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The Romantic Workplace: How Coworking Spaces Drive Post-Digital Consumption

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Abstract

Society and culture are increasingly marked by post-digital developments where the normalization of digital connectivity is challenged both through critical resistance, e.g., digital disconnection practices, and in commercial discourses on, e.g., "digital wellbeing" and "digital detox." This article seeks to understand such post-digital trends in working life through the lens of romantic ideals. In modern history, the Romantic ethic implied an escape into the beautiful, the genuine, and the sublime. While constituting a counter-force to functionalism, it also shaped the evolution of modern consumerism through the embracing of novelty and imagination. Here, the analytical focus is on coworking spaces (CWS), a form of digitally reliant workspaces where mobile workers can rent a desk or an office for a limited period of time and where disconnection and non-digital features are promoted as ingredients of "good work." Previous research shows that many CWS, while promoted as consumable destinations, function as anchoring places and environments for gaining a sense of presence and peace under digitally networked conditions. The current analysis extends these arguments through a case study of a CWS in an early-gentrifying part of Oslo, Norway. Based on ethnographic observations and interviews, the article shows how four romantic tropes—novelty, authenticity, creativity, and harmony—saturate spatial production as well as the mindsets of coworkers. It is concluded that CWS form part of a neo-romantic movement that includes a plethora of related post-digital phenomena, together constituting a counter-culture within capitalist consumer society.

Keywords

consumer culture; coworking spaces; digital disconnection; digital work; gentrification; media geography; post-digital; romantic ethic; sense of place

1. Introduction

Coworking spaces (CWS) are digitally connected workspaces where freelancers and other "flexible" knowledge workers can access a "hot desk" and other work facilities for a limited period. In a recent analysis, Merkel (2022) suggests that these workplaces can be understood as "destinations and new stakeholders in hospitality ecosystems" (p. 140). This is a pertinent formulation that captures, first, that CWS are promoted and consumed in a way similar to tourism destinations, and, second, that part of their desirability should be understood in a relational manner. CWS are designed to evoke attraction among customers and do so both through their appearance and through their functional and semiotic ties to neighboring places and businesses (bars, restaurants, shops, and so forth). In this respect, CWS represent a cultural shift whereby (some) workplaces become subjected to individual consumer choice (e.g., Bacevice, 2022; Burrell & Dale, 2014; Gruen & Bardhi, 2025). Of course, self-employed workers and entrepreneurs selected their places of operations also in the past, and some customers of CWS are assigned to a particular establishment by their employer. But never before has productive work in this way coalesced with *the consumption of place*. Today, there is competition among CWS companies to provide the best value for money as well as between cities and municipalities to attract new CWS establishments (e.g., Mariotti et al., 2024; Nakano et al., 2020).

As an index of this commoditization of the workplace, much research, especially from business- and management-oriented strands, has charted the demands and preferences of mobile workers, trying to learn what the CWS business looks like (e.g., Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2021; Jeske & Ruwe, 2019). Notably, CWS are demanded because they can provide (in addition to basic infrastructural amenities) a sense of community and boundedness, as well as social serendipity, among people who would otherwise suffer from loneliness and/or liquid working conditions (Garrett et al., 2017). What has been less discussed and analyzed, however, is how the construction of workplaces as "destinations" and "stakeholders" in "hospitality ecosystems" builds upon deeper socio-cultural value systems (Fast & Jansson, 2024; Merkel, 2022). This development, we argue, is not just a market-driven response to the fact that a growing share of the workforce in many Western countries lacks long-term employment and a fixed workplace. Having conducted several years of fieldwork—ethnography as well as analyses of marketing discourse—we discerned that CWS articulate values that correspond to the Romantic roots of consumer culture (Campbell, 1987). While the CWS business is diverse (ranging from global franchises to locally anchored collaborative hubs), meaning that romantic influences come in different shapes, our studies suggest that CWS are sites that reproduce a shared dream of authentic connections between place and identity. They are workplaces that ask to be consumed in a spirit of self-fulfillment, thus interweaving the forces of production with the "imaginative hedonism" of consumers (Campbell, 1987).

Based on these preliminary observations, we set out to explore the following research question in a more systematic fashion: How does the material and socio-cultural construction of CWS reflect and re-articulate romantic values, and how do such values relate to the dreams and hopes of their customers, that is, digitally entangled laptop workers?

We will show that CWS are constructed and appropriated as environments where the reliance on digital connectivity, and the associated threat of "placelessness" (Relph, 1976) and loneliness (King, 2017), are countered by means of socio-semiotic textures that speak to workers' longing for a "genuine" sense of place and belonging (Adams & Jansson, 2023). CWS use romantic tropes to promote and sell *a* post-digital

sense of place—a particular form of topophilia (Tuan, 1974/1990) that refers to both the workplace and its local surroundings.

To build our argument, we use a case study from a CWS in Oslo, Factory Tøyen (FT). FT is located in an early gentrifying neighborhood, Tøyen, and hosts mainly cultural entrepreneurs and start-ups. It is promoted by a strong focus on work-life balance and encapsulates the fundamental values of the coworking movement (Gandini, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012). Our study is abductive in nature, meaning that the results presented here do not respond to any pre-defined hypotheses, nor do they stem from an entirely open-ended exploration. Rather, our interest in the romantic undercurrents of CWS emerged as we started to interpret disconnection practices and other post-digital phenomena in light of consumer culture. This also means that while we begin the article by presenting our theoretical framework, including the notions of topophilia (Tuan, 1974/1990) and imaginative hedonism (Campbell, 1987), this framework is also part of our results. In subsequent sections, we present our methodological approach and the findings from our ethnographic fieldwork. The findings are grouped according to four romantic tropes defining a post-digital sense of place: novelty, authenticity, creativity, and harmony.

2. Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

Contemporary society is marked by post-digital developments where the normalization of digital connectivity is challenged or even resisted. The post-digital is articulated through critical practices (e.g., digital disconnection or withdrawal) as well as in commercial discourses (e.g., "digital wellbeing," "digital detox"). In CWS, we argue, these tendencies come together in interesting ways as CWS are digitally reliant workplaces that *also* promote disconnection and non-digital features as ingredients of "good work." Such efforts to construct CWS as desirable post-digital environments put the accent on place-making, ranging from material design to the curation of pleasurable atmospheres intended to compensate for digital fatigue. Along these lines, we theorize CWS as at the same time consumer objects and sites where mobile workers can nourish a strong sense of place—where imaginative longing for the latter drives the former.

In the following, based on previous research, we discuss CWS as (a) post-digital workspaces, (b) identity anchoring places, and (c) consumable destinations. We also show how ideals rooted in Romanticism—notably, the appreciation of nature, emotion, creativity, and imagination, as well as the human striving for authentic experiences and inner harmony (see, e.g., Smith, 2023)—contribute to the linking of these themes. The Romantic movement harbored what Campbell (1987, p. 259) calls a "cult of sensibility" that peaked around the mid-18th century, especially in literature and philosophy, but played a deep and enduring role for modern society at large. In their reactivation of this cult, CWS unfold as neo-romantic havens for the uprooted digital subject.

2.1. CWS as Post-Digital Workspaces

Cramer (2015) argues that "the post-digital condition" is characterized by "disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets" alongside a revalorization of "old media" (p. 12). He illustrates this with the analogue typewriter whose cultural status, Cramer claims, is rising beyond niche "hipster" communities. While the extent of the "mainstreamification" of post-digital tastes can be debated (e.g., Fast et al., 2021), we accept Cramer's view of the post-digital as a response to the normalization of digital

technologies in everyday life (see also Albris et al., 2024; Taylor, in press), including working life. Like Jansson et al. (2025, p. 4), we understand the post-digital condition as a social condition encompassing "a continuum" of responses to digitalization, from coping tactics against "digital threats to individual agency" to "deliberate resistance to digital pervasiveness and social norms." Among these responses are various tactics for fighting the media "messiness" (Cramer, 2015, p. 17) that define the post-digital condition, such as "digital minimalism" (Newport, 2019), "digital detoxing," or "digital decluttering."

Through various examples of the "disconnection turn in work," Fast (2021) shows how, in post-digital capitalism, digital disconnectivity is re-coded from deficiency to resource, aligning with traditional work values like productivity. She identifies the post-digital workplace as a material and cultural model embodying a critique of digitalized work, including hyper-flexibilization and the subsequent loss of socio-spatial anchoring. The laptop-intensive CWS can thus be seen as prototypical of a post-digital workplace ideal that embraces "disconnective" technologies and designs such as designated areas for analogue recreation like yoga. Through their boundedness, CWS even act as "post-digital territories"; exclusive havens in hyper-connected surroundings (Fast & Jansson, 2024).

The spatial implications of (non-)media use in CWS are also analyzed by Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte (2021), who point to tensions arising in milieus where the digital is both indispensable and contested. These tensions include disputes over the core function of CWS. As they note, "Putting technology centre stage or relegating it to the backstage are material practices that constitute the CWS as either a workspace for productivity or a social space for community" (p. 7). We argue that this (spatial) ambiguity is symptomatic of the post-digital work culture.

We also argue that the post-digital workplace must be seen within a longer history of organizational measures to create productive *and* "happy" workers. This includes initiatives pertaining to the spiritualization of work—a trend that, fueled by the return to Romanticism in the 1960s, gained momentum in the 1980s (Watts & Houtman, 2023). The "spiritual workplace," Watts and Houtman (2023) argue, reflects the view that "within each and every worker lies an *authentic inner self*…that is the repository of the spiritual/sacred, but which is stifled and repressed by the bureaucratic and rationalized character of the modern workplace" (p. 440, emphasis added). Today, this neo-romantic trend comes in the guise of corporate "mindfulness," "workfulness," and "digital detox" programs (e.g., Guyard & Kaun, 2018) that aim at to "purify" work—not primarily from "bureaucratic pollution" (see Watts & Houtman, 2023, p. 441) but from digital contamination. Thus, the post-digital workplace shares traits with what Gregg (2018) calls "the mindful workplace," designed to secure productivity amid digital distractions and modern afflictions such as "digital fatigue," "Zoom exhaustion," and "technostress" (Bondanini et al., 2025).

2.2. CWS as Identity Anchoring Places

As shown, post-digital discourses and practices actualize place as a counterweight to digital networks and connected life-forms. This does not mean that there is an opposition between place and digital media; digital technologies and (locative) platforms can also enhance place-making practices (Halegoua & Polson, 2021) and deepen people's experiences of place (Braunerhielm & Ryan Bengtsson, 2024). Yet, there is a tendency among people to think of, and relate to, digital connectivity as a threat to place and spatial boundaries, and vice versa, to retreat to certain places in order to get away from digital connectivity demands (Adams & Jansson, 2023).

It may be a second-home, a place in nature, or simply a dedicated—and disconnected—place in one's home (e.g., Doerr, 2021; Fast et al., 2021; Hesselberth, 2021; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). As digital connectivity has turned into the normal state for many people, it takes boundary work to secure such exceptional places (Adams & Jansson, 2023).

There are romantic undertones to this longing for undisturbed places free from digital "pollutions." To grasp this phenomenologically, we shall turn to Tuan's (1974/1990) understanding of topophilia, the love of place. The term topophilia "couples sentiment with place" (Tuan, 1974/1990, p. 113), meaning that people's affective ties with the surrounding environment are crucial to how they evolve as human beings. Tuan's mission is to understand how different manifestations of topophilia come about. He points to three aspects, which are also relevant to our analysis of CWS. First, people's attachment to place may unfold as responses to aesthetic or sensory impressions. The appreciation of delightful sceneries has long historical roots, especially within the Romantic movement, but may not always resonate with other tactile experiences. Tuan mentions children, whose "aesthetic distance is minimal" (p. 96), meaning that other senses than vision sustain their appreciation of, for example, a playground.

The second aspect has to do with "health, familiarity and awareness of the past" (Tuan, 1974/1990, p. 92), which Tuan illustrates with the fact that spatial appreciation also depends on one's physical state and inner wellbeing. A place can become subject to precious feelings if it sustains and is associated with wellbeing, such as a café where one regularly meets with friends to have a cup of coffee. This stresses that topophilia must be understood holistically, which is important to our analysis of CWS.

Thirdly, Tuan highlights that place attachment evolves and gains deeper meaning in relation to what a place *is not* (Tuan, 1974/1990, p. 102). This is a fundamental logic of semiotics, as seen for instance in how modern urbanization and "the temptations and distractions of city life" (p. 102) soon led to a growing, romantic appreciation of nature and the countryside. A classical trope is the "cabin in the wood," to which the modern, urbanized individual can temporarily escape to reconnect with oneself and with nature. This romanticization of "simple," non-urban places resonates in interesting ways with the post-digital turn, as we will show.

Whereas Tuan's work has been little cited in research on CWS, it can illuminate findings on how CWS attract customers and why customers stay (if they do). A key reference here is Bacevice and Spreitzer's (2023) analysis of a CWS business in the US, which captures the importance of spatial anchoring. While technological amenities are rudimentary, the authors argue, what makes a CWS attractive has largely to do with how well it resonates with the individual's self-identity. This, in turn, is grounded in material and aesthetic elements as well as in social factors, that is, who else occupies the place. Similar conclusions have been drawn in other studies (e.g., Cnossen & Stephenson, 2022), emphasizing that feelings of community and place attachment play an important role for mobile knowledge workers seeking somewhere to belong (see also Savage, 2008). In a certain sense, then, CWS are in the business of constructing and selling topophilia—something that, in turn, demands a high degree of spatial and cultural sensibility.

2.3. CWS as Consumable Destinations

According to Campbell (1987), the Romantic ethic, with its "cult of sensibility" (p. 259), was as important as the Protestant ethic to the expansion of a capitalistic society based on consumption. While Weber's

(1920/2001) classical analysis could explain the emergence of capitalists—as Protestant ascetic ideals spurred and legitimized capital accumulation—it was not satisfactory for understanding where all consumers came from. What drove them to spend? According to Campbell (1987), it was largely the romantic search for novelty, difference, and something "tasteful" that motivated people, notably the growing bourgeoisie class, to indulge in consumption beyond functional needs. In contrast to Protestant values, Romanticism advocated pleasure, hedonism, and sublime experiences that were true to the self (see also Smith, 2023). Such experiences refer to something else than just material comfort and can only be achieved if people are able to gain new, even unique, sensations (Campbell, 1987, pp. 112–113). As a consequence, the Romantic ethic celebrated a state of longing, or what Campbell calls imaginative hedonism.

Romantic sensibilities saturate consumer culture through the modern consumer's predisposition to imagine how a novel commodity might bring about genuine pleasure (Campbell, 1987, pp. 142–143):

> The essential activity of consumption is thus not the actual selection, purchase or use of products, but the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself, "real" consumption being largely a resultant of this "mentalistic" hedonism. Viewed in this way, the emphasis upon novelty as well as that upon insatiability both become comprehensible. (Campbell, 1987, p. 144)

The romantic longing for genuine experiences pertains to a wide range of phenomena, including places. As such, imaginative hedonism provides a theoretical bridge between consumerism and Tuan's notion of topophilia. In his book *Romantic Geography* (Tuan, 2013), Tuan observes, for example, that the lure of the city stems from the possibility to build many intense local attachments and walk through fleeting moments of spatial excitement and surprise—New York being "a superb instance of the romantic sublime" (p. 139). He also discusses other places, including natural environments like mountains, oceans, and forests, that in different ways work as "dream material" (see Campbell, 1987, p. 144), offering a refuge from the orderly conditions of modern life.

In this way, we can theorize CWS as consumable destinations responding to the neo-romantic desire for authentic place experiences, whether adventure or stillness. Similar approaches to spatial consumption and phantasmagoria have figured in tourism studies (e.g., Strain, 2003; Urry, 1995), while just occasionally referring to the Romantic ethic (e.g., Garcia, 2016; Gilroy, 2000; Jansson, 2024). More than any other form of consumption, tourism is characterized by a longing for places that are perceived as exotic, genuine, and hedonistic. While modern tourism developed in tandem with the industrial revolution, Romantic views of travelling were mainly constructed in opposition to mass tourism and pre-packaged experiences. Mass tourism fails to deliver authentic encounters with place and cannot assist the individual in finding their true self. In a similar way, the saturation of Romantic ideals into the world of work could be seen in the arts and crafts movement around the turn of the 20th century, which was a reaction to industrial mass production and standardization (Thompson, 1976/2011).

While few researchers have paid attention to the romantic underpinnings of new forms of work and workplaces, there are many rich descriptions of how flexible work regimes are constructed and promoted as alternatives to bureaucratic structures and standardized office spaces. Burrell and Dale (2014) take a quote from the Romantic poet William Wordsworth—writing in the early 19th century that "the desk is an instrument of torture"—as a point of departure when analyzing the modern office as a consumer object and

environment. The quote illustrates the longstanding controversies surrounding the production of modern office spaces, pointing to the antagonistic relation between the Romantic ethic and bureaucratic ideology. Even bureaucracy's semantic root in the French word for desk (bureau) underscores the significance of architecture and material emplacement for controlling employees and their movements (Burrell & Dale, 2014, p. 686). By contrast, new digitalized work regimes, including CWS and digital nomadism, are saturated by a mythology of mobility, entrepreneurship, and flat organizations. Burrell and Dale (2014, p. 693) emphasize that the management of flexible work organizations aims "to bring the whole person into relationship with the organization, including their emotional and sensory responses," which motivates things like "mood management" and a focus on "aesthetic pleasures." This is also how the workplace gradually becomes a space of consumption and lifestyle choice as much as of production.

CWS are symptomatic of this trend, where the "community manager" plays an important role in shaping atmospheres and (re)creating affective environments (Gregg & Lodato, 2018; see also Bernhardt, 2023). As Bacevice (2022) shows, it is symptomatic that CWS (in contrast to most traditional offices) are located on street level and form an important part of urban storefront spaces. Additionally, an expanding branch of corporations offer sensory stimulation to the consuming gaze (of office spaces), including plants, art, special scents, and so forth (Burrell & Dale, 2014). Even the recruitment of the "right" customers in terms of lifestyle and expressive markers has become an element of office design and management, meaning that customers of a CWS are at the same time producers, consumers, and commodities in the new urban economy (Dale, 2012; Grazian, 2020).

In this context, we must acknowledge the relationality of CWS. As Gruen and Bardhi (2025) conclude, it is not just the workplace as such that defines it as a consumer object. The attraction of CWS is also tied to broader "consumer lifestyle aspirations" (Gruen & Bardhi, 2025, p. 11) that coworkers feel cannot be fulfilled in traditional, more alienating, office spaces. Here, the position of CWS within hospitality ecosystems (Merkel, 2022), including neighboring restaurants, bars, shops, and other services, plays a key role in whether an individual feels that a particular CWS resonates with their taste and desired identity. It is not a coincidence that CWS have been found to play a role in gentrification processes due to the inflow of upwardly mobile knowledge workers and cultural entrepreneurs for whom work and distinctive leisure practices overlap (e.g., Jamal, 2018; Mariotti et al., 2017). These groups typically spur the early, aestheticizing stages of gentrification, when neighborhoods are still perceived as "authentic," even a bit "rough," and real estate prices are relatively low (e.g., Ley, 2003; Pratt, 2018). As Gerosa (2024) argues in his analysis of the urban "hipster economy," digital start-ups and innovation hubs—commonly the customers of CWS—tend to cluster with micro-breweries, gourmet food trucks, craft cocktail bars, and other micro-entrepreneurs that cater for the hipster's longing for "something rooted in tradition but with an innovative twist, which makes it distinctive" (Gerosa, 2024, p. 3; see also Campbell, 2005; Zukin, 2020). These are the kinds of romantic desires we intend to explore in the following analysis.

3. The Case Study: Contexts and Methods

This article is part of a four-year research project funded by the Swedish Research Council that investigates the manifestation of CWS as both an industry and social movement. We have conducted ethnographic studies including longer and shorter fieldwork at altogether 16 individual CWS, in Malmö (Sweden), Oslo (Norway), Denver (CO, US), and Palma de Mallorca (Spain). Due to the diversity of the CWS market—in terms of profile,

aesthetics, business models, etc.—we first undertook what we call a "hot-desking ethnography," involving short stays in many different CWS, before concentrating our fieldwork on four sites in Malmö and Oslo—FT being one of them. The approach has been abductive, recognizing the importance of ethnographic serendipity which means that findings are not "found" but created along the way (e.g., Sacramento, 2025). Our insights from diverse CWS thus provide an important backdrop to the analysis and findings presented in the current study. Likewise, we have used our theoretical knowledge sensitively while moving "from ideas to data as well as from data to ideas" (Hammersley, 1992, p. 168), gradually leading up to the four analytical tropes constituting the scaffolding of our results (see Section 4).

3.1. Factory Tøyen

FT was selected as one of our key sites for three main reasons. First, it represents an independent, privately owned corporation that is not part of any bigger brand. FT is thus a unique place, with a deliberate design. Second, FT represents a CWS that mainly targets people in the creative industries, especially smaller entrepreneurs and startups at the intersection of culture and tech. This profile also characterizes our selection of informants. Third, FT is located in a gentrifying neighborhood, Tøyen, which has a deep history as a working-class area and, more recently, a reputation for social challenges due to immigration, low levels of education, and high unemployment rates. Geographically, Tøyen is located on the eastern side of Oslo, traditionally classified as "working-class," in-between the gentrified and rather "hipsteresque" Grünerløkka and a socially more disadvantaged area called Grønland. During the last two decades, Tøyen has undergone several social development programmes, most significantly the "Tøyen lyft" ("Elevating Tøyen"), and seen a gradual inflow of people with higher incomes (Holgersen, 2020; Huse, 2016). However, while marketed as a diverse and "hip" neighborhood, Tøyen is still relatively poor in economic terms. Altogether, these factors provide a backdrop to our discussions around neo-romanticism and post-digital tendencies in office work.

FT is distributed over two floors in a red-brick building from 1913, originally housing textile manufacturing. After the factory closed in the mid-20th century, the 6,250 m² building stood empty until FT opened in 2019. FT comprises coworking areas, offices, meeting rooms, lounges, studios, event spaces, a meditation/yoga room, and a kitchen and lunch area. The reception is staffed during standard working hours. However, anyone with a membership and the designated location-detecting key app on their smartphone can enter outside of these hours. Opening hours are 06:00 to 22:00 on weekdays and 07:00 to 20:00 on weekends.

FT was founded by a young local entrepreneur, Amalie Kristoffersen. In an interview on *Estate Media* (all quotes below have been translated to English by the authors), Kristoffersen explains that the space is inspired by London and New York (Rønne, 2018). Her aim was to create a "convenient" space for creative "millennials"—working, for example, in "fashion, architecture offices, photo, film, graphic bureaus, design, technology, media, and advertising"—who yearn for a flexible working life (Rønne, 2018). This is still their target group (Factory—Tøyen, n.d.-a). Although FT now also houses more established firms, many clients are early-career professionals or run small-scale or even single-person businesses.

The management emphasizes "design, environment, sustainability, and harmony" as central to FT's identity and mission (Factory—Tøyen, n.d.-b). "Light, air, and nature" are framed as "the foundational pillars" of their "design philosophy" (Factory—Tøyen, n.d.-c). The building is protected from radical renovation by the Municipal Archivist, and FT has endeavored to align the new design with the original interior, for example, by preserving

old radiators, original wood paneling, and the "pearl of the coworking area—the glass roof" (Rønne, 2018). The mix of old and new interior features contributes to FT's "industrial cool" aesthetic (Willim, 2005). From the outset, it was also a vision that the building would house companies that complement each other. As of March 2024, FT shared the building with a Swedish digital design company and, on the ground floor, a French family business and vintage shop, and a combined "craft bakery" café and wine bar that regularly organizes multi-purpose events like "knitting, wine and livepod."

As of June 2025, FT offers four main types of memberships, ranging from basic access to the communal coworking areas and social spaces for 10 days a month (1,990 NOK/month/person) to lockable studio workspaces for 2–20 people (5,990 NOK/month/person). All memberships include postal services, printing, and coffee (Factory—Tøyen, n.d.-b). FT has no designated community app (but uses Slack to some extent), and scheduled social activities at FT are relatively limited. As we were told in a research interview, the management values bottom-up and face-to-face initiatives for networking and sociality. Nonetheless, the staff arranges seasonal parties and regular community brunches to foster companionship and affiliation. By the time of our study, FT also organized yoga classes every Thursday morning. A special deal was offered to non-members who purchased tickets for the yoga class: They were allowed to remain in the CWS until lunchtime.

3.2. Fieldwork and Data

The main fieldwork at FT was carried out in March 2024 by two of the project researchers. One researcher conducted most of the fieldwork, but the involvement of the second researcher allowed for discussion of empirical insights. In total, the researchers spent 55 hours in FT's premises, distributed over nine working days (from March 5 to March 27). It is a short fieldwork in ethnographic terms. Nevertheless, it gave us opportunities to capture social, material, and organizational contexts. During the fieldwork, the researchers carried out their regular academic duties and simultaneously engaged in informal conversations, notably over lunch and by the coffee machine, and observed the material and social environment. Fieldnotes in diary format combined detailed observations, interpretive insights, and personal reflections. The fieldwork also included the urban context of FT, the Tøyen neighbourhood. Walking the streets, visiting public spaces, and commercial establishments gave us insights into local life, with a particular focus on gentrification (Huse, 2016), which also included adjacent neighborhoods mentioned in the interviews.

The fieldwork also involved semi-structured interviews. We interviewed one staff member, a male community host, and eight clients (five female, three male). They were recruited via direct contacts and snowball sampling, aiming to reflect the typical FT clientele in terms of different occupations, ages, and genders. On average, the interviews lasted 37 minutes. While it proved difficult to book longer interviews, informal conversations, especially around the coffee machine and in the lunch room (where laptops were prohibited), provided additional insights. In the interviews, coworkers were asked about their work, work conditions—notably their handling of digital connectivity—and their overall experiences and views on the environment of FT and its surroundings. The host was asked about (his view on) FT's history, visions, design choices, community activities, and his efforts to create a professional and social atmosphere. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, except for one which, at the respondent's request, was documented only via note-taking. Prior to the interviews, all respondents were informed about the project's ethical guidelines and conditions. All gave written consent to participate. We have been careful to keep the interviewees

anonymous and, therefore, do not reveal what they work with or their real names. Therefore, the names in the interviewees' quotes are pseudonyms.

4. Findings: Four Romantic Tropes in the Post-Digital Sense of Place

During our fieldwork at FT, we gradually realized that much of how the place was constructed, and how customers appropriated it, was replete with romantic ideals. The same thing can be said about how the coworkers we interviewed envisioned a good workplace. A general takeaway from our fieldwork is thus that FT represents a relatively coherent social space where encoded discourses, visions, and experiences are in harmony. Most customers that we interviewed had chosen FT deliberately with regards to their businesses and personal lifestyle (with one noteworthy exception). It was also important to them that FT represented something different from major CWS franchises, and that it was located in Tøyen ("the East") rather than in the affluent neighborhoods in the central and western parts of Oslo.

Bringing together our findings, we discern four recurring and overlapping romantic tropes that capture what makes FT attractive to its customers and how it spurs a post-digital sense of place: (a) novelty, (b) authenticity, (c) creativity, and (d) harmony. The tropes were crystallized through an abductive approach, typical for short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013), starting out from the overall observations of our project. Already in the hotdesking ethnographies and analysis of promotional discourse, the emphasis on genuine, mindful, and creative work environments stood out. This inspired us to revisit the theoretical literature on Romanticism, especially Campbell's (1987, 1992) work on the rise of consumer capitalism. Here, novelty represents the supreme driver of imaginative hedonism, whereas the three additional tropes can be understood as sub-themes that further articulate what the search for novelty is about in the context of CWS. The labels should be understood as elastic constructs, comprising various features that we found during the fieldwork—their common denominator being that they resonate with the overall "cult of sensibility" (Campbell, 1987, p. 259) characterizing the Romantic ethic.

4.1. Novelty

In Campbell's (1987, 1992) theory of imaginative hedonism, the desire for novelty plays a key role. The romantic ideal is fundamentally about achieving a life that is vitalizing and true to the self, rather than repetitive and standardized. In our interviews with FT customers, such an outlook is articulated regarding both the CWS and the Tøyen neighborhood. Many of our informants express their excitement with being in a neighborhood in flux, "up-and-coming," that is also different from the nearby, already gentrified, Grünerløkka:

> Turid: Um, I really like it….I know that cities can change, and I'm pretty sure that this is a kind of up-and-coming neighborhood. Maybe it used to be not as nice…but now, to me, it seems like things happen here, and it's nice and residential.

To several informants, working at FT means that they feel part of an ongoing urban transformation that brings a promise of novel things happening, such as new establishments being opened and interesting people moving in:

> Nora: Generally, Tøyen is like the new Grünerløkka. It's like a transition where this is more authentic with more newcomers and creative people….Tøyen has been a little bit problematic with some social challenges. But this is the part of Oslo that will flourish a lot within not too many years. Then, it might be very expensive to buy apartments here….Now is the phase when it's pretty interesting here.

While statements like this articulate an awareness of gentrification and the socio-economic dynamics at play, the desire to be in a place where one's work and leisure resonate with local developments seems to prevail over social critique. Here, the transitory design of the FT building itself—the integration of new functions and aesthetics into a former factory building—adds to the romantic sense of adventurousness. One informant says that coming to FT is like passing through "a portal into an unexpected world," and that it is an event for her customers to visit. Similarly, Josefine explains why she thinks that FT is a "cool place":

> When you enter, people think this looks like a place in New York and you are like in a café. You are in a place in Tøyen where you've never been before. You didn't know it existed. And then it's about the people working here who are in the creative industry and are very different in a way. Urban people working with stuff that people find exciting.

Josefine's description highlights the romantic fascination with spatial discovery; the experience of finding a place one did not know existed, even a bit bewildering at first, where it is still possible to make oneself at home among like-minded people. It is also obvious that the creativity of these "urban people" spurs a sense of spatial excitement and elective belonging (Savage, 2008). FT is a place where people come from a variety of backgrounds and are understood to do, and create, many different things. There is also an outspoken celebration of face-to-face meetings and digital minimalism among most informants. The absence of a community app underscores the post-digital vision of a workplace that spurs social serendipity. As one interviewee puts it, "word of mouth is pretty much the only way things happen here":

> Nora: I began winter-bathing this winter and we are three–five persons who do it….And it's so fun because there is one who is from [country X] who do [X] and one working with gender solutions….There is one doing sustainability stuff….So, we're just very different people and nationalities….We got in touch just one day in the kitchen and I just said yes.

Nora's story encapsulates the overarching desire for cultural pluralism and new experiences among our FT informants. The fact that Nora "just said yes" indicates a romantic openness to the unexpected. Several informants also hold that the location in Tøyen, a diverse area, makes people "a bit more open" than otherwise in Norway, which is a "tough crowd" if you want to get to know new people.

4.2. Authenticity

While a slippery theoretical concept, authenticity is a core value among coworkers at FT. Much of their appreciation of FT stems from a feeling of being in a place that has a genuine history, a unique design, and is interwoven into a lively neighborhood. As told by one of the managers, this is also how the place was envisioned from the start:

> Manager: The building has a rich history, being over 100 years old. It originally housed Lauritsen & Sørensen's knitting factory, located at Kjølberggata 21. It's considered the younger sibling to the Havnelageret, both designed by the same architect.
>
> Interviewer: Ah, exactly. And I can see that you have also preserved a lot of the old material and old details?
>
> Manager: Yes….That was very important, to preserve the soul of the building.

The ambition of the FT management has thus been to inscribe, or invest, a sense of authenticity into FT—preserving "the soul of the building"—in different ways, including the preservation of original details and historical narratives, and adding an artistic signature to the design. This has been a successful investment. Most FT customers describe the place as "true," "genuine," and "unique," compared to major CWS firms like Spaces that stand for the "corporate" and "standardized." Some informants also describe a sense of local pride—a strong articulation of topophilia (Tuan, 1974/1990)—meaning that they link their identity to this place, rather than to other places. Here, the nearby neighborhood Grünerløkka is an important reference point for making more fine-grained distinctions:

> Josefine: This is not like being in Grünerløkka or the central city. It's rougher. And in a way this is a unique place in this area….We are like, proud to say that we work here, and I notice myself when we tell people where we are….Then it's very easy to pitch it.

Grünerløkka is understood as more gentrified and thus less authentic than Tøyen. At the same time, there is an awareness among informants that Tøyen might become more like Grünerløkka one day. To some, this imposes a state of dissonance. Much of the attraction of FT lies in its integration into a wider hospitality ecosystem (Merkel, 2022), including bars, restaurants, and bakeries, many of them with a sustainability profile and focus on local tradition and craftsmanship. At the same time, there is a concern that this very ecosystem, targeting the FT clientele, might engulf the neighborhood:

> Felicia: [This area] has a lot of potential….I think it's a part of the city that used to be like a more kind of dangerous place, like a lot of immigrants live there. And it was kind of seen as a sketchier part. I hope that gentrification doesn't like, push certain people out of there, but I hope that the city does things just to make it a nicer place.

To Felicia, the romantic longing for genuine place experiences collides with an awareness of how gentrification works, and that she is part of the "problem." This type of reflexivity is symptomatic of early gentrification processes when rents and prices are still relatively low and the inflow of artists, cultural workers, and small entrepreneurs contributes to setting a creative vibe in the area (e.g., Ley, 2003; Pratt, 2018). Threadgold et al. (2024) call it reflexive complicity, denoting a condition where early gentrifiers in possession of cultural rather than economic capital create spaces that (they know) also speak to the taste of more affluent middle-class consumers. Still, none of our informants says that they consider leaving FT for this reason. Their romantic fascination with Tøyen is stronger and the creative venues and side-activities available in relation to FT are to their taste.

Digital services and technological amenities are *not* mentioned when describing the attraction of FT. Computers, mobiles, and screens are taken as mundane tools, or infrastructure, whereas other activities can help people get off their screens, even finding a better way of life. Felicia mentions that working in the creative environment of FT has made her realize that she is tired of only working with the computer and that she wants to do something more creative. Her example shows how romantic values of authenticity and self-fulfillment underpin a post-digital sense of place.

4.3. Creativity

Given the culture-oriented businesses of most coworkers at FT, their celebration of creativity comes as no surprise. Yet, it is worth reflecting on how their creative ethos intersects with romantic ideals of what a good workplace and a good neighborhood are. Most of our interviewees stress that they have chosen FT partly because of its "laidback vibe" and the absence of conventions, such as dress codes and distinct work-leisure boundaries. FT is a place where creativity can flourish in an open-ended manner and where the whole setting, including the streets of Tøyen, invites free thinking:

> Thomas: I'm a person who always works from everywhere, like I'm very happy to work from a café…or the type of coworking spaces where there is a lot of buzz….I can say that there is a more laid-back, chill, vibe here….It's like "come as you are." People in high heels, you don't see much of them here….And [in Tøyen] there are many people working with ceramics, furniture carpentry, painting, and what else they do. Very nice then…yeah, it's like children are playing out in the streets, that's how it is.

Thomas's words encapsulate an ethos that can be found across our interviews. Even though Thomas works a lot, it is important for him to feel no pressure and for the surroundings to denote something more than just work. Symptomatically, his description links the CWS (where you can "come as you are") with the creative and seemingly tolerant culture of Tøyen (where "children are playing out in the streets"). According to our informants, creativity and playfulness do not match with the conventions found in many other workplaces, notably on "the west side" of Oslo:

> Nora: I find it very inspiring to have this kind of diverse environment and flexibility in my everyday life. I was nine years at an engineering firm…and I feel that being within such frames that are very, very boxed…it chokes my creativity and my inspiration and my drive to have things done and find solutions….I felt it became too much like the west side [of Oslo]. Very much a profit environment….I like that it's more rustic, that it's not like that super-professional with a polished façade.

Our informants' understanding of what makes a creative environment combines social factors, such as work regulations and unspoken rules, and characteristics related to location (not "the west side") and spatial design (the "rustic" feel of FT). Creativity is associated with handicraft, free play, and an environment that is not too clean. This goes hand in hand with the appreciation of the analogue over, or alongside, the digital that saturates FT at large, including adjacent activities such as the "wine, knitting and podcast" sessions arranged by the sourdough bakery in the same building.

The significance of the analogue is spelled out more explicitly in other parts of our interview material. For example, Kjetil describes what we might call a "post-digital workshop" in his vision of how FT could become an even better workplace:

> I often think I should go to them [the management] and ask, "Listen, are you interested in somebody putting up a drawing corner?" Cause I can do that. I can draw and I know which pens you need. I mean, it's not that expensive. It's just a fraction of what the digital infrastructure costs….It should just be like a corner workshop where you can just go and draw things. Perhaps some post-it notes but you should not book it, never. And it doesn't have to be kept very clean, no, no…then some of the magic is lost.

The envisioned drawing corner is not just analogue, including pens and Post-it notes, but it is also explicitly contrasting the digital infrastructure. Creativity is associated with spontaneous face-to-face interactions and a minimalistic attitude when it comes to rules, regulations, and cleanliness. Thus, Kjetil's vision is a bit like a romantic dream of a sacred place liberated from the burdens of bureaucratic and/or digital working conditions. And this dream is not completely unrealistic. FT is an environment where this type of initiative could happen and, as such, it both responds to and energizes people's longing for place. Ultimately, FT has succeeded in making coworkers feel that they are part of building something new—their identities and careers, as well as the workplace and the "up-and-coming" neighborhood—while also acting as consumers.

4.4. Harmony

The tagline of FT is: "Work-life balance is not the goal—it's a lifestyle" (Factory—Tøyen, n.d.-b; authors' translation from Norwegian). This outlook also saturates the design of the material environment, with an emphasis on organic materials, plants, fresh air, and direct contact with the sky. Part of the concept is also the enabling of activities and time-spaces for disconnection and contemplation:

> Manager: Thanks to the design and the glass ceiling, you can just set your computer aside, have a cup of coffee, and stare at the sky….Disconnect from this digital world and this excess of information that we are being bombarded with. I think there is a huge value in that. And I myself very often use analogue media.

Digital disconnection and analogue media are thus integral to the managerial vision of harmony, reverberating with broader cultural trends in work-life management like yoga and various forms of mindfulness as well as with discourses of digital wellbeing and digital minimalism (Newport, 2019). The customers of FT buy into this post-digital vision—also literally, through post-digital consumption (Humayun & Belk, 2020)—and feel that they have found a place where they can achieve a sense of here-and-now, temporarily detached from the outside world. Several of our informants are familiar with digital detoxing and have tried it (one of them during a yoga retreat). Bente describes that she never brings any digital devices to FT, except for her smartwatch and a smartphone without a SIM card. She handles all digital interaction and work duties in her home office while FT functions as a post-digital territory for thinking, inspiration, and social interaction (Adams & Jansson, 2023). Other informants mention that they would have liked FT to emphasize disconnection and harmony even more:

> Kjetil: Well, it was almost the main reason why I was drawn here—the yoga on Thursdays. Yeah, it could have been even more because in many jobs all work happens on the screen, but there are also ways of inviting other ways of working…to have large whiteboards and access to paper and stuff to draw with, to get people off their screens.

> Nora: It feels very nice to be here because it feels like you are almost a secret. So, when you work, it feels like you are in a nice atmosphere. Maybe it has something to do with the rustic and the green…yes, there is a choice of earth tones. But I would have liked to see even more plants here.

Overall, leisure-oriented features are much prioritized by the FT clientele. Turid, who also signed up due to the yoga classes, says that she likes the picnic tables that are placed outside during the summertime. She sometimes sits out there and works. Felicia mentions the importance of huge windows and high ceilings to bring light and air into the workspace. Again, many of these descriptions include references to "corporate" spaces and the "west side" to clarify what FT *is not*—"dark," "strict," "snobbish," and "masculine":

> Kjetil: It's quite old around here. You have like, a museum neighborhood where you also have a botanical garden. That's nice. I like it more here than on the west side. It's more snobbish on the west side. Here, it's a more down-to-earth and laid-back culture.
>
> Interviewer:…Does it also show on the inside?
>
> Kjetil: Yes….One can tell that there is a feminine over-representation here. There are more women than men in this coworking space, and they are more than average interested in a healthy lifestyle.

It should be stressed that there are also examples in our interviews where coworkers describe frictions, frustrations, and a sense of *not* belonging. One example comes from Frederik, a customer who works in a different sector than most others in the building. He and his business partner have chosen FT mainly for logistical and economic reasons, but are looking for alternatives as they feel out of place. While they find the factory building rather cool, they would prefer a place with less buzz and a stronger work focus. Another interviewee expresses that she likes the aesthetics of FT but thinks it has been taken too far in some respects. She mentions that the lighting in some meeting rooms and telephone booths seems "over-designed" and less adapted to the purposes of the rooms.

Accordingly, there is no rule stating that "harmony" must stem from a particular kind of nature-oriented aesthetics or the absence of digital connectivity. Under certain circumstances, and to some people, such features may work against harmony, what we might think of as a post-digital backlash. Still, these few examples are exceptional in their "anti-romantic" stance and thus underscore the overarching post-digital focus of FT.

5. Concluding Discussion

We have tried to grasp the post-digital turn in working life through the lens of the Romantic ethic and by empirical scrutiny of CWS. We have approached CWS as spaces of consumption where *place*—and, more specifically, the longing for place—constitutes the key commodity. While this might seem like a redundant remark in relation to a business that vends office square meters, our results illustrate how CWS sell more than "just" a place to work. They trade in spatial anchoring (Bacevice & Spreitzer, 2023). As such, CWS promise to fulfil laptop-workers' hopes and desires for a more meaningful working life where office desks, power sockets, and Wi-Fi networks are supplemented with material, social, and aesthetic features that generate a contrast to mobile and hyper-connected, potentially alienating, working conditions. Through an

ethnographic case study of one specific CWS, FT in Oslo, we have shown how the encoding and enactment of such place-anchoring features revolve around four romantic tropes: novelty, authenticity, creativity, and harmony. We argue that these tropes fuel what Campbell (1987) terms "imaginative hedonism," referring to the romantic inclination to encounter the surrounding world—notably consumer objects—as "dream material." Our interviews with FT coworkers illuminate how the combination of a historic factory building, rustic materials, organic design elements, offline activities like yoga and sauna, analogue technologies, and a diverse, transitory neighborhood—including the gentrifying hospitality ecosystem of Tøyen—spur the clientele's vision of a good working life. What is more, we see this as part of a broader post-digital trend, which bespeaks how the digitalization and datafication of work and life necessitate spaces where alternative values and outlooks can be nurtured in order to build hope for more meaningful and sustainable futures.

While critical points can be raised regarding the CWS business as a whole—for example, concerning its role in gentrification processes and its basic goal to make a profit from the precariousness of self-employed workers—our study highlights a striking congruence between the values encoded by the FT management and the outlooks held by customers. It is difficult to argue that our interviewees are being exploited. Most of them describe what we with Tuan (1974/1990) might call "topophilia," a love of place. This means something more than just liking a place or thinking that it is "cool." It means that an individual feels that there are meaningful bonds between their identity and the place, which in our case refers both to FT and the Tøyen neighborhood. Our informants sense that they have discovered, or selected (Savage, 2008), a place that is for them, meaning that it is also different from something else (notably, the "corporate" CWS sector with more standardized and "clean" offices and stricter regulations, located on "the west side" of Oslo). They also feel that they are part of a thrilling process where something new and authentic is being created, involving the neighborhood as well as their own life trajectories. In this way, FT not just responds to, but also spurs a romantic ethos. While promoted almost like a tourist destination (cf. Merkel, 2022), FT is *not* consumed in the moment people start working there. Rather, it provides a sense of anchoring through nurturing a feeling among its customers that they are "going somewhere," if only through their imagination.

Our overarching argument is that FT is symptomatic of a broader post-digital trend in society, including a disconnection turn in work (Fast, 2021), and that this trend re-actualizes deep-seated Romantic ideals. In a broader sense, we see CWS as part of a neo-romantic movement that includes a plethora of related phenomena that together constitute a counter-culture within capitalist society. Besides initiatives that emphasize digital disconnection and self-discovery, such as digital detox retreats and similar hospitality services, there are trends like the neo-craft movement (Gerosa, 2024), urban exploration and ruin tourism (Jansson, 2018), and certain place-based subcultures and music scenes (Garcia, 2016) that allude to romantic values and might even be mapped like neo-romantic (urban) geographies. Thus, in line with previous research (e.g., Gerosa, 2024; Ley, 2003; Pratt, 2018), romantic ideals seem to saturate early, consumer-driven gentrification processes at large.

This does not mean that all CWS manifest this neo-romantic wave to the same extent, or in the same way, as FT. We admit that FT is a particularly obvious case where post-digital and other neo-romantic tendencies come together. Still, the findings from our research project at large are replete with examples that point in the same direction. Even larger, more "conventional" firms emphasize holistic views of work, including amenities for digital disconnection, and play with romantic tropes like organic materials and analogue media in their

design concepts. Then, as Campbell (1987) states in his theory of consumer culture, the Romantic ethic is not just a counter-force to consumer capitalism; it is an integral and indispensable part of it.

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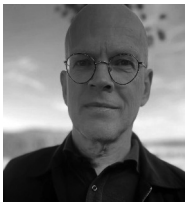

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