

ROHS STREET CAFE: THE DARK MATTER OF SHARED WORK SPACE

Dark matter is the "missing mass" in design. It is the material that must be inescapably there, that must be causing a particular outcome. It is the "architecture" surrounding every design problem. This matter appears in "...the hegemonic characteristics of certain systems mean that we tend to ignore, or conveniently forget, that they have been designed; they have been imagined, articulated, stewarded into position." (Hill 105)

My dark matter study emerges after spending many hours at Rohns Street Cafe. In addition to spending six hours there on assignment, I would consider myself a regular patron of the coffee shop. During my time there, I became particularly fascinated by the shared table spaces, and further the concentration of power sources available.

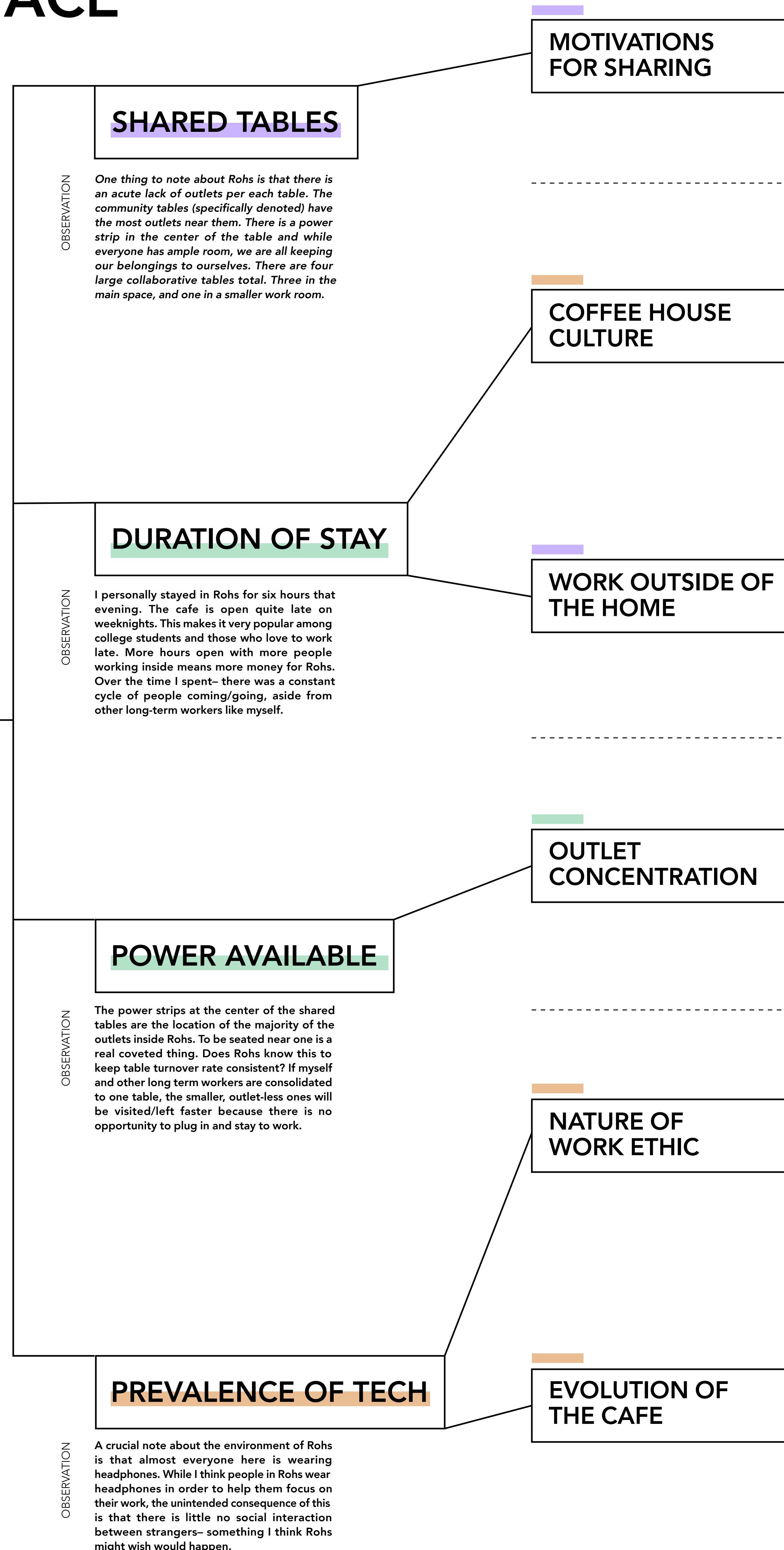
My dark matter mapping displays the progression of distilling my observations down to concise questions and certain positions on where the solutions might lie.

OBSERVATION

ROHS STREET CAFE
SEPT. 10, 2018
TIME SPENT: 5PM-11PM
CLIFTON, CINCINNATI, OHIO

KEY

- BEHAVIORAL
- CONTEXTUAL
- CULTURAL



MOTIVATIONS FOR SHARING

Is consent needed to share the work space?
I just need an outlet!

When sitting with strangers, patrons abide by basic social cues such as respecting space of others— keeping belongings to themselves, staying quiet, etc. These social cues, along with table denotation, nudge patrons they may in fact join the collaborative space.

The notion that Rohns is a place to get work done— those who patron the cafe have a might have a directive in mind and are focused on it.

From observation— work within Rohns is extremely tech-saturated. Needing to power ones device(s) appears to be valid reason to share a collaborative space.

Those with social anxieties might be eased through the notion that "charging" is reason enough to sit at the table.

COFFEE HOUSE CULTURE

How has "coffee shop" culture evolved as society has evolved?

"Coffee shops have become a global phenomenon. Although coffee shops, or coffeehouses, have existed for nearly 500 years, in the past few decades they have experienced a dramatic expansion... Growth of the World Wide Web played a role; it led to a synergistic convergence between caffeine and Internet access in coffeehouses and cyber cafes" (Tucker, Coffee Culture).

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With the rapid evolution of technology and ever increasing reliance on Internet facilities—the need for online productivity increases among individuals and organizations.

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WORK OUTSIDE OF THE HOME

Do people work better/smarter outside of the home?

"In order for the city and its neighborhoods to offer the rich and varied association that is their promise and potential, there must be neutral ground upon which people may gather. There must be places where individuals may come and go as they please, in which no one is required to play host, and in which we all feel at home and comfortable" (The Great Good Place, p. 22).

The idea that working in busy, noisy places like coffee shops enhances creativity and concentration has had a great deal of press over recent years. Research has shown that a moderate level of ambient noise, such as the clattering of plates and the whir of a coffee machine, improves performance on creative tasks. (Simon Oxenham, NewScientist)

The notion of "the third place" is extremely prevalent at Rohns. While located near a university, people of all kinds visit the space to accomplish their work on neutral ground.

The buzz of coffee-making, dish clattering, and mild conversation might only be bothersome to those listening closely. For the most part, that an ambiance becomes mere background noise for those working on their tasks at hand.

OUTLET CONCENTRATION

How has the nature of work changed at Rohns over time?

One might posit that the types of customers/types of work seen occurring in the coffee house has evolved along the same timeline as the evolution of personal computing devices such as phones, computers, and tablets. With the use of these devices comes the need to power them.

The rise of the computing age shot up exponentially after the dawn of the internet. With personal computing capabilities and access to open-source information like wikipedia, the nature of modern work was dramatically altered.

What might be a factor in someone choosing to do their tech-based work (and spend their money on coffee) in a particular place? The availability to charge those devices. This opportunity can be seen at Rohns through their community tables with power strip outlets.

This sort of evolution presents itself at Rohns' through its proximity to a college campus. Combined with its late-night hours and free wifi access, the cafe proves a highly effective space for individuals to leave their home environments in pursuit of productivity.

NATURE OF WORK ETHIC

What becomes of a popular workspace like Rohns in the event of something like UBI?

Our lives have become increasingly structured around competitive self-realization, and work has become the primary avenue for achieving this (Srnicek-Williams, 125).

The real significance of UBI lies in the way it overturns the asymmetry of power that currently exists between labor and capital... The repetitiveness of a nine-to-five job, combined with the tediousness of most work, is hardly an appealing prospect for a life-long career... The nature of work would become a measure of its value, not merely its profitability.

The cultural obsession with "better" work might be said to be a driving force behind Rohns "regulars" and long-term patrons (such as myself). Given its relaxing environment, availability of caffeine, free internet access, and proximity to my university— There are myriad reasons to stay and work hard.

With UBI, individuals might only feel motivated to spend hours in Rohns doing work that is actually meaningful to them. If one's tasks are no longer menial— do you work better/smarter? I would argue— YES. In turn, the presence of patrons in Rohns for pure leisure might increase. Not worried about income, they may put the laptop down, invite a friend, and enjoy the quality time.

EVOLUTION OF THE CAFE

What does the nature of coffee shop culture today mean for work spaces of the future?

A third place which provides internet access may create a hollow effect in that the patrons are physically present but do not make social contact with each other, being absorbed by their remote connections.

New social environments can combine elements of the first and second place (co-living); of the second and third place (co-working); and of the first and third place (co-mingling). The combination of elements of the first, second, and third place in new social environments implies the emergence of a new place, the fourth place. (Wikipedia, The Third Place)

While spending time in Rohns, I have noted the vast majority of people wear headphones while they do their work. In turn, the nature of work being done appears to be screen-based. Often, individuals are participating in both behaviors. There is a certain irony in this sort of isolating behavior occurring inside of a collaborative space shared by many other people.

The notion of The Fourth Place is fascinating. One might posit that social media sites and applications have manifested this Fourth Place. They are bastions for knowledge sharing, community, and entertainment that in a sense "removes" users from their physical environments.