SHARING SPACE:
User perspectives from a startup and coworking environment

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RESOURCEFUL SHARING PROJECT

This report is an outcome of the 'Resourceful Sharing Project', a project conducted by University of Helsinki, Aalto University, Aalto University Campus & Real Estate (ACRE), and City of Helsinki. It is co-funded by the European Union. The duration of the project is from early January in 2023 to the end of September in 2025 (01/2023 - 09/2025).

Read more about the project here: https://hevinnovations.fi/javist/

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

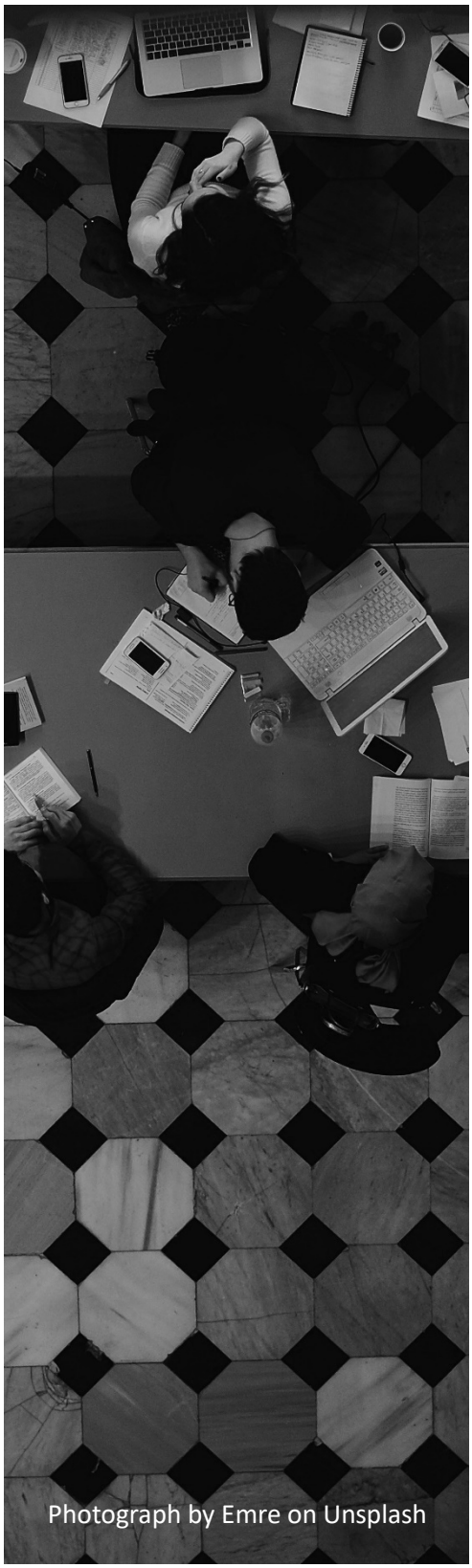
Providing shared space to building users is a resource-intensive initiative, but a necessary element in start-up or coworking environments. However, it is not enough to simply provide the space, but the space should also be well-utilized and provide value to the users by fulfilling their needs. The objective of this report is to understand how users currently utilize shared spaces in a coworking and startup environment and what opportunities exist to optimize these spaces to the users' needs.

To obtain thorough feedback from users, walking interviews were conducted at a coworking and startup hub located on a Finnish university campus. Walking interviews enable the interviewer and the interviewee to experience the spaces while they are discussing them. 19 interviewees provided thoughtful insights into how shared spaces were used and how they could be improved.

This report has analyzed and presented the findings in the following parts:

Part 1 – Empowering users in shared spaces
Part 2 – Providing alternative social environments in shared spaces
Part 3 – Participatory feedback of individual shared spaces

We hope this report provides valuable insights to anyone pursuing positive outcomes in shared spaces.



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WALKING INTERVIEWS: METHOD & DATA OVERVIEW

METHOD

Walking interviews are semi-structured interviews that occur while the interviewer and interviewee walk together. In this case, the walks occurred in the startup and coworking hub while visiting the shared spaces of the building. In total, there were 19 interviewees who participated in the walking interviews, which occurred between December 2024 and April 2025. The interviews were conducted in three parts, as follows:

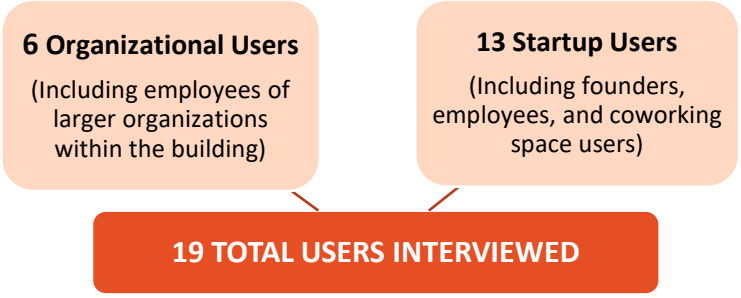
INTERVIEW PART 1: Interviewees were asked, "What space outside of your immediate working areas is 'for you'?". Their answer was then the first walking destination. If the interviewee noticed things along the way, then they were encouraged to share those observations as well. Additional sub-questions were asked in these spaces, including, "What makes this space 'for you'?", "What has your interaction with other users in this space been?", etc. If the interviewee identified multiple spaces, then they were encouraged to visit those as well.

INTERVIEW PART 2: Interviewees were then brought to spaces of the interviewers' choosing and asked, "Do you find this space is 'for you'?". Additional sub-questions were asked, including "What could make this space more 'for you'?", "What has your interaction with other users been like?", etc.

INTERVIEW PART 3: Finally, interviews were concluded in a meeting room to provide privacy and let the interviewee reflect while seated. Interviewees also had the opportunity to point out any resources or spaces they valued on the surrounding university's map.

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Figure 1: Breakdown of Interviewee types and subtypes.
NOTE: Exact counts of the "subtypes" in each category are excluded for anonymization purposes.



SHARED SPACES VISITED

Eight different types of shared spaces were the primary focus, but there were also liminal spaces passed through on the walkthroughs such as hallways or smaller spaces. For anonymization purposes, the exact spaces are not listed. However, some examples of the shared spaces examined include meetings rooms, kitchen spaces, a gym, shared seating areas, a restaurant, a café and a space for sharing technological resources such as 3D printers.

REPORT:
OVERVIEW & ANALYSIS

Overview:
Users' Core Expectations & Beyond

Coworking and startup environments have desired outcomes that might go beyond traditional workplaces or tenancy, including collaboration, creativity, and innovation[1]. However, this does not negate the traditional user expectations that any workplace or tenant could benefit from and based on the interviews, users were generally positive about these core expectations being met, including for the following reasons:

- Core organizational personnel have a positive effect on their experience (6 users)
- The space works well for what they need (5 users)
- The building and amenities are well-maintained (4 users)
- The location is convenient (3 users)
- The cost is good for what is offered (2 users)

"I feel this whole building is ours. I feel that because there are meeting rooms and you have access everywhere. I feel that we are paying [for] only that 35 or 31 square meters, but we get all this big house."

INTERVIEW # 2

Then what remains are the additional expectations that make startup culture unique. Beyond choosing to locate at a startup hub because it is an economic choice, many also do so because they envision the spontaneous collaboration or sudden inspiration that these spaces have become known for. Yet, those outcomes can't be pursued with a simple formula and certainly can't be put into a lease agreement. However, shared spaces are logical as places to target to create these outcomes as they are where users can interact with each other directly or indirectly.

However, even considering shared spaces as a natural opportunity area for ideal outcomes, it is still not always clear who is responsible for pursuing these outcomes further. Users naturally grappled with whose role it was to provide some things that might not be traditional for management to provide. A perfect example is below, where three separate users expressed a desire for more social interactions but attributed the responsibility for providing it to three different sources:

1. RESPONSIBILITY BELONGS TO THE USER

"It depends on people. If I have a goal to meet someone, I can do it. You have this opportunity because everything is open to many people, so it should come from myself."

2. RESPONSIBILITY BELONGS TO A THIRD PARTY

"Definitely we need somebody to facilitate and have Monday morning coffee meetups and maybe some other events. I think it's not the responsibility of [management] to create, but they should kind of make it easier for existing players or even third-party organizations that are not currently physically here so that they could basically have some of some of their pop-up events here."

3. RESPONSIBILITY BELONGS TO MANAGEMENT

"A good idea for [management] in general, would be organizing something where people can [interact]. (...) I think that this is a good area to improve because then we would kind of get to know who are the people working in the other side of this building because this building is huge and it's long."

Report analysis method:
Identifying optimization opportunities

As a result, the goal of this report is not to identify who is responsible for what. And in fact, when reviewing this report, it is important to keep in mind that it contains extrapolations of many different opinions and even some contrasting ones. Instead, the analysis is meant to provide optimization opportunities for shared spaces based on user feedback. When users were asked what would make spaces feel more "for them", they were invited to think about things that might optimize their experiences, specifically within the relevant shared spaces.

However, the conversation of who should pursue these optimization opportunities is still crucial to implementation. As a result, the report then concludes with an exercise that allows the reader to reflect on who holds the power and capability to pursue the desired outcomes described.

Reference

1. Yang E, Bisson C, Sanborn BE. Coworking space as a third-fourth place: changing models of a hybrid space in corporate real estate. *J Corp Real Estate*. 2019;21(4):324-345. doi:10.1108/JCRE-12-2018-0051

SHARED SPACE OUTCOMES

As this report focuses on optimizing shared spaces, it is crucial to consider what it means to provide shared space so that it not only exists but is used to its fullest potential and provides value.

Outlined below are the ideal shared space outcomes and the worst-case shared space outcomes based on the experiences of the users interviewed:

Figure 3: Shared space outcomes: Ideal & Worst-case

IDEAL SHARED SPACE OUTCOMES

- Social or business connections formed
- Resources are shared among users
- Space is well-utilized because it meets user needs
- Personal well-being is increased
- Opportunities are provided by the space or equipment provided which they might not otherwise have available to them
- Users recommend the space to others

WORST-CASE SHARED SPACE OUTCOMES

- Animosity towards others due to perceived misuse of shared spaces
- Resources are unnecessarily duplicated among users
- Lack of privacy opportunities
- Lost or damaged personal items
- Space and resources are underutilized because users either avoid the space or don't know about it

The remaining 3 parts of this report will discuss various approaches to pursue ideal shared space outcomes based on the interview data.

PART 1: EMPOWERING USERS IN SHARED SPACES

FINDING 1: Empowered users result in more positive shared space outcomes.

Based on the data, users who felt empowered were more likely to utilize the shared spaces and resources available compared to those users who did not. What does an empowered user look like? There are many different examples and even variations, as some users could be empowered in some ways and not in others. Levels of empowerment based on interview data can be found below in Figure 4, with the category "empowered" being the ideal outcome.

Figure 4: Empowerment scale of users and corresponding data

Empowerment Scale	Observed User Behavior	Observed Potential User Attributes
INHIBITED	- Do not use shared resources and shared spaces to the fullest potential due to uncertainty regarding usage rights, and do not seek further clarification - Avoid a space rather than asking for a simple fix or quality of life improvement	- New to the building. - Not in "charge" (employee rather than founder, not in organizational position, etc.) - Unfamiliarity with building (even if not new) - None or few startup hub or surrounding ecosystem connections
EMPOWERED	- Share information with others (including "inhibited" users) regarding how to best use resources and spaces - Utilize resources and spaces to high or fullest potential, including sharing among peers - Communicate needs to ensure continued use of resources and spaces - Confront and/or report "entitled" use of shared space and/or shared resources to ensure continued usability	- Knowledgeable about the building, perhaps due to length of tenancy, initial introduction, or willingness to explore - Connection to startup hub or surrounding ecosystem with a broad social network or understanding of available resources - Well-acquainted with startup hub personnel
ENTITLED	- Leave space dirty or broken for others. - Take or abuse resources that aren't theirs - Break usage rules	- *N/A* ("Entitled" user behavior was only collected second-hand from interviews regarding what they experienced with other users)

USER EMPOWERMENT OPPORTUNITY AREAS

To empower users who otherwise might not be, three potential opportunities are examined below:

1. Empower users by enhancing knowledge and navigation of shared spaces

Case example: Anonymous User A was new to the startup hub and did not have any existing connections. There was one room that was not clearly marked as being a shared space, so they did not know about it, nor did they ever think to enter the space despite walking past it often. When they were introduced to the space by the interviewer, they were doubtful at first that it was okay for them to use and needed extra assurance. And once they understood the purpose and accessibility of the space, it became a valuable addition for them.

Problem summary: Many users want to be conscious of both the rules and of other people. As a result, they would rather avoid a space or resource rather than use it incorrectly. In a startup environment, where both peer and management relations could affect their professional life or business, some users need to be confident that they are acting within their rights, needing extra assurance through clear knowledge and understanding of the building. If there is not a space or resource that is labeled or introduced to the users clearly, then it will be underutilized or ignored by some users.

Practical solutions:

- *Communicate clearly which spaces and resources are shared:* This could be done in multiple ways, such as providing a "shared spaces and resources" map or ensuring that tours are done for users who might otherwise miss them (for example: those hired at a later date after their employer's initial introduction to the space, visitors, etc.). On-site labeling of shared resources and spaces could also be helpful, with a simple sticker or sign identifying it as such.
- *Enhance navigational tools*: 3 users suggested additional navigational tools would make them more confident exploring. An example provided was color-coding the building sections, so users don't only navigate vertically by floors, but also horizontally by sections. One user suggested implementing a "hospital line" style guide so you can follow that throughout the building.

2. Empower users by supporting opportunities for user control

Case example: Anonymous User B was delighted when a perfect setup for them to enjoy a cup of tea appeared in their shared space: a plant and a couch near a window. It was enough to add to their day significantly, until one day everything moved and they no longer had this area for their daily break. This user was very

aware what contributed to their well-being, but did not feel that they had the control to pursue these outcomes. Once these details of the space were gone, they felt there was nothing to be done to restore this simple well-being ritual of theirs.

On the contrary, Anonymous User C was having an issue with another user in their shared kitchen space leaving dirty dishes in the sink. At first, they were washing the dishes themselves but then decided to create a sign and post it in the space, which at the time of the interview seemed to have helped the user feel more control over their space. Management did not take the sign down but allowed the user to have that piece of control over their space and, therefore, enabled them to be empowered when maintaining their space.

Problem summary: Users can have strong ideas about what would make their experience in shared spaces better, but they do not feel empowered to enact them, as it is not only their space. Examples of this from the interviews include wanting more greenery, wanting to assign certain parts of the space for certain purposes, wanting to establish better rules about shared kitchen areas, and even organizing events in the shared spaces. But instead of pursuing these changes, some users accept the status quo as they feel it is not "their" space to control despite the possibility that these changes could have a positive effect on the overall space for other users as well.

Practical solutions:

- Provide a participatory budget to enable users to democratically choose improvements to their space. Steps for a participatory budget are as follows:
    1. Allocate an amount of money for a purchase
    2. Collect initial ideas from users (targeted if necessary to a space or a theme)
    3. Identify which ideas are feasible and popular
    4. Conduct a final vote
    5. Purchase and implement
- Provide opportunities to allow users to modify the space to their needs, including making their own space rules, moving adaptable furniture, and even encouraging self-organized social events (discussed further on p. 17).
- Communicate clearly when management is making a significant change to a space and ideally pursue feedback from the users beforehand.

3. Empower users by enhancing connections within the building and/or within the surrounding ecosystem

Case Example: Anonymous User D was one of the strongest examples of an empowered user regarding fully utilizing resources in both the building and within the surrounding university's ecosystem. They had a background in a technical field with their degrees completed at the university. Their fellow alumni were still on campus and even some in the same building. They made good use of their connections in many ways, from accessing technical equipment to enjoying lunch or coffee with their many social contacts. When an instance came up that they needed a piece of equipment that wasn't available through their network, they

felt confident enough to ask around and seek it out. They were referred down their line of contacts, and eventually they were able to utilize a rare multi-million-dollar piece of equipment to help develop their business. Overall, they felt like the possibilities in both the building and the surrounding campus were endless.

Problem summary: While the previous case is an example of a strong connection with the surrounding university ecosystem, other users felt disconnected from the university and the resources it provides. In total, 11 users described feeling disconnected from the campus despite often feeling as though they could benefit from connections such as the students, equipment, and events. And while many people had connections within the building, there were still examples of those who did not have any or had few and, as a result, were not as familiar with the building resources through shared knowledge from their peers or did not have close enough connections to share resources with, like the previous example benefited from.

"I think [the university] is like an archipelago, honestly. It is wonderful, beautiful, but sometimes very, very detached and not connected and completely ignored by each other. And if we have the platform to be the bridge between these isolated islands together, in a technical way and also bring in some services in terms of social services, like playing games or whatever events, to connect those, we can bring much more value for the same people who are working in the same campus and the buildings."

INTERVIEW #11

Practical solutions:

- Consider those that might not benefit from connections and implement systemic access that equalizes opportunity. For example, simply providing a list of both the startup hub and surrounding ecosystem resources would be valuable. For those resources not available or without clear accessibility, petition for the creation of formal processes that enable start-ups to access surrounding ecosystem resources.

- Assign a focal point, such as a person or point within the building, for not only the resources within the space, but as a gateway to understanding all the resources in the building, on campus, and potentially even resource sharing among users.

-Provide alternative social environments to connect users with each other to increase their network of peers (elaborated on in the next section).

PART 2:
PROVIDING ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS IN SHARED SPACES

FINDING 2: Users are seeking alternative social environments compared to what they currently have access to, and there are different ways users described this could be achieved.

The alternative social environments that users described vary, but a common theme was that users would value being around others organically, meaning that these environments wouldn't require them to pursue socializing but instead facilitate proximity in a casual and low-pressure way. This is beneficial to shared spaces in multiple ways, the first being discussed in Figure 4 and Part 1, which is that a larger social network empowers users to better utilize the shared spaces and resources, as well as to share among themselves. The second benefit is that these alternative social environments would likely all occur in shared spaces, resulting in higher utilization and familiarity.

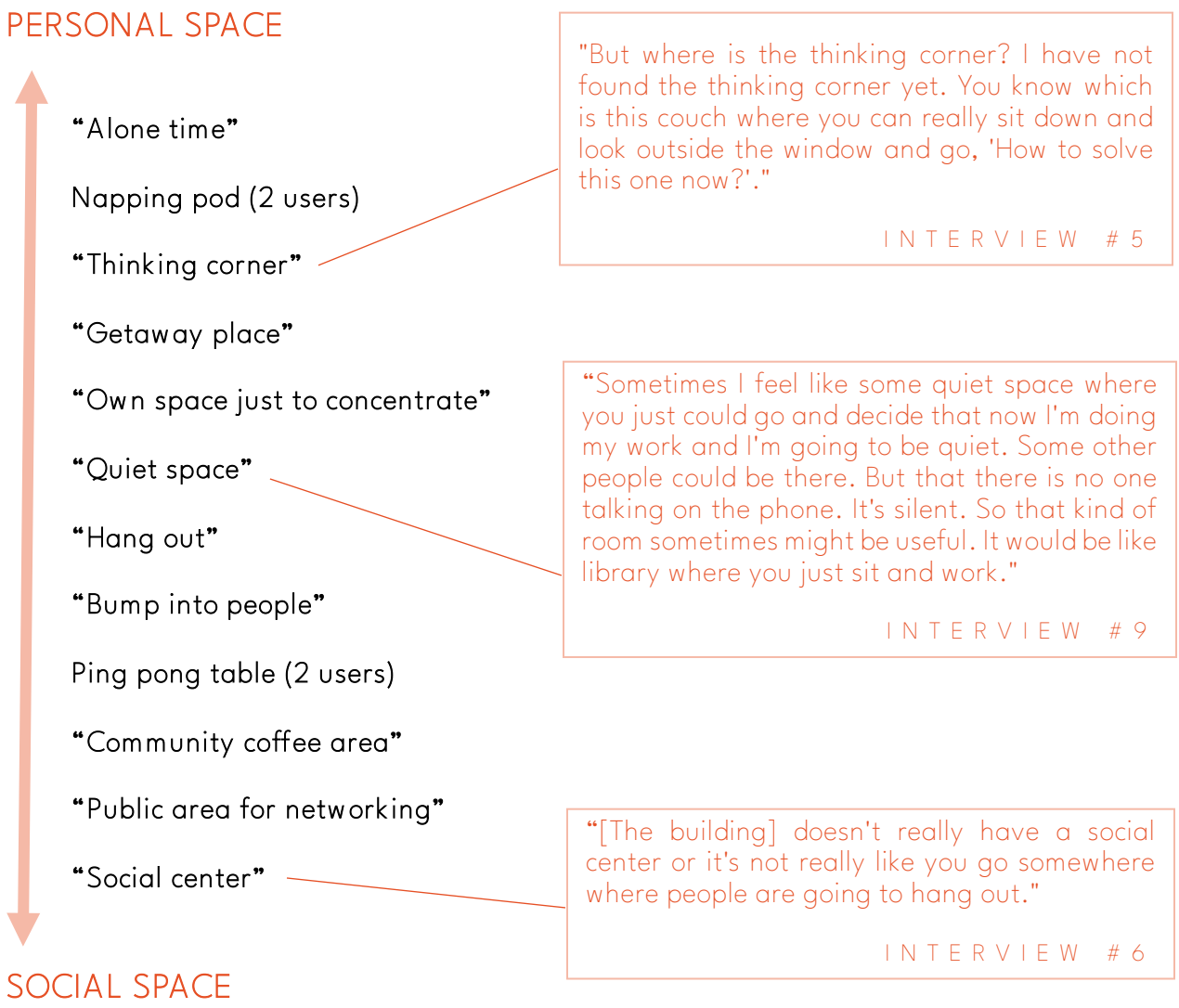
In order to pursue these outcomes, three approaches arose from the data, which will be explored in Part 2 and are as follows:

1. PROVIDE SPACE THAT FACILITATES ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS
2. EMBRACE MICROCOMMUNITIES
3. PROVIDE CASUAL SOCIALIZING OPPORTUNITIES

APPROACH 1: PROVIDE SPACE THAT FACILITATES ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

Users made it clear what they wanted from the shared spaces by often listing descriptions of types of space they felt were missing. This list is compiled below, containing 12 "missing space types" with a scale ranging from "Personal Space" to "Social Space".

Figure 5: Missing space types according to users



Missing Space Type: *Personal (or Individual) Space*

Some users expressed interest in a space where they could be completely alone, finding that the shared office space did not provide that opportunity, and there was no other sufficient space for this. Other users mentioned that they choose to work from home when they need alone time, knowing that they won't be able to get it in their shared spaces. While space for being completely alone was the least requested of these spaces, it remains important for providing an opportunity for users to recharge enough to properly enjoy the other shared/more social spaces. Based on further elaboration by the user, the only the requests for completely individual space in Figure 5 were for "alone time" and napping, while the remaining spaces could be hybrid spaces, which are described below.

Missing Space Type: *Hybrid Space*

An interesting outcome was that even the spaces that one might assume mean that the user would like to be alone (such as "quiet space") did not require complete solitude by the user (see quote on previous page from Interview #9). For these users, it would be enough to work around others in silence. Additionally, some felt that being away from colleagues and instead around lesser-known people would provide all the privacy needed while still feeling connected to others and giving an overview of other users in the building. These spaces are primarily described as having the purpose of providing a change of scenery from their office by providing an alternative, desirable ambiance.

Missing Space Type: *Social Space*

Finally, as mentioned, various forms of social spaces were mentioned as something the user would value but currently does not feel exists. The data makes it clear that users want something more nuanced than a simple "public area" or "coffee area" because technically, those already exist in the building. Users seem to be looking for a space that offers features that make it special enough for people to congregate in. Some descriptions include better food and coffee offerings than what they have at their working area, an atmosphere that is cozy and welcoming, and a ping-pong table with a sign-up sheet to play other players. The nuances of what the users want in shared spaces are elaborated on when examining their feedback on the existing individual spaces in Part 3, but overall, it is clear that users want a space that brings people together, which means providing something "extra" to make it an in-demand destination.

APPROACH 2: EMBRACE MICROCOMMUNITIES

The architecture of the building in which the interviews took place has a unique element of closed-off areas throughout the building, which were sometimes described as a difficult issue to overcome in regard to meeting others. But they also serve as a natural area for meeting neighbors and colleagues and providing the social connection many hopes for, as those within proximity naturally begin to speak with each other. 11 users refer to socializing with their neighbors with whom they shared immediate space with. 2 users spoke fondly of attending events planned by their nearby neighbors, explaining that it was a valuable addition to their feeling of community. 1 user mentioned that they imagined having breakfast with these neighbors when they first moved in, but it hadn't yet happened.

"People are pretty open and kind. And in the kitchen, they are usually up for a chat. So, it's kind of like if you go there, you can talk, too."

INTERVIEW #6

This brings up a larger opportunity to consider microcommunities as a powerful opportunity to create social connections. Within this particular building, the architecture made the concept physical and proximity-based, with community often occurring behind closed doors. However, the microcommunity boundary could also be topical, for example, bringing together all those startups within the same industry. Or even interest-based, such as a sports team or a craft hour. Microcommunities can be physical, industry-related, or interest-related, depending on the needs and opportunities of the startup or coworking environment.

If these microcommunities succeed in being organized, it is then valuable to consider how they could cooperate with the exterior community. For example, if a physical microcommunity strongly develops behind closed doors, then they might better be able to organize among themselves to open up those doors and invite others in for a presentation or a coffee hour. Or if there are hobby-based microcommunities, then perhaps there could be an event where they offer to teach others in the building that same hobby. The concept of a microcommunity should not exclude the overall larger community but add to it.

APPROACH 3: PROVIDE CASUAL SOCIALIZING OPPORTUNITIES

Professional events (and the networking opportunities that result) are imperative for a startup environment. However, an interesting theme also resulted from the interviews, which is that users would like the opportunity for non-professional events as well.

"There are not events... Of course, there are- but it's more like companies come together, not people."

INTERVIEW #9

Users who value community, either as tool for networking or for their own desire to socialize and simply be around others, would like the option for more casual non-business events and opportunities. 13 users suggested that they would attend and/or value more casual or non-business-oriented events and 8 users discussed wanting casual opportunities for socializing.

Examples including the following:

- Eating or drinking coffee together
- Events not only for "founders" but also employees (valuable for employees but also for employers to contribute to employee offerings)
- Games like ping-pong and something to facilitate playing with strangers as well as friends, such as a sign-up sheet or tournament
- Workout classes (5 users discussed that they would attend workout classes at the gym, specifically yoga was often mentioned. One user said they would even pay extra for it and another user said it could even just be a video playing at a certain time and they would attend.)

"[Fitness classes] would be like a place to meet (...) other women interested in sports from the other offices. That would be nice just to get to know people at work a little bit."

INTERVIEW #8

PART 3: PARTICIPATORY FEEDBACK OF INDIVIDUAL SHARED SPACES

FINDING 3: Participatory feedback opportunities, such as the walking interviews completed for this report, are useful for identifying key optimization opportunity areas for each shared space that might not come up otherwise.

Users might not communicate the nuances of how a space works for them or doesn't work for them unless prompted. Understanding user needs is valuable for enabling shared space to facilitate user goals, maximize utilization, and enhance user experiences in the space.

The final report provided to management goes into depth regarding each space and the related feedback from users. While this section is not in the public report due to the specificity of each space, included instead are some thematic topics:

1. Low-barrier reporting

6 users described small issues with certain spaces such as problems connecting to the monitor or finding it untidy from another user. These issues are bound to happen, but an interesting finding is that when users were then asked what they do about these issues, they all said that they do not report the issue, but they might instead avoid this space in the future. In one case, the user mentioned that they are usually in a hurry because the problem is often during a meeting, so they quickly change rooms. Another user explained that they know the building very well and choose spaces based on their past experiences, perpetually avoiding those which they had bad experiences.

Ultimately, avoidance is underutilization, and therefore it would be valuable to implement a solution such as a low-barrier reporting mechanism that would alert management about the issue while increasing user confidence that they can utilize the meeting room in the future rather than avoid it.

Low-barrier reporting examples could include:

- A comment box directly in the room for users to mark down suggestions or report issues while in the space.
- A follow-up e-mail after a room reservation asking if all the equipment was working or if there were any other issues.

2. Consider the congruence of purpose and ambiance of shared spaces

In some cases, users were not aware of the purpose of a shared space, and as a result might express some hesitancy embracing the space. Some categories that affected user interpretations of space purpose included (but are not limited to): furniture type (professional or casual), witnessing their peers' behavior in a space, proximity to others working making it a "quiet space", a feeling (or lack of) coziness vs. openness, and sensory experiences such as the music being played or the lighting. And when these "signals" did not match, users felt hesitant in the space and uncertainty on how to utilize it. One strong example is that a gaming system was provided in space next to offices and a conference table, making users uncomfortable with the idea of playing a game in a space where they might disrupt peers. Therefore, reflecting on how the purpose of the space matches the ambiance of the space is valuable for encouraging use of the space.

3. Clear communication of which spaces and resources are shared

In addition to relying on ambiance of space, sometimes clear communication is the best option and needs to be considered more carefully. Users might not know certain spaces or resources are shared and therefore would miss out on valuable opportunities that their more informed peers would benefit from.

Some examples of clear communication could include:

- Labeling shared equipment and other resources
- Easily accessible map of shared spaces and resources
- On-site signage explaining who and what the space is for, and rules if applicable
- On-going tours throughout the building to learn about shared resources and spaces

4. Privacy is a simple but important option

While many privacy fixes might be very small, such as adding a curtain or a fogged glass, it can make a big difference for users who might be otherwise around other people all day. By providing thoughtful privacy options, users might then be able to embrace other shared spaces more fully.

5. Offering something "extra"

When a shared space offers something extra or additional to what users have access to in their own space, then it becomes valuable to the user. This is a simple observation, but it is especially important when considering creating "social hubs" in building. What could be provided so that people want to leave their own space and congregate in another? Some options could include high-quality coffee, a desirable atmosphere, and an inspiring change of scenery.

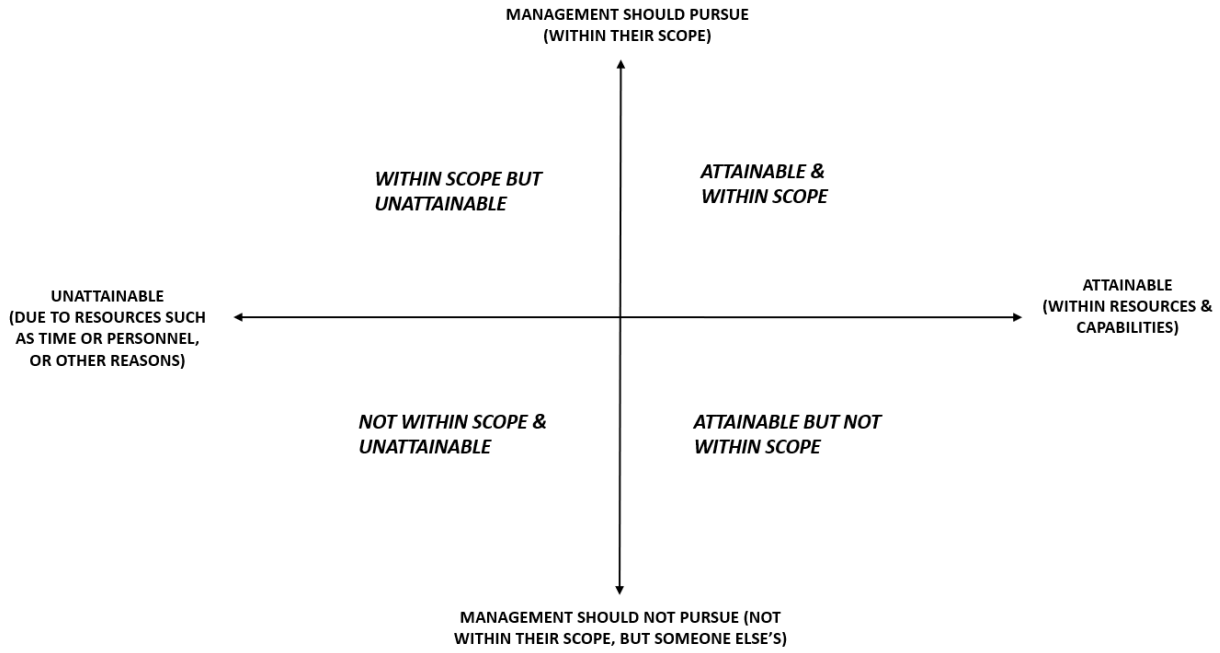
CONCLUSION & WORKSHOP

In concluding this report, the same question asked in the beginning is still present; Who can and/or should pursue the more nuanced desired outcomes of shared spaces? In the final workshop for this project, we asked management representatives this question by providing a similar but more specific version of Figure 6 (as seen below). We then asked participants to place each 'Potential User Need' within one of the quadrants found below in Figure 7. To conclude, we also invite the reader to reflect on these questions and potentially emulate this same workshop if it applies.

Figure 6: Potential user needs in coworking or startup environments shared spaces

People	Place	Processes
Connect users with relevant external ecosystems (universities, cities, businesses, etc.)	**Provide a space that inspires and promotes creativity**	**Facilitate sharing resources among users**
Help users expand their professional network	**Provide a space for alone time and recharging**	**Facilitate user influence over shared space and resource decisions**
Help users expand their social network	**Provide a space for socializing**	**Facilitate external access to users (potential employees, investors, buyers, etc.)**
Connect users with each other	**Provide visitors with an understanding of the people and opportunities within the building**	**Update users ongoing shared space and shared resource availability and changes**

Figure 7: Identifying attainability and scope



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