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Caroline Datchary & Séverine Marguin

## **Space and Ecology**

Multiscalar socio-spatial survey on  
the development of startups

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**Multiscalar socio-spatial investigation on the development of startups**

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## Abstract

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This paper, which is the result of an encounter between two epistemic cultures, traces our discussion of the notions of ecology and space, conducted on the basis of an ethnographic survey of a biotech startup holding company in Berlin. Following a spatio-temporal approach, we sketch the scalar logics supporting the spatialization strategies in the course of the holding’s economic expansion: which spatial qualities can be detected according to the phases and needs of the companies? What role do global chains of coworking spaces play with their standardized offer of workspaces? How does the spatial path of the holding company affect employees and the construction of their professional identity? We conclude the paper with a theoretical discussion on the (in)compatibilities between the concepts of space and ecology.

*Keywords: Relational Space, Ecology, French Sociology, Multiscalarity, Startup development*

## 1. Empirical approach for a theoretical comparison

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The approach that forms the starting point of this working paper is a fundamentally experimental and dialogical one. Through presentations at academic events over the last few years, we have sensed a real epistemological familiarity, despite a distinctly different positioning and theoretical framework (French pragmatic sociology of work for one and German sociology of space for the other). Convinced that a rapprochement would be a productive heuristic to reflect on our respective theoretical positions, we wanted to confront our understandings and uses of the concepts of “ecology” and “space” to evaluate their differences and similarities. As sociology is an empirical-conceptual discipline, it seemed logical to us to base this theoretical discussion on the inductive analysis of a jointly conducted exploratory fieldwork study. The joint fieldwork allowed us to discuss in real time the specific modalities of the investigation as well as the elements of the fieldwork we considered most important, and to test our differing perspectives.

This fieldwork took place over two weeks in June 2022 in Berlin, Germany, in a startup within the field of healthcare technology. The topic we chose concerned the use and representation of workspaces in a post-Covid context, which we assumed would be characterized by increased reflexivity on the part of the employees. Ultimately, however, the choice of field was secondary to its actual accessibility in the given time period: what was important was to concretely organize the empirical testing of our theoretical familiarity.

It seems important to examine the impact of this specific research arrangement characterized by both its speed and intensity: we did nothing else during these two weeks, which is not so common given the heterogeneous and fragmented nature of our daily teaching and research activities. We established regular time slots for dialogue during and between the observation sessions. These initially spontaneous and oral conversations on a sofa in the field were soon supplemented by note-taking and sketching in our notebooks. The ‘writing chain’ (Fraenkel 2001) did not stop there: We made use of a software that allowed the exchange of both notes and images, which we found practical for organizing the juxtaposition of elements. During the first observation session, it already became clear that our previously perceived intellectual understanding was not unfounded. While our respective observations were not completely congruent, in most cases they coincided and even complemented each other. Feeling intellectually inspired, we were eager to record our early analyses and to start organizing this theoretical dialogue, convinced that, at the end of these two weeks, we would be quickly caught up with the rest of our activities.

Let us now turn to the content: In this article, we want to analyze the spatial strategies of a startup holding company in Berlin in the different phases of its development. In

the context of a spatio-temporal analysis, the aim is thus to outline the scalar logics that constitute the location choices of the various workspaces throughout the economic expansion of the future holding company: What spatial characteristics or qualities can be identified in the different phases and demands of the companies? What is the role of global enterprises providing coworking spaces with their standardized supply of workspaces? How does the spatial trajectory of the holding company affect the employees and the construction of their professional identity?

To conduct this multiscale study, we used various methods of data collection and analysis. The main tool of the study was multimodal ethnographic observations in the different premises of the startup holding company, which were recorded in the form of field notes and protocols, photographs, drawings, and mappings (Baxter et al. 2021; Marguin 2022). We were able to conduct a group discussion with employees of a startup of the holding company who were about to leave a high-end coworking facility and join the parent headquarters of the holding company on its own premises, as well as several interviews with the head of the startup. Finally, some employees ( $n = 4$ ) answered an email questionnaire using the method of self-photography, in which they were asked to report on their workspaces at home as well as at the coworking space, and on the time of transition between the two.

The research shows that the materiality of the spaces plays an essential role in the process of identity formation of companies and employees and can prove to be a source of unresolvable conflicts. We have observed that global chains of coworking spaces have a major impact on shaping expected notions of what a workspace should look like for employees belonging to a cosmopolitan economic elite. This specific and serial standardization of workspaces may conflict with the spatial trajectories of the startups themselves, whose growth needs may go hand in hand with their spatial autonomization.

The following account is organized in two parts, mirroring the inductive research approach that we adopted together throughout the process. The first part presents the exploratory and experimental ethnographic research in Berlin as well as its findings. We looked at the connections that are formed between resident companies and these elite coworking spaces. By focusing on the international and dynamic startup milieu in Berlin, the aim was to empirically investigate a possible refiguration of the flexible workspaces of a specific cosmopolitan economic elite. The second part is a theoretical discussion around the similarities and differences between the concepts of ecology and relational space. We argue for a relational space/ecology approach, with the aim of shedding light on research questions that relate to the organization, work, or career of employees. This is a point that unites us despite our differences with regards to social theory: we both believe that a focus on space/ecology can enable a complex and accurate analysis of the social changes that are at work. In fact, the notion of ecology, like that of relational space, aims to

emphasize the connection between a certain practice and its surroundings, to re-establish the ties between the activity and the environment in which it unfolds.

## **2. Multiscalar socio-spatial investigation on startup development**

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As part of this experiment, we decided to conduct joint fieldwork in the area of workplace studies<sup>1</sup>, in which both of us have expertise (Datchary 2011; Marguin et al. 2019). Our initial considerations concerned the issue of the sustainable transformation of workspaces in the post-pandemic context, a phenomenon that we felt was exacerbated in the case of coworking spaces, thereby rendering it an exciting object of research.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in these flexible workspaces, which symbolize a new and expanding style of work. According to Deskmag, the global coworking news magazine, “at the beginning of 2020, roughly 2.2 million people were working in approximately 22,000 CWS worldwide” (Deskmag 2019). A coworking space, as a third place (Moriset 2014), is “a place where entrepreneurs, bearers of projects and ideas who wish to share them with others, can meet and work; this place is energized by a specific animation that aims to create connections within the coworking community” (Moriset 2017: par. 2, own translation). Since their emergence in the 2000s, in connection with the shared economy and its community logic, coworking spaces have seen a diversification of their business models: we now observe a growing number of international companies whose business model is based on offering coworking spaces to small and medium-sized startups. These global coworking chains “[sell] the collaborative working idea from the very beginning, but by combining it with the exclusivity and high prices of the business centre model. [The company], which targets start-ups and freelancers, but also established companies, functions similarly to other elite ‘clubs’ such as sailing clubs or Soho House clubs, where you need a membership card to get access to the community and physical amenities” (Müller 2021: 128). There is a growing but still marginal literature on coworking spaces, such as Müller’s work on coworking spaces in Berlin (2021), Huang et al.’s work on coworking spaces in Beijing (2020), or Cnossen and Stephenson’s work on coworking spaces in Paris and Amsterdam (2022). However, as the various authors note, this “research on the spatial dimensions of coworking spaces is still in its infancy” (Huang et al. 2020: 41) and tends to focus on the layout and interior design and urban implementation of coworking spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> By the terms of workplace studies with small capital we refer to a broader field of study and not to the very specific research current of Workplace Studies (see Luff et al. 2010).

In the presentation of the preliminary results of our joint investigation, we will begin by describing the divergent spatial properties of the different spaces inhabited by the holding company and its members, before differentiating the various spatialization strategies associated with these spaces, and ending with an analysis of the links between space and identity. This diachronic analysis of the spatial paths of high-end coworking spaces, of the holding company and its different startups, as well as of the employees, reveals a conflictual refiguration of the working spaces of a specific cosmopolitan economic elite - this is our thesis.

## **2.1. A startup located in a high-end coworking space**

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We will begin with a thick description of the entanglement of the two actors at the center of this investigation: firstly, the startup, we focused on, member of a digital health entrepreneurial ecosystem and secondly, the global coworking space enterprise offering the first anchoring to the said startup.

### **2.1.1 Focusing on the youngest member of a digital health entrepreneurial ecosystem**

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The startup 2.2 (as we anonymized it) is a medical-psychological startup based in Berlin. As a digital health company, it is building disruptive digital interventions in the area of mental health specifically intended for the treatment of major and minor depression as well as other affective spectrum disorders via a simple smartphone app. It is currently developing four products, all in the field of neurological disorders: while the first product for the treatment of major depression is currently undergoing clinical testing, the second product for anxiety disorders is in the prototyping phase and, finally, the third and fourth products, for post-traumatic stress disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder respectively, are both in the early discovery phase. The first product is their flagship product, which they hope to have approved by the health authorities soon so that it may be recognized as a prescribable treatment. It is the spatial story of the team of the start-up 2.2 developing this flagship product which we want to tell in this paper.

The startup 2.2 brings together a team of 8 people. It is an interdisciplinary team at the crossroads of neuroscience, machine learning, and psychology whose objective is to develop a new type of digital intervention. Anchored in the field of applied research, they are co-funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Using a patented neurophysiology-based technology that uses visual stimulation to treat depression and anxiety disorders, they have conducted 7-day preclinical trials that have shown promising results and are currently preparing 6-week clinical trials. The team includes a COO, a science manager, a machine learning scientist, three neuroscientists, a game designer – all under the direction of a

managing director and a managing partner who are members of the holding company that oversees the startup 2.2.

The startup 2.2 is embedded in a dynamic, constantly changing ecosystem. It is part of the Berlin startup holding company, anonymized here as DigiHealth, which brings together several startups in the digital health sector. Its two founders have built their respective careers at the intersection of the fields of healthcare and business, serving as consultants and directors of various institutions and holding advisory roles with public health organizations. The holding company DigiHealth was created after the proliferation of several companies in the wake of the establishment of the first company startup 1 in 2012. Today, it contains 3 separate domains (see figure 1):

- The first domain is consulting startups in the field of digital health. The aforementioned startup 1 is in fact providing an ecosystem for the next generation of healthcare by guiding industry leaders and entrepreneurs to the future markets of healthcare. This startup is the flagship of DigiHealth.
- The second is the financing of products/investments in the field of digital health. This is where the venture DigiHealth comes in, a venture for fundraising in the field of digital health.
- The third is the direct development of products/applications in the field of digital health for patients and doctors. There is one shareholder company, startup 2, which hosts two startups: startup 2.1, active in the ophtalmological field; and our startup 2.2, active in the neurological field.

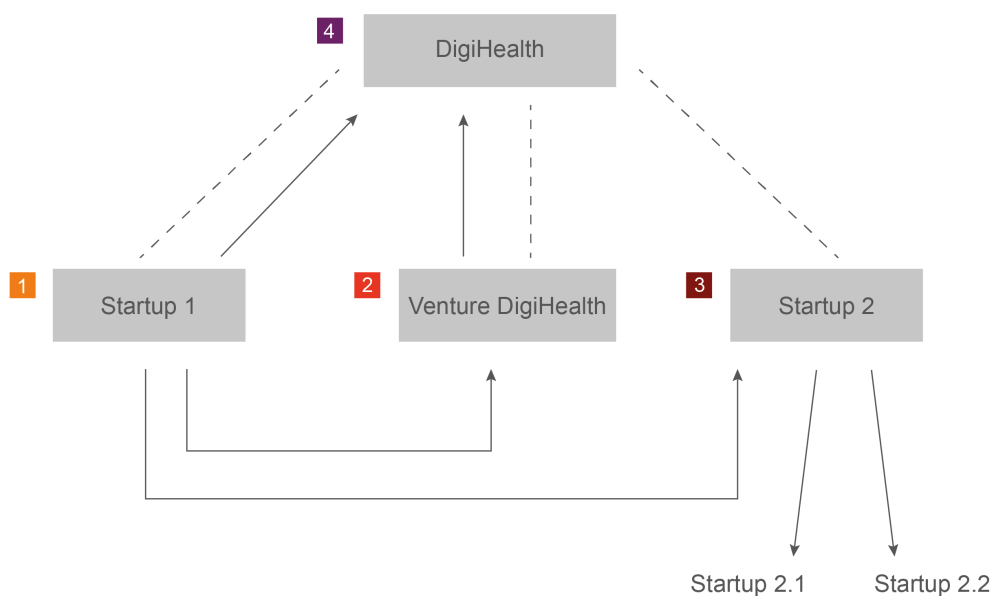


Figure 1: Growth and expansion of DigiHealth (own diagram).

This multifaceted development strategy shows an ambition to cover different aspects of the flourishing digital health sector by implementing an entrepreneurial ecosystem development strategy (Cloutier/Messeghem 2022). So the startup 2.2, as the latest creation of DigiHealth, is not an isolated startup fighting alone, but rather it is nourished by the entrepreneurial ecosystem set up by the holding and has benefited from being housed in a luxury coworking space: FLEXI.

### **2.1.2 FLEXI, a luxury hotel for startups**

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FLEXI offers various office spaces: private offices, team suites, or even a simple office in a shared space. The FLEXI site where DigiHealth's activities are mainly developed is located on one of the main streets in the central district of Berlin-Mitte. It is a busy shopping street, full of stores and cafés, which was recently converted into a street for pedestrians and bicycles only. The atmosphere is lively, with lots of people moving from one side of the street to the other. The bustle of the city is palpable. It is a business district, with very little residential space. Here, FLEXI occupies the top two floors of a large building with several backyards in the tradition of Berlin architecture. The lower levels of the building contain a mall with stores and a variety of places to eat at lunchtime. On the ground floor, directly facing the street and next to the elevators of the building, there is a reception area of FLEXI. This area, which is staffed by a FLEXI hostess behind a counter and includes a desk with six workstations and a sofa area, is intended for visitors and new members. Regular users gain access to the floors of FLEXI via the building's elevator, using a badge authorizing their entry.

The premises on the 6th and 7th floors are organized around two large square-shaped patios. When our host, the head of startup 2.2, takes us to the two cubicles of his team, we quickly experience a sense of disorientation as we move through a series of right-angle turns and a succession of relatively similar shared spaces. The lack of a direct view of the street reinforces the impression of walking in circles. Signage on the walls helps navigation, adding humorous quotes to reinforce the feeling of belonging to the same social circle (see figure 2).

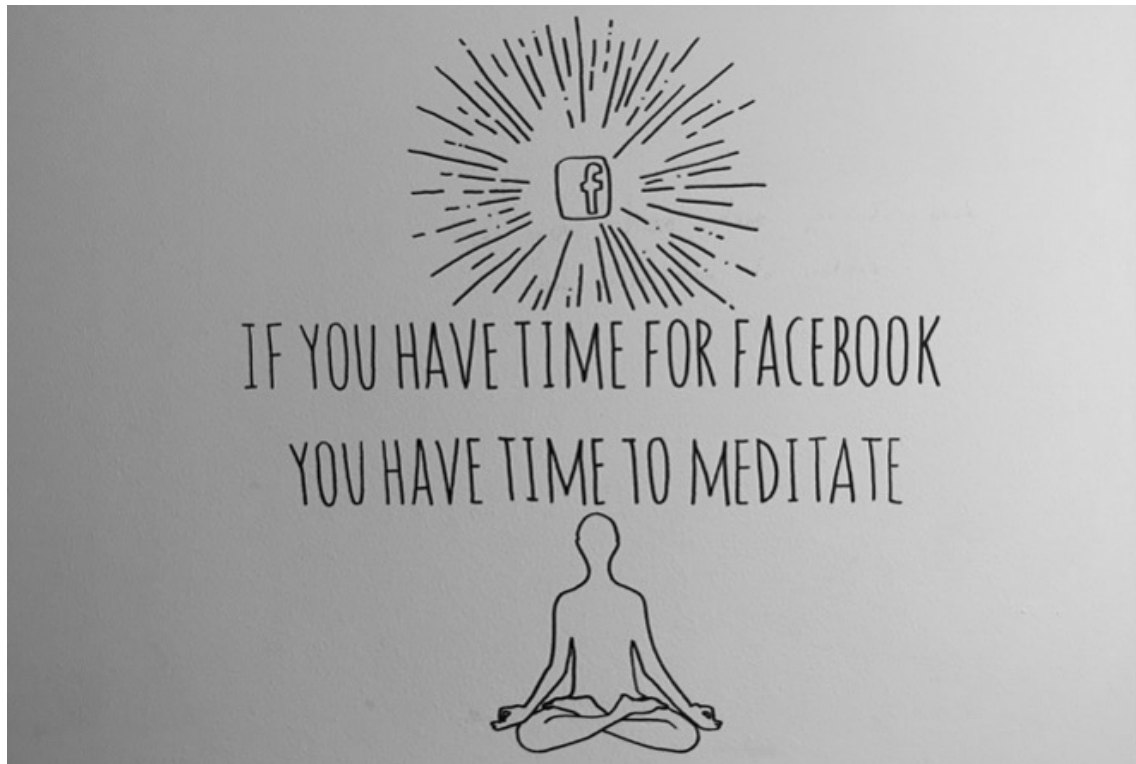


Figure 2: Photo of a corridor of FLEXI (own source).

The cubicles are arranged along the outer walls facing the street or courtyard, while the community spaces form the central span. The work cubicles are transparent on all four sides. Several elements are used on some of the windows to produce opacity: posters, writing on glass, milk glass. The cubicles vary in size, usually containing 2, 4 or 6 desks. The basic equipment of each office is identical (desks, chairs, shelves, monitors, hanging plants, etc.) with little variety (cupboard, meeting table, decorative objects, personal items brought in by employees). The startup 2.2, in turn, occupies two adjacent offices and a third located in a different wing; we will come back to this spatial discontinuity later. The shared spaces differ in nature, even if this is treated spatially as a fluid transition, exemplifying the philosophy of such workspaces: there are formal communication facilities that occupy clearly demarcated areas (meeting rooms, phone booths) but also more informal ones extending into home-like settings (sofa, terrace) located near a fully equipped kitchen, with unlimited drinks and goodies, depending on the partnerships currently in place.

To summarize the spatial qualities of FLEXI on this site: a) architecturally and atmospherically, the workspaces are transparent, cosy, bright, luxurious. They project an image of creative serialism that is relaxed but productive and successful. b) They are serial, i.e. the equipment and spaces are alike and belong to the same series, which refers to a specific eco-system associated with a particular social milieu, that of a cosmopolitan economic elite. c) They are of the order of a centralized bastion, insofar as FLEXI is a confined place, hardly accessible from the outside



without the required badge. Once inside, the circulation is directed towards the interior where the shared spaces are located. d) And lastly, the workspaces are hybrid, providing a homey quality due to their comfortable and cosy layout, which offers incentives for non-work commitments that are, in turn, reinvested in work in terms of time, relationships, etc. (cf. Time Bind).

## **2.2 Risk of spatial closure**

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In order to analyze the spatialization strategies of the holding company, it seems necessary to adopt a diachronic perspective on our research object, and thus to trace the history of both the holding company as well as the company renting the coworking spaces.

### **2.2.1 Spatialization strategies adapted to the phases of development**

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The spatial journey of the entrepreneurial ecosystem developed by DigiHealth is closely linked to the establishment of FLEXI in Berlin in the middle of the 2010s: in fact, in the early days of their first startup 1, the three founders used to work at a café. When the startup began to grow, they had the opportunity to rent office space from the Israeli company FLEXI, which had just opened its doors in Berlin with its first location in Mitte. So the startup's debut coincided with FLEXI's debut, it was a euphoric and exhilarating time. The process of diversifying the portfolio of what was becoming the DigiHealth ecosystem gradually led to more office space being rented from FLEXI: for the holding company itself but also for the two startups that were created later, startup 2.1 and, more recently, startup 2.2. This was one of the advantages of being in a startup incubator, as it could – at least for a certain time – accompany the first expansions of the startups that were already part of its ecosystem.

At the time of the survey, however, there were divergent spatial trajectories of different members of the DigiHealth ecosystem:

- The holding company seized an opportunity provided by the social network of its director to leave FLEXI during the pandemic to move into its own premises, located in a Berlin church in the heart of the city's center.
- The fast-growing startup 2.1, which was at this point already autonomous and recently transitioned into a clinical-stage company, wanted to expand but could not find adjoining cubicles at this FLEXI site and therefore made the decision to move to another FLEXI location, situated 400m away.

- The startup 2.2, the focus of our exploratory investigation, is about to move from the first FLEXI site to the headquarters of the holding company located in a church. This is due to a variety of factors. The main reason is that the startup is not developing at the expected rate and needs to be monitored more closely by the holding company; however, it is also related to the fact that the startup is expected to expand soon and, as in the case of startup 2.1, it is not possible to find adjacent offices in the first FLEXI location; and finally, the use of the generous premises in the church allows them to avoid FLEXI's expensive rent.

These different spatial locations are linked to a particular moment in the expansion of the holding company and its startups. They are the result of different spatialization strategies.

The first is a strategy of setting up in the startup environment: as already mentioned, startup 1's founders decided to join FLEXI when the business began to take off. In the employees' accounts, this refers to the golden age of these luxurious, casual, and creative workspaces, which always managed to impress clients and investors (what one employee describes as "the wow effect"). In the literature, coworking is justified using different criteria such as "efficiency and optimization of sub-utilized resources" (Muñoz/Cohen 2017), the attractiveness of "collaborative consumption" (Botsman/Rogers 2010) or the search for temporary space in case of large projects with limited duration (Müller 2021). In our case, it is more a question of economic development, since the main argument for startup 1 was "to be close to the target group of their products and thus to adapt them properly. In these cases, the interest lies less in the aim of reducing the consumption of resources and more in the aim of benefiting from the community in order to make profit within their own company" (Müller 2021: 125).

After the development of startup 1, and the subsequent creation of various other companies, a strategy was set up for dissemination in different startup networks. During the pandemic, one of the holding companies invested in offices in another FLEXI site, which is located a few hundred meters from the original FLEXI. The main reason was a lack of space in the original location, which hindered the expansion of the respective startup. This corresponds to the second phase of development after several years (Grossetti et al. 2018: 83). The decision to set up in the neighboring FLEXI shows that the serialization logic of FLEXI works and that it can through its "own brand [...] be recognized anywhere in the world by [its] design. This includes the universal style of coworking interiors which combine design classics with the ambience of a living room and thus represent a counterpart to classical office style. [...] This makes you feel 'at home' all over the world and indicates a global vision of the 'ideal' working environment for creative professionals" (Müller 2021: 129).

The third strategy, breaking with this alignment of the startup with the global coworking chain, constitutes an appropriative anchoring strategy, in which the company moves out of the coworking chain's spaces and into its own space. Again, this comes back to the question of available space, which works against the expansion of the new startup: startup 2.2 fails to obtain adjacent spaces in the first FLEXI site, and in the post-Covid phase, it is out of the question for the managers to encourage desk-sharing or hot-desking practices (Moriset 2017). On the contrary, the company needs to strengthen its identity, which is reflected in its own unique spatiality – not in serial coworking spaces. The narrative (Ughetto 2014) of the space genuinely becomes a strategy for the company to strengthen its internal cohesion.

The context of the move, a spatial rupture par excellence, allowed us to understand the attachment and the projected needs of the company and its employees regarding their workspaces as well as their dependencies on a global coworking company like FLEXI.

### **2.2.2 FLEXI, a breeding ground for the ecosystem – for a certain period of time**

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FLEXI has been a very important breeding ground for the development of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Indeed, a new workspace market has emerged since the 1970s, driven by new professionals, often from outside the company (Pillon 2016). FLEXI, which inherited this tradition a few decades later, bases its economic identity on the production of workspaces that it rents to startups. Located in a German city with little industrial focus, this startup incubator hosts mainly digital activities that can be carried out from anywhere since there is little need for specific industrial or laboratory equipment. However, working at FLEXI does not imply working anywhere else, as FLEXI offers not only premises but also related services and a distinctive image, which, as already mentioned, is linked to its innovative character.

The uniqueness of the work environment that startups offer to their employees, and which FLEXI perfectly embodies, often comes up in analyses as a distinctive element. This spatial setting, which is less compartmentalized than in traditional companies, encourages personal development and offers the opportunity to engage in activities that traditionally take place outside the corporate world (e.g., games, meals, parties, relaxation, concierge services, etc.). According to some authors (Hochschild 1997; Flécher 2019), this blurring allows workers to better strengthen their commitment to the workplace by allowing them to spend more time at work, but also by embedding their professional relationships in friendly relationships: “The designs made in the years 1990-2000 embody organizational principles and managerial conceptions of work. The search for greater subjective involvement in work and for cross-disciplinary professional exchanges tends to redefine the workplace as a ‘place to

live'. There is both a specialization and an extension of the functions of workspaces contributing to the blurring of boundaries (individual/collective; personal/professional; rest time/active time)" (Benedetto-Meyer/Cihuelo 2016, own translation) (see figure 3).



Figure 3: Example of boundaries blurring (own source).

These are precisely the features that companies offering coworking spaces have relied on to capture ever-larger markets. The development of FLEXI is exemplary in this regard: the Israeli company founded in the mid of 2010s is characterized by rapid expansion. It started out providing coworking spaces in Tel Aviv before expanding to Europe. While startups and freelancers make up a large part of the company's customers, more and more companies with a global reach are moving into spaces provided by FLEXI. The company is therefore expanding rapidly, now boasting 30 offices in Western Europe (Germany, Netherlands, UK) and Eastern Europe (Poland, Romania), as well as several locations in the US (see figure 4). Like a luxury hotel for established startups, FLEXI defines itself as a new generation of impeccably stylish and flexible workspaces that inspire collaboration, stimulate innovation, and magnify the significant effect of idea sharing. It shares this exemplary path with other competing companies, and the development of one of them has even been adapted into an American TV streaming series called "WeCrashed", starring well-known actors and actresses.

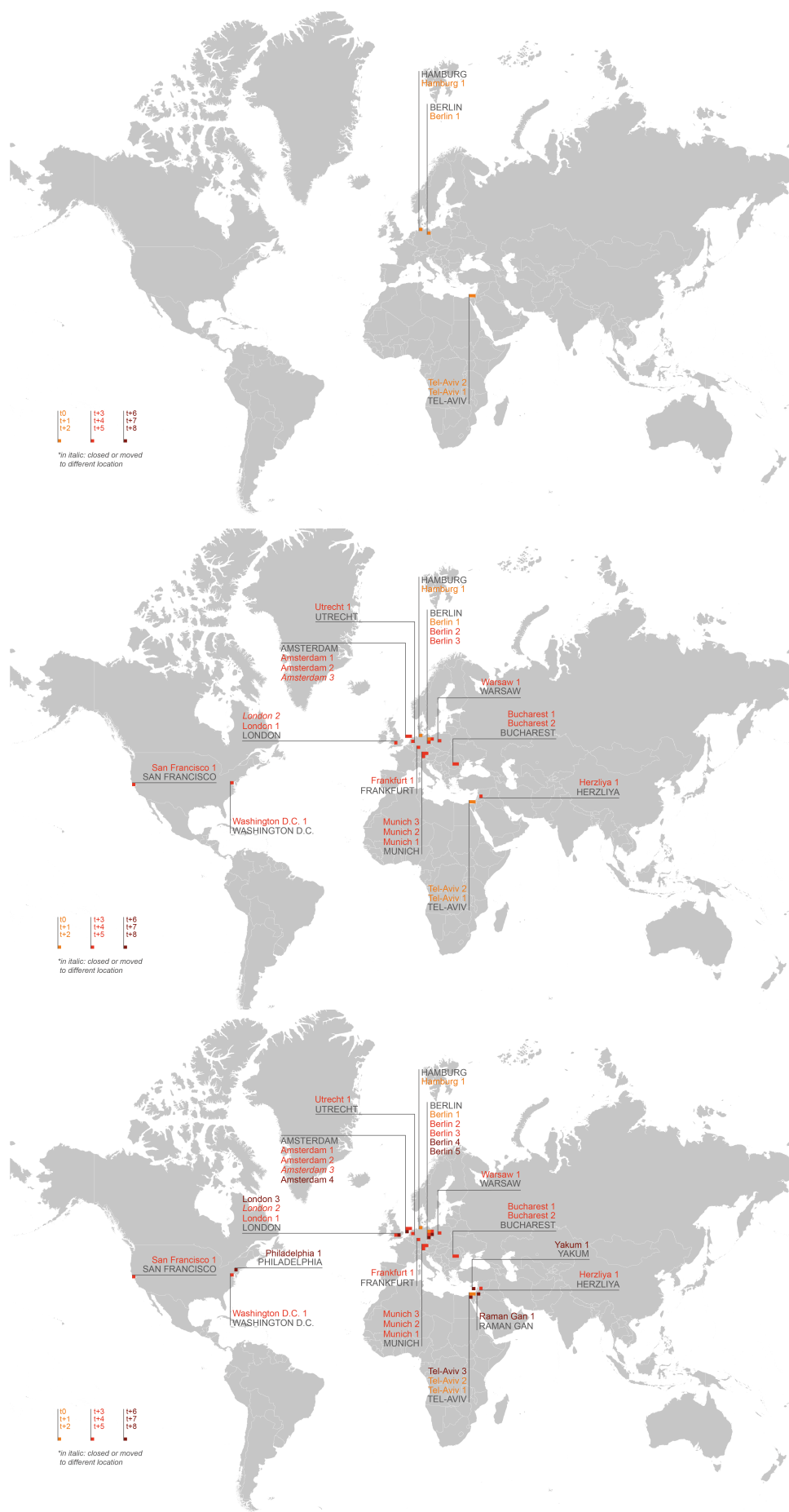


Figure 4: Mapping of the worldwide expansion of FLEXI since the mid-2010s in three phases (own source).

The proliferation of such workspaces and the symbolic discourse of their managers is evidence of their increasing dominance. We put forward the hypothesis that these global coworking companies brand the spatial representations of offices in distinctive, translocally effective ways. They impregnate and shape an idealized vision of what workspaces should be.

### 2.2.3 Desynchronization of spatial paths

Although real synergies existed between FLEXI, DigiHealth and the employees at the outset, these congruences have been eroded over time. The decoupling of employee relations within FLEXI was initially beneficial to DigiHealth, but given its economic development, this is no longer the case. As DigiHealth grew and entered a “market” phase (Grossetti et al. 2018), it needed more space. The flexibility and modularity of workspaces, which are rented on a monthly basis, are emphasized in FLEXI’s offer. But in reality, it is not possible to rent a contiguous office due to the demand and low turnover of the tenant companies. This poses an initial problem in terms of work teams, as the additional office space offered by FLEXI is located on another wing and the common spaces are not the same. Beyond these practical problems that undermine the service provided by FLEXI, the distinctiveness of these premises has clearly been weakened with the rapid development of other similar coworking spaces, as mentioned by the managers of the startup and the holding. FLEXI now has 5 buildings in Berlin (see figure 5).

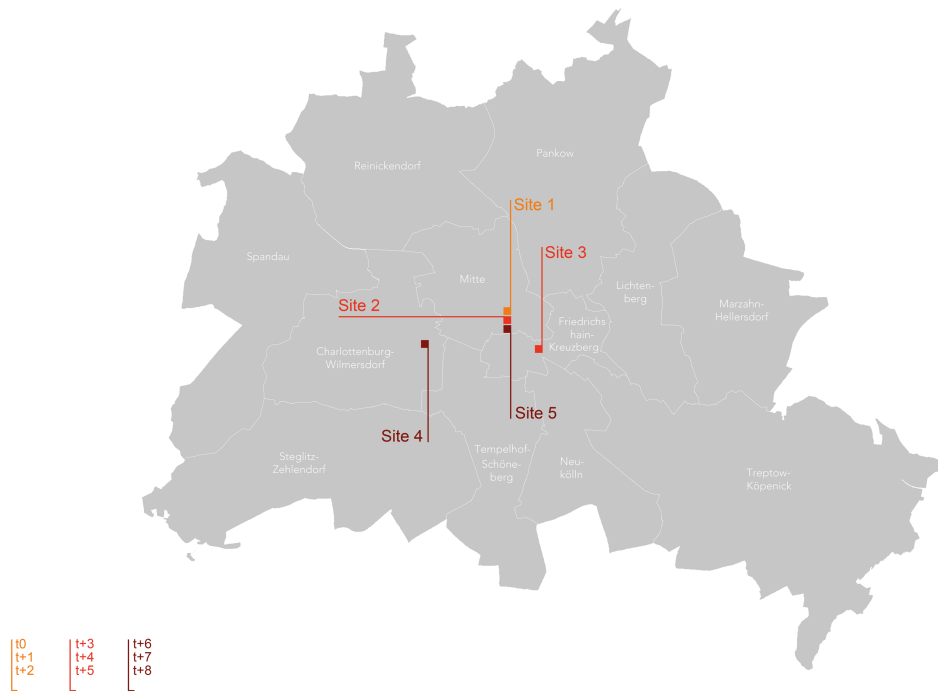


Figure 5: Mapping of the expansion of FLEXI in Berlin since the mid-2010s (own source).

This trend can be observed on a global scale: in 2019, the number of coworking spaces worldwide was estimated at 22,400 (Mazareanu 2019; Cnossen/Stephenson 2022). However, as previously mentioned, the uniqueness of these premises is a key element of the strategy of this type of company, not only for the employees but also, and above all, for the clients, in order to distinguish themselves from the competition. Another motivation for moving to other premises is the need to further establish the brand in view of the expansion phase. At the entrance of FLEXI's premises, there is no mention of the companies hosted (see figure 6).



Figure 6: Entrance of FLEXI (own source).

If we look closely at the signage of these workspaces, we can see that the identity markers of each individual company have been erased in favor of those of the startup space (see figure 7). Once inside the premises, there is no map displayed for visitors or available to employees to locate the companies, and the tangle of serialized but still slightly differentiated spaces contributes to a feeling of disorientation. Employees all told us that it took time to find their way around the premises, and even now, finding the right meeting room was not easy for everyone. In addition to the furniture, the written messages on the walls contribute to this serialization of spaces.





Figure 7: Orientation markers without any company names in FLEXI (own source).

This signage only indicates the office numbers. Overall, the identity of the companies appears only through a discreet logo on a glass door that is not always visible given the abundance of lettering, but also depending on the angle of view or incidence of light (see figure 8).



Figure 8: Markers of the company names in FLEXI (own source).



We can thus detect a competitive dimension in relation to identity profiling in this informational environment, as has been shown in other fields (Denis/Pontille 2009), revealing the complex positioning games played by the actors. This observed shortcoming is not so surprising if we refer to certain studies that have shown that, at a global level, the two main target groups of 80% of coworking spaces were individual employees and companies with less than ten employees (Cnossen/Stephenson 2022: 7). This competitive dimension is fully reflected in the attachment of employees to the workspace, which is that of FLEXI rather than DigiHealth, in line with the idea of a workplace conceived as a place to live (Pillon 2016). DigiHealth's plan to move in order to free itself from FLEXI and consolidate its identity is therefore met with resentment by employees, even if their capacity to protest remains very limited as has been shown: "the organizational framework of start-ups is not very conducive to the emergence of a critique of the model, on the contrary it aims to produce consent and loyalty, or to incite people to leave the organization" (Flécher 2019, own translation).

### **2.3 From the mall to the church: a story of decoupling**

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Indeed, it became clear during a focus group interview that the employees of startup 2.2 were not ready to move from FLEXI to the church. An analysis of the spatial qualities of the church will help to highlight the differences between the two workspaces.

#### **2.3.1 Berlin Dome, the solemn home of a growing company**

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The site of the church, where the holding company is located and which is about to merge with the startup previously located in FLEXI, exhibits completely different spatial qualities. The church is located on the banks of the river Spree close to one of Berlin's tourist districts. It is a neighborhood consisting mainly of buildings from the historicism era, built between 1824 and 1930 and placed under historical protection. It also has the museum-like atmosphere of a tourist district, which at peak times is full of sightseers, whether in its gardens, on the quays, or on river cruises.

DigiHealth occupies the former canonical quarters, which were once reserved for high religious dignitaries of the church in question. These quarters are accessible through a side entrance on the west wing of the church. There is a bell for visitors and a code for employees of companies renting the canonic quarters. The entrance door is made of solid wood - majestic, proportionate to the dimensions of the church. The vestibule has the appearance of an antechamber, with three dark paneled

doors: the two doors on the sides lead to offices of religious dignitaries in charge of the church. The third door leads to hall occupied by a stairwell. On the first floor, this hall serves as a storage/warehouse for church supplies and furniture. DigiHealth's office is located on the second floor, accessible by stairs. The space is very quiet and reverberant, and tends to discipline visitors into an attitude of poise, reverence, devotion (see figure 9).



Figure 9: Entrance door of DigiHealth in the church (own source).

The entrance to the offices is a row of massive, non-transparent, heavy wooden doors. The premises are organized on two levels. The lower floor is bright with large windows directly overlooking the Spree, which offers an inspiring and relaxing view. There is an adjacent meeting room, which also serves as a videoconference room and is occupied by the head of the holding company. Using the “magic key” (according to one of the employees), one can access a balcony overlooking the nave

of the church through an adjacent door. Bending forwards, one can admire the church's ornate dome. The offices of the startup are completely soundproofed, you can't hear the organ concerts at DigiHealth. There is a phone booth to isolate oneself, but it is less elaborately designed than in FLEXI and also less efficient. At the foot of the central staircase leading to the mezzanine, there is a coffee machine with armchairs next to it, available to employees. The upper level is a mezzanine, partially open to the lower level, with no acoustic separation. There are solid wood shelves both above and below, a protected historical heritage from the quarters of religious dignitaries. This classic furniture is complemented by standard startup furniture with Modur tables and canary yellow desk lamps (see figure 10).



Figure 10: Offices of DigiHealth in the church (own source).

To synthesize the spatial qualities of the church: a) From an architectural and atmospheric point of view, the workspaces are transparent, open, bright, classic. They convey an image of productive seriousness and confidence. b) They are singular, distinctive, original and privileged, due to the functional subversion of the place. c) They are conservative, gut-bürgerlich (educated middle-class), convey an impression of respectability, so trustworthy that the Church seems to vouch for them. d) They form a compartmentalized enclave, which (re)establishes the clear separation between personal domestic and work space and thus brings about a disconnection from the business district, from the FLEXI ecosystem, and a withdrawal into the company itself. The church functions here as a symbol of inwardness, as an

echo of the sanctuary of knowledge represented by the university with which DigiHealth is closely linked.

All in all, while the dome's spatial qualities – which differ greatly from those of FLEXI – better match DigiHealth's needs, the same cannot be said for the aspirations of the employees.

### **2.3.2 Space and identities**

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On the employee side, studies in psychology and anthropology have clearly shown how workers appropriate a space in order to make it their own (Monjaret 1996, 2002). This appropriation “ultimately becomes the means to recognize oneself, to interact and to have one's identity recognized” (Benedetto-Meyer/Cihuelo 2016, own translation). According to Bobillier Chaumon (2013: 162, own translation), “lastly, one appropriates [and accepts] only that in which one can recognize oneself.” The establishment of this link between identity and space is self-evident when we understand space as an ecosystem of interacting elements, as identity is the place one occupies in a changing configuration (Glynn/Navis 2013). “With a relational view, we assume that identity play activities have an effect on space, as does space on identity play” (Cnossen/Stephenson 2022: 5).

More specifically, coworking spaces are also vehicles for professional identity (Bacevice et al. 2019; Cnossen/Stephenson 2022: 3). These authors highlight several spatial mechanisms in which coworking spaces engage identity. The first is the blurring of boundaries between a space designed for work and non-work activities; it works particularly well among young workers who are in a transitional period between the end of their studies and the beginning of their working lives. “This liminal character is present in how people say they perceive the space: buzzing, the right type of noise, decorated with furniture reminding them of student life. Student life is a transitional as well as a clearly demarcated period, and being reminded of it could be conducive to identity play” (Cnossen/Stephenson 2022: 12). In doing so, these spaces act as an antidote to the uninviting model of conventional office work, in soulless spaces on constantly repeating time sequences.

The second mechanism is based on the way coworking spaces connect various people. “This relates to the possibility of seeing a variety of different roles, another condition for identity play. By bringing individuals into contact with new ways of doing, thinking, working, and organizing, they have more resources from which to construct their own work identities.” (Cnossen/Stephenson 2022: 14). This assemblage is welcoming and inclusive, especially to those similar in class, age, and gender, which in turn forms the basis for a secure environment and is thus conducive to identity construction, to borrow from Winnicott's work.

FLEXI's strategy is clearly in line with this trend, as they promote their intention to strike a balance between luxury and function, fun and productivity, the global and the local. FLEXI is about finding a community that feels like an exclusive club that accepts and respects every member. It is also reasonable to assume that DigiHealth's employees were particularly attracted to this environment, which forms a contrast, to say the least, to the much more austere and less luxurious environments of university research from which they came.

The implications of resorting to such a service are not insignificant. This logic of outsourcing to retain employees by offering favorable working conditions in a particular workspace contributed to DigiHealth being embedded in FLEXI from the start. Taking up the ideals of creative community environments (Müller 2021), FLEXI serializes companies to build a community that fosters both an innovation-friendly ecosystem (Berthelot 2020) and a more pleasant workplace: in terms of size, meeting space but also socializing events.

Frequenting the same spaces, especially when these spaces are equipped for both work and non-work activities (equipment for informal encounters include sofas, shared kitchens and terraces), contributes to the multiplexity of individual relationships and, as a result, to embedding (Granovetter 1985), which is not without effect on individual and collective careers (Grossetti/Bes 2001). The materiality of the premises resembles the environment elite cosmopolitan employees are accustomed to, and in return, the serialization of workspaces carried out by FLEXI and other competing multinationals, globalizes a particular conception of a good and fulfilling work environment conducive to the quality of life at work.

All in all, the multiscalar and dense description of the spatial inscriptions made by the various actors observed, combined with a diachronic approach, makes it possible to understand the spatial rupture at work and to anticipate a process of decoupling (White 2002) between the aspirations of DigiHealth and those of its employees, who are largely embedded in FLEXI: "Moreover, the notion of embedding, taken in a static sense, does not allow us to understand the logics that give collective entities the possibility of becoming autonomous from the relationships that their components maintain, what Harrison White calls the process of decoupling (White, 2002)" (Grossetti et al. 2006: 48, own translation).

### **3. Theoretical discussion**

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As announced in the introduction to our approach, the purpose of this exploratory investigation was to conduct a theoretical discussion between the concepts of ecology and space based on common empirical material.

### 3.1 Common ground: processual and material approaches

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#### a) Brief introduction to the ecological approach

When one wonders about the genealogy of an approach that defines itself as ecological, the sociology of the Chicago School and its interest in urban phenomena is an important shared point of reference; however, one cannot presume unity solely on the basis of a common ancestor: the differences between these approaches constitute a more pressing concern. Charbonnier and Kreplak (2012) have made an effort to summarize common traits: “It seems to us that these different approaches share, from their roots, the project of rediscovering a connection between action and that which surrounds it, in order to restore something like a unity or a solidarity between the world of practices and the milieu in which they unfold. From this point of view, the ecological frame of reference appears as a way to mobilize, as comprehensively as possible, the elements necessary to challenge relational orders of different kinds and scales” (Charbonnier/Kreplak 2012: 76, own translation). The ecological approach is necessarily inductive, the inclusion is determined by the environment and refuses any aprioristic discrimination between what is worthy of interest and what isn’t: “By starting from the milieu, ecological approaches never seek to presume the range of beings that must be mobilized to explain a given process, and it is for this reason that they are so closely tied to an empirical anchoring. Investigation and observation are the necessary preconditions to establish a relevant order of relations: they are what make it possible to grasp and follow the relationships to be analyzed.” (ibid.: 78.). The use of the term milieu is well chosen: the links that are established between the different entities of a given set are the real object of these approaches (it should be specified that these entities are not limited to humans, hence a sustained interest in material elements). The underlying hypothesis is that it is a complex and unique mixture that cannot be taken for granted, and that the researcher often seeks to tease out the heterogeneity of this mixture. This stance does not come without a number of consequences. The methods are borrowed from ethnography, so the researcher is part of the milieu and cannot take a higher-level perspective. Another consequence is the impossibility of exhaustively capturing the elements of the milieu, which renders any project aimed at a universal modeling of the connections between the elements of that milieu, if not moot, at least difficult. The perspective is distinctly dynamic and phenomenological. The question of scale is crucial to defining the nature of the entities at the center of analysis. For Caroline Datchary, the focus lies on the activity being performed, so the elements taken into account may be considered by other researchers to be details outside of the scope of analysis, such as a half-open door or an unusual noise.



## **b) Brief introduction to the concept of space**

The theory of relational space was developed by the German sociologist Martina Löw in the 1990s. In the following spatial sociological perspective, spaces are understood as relational arrangements of objects and people in places (cf. Löw 2001: 159 f.). However, space is not only a question of topographical relations of storage, but also of people's meaningful understanding of them. Löwian spatial theory identifies two processes, spacing and synthesis, which lead to the constitution of space. Spacing refers to the material practice of placement. In very simplified terms, it refers to where an element is placed in order to create a certain space. The act of synthesis determines which elements are combined and recognized in a space based on existing (socially and culturally formed) spatial knowledge (ibid.: 159). Underlying this approach is the assumption of a dialectical interaction between structure and practice: "Thus, the constitution of social spaces becomes a phenomenon that must be understood, on the one hand, as the formation of structure by human practice and, on the other, as the structuring of human practice." (Weidenhaus 2013: 215, own translation). Over the past two decades, a series of spatial sociological investigations has emerged, be it on the topic of prostitution (Löw/Ruhne 2011), the inherent logic of the city (Löw 2018), or the connection between architecture and ritual embodiment (Steets 2015a, b), the importance of cultural heritage in the city (Frank 2020), the relationship between space, time, and (re)production (Mock/Weidenhaus 2022), or the urban network of artist spaces (Marguin/Pelger forthcoming). In addition, there have been further spatial studies on the interweaving of physical and virtual spaces (Marguin et al. 2019). Following the socio-spatial approach, the analysis of spatial constitution brings people's practices into focus – especially in times of structural spatial transformations. This is exactly what we want to address with the theory of the refiguration of spaces (Löw/Knoblach 2019): We explore the question of how societies reorganize themselves in the course of profound spatial transformations – since the 1960s in the wake of globalization, digitization but also decolonization. For this purpose, training an empirical lens on space (in its relational understanding) offers a productive perspective that can be deployed at different scales in order to analyze social practices embedded in a constantly changing yet institutionalized, materialized environment.

Our shared initial intuition proved to be right: we both think of ecology or space as a fruitful methodological device that allows us to analyze social realities in transformation – in this case the development of an entrepreneurial ecosystem in the biotech sector. Our approaches in terms of relational space or ecology share common presuppositions:

- a) We both favor a praxeological approach in the analysis, in which we look at the activity or action (in the sense of *Handeln*) as it is carried out – beyond our terminological (and not epistemological) differences, which can be attributed to the national scientific discourses in which we are each inscribed.
- b) We argue for a consistent consideration of materiality in the analysis, i.e., of the physical (infra)structures or objectivations which are constructed by the action and construct it in return.
- c) Following on from the first two points, we are inclined to think of space or ecology in a processual way, i.e. in the process of being made. There is a certain parallel between, on the one hand, a conception of space, understood as the dynamic result of an arrangement of objects and bodies in relation to each other (process of spacing) and of a cognitive-symbolic interpretation of this arrangement according to the spatial knowledge held (process of synthezizing) (Löw 2001); and, on the other hand, a conception of ecology that aims to emphasize the articulation between the activity and what surrounds it, that is, to renew a solidarity between the world of practices and the environment in which they are deployed.

We therefore see a continuous dialectic between action and environment without determinism of one over the other, which means that we do not naturalize the environment of the action (whether it is thought of as space or ecology). We follow a shared methodological principle according to which any element of this environment can a priori influence the activity and any activity in turn shapes this environment. We both ask ourselves the question of sustainability or permanence in relation to the various elements of a system formed around an activity/action in an ever-changing world.

### **3.2 Divergence of research perspectives**

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This common starting point should not, however, obscure the deep divergences that our theoretical exchanges revealed, both in terms of the level of generality of the statements to be produced and in terms of the choice of research lens.

#### **a) Level of generality of the statements produced**

We share the conviction that it is necessary to think our research objects in a situated and grounded way. However, our respective views on the level of abstraction of the sociological statements (Grossetti 2006) to be produced diverge. In particular, the framework of refiguration theory aims to make a sociological statement of high



generality about the world as a whole, while taking into account the possible variations of refiguration in different cultural contexts. The framework of ecological theory program aims instead to understand heterogeneities in their complex and dynamic plurality, with a claim to generalization more at the level of the activity itself and its consequences for the person in question.

The concept of relational space is in this sense thought of as a category of social theory (*Sozialtheorie*) and not only of societal theory (*Gesellschaftstheorie*)<sup>2</sup>: the former is intended to be used for the analysis of any social fact beyond temporal and spatial borders – beyond European modernity to ancient Greece, the Chinese Middle Ages or American postmodernity – and thus involves a very high level of abstraction (in relation to the definition of a social interaction, for example, or the links between action and environment). The tools of societal theory, on the other hand, have a strong diagnostic dimension, insofar as they are developed from a precise and specific context. Although their degree of abstraction and generalization is lower, they are nonetheless useful and relevant for a better understanding of the social changes at work. The nature of the concept of refiguration is still under discussion within the CRC 1265, as to whether it belongs to social theory or societal theory, depending on the degree of theoretical abstraction that the members of the research project attribute to it.

## **b) Spatial lens vs. temporal lens**

Our other notable, though not insurmountable, point of divergence is the establishment of a different primary lens in approaching the objects of research. Working with the socio-theoretical framework of ecology requires an emphasis on the temporal heterogeneity of commitments in order to think about the contested coherence of the individual. Relational spatial theory views social phenomena primarily through the lens of space, whose heterogeneity it also considers, particularly through the concept of polycontexturalization.

It is, of course, very schematic to divide the lenses in this way, since the ecological approach also thinks of space and the spatial approach also considers time. Thus, in the relational spatial approach, polycontexturalization designates in itself a spatial heterogeneity that occurs simultaneously. In the ecological approach, the heterogeneity of the engagements is similarly thought of according to their spatial inscription. But there still remains a slight preference in each of the approaches – which in turn also highlights the shortcomings of the other approach.

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<sup>2</sup> On the distinction between social and societal theory, see Lindemann (2014); Reckwitz (2016); Knoblauch (2017).

### 3.3 From divergence to complementarity: an articulation of three types of multiscale scales

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In fact, this experiment has made us aware of the proximity and the possible complementarity of our approaches, which are produced precisely by our differences. Based on our common inductive, anchored, and situated methodological approach, we share the same definition of the theoretical instrument of scales of analysis and advocate a multiscale approach to the social, even if we each give it a slightly different orientation depending on our scope and preferred research lens. Thus, one of our commonalities is that we capture the analysis of the social world through the notion of articulation, which determines the need to reconcile a plurality of dimensions. The heuristic tool of the scale of analysis makes it possible to capture this plurality systematically. Grossetti reminds us that “the term ‘scale of analysis’ can have two different meanings. In the first sense, a scale is understood as a relationship between reality and a pictorial representation, as in the scales of maps (scale 1:100 000) [...] In the second sense, a scale is understood as a sequence of stages or levels that form a single scale (e.g. the Richter scale) [...] as a hierarchically ordered set of levels” (Grossetti 2006: 283, own translation). In contrast to Grossetti, we want to take seriously not only the second, but also the first definition.

Thus, we start from the desire to keep the micro, meso and macro levels together and deploy them to a specific context of application (here the Berlin startup scene), as we believe that this is the only way to investigate and reflect the processuality of the social. With this first scale of analysis (micro-meso-macro), we would like to combine two additional scales:

- a) The first is the temporal scale of analysis. We consider a diachronic analysis of the research objects essential: one must always reconstruct the relevance of the research object in a historicizing way and think the inscription of the action in terms of past, present and future actions. The pragmatist school of thought, in which the concept of ecology is embedded, offers a wealth of discourse on this temporal thinking (Datchary 2017).
- b) The second issue is the spatial scale of analysis. We believe that a multiscale and dense analysis of the spatial inscriptions of the different actors observed is indispensable: it is not just a matter of fixing the analysis to a single spatial level (e.g., the city), but also of capturing the play between the different levels (e.g., the building, the neighborhood, in the city, in the country, etc.). The spatiality of actions does not unfold at a single level, but rather in an interlocking system of multiple levels (Marguin et al. 2021; Pelger et al. 2021).

This is exactly what we have tried to do in this analysis, namely to think about the social entanglement while at the same time taking into account the spatial and

temporal dimensions of this reality as emerging alongside, as summarized here schematically: We have tried to understand the production of the spatial trajectories of companies (meso, time, space) and workers (micro, time, space) while considering the economic and symbolic expansion of coworking space chains at the global level (macro, time, space). It is therefore a matter of thinking horizontally, for example at the level of the person, by considering the succession of different spaces that they cross and that make them consistent; but also vertically, by grasping the relationships between that person's workplace, the spatial logics of a city, and the strategic choices for international development made by a multinational company.

#### **4. Conclusion**

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The dialogue between our respective theories – relational space and ecology – led us to explicate their underlying epistemological premises through empirical testing. Conducting an exploratory field study together allowed us to draw out the commonalities and differences between our approaches, which ultimately proved to be complementary. The result of this cooperation is the imperative to have a better understanding of the scales of analysis used as well as their intersections: We thus argue for a play of scales that links the social (micro-meso-macro), the temporal (past-present-future), and the spatial (local-global with all intermediate levels).

This theoretical a priori thus establishes a methodological imperative that requires rigorous discipline in empirical implementation. This is where collaboration has proved fruitful in holding together the different scales of analysis in the analytical premises presented here.

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