

# Plug&Play Places: Subjective Standardization of Places in Multilocal Lifeworlds

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**Abstract** ‘Plug&Play’ is a technological term describing the immediate usability of items in a system without having to configure them. Referring to this term, the present chapter introduces the heuristic concept of ‘plug&play places’, which allows for an understanding of the meaning of places for multilocal people. Based on a set of 25 qualitative interviews with creative knowledge workers, this concept was developed in order to illustrate a specific feature of places within multilocal lifeworlds. This specific feature consists in the fact that multilocal persons configure a new place upon their first arrival, but on subsequent visits these places are immediately functional and usable within their multilocal lifeworlds. They standardize the places to be ‘plug&playable’ in their lifeworlds. Comparing this finding to the existing body of literature on the standardization of space and places, it is argued that one has to distinguish between a subjective and an objective type of standardization of places, with the former not necessarily changing the physical space. Every multilocal person proceeds to an individual configuration of these places, in which only a limited quantity of objectively standardized elements are incorporated. In this sense, ideas of objective standardization of space have to be examined critically as mobile lifestyles do not automatically resort to objectively standardized places.

**Keywords** Plug&play places · Multilocality · Creative industries · Mobility · Place attachment · Standardization of places

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## 1 Introduction

Mobility becomes an ever more important aspect of our everyday lives (Urry 2000); geographical areas covered by our individual actions keep on expanding (Werlen 2000). Therefore the number of places relevant to our lives increases. The geographies of everyday life take on new forms, which are similar to archipelagos (Duchêne-Lacroix 2009). Mobile people have to make huge cognitive efforts in order to manage this multitude of places. Generally, places can be understood as objects of everyday life (Weichhart 1990). They can be differentiated from one another, and most people use this feature of places to differentiate between a 'here' and a 'there'. According to Weichhart (1990), places take on a denotative (physical) as well as a connotative (psychological) function for our orientation in space. Since the 1960s, psychologists, urban planners, and geographers have especially studied the denotative function of places. Lynch (1960) tried to facilitate the legibility of urban areas by analysing the perception of the built urban environment by residents and other 'city users' (cf. Martinotti 1996 for a discussion of different groups of city users). Building on Lynch's findings, Downs and Stea (1977) studied how one relates to a place and its expression in mental maps. Within the frame of Humanistic Geography, geographers also started to combine knowledge from social phenomenology and research on spatial perception (Buttimer 1976). Here, aspects of everyday life were stressed and places were looked at from an everyday perspective. As such, places act as anchor points for personal identities and they work as reference points for individual localization. Sociologists also point out that places can be determining factors for a person's attitudes, norms and values (Mühler and Opp 2006). Finally, places can also be considered as a set of conditions determining individual action (Petzold 2010).

No matter the definition, places and place relatedness are most probably being affected by the increasing demand for mobility in our post-modern societies. This hypothesis was a starting point for numerous multilocality studies. This field of research investigates the distribution of everyday lives over various places (Rolshoven 2006). Multilocality is described as a phenomenon midway between the following two extremes: first, daily commuting and, second, permanent migration (Weichhart 2009). Research topics both focus on the circulation between places as well as the multiple localization of individual lifeworlds. In particular this second aspect has been less researched. The wider field of mobility studies mainly scrutinizes movement and circulation, but often overlooks how place attachment is evolving through mobility.

Open questions comprise the following: What specific demands do multilocal people express regarding the characteristics of their places? How should places be designed in order to provide to multilocal people's needs? Which specific services and infrastructures do multilocal persons demand? This paper seeks to shed light on this scarcely studied issue. In particular, I will focus on the aspect of standardization of space and places using the exemplary cases of multilocal creative knowledge workers. I understand standardization of places as a means to ensure their

‘playability’. With the help of standardization, differences between places are reduced and orientation is less dependent on the specific features of a given place, and as such is made easier. An issue of interest is how multilocal people actually create such comparability between places and how do they appropriate their new places. Do they actually consume specific market-supplied services, or do they also develop their own practices of place standardization?

Therefore, I will use the subsequent section to introduce to the concept of ‘plug&play’, which I deem helpful in order to understand ‘standardization’ in complex systems. This excursus is followed by a literature overview on the standardization of places. The fourth section will explain the specific character of creative knowledge work and its embeddedness in mobility. Then, Sect. 5 will deal with the methodology used during my fieldwork, while Sect. 6 will present its results. In Sect. 7, findings will be discussed and the concept of ‘plug&play places’ will be introduced as a result of my analysis. The final section will indicate fields of interest for future research, interested in the spatiality of mobile lives.

## 2 The Concept of ‘Plug&Play’

Nearly all of us have used USB devices while working on our computers. USB stands for ‘universal serial bus’; it is an example for the standardization of interfaces and software in the field of computer sciences. Such a type of standardization has been observed since the early 1990s and it is widely subsumed into the concept of ‘plug&play’ (Kelsey and Kelsey 1995; Shanley 1995; Bigelow 1999). ‘Plug&play’ devices are constructed in a way that they can immediately be ‘played’ without any major configuration effort after they were initially ‘plugged’ into a computer system. Plug&play devices are compatible with as many systems as possible. The aspect of ‘plug&playability’ consists of both the hardware (the physical design of a device’s plug) and the software (the specific codes used to automatize communication between a device and a system). As such, computer users enjoy an enhanced utility of their peripheral devices, because they do not have to undertake a proper installation. Ideally, the device (e.g. a printer or an external hard disk drive) communicates through standardized protocols with any computer. The device and the computer recognize each other and exchange information about their resource requirements (e.g. in terms of processing power). Once an initial recognition between the device and the computer took place, the device is familiar to the system and it must not be recognized again upon future connections. This standardization and automation massively reduced efforts for computer users. Once ‘plugged’ into the system, a user can immediately ‘play’ a device upon further reconnections to the computer system.

Today, this technology is increasingly based upon wireless modes of connection. We can easily stream our photos from our last weekend trip to our TV screens using Bluetooth connections, or we are able to print out the flight ticket from our tablet PCs without having to plug a cable into the printer. In the future, plug&play

technology is expected to facilitate the integration of devices into larger networks instead of individual local computer systems (UPnP Implementers Corporation 2006). Yet, the principal of ‘plug&play’ remains the same: It facilitates the usability of elements within a system through a standardization process.

This simplification of systemic integration is also appealing in a metaphoric way. In the field of business studies, the idea of ‘plug&play’ was applied for the development of more efficient organizational structures and the design of more flexible production chains. Economist Veryard (2001), e.g., imagined companies as organizational systems—equal to a computer system—becoming more successful if they are capable of flexibly integrating and detaching business modules according to market demand. The idea of ‘plug&play’ has however not yet been adopted by space-related studies in social sciences. Nevertheless, also social scientists observe phenomena, which resemble ‘plug&play’ situations regarding people’s own relation to space. I will show this in the subsequent section by introducing research findings that deal with the standardization of places.

### 3 Standardization of Places in a Mobile Society

Various spatial manifestations of the mobile society were recently portrayed in the media. One such phenomenon is the emergence of so-called coworking spaces (Schürmann 2013; Johns and Gratton 2013; Aguiton and Cardon 2007). Coworking spaces are shared office rooms that can flexibly be rented by office workers. The offered service goes beyond the mere provision of physical space, desks, or information and communication technology. Most coworking spaces also foster networking and exchange flows between their customers. Additionally, coworking spaces offer catering and specialized business services (e.g. web design, tax advice, business planning). Another phenomenon of standardization of places can be observed in the real estate sector. On 23 March 2014, journalist Nadine Oberhuber described in an article for German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung Online* that micro apartments become increasingly popular in central neighbourhoods of large European cities. These micro apartments seek to attract highly mobile professionals, whose workplace is located too far away to enable daily commuting. For these professionals, micro apartments offer a convenient full-serviced second home and as such a flexible alternative to relocation. Micro apartments are small, furnished and comparably cheap modes of accommodation. They include services like cleaning-up and contract processing with internet providers, or gas, electricity and water companies. A real estate developer, who was quoted in this article, spoke of ‘plug&play solutions’ to dwelling. Also in this case, consumers can resort to standardized places in a temporarily flexible way and in different cities, and they will always know what service they are ought to expect.

Sociologist Ritzer (1993, 2010) described this standardization of consumption modes, which is neither place-specific nor much embedded in local cultures, as ‘McDonaldization’. Drawing on the examples of business models such as IKEA

furniture stores and McDonald's fast food restaurants, Ritzer described four central properties characterizing the standardization of places. First, these places are based on efficiency: Quantity is more important than the quality of the sold products and services. Customers should consume a lot and repeatedly. Second, calculability should be a main characteristic of the offered products and services in these places. The customers should know that they can afford a lot because of moderate prices. Third, price levels are stable and comparable between stores from different places, and the execution of sales and other services are standardized in a way that they are predictable regardless of the place. Fourth, business models comprise a rigid control of social interactions between sales people and customers. Salesmen are taught standard mechanisms and routines regarding the interaction with customers, and customers' behaviour in these stores is shaped through marketing strategies.

Dutch sociologist Duyvendak (2011) studied the standardization of places drawing on the example of global hotel chains offering identical services across the world irrespective of local cultures. His findings show four different types of highly mobile clients in these hotel chains, each representing a specific mode of place attachment. Duyvendak (2011: 12/15) introduces these four types with the help of a two dimensional matrix. Here, one dimension represents attitudes towards one's own mobile life (positive vs. negative), while the other consists of the types of places used within this mobile life (generic vs. particular places). This second dimension is interesting as it demonstrates the widely different features characterizing places used by mobile people. Duyvendak's notion of 'generic places' refers to the ones that are able to provide identical atmospheres all over the globe. Local culture is mainly ignored by generic places. Instead a global and standardized culture is being staged. For highly mobile people with positive attitudes towards mobility, these places can become a home, which is everywhere at hand. At the same time, these places hinder place attachment and settlement for those highly mobile persons with negative attitudes towards mobility. For the latter group of people, generic places do not provide a satisfying option for place attachment.

The lack of distinctiveness of standardized places was also a starting point for Augé's (1995) research on so-called 'non-places'. Augé argues that places are normally embedded in historical narratives and relational systems with social groups, which form the identity of a place. Yet, increasingly one can observe the emergence of places that become more relevant in our lives, but that are not framed by a specific history and/or relation to social groups. These places do not function as anchor points for feelings of belonging and attachment. This is why Augé calls them 'non-places'; they simply do not exist in our collective memory. According to Augé, the new places of a mobile society, e.g. airports, motorway service areas, and refurbished train stations epitomise such 'non-places'. We travel through these non-places, but seldom are they the destination of our trips. There is no organically grown and stable social life inherent to these places. They are characterized by pure uniformity, which facilitates circulation of individuals within them.

The emergence of standardized places can be understood as a reaction to the increasing mobility of our societies in an era of globalization (Urry 2000; Larsen et al. 2006). Flexibilized labour markets have generated new demands concerning

labour mobility, and this in turn contributed to create new mobile lifestyles, affecting how and where we work, live and spend our leisure time. Market-based actors react to these new demands by offering solutions like coworking spaces, micro apartments or global hotel chains. As such, they are driving forces in the process of standardization of places.

#### **4 Creative Knowledge Workers as Consumers of Standardized Places?**

Looking at the demand side, creative knowledge workers are an interesting focus group [for a detailed definition see Nadler (2014, pp. 22–73)]. In the late 1990s, they were identified as a group of highly-skilled professionals who regard the new flexibility of labour markets as an opportunity for their individual career advancement (Lange 2007). Critical scholars interpret work in the creative and knowledge economy as post-modern slavery (e.g. Bröckling 2007), but more optimistic observers also view it as a release from the rigid organizational structures of industrial work (Friebe and Lobo 2006). Both perspectives underline that creative knowledge work is taking place in a dynamic and still poorly regulated environment. Creative and knowledge economies developed rapidly in the wake of outsourcing processes and the re-organization of industrial production. Today, creative knowledge workers function as providers of highly specialized services for other sectors. Creative knowledge work is organized in compartmentalized structures, consisting in specialized and temporary project groups. Hence, many workers are freelancers or self-employed. The work itself mostly deals with a largely immaterial value creation, and large investments into production facilities or office space are not as necessary as in other economic sectors. Still, only a few large corporations control access to the market, provide relevant distribution channels and define legal structures (e.g. copyright, intellectual property) for the commercialization of products and services (Caves 2000). Consequently, creative and knowledge economies are characterized by power asymmetries, leaving freelance workers in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis their contractors (Bröckling 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2008; Gill and Pratt 2008).

Given the characteristics of such a labour market, mobility requirements of workers are high (Florida 2002; Favell 2008; Pethe et al. 2010; Martin-Brelot et al. 2010). The strong degree of specialization of individual workers and the projects' short lifetimes require spatial flexibility in order to sell their own expertise and thereby make a living. Given that many creative knowledge workers are self-employed, they are also self-reliant when it comes to the organization of their geographical mobility. This is unique compared to other labour market segments. Nowicka (2005), e.g., studied the transnational mobility of employees of the United Nations. She found that UN officials almost act like diplomats; when relocating to another country they do not have to organize their mobility by themselves.

The employing organization assists with paper work and provides relocation services, and relocation costs are even covered by the employer. Equivalent services and financial resources are not available to most creative knowledge workers.

This self-dependence makes of creative knowledge workers an interesting focus group for mobility studies. They have a strong symbolic power [e.g. in defining values, norms, lifestyles; cf. Lange (2007)] and at the same time these workers are personally involved in the organization of their mobility. Given the strong competition in the creative knowledge market, it can be assumed that creative knowledge workers try—to a certain extent—to limit their costs and as such avoid market-based offers for mobility (cf. Sect. 3). Furthermore, I expect creative knowledge workers to develop individual practices when organizing the incorporation of different (work) places, and the mobility among them, into their own lifeworlds. The central questions are: How do creative knowledge workers organize their multilocality? How do they get attached to a multitude of places? Are they potential consumers of standardized places?

## 5 Methodological Design

In order to answer these questions, I draw on results from an empirical study conducted in the years 2010–2012. During fieldwork, a sample group of 25 creative knowledge workers were interviewed, applying a mix of biographical narration and problem-centred interview techniques (Hopf 1995). Interviewing was combined with the visual method of mental mapping (Ploch 1995; Scholz 2011). Both tools of data generation are well suited for investigation in the understudied fields of mobility studies (Scherke 2011). Sampling had to respect the following criteria: (1) a professional activity in one or more fields of creative or knowledge economies as well as (2) a transnational multilocality. Given that potential interviewees are not listed with these properties in official registers, I applied a snowball sampling method. This means I started sampling with two transnationally multilocal creative knowledge workers, whom I knew beforehand, and who then recommended future interview partners. Furthermore, I looked for interview partners in my private and professional networks and spread the word about my research in different events (such as conferences and exhibitions). When selecting interview partners, I sought to conserve a certain socio-economic heterogeneity regarding the characteristics of my sample.

The final sample was composed of 16 male and 9 female interviewees. Family status was heterogeneous: They represented singles, unmarried couples as well as married people. Some interviewees had partners from the same country, but others formed binational couples. Some of the respondents had small children in their households, others had adult children who already lived on their own. Further interviewees were childless. Nearly all interview partners are engaged in a variety of different professional and volunteering projects in different places and countries at the same time, and they regularly commute between these different countries.

They also originated from a number of different countries. Many came from EU countries, some were also citizens of American and Central Asian countries. This implied that I had to conduct interviews in different languages [for a methodological discussion on problems related to multilingual fieldwork see Nadler (2014: 205–207)].

At the beginning of the interviews, I asked respondents to draw a map including the places that were relevant to their own transnational lives. These mental maps helped to guide the narrative sections of the interviews; in some cases, these maps were also completed later during the interview. The interviews focused on relations between the interviewees and their places based upon their individual biographies and their current multilocality. Also, their perception of mobility, social networks and the professional field were discussed.

For an analysis of the interviews and the mental maps, I made use of approaches from Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2008; Clarke 2007), Qualitative Heuristics (Kleining and Witt 2000) as well as hermeneutics [in particular *Geschichtenhermeneutik* according to Vonderach (Vonderach 1997)]. In accordance with principles of *Geschichtenhermeneutik*, I reconstructed individual life stories of my interviewees. According to Vonderach (1997), only by looking at the aggregate of single biographical narratives, is one able to understand latent structures of sense and orientation in an individual's lifeworld. Subsequent cross-comparison of single cases was the basis for the development of categories and relations between categories, paving the way to the articulation of heuristic concepts.

## **6 Empirical Results: Subjective Standardization of Places in Multilocal Lifeworlds**

This section will introduce empirical findings with a strong focus on the multilocal interviewees' practices of relating to places. The main aspects explored here are the techniques used in order to guide oneself within and to appropriate new places (Sect. 6.1), the professional multilocality and the incorporation of different work-places (Sect. 6.2), as well as the private sphere of multilocality including dwelling practices (Sect. 6.3).

### ***6.1 Place Appropriation and Orientation***

Regular circulation between different places of residence and work in different countries generates continuous change among the individual geographies of my respondents' lifeworlds: New places are added to personal mental maps, while others lose relevance. Dealing with this continuous change is demanding in terms of



place appropriation. The basic problem is that all places have their own proper way of functioning. The urban fabric looks different and orientation systems are designed differently. Local people have different mentalities from each other and local culture needs to be learnt. In order to become familiar with these new places, my interview partners develop routines of place appropriation.

Even individuals with lifestyles marked by a strong mobility do not automatically adapt to new places. Arriving to new places is often described as a ‘temporary condition’, which is characterized by a lack of knowledge of how things work and how my interview partners can best integrate into local networks. Christian—a young artist commuting between places in Germany and France—says that frequent relocation within France and later to Germany implied a huge cognitive effort:

Each time that you move, there’s always a new difficulty. I don’t think that one can say that you develop a habit of moving around. There is always a... every new place has its own constraints, one has to re-install one’s own personality, one has to find footing again. You are always a different kind of person, because this depends on what others think of you. Uh, therefore, yes, I don’t think... When I came to Germany, I didn’t speak any German, and I couldn’t be who I was elsewhere. And even if I moved around in France, when you arrive to a new location, the mentalities are different, the systems are different, people already know each other. You are always a stranger again. You always have to resettle. Therefore, the question of the stranger is that of the strangeness which comes along, to use Albert Camus, for instance. That’s a question which I am highly interested in and which is part of my artistic work, mainly the poetry that I write.

Christian’s quote shows that the development of new social relations is an important aspect of place appropriation. Place appropriation often works as a two stage process which transforms a new place from a foreign place (*Fremdort*) into a familiar one (*Eigenort*; cf. Stock 2009). In the first stage, immediately after arrival, my interview partners rather observe their social environment and they conceal their personality to a certain extent. They adapt by developing a form of ‘humbleness’. This means that my interviewees do not expose their individual mentality, but embrace the position of an observer of local mentalities and they adapt to them. They do so in order to avoid offending locals. This technique enables a more rapid adaptation to local mentalities, values, and norms.

Only in the second stage, do they start building new social relations with locals and this in turn allows for the uncovering of their personality again. In this process, having a job in a new place is essential because it helps to build new networks starting from professional contacts, which then could lead to the development of further private social networks. Also, buying real estate can have a beneficial impact on the development of social networks as it increases social interaction levels (e.g. dealing with bureaucracy or neighbours). Finally, social relations predating relocation to a new place work as a catalyst for the creation of new social networks.

Another daily practice of place appropriation consists in discovering the physical environment. Many of my interview partners try to find modes of gradually exploring their local space, e.g. taking long walks in their new neighbourhoods. This includes methods such as ‘losing oneself voluntarily’. Losing one’s orientation in a new environment might force openness towards the new and unknown.

One has to ask locals in the local language for directions; likelihood to meet people is thus high. Remaining open increases chances of intensive experiences of new places and getting to know new people; this in turn facilitates place appropriation.

The process of place appropriation—the passage from a foreign place to a familiar one—finishes once my interview partners feel that being in these places has become normal life. This is often the case when habits of everyday life start being developed. Birgit, who is working as an architect in one place and as a university professor in another, explains that she used to stay at the same hotel during her office days at the university. Her everyday routine there consists of long working hours and then eating out. By contrast, in her other place of residence, she lives in her own apartment, cooks with her partner and spends some free time with friends. Dirk lives and works both in Bulgaria and in Germany. He frequently cycles to his office in Germany, while he only walks to his office in Bulgaria. Emil is based in Germany and in Switzerland. In Germany, he loves to go to classical music concerts. In Switzerland, he never does so, but he often goes to theatre. My interview partners seek to develop place specific habits in their everyday life, in order to make sense of their individual multilocality. Such complementary routines in different places help people to become more aware of the benefits of multilocality. It is precisely when my interview partners become aware of this complementarity and the specific value of a new place, that this former foreign place becomes familiar to them and forms a component in the geography of their lifeworld. This implies to find a balance between the satisfaction of some needs and the renunciation of others. These multilocal creative knowledge workers adapt to local customs and culture, but they do not immerse themselves completely. They remain true to themselves by ignoring those elements of local culture that cannot be aligned on their personal attitudes. Striking a balance between remaining oneself and adapting to the environment is a condition to place appropriation.

Furthermore, in order for a place to take on an everyday life character, the ubiquitous availability of small gadgets and objects seems necessary. Emil stores swimming trunks in all his places because he loves swimming wherever he is. Oskar, living in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, keeps a pair of running shoes in each of his apartments. Aurélien has equipped his two ateliers in France and Germany with similar tools in order to be able to produce art work without having to carry his toolboxes around. Likewise, CDs, books, toiletry, or clothes are made available in each of these places. This reduces the amount of necessary luggage and thus facilitates travel, and it enhances the ‘playability’ of places upon returning.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that the passage from foreign places to familiar places can cause emotional stress. Often partners and other family members as well as close friends remain in ‘the other’ place, and my interview partners feel alone in their new place. In this situation, emotional stability is sought for through virtual and imaginary travel to more familiar places [cf. notions of ‘virtual travel’ and ‘imaginative travel’ in Larsen et al. (2006)]. At the same time, developing new social ties in new places can induce a reduction of social relations to previous familiar places, which then need to be re-intensified if these earlier places were to regain relevance for the individual’s own lifeworld.

## 6.2 *Multilocal Working*

My interview partners also employ different practices in order to manage their professional projects in different places. Surprisingly, these creative knowledge workers rarely rely upon services for multilocals provided by the market (e.g. coworking spaces). Federico—a historian and cultural mediator based in Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Italy—describes such a multilocal working world as follows:

Our coworking space is the library, you know. The libraries all have Internet now. They are very comfortable. Yeah, I think, it's like that. Because if I think of the Czech Republic, I always go to the library. If I am in Slovenia and Italy, I do the same. If I am in London, I always go... or I can go to the British Library.

Creative knowledge work mostly takes place within structures allowing flexible forms of organization. Creative knowledge workers need a table and a connection to the Internet. These services are provided by most libraries today. Libraries are supposed to provide infrastructure for learning and studying, and initially they were not conceptualized as substitutes for creative knowledge workers' office spaces. Yet, they offer the same services as marketed coworking spaces: desks, access to the Internet, often a small cafeteria and the possibility to exchange and discuss project ideas with other people. Same applies for airport lounges and train stations as well as cafés, which are used as working spaces by my interview partners, too. In the field of professional art, so-called residence programmes are established offering residential and working spaces for artists temporarily staying in different places. In the scientific world, travelling researchers have the possibility to make use of office spaces and research infrastructures (scientific libraries, archives, and databases) of local research centres. Furthermore, my interviewees also work in places made available by family members and friends.

As mentioned in Sect. 4, labour markets were flexibilized in the past decades. This favoured the development of short-term and part-time labour contracts as well as multiple job holding. Many of my interviewees hold positions in different organizations in various locations. Accordingly, they can make use of the different organization's infrastructures. When being self-employed in one place, they also seek to share their office space with other self-employed colleagues. In this regard, Pia—who works at a university in Germany and owns an architecture firm in Denmark—remarks that sharing an office space with a professional peer facilitates social integration into the (labour) market:

How we planned it is simply that we want to rent a larger office where we can sit together. Um, because we think that it is quite good to have some movement, and mainly because Ronald, the renovator, um has other competences than I have, and we already exchange advices with each other about our projects. And then we can directly sit together, and probably also develop projects together in Germany, by pooling what we both can offer, so to say. And this has... I can imagine that this works well on the personal level, if we share an office.

My interview partners sought for loopholes in existing structures, in order to independently organize their multilocal working worlds while bypassing market-based infrastructures and services. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that they would completely refuse these offers, but they try to identify and favour the most cost-effective ways of organizing multilocal work. This includes a re-definition of places, which originally were not planned as workspaces for creative knowledge workers (e.g. train stations, airports, cafés). These spatial solutions are similar in that they respond to certain expectations in terms of utility and usability. They are accessible for free or at a low cost, and thus not provoke a drain on resources. In addition, these re-defined work places can be used flexibly upon arrival, what matches well with the unpredictable character of a creative knowledge worker's schedule. Finally, such work places are likely to generate encounters with other peers and locals, and as such, they provide entry points into local culture and networks.

### **6.3 *Multilocal Dwelling***

Besides the professional dimension, multilocal lifeworlds also entail a private sphere. Here, dwelling practices of the interviewed creative knowledge workers show some particularities that distinguish them from other highly mobile groups. In addition to the aforementioned solutions of settling in artist residences or at friends or family, there are further ways to organize economical multilocal dwelling. Like work spaces, dwellings have to be flexible and they should not cause a long-term drain on one's own resources. Within the frame of multilocality, creative knowledge workers irregularly pay visit to their places. Absence or presence are hardly foreseeable, as it depends on jobs and projects, which often arise spontaneously. This implies that not all places are equally important as residential places, but they must be available round the clock.

As a result, market-based offers such as rental apartments (including furniture) are not always the most appropriate form of dwelling. More often than not, it is the burden of maintaining one's own apartment, which keeps my interviewees from renting on the market. Isabel works as a translator and interpreter, and she was an exception in that she is still maintaining two rental apartments in Barcelona and Berlin. Yet, during our interview, she was also thinking about leaving one of her apartments. She illustrates her doubts by describing her routine when coming back to these apartments:

I first have to throw away or save all the plants, provided they are still alive. I always have forgotten some oranges or apples, and it smells somewhere. I forgot some food in the fridge, so it has rotten, and I always have to check everything. Or a handyman came by, and I had forgotten about the appointment. During my absence, the chimney sweeper came to the building, and I wasn't there. These things often happen. Uh, or the telephone broke, because lightning struck. This means I always have to check everything what has happened, and I have to clarify issues, and somehow these apartments need to be taken care of.

Taking care of two different apartments is often too time-consuming for most of the interviewed persons. For them, it makes more sense to find more flexible and less demanding forms of dwelling. One such strategy consists of sharing an apartment—and being equally responsible for it. Sharing even extends to such practices, where creative knowledge workers share individual rooms within shared apartments with other multilocal workers, who are never present at the same time. Xaverio is a photographer who circulates between Milan, Berlin and Rome. He explains that he has rented an apartment and a studio in Milan, but in Rome and Berlin he shares rooms with an historian who also circulates between Berlin and Rome. They continuously exchange about their times of absence and presence in each of the places and they take turns at occupying the rooms. In Germany, Dirk shares an apartment with a friend who is multilocal too. This friend is working in another city and only returns during weekends. Additionally, Dirk has rented an own apartment with his girlfriend in Bulgaria.

Another way of flexibly organizing dwellings consists in re-interpreting hotels as flexible apartments. Correspondingly, Kate—who works as a supervisor for the dubbing of US American movies and who circulates between France, Spain, Germany, Italy, England and the USA—describes that she did not even have a registered place of residence for several years. She never spends more than five days in one place and she is not able to predict where she has to go afterwards. Therefore, she decided to resign from her rental apartment in Germany. Still she found a new way of organizing home within her mobile life by always booking the same rooms in the same hotels in the places to which she frequently returns. In these hotels, she leaves suitcases with her personal belongings, clothes, and toiletry. Upon booking, receptionists bring her suitcase with cleaned clothes to her room. Hence, she has several similarly equipped suitcases in various hotels across Europe and she actually lives in hotels. Similarly, Birgit says that she always returns to the same hotel while staying in one of her places, generally for three days per week (Sect. 6.1). She knows the staff members and they know her. She always takes the same room and she got so accustomed to dining in the hotel that it feels like being home. Furthermore, she appreciates not having to care about household chores.

Aurélien, who works as an artist, explains that he prefers staying at friends' places when he is in France. In return, he offers his French hosts to stay in his apartment in Germany whenever they need it:

It is about always having a free room for someone who needs to come spontaneously. [...] To work in Germany, for example. And like this establishing different places across Europe, where there is such a possibility too. And why not in a sense of uh... how to say that, also of professional assistance. You know, having this kind of relationship. That's what I am starting to do in Paris. I have some artist friends who will host me the time of an exhibition, because I will probably organise something in Paris, well, because someone also lets me use his apartment. Or there is a kind of exchange, of apartments which can be organised. This is also a completely new form of economy, which could be set up.

The advantages of such forms of dwelling consist in facilitating interaction with local people and providing access to local networks, which themselves can become important resources for creative knowledge work. Federico makes this explicit

when speaking about the ways how he is accommodated during trips to the Czech Republic and Slovenia: He always seeks to stay with fellow local scientists. These encounters foster inspiring discussions and extend one's own contact list.

In general, my interview partners organize their accommodation in a cost-effective way. This also means that they avoid resorting to marketed services whenever this is possible. Furnished micro-apartments supplied by real estate agencies were not used by my interview partners. However, this avoidance is not only based upon financial motives. Rented apartments are also supposed to impede contact to local networks as my interviewees would feel secluded if living alone. Flexible forms of accommodation—such as organized by creative knowledge workers on their own—enable stronger interaction with the local people. Another argument in favour of flexible forms of accommodation is the more acceptable burden of household maintenance coming along with sharing compared to that of renting a second or even third apartment. Nonetheless, this is often combined with a main residence, which works as a base for individual multilocality and which is often one's own property or a traditional rented apartment (cf. Nadler and Montanari 2013).

## 7 Discussion of Results

### 7.1 *Plug&Play Places*

The empirical results show that multilocal creative knowledge workers are self-reliant when it comes to organizing work and accommodation in multilocal contexts. They actively strive for attachment through practices of exploration and appropriation of places and by meeting local people. Through the continuous incorporation of new places in the frame of their professional activities, these creative knowledge workers develop a certain polyperspectivity. This polyperspectivity allows for an efficient comparison between places playing a role in their individual lifeworlds; one becomes conscious of each place's specific features (cf. Petzold 2010). Knowing about the utilities of places makes one aware of the value of one's own multilocality.

What analogies to the idea of 'plug&play' become apparent here? First, multilocal lifeworlds can be understood as 'systems' too. These systems consist of individual components, which taken together form a coherent and functional structure for the conduct of one's own life. For each multilocal person, the specific composition of this system does condition individual courses of action and personal identity. Second, routinized practices of place appropriation can—in a metaphoric sense—be understood as a type of automatized initial configuration, just as when a device is being plugged into a computer system for the first time. When a new place is added to the geography of one's own lifeworld, multilocal creative knowledge workers compare current situations and contexts to experiences made in former

environments. Through this comparison, multilocal creative knowledge workers evaluate the value added by the new place and they decide about the procedure of integration into one's own lifeworld. Similar to the plugging of a new device into a computer system, the opportunities for one to act are increased by adding a new place to the 'system' of one's own multilocal lifeworld. It was shown that these new places were then standardized in order to fit into one's own lifeworld through the above mentioned practices of constructing new social relations and through finding flexible forms of dwelling and working. As soon as a new place is 'plugged' into one's personal lifeworld, it is 'playable' again upon each return, as illustrated in Fig. 1. There is no need to re-configure the place according to one's own needs. Furthermore, the empirical results pointed out that the addition of new places to one's own lifeworld is a very subjective process. The specific patterns of places of one multilocal person are not equally 'playable' by any other multilocal person as they are always based on one's individual needs.

A third similarity to the 'plug&play' concept consists in the management of resources. The computer system monitors resources needs (e.g. processing capacity) related to individual devices in the system. According to the availability of resources, each device receives a certain share of it, in order to optimize the system's efficiency. A similar distribution of resources takes place in multilocal lifeworlds. Resources like time, money, objects, and even emotional attachment or cognitive capacities are allocated to different countries and places in an appropriate—and subjectively perceived as coherent—way. This distribution supports the



**Fig. 1** Playful imagination of the plug&play places (*Source* own picture)

meaningfulness of multilocality. All places receive just as many resources as necessary in order to optimize the exploitation of place-specific characteristics.

Fourth, plug&play devices are flexible as they do not consume any resources after they have been removed from the system. They unblock resources for other devices to use. Similarly, multilocal people organize the incorporation of places into multilocal lifeworlds in such a way that costs are minimized when multilocal people are physically absent. Flexible forms of accommodation and working require only little financial and organizational effort, and at the same time they are always available and ‘playable’ when multilocals need to ‘re-plug’ to these places.

In this sense, I think that we can understand how multilocal creative knowledge workers relate to places as the social construction of ‘plug&play places’. Plug&play places are coherently integrated into the systems of their multilocal lifeworlds. Upon each return, a plug&play place is fully functional for the multilocal person. Social phenomenologists point to the fact that people design their individual lifeworld according to the criterion of coherence in order to be happy with their lives (cf. Buttner 1976). This is exactly what happens when multilocal people turn places into ‘plug&play places’ according to their own needs.

## 7.2 Objective Versus Subjective Standardization of Place

Regarding the reflections on the standardization of places as presented in Sect. 3, I will now suggest a differentiation between objective and subjective standardization of places, a distinction which is summarized in Table 1. Existing approaches to grasp the standardization of places refer to an ‘objective’ standardization. Ritzer’s concept of McDonaldization, Duyvendak’s reflections on generic places and

**Table 1** Comparison of objective and subjective standardization of places

Objective standardization according to the concept of ‘generic places’	Subjective standardization according to the concept of ‘plug&play places’
Efficiency: quick and massive consumption	Efficiency: in terms of place appropriation; practices of orientation; flexibility
Calculability: acquiring a lot for a modest price	Calculability: costs and utility of multilocality
Predictability: standardized and simple market transaction	Predictability: place-specific offers
Control: salesperson-client-Interaction	Control: relation between individual persons and places; comparison and functional complementarity; distribution of resources
Actors: multinational corporations; collective	Actors: multilocal person; individual
Effect: transformation and creation of new spatial structures	Effect: increase in the usability and utility of existing spatial structures

Source Own draft



Augé's understanding of non-places all share the description of standardization based upon mass consumption. They imagine an anonymous mass of consumers, who purchase services and products offered in these standardized places. The example of global hotel chains as prototype of generic places illustrates McDonaldisation in a metaphoric way. Based on efficiency, customers are quickly served and these standardized hotels seek to increase usage and their customer pool. Hotel guests are aware of the standardized value attached to the service they wish to purchase and it is predictable that this information is valid also in other world regions. Furthermore, the interaction between guests and the hotel staff is highly structured and standardized so that transaction processes take place efficiently and rapidly.

When comparing objective and subjective standardization, then one can see that the properties of the categories are different. As such, the 'plug&play places' concept refers to a standardization of places as well. Yet, this standardization is rather subjective in character. It is about the standardization of only a few places from the perspective of an individual multilocal person. Plug&play places refer to the incorporation of places into the complex and individual contexts of one's own life. Of course, this requires efficiency to some extent. Applying practices of orientation and place appropriation, multilocal people make use of their places as flexible components of their own multilocal lifeworlds. Once these places are standardized in such a subjective manner, their functions are foreseeable for multilocal individuals. A multilocal person can calculate what costs and benefits for self-fulfilment result from the incorporation of places. Furthermore, multilocals know exactly what to expect in each place in terms of working or dwelling opportunities as well as to what type of people and mentalities they will be facing. After this process of subjective standardization is completed, multilocals are aware of the complementarity of place-specific features, the requirements in terms of resources (e.g. time, money, attention, emotional attachment etc.) and the accordance with their own needs. They continuously reflect the relation to their places by comparing these places with each other. This in turn represents a mode of control over the geography of one's own lifeworld.

However, the standardization into plug&play places is only functional for a single individual; it is not objective as retail stores like IKEA, global hotel chains or fast food caterers like McDonald's can be. This subjective standardization is based on the very individual needs of one multilocal person; it does not reflect an average pattern of needs of an anonymous group of customers. Subjective standardization is not managed by collective and corporate actors in the market, but by multilocal people themselves. While the objective standardization of places leads to changes in our physical environment, this is not necessarily the case with the subjective standardization of places. The manufacturing of 'plug&playability' can just have a cognitive character. Sometimes it does not even materialize itself. Becoming aware of the benefits of multilocality—which is a rather cognitive process—, an individual is able to consider places as flexible and compatible constituents of one's lifeworld, but this process rarely involves a physical impact on the respective places themselves.

## 8 Conclusion

I understand this conceptual idea of plug&play places as a tool, which helps us to understand place attachment and the respective meaning of places in lifeworlds characterized by mobility and multiplicity of attachments. Places represent functional elements in the 'system of one's own lifeworld'. Considering places as 'plug&play' devices allows for an understanding of standardization in the context of complex relational systems between human beings and their environments. Former approaches to conceptualize standardization of space and places remain insufficient, because they simply focus on objective and materialized phenomena. As a complement, I suggest the concept of 'plug&play places' as a heuristic tool to depict phenomena of subjective standardization of place and place relatedness, which are not always physically observable. Both aspects of standardization of places will most probably become more important as societies continue to grow more mobile. As such, they both have their legitimation as a conceptual basis for future research in the field of mobility and multilocality studies.

Still, I admit that my remarks regarding the concept of 'plug&play places' can only be considered as an early draft. My qualitative research followed an explorative approach, and the sample of the studied multilocal creative knowledge workers is specific in terms of their capability to act in a self-reliant way and accept mobile lifestyles. It is now important to elaborate on these early ideas and confront them to a more robust empirical study. Studies of other focus groups can complement the present findings, and larger samples need to be analysed. It would also be interesting to conduct a panel study in order to examine the changes of place relatedness over time. My own empirical results pointed to the fact that multilocal arrangements have a strongly temporary nature. Many interviewees signalled they considered multilocality as a passage to a more stable and monolocal life. Research could thus also question how stable subjective standardization actually is, when multilocals return to a more monolocal lifestyle.

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