Coworking: A Rhetorical Enterprise
Situated in Place

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Introduction

Broad advances in technology have opened opportunities for entrepreneurs to rethink and, in current terms, disrupt, long established and institutionalized sectors of the economy. Airbnb, for example, has disrupted the hotel industry. Lyft and Uber have disrupted the transportation industry, both taxis and rental cars. In doing so, they have also contributed to—and built their platforms on—what has come to be called the “sharing economy”: home-owners sharing vacant rooms or second homes; car owners, not professional drivers, sharing time in their cars. To this list of economic sectors poised for disruption add the office. Mobile information and communication technology (ICT), among other forces, has led to changes in the concept of work and decoupled work and workers from the fixed office spaces of existing corporations. “Mobility and
ubiquitous technological connectivity of work mean that the office is no longer a stable entity in terms of place, as office work can be carried out in multiple kinds of spaces” (Laing and Bacevice 2013, p. 39).

This new concept of work, largely aimed at creating new knowledge and driving innovation, and a new choice in location of work have inspired entrepreneurs to create a new kind of commercial workplace. These are coworking enterprises, part office with advanced technology and part social setting, available for short- or longer-term rental. A researcher at the Harvard Business School argues, “We have not reinvented office space in 50 years, so WeWork [the original corporate disruptor] is moving into white space” (quoted in WeWork's IPO: Risky Business 2019).

In emerging from the sharing economy, these new workspaces also reflect a widening assumption that collaboration, especially across disciplines, cultures, and perspectives, is the key to knowledge work. Collaborative communicative practices are essential to solve messy problems and pursue new opportunities in the twenty-first Century global economy. In my larger research project, I’ve been addressing how, or whether, a physical environment, like a coworking space, can be designed explicitly to foster collaborative communication (Andrews 2016, 2017, 2018). As newly designed places for a new kind of work, coworking spaces provided an appealing research opportunity.

The invitation to contribute to this volume inspired me to look more closely at a source of data that I’d seen simply as background reading for that project: the marketing pitches, the stories about coworking, that founders of such spaces deliver on their websites. To do so, I’m taking something of a detour from my larger project, which aims to disrupt communications research by focusing less on what is said and done in a workplace and more on the agency of place itself in that activity. The research presented in this chapter is less about the actual agency of place than about how the language in these marketing pitches, considered as both text and images, creates a spatial experience. Coworking spaces are arguably rhetorical enterprises situated in place.
To address this argument, I first discuss my data and research method in terms of this volume’s central themes: authenticity, triangulation through a mix-methods approach, saturation, and background. Because these pitches represent real places, the section on background reviews the development of coworking spaces as I’ve researched their growth in relationship to communicative practices. That review of enterprises on the ground sets the context for this study of their recreation as rhetorical enterprises online. The main section of the chapter details the rhetorical strategies used to create the stories of coworking in five websites that are the focus of my study. The conclusion reiterates major findings and suggests topics for future research.

**Two Limitations**

One limitation to the description of my research data in this chapter is its presentation in print. These pitches, in full color online, are highly visual. They incorporate videos and music. Text and images *move*. The background section in this chapter includes photographs of a coworking space as a way to at least suggest what such spaces look like.

As I write in Spring 2020, however, the major limitation to coworking as a subject of study and, more significant, as an enterprise, is the general global economic collapse in response to the Covid-19 virus pandemic. Lock-down orders intended to prevent the spread of the virus have forced companies and other institutions to close and required workers to work from home. Under these circumstances, social distancing, as it has come to be called, has overridden the chief value promoted by coworking, that is, face-to-face social engagement and a sense of community. Many coworking spaces have also closed, and their reopening is uncertain. But the research remains pertinent for the time researched, conditions that may return after the pandemic subsides. Addresses for the websites in my study appear with the references and were valid in early 2020. Publicly available, the sites would be worth a visit as a companion activity to reading this chapter.
The Culture of Coworking

Even before Covid-19, WeWork, once the largest manager of coworking spaces in the world, was in serious financial trouble. Indeed, in his 2015 review of literature on coworking, Gandini (2015) argues that empirical findings about whether coworking can achieve its promise are few. He focuses on what he characterizes as the inevitably positive picture provided by academics and practitioners of such enterprises. The concept, he insists, may simply reflect an “illusory enthusiasm” used for “branding, marketing and business purposes” (202–203). For the study discussed in this chapter, however, it’s the creation of that illusion that matters and is the center of my analysis.

A ground-breaking 2013 collection, *The Style of Coworking: Contemporary Shared Workspaces* by Davies and Tollervey, set me on course for this study. It includes statements by founders of 30 “hot” coworking spaces worldwide as well as abundant images of each. What the founders said was not reliable evidence for what was actually happening in their spaces. But in themselves, and with their emphasis on style, the statements seemed to cultivate an intriguing image of a culture of coworking. To follow up on their stories, I searched online for the websites of these 30 spaces in 2019. Some enterprises had disappeared or morphed into event spaces or restaurants. But many had continued and were thriving, demonstrating their staying power in the growing but fragile shared workplace industry. The arguments on their websites were deeply layered and, I thought, could sustain serious analysis, especially looked at through a mixed approach incorporating my research in material culture studies, in design, and in rhetorical theory.

Davies and Tollervey (2013) see coworking as having “its own unique aesthetic and *form of expression*” (7, italics added). Mostly as a critic, Gandini (2015) discusses the “‘celebratory framework’ that surrounds the representations of proliferating coworking spaces” (193, italics added). Such statements about expression and representations further validated for me my instinct that the pitches were worth attention. They helped me turn something previously taken for granted as simply part of a literature review into the data base.
Authenticity

Business and professional discourse occurs, by definition, in the context of work and the workplace. The physical environment of an office, however configured, or another place of work shapes, reflects, and sometimes subverts the kind of communication required to get work done there. That’s the hypothesis of my larger project. To inform myself about communication at work, I’ve visited a range of workplaces, including coworking spaces; talked both formally and informally with practitioners; and read extensively not only in the academic and but also in the commercial literature of workplace design.

For this study, I’ve put aside questions about the agency of place in the real world. Instead, I’m looking at what might be considered the agency of text and images to create a virtual workplace that represents the real one. In the five sites in my research that agency has depended in part on the crafting of a rhetorical persona, someone of good character, presumably the founder-entrepreneur, who speaks for the space. The persona is an artifice, not authentic in any standard sense. It sets the frame for the fabrication of the larger artifice, a persuasive story about coworking.

Triangulation

In triangulating on how these representations, these stories, were put together, I incorporated methods from material culture studies, which looks at the effect of place on people’s behavior and experience in the place, and design thinking, which creates places to achieve the desired behavior. In addition, beyond these methods, which I foreground in my larger study, I relied on theory and methods in classical rhetoric, something I’d taught for years. Rhetoric became dominant, the primary driver for choosing and analyzing the data. The following section briefly describes my mixed-methods approach.

Researchers in material culture studies examine the relationship between people and their things. This is in itself an interdisciplinary field that grew out of anthropology, art, history, and sociology, among other disciplines. Citing Pierre Bourdieu, anthropologist Danny Miller (2010,
p. 23), for example, notes, “Things, not mind you, individual things, but the system of things, with their internal order, make us the people we are”. “In short, objects create subjects much more than the other way around” (Miller 2008, p. 287). From that perspective, a place, like a workplace, is inherently social and invites investigations into how people shape and are shaped by it. It is defined by its use, by the relationship among its inhabitants, by behavior there and its cultural norms. It is in flux. Place motivates certain specific actions, unlike space, which is experienced similarly by everyone and provides the opportunity for action (Overmyer and Carlson 2019). Without probably being aware of it, the spokespersons on these websites build their argument on the assumption that the place they have created can foster the kinds of behavior their customers seek.

A second method, drawing in some respects on material culture studies, is design thinking. Developed by architects, interior designers, and engineers, it is a process put into practice by international office design firms like Gensler and manufacturers of office furniture like Herman Miller. As David Kelley, a co-founder of the international space design consultancy IDEO argues, space should be thought of not as something “fixed-as-given, a facilities project or a showcase.” It should instead be considered an “instrument for innovation and collaboration…. A valuable tool that can help you create deep and meaningful collaborations in your work and life” (quoted in Doorley and Witthoft 2012, p. 5). Aesthetic concerns have marked coworking spaces from their roots as an artsy underground movement to the high style enterprises today, so attention to design features is critical in the pitches, and in analyzing the pitches.

Third, and enveloping the other two approaches, is theory, along with method, derived from classical rhetoric. The art of persuasion is ancient, but it is easily refreshed to provide strategies for representing these new work environments. Because of its central importance, my rhetorical method is detailed later in the chapter.
This study is not intended to be a thorough investigation of all coworking space websites, or even all those in a particular region, or of whether the claims in these sites are true. In particular, I put aside any validation of the websites’ claims. I chose instead to take the sites’ founders at their word and to be suggestive in my analysis, based on a small sample of five sites emerging from those featured in Davies and Tollervey (2013). They represent different regions internationally (and explicitly not in the US, for diversity); different demographics, a differentiation that has developed as the industry expands; and different forms of enterprise, from small, independent spaces to nodes in a network of spaces. That said, they also align their pitches along certain themes, including a sense of community and mission, common across these differences. My selection was admittedly arbitrary but proved to be productive, as the discussion of results aims to demonstrate. The five sites are The Hive in Hong Kong; Impact Hub, Bergen, Norway; Central Working, London; Spaces, Herengracht, Amsterdam; and Spacecubed, Perth, Australia.

Coworking: The Office Disrupted

The following discussion briefly reviews the origins and development of the coworking concept to provide context for my study. As a relatively new entrant in the marketplace, coworking spaces have been featured in popular publications, including the real estate and styles pages of The New York Times and the Wall Street Journal (e.g., Fost 2008; Williams 2013). While some discourse-oriented researchers have investigated coworking, notably Spinuzzi (2012), coworking has more often been studied by those in management, organizational behavior, marketing, computer science, and facilities planning (e.g., Balakrishnan et al. 2016; Gandini 2015; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Isaac 2016; Moriset 2014; Waber et al. 2014). Architecture and design firms also conduct extensive research on the state of play in workplaces, including those of existing organizations and emerging ones, like coworking enterprises. Their
reports and other publications provide insights into best practices in workplace design, particularly, for my purpose, those that foster collaboration (e.g., Gensler 2018, 2019; Herman Miller 2019).

As Laing and Bacevice (2013, p. 39) argue, the movement away from fixed office space to multiple locations complements the plural nature of knowledge work, as work itself escapes organizational boundaries. The essential character of knowledge work in developing, communicating and sharing ideas reinforces its communal rather than solitary characteristics.

For independent workers in the twenty-first Century, mobility has meant having a choice about where to work. No longer simply taken for granted, the place of work becomes a factor in one’s identity, a source, among other sources, of inspiration and motivation for work (Liegl 2014). In joining a coworking space, such workers are not looking for an office, but for people, for a community in which they can improve their work performance (Williams 2013). Coworking offers that, especially the potential for face-to-face communication and casual encounters. Laing and Bacevice (2013) point to “socially reinforced place and physical proximity as enablers of innovation and creativity” (43). Calling them “serendipity accelerators,” Moriset (2014, p. 2) argues that coworking places are “powered by a specific animation intended to create links inside and outside the community of co-workers”. In coworking spaces, “intensified social interaction, strengthened networking, exploration of complementarities, knowledge transfer, and learning specifically create potentials for creativity, unexpected serendipity, innovativeness and improved or new business models” (Bouncken and Reuschl 2018, p. 328).

By most accounts, coworking (a term originally hyphenated but now mostly used without the hyphen) began in San Francisco in 2005 (Fost 2008). Davies and Tollervey (2013, p. 7) call coworking a “culture rising from the underground”. The original coworking spaces tended to be small, locally grown, independently owned and managed, and relatively ad hoc. Those who gathered in the space helped shape the environment and sometimes worked there for free. Coworking as an activity paralleled the open-software movement, a volunteer effort to make the world a
better place through sharing. Often located in the vacated spaces of earlier economies, and in urban settings, many coworking spaces were started by entrepreneurs with an artistic bent to serve artists, designers, and other creatives who sought an inspiring aesthetic environment. The spaces tended to be eccentric in style, with high visual interest, and were only modestly remodeled from their earlier mercantile or industrial uses. The furnishings themselves were often repurposed except for a robust digital infrastructure. In these spaces, coworkers escaped the more authoritarian approach of the formal offices they had left behind and the loneliness of home.

The coworking concept has morphed, expanded in the number of enterprises and influence internationally, and gone upscale from its underground roots, although some small local sites remain. According to Deskmag, an online publication that tracks the growth of the shared workspace industry, by the end of 2019 almost 2.2 million people were expected to work in over 22,000 coworking spaces worldwide (Foertsch 2019). Beyond independent enterprises, coworking has fueled large-scale commercial real estate development by such major international property managers as CBRE and IWG. Architecture and design firms like Gensler and IDEO are now major players in designing coworking spaces.

In an early and frequently cited analysis of why users chose to join one or another of several coworking sites in Austin, Texas, Spinuzzi (2012) identified two overriding outcomes, which he summarized as cooperative work and parallel work. One configuration, “good partners,” supports the development of collaborative networks. Independent contractors hope to connect with subcontractors to attack shared work problems and learn from each other, along the way creating “innovation networks” (Gandini 2015, p. 199). The style is casual and comfortable; coworkers benefit from interaction and feedback. They learn from each other, building trust and ensuring safety. Renters looking primarily to another outcome, “good neighbors,” are less interested in networking and more in the space as a stage-set for their professional appearance. It’s quieter, more like a traditional office in style. Coworkers help create a professional environment in which consultants and small business owners can meet clients.

Spinuzzi’s distinction between cooperative and parallel work remains valuable, but as coworking spaces have evolved they tend to
accommodate both. How they do so can be suggested by Figs. 7.1 and 7.2, photographs taken at a coworking space in Chicago. A largely open floorplan offers a variety of settings to foster diverse styles of work and leisure, privacy as well as proximity to others, and a lot of room to move around, take a break, and talk. Private office-like spaces are also available, in various sizes, in areas accessible only by keycard. All such spaces have glass doors (lockable), glass walls to a corridor, and white boards on other walls. Basic furnishings (table and chairs) and connections to technology are included, but individuals can personalize the space as they choose. Some spaces have windows with unobstructed views of Lake Michigan. In several lounge areas, those views, along with natural light, are available to all.

Figure 7.1 shows an open area on the main floor. While the couches are relatively fixed, stools and cushions are available for group seating during presentations (note the projector in the ceiling). Chairs by the
long tables at one end are easily moved for discussions or for individual work, with abundant outlets for plugging in the laptops and smartphones that accompany creative professionals. There’s a small kitchen and bar areas.

Figure 7.2 shows a conference room on the lower level. It is next to (another) bar area but with a glass wall and door for noise abatement. The ping pong net folds away for a business meeting; the side walls are whiteboards. The C is an abstraction of the logo for the Chicago Cubs, the local and much loved (and often defeated) baseball team. It brings a regional accent to what is otherwise a more corporate style. The bright orange chairs move easily. The ambiance suggests the importance of play to innovative thinking.
A Rhetorical Analysis of Five Coworking Websites

Having looked at the origins and general plan of coworking spaces, I now turn to the central focus of this chapter: an analysis of the rhetorical strategies that five coworking enterprises employ to create a virtual representation of their spaces on their websites. These representations aim to persuade customers to buy in. Consider this message on the website of WeWork:

When we started WeWork in 2010, we wanted to build more than beautiful, shared office spaces. We wanted to build a community. A place you join as an individual, ‘me’, but where you become part of a greater ‘we’. A place where we’re redefining success measured by personal fulfillment, not just the bottom line. Community is our catalyst. (WeWork.com 2019)

A feature of this message, something prominent in each of the sites in my study, is its rhetorical persona, someone of good character who speaks for the space. This speaker, presumably the founder-entrepreneur, demonstrates adherence to a higher purpose or mission beyond the mere commercial while also displaying an attitude of empathy toward potential customers and concern for their personal fulfillment. The personal pronoun “we” first references the speaker (and the collaborative origins of the space) but then invites the customer into its plural meaning. It reinforces the notion of community, a term raised explicitly and a fundamental value of coworking. Shaped through the speaker’s persona and voice, this message previews a celebratory story about a physical “place you join” where you are then transformed—your workplace revolutionized—by the people, the values, and the experience of coworking.

To analyze the strategies used in constructing such stories, I’ve applied the structure for persuasion identified in classical rhetorical theory (e.g., Corbett and Connors 1999). This structure is usually described in terms of three appeals designated by their Latin names: logos, ethos, and pathos. After briefly defining these terms and introducing the wordplay often involved in the names of coworking spaces, the following discussion presents the results of my research aligned by these categories.
Logos is, briefly, the rational or logical appeal. Ethos is the appeal embedded in the character of the speaker/persona as well as the values, the spirit or mission, shared by a group of people. Pathos is the appeal to our emotions, to how we experience a space or feel about something. It’s often associated with aesthetics. While thinking in terms of these categories is useful for creating an argument or for analyzing how an argument has been created, the performance itself has to weave all three appeals together seamlessly to be successful. One such performance is analyzed at the end of the discussion.

The names of coworking spaces are often rhetorical gestures in themselves, clever exercises in wordplay. In a nutshell, they announce to potential customers who the founder of the space thinks they are (educated and welcoming of such play) and what awaits them in the space. Moriset (2014) draws specific attention to names in an appendix to his study of coworking, which lists some 100 spaces in cities world-wide, especially in the US, in 2013. For example, “Jigsaw Renaissance” in Seattle represents a new awakening, a place where you can put together the pieces of a puzzle in a new way; “Plug and Play” in Austin uses a familiar term for an easy way to connect and network digitally and suggests that their space provides similar affordances; “Newton’s Cradle” in Albuquerque appeals to an educated, technically-savvy demographic who know about Newton and alchemy and are looking for inspiration to create new ideas; “The Hatchery,” San Francisco (and other spaces with “hatch” in their name) tells start-ups they can incubate their ideas here (Moriset 2014, p. 23). Many of the names are in English, even in countries where English is not the native language (less so in France). But the English carries something of the vibe of Silicon Valley and the rise of the big US technology industry.

The names of the five spaces in my study are similarly illustrative. The Hive reflects collaboration (as with bees), energy, productivity, buzz. Impact Hub, where coworkers address sustainability and foster social impact, incorporates in its name the term “hub,” a centralizing place to come together to advance such work, a diverse community. Central Working also evokes a coming together, as in a central train or bus station. Spaces as a name seems to take a different direction from centralizing to generalizing, opening up to larger uses and a broad range of customers.
The *Spaces* enterprise in my study (on the Herengracht, in Amsterdam), with its name in English, is the original location of what has become a vast network of *Spaces*-branded coworking spaces worldwide managed by IWG. *Spacecubed* evokes thoughts of an incubator, a place for new enterprises. The names in themselves predict the community and creativity to be engendered in the space.

**Logos**

As Figs. 7.1 and 7.2 and the discussion of the coworking space in Chicago suggest, the fundamental, rational argument for coworking is its role as an alternative physical environment for twenty-first Century work. Coworking spaces were explicitly designed to make the match between knowledge work and place, and the argument for them on their websites derives from the assumption that objects can indeed create subjects. Such spaces give independent professionals who can choose when and where to work an alternative with the right furnishing and objects to support that work.

Assuming that “work” for their potential customers means “getting creative,” *Impact Hub*, for example, offers “everything you need to get creative: fast wifi, post-its, pens & markers, tea and coffee.” In particular, vertical surfaces, like walls and whiteboards that you can write on (with pens and markers) and tack things on (like post-its) foster collaboration. They serve to “mak[e] thinking tangible so it can be touched, stretched, understood, and acted upon” (Doorley and Witthoft 2012, p. 157). Abundant horizontal surfaces, both tables and desks, are also available for writing individually or on a small team. Most spaces provide phone booths (without phones), nooks, or alcoves for focused work. *Central Working* has showers, a recognition that its urban customers may arrive on a bike or after a run, and want to change clothes, and is dog friendly. Access to nature and natural light are foregrounded, where available. *The Hive*, for example, features images of coworkers gathering on its deck, rare access to the outdoors in the business district of Hong Kong.

In their open areas, lounges and bars, coworking spaces encourage casual conversations and the networking aimed at accelerating
innovation as well as accommodating more formal events and outreach to the community. These include routine events, like weekly breakfasts or networking meet-ups, as well as special, one-time events like talks or training programs. Impact Hub calls its spaces an “incubator, a project generator and an arena for events.” The Hive’s website refers to its “best-in-class events.” Spaces cites its “full program of professional events and hospitality services.” Central Working calls its café in the Shoreditch section of London “a hive of collaboration and creativity.” It “brings the ethos of Central Working to the heart of Tech City” (Davies and Tollervey 2013, p. 107).

**Ethos**

Central Working’s reference to “ethos” is hardly an anomaly in the literature about and from coworking spaces. As the second persuasive appeal identified in classical rhetoric, ethos evokes a common bond between speaker and audience. That bond represents shared values and a shared spirit or mission and is reinforced, as we have seen, through the persona evoked in the website’s text. Even as coworking becomes more institutionalized and commercialized, its origins in the sharing economy remain a point of persuasion. In language that reverberates throughout my study, Opencoworking, an international not-for-profit association of coworking founders based in the US, presents an ethical argument for the shared workspace industry. Its website lists these values that coworkers “subscribe to by being in the space”:

1. Community
2. Openness
3. Collaboration
4. Accessibility
5. Sustainability

The Opencoworking (2019) website further emphasizes the commitment coworking spaces make to open sharing, with each other and with the public, and to reinforcing “the good that [coworking] can do in the
world.” “The power and beauty of coworking reside in its freedom to be interpreted differently” by each coworker as well as its foundation in “positivity and collaboration.”

“Community,” for example, is reinforced by a tendency to call coworkers members, not renters, even though they pay rent. (The name “WeWork” highlights this.) Membership rates emphasize flexibility, with multiple categories to meet individual choices about amount of time and type of space desired. To encourage young people and otherwise diversify the membership (diversity being one of the benefits of coworking), The Hive, for example, offers a special rate for those under 23. Several sites, especially in the UK, wrap their appeal in the metaphor of a “club,” an exclusive (but open to nomadic members) space for a mix of leisure and work. The Spaces coworking site boasts the availability during regular hours of a suitably appointed “business club” where members can “meet new people without leaving the office.”

Membership in a community is described as bestowing other benefits as well, for example, enhancing the reputations of coworkers, who share desired characteristics and style. Gandini (2015) calls this “reputation based on social capital” through the development of innovation networks in the space (200). Impact Hub specifically calls attention to the collaborative advantages in a community of “likeminded changemakers.” It is home to “the innovators, the dreamers and the entrepreneurs who are creating tangible solutions to the world’s most pressing issues.” According to the website for Spaces:

Our Spaces are inhabited by forward thinkers, innovators and game changers who are confident in achieving their goals. Whether you are a small business, entrepreneur or a corporate intrapreneur, at Spaces we help our community to expand their horizon.

Our free-spirited vibe attracts an energetic community of positive and open-minded business thinkers who love to meet new people.

Another member benefit, similar to the benefits offered by private clubs which have reciprocal privileges at other clubs, is privileged access to partner organizations. The partners may offer special discounts at hotels and restaurants, priority service at a range of attractions, tickets for
museums and shows, special rates on publications and printing service, connections to professional business organizations and entrepreneurial associations, rental bikes (in the Netherlands), and the like. Coworking spaces that are part of a network also offer the option to work at any club when a member of one of them.

In addition, to help members connect virtually between their visits, and participate in the coworking ethos when they are not actually in the space, some coworking spaces publish magazines about their activities available online, host blogs created by members, and offer links to articles of interest published in the media. In my study, all of these options were available as well to potential members as a marketing device. A special section of the Impact Hub website, for example, labeled “Impact Stories,” features member blogs and news so members can “read about learnings from peers on their impact journeys.” Central Working provides an extensive bibliography about coworking in general and about Central Working in particular. The Hive emphasizes that “our Hivers App, and our community engagement empowers our members with the network effect. Helping them build deep, lasting connections across the Hive membership base, whatever their industry, role or location.” This mention of an app references another benefit provided by some spaces: a password-protected platform for member communication separate from the open-access website.

As the number of coworking spaces has grown, some are differentiating themselves by establishing an ethical bond with a particular demographic. These include, for example, coworking spaces for veterans, or writers, or leaders of small non-profit organizations, or graphic artists. While none of the websites in my study targets only women as customers, several incorporate women in their appeals, reaching out to a group often underserved in other high-tech organizations. An early proponent of coworking—and accessibility—argues that spaces focused on women entrepreneurs are “exploding” (Baciagalupo 2017). Some are exclusive to women, as noted in their name, for example, CoworkHERS in Portland, Maine. Loffice, a coworking site in Budapest, targets a demographic they call, in a lovely twist on English, “newborn parents.” With the informal name “coworkid,” the space aims to connect new parents, men and women who are professionals interested in flexible work, with
entrepreneurs looking for such workers. Child care is incorporated in the mix (Davies and Tollervey 2013, p. 120). The Hive in Hong Kong talks about its appeal to independent creatives it calls “mumpreneurs” (Davies and Tollervey 2013, p. 46). Spacecubed in Perth, Australia, claims on its website that it serves women by partnering with an organization that “empowers and helps women learn coding by organising free programming workshops and meetups … to increase the diversity in the tech community, and to spark collaboration, creativity, and expand networks.”

Both Impact Hub and Spacecubed differentiate themselves by appealing to a demographic specifically focused on sustainability, broadly understood as a social as well as an ecological movement. Sustainability is often mentioned as a coworking value, demonstrated in part by the many spaces that emerged in buildings abandoned by earlier economies. Indeed, Jane Jacobs (1961), the urban economist who extolls the value of neighborhoods and organic growth, argues that old ideas can exist in new buildings, but that new ideas come best from old buildings. Impact Hub and Spacecubed had such origins; sustainability underpins their brand.

Impact Hub, in Bergen, Norway, occupies two wooden warehouses dating from 1702 in a harbor area prominent in the days of the Hanseatic League and currently a UNESCO historic site. Limited in funds for renovating the space, the founder invited local art and design students to help, a source of free ideas and a way to inform young creatives about the space. Most of the original furniture was “vintage, bespoke or upcycled” to explicitly save money and enhance sustainability (Davies and Tollervey 2013, p. 55). Originally an independent enterprise called The Hub, it has now expanded as part of a network of 101 “inspiring locations” focused on social innovation. Their embrace of the value of openness is shown in community programs that aim to “make a positive impact in the world.” This includes reducing air pollution and improving care for the elderly. Their members value “inspiring, connecting, and enabling citizens, entrepreneurs and organisations—to work together in collaborative environments and to jointly create resilient entrepreneurial ecosystems” (Davies and Tollervey 2013, p. 57).

Similarly, Spacecubed in Perth, Australia, emphasizes sustainability and social innovation as prominent values shared by its coworkers. Housed in a former Reserve Bank of Australia building, the original coworking space
was built using 75 percent recycled materials “to encourage sustainability in Perth” (Davies and Tollervey 2013, p. 149). It was also “shaped by the community of people who use it and has evolved organically over time.” That community includes social and environmental entrepreneurs, technology and creative startups, and government and corporate innovation teams. The brand statement on their 2019 website reads “empowering positive change through community.” Members can also connect with an industry-specific hub and a makerspace. Organizers of Spacecubed offer programs and grants to support their “passionate, driven community of collaborators fostering creativity and engagement.” The “Impact” button on Spacecubed’s home page links to statements about their program of mentoring and their grants aimed at “social impact and prioritising gender diversity in the workplace, inclusion and empowerment through entrepreneurship.” The three major themes are (1) “Enterprise education and experiential learning for youth”; (2) “Supporting regional innovation and enabling peer learning across regional communities”; and (3) “entrepreneurship research.”

**Pathos**

Reference to a “passionate, driven community of collaborators” evokes the third appeal of classical rhetoric, the appeal to emotions. Beyond finding the right office-like affordances to get their work done, and in a setting in which they’ll collaborate with the right people who share their values and will enhance their innovative thinking, potential members will find in the space the right aesthetics, the right feel. The space will give them the right experience. It will make their work enjoyable and make them happy. Given the consumerist society of the twenty-first Century, and a trend toward the aestheticizing of work, it’s important that people feel good in the space. Gensler (2018), for example, asserts that “The connection between a great experience and business performance is well documented.” This reputation of coworking is what the developers of federally funded opportunity zones in declining industrial cities of the US, for example, rely on to keep young professionals who would otherwise abandon them for San Francisco or Boston near home.
The founder of *Spaces* asked its designer in 2008 to create “spaces that are fun, inspiring and sociable to work in … a personalized and homely environment to encourage interaction and collaboration” (Davies and Tollervey 2013, p. 113). Under the heading “What we deliver,” the founder of the *Hive* notes on its website, “By delivering an exceptional Hive Experience, [with the capital letter E] we strive to ensure that every one of our members has a happy and successful day, every day.” Valuing openness and warmth, he boasts that “our team is passionate about providing an uplifting workplace experience.”

Like the founder of *Spaces*, coworking entrepreneurs are increasingly turning to professional space planners and designers to help them create attractive workplace experiences. What they learn from such designers, and the process of design thinking itself, is often reflected in their pitches. Most important, design thinking is human-centered. It begins in empathy, that is, understanding and sharing the feelings of others. It depends on close observation of potential customers, gaining an empirical knowledge of what they need, even when potential customers can’t articulate or imagine what they might want that a coworking space could provide. Coworking entrepreneurs need to create the desire in their pitches before their potential customers can see that they need the space, before they can imagine themselves in the space. That creation, I argue, is a rhetorical enterprise of its own.

**In Performance: The Appeals Combined**

To demonstrate how these rational, ethical, and emotional appeals can be effectively integrated in a persuasive story, told through an empathetical rhetorical persona, I’ve included below the full text of “Central Working, In our own Words” from the space’s website. The text is also a script, linked to a 2+minute Vimeo video featuring James Layfield, founder of *Central Working*, as he relaxes, in casual clothes, while seated on a couch in the space. In the video, Layfield the person demonstrates the good character of the founder-entrepreneur described earlier as an important element in each website in the study. The script as posted on the site varies somewhat awkwardly between description and first-person statements.
as it establishes the story’s context and argument. It does, however, consistently address the potential customer as “you.” Two headings, “The story of why” and “Our values,” and four quoted testimonials about the space break up the text and reinforce the argument that Central Working meets three big challenges (the third cast as a value) to new entrepreneurs: space, support, and a magical experience of community. To incorporate my commentary, I’ve divided the text into segments here, although it runs uninterrupted on the site.

**The story of why**

Central Working was started to address challenges that James Layfield, founder, believes all new business owners are affected by. The first was the space. Why sign leases for three, four, or even five years when you have no way of knowing how big or small your business will be in that time? Wouldn’t you prefer a space with soul, and a place you can envisage yourself going to work everyday? Somewhere you’ll be more likely to connect with the talent that you want to attract.

The second was support. It’s really difficult to be an entrepreneur, running your own business. There will be difficult times or issues that you might not feel you can speak to your team about, these problems then get bottled up and cause you unnecessary stress.
[First testimonial] “Central Working offers incredible flexibility with no leases to worry about. We also give you a genuine support network.”

That’s why Central Working offers incredible flexibility with no leases to worry about. We also give you a genuine support network; other people like you, running businesses, having problems, helping each other by sharing their experience and knowledge.

The second challenge, announced earlier, is the need for support. The option of flexibility in leases is repeated. Support is introduced. Empathy for those “running your own business” is reconfirmed. The story is now directly told by Layfield: “We … give you a support network.” The text references a common communication problem: not being able to talk with your team about “difficult times or issues” so these issues get “bottled up” and cause you stress. Not having to sign a lease is one way to relieve stress. The “support network” is even more important. Evoking the “genuine support network” further reinforces the ethical appeal of membership: a collaborative network for communication

Our values

Lots of people talk about ‘community’ and ‘networking’, but they just mean something random that relies on serendipity. At Central Working when we talk about reinvigorating community, we mean something much more reliable than that.

[Second testimonial] “When you walk into a Central Working location, you can feel that these people care about you.”

You spend most of your time in your office, so we’ve created a workplace that gives you a real and supportive community. It isn’t random, and is made up of people that really want to look after you and care for you, making you want to come into work each day. When you walk into a Central Working location, you can feel that these people care about you - not just our team, but the membership as a whole - it’s a real community, for you.

[Third testimonial] “Our team don’t have computers to sit behind; they will have a conversation with you. know your name and about your company, they care about you and what you do.”
“Our values” as a heading is not logically parallel with “The story of why” and comes in mid-text, which continues to discuss the second challenge (support). But the heading does reinforce the ethical appeal of a value-driven enterprise. As we’ve seen in this chapter, “community” and “networking,” even “serendipity,” are key marketing terms for coworking spaces. Within that context, Layfield refers to something special, setting up the discussion that follows, the differentiator. The second testimonial, from a speaker/member about the staff, and the third, spoken presumably by Layfield, reinforce the picture of a caring place, an empathetic community.

It’s pretty common to see someone walking around with their nose buried in their phone, and to us, that isn’t how business is done. The magic happens when you’re sat across a table, looking another person in the eye, talking to them with enthusiasm; that’s why our second value is about cherishing human connection. Email, Facebook, even instant messenger doesn’t offer that; that’s why we put you in the room with the right people.

[Fourth testimonial] “The word love isn’t used a huge amount in business, but we think it’s important.”

The way that those human connections help you is our third value: creating magical moments, with love, care and attention. The word love isn’t used a huge amount in business, but we think it’s important. Your workspace is where you spend most of your time, so if you don’t feel like there’s some truly inspirational magic in the air, what is the point? With us, you’ll be able to create moments that encourage your business to thrive.

Our members tell us there’s something amazing about our spaces, and we believe it’s the amount of effort and love that we put in. We can tell you our story, but the only way to really ‘get it’ is to come in and feel the difference for yourself.

This segment of the text/talk rises fully to the emotional appeal: “creating magical moments, with love, care and attention.” The image of people with noses buried in their smart phones contrasts with the picture of staff and coworkers at Central Working “cherishing human connection.” People at Central Working talk to each other. Proximity and face-to-face communication matter, even more than social media and
messaging apps. To achieve enthusiastic (and presumably productive and pleasurable) communication, “we put you in the room with the right people.”

The final testimonial introduces the concept of love, the ultimate positive emotion but a term rarely used in business. It should be, the speaker argues, because you, the entrepreneur and potential member, spend most of your time in your workspace. It’s unreasonable to spend that time somewhere that lacks “truly inspirational magic in the air.” The message: you’ll find it here. The repetition of the sentence beginning “The word love isn’t used….,” reiterates that argument. Love and effort create spaces that “our members” tell us are “something amazing.” Place makes magic. The pitch ends with an invitation to come to the space and “feel the difference.” Join the experience. Join the place.

Conclusion

“The Story of Central Working” pulls together with gusto key elements of the larger coworking story presented in the five websites which are the focus of this chapter. Hardly elegant or even grammatically correct, Layfield’s text still creates a strong and persuasive image of coworking as a values-driven enterprise that will enhance its members’ productivity and pleasure as they work. It demonstrates the power of a rhetorical persona who speaks for the enterprise (perhaps more so in the video) and employs well-tested strategies of persuasion—logical, ethical, and emotional—in building an argument in virtual space for the spatial experience a customer will find on the ground.

That said, in looking back on each of these websites as I write in 2020, I seem to be looking at another world. In particular, assumptions about community, the social creation of knowledge through face-to-face communication, the collaborative origins of innovation, and the importance of place—these seem, like the coworking spaces themselves, relics of a far distant past. It’s hard to know what form knowledge work, now mostly digital, will take when the world reopens.
Whatever form work takes, however, it will have to take place, somewhere, and thus the agency of place will continue to be an important research concern. This study of coworking websites has been something of an aside from such research. But it has uncovered an interesting data base in itself and illustrates the productivity of a mixed-methods approach in illuminating this data. Of the themes being addressed in this volume, such **triangulation** comes to the forefront in my research. The study is also tied to an interesting new concept for a workplace, making this business and professional **background** relevant. These workplaces were real and thus research on them is, I’d argue, **authentic** even if their virtual representations, the object of my study, are artifices created through rhetorical strategies. The fourth theme, **saturation**, was not a concern. My study in the end aimed to be suggestive, to offer new ways to find and analyze data rather than to close an argument around a determined sufficiency of data found.

In conclusion, let me suggest two ways to extend this mixed-methods approach as new forms of knowledge work prevail beyond the particular configuration of a workplace represented by coworking spaces.

First, once I had identified these stories of coworking as a rhetorical genre, I realized that, in fact, they were also exemplars of the kind of communication entrepreneurs pitching any innovative idea, service, or product must create. The activities and the writing needed to create an organization and market that organization often differ from such practices in existing organizations (e.g., Spartz and Weber 2015). Among other differences, this requires storytelling, narratives that envision a scene in the future in which customers can imagine themselves using, to great benefit, the app or other product the entrepreneur has created for them, whether the potential customers know they need it or not. These coworking websites are good examples of entrepreneurial storytelling, and research on them can inform other entrepreneurs as they write their own organizations into being.

Second, as I applied theory and method from classical rhetoric to these pitches, I was also reminded about the powerful role rhetorical tropes, particularly metaphor and personification, play in enhancing creativity and communication. This may seem obvious but is worth restating. Phrases like “join a place,” “inspiring location,” “collaborative
environment,” “make thinking tangible,” “a place with soul,” “personalized and homely environment,” are among many quoted in the chapter that attribute the characteristics and abilities of humans in real places to the rhetorical place being evoked. Communicating a new idea or a new place through metaphor—giving human characteristics to an object—can have subtle, persuasive appeal. I’ve only touched on metaphoric implications in this study, as in the list of names for coworking spaces, but the data warrant another look with that in mind.

For the larger picture of research on business and professional discourse, I hope this study has at least sketched an inviting area of interest at the intersection of questions about the agency of text, which is the province of classical rhetoric, and the agency of place, which is the concern of material culture studies and design thinking.

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