

Coworking spaces in Berlin Brandenburg

an interview with Dr. Janet Merkel

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With the intention of fostering debate on changing infrastructures and the impact of global and local agendas in the region of Berlin and Brandenburg, we invited Dr. Janet Merkel for an interview to elaborate on the possible effects of some collaborative consumption practices, such as coworking and start-ups. During the talk, we tried to better understand how these activities have a socio-spatial impact on the urban.

Dr. Janet Merkel is a trained sociologist and has been working as a research associate for TU Berlin since 2018. She is currently a substitute Professor at Universität Kassel teaching on „Ökonomie der Stadt- und Regionalentwicklung“. Her work focuses mainly on coworking spaces and the creative sector, considering some of its urban and political implications.

“My main topics I am working on at the moment are still coworking spaces. I started a new project last year with colleagues. I have been in Paris to work on coworking in peripheral regions, so it is more about the growth of coworking spaces in small cities to sort of compare with the spaces in bigger cities. On the other side, I am still working a lot on this notion of cultural governance, understanding how artists and cultural workers could be more part of the cultural policy processes.”

Considering her academic and professional trajectory, we asked Dr. Merkel about the relations and influences of Gig Economy with the coworking spaces, as the development of such practices supports an increasingly free labour market system with perhaps less security for those involved.

“The Gig Economy is about the freelance workers [conditions] nowadays, and how freelance workers are able to get contracts or work through platforms [...] But actually the majority of people I see in coworking spaces are very established freelance workers or self-employed people, who do not necessarily work wired to platforms; or are employees of small and mid-size companies that started to rent out spaces in those coworking spaces. Interestingly, it is a strong urban phenomena [coworking] and its growth is the biggest in cities and not necessarily in peripheral regions. Coworking spaces are their own kind of phenomena. It has something to do with the shared economy, but now it is at a completely different level and still mediated through those places [coworking spaces] and not necessarily through platforms, so the scaling is a bit different.“

Dr. Merkel also looked particularly into the creative sector, developing her thesis and publishing many articles about this subject already. Throughout the interview, she explained some of the reasons why the phenomenon of freelancing and coworking was firstly so prominent in the creative sector and how this influenced other fields. In addition, she also talked about the relation of such activities to the neighbourhood scale and gave hints on possible effects that it has on the city.

“[Coworking space] is more locally based. It has a very strong local foot. I am not aware of any particular coworking space that just exists online. It has its space, it has its roots, and it is strongly connected to the local community.

[The urban consequences] very much depend on what coworking spaces you study. One segment is international cooperation that invests in coworking as a new business model. They have a special interest in central city locations, so they basically go into very normal office buildings. [...] On the other side you have a

constant growth of smaller independent spaces that are way more rooted in more local neighbourhoods [...] so inner city location or sort of close to inner cities where they find way more amenities but also more street life; and where more encounters would be possible. They are in old shops, or in shops that have been empty for a while; they go into flats; they rent old houses; they take over industrial spaces. So there is a whole variety of them. They are also more affected by gentrification dynamics and they may be pushed out.

[...] The neighbourhood changes because the work changes. So one effect can be already seen in more coworking spaces. [...] There are not yet proper studies on economic effects that would measure maybe how much more money is brought into the neighbourhood because of coworking space; or how much they would frequent neighbourly bars, restaurants, coffee shops, etc. But also it depends on the particular coworking spaces, because many have their own coffee shops, their own restaurants or places to eat. So basically they provide food for their coworkers and they would not spend money outside. Also - interestedly - that it is very different internationally. I just talked to someone from Brazil and he said that everyone that works in a coworking space tries to live as close as possible to it, which is not necessarily the same in Berlin, where they would usually come by bike but they might live in different neighbourhoods. [...] We don't know much about that [urban consequences] yet. There is lots of speculation, but you can see sometimes in living streets - that happened in the northern part of Neükolln when the first coworking spaces popped up in 2010/2011. Now it is difficult to imagine how it was back then and it was just 10 years ago. It was a very quiet neighbourhood with not many shops you would go for; there were no bars, no restaurants, and there were no coworking spaces.“

As we can easily see in the city of Berlin, these new spaces for work are changing and shaping the urban fabric in a very short period of time. These urban dynamics, previously thought as easily readable, are also being reformulated or having their transformation process accelerated by the pandemic. Dr. Merkel even mentioned that “the notion of offices is changing and we will see way more of these [changes] after the pandemic.” She argued that those changes are not only related to physical modifications, but mainly to the impacts on a social level, since she believes that coworking has this appeal to the social infrastructure more than to the physical ones. Due to that, some possible questions still need to be answered: How could the city look like if people just go to the office for two or three days? What would be the new infrastructures related to that?

In the last part of the interview, we tried to link the topic of collaborative consumption to the emergence of new infrastructures, understanding how those economic and social activities can represent a lack of adequate infrastructure and be able to stimulate urban transformations in the next 20 years in Berlin and Brandenburg.

“I see a sort of more socially unequal city. Nevertheless, Berlin will be a frightening economic context, where there is a consistent growth in technology sectors that will bring more high skilled people to the city and this will intensify the existence of socio-economic divides and will push more poor people out of the city.

I see these transformations are driven by economic discourses of entrepreneurship and innovation more than policies. Also they depend on the reactions of the policies makers and their intentions to do something about the economic dynamics. I would like to see more policies made that mitigate the effects of these developments. Coworkers and freelancers are to take a huge part in these urban transformations and developments because this is the type of companies that are growing, and if it is a frightening economy, we will see more people coming as freelancers because they find many contracts so they can sustain themselves. We see a tremendous growth in coworking spaces especially after Covid-19 and it is a good alternative for [Working from home]. We are going to see more of these coworking spaces. In Berlin around 10-12 % of the workforce is self-employed.”

The notion of office has changed with the growth and expansion of these new coworking spaces. One of the consequences of this increase is a possible process of emptying some conventional office spaces, which makes it necessary to investigate the physical impacts of these idle spaces in the structure of the city.

“In big cities with enormous economic growth that we see the city eats all of these types of spaces and there is an appetite for large-cubic structures of office spaces and on the other hand you see other companies that ask for the coworking model not only in a social sense but in a curated sense. Like Amazon and Google, who do not want to be the company that is responsible for the facility management but they only need office space, so we are going to see more office space providers.

So I do not see the emergence of new typologies, rather it will grow in both direction of huge office spaces towers and small structures with a variety of spaces. At the moment, there are bouncing ideas from the more-established companies that they do not want to provide desks to their office-spaces because these spaces will be only for weekly face to face meetings and then the employees will go back to their office space at home or flexible office spaces where I think that Covid-19 is going to be a catalytic event.

Consequently, we questioned the new types of projects needed to transform Berlin Brandenburg in the right direction, accelerating the development and taking this building process not only as a tool to encourage the economic cycle, but also as a regularity tool for Berlin's Brandenburg spatial expansion.

“Housing is the main infrastructure to focus on our future developments and we need to think about providing affordable housing. [...] Also, the mobility, traffic and transportation infrastructures are important to think about, although the current efforts. Berlin needs to think more integrated with Brandenburg and to think more about the connections that come to Berlin “Regionalverkehr” that were built in a way that they cannot grow or expand. And thus, we need new and huge infrastructures projects especially in the north.”

The interview with Dr. Merkel pointed out some concrete changes resulting from the new dynamics that have taken place in urban centers in the last decade, but it was also speculative about the consequent transformations of the pandemic. It is evident that the intensification of some working practices directly and indirectly influence other urban infrastructures, such as public transportation and housing. This systemic vision of the city must therefore be a premise for Berlin and Brandenburg to be constituted as an integrated region and to sustain economic growth in an affordable, sustainable and accessible manner.