

**SOCIO-CULTURAL HYBRID SPACES IN MILAN COPING WITH THE COVID-19  
PANDEMIC**

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**Abstract**

Since 2012, the municipality of Milan has promoted socio-cultural projects, and enhanced the diffusion of coworking spaces and innovative socio-cultural hybrid spaces (SCHSs). In 2022 Milan counts twenty-six SCHSs. These spaces are described as a type of third places and new working spaces. They offer essential services, focus on engaging in social innovation processes with the local communities, are mainly carried out by social innovators, who can co-design and co-decide public policies. SCHSs also provide cohesion and social inclusion in the neighbourhoods. During the COVID-19 pandemic, SCHSs have developed and/or managed solidarity activities and welfare services, thus becoming more recognizable by the community. Within this context, this paper, through desk research, and in-depth interviews with stakeholders (community managers, users, and policy makers), describes these spaces, the offered services, the services that have been developed and/or

managed to sustain the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods in Milan during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also focuses on whether and how SCHSs engage in social innovation with local communities.

**Keywords:** coworking spaces, socio-cultural hybrid spaces, social innovation, Milan, COVID-19, neighbourhood, policy.

**JEL Classification:** R110, R580, J620

## 1. Introduction

The transition from a service society to an information and knowledge society affected the labour market, the way of working, and the types of workplaces. Two main elements of the knowledge society influence how spaces will host work in the near future. The first concerns the immateriality of production, which is linked to a progressive reduction in the distinction between goods and services. The second element is represented by the 'despatialisation of work' (Beck, 2000): work can be undertaken regardless of where the office is located. The question then arises as to which spaces can accommodate the new functions and ways of working in the knowledge society (O'Mara, 1999). People have increasingly conducted their work from multiple places (home, office, new working spaces, etc.), some organized as places of work, others constantly adapted, thus creating 'plural workscapes' (Felstead et al., 2005). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a proliferation of new working spaces (NeWSp) such as (i) collaborative working spaces (e.g., coworking spaces and smart work centres); (ii) makerspaces, fab labs, open workshops); (iii) other new working spaces (hackerspaces, living labs, and corporate labs); and (iv) coffee shops and public libraries providing formal and informal spaces for working (Akhavan, 2021; Mariotti et al., 2020b). The several typologies of NeWSp can be referred to as third place (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982; Oldenburg, 1989), straddling the 'first space' (home) and the 'second space' (office).

Since the beginning of the 2000s, NeWSp have become increasingly hybrid, offering physical space, digital information, and communication networks. Hybridization had also accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic when remote workers demanded workspaces outside their home (Mariotti et al., 2022a). A space can, therefore, also be considered hybrid in time and space, meaning it can host several activities in different spaces and at different times of the day (Cho et al., 2016, 2017; Migliore et al., 2021; Di Marino et al., 2022). For example, a local coworking space (CS) can be conceived as a hybrid space (Migliore, et. al. 2021) between a shared office and a community space, which aims to provide affordable workspace, work opportunities to residents, community support, improve work-life balance, and attract remote workers (Manzini-Ceinar and Mariotti, 2021). Policymakers are becoming increasingly interested in these spaces because they produce generative

welfare, social innovation, develop culture, and contribute to the renewal of cities' material and immaterial cultural patrimony.

In 2022, Milan hosts 119 CSs (Mariotti et al. 2022c), and 26 socio-cultural hybrid spaces (SCHSs). These spaces are mainly located in peripheral neighbourhoods, offer socio-cultural services hosted (promoted by third parties) and self-organized (promoted by the SCHSs), and focus on engaging in social innovation processes with the local communities. They are mainly carried out by social innovators, who can co-design and co-decide public policies (Tajani, 2021). These social innovators have managed solidarity activities to face the COVID-19 pandemic, thus reducing the workload of the public services (Tajani, 2021). SCHSs may enhance cohesion and social inclusion at the neighbourhood scale, creating job opportunities and fostering economic, social, and environmental revitalisation of urban contexts.

Within this context, the present paper focuses on the SCHSs in Milan, exploring their location, the services they offer, specifically those developed to sustain the inhabitants during the pandemic, and analyses whether and how they engage in social innovation processes with the local communities. The analysis is based on desk research and in-depth qualitative analysis through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (e.g., community managers, users, and policy makers).

Four sections compose the paper. A short review of the literature on NeWSps, including CSs and SCHSs, follows the introduction. The review focuses on the role played by social innovation within these spaces and how CSs and SCHSS have coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. Section three describes the case of Milan and, specifically, the policy measures developed to promote socio-cultural projects, and enhance the diffusion of CSs and SCHSs (Tajani, 2021). It briefly describes the methodology, followed by the results of the desk research and the structured interviews. This section presents the location, offered services, and users of the SCHSs in Milan. It discusses how the SCHSs have coped with the COVID-19 pandemic, thus organizing collaborative welfare services and promoting solidarity. Conclusions and further research directions conclude the paper.

## **2. Coworking spaces (CSs) and socio-cultural hybrid spaces (SCHSs) enhancing social innovation and coping with the COVID-19 pandemic**

The phenomenon of NeWSps (including CSs and SCHSs) has spread internationally in an era characterised by: (i) the globalisation of the economy and society and the gradual collapse of the stable employment paradigm; (ii) the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution; (iii) the new industrial revolution and the makers' movement; (iv) the economic recession in 2008 (Mariotti et al., 2017).

While ICTs have enhanced the spread of NeWSp, intended for knowledge sharing and facilitating the transmission of ideas and experiences, they have further dispersed workers by depriving them of places (and times) traditionally dedicated to work activities (Mariotti and Akhavan, 2018). Despite the increasing de-spatialisation of traditional workplaces such as the office, knowledge self-employed workers and freelancers<sup>1</sup> still need social and professional interaction to reduce the risks of isolation (particularly high with working from home) and to increase opportunities for encounters (Johns and Gratton, 2013; Moriset, 2014). In other words, they need a third space. The term 'third space' was coined by the American sociologist Oldenburg (1989) to describe spaces that are neither home (first space) nor office (second space), but spaces where people gather and socialise freely and informally. Oldenburg sees these places as irreplaceable in the production of the social urban fabric. Bars, libraries, bookshops, community centres, parks, hotels, airport lounges are typical examples of third space.

The 2000s witnessed a great spread of CSs. In 2005, the 'Hat Factory' was the first work environment officially defined as coworking in San Francisco. Since then, the growth of coworking spaces has been exponential worldwide, in parallel with the spread of the global crisis. The production of serendipity is the fundamental principle of new workplaces: CSs have been defined as serendipity accelerators (Moriset, 2014), born to accommodate knowledge workers, who carry out their activities by renting a workstation for a variable period, and taking advantage of the services offered (e.g., secretarial services, wi-fi connection, meeting rooms, kitchen, leisure spaces, training and coaching courses, babysitting) (Spinuzzi, 2012). The literature has already explored particular places and events that produce serendipity. In fact, as Gottmann (1970) already stated, information flows across various meeting points outside formal offices: around lunch or dinner tables, at aperitifs, in clubs, in conference lobbies, on golf courses, on trains. Proximity in physical space enables proximity in social space to produce all its effects, allowing one to continuously benefit from the fortuitous and predictable encounters provided by frequenting certain places (Bourdieu, 2015; Boschma, 2015).

Since the beginning of the 2000s, NeWSps have started a hybridization process to cope with remote working, and the users' needs, thus enhancing the interaction with the local community. A space can be hybrid in time and space, since it can host several activities in different spaces and at different times of the day. Several disciplines (e.g., sociology, mobility, entrepreneurial and organizational studies, information technology, urban planning, and architecture) have analysed and

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<sup>1</sup> The fields of specialisation of knowledge self-employed workers and freelancers range from the creative industries (such as architects, designers, journalists, etc.) to engineering and digital sectors (e.g. information technology, computer programmers, consultants, etc.), (Mariotti et al, 2021b; Spinuzzi, 2012).

discussed the concept of hybridisation (Di Marino et al., 2022). According to urban planning and architecture disciplines, hybridization is considered the combination of spatio-functional and social interactions in buildings and urban spaces (Cho et al., 2016, 2017; Migliore et al., 2021; Di Marino et al., 2022). The hybridisation of spaces has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, also thanks to access to technology, which allowed new social, and digital interactions among people within hybrid spaces (Paay et al., 2007; Di Marino et al., 2022). Therefore, a renewed interest in third spaces increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the need to nurture 'social distancing' to minimise opportunities for contagion and transmission of the virus, raised the need to change the way individuals worked. Indeed, many private professionals and civil servants started working remotely, mainly from home. Nevertheless, the first place (home) does not represent a favourable environment for work, especially if it is small (as is often the case in large cities) and is crowded and noisy (e.g., in the presence of children) (Eurofound, 2022). The NeWSp, therefore, can be ideal spaces to accommodate remote employees and self-employed workers who will be looking for alternatives to working from home and, due to the post-pandemic crisis, will need a community of reference that supports them in relaunching their careers (Mariotti et al., 2022a).

A recent book by Mariotti et al. (2022a) collected several cases of how NeWSps have coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. It describes the transition from face-to-face contacts to online or hybrid strategies to build internal and external community ties to maintain the sustainability of NeWSps, and increase the resilience to exogenous shocks. Danko et al. (2022) found that NeWSp managers have developed and implemented strategies (e.g., gamification and hybrid forms of sharing) to support knowledge sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic, in several EU countries. Sinitsyna et al. (2022) describe the growth of remote working and virtual coworking during the pandemic in Tallinn (Estonia) and Oslo (Norway). They found that virtual coworking is strictly related to online community-building and integrates remote working. Remote working and virtual coworking foster the development of hybrid forms of work and can be considered sustainable work practices as they reduce commuting and, consequently, traffic congestion and air pollution.

A recent paper by Rabiej-Sienicka (2022) shows that several CSs in Poland implemented new strategies to cope Covid-19 spreading, e.g., offering discounts, virtual services, and organising virtual events. Besides, some coworkers have developed initiatives to cope with the pandemic (e.g., sewing masks). This evidence demonstrates how coworkers, as a community, showed a sense of solidarity with other CSs users, thus helping the community. The members of the CSs can therefore define a community of practice capable of generating resources and ways of addressing recurring problems.

An interesting aspect of CSs and SCHSs is their focus on social innovation, since several managers and users of these spaces are social entrepreneurs and nonprofit-oriented innovators who

voluntarily develop social innovations (de Wit et al., 2019; Westley and Antadze, 2010). The OECD defines social innovation as “the design and implementation of new solutions that imply conceptual, process, product, or organisational change, which ultimately aim to improve the welfare and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Many initiatives undertaken by the social economy and civil society have proven innovative in dealing with socio-economic and environmental problems, while contributing to economic development. To fully tap the potential of social innovation, an enabling policy framework is needed to support public, non-profit and private actors to co-construct and implement socially innovative solutions and thereby contribute to address socio-economic issues, build stronger territorial resilience and better respond to future shocks”<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, social innovation adds to the technoscientific component of innovation, the social aspect which can guarantee inclusion and redistribution. Social innovators are also considered community organisers, they are delegates of the community and can co-design and co-decide public policies with the local policy makers (Tajani, 2021). Indeed, CSs and SCHSs have been - at least in part - supported by public administrations through actions concerning three policy areas: (i) labour-oriented, (ii) social innovation, and (iii) local economic development policies (Mariotti and Pais, 2022). Social innovation is enhanced through a public-private collaboration for managing public spaces by third-sector organisations. CSs and SCHSs focus on engaging in social innovation processes with the local communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the profiles of the social innovators have been precious to managing the solidarity and proximity intervention to face the health emergency, thus lightening the workload of public services (Tajani, 2021).

SCHSs have developed in several European cities, in recent years. They tend to regenerate and activate former industrial buildings, farmsteads, kindergartens, churches, cinemas, theatres, offices, markets, gatehouses, and new architecture (Inti, 2021). In Amsterdam, for instance, the municipality runs a desk that deals with the online mapping of abandoned areas in municipal ownership, which are assigned to socio-cultural entrepreneurs, associations, and organisations. In Berlin, several bottom-up movements have emerged in recent years to reclaim abandoned spaces or buildings, which have initiated the regeneration of local economies with a focus on solidarity-based welfare. The Berlin collective Raumlaborberlin<sup>3</sup>, for example, works in synergy with the Berlin Department of Urban Planning on various projects involving SCHSs. Such SCHPs focus on urban renewal, creating new programs and local economies, often flowing into a new solidarity welfare

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/regional/leed/social-innovation.htm>

<sup>3</sup> The Berlin collective Raumlaborberlin awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for best participation in the 17th International Architecture Exhibition “How will live together”.

economy in city neighbourhoods while adapting to top-down transformation processes. Among the socio-cultural hybrid spaces in Berlin, it is worth noting the Station Urbaner Kulturen sGbk Hellersdorf, active since 2014. It is a rented shop in the large housing estate Berlin-Hellersdorf, which program focuses on art, culture, and community development. It is an exhibition space for artists and residents. Besides, Stadtwerk mrzn, active since 2020, is a wasteland reactivated with a program oriented towards community development. It is an open experimental construction site where architects, gardeners and artists, young people and older people, new and old-established neighbours, initiatives, and associations develop joint ideas for open spaces focused on community-based urban development.

The following section focuses on the 'socio-cultural hybrid spaces' that have sprung up over the last ten years in Milan.

### **3. Methodology and results**

The present paper aims to explore the twenty-six SCHSs in the city of Milan, their location, the services they offer, specifically those developed to sustain the inhabitants during the pandemic, the users, and the social innovation character of the spaces. Desk research concerns the analysis of the spaces' website, the studies describing the SCHSs in Milan (Inti et al., 2021), and news published in blogs and magazines. Desk research allowed us to describe their location, the offered services, the spaces' users, and the activities they carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic to help the inhabitants. Besides, semi-structured interviews with several stakeholders (one-third of the community managers of the spaces, some users, and a few policymakers of the municipality of Milan) allowed us to understand the characteristics of the spaces, their users, the services, and how the SCHSs have coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews with community managers were conducted during the workshop held in Milan (April 7<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup>)<sup>4</sup>, and by telephone. Specifically, during the workshops, several community managers of SCHSs had the opportunity to talk about the initiatives undertaken during the pandemic and their significant difficulties. In addition, telephone interviews were conducted individually with community managers, who spoke openly about their own experiences. Finally, during the workshop, a few policy makers of the municipality of Milan have been interviewed, while during the site visits in the SCHSs the authors interviewed a few users.

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<sup>4</sup> CITTÀ APERTE e SPAZI IBRIDI SOCIOCULTURALI. Luoghi del welfare di comunità per la città e i territori di prossimità.

### 3.1. The case of Milan: desk research

The first CS in Italy opened in 2008. Italian Coworking recorded, in 2020, 700 spaces in Italy<sup>5</sup> (Mariotti, Lo Russo, 2022). Of these, 119 were located in Milan since coworking is a predominantly urban phenomenon (Mariotti et al., 2022c). In 2021, Milan hosted 26 socio-cultural hybrid spaces, as carefully described by Inti et al. (2021).

The Municipality of Milan has invested in promoting socio-cultural projects, third spaces, and tailored policies to enhance the diffusion of innovative socio-cultural hybrid spaces (Tajani, 2021). In 2012, it announced initiatives to improve the reuse and regeneration of unutilized buildings and spaces to develop socio-cultural projects. In 2013 it created the first network of CSs and fablabs in Milan and offered economic incentives to their managers and users (Castiglioni, Pais, 2017). In this period, public policies stimulating private initiatives have supported the birth of social and cultural incubators (e.g., Base, Fabriq, Luiss Hub, Mare Culturale Urbano), which, in turn, have contributed to the regeneration of their neighbourhoods (Tajani, 2021). In 2021 it was presented the “Manifesto degli Spazi ibridi” (Hybrid spaces manifesto) and developed the first informal network of hybrid spaces<sup>6</sup> (Figure 1). Such networks of CSs, fablab and SCHSs, are periodically updated.

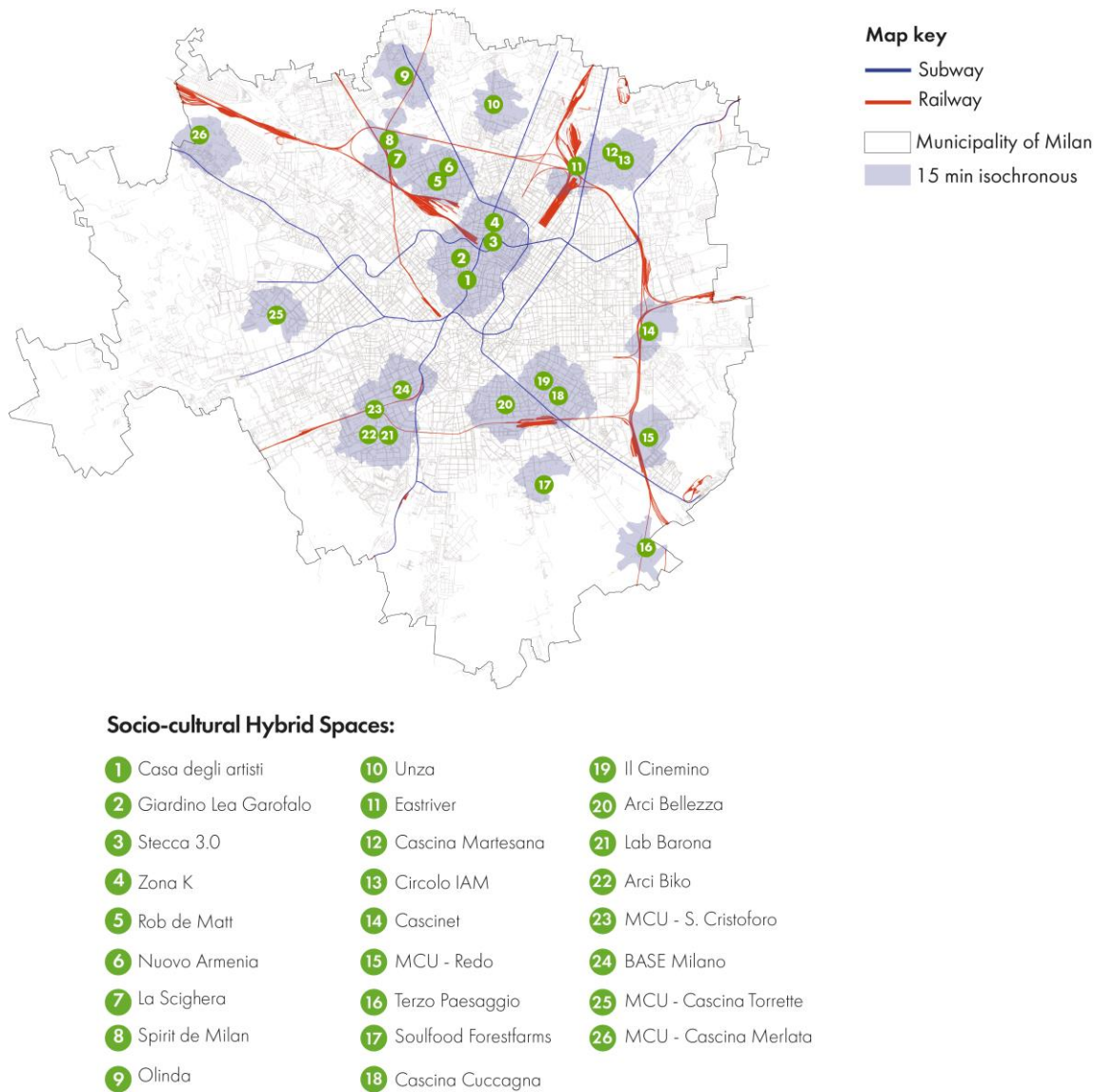
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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.italiancoworking.it/i-numeri-del-coworking-in-italia/>

<sup>6</sup> 'Guidelines for the experimental establishment of a qualified list of places of socio-cultural innovation in the city of Milan called "Hybrid Spaces Network".'



**Figure 1.** Location of socio-cultural hybrid space in Milan in 2022



**Source:** authors' elaboration on Inti et al. (2021).

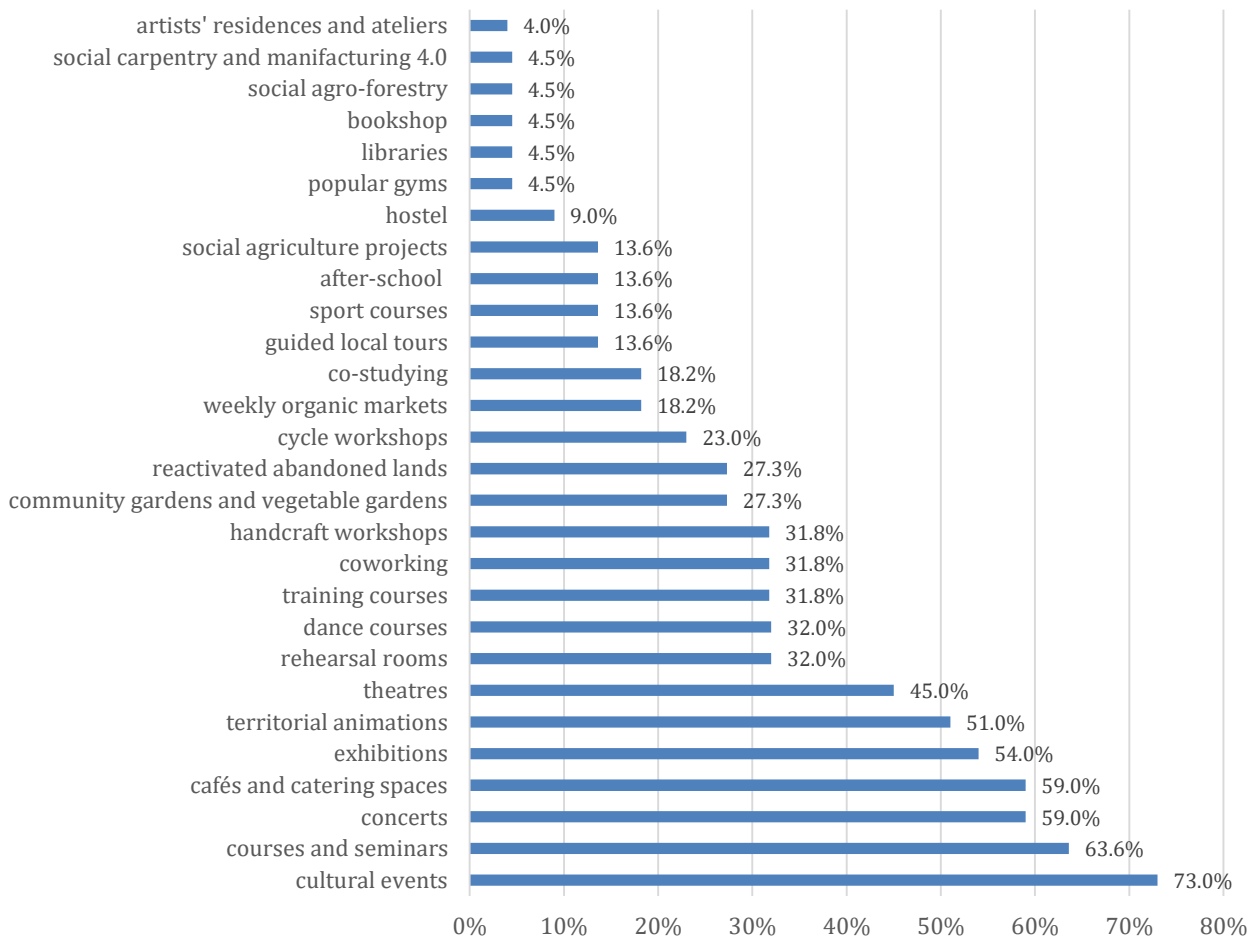
These initiatives aim to regenerate and activate former industrial spaces, farmsteads, kindergartens, churches, cinemas, theatres, markets, gatehouses, and to hybridise functions such as association houses and cycle workshops, fablab and exhibition spaces, CSs and hostels, cinemas and bars, bookstores, and bistro-gardens. Such hybrid spaces open up to a plurality of populations and uses, offering moments of aggregation, innovation, and social inclusion (Inti et al., 2021). SCHSs are managed by organizations and individuals promoting the activation of places, or involved in culturally-based regeneration experiences, often in collaboration with public institutions and local authorities.

According to Inti et al. (2021), most of the SCHSs are associations and limited liability companies that, to carry out the projects, must assume a double legal form with a 26% social enterprise. Several community managers of the 26 SCHPs in Milan have complained about difficulties concerning economic sustainability due to a lack of funds. This underlines the lack of recognition of the urban role and the type of service provided by SCHPs. In fact, the ones who have experienced the most significant difficulties are private investors who can support themselves by offering for-profit services such as cafés, restaurant, bistros, and CS in the absence of funds.

As concerns the ownership, the municipality of Milan owns about 54% of the SCHSs, private third parties about 41%, and other realities own the rest. These spaces offer services and self-organized activities, a functional mix that intercepts different populations and overlaps and exchanges knowledge during the week. As presented in Figure 2, the most frequent services and activities concern: cultural events (73%); courses and seminars (63%); concerts (59%); cafés, catering spaces (59%); exhibitions (54%); local entertainment (51%). It is interesting to note that 31.8% host a coworking space, 27.3% have community gardens and vegetable gardens, 23% bicycle workshops, 4.5% social carpentry and manufacturing 4., 31.8% handicraft workshops, 9.1% manage handicraft markets, 9% a hostel and 4% artists' residence and atelier (Inti et al., 2021). About 23% of the SCHSs are neighbourhood info points, 9% are listening desks (women, migrants, abandoned spaces), and 4% legal desks.

But who is working in these spaces? And to who are these activities and services mainly addressed? About 70% have paid workers, and 56% volunteer workers; 17% also do job placement for frail persons; 4% also activate paid experts on a project basis.

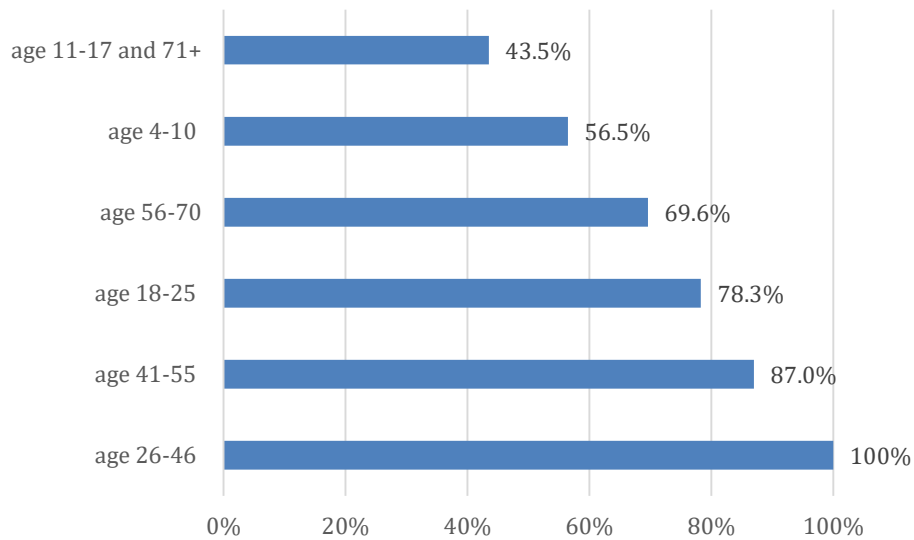
**Figure 2.** Services and activities offered by the SCHSs in Milan



**Source:** Inti et al. (2021).

The populations benefiting from the socio-cultural hybrid spaces are diverse. All SCHSs cater to an age range of 26-46 years; followed by 87% of adults aged 41-55 years; 78.3% of adults aged 18-25 years; 69.6% 56-70 years; and 56.5% have projects for children aged 4-10 years; the population groups of adolescents aged 11-17 years and the elderly aged 71 and over are the least involved (43.5% of the spaces) (Figure 3).

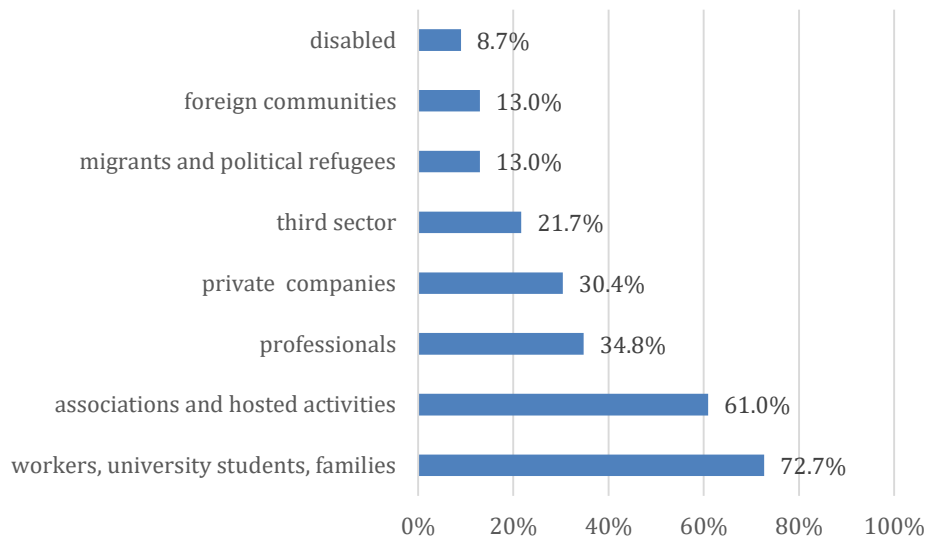
**Figure 3.** Age of SCHSs users



**Source:** Inti et al. (2021).

About 72.7% of the spaces host university students and families, 61% temporarily host activities by other associations, 21.7% by third sector, and 30.4% by private companies. In particular, professionals use the spaces in 34.8% of cases. They are also venues for projects and services for migrants and political refugees in 13% of cases. Another 13% of spaces provides services for foreign communities and 8.7% for the disabled (Figure 4). About 78% focus on the city users, 74% on the neighbourhood audience, while 22% on an international audience. The 26 socio-cultural hybrid spaces involve approximately one million people per year in the city.

**Figure 4.** Population benefiting from the socio-cultural hybrid spaces



Source: Inti et al. (2021).

### 3.2 Socio-cultural hybrid spaces in Milan facing the COVID-19 pandemic: in-depth interviews

One of the main aspects that characterize the SCHSs is the social support, intended as the aid or the supply of tangible or intangible resources (Berkman, 1984; House, 1981) from which individuals can draw. Cohen (2004), instead, refers to social support as a social “fund”, where individuals draw on emotional and material resources to assist colleagues in situations of need (Rabiej-Sienicka, 2022). Mariotti and Lo Russo (2022) stated that, in Italy, during the lockdown phases<sup>7</sup>, the CSs’ managers aimed to keep the community alive through investment in communication channels and the organisation of many online or in-presence events while respecting security measures. Larger CSs (more than 1,000 m<sup>2</sup>) developed virtual events and promoted community activities; some CSs migrated services previously offered on-site to digital platforms.

Similarly, the SCHSs in Milan have strengthened proximity relations, collaborative welfare services, and the solidarity economy. They have undertaken several activities to cope with the pandemic. Half of them embraced solidarity projects to support the population's needs, while a share

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<sup>7</sup> The progressive closure of non-essential economic and institutional activities in Italy started with the Prime Minister’s Decree of 4 March 2020 (Gazzetta Ufficiale Serie Generale n. 55/2020). The following pandemic phases can be distinguished: (i) March to May 2020: first strict lockdown, when only “essential activities” were allowed to operate; (ii) June to October 2020: the “second phase”, when there was a gradual easing of the previous restrictions and containment measures and the economic activities reopened; (iii) November 2020 to March 2021: second lockdown, when there was a progressive closure of specific activities, differentiated across the Italian regions depending on the number of infections (Mariotti et al., 2022b).

of the others had to juggle rent and running costs. However, in most cases, the owners reduced the rent of SCHSs for a limited period. Among the main initiatives was the collaboration with MilanoAiuta<sup>8</sup> and other solidarity initiatives, which have been activated during the most critical phases of the pandemic. MilanoAiuta supported the community in catalysing energies and resources to face the tremendous social emergency that has affected the most vulnerable people. Taking advantage of the Cariplo Foundation, the MilanoAiuta fundraising to was launched, and several SCHSs joined it.

One of the community managers interviewed stated: “During phase 1, we developed a bicycle workshop to repair the bicycles of the riders and of the volunteers bringing food and medicines to those who were unable to go out, mainly older people, within the network of the services offered by MilanoAiuta” (Interviewee 1).

The community manager of another hybrid space stated: “During phase 2, the empty stalls of the market halls have become local medical centers, or they hosted local products such as bread produced locally” (Interviewee 2). Other interesting initiatives were addressed to homeless psychiatric patients, who were hosted in the hostel of the SCHS for three months, with the possibility of carrying out activities such as gardening and preparing fresh pasta according to personalized treatment plans, special assistance, and supervision.

Several SCHSs joined the ‘AiutArci a Milano’<sup>9</sup>, a voluntary project promoted by Arci Milano<sup>10</sup> to prepare and distribute hot meals for the homeless in the city. One of the community managers stated: “When the lockdown began, we went through a moment of panic, which immediately turned into a willingness to support the population [...] that’s how we joined ‘AiutArci a Milano’” (Interviewee 3). The SCHS carried out the following activities: (i) preparing 150-200 daily meals, which the Red Cross then delivered to the homeless, and (ii) distributing home parcels for the poorest. “Thanks to our warehouse”, concludes the community manager, “we were able to distribute 600 kg of food in just one week” (Interviewee 3). In addition, several hybrid spaces have jointly foreseen home food delivery for people unable to move, and prepared food baskets. This initiative mobilized volunteers to deliver groceries and store food donations within the spaces.

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<sup>8</sup> It is an initiative offered by the Municipality of Milan to enhance proximity services and home care for lonely elderly people, disabled and vulnerable people: <https://www.comune.milano.it/web/milanoaiuta>.

<sup>9</sup> It is an initiative promoted by ArciMilano which is carried out by associations, trade unions, groups, companies, social realities of the Municipality of Milan with the aim of helping the most vulnerable people during the Covid-19 pandemic.

<sup>10</sup> It is a large popular association, which counts over five thousand clubs that promote recreation and culture, good social relations, quality of human relationships and lifestyles, responsibility, and active citizenship.

Besides, the projects in collaboration with other solidarity realities, some SCHPs acted autonomously to make themselves useful during the pandemic. For instance, one of the hybrid spaces made some multi-purpose rooms available for the storage of food donations, it opened the artistic residences to the population in difficulty – especially women victims of domestic violence – and allowed young students and researchers to use the spaces free of charge to conduct thesis and research work. In addition, another community manager stated: “We also made available the rehearsal rooms that could be used by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood free of charge” (Interviewee 4). Despite the difficulties and closures imposed by the pandemic, most of the SCHSs supported the population: “The space, despite the pandemic, has been a point of reference for the neighbourhood. We often hear about ‘generative welfare’ when talking about us, and this is an aspect that gratifies us” (Interviewee 5).

This kind of welfare focuses on the regeneration of the available resources to increase the efficiency of social policy interventions. In another case, the SCHS kept the WeMi<sup>11</sup> active, supporting over 10,000 people in trouble during the pandemic. In addition to solidarity initiatives, a radio channel was developed to help the community and keep it alive: “During the pandemic, we wanted to be close to the community through a radio channel that allowed it to follow in real time the music, previously played at the venue” (Interviewee 6). Thanks to these initiatives, the SCHPs played the role of energy catalysts throughout the neighbourhood, and they have been points of reference for a possible ‘new normal’.

#### **4. Conclusions and further research**

People increasingly demand new working spaces (or third spaces) like SCHSs. The municipality of Milan has invested in the last twenty years in promoting socio-cultural projects, third spaces, and tailored policies to enhance the diffusion of innovative socio-cultural hybrid spaces (Tajani, 2021). Specifically, the social innovators managing the SCHSs have been included in the design of the policy provisions.

The interviews with the community managers and users of the SCHSs in Milan have underlined their crucial role during the pandemic, for instance, by embracing solidarity projects to support the population's needs. These spaces develop ‘generative welfare’ which is the regeneration of the available resources to increase the efficiency of social policy interventions.

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<sup>11</sup> WeMi is the first public platform that aggregates the offer of welfare services provided by the Municipality of Milan and by a qualified network of associations, cooperatives, and social enterprises in the area (<https://wemi.comune.milano.it/#cosa-e>).

Therefore, policymakers must recognize the urban role these hybrid spaces have and the importance of the services they provide. The policy can enhance the supply and demand for social innovation (Nesta, 2016), which can receive financing at local, regional, national, and international levels and can use financing tools such as crowdfunding (Lehner, 2013; Rey-Martí et al. 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for new working spaces and hybrid spaces to interact with the neighbourhood, becoming service centres for the community, offering workplaces, services to improve work-life balance, training courses, etc. SCHSs could foster the socio-economic development and frequentation of less central neighbourhood, contributing to the development of a polycentric city (Manzo et al. 2021), where each neighbourhood might become autonomous centre of social, cultural, and economic life.

Within the logic of a city of proximity (15 minute city) (Moreno et al. 2021), the SCHSs could represent a crucial resource for the neighbourhoods since they host activities promoted by the City Council or third parties, self-organised and innovative services such as coworking spaces, and are based on the key concepts of flexibility, ‘mixité’ of populations and uses, economic sustainability, social inclusion and plurality of functions.

The demand for SCHSs is also increasing in peripheral areas, attracting remote workers and innovators searching for a higher quality of life, thus reduce pollution by decreasing traffic congestion and reducing commute times (Vogl and Akhavan, 2022). These spaces can enhance local economic development, but they should be accompanied by a step-by-step strategy to avoid the temptation to open a space at an early stage and to be able to build the internal community, thus promoting community wellbeing (Capdevila, 2022).

Future research could focus on exploring the case of SCHSs in peripheral areas to understand similarities and differences with the urban spaces and the potential effects on the local context and the social innovation ecosystem.

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