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**To cite this article:** Stefania Fiorentino (18 Jun 2024): Are shared workspaces a new form of social infrastructure?, Planning Practice & Research, DOI: [10.1080/02697459.2024.2367291](https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2024.2367291)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2024.2367291>



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Published online: 18 Jun 2024.



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## Are shared workspaces a new form of social infrastructure?

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the delivery of shared workspaces as a new type of social infrastructure. Planning tools for the delivery and longer-term maintenance of these spaces are still on trial. We examine a selection of cases in Europe highlighting the social value generated and the delivery mechanisms used. In both cases, shared workspaces can deliver social infrastructure benefits if they are embedded within a wider strategic regenerative vision based on the needs of local communities but combining public and private sector efforts. The label of 'social infrastructure' is crucial to achieve this policy and practice shift.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 May 2023  
Accepted 7 June 2024

### KEYWORDS


Social infrastructure;  
coworking space; social  
value; public-private  
partnerships

## Introduction

Greater global challenges and new digital technologies are creating new disruptions and changing the way we interact with each other. We live in an era shaped by increasing remote working and professional isolation. The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered the unequal impacts of and accessibility to remote working. The polarization between urban and rural peripheries has also been exposed, with new emerging requirements and needs for workspaces and social services. In this context, the debates around social infrastructure have therefore seen a renewed interest among scholars and policymakers.

In this article, we explore the potential held by some co-working spaces of acting as social infrastructure, enabling the creation of social and professional networks for small independent businesses and strengthening social capital at the neighbourhood level. At present, the policies and practices used to deliver publicly supported shared workspaces and those used for social infrastructure are still quite separated and fuzzy. As demonstrated by the case of London, this approach hampers the regenerative potential that shared workspaces can acquire and the social benefits that could be delivered through them.

Not all co-working spaces can be considered as social infrastructure, there is a great variability in their features and business models, and by now many of these spaces just have a commercial dedication. Within this article, we therefore, prefer to adopt the umbrella term of 'shared workspaces' as we are not interested in the details of their business model, the logistics nor the set-up of the spaces but instead in the mechanisms used to unlock their social benefits, the role played by the public sector, and the

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interaction between different actors and stakeholders in the process. The adopted terminology – shared workspaces – refers to all co-working-inspired working facilities and similar spaces that target multiple users with an easy-in/easy-out policy, providing all fit-outs, and a series of additional events, training and/or incubation services.

The next section reviews the literature on social infrastructure, highlighting its regenerative benefits and the emerging need for new types of social infrastructure. We then review relevant literature on shared workspaces, with regards to the social dimension of these spaces that is becoming even more relevant due to the emerging post-pandemic working patterns. Through these two sections, we disentangle the crossovers between these two bodies of literature.

The second part of the article discusses a selection of case studies of shared workspaces in different European cities (Milan, Rome, Brussels, Lisbon, and London) that could be considered as a new type of social infrastructure. We disentangle the social outputs generated by these existing spaces, the planning strategies and the delivery mechanisms used, and at each time we highlight the required interaction between local communities, public and private sectors. We use the case of London to demonstrate why it is important to label such shared workspaces as ‘social infrastructure’. We conclude by highlighting key recommendations for the delivery of shared workspaces functioning as social infrastructures.

## Why do we need social infrastructure and what for?

The concept of social infrastructure has risen to fame following the seminal work and updated definition provided by Klinenberg (2018) as the physical environment that allows social capital and networks to be built. Typical examples in cities could be public spaces like libraries and schools, or outdoor areas like playgrounds. Those are places where ‘*strangers can meet and mix with others with whom they share their neighbourhoods and cities*’ (Latham & Layton, 2019, p. 2). While building social bonds, users register benefits for their well-being; in turn the vibrancy and liveability of the local area is also improved. Social infrastructure are very important elements in supporting local economic development and the socio-economic resilience of places, by contrasting socio-economic segregation, stagnation and feelings of isolation or exclusion.

When social infrastructure is robust, it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbours; when degraded, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves. (Klinenberg, 2018, p. 17)

Swanson (1992) considers three main ingredients for a social infrastructure to work: public participation and the involvement of local governments, human resources, and the presence of a social network of some sort (i.e. people belonging to a community and sharing interests). Nowadays, a study by The British Academy (2023), has highlighted the increasing role of the private sector especially concerning longer-term maintenance costs.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and with the rise of new digital technologies like AI, our daily working patterns and social interactions are evolving, with new types of spaces starting to be considered as new forms of social infrastructure. Notwithstanding the initial conceptual definition, the usual classification of spaces is up for discussion. For example, Layton and Latham (2022) classify as social infrastructure all

those spaces generating social value that ‘create affordances for – and make available – a range of essential services’ (p. 758) for local communities, including commercial spaces like gyms, cafes, pizzerias, or laundrettes. Some commercial spaces are nurturing social networks and feelings of place attachment, they are an integral part of our urban fabrics, and as such public agencies should protect them. The same applies to selected cultural venues – like cinemas or art galleries – that are conducive to another form of social value. In other words, the identification of social infrastructure is expanding beyond the usual lifelong social services, like school and healthcare, to include any services contributing to local well-being, public health, and resilience (Davern *et al.*, 2017). As such, social infrastructure is also starting to be considered crucial for any long-term regeneration strategy (Slade *et al.*, 2021).

However, interest in social infrastructure has also been renewed interest in connection to the growing literature on ‘left-behind’ places. In peripheral and economically declining areas, the loss of place identity has often been correlated with processes of population shrinkage and the erosion of social capital imposing the duty of rebuilding the broken social ties – or networks – on regeneration strategies (Sha *et al.*, 2024). Scholars have also emphasised a correlation between a slow but steady erosion of social infrastructure and the widening of regional inequality gaps (Tomaney & Pike, 2020; Tomaney *et al.*, 2023). When places lack adequate social infrastructure, the local social tissue becomes fragmented at the expense of the whole local economy. Burlina and Rodriguez-Pose (2023) found that workers experiencing loneliness or lack of social interactions were more likely to be in regions registering slower or negative economic growth. Hence, policy makers should consider the role of social infrastructure in policy frameworks and strategies to tackle ‘left-behind’ places. MacKinnon *et al.* (2022) argues it would help tackling the general sense of neglect experienced in some of these declining places. Fiorentino (2023) looked at public-led shared workspaces fostering the activation of entrepreneurial social infrastructure (Butler Flora & Flora, 1993) in a selection of ‘left-behind’ locations, pointing to the importance of considering ‘intangible factors’ like social outputs when planning for regeneration strategies.

The presence of strong social infrastructures is an essential element in successful regeneration strategies, acting as a tool for community cohesion, mitigating inequalities and fighting economic stagnation. In the next section, we build on the need to update the list of spaces acting as social infrastructure. Following Layton and Latham (2022), we consider the role of the contemporary shared workspaces. We aim at disentangling the situations by which they can be considered as social infrastructure, being activators of ‘contact, mutual support and collaboration’ among the local community of professionals (Klinenberg, 2018).

### **When shared workspaces are a social infrastructure, they activate social networks and deliver new social value**

Some contemporary examples of shared workspaces can be considered as a form of social infrastructure, as they deliver ‘affordance for services’ while holding important ‘social powers’ (Layton & Latham, 2022, p. 758) and often benefitting from different kinds of public support (Swanson, 1992). The literature on co-working spaces emerged a decade ago due to rising levels of freelancing jobs, where people needed

ways to cut costs while fighting isolation and allowing for a better work/life separation (Spinuzzi, 2012). By now a stream of well-known literature has disentangled the social benefits and the positive externalities generated within such spaces (Merkel, 2015; Brown, 2017).

A further ‘entrepreneurialisation’ of labour and the consequent loss of traditional social securities in jobs (Ravenelle, 2017) have also stimulated the need for a set of ‘soft’ infrastructure facilitating the creation of networks and supporting the start-up phase as well as the survival of new and small businesses. Different types of co-working spaces have come to fill this gap (Fiorentino, 2019). Literature on business intermediaries refers to formal and informal infrastructure – made up of various associations of professionals – ensuring the circulation of ideas and opportunities, the organisation of training and skills development programmes, and the initiation of actions for community development and the lobbying for rights (Fiorentino, 2019). Butler Flora and Flora (1993) talked about ‘entrepreneurial social infrastructure’ while referring to the role performed by certain amenities in retaining local talents and supporting the resilience of local businesses. These points are particularly relevant in peripheral locations that are suffering from socio-economic decline. We have therefore experienced a diversification of the typologies of shared workspaces on the market with a gradual offer of additional services and a wide variety of connotations (Akhavan, 2021).

The COVID-19 emergency has reopened the debate on the future of work due to a potential increase in remote working patterns (Fiorentino et al., 2022). However, both the impacts of and access to remote working are highly unequal (Reuschke & Felstead, 2020). Scholars have started investigating the role of shared workspaces in this shifting situation (Mossa, 2020) and identifying potentially different scenarios between central and peripheral locations (Mariotti, Di Marino, *et al.*, 2021). Peripheral and rural areas are the ones that could benefit the most from the presence of shared workspaces (Mariotti, Akhavan, *et al.*, 2021) especially in terms of creating new employment opportunities at the local scale (Fiorentino, 2023). Here, new shared workspaces with the associated set of services and facilities could improve workers’ well-being, encouraging the re-use of derelict and empty spaces and therefore improving the wider socio-economic conditions at the local scale. This way, peripheral geographies could seize the post-pandemic opportunities coming from hybrid working patterns and relocations, enriching the local workforce with shared workspaces becoming part of the local offer of amenities.

The social engagement of the space, the activation of social networks and the delivery of social value are essential requirements for shared workspaces to be considered as social infrastructure. Often, this social purpose is vehiculated by the participation of the public sector (cf. Swanson, 1992).

Planning tools and mechanisms for the delivery and operation of new social infrastructure like shared workspaces are still on trial. For traditional ‘hard’ social infrastructure like schools, hospitals, or even prisons, the use of different types of public-private partnerships is not new (Jefferies & McGeorge, 2009). Whereas partnerships for the delivery of ‘softer’ ones like shared workspaces are less straightforward. They require a strategic vision grounded on a deeper understanding of the local needs, one that is conscious of current businesses and skills, and that sets the required socio-economic improvements based on filling gaps and shortages while enhancing the existing local

opportunities. Both the strategic guidelines issued by the public and the participation of private stakeholders are being overlooked in current studies.

The next section reviews some existing cases of shared workspaces that have generated positive ‘social’ externalities in the surrounding neighbourhoods (Romero & Pela, 2023). All have been set up with different forms of public support mechanisms. We discuss the type of public involvement, the planning tools, and the delivery mechanisms that were used to activate the social infrastructure role.

## **Different types of cooperation between the public and private sectors to deliver new social infrastructure. Lessons learnt from selected shared workspaces in European cities**

### ***Existing shared workspaces that work as social infrastructure***

This section reviews some European examples that display the above-mentioned elements of social infrastructure: facilitating social networks and collaboration, enabling social value creation and further benefits in the surrounding neighbourhood, and being delivered under the guide and following the needs of local communities. Examples from the literature show that many existing co-working spaces have acted as a local catalyst for social and economic regeneration in many European cities (Fiorentino, 2019; Akhavan, 2021). But only some spaces are functioning to improve the local social fabric and as enablers of social activities (cf. Klinenberg, 2018). All spaces discussed in this section are aimed at contributing to reach designated societal benefits and strategic improvements at the scale of the neighbourhood.<sup>1</sup> Once delivered, they were effectively acting as social infrastructure, improving the local living conditions.

The shared workspaces presented in this section have been selected as examples that have helped revitalise socially deprived areas of cities, by re-using a series of derelict buildings and creating new opportunities for local employment. The selection of spaces presented in this and the next section have been selected from a series of research projects on co-working spaces undertaken in the past five years (of which results have been published in Fiorentino, 2019, 2023) and within various workshops as a country representative member for a COST Action on ‘New Working Spaces’ (CA18214<sup>2</sup>) and as volunteer for the JustSPACE network drafting a post-Covid recovery plan for London (JustSpace, 2022).

The first example, BASE – in Navigli, an inner peripheral and formerly industrial area of Milan, Italy – is a shared workspace that occupies a former industrial site dedicated to the production of trains and locomotives. The municipality of Milan procured a private provider to refurbish the area and set up a co-working space with some specific requirements, and later facilitated its occupation. The conversion of the site aimed at creating new local employment opportunities and the regeneration of the surrounding urban fabric by unlocking further employment and development sites. Other international firms like Deloitte have now settled in the area, alongside a start-up incubator owned by one of the most important Italian banks and a museum institute of La Scala (the opera theatre of Milan) with opportunities for collaborations with local creative industries. All factors contribute to new employment opportunities and newly established social ties in the neighbourhood.

In Rome, similar mechanisms have allowed for the re-use of several derelict public premises like a market hall and a former community centre, both granted to private users in exchange for social services. In the first case, the operator committed to providing some free spaces and training to unemployed people (Millepiani co-working in Garbatella a former working-class peripheral area of Rome, Italy). In the second case, an abandoned community hall below a social housing estate, that was encouraging antisocial behaviours, was turned into a co-working space with an incorporated nursery (L'Alveare, in Centocelle a peripheral and previously severely deprived area of Rome – now closed). The local council mediated the lease negotiations allowing for some fiscal incentives, seeing the opportunity to improve the social fabric of the area while also enlarging the locally insufficient supply of nursery spaces.

By rescuing and re-using a selection of different derelict sites, these shared workspaces contributed to changing the aesthetics of the place, but most of all they allowed for the creation of new social networks. They vehiculated the creation of a sense of belonging and place attachment through the delivery of a series of services that were really needed at the local scale.

Thorough strategic planning at the local scale is also needed as the local scale benefits of new social infrastructure are likely to be perceived in a slower and longer-term horizon. Another interesting example is the gradual transformation of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, a peripheral district in the Brussels region not too far from the city centre, in Belgium. The area is affected by severe social inequalities and deemed by the media as a 'breeding ground for terror' by the Washington Post in 2016,<sup>3</sup> following rounds of terror attacks shaking Europe. It is the poorest of Belgium's 589 districts characterised by an 18.9% unemployment rate among people aged 18–64 in 2015 (peaking at 27% for young aged 15 to 29), now decreased to 15.1% in 2021, 63% of which are long-term unemployed (with 11% being the regional average) (BISA, 2024). Predominantly housing migrant communities, the area suffered from a lack of educational opportunities and social segregation resulting in violence, high crime rates and large numbers of reported anti-social behaviours. Since 2015, the area has seen a series of new openings, facilitated by the local planning authority securing some dedicated EU funding. The first opening was MolenGeek a shared computer-coding centre, partly sponsored by Google, set to provide new training and job prospects to the local young population and mitigate social conflicts. New openings followed that of the shared workspace: a public art gallery in a former brewery and many more local independent businesses. The establishment of this social infrastructure overturned the previously gloomy reputation of the area and contributed to changing the highly deprived character of the area by supporting other openings.

In all cities, the mix of uses planned for the workspace was designed to support the surrounding areas and to make sure that social infrastructure effects would be activated. It was never just about delivering the physical workspaces, but all interventions were led by intangible social factors. The social value generated by these initiatives was the result of a specific assessment of the local needs that wisely paired up other social services to the sheer desk rental and workspace provision.

The public sector helped the realisation of the project in different ways at each example, but in all cases, the decision over what was needed in that specific space came from understanding and accommodating some specific local needs. So, the engagement

of local authorities is crucial in the delivery of shared workspaces as social infrastructure (Swanson, 1992), but mostly in terms of gaining a deep understanding of the places in which those are needed and then only at a second stage for the facilitation of financing mechanisms, resourcing, and cost mitigations.

### ***Delivery mechanisms and the role of partnerships between public and private sectors***

The role of the private sector has so far been overlooked in the literature on social infrastructure. All the analysed shared workspaces were delivered under a public sector lead but many also benefitted from the partnership with private sector operators and sponsors. This cooperation helped to achieve the desired outcomes and activate the social infrastructure benefits. Public actors were crucial to delivering a local vision and long-term strategy, setting the conditions of the partnership and of the operation of and services attached to the shared workspaces. Private actors helped mobilise a wider share of funding and enlarge employment opportunities.

In Milan, for BASE, the municipality procured a private provider to bear the cost of the site conversion aiming at a wider regeneration strategy. The initial negotiations and the built-up clauses within the signed lease included conditions over future uses, the delivery of social services, the protection of heritage and local characters, as well as caveats on the sustainability of the construction and the materials utilised for the refurbishment. For further social spillovers, the shared workspace also needed to include spaces specifically targeting creative industries (e.g. a recording studio) and to reconnect with the new museum site of the opera theatre La Scala. The cooperation between public and private also continued after the delivery of the site. For example, in combination with regular subscriptions at the market rate, paid to the private operator, the municipality also issued vouchers to allow some eligible workers to use the space at subsidized rates for a certain amount of time. The arrival of international corporate tenants (Deloitte and the Intesa Sanpaolo incubation hub) completed the activation of the site.

A similar example, with an even more structured initial lease contract, could be seen in Lisbon, Portugal, with the Hub Criativo do Beato, which was developed in a peripheral former military site at the city fringes. In this case, the municipality managed to secure funding from the national government to transform the site into an entrepreneurial hub dedicated to creative industries. The funding was used to procure an operator to set up a start-up incubator bringing together freelancers, independent businesses, and global firms. The vision led by the municipality included concerns over the protection of the local heritage, stringent directions upon environmental sustainability, and the creation of new social networks.

Partnerships with private sector stakeholders present potential opportunities but also several threats to the very initial social purposes of the initiatives, above all that of commercial gentrification. On one side, they allow for additional social and economic spillovers. On the other side, they might act as commercial gentrifiers if the public sector does not monitor the longer-term development of the workspace in the same it usually does for other infrastructure. There can be a variety of monitoring mechanisms for the longer-term performances of social infrastructure and more research needs to be done in this field.

In the next section, we look at the case of London where the overheated real estate market is threatening the survival of small businesses and small-scale urban innovation spaces. Within a market-led planning system, the emphasis has been on ‘affordability’. Policy for the delivery of (affordable) shared workspaces and social infrastructure have both entered the local government agendas, although remaining separate. Different trials and attempts at both regulating their provision and monitoring their longer-term operation are presented below.

### **Why is the formal label of ‘social infrastructure’ needed for planning purposes? Lessons from London, UK**

In the last two decades planning policies in the UK have somehow neglected the importance of protecting workspaces and small industrial premises for small businesses, pressured by a more stringent housing crisis and austerity cuts. In prime urban locations like London, planning scholars have highlighted problems of commercial gentrification, resulting in the progressive marginalisation and displacement of small businesses (Ferm, 2016). In parallel, a market-led approach to planning with the progressive financialization of the commercial real estate sector has contributed to further eroding the remaining stock of office premises that small businesses and freelancers could afford. More recent studies have shown that big cities like London and Manchester now display a lack of industrial land and workspaces for SMEs, threatening the longer-term resilience of these firms and therefore also the innovative potential of cities (Ferm and Jones, 2017; Gunne-Jones, 2019; Centre for London, 2022).

This pressing situation and debates over workspace affordability were reflected in the London Plan (2021) by directly addressing the provision of ‘affordable workspaces’ as part of its local economic development strategy (Chapter 6 – Economy, sections E3 and E6). However, the dedicated section of the plan only considers the rental side of the issue, providing a fuzzy definition of ‘affordable workspaces’ and leaving behind the social dimension that is equally crucial. Social infrastructure is tackled separately in a different section (Chapter 5). There is no recognition of the social benefits provided by some shared workspaces (for those working in it and by regenerating the social fabric of the surrounding neighbourhoods) and therefore – like in the other European examples – there is also no real planning guidance on ways to plan for and support them.

The current public initiatives found in London to deliver shared workspaces that are effectively working as social infrastructure are therefore branded within the broader umbrella of the ‘affordable workspace’.

At present, many of the most successful examples of shared and affordable workspaces that also produce social benefits have been delivered as meanwhile spaces (i.e. spaces that are designated for re-development but can be allocated for temporary uses until development works start). For example, Woodgreen’s Blue House Yard in the London Borough (LB) of Haringey, mainly targets creative industries and artists, to uplift the profile of the area and attract new skills while the full regeneration of the neighbourhood takes place. The good reception of this temporary initiative has stimulated debate to provide more opportunities across the borough. So, the re-development of a former chocolate factory followed the same lines, converting the old industrial premise into a mix of light industrial uses, a shared workspace, and some residential units.

Similarly, in 2022 the LB of Lambeth has transformed, a former council office building (International House, 12 stories building in Brixton a multicultural area with a history of social frictions), into one of the biggest affordable office spaces in the country. The council has procured a private operator to set up and manage the space. It is again a meanwhile space, conceived for local businesses to grow ideas and to support small businesses that are affected by rising rental and utility costs, while a decision is made on a broader re-development strategy for the area.

Meanwhile uses are a tool for regeneration that ensures the activation of a sense of local community, or cultural development – before wider re-development projects take place, implementing the rise of demand for that area and often resulting in the longer term in unaffordability (Andres, 2013).

Given the success of these initiatives, the demand for these shared workspaces to become permanent is usually high. But in prime central locations of London, several factors like the high cost of land, the development pressures, and meeting the required housing targets present a challenge to their survival. PLACE Ladywell (LB of Lewisham), is one example of meanwhile space that became permanent, thanks to its prize-winning modular design conceived to host homeless, affordable housing and workspace units at cheap construction costs. Quite controversial has been the attempt to save a former school building in the LB of Camden (within the boundaries of Drummond Street Neighbourhood Forum). The building was temporarily converted into a multi-functional centre endowed with shared workspaces, community facilities, allotments, and a construction skills centre. Despite local campaigning, its survival is heavily threatened by the proximity to high-value land within the highly contested large-scale re-development associated with the new high-speed railway line (HS2) in Euston station.

The temporary nature of these initiatives is itself a threat to their survival and to achieving the longer-term benefits activated by social infrastructure becoming a local amenity and contributing to delivering that sense of place attachment and belonging that is crucial to support local communities, especially in areas that are suffering from a form of socio-economic deprivation (cf. Tomaney *et al.*, 2023).

The definition of ‘affordable workspace’ itself proves fuzzy and difficult. Following the broader guidelines published in the London Plan 2021, some more formal attempts at providing a more stable provision of shared workspaces across London saw some boroughs including requirements for affordable workspaces for SMEs in their local plans and as part of the pre-development agreements. The LB of Hackney has been a pioneer in the experimentation of affordable space delivery mechanisms. In 2015, Hackney was studying ways to cap rents for co-working spaces to contrast the rising commercial gentrification in Shoreditch (after the London Tech City policy framework), although with no apparent and formal success.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has brought the topic back to the local agendas, with a series of public-led initiatives and attempts to achieve a formal regulation. In 2020 Hackney announced the transformation of three council-owned buildings (laying vacant or derelict) into shared workspaces with possibilities for renting at affordable rates and a special discount for social enterprises, as well as the possibility of accessing local sports facilities. The initiative is dedicated to independent SMEs to be housed in Hackney Wick’s – a former industrial estate – as part of its wider regeneration strategy (see Wick Workspace programme). The spaces have a capacity

for up to 30 SMEs, prioritising those businesses that have faced eviction but want to remain in the area.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the recently adopted Local Plan 2033 for Hackney (July 2020) has introduced a soft zoning approach to tackle the issue, by creating a series of designated PIAs (Priority Industrial Area) and POAs (Priority Office Area). In a POA a capped rent applies to 10% of all major new mixed-use developments. The affordability threshold is here capped at a more reasonable rate: no more than 60% of the local market rent in perpetuity, which decreases at 40% in the Shoreditch POA (most affected by gentrification). The plan also introduces clauses to prevent re-developments displacing businesses from the area. However, none of the existing measures have specific requirements on social indicators and outputs.

Various other boroughs have shown openness in defining their affordability standards for shared workspaces. A relevant framework to note is the *Affordable Workspace Strategy* drafted in 2018 by the LB of Islington. The document notes that the borough is subject to stark income inequalities and suffering from the impact of ‘commercial gentrification’. Islington defines as affordable a space that is rented for 80% or less than its market rental value. For the first time, the strategy refers to the undoubted social value generated by those spaces that in the longer term exceeds the short-term market rental value of the same spaces. But the council is set to appoint a provider to ‘*deliver a series of well-defined social value outputs, instead of paying rent*’. Such activities might include:

business mentoring in the wider local area, apprenticeships; employability programmes for residents, especially for women, Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and residents with disabilities; prioritising local suppliers; provision of childcare; or, networking. The Social Value created will depend on the location, size and local business clusters, and will be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. The council welcomes delivery partnerships with social enterprises, charities and cooperatives. (London Borough of Islington, 2018: 3).<sup>5</sup>

This is a considerable move forward from the ‘affordable workspace’ branding towards a more efficient recognition of the social value of selected shared workspaces.

We can consider these preliminary initiatives as the first formal attempts to include shared workspaces in the provision of amenities foreseen by a local plan, as such they need to be praised. However, they present two major criticalities. First, the label of ‘affordable workspace’ is flawed: in a prime urban location like London, the provided ‘affordable’ rates might still be quite unaffordable to most small businesses and therefore might still not guarantee social benefits. The second issue refers to the formal delivery mechanisms. Here issues are similar to those encountered for the delivery of affordable housing, the provision of these spaces comes as a planning contribution that is subject to negotiations between the developer and local authorities (Section 106 agreements). So not only their provision might replace other equally needed services at the local scale, but the initial promises made in the planning permission stage might always be scraped down the line if deemed ‘unviable’. Overall, the social value component is completely overlooked and not well defined.

The cases of London discussed in this section show that delivering ‘affordable workspaces’ is not enough to fight commercial gentrification nor to ensure that the potential social benefits activated by some shared workspaces are maintained over time. To work as a social infrastructure, shared workspaces need to be part of a wider strategic plan. It is not enough to establish in a local plan that a physical workspace for SMEs should be provided. In that sense, the European cases presented in the previous section showed

much better cooperation between the private and public sectors – even if not entirely regulated – that was aimed at enhancing the local social capital.

Branding these shared workspaces as ‘social infrastructure’ would help the definition of funding mechanisms, of long-term monitoring tools as well as gearing towards the delivery of social value to any contractual conditions for the procurement of operation tasks to private stakeholders.

## Conclusions

In this article, we have reviewed different examples of shared workspaces delivered with the support of the public sector to enhance social inclusion and community-building. In some more deprived areas, these spaces have helped create new local employment opportunities, uplifting local skills, and taming social frictions and inequalities.

In cases like London, the emphasis has been more on ‘affordability’, than on delivering social value and amenities to local communities, while also contrasting issues of commercial gentrification. In other European cities, the delivery of new shared workspaces was moved more explicitly by a need for strengthening the local economy and social fabric, by producing new local employment and training opportunities. Effectively, these spaces were treated and delivered as a new form of social infrastructure.

The reviewed examples show that the key ingredient for shared workspaces acting as social infrastructure is a thoughtful strategic vision delivered by the public sector with the engagement of both the local community and the private sector.

The planning tools and mechanisms used to deliver the spaces and to ensure the activation of ‘social externalities’ - beyond the usual economic externalities – might vary but could be summarised in three main paths:

- (i) Ad hoc formal use class designations and/or requirements implemented in local plans and other planning regulations.
- (ii) Direct provision of public premises and workspaces directly managed by the public sector or building partnerships for the operation with the private sector.
- (iii) Indirect set of incentives, subsidies, and other forms of support for community-led initiatives associated with the workspaces.

Mechanisms to unlock the kick-starting capital are numerous, but then many local authorities do not have the built-in capacity to manage the workspaces over the long term. In all three scenarios above, there is a challenge in monitoring and maintaining the workspaces, that could be overcome by building successful partnerships with private stakeholders. To do so, a strategic vision setting the key requirements of the spaces is crucial to impose the right conditions over partnerships with the private sector and on contractual agreements over the long term. This process comes through a deep understanding of local needs. Local businesses and communities should be consulted on their needs; the workspaces should accommodate their needs in terms of services and network provided, and they should have the flexibility of evolving throughout time (hence the importance of maintaining and monitoring the infrastructure). Whereas, at present, the formal engagement of local authorities hardly ever goes beyond the initial set-up stage.

We have argued that framing these shared workspaces as ‘social infrastructure’ would help even further with the definition of funding mechanisms and of long-term conditions upon private/public collaborations to manage the spaces.

We also note that the story of shared workspaces is slightly different between urban and peripheral locations. In London, those shared workspaces that are functioning as social infrastructure help support the retention of small and independent businesses and act as a buffer to tame the rising socio-economic inequalities. Whereas in some smaller towns or mid-sized cities shared workspaces support the creation of social networks and the retainment of local skills and jobs.

Literature has highlighted the value of social infrastructure in left-behind places to strengthen the sense of belonging and place attachment (Tomaney *et al.*, 2023). When this infrastructure is found in shared workspaces, they acquire the potential to overturn the declining narrative and enhance local aspirations by simply providing new employment opportunities in a socially innovative manner. However, the delivery of a physical space alone is not enough, it needs to be strategically planned in association with other amenities and social services, tailored to the local needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the role of small businesses in enhancing the liveability of our neighbourhoods and the widening social inequalities that we face. Small businesses are a vital part of the social fabric of our cities and towns, and it is part of the strategic planning of an area to protect them. To support the delivery of this new type of ‘soft’ social infrastructure, local authorities need to develop a series of holistic but locally-specific measures, mindful of the necessities of local communities. Otherwise, shared workspaces are not likely to activate any additional social spillovers. Classifying local shared workspaces with a ‘social infrastructure’ status could once again help this task.

There is a greater need for social infrastructure and new creative planning tools. If strategically delivered, shared workspaces can work as social infrastructure and they have a great potential to support the revitalization of town centres and repopulate high streets, especially in peripheral geographies. Independent businesses are at the heart of our local communities and play a key role in creating strong social ties and a strong sense of belonging that can invert the lack of local aspirations and the feelings of isolation that affect many declining locations. As planners, we cannot forget about them.

## Notes

1. It needs to be noted that there is great variability in the way local authorities consider the benefits of and assess social value and the social impacts of spaces, due to the nature of these benefits being intangible, context-dependent, and subjective. However, in all the selected case studies social outcomes were at the heart of the development and set-up of the shared working spaces.
2. For further details see: <https://new-working-spaces.eu/#:~:text=The%20COST%20Action%20CA18214%20The,topic%20of%20new%20working%20spaces>.
3. The Washington Post (2016) *How two Brussels neighbourhoods became ‘a breeding ground’ for terror*, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/brussels-molenbeek-demographics/>
4. See LB of Hackney website at: <https://hackney.gov.uk/regeneration-hackney-wick>

5. See LB of Islington website at: <https://www.islington.gov.uk/business/support/affordable-workspace>; Summary of the strategy available at <https://www.islington.gov.uk/~media/sharepoint-lists/public-records/communications/information/adviceandinformation/20182019/20180920affordableworkspacestrategysummary.pdf>. Full document detailing current lease conditions (p.12): <https://democracy.islington.gov.uk/documents/s15929/>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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