

The spatial diffusion of coworking spaces to non-metropolitan areas in France. A critical analysis of coworking as an organizational innovation.

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S80 New Work Horizons: Geographical, Social, and Economic Dimensions of Collaborative Working Spaces

Extended Abstract

Objectives and discussion

Coworking spaces have emerged for more than ten years in major cities around the world but more and more collaborative workplaces are nowadays created in all types of cities and even in rural areas. As part of a French national research programme called Péri#Work (ANR), the spatial dynamics of coworking spaces (CWSs) towards non-metropolitan territories was analyzed in three French regions: Brittany, New Aquitaine and Hauts-de-France. Following the theory of the geographer T. Hägerstrand about the spatial diffusion of innovations, we consider the spatial spread of CWSs as a spatial diffusion process of an organizational innovation (collaborative work in shared spaces). According to this theory, CWSs are experimented through different waves of “innovation” from the largest metropolises to the rural areas. The objective of the communication is to explore the strengths and limits of this theoretical approach, through a qualitative analysis given the scarcity of statistics available for quantitative studies.

Methods and Data

Method and data: From a quantitative point of view, a national inventory of third places in France realized for the government (including CWSs but not limited to that type of collaborative spaces) is the only national data base available. These data suggest a process of hierarchical spatial spread of CWSs, from large cities to smaller cities. To test the validity of this approach, we realized a qualitative analysis in three French regions through interviews in 36 CWSs (66 founders or users). The aim was to understand the vectors and channels of this spatial diffusion.

Theoretical framework, results and conclusion

According to the geographer T. Hägerstrand, the theory of the spatial diffusion of innovations aims to determine spatio-temporal waves of innovation and the vectors and channels of this spatial spread. The academic literature about coworking spaces suggest a hierarchical process of diffusion from large metropolitan areas to medium cities and then to rural areas. But to check this theoretical approach, there are no official statistical data at national level in different countries and that lack of data base makes it impossible to test the hypothesis

through a quantitative analysis. Nevertheless, T. Hägerstrand proposed a qualitative approach in order to test the vectors and channels of the potential spatial diffusion. We propose to consider a coworking space as an organizational innovation that is imitated and adopted from pioneers of the movement to early adopters then more and more citizens and entrepreneurs. The question is to know if the spatial diffusion from larger metropolises to little cities and rural areas is so simple as some data suggest or if the diffusion is more complex. The aim of the paper is also to analyze the vectors and channels of diffusion, that is to say why the model of the coworking spaces is adopted, or not, in different types of spaces.

Our hypothesis, according to the theory of T. Hägerstrand, is that spatial diffusion follows a hierarchical (vertical) channel, that is to say from the top to the bottom of the urban system. This main process of diffusion is combined with a horizontal spatial diffusion process by contagion, by imitation from one person to another. In this framework, private actors are the main vector for the diffusion of CWSs, because of their aspirations to new work methods, to new lifestyles, or because they discover these new types of workplaces and collaborative methods through their informal professional networks. The emergence of CWSs in non-metropolitan areas, that is to say in less populated and vulnerable areas (rural areas, depressed industrial areas, low-density areas and/or in population decline) is a mystery and raises the question of public policies to sustain territorial development thanks to coworking spaces.

The results of our French comparative case studies show that the methods of diffusion vary according to: 1) the demographic and economic structure of the three regions studied; 2) the pioneering role of private actors. Different channels of diffusion are essential to make known coworking methods and coworking spaces as innovative processes. In France, local and regional policies sustain the creation of CWSs, to improve local innovation or telework, and the national government launched in 2019 a new policy dedicated to CWS and other types of third places. Nevertheless, our study shows that the role of public policies is not so essential in the spatial diffusion of CWSs, even in fragile territories far from metropolises.

Socio-economic approaches predominated the academic literature about the emergence and spatial spread of coworking places. There is a great attention on location in particular, about the role of CWSs on territorial development or in terms of collaborative processes inside the CWSs. An analysis in terms of spatial diffusion of innovations focuses less on the factors (why) and more on the modalities (how) of coworking socio-spatial dynamics. In light of the innovation diffusion theory, the behavior of individuals (founders, users) is linked to social processes such as the mobility of new ideas through networking, such as the concept of coworking practices and spaces invented in the larger metropolitan areas of the world.

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