

18 Concluding remarks, trends, and future research on new working spaces

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This book provided a novel understanding of the socioeconomic and spatial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on NeWSps such as (i) coworking spaces and smart work centres; (ii) makerspaces and other technical spaces (fab labs, open workshops); (iii) other new working spaces (hackerspaces, living labs, and corporate labs); and (iv) coffee shops and public libraries that provide formal and informal spaces for working. To reach this goal, we explored the following issues.

Firstly, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on NeWSp business model reorganization and change were analyzed and described (see Part 1). In particular, we described and discussed the new socio-spatial relationships and strategies for communication and interaction (see Chapter 1 by Gerosa and Manzini Ceinar and Chapter 2 by Danko et al.) and rethinking socioeconomic factors to sustain NeWSp values, practices, and engagement activities (see Chapter 3 by Micek et al., Chapter 4 by Akhavan et al., and Chapter 5 by Tagliaro et al.).

Secondly, the contributions to the edited volume (see Part 2) reveal how ‘other locations’ (for work) have increased within our cities and regions, impacting mobility and work patterns in various ways (see Chapter 10 by Bajada et al. and Chapter 8 by Leducq et al.), as well as the opening and/or closing of rural coworking spaces (see Chapter 9 by Tomaz et al. and Chapter 7 by Lange et al.). Thus, NeWSps can have a renewed role in urban and regional development, policies, and planning within this context, including peripheries and rural areas during and following the COVID-19 pandemic (see Chapter 6 by Pacchi et al.).

Thirdly, the book explored the effects of COVID-19 on remote workers and teleworkers and the potential of working from non-traditional workplaces such as NeWSps. Several chapters in Part 3 showed that during the pandemic, CSs have become complementary to other forms of flexible working (e.g. remote working and presence of 1–2 days at the office) (Chapter 12 by Smith et al., Chapter 13 by Seong et al., and Chapter 14 by Brower et al.). The combination of remote working and virtual coworking can be viewed as a hybrid form (see Chapter 11 by Sinitysina et al.) which can support a sustainable way to balance work and life (see Chapter 15 by Akhavan et al. and Chapter 17 by Smekalova et al.).

Furthermore, the book reflected on the relevance of tailored policy tools and governance actions to face the expected upcoming phases of the pandemic, and, if necessary, also waves of new viruses. These aspects should be further investigated on the national level (including comparative analysis). It is therefore important to further explore (i) living and working in safe and healthy work environments; (ii) improving work–life balance considering the additional family and gender issues that have mainly penalized women working from home; (iii) rethinking traditional offices (e.g. providing larger open spaces and renting working spaces in coworking spaces); (iv) relocating office buildings/spaces and NeWSps closer to workers and their own neighbourhoods, thus using different spaces for work in addition to home (CSs, public libraries, and coffee shops); and (v) providing new layouts in NeWSps (e.g. more spacious and flexible meeting rooms and more single offices) (Di Marino et al., 2022; Mariotti et al., 2021a).

At the beginning of the pandemic, several researchers claimed the ‘death of the city’ because dense areas had become risky. Public transport was not prepared to counteract COVID, and compact cities and neighbourhoods became the epicentres of the pandemic crisis. Besides, ICT has allowed knowledge workers to work from anywhere, thus reinforcing what Thomas Friedman (2005) underlined in his book *The World is Flat* that people present similarity and greater homogeneity in different parts of the world, and that the transaction costs have fallen rapidly.

However, during the pandemic, knowledge workers have worked inside their homes and discovered their neighbourhoods. Less dense peripheries and rural areas have been reconsidered for offering closer proximity to outdoor spaces and access to green places, and such areas have been perceived by the population as a more healthy and safer environment, albeit with local differences. Within this context, NeWSps may therefore represent an alternative to traditional offices in central areas as more sustainable locations and an alternative to home, which is not always the most efficient place to work if it is small, noisy, and crowded, especially when children are around. In addition, working from home is characterized by the following aspects: inadequate technology, a sense of loneliness, poor work–life balance, and overworking (Osservatorio Smart Working, 2020).

After the second wave of the pandemic, people returned to work in the city with different frequencies: from 1–3 days a week to 5 days a week, depending on the country and city. Several studies have therefore supported the idea that ‘the city is still alive and is flourishing’. As stated by Florida et al. (2021, p. 3), ‘Throughout history, large cities have rebounded from the devastation of epidemics and many other types of crises and catastrophes’, because innovation, creativity, and economic growth require the clustering of talent and economic assets, face-to-face interaction, buzz, diversity, and the critical mass that only cities can provide (Storper & Venables, 2004). Moreover, knowledge-intensive activities require the frequency of face-to-face interaction because the time (opportunity) costs associated with not having continuous face-to-face contact have increased with the quantity, variety, and complexity of the information produced (McCann, 2008).

Although at the time of writing, people around the globe are debating about what the ‘new normal’ will look like, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that several, mainly knowledge-intensive activities can be carried out remotely, and thereby support resilience of CSs and communities by knowledge-sharing (Bednář et al., 2021). Not only central areas, but also suburban and peripheral areas can become places to work, either within the boundaries of the home or at NeWSps. With regard to urban areas, several cities worldwide have developed the ‘15-minute’ or ‘x-minute’ concept (Moreno et al., 2021; Mariotti et al., 2021b, 2022b; Di Marino et al., 2022). The ‘15-minute city’ seeks to provide primary services within walking and biking distance. In some cities, there are ‘flexible working’ season tickets for rail travel in line with new commuter behaviour to accommodate some working from home, as in the case of London.¹ These strategies aim to strengthen remote working as an ordinary system, to be conducted at home or in NeWSps, thus ensuring work-life balance (Mariotti, 2021a, 2021b).

A new debate has flourished among scholars and policymakers regarding local-global development and the centre-periphery model. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of networking with community hubs (e.g., from third to fourth and fifth places), and moving beyond the peripheral/rural and urban dichotomy, as well as developing sustainable strategies in decentralized areas (Mariotti et al., 2022a).

Suburban and peripheral areas are enhancing and developing NeWSps to host remote workers, and specific policy measures are designed to make these areas more attractive places to live and work. The redistribution of working in suburban and peripheral areas might positively impact these areas and reduce the congestion of large cities. Less frequent commuting will allow for larger hinterland areas, and this will tend to favour most prosperous cities, thus producing a sort of shadow effect on weaker cities; besides, cities that are more economically weaker will become more vulnerable (Mariotti, 2021b).

Another important issue concerns the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on low-skilled and low-income workers. Higher-income groups have more easily adapted to working online and to more flexible working than lower-income groups, and this requires attention by policymakers to reduce social and territorial imbalances. Tailored policies aimed at enhancing and supporting the labor market should also be developed to achieve work-life balance. Indeed, if remote working becomes permanent, women will continue carrying the most considerable family load, which is not reimbursed and not adequately recognized.

The contributors to the edited volume collected data from December 2020 to May 2021 (with some variations based on the cases) during the third wave of the pandemic. The results from this temporal window cannot be generalized, but they help in interpreting the complexity of the phenomenon. Moreover, this book collected pioneering research on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on NeWSps, and it presented in a large compendium of several comparative and

interdisciplinary analyses which have not yet developed within the academic debate. Future studies should focus on a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses that can further support the understanding of new trends in working spaces and practices. Additionally, further research is needed to examine the effects of COVID-19 in other countries which are not investigated in the book, that is, outside Europe, Lebanon, and the US. It is also crucial to study the impacts of future waves of the pandemic, including related recessions and new health crises, on NeWSps that may experience different effects across the globe.

Note

- 1 'City of London seeks to reinvent itself after pandemic', *Financial Times*, 19 October 2020.

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