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Courtesy of JAJA Architects and Open Platform

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Jim Stephenson, courtesy of Squire & Partners

The remote working revolution has left us with choices. While working from home suits some demographics and personalities, we've learned that it's not the solution for everyone. The downtown HQ still has appeal, but soul-sapping commutes are something to which few want to return. Does the solution lie somewhere in between?

The 15-minute office

Research by Accenture in March 2021 found 74 per cent of Gen Zers worldwide wanting more opportunities to collaborate in person, and that young urban millennials were most likely to feel healthy and productive working on site rather than remotely. But 'on site' doesn't have to mean a return to the huge central HQ. Capitalizing on the demand to work near home, workplace providers are eyeing up regional towns, suburban malls and even bus stops to create third places for work. The continuing popularity of co-working is in no doubt, leading all types of white-collar workers to desire a more flexible setup too. According to a Survation survey about the draw to work near home, 42 per cent of 2,000 UK office workers wanted to work in a serviced office or co-working space as well as in their usual office.

The rise of remote work has seen commutes drop dramatically. In a country where the average worker spends 225 hours a year commuting, *Forbes* reported a decline of 50 per cent in Chicago. Though this will naturally rebound as more offices reopen, the culture of hybrid work is creating an affluent ex-commuter market seeking a dedicated place to work some or all of the week. Flexible office space is also increasingly used to house the remote teams of larger companies. The pandemic is seeing businesses of all types using flexible space to set up satellite offices close to where their employees live.

The idea of working close to where you live, shop and play is at the heart of the 15-minute city movement. The brainchild of French-Columbian scientist Carlos Moreno, this sustainable urban vision sees cities split into local neighbourhoods where common amenities are all within a 15-minute walk or cycle. The 15-minute city is gaining political traction worldwide as cities look to rebuild themselves more sustainably after the pandemic. Versions of the concept have been rolled out in Paris, Bogotá, Portland and Melbourne in recent years.

Here, we look at where work-near-home spaces are springing up, what it takes to make them successful, and how they fit into an overall trend for more localized urban living.

Words Riya Patel

NEIGH BOUR HOOD SPACES

Jack Hobhouse

Local co-working is on the rise, thanks to the growth of hybrid work, operator-landlord partnerships and the pandemic renewing our appreciation for community.

WeWork grew to monumental status by leasing huge amounts of urban floor space and subletting it to its tenants for a profit. But as the pandemic saw those swathes of central office space empty overnight, there is new thinking about how flexible office space is best created. In February 2021, *The Wall Street Journal* noted more joint ventures between co-working operators and landlords, where risk and revenue are shared. This approach is helping providers open spaces faster and more freely, particularly in locations that are seeing the work-near-home demand. It's also helping neighbourhood workspace have a more localized and individual feel, with community benefit too.

While the major players have so far dominated the urban scene, newcomers are enjoying success in the near-home space, like Perth-based Spacecubed, Common Ground in Malaysia, and London-based start-ups Patch and Spacemade. Demand for near-home spaces saw Spacemade's members increase 15-fold in the first eight months of 2021, with »

BELOW AND OPPOSITE **Developed by British architecture practice Squire & Partners and located next to its Brixton headquarters, Department Store Studios offers flexible workspaces to local businesses and entrepreneurs. In addition, the venture supports the hub-and-spoke model of regional workspaces acting as satellites to a central HQ.**

Jim Stephenson

London locations like The Loft in Queen's Park and Neighbourhood Works in Hackney in high demand. Cofounder Dan Silverman told PlaceTech: 'As working behaviours become more varied and increasingly personalised, we are creating individual spaces that offer flexibility and variety with the benefit of access to our growing network of spaces across the UK. Each of our workspaces is shaped by their locality as we truly [believe] there is no longer a one-size-fits-all approach to the office.'

Larger operators are also pivoting to the partnership model. In October 2020 LoopNet reported that the International Workplace Group planned to close 4 per cent of its 3,392 underperforming locations because of the pandemic. It's now focused on partnering with local property developers to create neighbourhood spots with smaller footprints and capacities, around 40 to 100 desks. The first of these opened at lifestyle centre First Street Napa in California. The next will be Perkins Rowe in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, before expansion to the UK.

British architecture practice Squire & Partners took the step of developing its own co-working space – Department Store Studios – adjacent to its headquarters in Brixton, South London. 'Workspace in neighbourhoods outside of central business areas creates a cost-effective option for start-ups, with the bonus of extending the economic ripple effect to local shops and businesses, and supporting shorter and more sustainable commutes,' says partner Tim Gledstone. 'Offices for entrepreneurs should also be led by access to collaborative networks, since this is what makes a workspace more appealing than their kitchen table. Sharing skills and having support from a group of people with varied experience is an invaluable asset to those just starting out.'

Community values in near-home workspace appeal to those who feel isolated working at home. They enjoy a feeling of belonging that's incomparable to a big, central office. The users of these spaces typically want to feel like they are contributing to the life of the areas in which they spend time, and neighbourhood spaces are successful where they have some social purpose embedded.

'Workspace in neighbourhoods outside of central business areas creates a cost-effective option for start-ups'

Department Store Studios has an annual residency programme through which two young local entrepreneurs can access free workspace and mentorship. Expressway in London's Royal Docks has incubation space for 17 young entrepreneurs, who are guided by the business centre's main tenants.

Expressway is run by creative developer General Projects. Development associate Ben Cross explains: 'We're firm believers that a business community and its neighbours should be seen as one and the same. As part of tenants' leases, they must give time to training school leavers. We expected some pushback, but people actually want to feel like they are making a positive contribution on top of their work lives. Creating social value can be more beneficial to some people than individual wellbeing. I'd like to think that as we move out of the pandemic, we're more aware of other people's experiences, and are far more neighbourly.' »

Peter Landers

Tian Khee Siong

Expressway in London's Royal Docks boasts an incubation space for young entrepreneurs, who are guided by the business centre's main tenants. The building's central lobby features a healthy café run by local coffee roasters Perky Blenders.

SUB URBAN MALLS

Use of commercial space is shifting rapidly from retail to residential, leisure and even logistical use. Where workplaces fill the gap, there's opportunity to bring active daily users to empty retail hubs.

American flexible workspace provider Industrious has been moving into malls like northern New Jersey's Short Hills, alongside its city locations.

Courtesy of Industrious

Those renting a workspace at Industrious in Walnut Creek, California, can benefit from the amenities offered by the location's open-air shopping centre Broadway Plaza. Retailers, in return, enjoy the advantage of increased footfall and ongoing daily trade.

Offices and co-working spaces in suburban and town malls are becoming a common sight, particularly across the US. These meet the near-home worker's demand for convenience with established infrastructure and good transport links or parking. Plus, there are ready-made amenities like gyms, cinemas, food courts and, of course, shops. The development of mall co-working is also propping up a typology in decline. According to Coresight Research, 25 per cent of American malls are expected to shut in the next five years.

Real estate advisors JLL studied the growth of co-working in US retail spaces in 2018, and predicted continued growth in the demand for suburban workspace fuelled by millennials coming of age. It reported: 'Buyers 37 years and younger continue to be the largest generational cohort of homebuyers, at 34 per cent. Fifty-two per cent of this group are purchasing homes in the suburbs. Since millennials play a major role in driving the growth of co-working, the fact that they are increasingly moving out of the urban core into suburbia means that more co-working spaces will open in these neighbourhoods to serve them.'

American flexible workspace provider Industrious has been moving into suburban malls like northern New Jersey's Short Hills and Broadway Plaza in Walnut Creek, California, alongside its city locations. CEO Jamie Hodari told *Fast Company* its space inside the former Barney's at Fashion Square in Scottsdale, Arizona, took just two months to reach

'The ability to quickly pop out and run errands without losing too much valuable time at work is a game-changer'

90 per cent occupancy and the units are the highest-performing of its last 25 launches. The company's PR and communications manager said in an interview: 'The ability to quickly pop out and run errands without losing too much valuable time at work is a game-changer. We're going to see more and more co-working locations appear in retail environments across all submarkets. Landlords are becoming increasingly concerned about what to do with 40,000 sq-ft [3,700 m²] of retail space – co-working is the next viable option.'

Having office tenants in a mall can throw existing retailers a valuable lifeline in the form of improving footfall, activity and ongoing daily trade. The benefit can be mutual for co-working spaces that act as retail tech incubators, like Bespoke at Westfield San Francisco. The space includes rooms for hackathons, events, pop-up shops, product demonstrations and launches to test out on real shoppers and retail scenarios. In its first year it was estimated to have brought 100,000 additional shoppers to the mall. But JLL's research showed this type of co-working/retail hybrid tends to be successful only in areas where the average household income is high (€113,000), in top-tier malls and where the surrounding neighbourhood is walkable.

Working in a mall all day might not suit everyone. Natural light and outdoor access are challenges, as is working around retail opening hours. This is the advantage of outdoor malls in favourable climates, like Eastland and Watergardens, both outside Melbourne, owned and managed by QIC Global Real Estate. They can offer co-workers a good location and plenty of well-lit floorspace. Portfolio general manager Adam Heathcote writes for QICGRE's website: 'Aside from the sturdiness of Australia's economy and population growth rate, our town centres are less car-dependent than in the US and we know that walkability, public transport access and proximity to amenities are crucial factors for coworking space users.'

There's also the possibility to turn outdated malls into more sustainable mixed-use developments, like Epic Games, maker of Fortnite, is doing with the 91,045-m² Cary Towne shopping centre in North Carolina. It plans to make the former mall its new global headquarters by 2024, including office buildings and recreational space. Gensler's Joseph Brancato wrote of the typology's potential: 'Many traditional malls were disconnected from their surrounding neighbourhoods, often featuring a large sprawling building circled by acres of surface parking. Modifying the building with a mix of uses and replacing some parking with community green spaces connected by walking and bike paths can energize a district and provide measurable impact for stakeholders.' »

Courtesy Architecture Open Platform

Conceived by Open Platform and JAJA Architects together with Rama Studio and Søren Jensen Engineers, the winning proposal of an open competition for a new parking house in Aarhus, Denmark, features a façade with a vertical garden and active balconies.

MOBILITY HUBS

On-demand workspace is part of the vision for this new typology. In suburban and smaller communities, mobility hubs need to feel like they've been grown from a place, rather than plugged in.

Early in the pandemic we discussed how the remote work revolution could set us free, allowing work from anywhere. That inspired dreams of destination offices, co-working retreats in exotic places and sojourns in global cities no longer limited by our vacation allowance. While that's proven true for some digital nomads, the reality is that most of us need (or like) to be tethered to one locality. Caring duties, school facilities and community links make working near home a more sensible option for most. But that doesn't have to mean one fixed place of work. Access to a range of workspaces in a network can suit some workers, too.

Apps like Narau, Switch, Deskimo and Workfrom are helping people navigate a new landscape of on-demand near-home workplaces. These include conventional shared offices, coffee shops and hotel lobbies – and soon, mobility hubs – to check into for an hour or two while on the go. In September, engineering firm Arup and UK transport provider Go-Ahead outlined a vision for plugging workplaces into the fast-growing typology of mobility hubs. These expand existing nodes of transport, like bus stops and train station plazas, into micro-community places that combine retail, electric vehicle charging points, delivery lockers, bike storage, cafés and pocket parks.

Cycling and walking became popular as the safest forms of getting around in the pandemic. To keep that momentum up, cities need amenities to be located within a 15-minute radius of people's homes and ideally co-located in hubs or high streets that maximize convenience. That's led to multipurpose developments like Sarah Wigglesworth Architects' Go Cycle: Kingston Station, completed in outer London this spring. The design goes beyond its function as a pedestrian and cycle bridge to act as an information hub, bike park, cycle hire point and café. A mobility hub might also be a place to switch modes of transport and catch up with work in between. JAJA Architects' timber »

parking house proposal for the new South Harbour district of Aarhus, Denmark, imagines 'an attractive place to leave the car outside of the city and instead continue the journey on foot, by bike or even by scooter'.

The introduction of on-demand workplaces to hubs like these reflects this era's obsession to use every minute of time productively. Arup and Go-Ahead's report imagines a time-poor suburban dad who wants to work, have meetings and eat lunch in one place before awaiting his kids at the bus and walking them home. He even picks up a bedtime book to take home from the mobility hub's community library. To elevate these hubs to more than just passing places, each use must enrich the other. Determining the individual needs of a local area will be key to getting the mix of amenities and target audience right. The report is unclear on who should operate each function – specialist providers or one overriding brand. Finally, there's the question of how to integrate mobility hubs with the surrounding landscape and give them a sense of place.

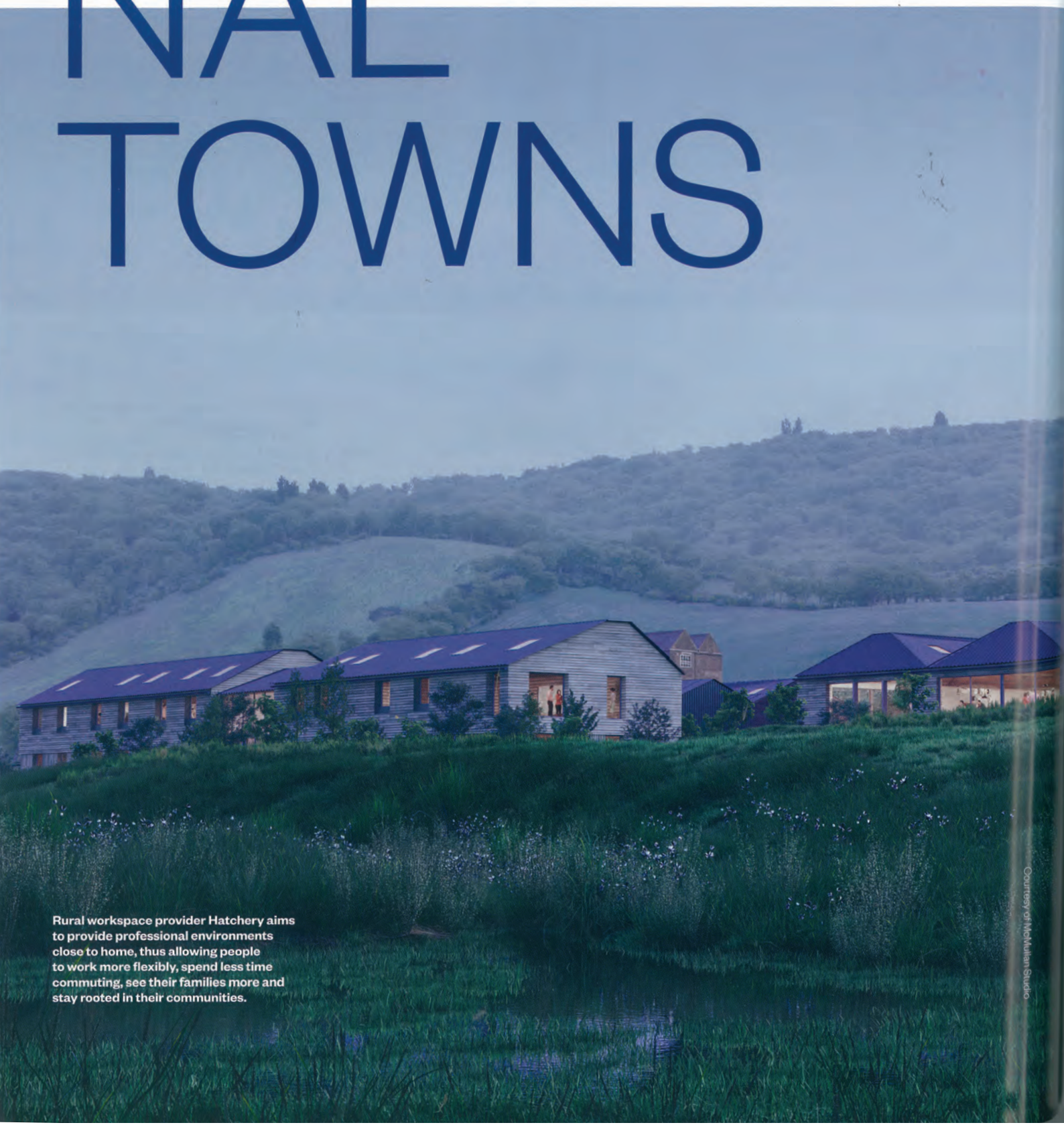
Transport consultant John Austin wrote for *TransportXtra* that wayfinding and branding were particular challenges for suburban mobility hubs, like the one at South Woodford outside London. It was initiated by the local council and is run with several partners. Green infrastructure specialists Meristem provided the design. Austin says: 'South Woodford demonstrates that achieving the sense of a homogenous, linked area within the mobility hub's immediate surroundings and, critically, along the key access corridors to it, can be a major challenge, partly because of different agency ownerships of the relevant space.'

An alternative model would be for communities, rather than transport providers, to develop these hubs to result in a greater sense of ownership. This was the case for the many parklets that sprang up over the pandemic. These developments saw local shops, cafés and restaurants reclaim street parking spaces to serve customers outdoors and provide space for social distancing. São Paulo has a citywide parklet master plan to encourage additional public spaces as part of street design, with policy to regulate their creation, and local design guidance. The architectural language of mobility hubs can vary wildly, depending on size and scope. Outside the city centre, community-led placemaking could lead the way to successful adoption. »

The introduction of on-demand workplaces to urban hubs reflects this era's obsession to use every minute of time productively

In addition to mobility-related functions, the Aarhus parking house will contain 2,000 m² of public amenities such as a gym, gallery and café, located in pavilions inside and around the building.

REGIONAL TOWNS



Rural workspace provider Hatchery aims to provide professional environments close to home, thus allowing people to work more flexibly, spend less time commuting, see their families more and stay rooted in their communities.

Courtesy of McMullan Studio

Beyond the city and its suburbs, small towns are feeling the benefit of the work-near-home demand, too. With wealth no longer necessarily concentrated in global cities, can post-industrial towns rise again?

Pre-pandemic co-working was popular mainly with freelancers and start-ups, but the ongoing backdrop of uncertainty has seen traditional businesses de-risk by setting small teams of their employees up in local hubs. 'Businesses today are looking for flexible rental options that are versatile and highly responsive to changing market dynamics,' says Kong Wan Sing, founder of JustCo. Before the pandemic, 50 to 60 per cent of the Southeast Asian flex space provider's deals were with enterprises. As of last December, it was 90 per cent. Sing told *Coworking Insights*: 'The combination of businesses seeking to deploy less capital into real estate, and employees expecting more choices over how and where they work, will fuel expectations toward flexible office space to complement primary real estate needs over the next decade.'

In Australia, major corporations now make up 20 per cent of co-working space clients, compared with 2 per cent five years ago. Julia Telford, director of Goondiwindi Business Hub, four hours' drive from the nearest city »

Using local materials, McMullan Studio designed Hatchery's Preston Farm in Sevenoaks, a town in Kent, England, as a free-flowing mix of private, public and co-operative spaces for entrepreneurs, farmers, makers, creators and locals to come together.

of Brisbane, told *AusBiz*: 'Out of the eight businesses we have working from the space at the moment, four are satellite offices for larger companies, two of which are international businesses. People want to raise their kids in a country town, but also have a professional environment to work from. And we offer that.'

The UK's Digital Futures at Work Research Centre studied the benefits of this development for those working in small rural towns. 'This shift in focus towards home-workers rather than freelancers opens up new opportunities for rural co-working to tap into a corporate client base where companies may rent space for their employees. It also has implications for the relationships between urban and rural economies. Co-locating professional employees and rural freelancers bridges networks that were previously highly impervious.'

Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) is a Vermont-based non-profit supporting rural entrepreneurship in regional towns across the US. Among the 20 tech hubs in its network is Codefi, born out of a derelict building in a small town in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Since 2014, Codefi has launched 50 start-ups, attracted €17.43 million in investment, and taught more than 1,000 young people to code. Su Kim, CORI's future of work employment lead, says: 'Place-based, community-owned solutions are critical for adoption, sustainability and resilience, and rural workplaces have the power to create places of belonging and economic mobility that are also deeply embedded in local culture. The more they're integrated into the ecosystem of the local community, the more they will thrive and grow.'

Rural and regional co-working is emerging at a time of greater support from governments. As leaders prepare to move beyond the pandemic, there is pressure to 'level up' opportunity and distribute investment outside major cities. In the UK a €5.61-billion fund is aimed at improving local infrastructure, skills and job opportunities. While in the US, financial incentives to relocate are being targeted at individuals as well as businesses. In 2018, *Curbed* reported that Vermont had begun offering an €8,720 grant to remote workers willing to move to the northerly US state, covering relocation costs, broadband access and membership of a co-working space.

The US is also investing €56.65 billion to improve broadband coverage as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, giving rural providers the opportunity to expand into underserved areas. Kim says it will take more than just fast internet for a budding rural workplace to thrive, however. 'As we've seen across our network, the places that have paired broadband access with physical spaces – co-working and entrepreneurship centres, as well as public spaces like libraries and community centres – are the ones maximizing the potential that the internet provides.'•

'Co-locating professional employees and rural freelancers bridges networks that were previously highly impervious'