

University Hubs: Hybrid Spaces Between Campus, Work, and Social Spaces



Alessandra Migliore, Chiara Tagliaro, Davide Schaumann, and Ying Hua

Abstract In recent years work and learning have radically changed to support community-focused, inter-professional, and interdisciplinary engagements. In response, companies and public administrations have been developing networked and dispersed workspaces to grant people access to a variety of places tailored to their needs. Likewise, university campuses have been evolving in the same direction. Aiming to expand into different geographical contexts, universities have been activating off-campus facilities that enact their mission of sustainable development, university-industry connection, and social inclusion. However, the phenomenon is still poorly understood even though evidence exists that it is an expanding trend. This study analyses this emergent phenomenon we call University Hubs by distinguishing it from other similar dynamics and discussing it in the context of the hybridization of spaces for study and work. Through a preliminary case study analysis, the paper reflects on University Hubs as an opportunity for the development of future university models. These spaces can pursue knowledge creation and sharing with diverse communities outside the campus boundaries, but they entail the risk of simply enhancing university visibility in different places without pursuing a true engagement with local communities.

A. Migliore (✉)

Department of Management, Economics and Industrial Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy

e-mail: alessandra.migliore@polimi.it

C. Tagliaro

Department of Architecture, Built Environment and Construction Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy

e-mail: chiara.tagliaro@polimi.it

D. Schaumann

Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning, Technion - Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel

e-mail: d.schaumann@technion.ac.il

Y. Hua

College of Human Ecology, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

e-mail: yh294@cornell.edu

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1 Introduction and Background: Understanding University Hubs as Hybrid Spaces

Universities play a critical role in social, political, and economic development, by generating knowledge, culture, jobs, and innovation through their primary missions of education and scientific research [5]. Traditionally, university activities have been located within a site-specific physical environment. The architecture of a university campus is a means to communicate the community's identity, ideals, and values [16]. Due to the growing number of students and staff and the pursuit of sustainable development of cities and regions, universities have started developing multi-campus systems composed of geographically dispersed units supporting research and teaching activities, which share a common organizational identity [1].

More recently, universities have been expanding their primary missions. They are promoting broader efforts to impact economy, attract the creative class and stimulate the development of neighborhoods, cities, and regions [5]. The so-called "third mission" of universities requires these institutions to have a tangible and measurable impact on society. Moreover, universities are facing a radical revolution thanks to the spread of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The growth of online education and remote working created an urgent need for flexible spaces dispersed across regions and for diversified services according to multiple user needs. "Third spaces" [12] have proved appropriate to meet these new objectives. Universities have been utilizing third-party accelerators/incubators and new working spaces located far from the university sites and exploited for distance learning for their students as well as for remote working for researchers and staff [2, 13]. Besides, similar spaces have been developed within university buildings as physical and/or virtual areas that transcend the social or work/study perspectives and constitute new types of university spaces [19]. In the form of maker spaces, Fablabs, and coworking spaces, they promote the "third mission" of universities [9] by integrating new services that provide new meanings to higher education institutions. They can be defined as "**hybrid**" facilities, as spaces between campus, work, and social spaces, which not only host the traditional activities of university campuses, that is, teaching and research. All these locations allow different groups to share a place with fluid boundaries and functions [15] and they configure as emerging design and building practices characterized by *in-betweenness* and *indeterminacy* [10, 14]. Anecdotal evidence shows that those spaces are not only located on-campus or near the flagship campus, but also far from the campus. This phenomenon, therefore, goes beyond traditional multi-campus systems. It has implications that are still poorly acknowledged in the literature, which has already studied multiple cases but without clearly distinguishing between different types.

On one hand, [2] reported on **on-campus sites** that some universities have gradually been opening to external users. For instance, some universities (e.g., Harvard University, Lakeview University, Tübingen University, Aalto University, Berlin Technical University) host coworking spaces either only for their staff or for externals. These types of spaces are likely to foster entrepreneurship for both students and

researchers, and, unlike university libraries, provide additional “non-silent” areas to give opportunities for teamwork.

On the other hand, universities open **off-campus hubs** with diverse aims [3, 4, 6]. It is common for universities to establish agreements with third-party **learning and working incubators for entrepreneurs** to ensure knowledge transfer and stimulate innovation [20]. An example is Cornell University’s 15,000 feet entrepreneurship space that is located both on-campus and off-campus (a five-minute walk from the campus). Alternatively, off-campus facilities can be hosted in existing spaces for temporary use. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, NYU Shanghai¹ leased and converted nearly 7,000 square meters of WeWork office space within walking and commuting distance to the campus into classrooms, lecture halls, and other academic facilities for students. Columbia University offered its students and academics access to all WeWork locations in 80+ cities worldwide. Furthermore, GTatria are gathering places providing physical and virtual services for Georgia Tech University to achieve a distributed global presence and offer—through co-working and co-learning spaces—education, career development, advising, enrichment, and specialized learning experiences. It is open to Georgia Tech University students, alumni, prospective learners of all ages, and the community at large. The project, which is still under development, plans to launch in several places around the world where distance learners and the Georgia Tech alumni community are concentrated (e.g., Monterrey, Colombia, South America; Morocco, Africa; Taipei, Taiwan, as well as several locations in the United States).

Among these latter practices, we identify a specific type of off-campus facility, which we call **University Hub**. It offers a variety of spaces to study, work and/or socialize outside of a campus and sometimes at a considerable distance from it. Apart from the above mentioned examples, available on the internet and university websites, literature on these practices is still scarce and fragmented.

Previously, Jane Knight ([8]: 13) conceptualized education hubs as “reputed centers for higher education, training and research” that can be found within and beyond a geographic region. These hubs build a “critical mass of local and foreign actors—including students, education institutions, training companies, knowledge industries and science and technology centers” ([8]: 14). By implementing this infrastructure, universities pursue a range of goals that may span from facilitating closer collaboration with industry and the territory at large up to attracting new students to other areas distant from the main campus site. Moreover, the neoliberal turn in higher education encouraged universities to operate as entrepreneurial entities [17]. This chapter aims to advance this understanding. We explore this emergent phenomenon which is changing the shape of campuses in both their physical and their symbolic presence, by recognizing off-campus university hubs as a brand-new spatial infrastructure that hosts multiple functions and activities while being open to the academic community and the public.

¹ <https://shanghai.nyu.edu/news/nyu-shanghai-host-students-nyu-and-nyu-abu-dhabi-shanghai-fall>

2 Methodology

Since the trend of University Hubs is still novel and poorly investigated, this research follows a phenomenon-based approach [18] intending to capture, describe, document as well as conceptualize the phenomenon. According to [18], every stage of maturity of a phenomenon requires specific research strategies (*distinguish, explore, design, theorize, synthesize*). The *distinguish* phase of the phenomenon-based research has the goal to (1) bracket peculiarities encountered against the existing body of knowledge; (2) describe a context in broad cultural terms; (3) identify inadequacy of the given body of theory and knowledge in the field; and (4) identify relevant concepts for study [18].

Specifically, this research aims at *distinguishing* University Hubs from three categories of university space: (i) on-campus spaces (both workspaces and learning spaces) located within the traditional campus boundaries; (ii) university accelerators/incubators and new working spaces created within the campus boundaries for entrepreneurial activity and incubation of university start-ups [7, 11], and (iii) third-party accelerators/incubators and new working spaces (such as coworking spaces), exploited for distance learning by students as well as for remote working by researchers and staff [2].

The chapter develops as follows. First, we conceptualize the emergence of University Hubs as a new form of hybrid space through a recent example, *MilanoLuissHub*², located in the city center of Milan, in Italy (section 3). Information on the case was collected through desktop research and interviews with the managerial team (i.e., the director and the community manager). Eventually, we identify relevant concepts for future research (section 4).

3 MilanoLuissHub Case Study

MilanoLuissHub (Figs. 1 and 2) was conceived as the first off-campus location of LUISS University (*Libera università internazionale degli studi sociali Guido Carli*),³ one of the most important Italian universities in the field of economics, law, and social sciences. LUISS, located in Rome, attracts students from all over the world for bachelor, master, and post-university degrees. MilanoLuissHub opened in 2018 and was purposely founded in the business district of Milan, the major Italian city for entrepreneurial and business activities.

MilanoLuissHub comes across as a highly diverse and multi-faced space. It was created by the shared initiative of LUISS University with Brodolini Foundation⁴ and ItaliaCamp⁵ united into a newly established temporary association of enterprises

² <https://milanoluisshub.it/>

³ <https://www.luiss.it/>

⁴ <https://www.fondazionebrodolini.it/>

⁵ <https://italiacamp.com/it/>



Fig. 1 External view of the MilanoLuissHub. Photo by the Authors (May 2022)



Fig. 2 Interior of the MilanoLuissHub. Photo by the Authors (May 2022)

(ATI, in Italian), with the support of the Milan Municipality⁶ which granted a long lease for the space. The local project manager of the space described this association as “a hybrid of different entities that work as a graft, with the objective to create a space with its own identity where each partner would bring in its own capacities”.

An ex-parking garage was refurbished to host a variety of spaces and become a place for social gathering. In total, the space (approximately 1,500 m²) includes three middle-sized rooms that can function interchangeably as classrooms for learners taking courses from master’s to professional refresher, as separate meeting rooms or as one large conference room. In addition, a large learning space is available for interactive workshops, exhibitions, and shows, and one coworking area with about 40 workstations is rented out to start-ups regardless of whether they participate or not in

⁶ <https://www.comune.milano.it/>

the university's incubation and acceleration program. Finally, two enclosed offices are occupied by non-profit associations, and a maker space is open and equipped with various tools and materials.

Such a variety of spaces translates into a range of **activities** which are different than the ones offered by on-campus spaces.

On the website, the project is presented as *“a multidisciplinary agora of the knowledge economy dedicated to learning, sharing, and integrating traditional and innovative entrepreneurial skills. The goal is to increase the creative potential of the territories for a more equitable and inclusive development of society and the economy.”*

In the words of the director of the space, MilanoLuissHub targets particularly what comes before and after regular university learning (i.e., activities for high school students and courses for young workers and executives). In addition, it focuses on the population as a whole. MilanoLuissHub regularly welcomes the people enrolled in the incubation/acceleration program, start-ups that have concluded the program and are renting out their workstations in the same space, attendees of the abovementioned programs, Alumni who participate in different events, the society at large in the occasion of exhibits and other public events, high-school students who participate in a project called “school-work alternation”.

4 Results and Discussion

University Hubs are recognized as a new spatial infrastructure that can be distinguished from other facilities mainly for three orders of characteristics (see Table 1): their **physical configuration**, including both territorial location and architectural features; their **function**, meaning the way it is possible to use the space, as well as the activities and users they host, based on different agreements; and finally, the **stakeholders** that interact with and within the space, which encompasses the managerial structure and the relationship that the space engages in with the general public.

In terms of **physical configuration**, the prominent characteristic of University Hubs is that they are off-campus and are found relatively far from the flagship campus, primarily located in other cities or countries. This is exactly the case with the MilanoLuissHub, created in Milan 600 km away from the main LUISS campus. Conversely, both university-related facilities (e.g., on-campus workspaces and learning spaces) and independent new working spaces/accelerators/incubators (e.g., those partnering with the university) are usually located semi-close to the campus (i.e., they are in the same city or in the surroundings where most students and staff live). The former benefit from the service exchange with the university, whereas the latter need to be accessible for students and researchers. Why are University Hubs distant from the original university campus? University Hubs only partially relate with multi-campus strategies of universities. They are not an additional site but rather an ancillary site of the university. They require less economic and managerial

Table 1 Distinguishing features of the Off-campus University Hubs phenomenon compared to other new working spaces in the university context

	On-campus spaces (Workspaces & Teaching Spaces)	University Accelerators/ Incubators/ New Working Spaces	Independent Accelerators/ Incubators/ New Working Spaces	Off-campus University Hubs
<i>Physical configuration</i>				
<i>Location</i>	On-campus	Close to the campus	Semi-close to the campus	Far from the campus
<i>Architecture</i>	Very recognizable and compact spaces (especially in Italy) Recognizable organizational identity Standard workplace and classroom layout	Varied layouts for different functions (informal spaces, maker space) Not immediately associated with the university's architectural design image	Varied layouts for different functions (informal spaces, maker space) Not immediately associated with the university's architectural design image	Less recognizable. Often in recently converted spaces (e.g., ex-industrial spaces) More varied layouts adapted to different functions (informal spaces, maker space)
<i>Functions</i>				
<i>Activities and functions</i>	Teaching, research, work, laboratories, eat, study, sport	Innovative learning, research, laboratories (maker space), research, eat, study, sport	Innovative learning, research, laboratories (maker space), eat, events	Innovative learning, research laboratories (maker space), teaching, eat, study, sport, work, events
<i>Fixed/ Temporary use</i>	High predictability in the use of space (standard lessons and working hours)	Activities often planned More overlaps between a wider variety of activities	Activities loosely planned More overlaps between a wider variety of activities and temporary events Independence from universities provides more flexibility for temporary use	Activities loosely planned More overlaps between a wider variety of activities and temporary events
<i>Stakeholders</i>				

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

	On-campus spaces (Workspaces & Teaching Spaces)	University Accelerators/ Incubators/ New Working Spaces	Independent Accelerators/ Incubators/ New Working Spaces	Off-campus University Hubs
<i>Users' diversity</i>	Users are very well defined Almost exclusively three types: academics, staff, and students	Users are defined and selected Mostly academics, students, alumni, and companies affiliated with the institution	Users selected according to different criteria (to ensure high diversity) Generally, do not target academics and students	Accessibility for different targets (students, researchers, alumni, enterprises, occasional users, etc.) Users' diversity is the highest because it sums those of the prior spaces
<i>Membership/ Subscription</i>	Need to be affiliated with the university Generally, not open to third parties for rental purposes	Strict membership rules (medium-long term) Generally, not open to third parties for rental purposes	Medium-short- term membership Open to rental possibilities	Medium-short-term membership Open to rental possibilities
<i>Managerial structure</i>	Top-down and centralized (one main stakeholder: university)	In-between/ nearly top-down (one main stakeholder: university)	Nearly or totally bottom-up (high number of stakeholders, mostly private actors)	Nearly bottom-up (high number of stakeholders, both public and private)
<i>Publicness/ openness</i>	Medium Externals cannot benefit from on-campus spaces continuously and not for rental purposes	Low-Medium Open to the public only for specific events	Low-Medium Open to the public only for specific events	Medium Open to the public for specific events based on the mission

effort to be opened compared to a proper new campus while they fulfil a different need, namely, the relationship with a territory where the university is not present. Additionally, University Hubs are characterized by architectural forms that do not follow the common rules of university facilities. Indeed, MilanoLuissHub involves superfetation of spatial arrangements over time and, most of all, is conceived as a flexible space that can be reconfigured based on changing needs.

In terms of **function**, the idea described by the community manager of the space was that the University Hub would take a totally different function than that of LUISS University in Rome. In his words, MilanoLuissHub “*does in Milan activities that LUISS University does not do in Rome*”. Therefore, it configures an expansion of the very mission of the university, besides teaching and research, rather than a simple space extension. Coherently, the Hub hosts an entirely different population, not only students and researchers but also makers, artists, designers and other professionals.

University Hubs host both planned and spontaneous activities, where multiple events and activities happen simultaneously. They are multi-functional in their essence since they mix activities typically carried out in the university—such as workspaces, research spaces and learning spaces—and others usually hosted in both university and independent new working spaces—such as maker spaces, coworking spaces, etc. To this extent, these spaces represent a form of the “entrepreneurial university” [17]. For instance, the MilanoLuissHub offers a digital manufacturing laboratory capable of bringing together, in a synergistic way, school-to-work activities and advanced managerial training initiatives, emerging start-ups and events open to the territory, a digitalization school with digital manufacturing classes; a group called H-ability that creates prototypes of new tools for supporting daily activities of impaired people; Creative Mornings, an initiative that welcomes all interested people to share opinions on a variety of themes including politics; a neuroscience lab that uses the space for their experiments on human–environment interactions; some exhibitions (also in collaboration with the European Parliament); and the training classes of the accelerator program. In this respect, University Hubs are similar to on-campus new working spaces as well to independent new working spaces/accelerators/incubators that host similar activities. Off-campus University Hubs, like independent new working spaces/accelerators/incubators, are open to different membership policies and rental possibilities for externals. In contrast, on-campus spaces and university incubators or coworking spaces are open mainly to members and affiliated professionals. In the case under examination, start-up members mainly have access to spaces according to their membership subscriptions, while requirements for students and the citizens’ community are less strict: students have free access according to their needs, and the community has open and free entrance to public events. Moreover, there are also non-standard opening hours (at night and during weekends) that are made available upon request to the space manager in charge of assuring effective space utilization throughout the day and the week.

Concerning **stakeholders**, University Hubs can be considered a hybrid because of their complex management structure. They combine a top-down approach, where their foundation strongly depends on the will of private (i.e., foundations and associations, and more) and public organizations (i.e., the university, the municipality, and others), with a nearly bottom-up approach according to which multiple members are entitled to autonomously propose their own initiatives. In the case of MilanoLuissHub, the project was initiated by a university together with the municipality, a foundation, and an association. This hybrid managerial structure allows LUISS University to maximize its social and inclusive mission by sharing university life with the local

community. We can conclude that University Hubs have a business model independent of the main University, including a separate board of directors and partnerships with other entities, such as public and private institutions in charge of educational and social activities. Regarding accessibility, off-campus University Hubs similarly to university campuses and independent new working spaces/accelerators/incubators, are less open to non-official members (excluding events open to the public). None of these spaces are configured as public spaces, even if exceptions may exist. Nevertheless, being off-campus, University Hubs represent a tool to increase university “**brand reputation**” and engagement with local communities. As the director of the space argued:

if they [University Hubs] are not removed from the territorial context but are linked to the territorial context, they are a way of creating a brand reputation that then leads local students to enroll in our university, which, as I repeat, does not have an economic effect but does have an effect of greater internationalization of our university. For example, what if you want to have more students from a specific country? Opening a University Hub is one of the many possible ways to have more students from that country and is quite less challenging and expensive than opening your own university there.

This intention may suggest that University Hubs are a response to the neoliberal turn in universities. In parallel to location strategies of big corporations, universities seek to enhance their image in attractive locations to eventually gain advantages in the form of reputation and students’ attraction. This aim is reflected in architectural features such as visual openness. According to the manager, the conference space has glass walls facing the street because the University and its two partners want to convey the value of “transparency” to the citizens by making whatever happens in the space directly visible from outside.

5 Conclusions and Future Research Directions

This chapter conceptualized the emerging phenomenon of off-campus University Hubs distinct from other university-related types of spaces. Even though still appearing as isolated cases, University Hubs are configured as off-campus locations which are hybrid in terms of physical configuration, function, and stakeholders, more than (a) on-campus spaces and other (b) university-related and (c) independent accelerators/incubators/new working spaces. Indeed, off-campus University Hubs mix the features of the three aforementioned categories of spaces, generating a hybrid that is progressively becoming more recognizable. University Hubs attract students, workers, research companies, and industries from other regions and countries beyond the main location of the campus. Their impact could be national, regional and/or global in scope [8] as they represent one of those non-academic spaces which complement campus spaces [6]. Even if this research relies on preliminary results from a single case study located in Milan, it proposes a first conceptualization of University Hubs which opens avenues for future studies.

We advocate for more research on this topic to explore the direct and indirect effects of these spaces on the individuals who use them and the neighborhoods/cities where they operate. At the moment, University Hubs seem to be an urban phenomenon taking advantage of geographical proximity to complementary activities and services. Nevertheless, they have the potential to be used as a tool for not only urban but also rural and peripheral regeneration, where the University Hubs' mission of social innovation could be enhanced thanks to new cultural activities triggered by the academic population. In this realm, University Hubs could expand education initiatives toward the population at large living in disadvantaged and peripheral neighborhoods. Similarly, these spaces could provide better working conditions for academics and for practitioners who regularly access them. By reflecting on this great potential, research should also address the potential negative sides of University Hubs. In fact, this kind of facilities can easily end up being exclusive places aimed at increasing the allure of universities while enhancing the visibility of the campus in already developed places, failing in their mission of engaging with local communities.

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