

FIELD REPORT

Vacuums with Meaning: The Observation of Vacuity in Coworking Spaces

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Abstract

This field report analyzes the unexpected challenges faced during participant observation in coworking spaces and how these challenges required a process of trial and error to be understood. Between 2018 and 2022, I studied the urban transformation of the Poblenou district of Barcelona, Spain. During my ethnographic observations, the coworking spaces did not align with the criteria of collaboration and social density established by previous research. This finding prompted methodological reflections on the role of ethnography, emphasizing the need to acknowledge that ethnographic research does not follow a standard formula, but rather requires continuous adaptation and interest in the evolving empirical reality.

Keywords

Ethnography, Coworking spaces, Fieldwork, Qualitative methods, Barcelona.

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Between 2018 and 2022, I studied the urban transformation of the Poblenou district of Barcelona, Spain. This former industrial area of the city was affected by the 22@ urban plan, which aimed to convert the land into technological offices following the narrative of the construction of a Catalan Silicon Valley. I was mainly interested in coworking spaces, since they were a central feature of the newly transformed area and were accessible in terms of observation. However, I failed to find the social life promised in both the academic debate of the time and the real estate propaganda. As a result, I was faced with unexpected vacuums in the field, which required a process of trial and error to address, acknowledge, and understand them as parts of the social mechanism that comprised these institutions.

Two questions accompanied me throughout the entire research process: Can social vacuums be observed? How should they be approached from an ethnographic perspective? This field report highlights the difficulties that I experienced with these unexpected vacuums during my participant observation in coworking spaces. The lack of informants and the vibrant social life promoted by the advertising of these spaces led to a process of trial and error in order for me to understand my position as an ethnographer and how I should approach these institutions. After an initial period of frustration, during which I felt that I had made a mistake, I adopted an open attitude towards uncertainty, which enabled me to manage my initial expectations and weigh them up against the reality analyzed.

Recently graduated, with a notebook in hand, I toured the new offices in Poblenou, Barcelona's former industrial district, to understand the social practices and cultural elements that were developing among the tech professionals attracted to this area of the city. For background information, I looked to Karen Ho's (2012) revealing study about the application of ethnography to understand the financialization of the American economy on Wall Street. Also, the Swedish record of "globalization at work" (Hannerz 1996; Mörck and Casabella 1994; Garsten 1991) was inspiring when I examined the Barcelona tech sector. In the 1990s, this anthropological research program was especially sensitive to the emergence of transnational connections through professional life, with studies ably describing the globetrotting lifestyles of the transnational business elite (see, for instance, Hannerz 1996).

With these prior experiences, I carried out observations in five coworking spaces for a monthly fee that ranged between €160 and €240. This enabled me to be near the new users of the entire space undergoing transformation after the demolition of industrial factories and the construction of new office blocks. Digital nomads, international entrepreneurs, and local programmers tended to share offices or, in the most precarious situations, even a desk. My approach was to become just another coworker and then later make clear that I was a researcher.

However, some of the coworking spaces immediately presented new and unexpected problems. While most pioneering authors writing about coworking spaces (Waters-Lynch et al. 2016; Merkel 2015; Gandini 2015) have found a frenetic social reality in these spaces, this was not reflected in my observations, as I shall soon describe in more detail with the case of the international coworking space, Urbano. Coworking spaces have been defined in theory as social institutions closely linked to the precariousness of work, incorporating elements of community management to facilitate interactions and foster a feeling of common purpose among the members (Bennis and Orel 2024). Among the main features of the practices developed in these spaces, cooperation between their various members is highlighted as a means of achieving common goals or joint projects (Yacoub and Haeffliger 2024; Orel et al. 2022). These perspectives indicate the importance of socialization of knowledge, professional contacts, and workplace skills within coworking spaces. The explanation given for the gregariousness of these spaces is that the horizontal disorganization of companies and a new, unregulated relationship with work have boosted the emergence of independent professionals seeking a physical place in the new offer for an office, but also a set of resources to “not be alone” (Spinuzzi 2012; De Guzmán and Tang 2011) and, thus, be able to access more key contacts in the form of suppliers, collaborators, and clients.

The first case study that I undertook was at Urbano, one of the three new large coworking spaces built in the area with an international presence. Comprised of twin towers over six floors, the building housed a space illuminated by a huge picture window on which several messages had been pasted: “Welcome home, oops we meant work.” This and other signs self-referenced the space as a place for coworking. However, this was not exactly true because the side rooms contained conventional offices whose occupants were subcontracted by large corporations. Moreover, in the central open space dedicated to coworking, there were only three coworkers. Despite that, the space was physically laid out according to the latest sector trend: an area of couches and wooden bookshelves leading into a large bar, a designer table tennis table set up to be used as a desk, and several meeting rooms named after famous scientists. Vega, the director of the space, had made it clear that it was the best coworking space in Barcelona in terms of infrastructure, but that it had not overcome its greatest problem: It had been open for a year, but had failed to create a genuine “community.” Beyond the bar area, the coworking space was empty. On the instructions of the director, several sales representatives from the real estate agency were seated there looking for all the world like film extras.

That confused me. I had organized a set of observation strategies, semi-structured interviews, and ways of taking field records of the space (such as informant mapping) to determine the rhythms and daily work

dynamics of the coworkers. Everything was ready for the observation – a large modern coworking space and my most considered techniques – except for the informants. Vega attributed Urbano’s low level of occupation to a lack of “coworker culture” in Barcelona, which did exist in other cities like Amsterdam, Urbano’s original headquarters. At that moment, my frustration over the lack of informants prevented me from realizing that the very question of coworking spaces was right before my eyes and that it was equally, or more, interesting than my initial preconceptions. Vega presented an interplay of otherness between different countries, establishing a symbolic international exchange in which multiple meanings intertwine. Blinded by the lack of informants, I continued to explore Vega’s perspectives. She was irritated by the failure of the dynamism strategies and by the fact that the city’s coworkers did not come and participate in the events organized. Vega’s first option was to counteract the lack of activity by planning with her team an extensive program copied from other coworking spaces. For example, they used “incentives” to attend by offering free activities such as healthy smoothie workshops and networking sessions that included free food. But the cheese and wine afterworks ended as soon as the corporate office workers grew tired of the gifts, as did the mindfulness and yoga activities once the initial free sessions were over.

As a novice ethnographer, I did not immediately problematize the reality encountered at the coworking spaces in terms of social theorization, nor did I take advantage to identify the novel characteristics presented by that space in relation to other ethnographically observed coworking spaces. Instead, I believed that the observations at Urbano would lead to “anti-ethnography,” which made me doubt my ability as an ethnographer. While gathering the scant results, I became rather depressed. I wondered whether I was observing these places “well,” given that the social reality that I encountered was very different from what was described academically. I did not find informants in these spaces and, if they existed, the collaboration and work solidarity observed by other ethnographers did not reflect my observations. My first question was: Am I doing ethnography well? This led to a second and much more worrying question: Was I a bad ethnographer? Only after profound reflection encouraged by the goodwill of my thesis supervisors was I able to view the vacuums that existed at Urbano as an opportunity to redirect my despair – at the hours spent observing silences, the inertness of the working space, and the empty desks – towards Vega and her team’s attempts to revitalize the empty coworking space.

The concerns that I experienced during this first case study have gradually been incorporated into the academic debate. Research studies have progressively examined how large corporations use coworking as a strategy to increase productivity and reduce costs. For Alessandro Gandini and Alberto Cossu (2021), this is related to resilient coworking

spaces becoming neo-corporate spaces. The first type refers to coworking spaces that, despite adopting flexible working, reject individualist ideology. Instead, they focus on establishing close ties to the geographical surroundings, prioritizing the quality of social relations, and promoting genuinely community-based interactions. They focus on balancing economic sustainability and social impact. The second type, the neo-corporate model, represents a form of flexible working led by large global franchises like Urbano. These spaces have standardized coworking practice by focusing on the profitability of real estate. By using the term “community” as a marketing tool, they promote an entrepreneurial ethos based on competition (Bandinelli 2020).

The observations at Urbano made more sense the more I distanced myself from the field and assimilated what had happened. My initial conclusions when beginning to write, after completing the fieldwork, indicated that this case study would not be very interesting for my ethnography. However, I was mistaken. Urbano was extremely interesting as a place to test and fail in my observation strategies. And it became even more fascinating in analytical terms because of its explanatory potential. Urbano was profiled as part of a taxonomy of neo-corporate coworking spaces with a presence in Barcelona (but with international franchises) in which certain dynamics were repeated: low density of coworkers, significant promotion of the notion of community, and ongoing initiatives by the managers to dynamize the space.

Despite not having obtained data about the social and cultural dynamics of the coworkers as I had initially intended, I did gather data of another kind, albeit equally significant. The attempts by director Vega and her team to create an atmosphere at the coworking space revealed a pattern that was repeated in another neo-corporate shared workspace. From then on, I was able to draw comparisons. At Urbano, managerial tasks were based on giving the impression that coworking existed using manipulation strategies which invited the observer to believe that experiences were shared collectively. Photos, celebrations, and post-its all formed part of an artificial décor that misled the visitor by creating the illusion that the space was occupied by a community. Every nook and cranny were adorned with highly creative coworker motifs, ranging from positive messages to drawings of lightbulbs, symbolizing the ideas that were sparked there. The theming of the space was achieved with elements of a global media culture that took important occasions, figures, and globalized events as a touchstone.

A fine example is the celebration of the Oscars for which the managers arranged a sweepstake of all potential Oscar winners. However, most of the participants (and winners) in the competition were the sales representatives at Urbano. This shows that the coworking space had become a powerful mark of distinction in real estate and, as in an advertisement, the scenography suggested to the observer that the space

existed through a set of post-its, gadgets like table football that I never saw used, and apparently spontaneous pieces of graffiti. The function of all these symbols was to support management discourse and its simulation strategy: to feign the existence of a kind of social life based on entrepreneurial collaboration and shared work conduct. Urbano was a complex symbolic artefact in which a set of dispersed symbols distorted the environment to conceal anomie and the lack of structured relationships within the space.

Experiencing the process of trial and error was the only way for me to understand the potentialities of deploying the ethnographic method in neo-corporate coworking spaces like Urbano. Doubt and inquiry are inherent to the ethnographic undertaking, which is often applied hesitantly because of trial and error. Interpretations can stretch over long periods if the true meanings are to be captured, and hurried conclusions, such as my initial mistake of conceiving of Urbano as a place of little interest, are to be avoided. In fact, the coworking space contained a wealth of information that contrasted with the data that I gathered every day: a note about a brief contact with a coworker who would disappear the next day, a post-it put up by one of the sales representatives, and the description of the arrival of a new ping pong table. These changes in the evaluation of my observations have led me to reflect on the role of triangulation as a tool in fieldwork. In studies on coworking spaces, I understood that a comprehensive understanding of the observed events had to be combined with other case studies that would expand the ethnography.

Addressing these gaps during fieldwork in coworking spaces as opportunities for observation and ethnographic reflection also presents an interesting challenge for the practice of ethnography. Remaining alert in an environment where informants are scarce and tend to dedicate most of their time to individual work, and where interactions and conversations are limited, presents a challenge to the ethnographer – particularly because of the discord between the rhetoric about collaboration and social effervescence and an isolated and monotonous reality. In my case, I arrived in the field conditioned by my inexperience in ethnography and influenced by a mistaken perspective of ethnography as a kind of mystical ritual passage, a Herculean labor that would enable me to ascend to a new category of thinking. It is vital to recognize the nature of ethnography as a human activity and the importance of approaching it meticulously and considerately. Returning to classics of the subgenre of “fieldwork accounts,” for instance by Paul Rabinow (1977), was a step forward in those moments of weakness and doubt. Understanding my specific position as an ethnographer within the fabric of intersubjective relations enabled me to reflect on my own position and role in the complexity of events occurring in the field. In this process, Malinowski’s ruminations on dealing with frustration over the lack of results and even

the impulse to escape from whatever is being done were resounding. Plunging into the ambiguity inherent in the process of trial and error, a fundamental element in any ethnographic undertaking, requires acknowledging the artisanal nature of all qualitative methods, without compromising rigor or denying the valuable lessons learnt through error.

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