



# UNITED by a DESK

***From lofts to coworking: 10 years on since the first space was fitted out in San Francisco, today there are about 50,000 workstations in 608 cities scattered in 89 countries.***

by **Silvia Zamboni**

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**In the beginning it was the loft, communicative yet impersonal. Then the digital revolution wave brought about home teleworking: working hours tailored to family needs, ecological elimination of the home-office commuting but also isolation and expansion of the work-space into private life. A decade ago, in California, a new choice peeped out: a new office format combining the socializing aspect of lofts with that of self-employment, embracing – and this is the aspect that makes all the difference – the collaborative philosophy of sharing. Welcome to the world of coworking, collective offices where fledgling freelance flexible workers, start-ups and microenterprises can rent,**

**even for just a few months, single equipped workstations and use Wi-Fi, secretarial services and common spaces such as meeting rooms, kitchens and bars.** And where, as a specific added value, one can exchange skills creating synergies – networking as it is known in these milieus – with other professionals working in the same location, creating a collaborative peer-to-peer network, helping self-employed workers developing their projects. An ideal solution for those who do not have the capital needed to start an office and aim at strengthening their creativity by exploiting the expertise of their desk neighbours. Another aspect of the sharing economy, united also by a strong link with digital technologies



Teddy Bear Advertisement. Sears Roebuck & Co. Catalogue, Winter 1916

Global Coworking Map,  
[coworkingmap.org/](http://coworkingmap.org/)

and the many platforms hosted in these spaces.

Coworking is already a worldwide phenomenon: [coworkingmap.org](http://coworkingmap.org) has registered over 1,000 (1,036 to be precise) locations in 608 cities scattered in 89 countries, totalling nearly 50,000 equipped workstations (49,463 at the moment). Too few? Too many? The real interesting point is the speed with which this formula has caught on. "Since 2005, when the first experiment was started in San Francisco according to an open source approach to working, from the USA to Europe, coworking has kept on expanding in all Western countries as a typically urban phenomenon. Today it shows outstanding growth rates also in Asia, for instance in Bangkok, Hong Kong and Singapore," Alessandro Gandini, a sociologist and an expert of this phenomenon, notes.

Some true colossuses of the digital economy have also entered the scene. Starting with Google Campus based in the Tech City in London, a technological hub opened in 2012 in an area universally known as Silicon Roundabout. Some giants of the Internet economy gather here, but also dozens upon

dozens of start-ups looking for sponsors. At Google Campus one can choose between the Campus Resident option offering a permanent workstation 24/7 and Work from the Café guaranteeing a permanent workstation but allowing people to work from the café of the Campus with wireless coverage and access to all the activities on offer. Similarly to other technological hubs, every day Google Campus offers workshops run by experts and big names of the tech industry, networking meetings with entrepreneurs and web developers. Google's partners include SeedCamp, an investment programme for start-ups financing about 20 of them a year, and Springboard, a technological platform accelerator.

From Moscow to Johannesburg, from Singapore to San Francisco, from Dubai to Sao Paulo, including London, Amsterdam, Madrid, Zurich, Stockholm, Impact Hub is an international franchising coworking network present in over 80 locations (plus 17 more ready to be launched). It is mainly aimed at social entrepreneurs, and boasts a community of over 11,000 members to whom it offers technological tools, professional resources,

Impact Hub,  
[www.impacthub.net](http://www.impacthub.net)



**InteriorBE, a platform that in just ten days churns out low cost projects by Italian architects for interior refurbishing and furnishing, with the additional option of buying online furnishing items at a highly discounted price.**

**"Beeyouconcert. La musica è di casa" a web platform devoted both to people wishing to buy a concert for private or public events, and musicians who want to play live in houses and special locations.**

opportunities of mutual inspiration and contamination, training events to increase the positive impact of their activities on local communities.

Impact Hub Milano (but there are also branches in Trieste, Rovereto-Trent, Turin, Reggio Emilia, Florence, Rome, Bari and Syracuse) "started in 2009 in a place used for fashion photo shooting," says Montserrat Fernandez, the young account manager of the company, originally from Barcelona and with a degree in arts. This certified incubator of start-ups and social innovation "occupies 600 square metres set up using Controprogetto, a group utilizing second-hand materials and components," Fernandez continues. "Our 300 member-strong community, with variable composition, includes creative people, photographers, graphic designers and language schools. As well as platforms such as Ugo, specialized in car sharing, Jobmetoo, an employment agency for people with disabilities and XMetrics" that invented an innovative electronic device to measure swimming performance launched by champion Max Rosolino.

Milan is the Italian capital of Made in Italy Coworking: the municipality has registered 25 projects that have gained a sort of guarantee *imprimatur* in order to tell them apart from normal rented offices passed off as coworking. Other coworking initiatives based in Milan include CoWo (led by Massimo Carraro, defined by Gandini as "a communication expert carrying out an outstanding networking job between freelancers operating in the communication sector in Milan"); Talentgarden (Tag), with branches in many other Italian and European cities; Avanzi including in its expertise urban regeneration, impact evaluation and social cohesion.

A few months ago, the estate management agency Haldis, part of the Windows on Europe, opened its premises in Copernico. StartMiUp is in charge of managing more than 100 open space coworking stations sharing an 8-floor building with Copernico's business centre traditional offices hosting enterprises and investment funds. In the coworking area, at a cost varying between € 250 and €290 per month, people can rent mobile or permanent workstations accessible 24/7: while a dedicated card grants access only to social areas, lounge, library, refreshment room and park. The co-worker community includes freelancers, web designers and digital platform administrators. Federica, 26, and Sabrina, 40, are the founders of InteriorBE, a platform that in just ten days churns out low cost projects by Italian architects for interior refurbishing and furnishing, with the additional option of buying online furnishing items at a highly discounted price. The main reason that led them to coworking? "The opportunity to know

other kinds of experience, learning both from their successes and their failures," Francesca answers.

Federico, 31, – founder of the portal Curioseety putting curious travellers, mainly non Italians, in touch with professional guides, chefs and vine-dressers for tailored tours in any Italian regions – from Copernico also values "the opportunity of networking with other start-ups and companies, exploiting synergies and starting fruitful partnerships in an informal environment." The only negative aspect? "The lack of sufficient privacy typical of an open space environment."

Beyond the Po River, in Florence, Multiverso, created in 2011, has expanded to regional level. In Rome, Millepiani coworking space, just round the corner from Garbatella underground station, has the distinctive feature of "being managed by the eponymous non-profit social promotion association based on an urban regeneration project. It was created in collaboration with Municipio VII in a disused building belonging to the Municipality," explains President Enrico Parisio. It hosts architects, environmental engineers, web designers, social media marketing experts, start-uppers such as the creator of "Beeyouconcert. La musica è di casa" a web platform devoted both to people wishing to buy a concert for private or public events, and musicians who want to play live in houses and special locations. These are only some of the professionals with whom Millepiani aims to create an actual community of expertise, engaged in studying shared projects based on the notion of common good open to the local community.

Other coworking projects are also emerging catering for the needs of parents with very young babies. In Rome, Città delle mamme, an association created in 2009 with the aim of making the city more children-friendly. After Mammacaffé, the baby-friendly hairdresser, and Cinemamme (cinema matinées for mothers) in the suburban area of Centocelle, the association opened Alveare: 200 square metres with equipped workstations, 2 offices, a meeting room and a baby area. The location is open to anyone interested in this sharing experience. The first generation of coworking digital "babies" will crawl here...

## Interview

edited by  
Silvia Zamboni

# Millennials Style

Alessandro Gandini, a sociologist and lecturer at Middlesex University in London



**Freelancers, VAT-registered workers, self-employed professionals and start-ups populate the coworking world. A variation of the more classical and prosaic “to make a virtue of necessity” and an expression of the uncertainty characterizing our working environment, above all of the so-called Millennials? Or, on the contrary, a positive representation of our times seen from a creativity and innovation point of view?**

“Both,” answers Alessandro Gandini, a sociologist and now lecturer at Middlesex University in London and author of the e-book *Freelance*.

“In the perspective of a special framework including phenomena of creativity, innovation and communication following the development of the digital economy, these projects have a positive value. On the other hand, they are also the result of the often uncertain working conditions of the self-employed. But those in coworking do not necessarily see themselves as having an uncertain working life: some do it because they could not do anything else, but some choose coworking because they see it as an opportunity for their professional and entrepreneurial growth. People choose coworking because it puts them in contact with other skills and expertise, for the social capital that these spaces attract making productive the fact of being together while somehow being alone.”

**There is no shortage of criticism towards the giants of coworking such as Google Campuses.**

“For those criticizing the relationship with the digital monopolist Google, being in that space means working partly ‘for’ Google” and not only ‘in’ Google’s spaces, even though from a technical point of view this is not the case because we are always talking about self-employed people committed to developing their own projects. For these critics there is a difference between the space owned by the monopolist host and a co-managed one, where the peer-to-peer philosophy is prevalent. On the contrary, for others Google Campus is an ideal incubation space to facilitate business development, thus an environment with which smaller coworking projects with limited resources cannot compete.”

**Can you foresee any novelties as a response to these reservations?**

“Judging by the criticism towards this model of ownership and management of mega-platforms

and algorithms of the sharing economy of the size, for instance of, Uber, Trebor Scholz – professor of Digital Media at New York University – suggests a cooperative approach to ownership, that he calls Platform Cooperativism.

By extension, we can think of coworking spaces self-managed by workers’ cooperatives replacing the renter. It is a very interesting evolution, even if it is still work in progress, that outlines two visions: an entrepreneurial approach on the one hand and on the other, a cooperative one.”

**Is there something linking synergistically the coworking phenomenon to the circular economy, which is by the way the focus of our Renewable Matter magazine?**

“There are some analogies, both from an intangible and immaterial point of view, even if they have not been either analysed or structured yet: I am thinking about the sharing of knowledge that takes place within coworking and circular approaches, obviously not in the physical-environmental sense of the circular economy.”

**We could define it as a sort of immaterial circularity**

“The coworking logic is based on the search and the opportunity to come into contact with other professionals. The implicit availability to share expertise characterizing being part of a coworking community is based on the idea that if today I cooperate with Tom, tomorrow Tom will help me. From this point of view it creates circular dynamics of immaterial resources which are both ethical and instrumental because they are inspired by the aim of finding possible opportunities for our own professional growth.”●

*Freelance*, free download of Alessandro Gandini’s ebook:  
[www.doppiozero.com/libro/freelance](http://www.doppiozero.com/libro/freelance)