At home in the workplace: The value of materiality for immaterial labor in Amsterdam

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Abstract
In the post-Fordist economy, labor processes are increasingly organized around the valuation of immaterial labor. Even though it has been argued that immaterial labor is becoming less dependent on material space, this article addresses the question how the material organization of immaterial labor creates value in work and shows that immaterial labor is not without a materiality. In fact, new, networked labor socialities are strongly materialized in space. Ethnographic material collected in a coworking space in Amsterdam shows how membership of this space brings professional value to its members by providing them with a network and status. This professional value-creation finds its expression in the creation of a very domestic materiality and familial sociality. In order to benefit from the value of this space, members are required to contribute to this intimate lifestyle and thereby perform ‘immaterial labor’, which in turn adds value to the space itself. The material space in which work is performed thus becomes valuable through its immaterial attributes. However, this value is not accessible to all: the extreme inward domesticity and inclusivity turns into an outward exclusivity.

Keywords
Aesthetics, domestic logic of justification, exclusion, immaterial labor, materiality, network sociality, privatization, space

Introduction: the spatial materiality of immaterial labor
‘The origin of the concept was twofold. We started with the idea of a flexible workplace, very service oriented. Second, we wanted to create the feeling of coming home; the feeling of a new
community, of family. What would it be like to combine a flexible workplace with a clubhouse? That was our ambition and intention: bringing those two dynamics together. Flexible working, forming a community, and sharing knowledge: all combined together in one house’.

This quote comes from a short video in which one of the founders of a coworking space in Amsterdam spells out her original ambitions for the space. She expresses two main objectives. On one hand, she aspires to establish a workplace. On the other hand, she wants to create a ‘home-like’ clubhouse, where a sense of community, ‘family’ even, is fostered. What these two ambitions share is the space in which they are joined: ‘together in one house’. Having conducted ethnographic research in this workspace, I found this focus on creating a familial togetherness and a domestic materiality to come back time and again. On an average day in ‘the house’, while some members work on their projects in the ‘living room area’, others attend the book club or work in the communal garden, while others are getting an in-house haircut. All of this occurs in a space that is carefully designed to create a ‘domestic feel’, an ambience that the presence of soft couches, fridges stuffed with beer and a table tennis table indeed evokes. This space reflects a more general development in which the boundaries between the traditional notion of the professional ‘workplace’ and the private ‘home’ seem to fade: ‘from a design perspective, we could say urban and transitional landscapes are turned into living rooms and offices or rather living-room-office-hybrids’ (Liegl, 2014: 166).

New workplaces such as coworking spaces are increasingly being established in urban areas in the Netherlands (van der Meer, 2017) and in cities globally. Such spaces accommodate flexible, mobile workers, often working on a freelance basis, whose labor processes are increasingly organized around a post-Fordist form of work that Maurizio Lazzarato coined ‘immaterial labor’ (1997). In contrast to the capacities valued in the previous Fordist production of material commodities, the productive activities required and valued in immaterial labor increasingly depend on workers’ mobilization of their personal subjectivities. In such a post-Fordist organization of work, ‘the entire person, with their knowledge and their affects, becomes part of the capitalist production process’ (Lorey, 2015: 83).

In this new notion of work, changes have thus occurred in how one’s value as a worker is determined. Interesting to explore is the question of how workers acquire such value and how these valuation processes are organized in socialities and space. Although some have argued that immaterial labor may result in the ‘deterritorilization’ of labor, labor losing its material body, the valuation of immaterial labor may in fact find a material translation in new workplaces: ‘as workers become increasingly mobile, this emphasizes the importance of studying the role which place and space have for work’ (Brown and O’Hara, 2003: 1585). Of particular interest here is the value of the increasingly popular coworking spaces. Workers often pay a considerable financial fee to work in these spaces, even when their independent and flexible organization of labor does not require them to work in a set space. What makes this fee worthwhile? In other words, what is the value of working in such a space?

This article brings together the notions of the valuation of post-Fordist immaterial labor and the spatial materialization of such value-creation. Drawing on ethnographic material collected in a coworking space in Amsterdam, this study aims to answer the
question: how does the spatial organization of immaterial labor in a coworking space in Amsterdam create value in work?

Sociality and space in post-Fordist labor

Transformations in late 20th-century capitalism have resulted in new ways work is organized in a ‘flexible regime of accumulation’ (Harvey, 1989). Lazzarato (1997) coined this new organization of labor ‘immaterial labor’ and described it as ‘the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’. In this ‘brave new world of work’ (Beck, 2000), both the productive activities and the product of work have changed considerably, and ‘the worker’s personality and subjectivity have to be made susceptible to organization and command. It is around immateriality [emphasis added] that the quality and quantity of labor are organized’ (Lazzarato, 1997: 133).

This new organization of labor is naturally also accompanied by new social arrangements of work. Although (immaterial) workers are increasingly self-employed, working on a freelance basis, this work is often far from individualistic. The productive activities that characterize immaterial labor revolve around the skill of networking, as ‘working practices become increasingly networking practices’ (Wittel, 2001: 53). Wittel (2001) coined this new form of work sociality the ‘network sociality’. In a labor market in which the long-term, secure career paths in hierarchical workplaces are replaced by a mobile, project-based, informal work culture, accessing and managing social networks has become increasingly valuable in securing work (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006; McRobbie, 2015; Pratt, 2000; Wittel, 2001).

Although some have suggested that the increasing flexibilization and ‘immaterialization’ of labor has resulted in a ‘decorporealisation’ of work, implying that work is losing its material ‘body’ or connection to things and spaces, many scholars found no evidence of such a ‘death of geography’ (Pratt, 2002; Pratt et al., 2007).

Drawing on Doreen Massey’s (1994) understanding of the inherent interdependence between space and social relations, as ‘the spatial is social relations ‘stretched out’’ (p. 2), studying the spatiality of labor might help to understand (the value of) its social dynamics. Rather than a view of space and place as bounded, Massey (1994) argued that space is inherently dynamic and grounded in power relations, as are socialities: ‘since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification’ (p. 3). Material space both reflects and constitutes social dynamics and thus forms an interesting point of analysis to reflect on the value of social relations such as post-Fordist (network) socialities. Specifically, it may help us understand how new work socialities are imbued with meaning and how they may endow workers with value in their work.

The increasing popularity of ‘coworking spaces’ illustrates how flexible, mobile workers working on immaterial labor spatially organize themselves within materialized socialities. Coworking spaces are workplaces shared by different individuals and businesses or organizations, with digital technologies facilitating this ‘working apart together’ (Richardson, 2017). Not only do such spaces facilitate flexible working, they can also provide workers with a network that can be crucial to them professionally: an important
aspect that attracts people to such spaces is the sociability and presence of others (Brown and O’Hara, 2003; Liegl, 2014). Although coworking spaces are initially intended as workplaces, they often cultivate an informality that stimulates the place to be used for activities not traditionally associated with work. Some scholars have argued that such new spatial organization of work has resulted in an increasing blur between the workplace and the home, or productive labor and private life: ‘workplaces and play places blur in a haze of alcohol and stewed coffee’ (Standing, 2011: 203).

The post-Fordist organization of work is thus characterized by the production of immaterialities, changing also the bases on which the value of work is determined. Within this new conception of labor the forming of socialities or networks is of important value. The way these socialities are translated into a spatial materiality in new spaces of work is of concern here. Particularly, this article focuses on the way the materiality of these socialities enhances value in work. The empirical analysis of this article will first address the members working in the space: who has access to this space and what do these individuals consider the value of membership? Second, the expression of this value-creation is explored: how is value constructed within this space?

Case and methods: ethnography of a coworking space

This article draws on an ethnographic case study of a coworking space located in the center of Amsterdam. It is a strategic case for studying the increasing popularity of an industry of new workplaces that aims to bring people together to ‘co-work’ and connect (van der Meer, 2017). Paid membership is required to gain access to the workspace, which makes membership naturally exclusive. Moreover, paid membership is not accessible to all: applicants are required to go through a selection process that selects members on the basis of their ‘creative and social aspirations’. There are different memberships, ranging from having access to the space 24/7 (for a monthly fee of €450 for a ‘fixed desk’ and €350 for a ‘flex desk’) to ‘social’ memberships that provide access to the network more than to the physical workspace (for a yearly fee of €350). These costly memberships then provide members—besides physical access to the space—with invitations to ‘members-only events’, participation in ‘a network of innovators’ and access to the use of facilities such as meeting rooms (which can be rented at extra cost), printers and personal lockers. The revenue of the membership fees as well as the fees for the occasional renting out of the space to external parties makes the organization profitable. On the ground floor of the building, a well-known restaurant is located that is open to the public. This is where many members eat during lunchtime, as there is a set daily menu especially cooked for members.

Members of the self-proclaimed ‘community’ work in a broad range of professions that could be coined under the umbrella term of ‘immaterial labor’. For example, members work in the fields of social design, advertising, research and consultancy. Most have a higher education degree. By the time I was conducting my research the space housed around 160 members, both employees of organizations and freelancers, with some working in the space permanently and some working or attending events there only occasionally.
Methods and data

The ethnographic data for this study was collected during 3 months in the spring of 2017. Throughout this period of fieldwork, I was particularly interested in the valuation of the materiality of the space and the way it reflected and constituted the value of social relations in work. Willis and Trondman (2000) described the ethnographic method as ‘the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events’ (pp. 5–6). Ethnography suited this study well, as the space gave a rather bounded character to the ‘community’ and my ‘witness-cum-recording’ enabled me to reflect on the space in its daily use. The research was conducted through participant observation complemented by 11 semi-structured interviews with members and staff. The participant observation consisted of my presence in the space on average 3 days a week for 3 months. I worked in the space like all other members, usually sitting in the spaces meant for flexible working. I had lunch with other members in the restaurant on the ground floor of the building and attended many of the events organized, such as the Friday out of office evenings and the Monday morning lectures. Moreover, I draw on extensive documentation material such as blog entries, websites and documents such as the original business plan and the results of two surveys conducted by staff among the members.

As I had previously worked for one of the two larger organizations located in the space, I was already familiar with the space, as well as with some of the members and staff. I thus entered the field as a ‘familiar face’, which made it easier to connect with people and understand the ‘community culture’. The level of trust I had already developed with the manager in particular provided me with access easily. I was granted access for my 3 months of research without financial charge. However, there were some immaterial conditions attached to my access: the manager asked me to occasionally share with her my observations on the progress of the ‘community building’ within the space and to advise her on the potential for a stronger community. In addition, she pushed me to be an ‘active member’ by frequently attending ‘community events’ and contributing to their organization.

Naturally, the study of one workplace draws on detailed descriptions of workplace evaluations and practices and does not provide representative data for a broader understanding of the spatial arrangement of new work. Therefore, this study functions as an explorative case study into the materiality of immaterial labor.

Membership and value

In a post-Fordist labor market characterized by immaterial labor, membership of a coworking space may benefit workers professionally. But how? Many people working in the coworking space studied here, and coworking spaces more generally, are mobile and self-employed workers who do not have (many) co-workers working for the same company or organization. However, they still look for people to work with, both in terms of sociability (working in a space in the presence of others, even if everyone works on separate projects) as well as in terms of coworking (creating professional collaborations) (Brown and O’Hara, 2003; Liegl, 2014). In fact, during my time as a researcher in this coworking space, many members started working together on professional projects, as
the proximity of other members facilitated networking and the construction of collaborations. Besides this individual networking within the space, some members and staff also expressed a more collective professional ambition. This ambition entailed the development of a ‘community brand’ that would generate its own productions. The identity of the space and its members would ideally turn into a brand that generated visibility in the exterior world of both individual members as well as of the collective. Even though members do not all work for the same company or organization, this brand would work similarly to a company or organization brand. One of the founders elaborated on this ambition, comparing the space to ‘conventional’ office buildings with a company name on the building:

‘I had a fantasy that this would also become a big building with a name on it, but inside it would be organized differently. We might need a sort of brand, or a label, to make sure that all those individual people who work for themselves can make a kind of mass, or to find a sort of organizational form to present to the outside world. […] So our fantasy is that eventually, when it is clear what happens here, that people will come to us, like: I have a research question, I have a project, could you select a group of people from your members file…?’

Hence, the ‘community’ constitutes a network that provides professional opportunities among individual members and organizations. Moreover, the identity of the collective is used to create a brand that generates visibility in ‘the outside world’, which in turn has a professional instrumentality.

The presence of others is thus of value to these workers. However, who are these ‘others’ in this coworking space? Membership and its professional value are not available to all: apart from the costly price of membership which makes the space only accessible to a certain (affluent) group of workers, applicants for membership go through a selection process in which a committee determines if they are suitable to be part of the ‘community’. Both members and staff speak of this exclusivity as valuable as it ensures the ‘quality of the network’. The ‘others’ must thus be ‘quality others’. This evokes the question of what defines this quality. In other words, when is one considered a valuable addition to the network?

The staff upholds two main official selection criteria. The first criterion for membership is a claim on a public ambition. One of the founders explained: ‘we all have a very similar drive: we are going to make the world a more beautiful and better place’. This normative claim on a public cause is rooted in the original concept of the space, aspiring to bring so-called ‘radical innovators’ together. The following two quotes stem from the results of a survey in which members were asked for their input on the membership selection criteria:

Anything goes, really. I think the common denominator should be genuine curiosity, social skills, high ambition and interest in and engagement with the state of society—not just to pay the bills.

Super smart, energetic ‘high flyers’ (hoogvliegers) that want to improve the world. Being an entrepreneur and making money comes second place.
This emphasis on a societal rather than a commercial ambition does not only apply to members’ product of work but is also intended in the ‘publicness’ of the space itself. In fact, an important reason for one of the founders to establish the space was to become more ‘open to the public’: her organization was previously housed in a more traditional office building, which one of their employees called ‘an ivory tower closed off from the world’. As an organization with a public mission, they were ‘basically obliged’ to change location to a space that facilitates inclusivity and contact with strangers and shows an ‘openness towards the world’. This supposed publicness creates an interesting contradiction with the exclusivity that is assured through the costs of and criteria for membership.

The second important selection criterion is members’ ‘reciprocity’: willing to contribute to the ‘community’ is considered to be a vital aspect of membership. Membership requires the investment of time into the community-building aspects of the space, where common duties and traditions strongly contribute to the feeling of togetherness. Interestingly, members pay a (considerable) financial fee to gain access to the workspace and network, but this does not suffice to gain access to the rights and privileges that membership brings: one is also expected to ‘participate’ and ‘contribute’ to the ‘community’. In other words, members also ‘pay’ through the ‘immaterial labor’ that membership requires. This ‘labor’ that members perform, for example, through organizing or being present at events, is of crucial value for the business model of the space, as it would lose its value (and thus revenue) if members did not live up to these ‘responsibilities’. Members working in this space thus work on two forms of immaterial labor: the work they perform for which they get paid and the work they perform to add value to and at the same time extract value from the coworking space.

Besides these two ‘official’ selection criteria for membership, access is determined through subtler, undefined processes. In the following vignette, one of the members of the selection committee Mark explains how the process of selection works:

‘Fleur, the club manager, is the one who has conversations with new people, they come to her, write her an email, or she has a coffee date with them. So she sees how somebody comes across, the look they have in their eyes, those intuition things, and all we see is the text they fill in on the intake form. Anyway, what I notice when I read such a text is that I am quite critical: I think someone should make clear what he brings […], why it fits within this vague mission of making the world a better place. […] If I don’t read that in the text and it just says: you offer such nice coffee and the location is perfect, then I really think: unacceptable. But then there is Fleur, who says: I had a nice talk with that person and it doesn’t come across in the text, but I do think we should accept him or her because of this and this. And then we are usually like, ok, that’s fine’.

The club manager’s opinion is thus crucial in deciding upon an applicant’s access, and even though semi-official selection criteria are formulated (i.e. working on a societal mission and willingness to reciprocate), she might bring in other motivations (‘those intuition things’) for accepting a new member into the ‘community’. Although the selection committee emphasizes to strive for a ‘diversity’ of members, this process might obscure how selection based on such subjective criteria can be subject to the preference for people with similar cultural dispositions or ‘habitus’, excluding those without
(Bourdieu, 1977). Hence, although the exclusivity of the space is justified on the basis of merely a civic logic of justification, informally it also draws on a very private, domestic logic of justification, where shared customs, conventions and moralities can determine access to the space (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

**Mechanisms of value-creation**

As we have seen, having access to the space and its network is supposed to be of professional value for members. At the same time, members also add value to the space through their (active) membership. How is this value created? This section will explore how the value of membership is expressed in this space, both socially and materially.

**The social expression of value**

In the original business plan, the coworking space was envisioned to become ‘a clubhouse’ and ‘a place to connect with like-minded people’. This description suggests the cultivation of a sociality that is much more than one of professionally ‘co-working’ individuals. Indeed, the network constructed in this space finds its expression in a very intimate sociality, revolving around the incitement of personal interactions, the building of trust between members and members and staff and the sharing of morals and manners, as two vignettes illustrate:

I am chatting with Suzanne, a new member, who tells me she became a member ‘for the network’. She is quick to emphasize that she is not just looking for a professional connection, but mostly for ‘the human aspect’. Suzanne: ‘People like you and me, who sit here, working all by themselves, we need that. A group we belong to, not being alone. I am not looking for a workplace. I am looking for a place where I feel at home, and where I know the people personally’.

Member Saskia tells me: ‘In this new economy you need to find common ground. That can also be something personal. A mutual love for tomatoes, for example. You need to build a basis of trust. For instance, I think I probably know around forty text editors. But there are only two I would actually use, because I know them, I trust them. They have a certain energy and presence that I find important. So that personal aspect is very important. I can teach the person what to do at work, but I cannot teach energy’.

These vignettes are illustrative for the informal ‘network sociality’ that is cultivated within this space, in which ‘professional ties become increasingly playful’ (Wittel, 2001: 68). Both members mention the personal, informal connection they are looking for within their work sociality. They search for affective bindings to other members, sharing an ‘energy’ or ‘mutual love’, which may eventually result in the development of professional relationships. This discourse is very much based on a subjective evaluation in which a connection is made and a community is formed on the basis of moral and emotional boundaries.

In order to create this professional but intimate sociality a lot of ‘immaterial labor’ is performed by members, through their time investment into the building of trust and
intimacy. First, many ‘community’ events are organized. Some events fulfill a service function, such as the weekly visit of a hairdresser and the in-house yoga classes. Others fulfill a more ritualistic function, such as the Christmas Dinner or the ‘Family Easter Breakfast’. Moreover, every 2 weeks a ‘Lunch Talk’ takes place, during which one of the members shares a difficulty he or she is encountering professionally. These talks are organized with the aim of creating a ‘safe space’ in which members can share insecurities about their work. The manager Fleur expressed that the feeling of trust that these moments encourage is ‘a feeling of comfort that we want to create on a broader scale’. All these events are characterized by their goal of evoking a personal, intimate connection between members. Most of these in the first place revolve around the sharing of leisure activities and affective interactions, not around producing something together professionally. Moreover, by bringing these services normally sought outside the workplace and working hours into the work sphere, they contribute to a blurring of work and private life.

To illustrate the intimacy sought in the socialities created, it is interesting to look at one particularly intimate event. This event, the ‘Festival by Night’, was organized to connect members in a completely nonwork-related way. The festival was themed ‘darkness’ and took place overnight, from 8 p.m. to 9 a.m. Members were asked to bring pajamas, a sleeping bag and a flashlight, and the program was ‘top secret’. In the following vignette, I describe the ‘opening ceremony’:

It’s 8 pm, and I am sitting on the floor with my eyes closed and my legs crossed, as ‘reverend Danny’ ceremoniously welcomes the ‘family’ into the night. He reads deep, spiritual texts, asking all members to be open for the night and all it has to bring. We may open our eyes now, and Danny tells us to look the person in front of us in the eyes for five minutes. Luckily, I know the woman in front of me, making it a slightly less awkward situation. Around me people are giggling. After 5 very long minutes, we all get a sheet of paper that lists fifteen ‘dark’ character traits, such as hateful, narcissistic, arrogant and sadistic. Reverend Danny asks us to pick three of the traits that we have found in the other person by looking her or him in the eyes, sharing with that person why.

As the night progressed, more of such ‘dark’ activities were organized, such as a ‘night dinner in the black square of Malevich’, a ‘blind trust’ activity where members guided each other through the building while blindfolded, and an ‘illegal rave’. All the while, different rooms in the building were made available for sleeping. Clearly, nothing about this event reminds of the conventional sociality of work. The timing, asking members to spend a full night at ‘the office’, the ritualistic, secretive character of the program and the intimate connections aimed at remind more of a religious cult than of a community of coworkers. According to Wittel (2001), these supposedly ‘private’ relationships are ultimately characterized by a professional instrumentality:

What unites all these networks, however, is their inherent ambivalence: on the one hand, they are instrumental and functional, on the other, they’re supposed to suggest the opposite. On the one hand the commodification of social relationships (doing a pitch, getting funds, finding work) is highly obvious, on the other, it is important to hide this commodification by creating a frame (music, alcohol, etc.) that makes people comfortable, that suggests a somehow ‘authentic’ interest in meeting people (Wittel, 2001: 56).
Hence, non-participation in the creation of this ‘frame’ of comfort or intimate lifestyle may result in less attachment to the ‘community’ and therefore fewer professional opportunities. In other words, the partaking in traditions and sharing of such intimacy has become an important element of performing immaterial labor, as it determines one’s access to a ‘community’ or network that may be crucial to one’s (paid) labor.

The staff plays an important role in cultivating this private sociality and informal lifestyle: they maintain a very personal relationship with members and constantly walk around to have a chat. Fleur the ‘club manager’ plays a key role in creating a domestic ‘world’ in this workspace: she is considered to be the main figure in the network and members and staff refer to her as the ‘business cupid’, the ‘head of the household’ and even the ‘corn starch (maizena) of the building’. She keeps an eye on people’s behavior, encourages people to contribute to the ‘community’ and considers it her task to connect people, constantly thinking about which members might be useful to each other professionally or might get along well personally. One of the members tells me about a time Fleur encouraged him to be more socially involved:

‘Some time ago I was reprimanded (op de vingers getikt) by her, well, reprimanded may be a big word but she addressed that I never talk to people here. She told me: in the end it’s all about the interaction with others here, you could get so much more out of that. So she gave me the name of someone who is in the publishing world like me, and told me: go have a chat with her. [...] There is nothing concrete yet but I do think we can help each other out’.

Fleur knows every member and is (almost) always present, therefore also noticing when a member is not participating and ‘getting everything out of it’. As the quote illustrates, she will address it when she thinks a member is not contributing enough to the ‘community’, thereby setting a certain standard on the immaterial labor that should be performed by members within the space.

The focus on creating a familial togetherness and intimate connection between members in the sociality of this coworking space is interesting, as it is not a sociality traditionally associated with work. The next section will address how this intimate sociality and informal lifestyle find a translation in the materiality of the space.

The material expression of value

Walking up the momentous wooden stairs that lead us from the restaurant and reception area on the ground floor to the first floor, one of the receptionists explains to me that this floor is called the ‘Living Room’. The area consists of different sitting areas, separated by high racks filled with plants, and two large ‘reading tables’, where some early birds have yet settled their ‘personal clutter’ of Macbooks, journals and cappuccino’s. The dimmed lights give this floor a calm, ‘homy’ feel, as does the colorful variety of couches that remind more of a cozy café than a workplace. She directs my attention to some of the artifacts spread over the windowsills: a blue ceramic tea set, a record player, a collection of Time magazines, a 3D printed lamp, a baseball glove, a box of Scrabble and some old books. When the building had just opened, she explains, new members were asked to bring an object from home and add it to the space, to give them a sense of ownership and make them feel at home. In her words, it’s about ‘bringing in a piece of yourself (een stukje van jezelf meenemen)’.
This vignette illustrates the connection between the esthetic and the affective valuations aimed for in the materiality of the space. A certain material esthetic is cultivated in order to provoke a certain affect: the affect of comfort, of ‘feeling at home’. By giving this workspace the materiality of a living room, the desired immateriality (a comfortable, intimate sociality) is given a material translation.

This translation was in fact at the core of the conceptualization of the building itself, as the idea of a house was taken as the conceptual point of departure for its design. The different floors of the building represent different ‘home-like’ spaces with corresponding different functions. The ground floor, on which the restaurant and reception are located, represents the ‘kitchen’ and is meant for meeting and eating. This space is open for the public. The first floor represents the ‘living room’, mainly meant for meetings and relaxing. The second floor represents the ‘study’ and is considered a private area specifically meant for individual working. The third floor has the ‘attic’ and the ‘garden’ and is semipublic, as it is occasionally used for events for (external) groups but can also be used by members to work. Finally, the small rooms on the fourth floor were originally named the ‘guest rooms’ and were designed as spaces where members could nap or even stay the night (in reality, this rarely happens). Hence, the architectural framework of a house was deliberately used in the design of the building, purposefully aimed to create ‘a domestic feel’.

Moreover, members and staff are encouraged to personalize the space, making the building ‘their own’. Personalization of a space may fuel people’s ‘home-making experiences’, as Ley-Cervantes and Duyvendak (2017) found that ‘the potentiality of a place to foster feelings of home depends on the possibility of personalizing it, of achieving some sense of control over the space and imbue it with meaning’ (p. 67). One of the ways members’ personalization of the material space is stimulated is through the tradition of bringing in objects from home, mentioned in the introducing vignette of this section. One of the members explained to me how this tradition came about:

‘From the start, the most important thing was: the building should not be overdesigned, it should be filled in by the residents. That’s why new members got the assignment: bring an object from home. I, for example, brought a tea set, which I still use all the time. People come up to me sometimes and say: what a nice tea set! It’s really something that is part of your own ritual in the house’.

Hence, ‘residents’ (members often use this word, translated from the Dutch bewoners) are encouraged to physically contribute to the space, attaching themselves to its materiality by connecting it with ritualistic habits. This personalization aims to invoke a ‘feeling at home’. However, the personalization of the space does have limits, as most members do not have their personal desk: only the most expensive membership allows members to have their own desk which they can set up in their preferred way, others only have a personal locker. Moreover, although the building is semiprivate and most spaces are ‘members only’, the building remains rather transparent: the ‘open floor plan’ makes it difficult to withdraw from visibility and create real privacy. Members are thus invited to personalize the space to enhance a private, home-like atmosphere, but this personalization is limited as it is shared with all other members.
So, what is the effect of creating this domestic materiality? Members and staff often mention how this materiality contributes to the ‘feeling of comfort’ that it also created through the sharing of intimate socialities described above. This quest for feeling comfortable comes back in the following vignette, in which member Merel compares the esthetic of this coworking space to the ‘conventional office aesthetic’:

‘If this would not be a beautiful place I would absolutely not work here. You just want a comfortable workplace’. She points to one of the large office buildings across the railroad that we can see from the window: ‘Sometimes when I see those people in a huge office building I think to myself: they look like ants. Why? Really: why? I don’t understand why you would ever want to work in a place like that’.

Apparently, this member looks for comfort in the workplace and finds it in this space because it is esthetically pleasing to her. Not only do the activities attached to a materiality evoke a feeling of comfort, so do the esthetic attributes of the materiality itself. Merel thus expresses that she wants to work in this space, be present and thereby add value to the space, because of its comfortable materiality. The materiality of a space might thus add to the value workers assign to their own work. Moreover, these workers are willing to contribute to the value of the space because they feel so comfortable within its materiality.

Another member mentions the inspiration she gets from the feeling of comfort in the space: ‘The notion home for me is about wellbeing, about feeling comfortable somewhere. And when I feel pleasant somewhere, that’s also good for my creativity’. ‘Comfortable’ places are said to inspire and induce creativity, as ‘play is associated with creativity, experimentation and innovation; it stands counterposed to bureaucracy and a Protestant work ethic’ (Wittel, 2001: 69). The desire to work in a space with a ‘beautiful’ esthetic, where (previously considered) domestic materialities and corresponding activities are cultivated, symbolizes a more general post-Fordist drive for a passionate attachment to work, the notion that work should be enjoyed and should lead to self-actualization (McRobbie, 2015). This ‘passionate labor’ is counterposed to routine work in anonymous office buildings, reflected in the way the member in the vignette above contrasts this space to the monotonous anonymity of the office collective. The discourse of ‘doing what you love’ (Tokumitsu, 2015) in a place that you love however has an important pitfall, as it may present the uncertainty and intensification of post-Fordist work as desirable, thereby obscuring its possible negative consequences (Neff et al., 2005). The frame of home-like comfort, authenticity and creativity that spaces like this cultivate may lead to a belief that we are not actually performing productive labor: ‘discussions about ‘creativity’ would quickly turn away from work to focus instead on the creative lifestyle’ (Arvidsson et al., 2010: 305).

**Exclusive traits of an inclusive sociality**

As we have seen, there is a strong focus on creating an intimate, familial togetherness in this space, which finds a translation in its domestic and private materiality. Members are encouraged to be present, included in all kinds of social gatherings and stimulated to share their personal stories in a ‘safe space’, thereby performing immaterial labor that
they may extract value from in their work but which also adds value to the space itself. This inward inclusivity however is accompanied by an outward exclusivity. In fact, spaces like this coworking space are so comfortable to some because of the exclusive access to their personalization. In the vignette above, a member expresses her incomprehension of people working in ‘huge office buildings’. In her statement, she implies that all workers have the agentic power to choose what work they do and where they do it, insensitive toward the possibility that some people might not have the choice to work in a beautifully designed space. There is an inherent contradiction in the notion that everybody should be able to work in a ‘comfortable’ space, when their exclusivity is what creates their comfort.

This exclusivity can also be seen when addressing the people who work in this space but who are not considered members. Particularly, the cleaning staff plays an important role in maintaining the (clean and comfortable) esthetic of the space. The staff works every day in the early morning hours and usually leaves before the first member has arrived. In light of the strong stimulation of members’ visibility and presence, their invisibility is striking. Not considered members of the community, they are, for example, not invited to most events (which is not to say that they would want to attend: the cleaning lady told me she would not be interested in spending an otherwise free evening in her workplace).

One anecdote that a member told me makes this division particularly clear, showing how different groups get different access to the personalization of the space and how exclusion finds its expression in the materiality of the space. During Christmas time, members were asked to participate in a ‘Christmas origami workshop’ led by one of the artist members, to create do-it-yourself Christmas decorations to decorate the building with. In the same period, one of the cleaners of the building had left behind a Christmas decoration (kerststukje) when she had finished work, to wish the ‘community’ a merry Christmas. However, the esthetic of this piece was not much appreciated by the staff and a fuss was created around the question where (if at all) it should be placed in the building. Although members were thus stimulated to contribute to the esthetic and personalize the space, the contribution of a ‘non-member’ was not much appreciated. The fact that this ‘non-member’ was so clearly not considered part of the ‘family’ shows how different value is attached to the presence of different people within the ‘house’. On which grounds are such boundaries of personalization enacted? They might be esthetic boundaries, with the cleaning lady not being aware or understanding the ‘cultural codes’ of the space. They might also be social boundaries: although the cleaning staff adds important ‘material value’ to the space, by keeping ‘the house’ clean and the carefully designed esthetic in place, the cleaning staff are not considered ‘residents’ because of their non-addition of ‘immaterial value’ to the space and its network. The ‘personalization’ of the materiality is thus limited to a few carefully selected contributors on the basis of potentiality for adding (immaterial) value, which in turn reinforces the specific materiality that is in place and renders the materiality of nonmembers as such invisible.

Conclusion

Drawing on an ethnographic case study of a coworking space in Amsterdam, this article has addressed the question: how does the spatial organization of immaterial labor create
value in work? In the post-Fordist organization of work, both the product as well as the productive activities of labor are increasingly formed around the production of immaterialities (Lazzarato, 1997). With such radical changes in the organization of work, an important question is how value of work is determined. In a post-Fordist labor market characterized by informality and self-employment, one important mechanism through which value in work is created is through the act of networking: having access to professional socialities may be crucial for professional progress. Understanding that ‘the spatial is social relations stretched out’ (Massey, 1994: 2), studying space in relation to new work socialities can thus teach us more about the way that the value of such socialities is constituted. Therefore, taking the case study of a coworking space in Amsterdam, I first explored the value of and requirements for membership of this space. The expression of this value was then studied, by looking at the social and material mechanisms of value-creation and their (excluding) boundaries.

Members pay a considerable financial fee for membership. It is thus interesting to question what members get back from this membership: what is in it for them? Which value do they extract from their membership? This research has shown that members do not merely come to this coworking space for the physical space to work but are mainly looking for a ‘quality network’ that may provide them with professional opportunities and collaborations within the network. Moreover, members expressed that ideally this network will turn into a ‘brand’ generating professional visibility in the exterior world. Hence, membership will endow them with a certain status, which may in turn lead to professional opportunities outside the direct network of members. Besides these direct work opportunities, members also expressed the inspiration they get from working in this space, inducing their creativity. This space is thus a workplace that mainly aims to generate professional interactions. However, this professional value-creation within the space finds its expression—both in the sociality and the materiality of the space—in the creation of a very domestic materiality and familial sociality. This way, ‘the value of work as well as one’s own value as a worker are increasingly conceived in terms of identity and lifestyle’ (Arvidsson et al., 2010: 306).

In order to gain access to this space and benefit from its professional value, members are required (besides paying the financial membership fee) to invest personal time and subjectivities into the space or to perform immaterial labor. Interestingly, this case study has shown how the value that members may extract from working in this space—providing them with a professional network and community, giving them inspiration, endowing them with status—is at the same time the business model for the space itself: members themselves create value of the space in the immaterial labor they perform through their presence and participation in the ‘community-building’ (their ‘reciprocity’). Hence, for members themselves as well as for the business model of the space, the revenue calculation can only be understood when incorporating the immaterial value of membership. In other words, in a labor market characterized by immaterial labor, the material space in which work is executed also becomes valuable through its immaterial attributes.

However, not everybody might be able to participate in, contribute to and extract value from the space, as access to this lifestyle and sociality is exclusive, which the financial fee and selection process ensures. This privatization stands in stark contrast with the claim on publicness that characterizes the ‘identity’ of the space and its
‘community’. The selection process assures exclusive access for ‘like-minded people’, an exclusion that finds it material translation in the exclusive access to the material personalization and the invisibility of nonmembers working in the space, such as the cleaning staff. The materiality of the space thus reflects and constitutes the selective sociality that it cultivates. Although this selection is supposedly based on a civic logic of justification, where one’s public ambitions determine one’s inclusion into the ‘community’ and diversity is stimulated, the criteria for access are very much based on moral and emotional evaluations reminiscent of a domestic logic of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

Sharon Zukin (2008) has already recognized how the formation of urban communities on the basis of lifestyle may result in exclusion: ‘They are united by their consumption of authenticity. And, over time, this norm of alternative consumption becomes a means of excluding others from their space’ (p. 745). Moreover, she argued that such identification with lifestyle might result in political disengagement and segregation from different urban groups (Zukin, 1998). These lifestyles may form on the basis of public claims but can thus essentially represent a ‘publicness without a public sphere’ where ‘social practices that are oriented not solely to the self and one’s own milieu, but rather to living together and to common political action, recede ever more into the background and become ever less imaginable as a lived reality’ (Lorey, 2015: 90). Further research should continue to explore how such new (work) socialities form and especially how the informality and domestic expression of its formation may result in exclusion. Moreover, it would be important to understand how exclusion from these socialities may impact one’s position in the labor market and play into inequality. Along the lines of Massey’s conception of the spatial, this article has shown how social relations and space in a post-Fordist labor market mutually constitute each other and therefore emphasizes the importance of incorporating the study of materiality into studies of immaterial labor.

Acknowledgements
I want to thank dr. M.A. van den Berg for her very constructive feedback and guidance and prof. dr. G.M.M. Kuipers for her academic inspiration and help with the submission process.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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