fi and a printer) to selected innovative entrepreneurs.

I have used workstations there sporadically, attended dozens of events organized by La Ruche, and interacted conversationally with various people in the workplace: entrepreneurs, guests, management team, people passing through, and others. In addition to my research journal, I took a lot of photographs of the interior of La Ruche that I did not have the chance to use as sources in my thesis. I have relied on this data set for this article.

SPACE AND ORGANIZATION AT LA RUCHE

The business activity of a coworking space is twofold (Figure 1). Its primary activity is to operate the workplace for residents. Its secondary activity is to organize events with a variety of formats and themes, either restricted to members or open to a broader public.
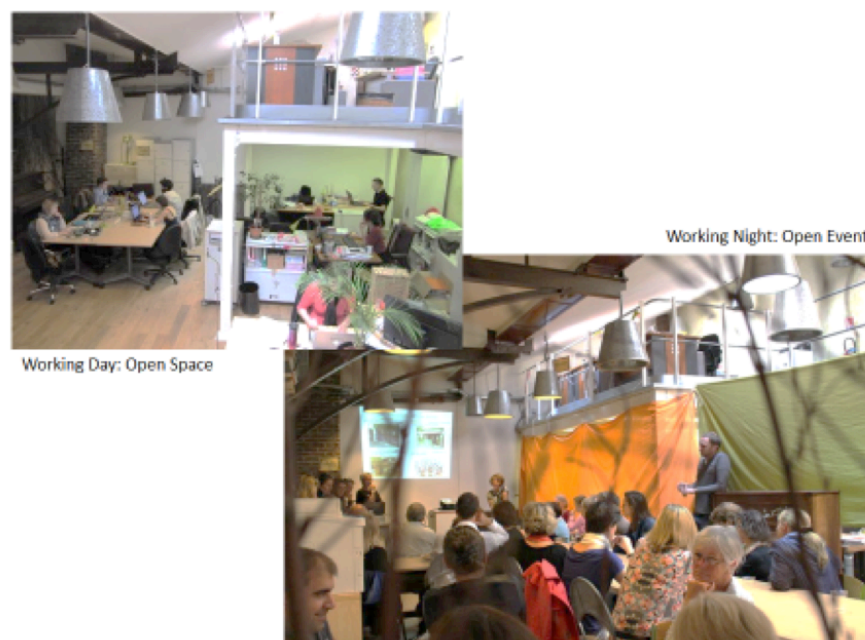

Figure 1: Open space by day, conference hall by night

These two activities thus coexist in the same physical place, which is possible thanks to the flexibility of the place. In material terms, the place is modular and furniture is easily moveable. As in Figure 2, the same room can be arranged and rearranged in many different ways depending on the types of activities residents need to carry out there. The meeting room can be booked and then used for different kinds of meetings. Meeting equipment can be borrowed from La Ruche or brought from outside. Users are simply asked to keep the space clean and fit for use (by tidying up the meeting room after using it in compliance with the sign at the entrance to the room).

Figure 2: Three ways of arranging the largest meeting room at La Ruche: to accommodate traditional business meetings, innovation classes, and practical workshops.

When activities require more space, that is to say when the meeting room is not sufficient, a conflict may emerge between the two activities that take place in the coworking space. In Figure 1, we can see that the negotiation process has resulted in the partition of the activities into working and non-working hours. Thus, the open space of La Ruche can be requisitioned at night and weekends, i.e., out of mainstream office working hours. The La Ruche team also envisaged another layout by keeping one part of the open space separate. As a result, the "Boutique" area has a separate entrance, kitchen equipment, and mobile workstations that can be removed so it can easily be transformed into a reception area. This room can be used even during the day for large meetings or workshops, noisy videoconferences, and experiments in new ways of working or small-scale business (e.g. standing desks or a pop-up store) (Figure 3).

Standing Desks Visioconference Room Pop-up Store

Collective Creativity Workshop Event

Figure 3: The Boutique area, an open space or event area for large and
lengthy conferences

The variety of spaces available at La Ruche, as well as their flexibility, provides opportunities for discussion, and facilitates adaptation to different kinds of interaction. Moreover, members choose freely how they use the space and its associated features, as well as whether to attend and organize events; La Ruche imposes no personalized recommendations or constraints, just a general invitation to participate in the life of the place. These features may influence entrepreneurial practices.

THE WEEKLY MEETING: A SPECIFIC SPATIO-TEMPORAL EVENT

One recurring event is particularly important at La Ruche, and it is known as "The Buzz." Every Friday, members have lunch together in the kitchen (Figure 4) and share a variety of information: skills, job offers, or other things they are excited about. This functions like a weekly team meeting. The Buzz gives visibility to the multitude of actions carried out by the members: "It's an informal and friendly way for you to find out what the others are doing." The Buzz is also a way of building ties with members: "We bring our food and we sit next to someone. That starts a conversation very easily." It attracts up to 40 attendees per meeting.

Figure 4: Different stages of The Buzz in the kitchen at La Ruche

There is neither a registration process nor a predetermined agenda, but this time for informal exchange is extremely ritualized: A bell chimes and then someone takes the floor and summarizes their message on a piece of paper, which remains pinned to the memo board in the kitchen for a week. In the various spatial layouts adopted in the kitchen for The Buzz (Figure 4), we can see that the speaker's corner is systematically positioned in front of the memo board, where they have to pin up their sheet. Three non-human actors or material artifacts also play a central role in The Buzz: the bell, the memo board, and the sheets of paper (Figure 5).
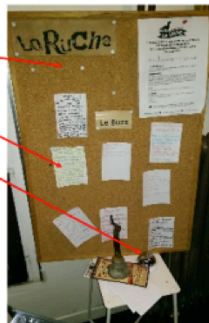

Figure 5: Three artifacts of The Buzz

The ritual of The Buzz was set up by La Ruche's founders at its opening and has barely changed since. It is the only weekly event. It is held every week except during Christmas and summer holidays—even if the management team cannot attend. Occasionally, however, The Buzz is held off-site (Figure 6). For instance, on sunny days, members may choose to spend lunchtime outside in a nearby garden or along the canal side in front of the building. Some special Buzz meetings are also organized during external events that bring together a significant number of La Ruche members (e.g., if La Ruche has a stand at an external business forum). In both cases, it is interesting to note the importance of The Buzz's regularity, and that the three material artifacts are necessary and yet sufficient to allow these delocalized events to take place.

Figure 6: Off-site Buzz meetings

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this ethnographic study of La Ruche was to shed further light on how a shared organizational workspace may play a role in the temporally and spatially constituted everyday activities of a group of entrepreneurs. It is difficult to succeed in this project using only established qualitative research techniques such as interviews, observation, and participation. Studying the mutual relationships between space, time, and organization through tools, objects, artifacts, buildings, and bodies would require more material and visual techniques (de Vaujany & Mitev, 2016). Combining interviews, observation—during and after the action—with photographs and videos may be part of the solution, even though this throws up huge methodological questions (and costs)! To study extreme situations, Lievre & Rix-Lievre (2012) suggest a research design that combines a video recording "outside" of the situation with a recording "embedded" in the same situation and after the event with the actors. In more mundane spatio-temporal work contexts, other techniques are worth bearing in mind as means of studying action in context; examples are shadowing (McDonald, 2005) and commented walks (Raulet-Croset & Borzeix, 2014) using the body of the researcher as the main research design tool (Casey, 1996; Warren, 2008). The need for more material and visual research techniques is even more critical when trying to grasp the social and material processes at work in collaborative spaces, like coworking or maker- and hackerspaces (Lallement, 2015). Some notable attempts have been made to analyze these new research objects. For instance, Bosqué (2015) used drawn observations during her doctoral fieldwork in aesthetics and design to describe critically the methods and practices that she witnessed in maker- and hackerspaces.

The aim of this article was not to operationalize the notion of place or spacing, but rather to offer some empirical illustrations of the relevance of those notions and of Massey's relational approach. We strove to offer a glimpse of the fact that place-based organizations are much more than containers in that some spatial tactics and practices, or politics of space, are implemented to create or allow "situated and unexpected encounters" (Sergot & Saives, 2016: 341). In an increasingly fluid, mobile, and open business world and society, considering space as spatio-temporal events is meaningful as a means of dealing with and managing "the confrontation with alterity." (Sergot & Saives, 2016: 341). We are convinced that this ontological perspective may offer a very appropriate means of shedding light on the emergence and development of inter-organizational collaborative dynamics through space and time in the broader context of the sharing economy and the revolution of work.

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