

Researching Silicon Roundabout's Thriving Co-working Scene...

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As part of [Creativeworks London's Place Work Knowledge strand](#), I am in the throes of conducting research into some of the co-working spaces and hubs in the Old Street area and I can only describe what I'm witnessing as utterly stimulating. This is part of a wider research on [creative hubs](#) where I have spoken to a number of businesses who co-locate in some of these spaces (expect the research to be available in Spring 2016) and I've been dizzied (I hope that's a term), especially in regard to what these entrepreneurs are working on – as well as how and where they work.



Co-working spaces are on the rise, this is quite [old news](#), however a 'co-working culture' has developed and matured in this part of London – and this has injected the start-up scene with a dose of real potential and capacity (for an interesting timeline on co-working spaces, view [this site](#)). This being said the start-up community in London, and Europe as well, still has a way to go before it can [realistically compete](#) with our American cousins. Nevertheless what we're seeing in Old Street is the development and maturation of new types of [urban agglomeration economies](#), and it is being led by the creation of hubs and co-working spaces.

I met a team who are working on educational games for kids who have just secured Series A funding and have grown too big for their current co-working space so they're on the move. I met another team who are working on mind boggling ways to use your smart phone as a type of medical triaging system; I met one guy that's aiming to turn the ways in which people advertise on Android systems on its head; and I met a young woman who has dropped everything in order to pursue an entrepreneurial dream. These are just a snow flake on the tip of an iceberg, meaning that if what I'm seeing isn't some type of mirage we should be seeing a whole host of exciting start-ups and products barrelling through the sector in the not too far future – all 'made in London' and all probably emerging from these co-working spaces.

As you can probably tell, it's difficult to not get caught up in the energy that infuses some of these spaces. And from what I'm seeing here, there is a real positive and momentum-generating quality to Old Street's start-up and co-working scene. From what I'm being told by start-ups, what makes Silicon Roundabout a great place to work are the co-working places. This is because within (some of) them exists an ethos based completely on sharing and a hunger to actually develop new things. Whether co-working culture and start-up development is a chicken and egg situation is a research question with significant policy implications which might be worth considering.

Can we say that healthy tech start-ups develop in a silo regardless of where they are set up (including at home), or do the places and spaces (the hubs and co-working spaces) that they work in, help them achieve a level of success? I think the answer partly lies in both, however I know for a fact, through speaking to people, that being 'co-desked' with businesses that are at the same stage that you are in, and that are willing to share their knowledge with you as well as contribute to an ethos based on developing new things has a strong effect on how much time and energy one puts into their business. My colleagues ([Dr. Mariza Dima](#) and [Dr. Gerard Briscoe](#)) and I have been involved in a much smaller research project that looked at this notion but with regards to [co-location and Hackathons](#), and what we found was that co-location does matter especially in regards to peer-to-peer learning and meaningful networking in the context of knowledge exchange.

A word of warning though, co-working spaces can be a little hit or miss. Some are blatant real estate and money making ventures, however (thankfully) others are not. Some care about the start-up community that they are fostering, and attempt to support small businesses that have ended up hiring their desk space. However some are aware of the fact that the co-working boom might be temporary and have decided to turn a tidy profit in the meantime. Importantly however, and I'm borrowing a colleague's terminology here, the start-up/co-working scene in Old Street depends on a type of 'informal peer-based incubation'. Nothing formal or dictated, no leadership courses or strategy documents outlining a 'vision'. They help each other in whatever way they can, just shy of full blown collaboration and within realistic parameters and through a gentle leadership. Just enough to get everyone inspired and realising their real potential in an environment that fluidly (and aesthetically) binds them together. There are a number of ingredients to a successful co-working community and for a researcher like myself talking to these entrepreneurs and trying to find out what they might be is a real pleasure.