

Walk into WeWork and the appeal is immediate. (Courtesy)



Roy Oron of Sosa. (Orit Arfa)

The theme of these communal spaces is simple: Just hook up your laptop or computer, and start working; the workspaces provide everything else — maintenance and, of course, a kitchen

the Tel Aviv branch. “The community is the real value.”

A WeWork app connects its international cadre of members; a series of weekly events, including lectures from movers and shakers in the business world, happy hours and even yoga classes, provide networking, professional enrichment and social opportunities. For a break, WeWork-ers can play some ping-pong on the roof.

WHILE WEWORK may be strongest brand name in the industry of communal workspaces, it is not the only one in terms of concept and scope. Mindspace opened two years ago on Rothschild Boulevard in an area widely considered the financial and business hub of Tel Aviv, and just a few months ago, the company took over an iconic city building for its new campus: the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange.

“We tried to make it like a grown-up amusement park,” explains Mindspace manager Dari Shechter. More like the “house mother” who warmly and cheerfully greets Mindspacers in the hallways, she helped conceptualize Mindspace from the ground up with founder Dan Zakai.

Counterbalancing the high-powered, hi-tech vibe is a vintage design in the common areas and conference rooms, which are adorned with stacks of books, old-fashioned typewriters, phonographs, board games and balls of yarn — a reminder that being creative in the modern world can still take inspiration from low-tech forerunners. Spaces here start at NIS 1,650.

“Basically I think the design of the space gives companies the comfort to bring clients and investors and show off their office, but I think the most important thing in here is the commu-

nity,” says Shechter. Still, she adds, “behind the membership model is the idea of ‘no-hassle.’ You come here to work.”

The theme of all these communal spaces, which include The Hub on Begin Road, Techloft on Nahmani Street, and the more corporate Regus network, is simple: Just hook up your laptop or computer, and start working; the workspaces provide everything else — maintenance and, of course, a kitchen, whose design and beverage stock varies from facility to facility. (Mindspace has an array of colorful herbal teas, while WeWork has beer on tap and an urban spice garden.)

Extending the synagogue analogy, entrepreneurs, freelancers and companies seeking a coworking space must find the “denomination” that works best for their social needs, budget, industry and, of course, location. Given the dearth of

Houses of workship

As lonely creators seek community to facilitate their work, communal workspaces are sprouting up in Tel Aviv

• By ORIT ARFA

WeWork made a grand entrance last November when this popular international brand of coworking spaces opened its first Israeli branch on the corner of Tel Aviv’s Dubnov and Shaul Hamelech streets. It took over a large, rectangular building that once housed a synagogue and the headquarters of the Bnei Akiva Zionist youth movement.

Murals with Zionist quotes have remained intact, as has the shape of the former synagogue’s ark, now a nook for work.

The fortuitous symbolism could not

have been more apt. In the country’s metropolis, professional success is as holy as daily prayer, and entrepreneurship has become a form of meditation that could lead one to his or her highest exaltation: personal fulfillment, a secure future and the realization of a vision. If the Holy Land these days has become the “Start-up Nation,” it stands to reason that this nation is filled with “houses of wor(k)ship” where entrepreneurs can congregate to maximize their success by working together, yet on their own.

Just as praying alone at home without a *minyan* can become an uninspiring chore, so can sitting alone by one’s desk. The Hebrew term for meditative concentration is *kavana*, which can

easily get lost when one is surrounded by housemates, the TV, the phone, and dirty laundry and dishes. Working in one’s pajamas all day may be a luxury, but at some point, people need a reason to dress to impress.

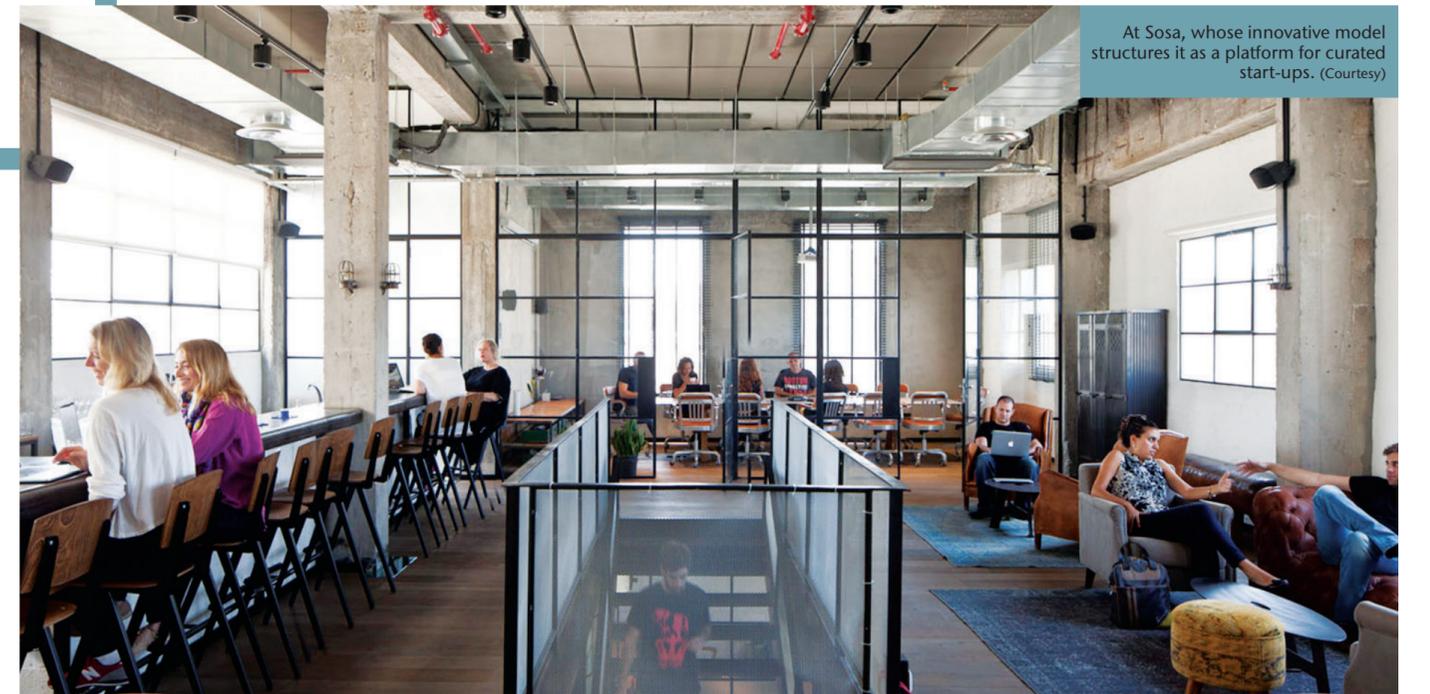
While WeWork is not the first collaborative workspace to enter the Israeli market, it has demonstrated how popular the concept can be when executed right. On November 1, it will open its second branch in the country (the other being in Herzliya) at the new Sarona Market, and plans for branches in other cities are in the works.

Walk into WeWork, and the appeal is immediate (and one reason this freelance reporter will park there next month). The homey lobby and sleek

kitchen, stocked with drip coffee and free Israeli-brand Jem’s beer, must have been designed with work-friendly feng shui in mind — while waiting for the tour, I kickstarted an article that has been the source of much procrastination.

WeWork was founded by Israeli entrepreneur Adam Neumann, a former kibbutznik who now lives in New York, and Miguel McKelvey, a Mexican-American architect who hails from a commune. It started in New York five years ago, and now boasts over 50 locations in 16 cities across the US, Europe and Israel. In Tel Aviv, workspaces start at NIS 1,000 a month.

“The office space is an additive,” says Ronnie Ceder, community manager at



At Sosa, whose innovative model structures it as a platform for curated start-ups. (Courtesy)

parking in Tel Aviv, being able to walk or take public transportation to the office is often a key concern. WeWork has showers on the premises for those who work up a sweat biking or walking there in the Tel Aviv humidity.

BUT WHILE the coworking idea may seem like a uniquely Tel Aviv trend, the man who takes credit as a pioneer in this country is from the largely Anglo suburb of Ra'anana: Elliot Cohen, an immigrant of 31 years from New York who is CEO and founder of Coworking Israel.

He implemented the concept almost by accident. He started out renting 10 rooms about eight years ago, mostly for fellow Anglos, and has since expanded to 120 rooms. Individuals can rent a space for NIS 800, while a three-person office starts at NIS 1,750.

As an engineer involved in the start-up community for the last 20 years, Cohen identified a need: "When you do your start-up, that's the most amazing thing in the world, but you really miss out on the opportunity of being with other people."

And it's not only for singles who live alone; men with families also need to get out of the house, he says.

"The women don't want the men at home, that's the basic idea," Cohen quips in a phone interview. He has noticed that the phenomenon of working at home has gained traction in the last 15 to 20 years, with the Internet and affordable international telephony making work from the comfort of one's home office a cost-effective option.

"I could have a conference call with India and San Francisco, and at the same time I could babysit my kids and surf the Web. People love that idea, but in the end they realize it's not good, and in a place like Israel it's more common to walk or bike to work," he explains.

A major advantage of the communal workspaces is flexibility. Start-ups in particular cannot predict their success – within a few months they may either die or get funding to advance to the next level. But what may bring start-ups closer to that coveted exit are the connections they make with fellow "workshippers."

Tal Revivo, CEO of Adoric, a company that produces smart pop-ups and other marketing tools for websites, casually found his new vice president of products at Mindspace.

"We met in the kitchen one day, decided to talk, and discovered that we were on the same level of expertise," Revivo recalls from his glass office overlooking the Mindspace common area, his dog Jin chilling beneath him in the pet-friendly office.

Having gathered experience with coworking spaces while living in New York, Revivo sought the same on returning to Israel. A snazzy sign advertising Mindspace captured his attention, and he immediately signed up.

"I like it better here than in New York because Israelis are warmer than Americans, and it's very easy to mingle," he says. "Dari took me by the hand and told me what I needed."

His one real complaint is that the NIS 70 massages Mindspace offers periodically cannot be extended past 40 minutes.

At WeWork, Ronit Friedman, art director of The Art of Branding (TAB), was attracted by the hub's powerful branding, which may account for its rapid growth. She has culled several clients and collaborators from the WeWork community. Often she advises clients not to obsess over a fancy logo, taking WeWork's as an example: Its logo consists of its name written in a simple font.

"It's about the actual whole experience, about the image you use, the messaging, the picture, the color, the font," Friedman says from her two-person glass cubicle there. "We have to reiterate a lot of times [that] it's not just about the logo, but the entire brand, experience and feel."

In that sense, she feels right at home at WeWork; she points to her WeWork mug, imprinted with a message that resonates with her: "Do what you love." (In all fairness, Mindspace also has inspiring slogans on its mugs, such as "Peace of mind, peace of space.")

"We feel that because it's kind of like cubicles, we're very productive, but the nice thing about it is that we can go outside, eat lunch on the roof or meet people here," Friedman says. "There are a lot of options to take breaks here that are interesting to us."

THE TEL AVIV-JAFFA Municipality has capitalized on this global trend to cement the country's reputation as the start-up nation. (Incidentally the general manager of WeWork Israel is Benji Singer, brother of Saul Singer – co-author of the book *Start-up Nation* and a former *Jerusalem Post* editor.)

"About four years ago, the municipality looked at the public institutions we have in various places around the city to see if they were still suitable for the needs of the public," says Mira Marcus, the municipality's international press director. According to the municipality, Israel boasts about 4,000 start-ups, about a fourth of which are based in Tel Aviv.

One of its flagship projects is The Library, located on the eighth floor of the Shalom Tower in what used to be a children's library that gradually fell into disuse.

"We feel that libraries are becoming a bit less relevant – people are reading more on their Kindles and iPads. We wanted to preserve the library, but make the space a little more relevant to people of the city," Marcus explains.

The Library accepts applications every six months from entrepreneurs at any stage of development, as long as they have a good idea and a team of at least two people. Qualified applicants rent desks for up to four people for a mere \$75 a month. The space holds up to 38 individuals and provides free Wi-Fi and coffee. The Library used to hold network-

ing and professional enrichment events until a survey revealed that office space was the most desirable feature.

City hall has set up two other communal working spaces: the Atidim Center for Technological Entrepreneurship in Ramat Hahayal, and WMN at Jaffa Port for female entrepreneurs.

BY FAR the most exclusive and well-equipped collaborative workspace – although it is much more than that – is Sosa, named after its location "south of Salame," down the street from the headquarters of business magazine *The Marker* in south Tel Aviv. The facility's run-down exterior contrasts with the industrial-chic four-story campus featuring a large roof overlooking the sea and the Tel Aviv skyline.

Here, "well-equipped" doesn't only refer to its fancy espresso machine, fridge filled with beer and on-premises chef who prepares "brain foods." This innovative model sees itself as a platform for select, curated start-ups that are most likely to survive the start-up ecosystem. As such, its partners consist of multinational corporations (including PayPal, SAP, IBM and Microsoft), venture capital funds, angel investors, financial institutions and attorneys who are constantly on the lookout for the next best innovation; their involvement in Sosa gives them first dibs on some of the best of Israeli hi-tech.

"It's a long-term relationship; it's



Dari Shechter of Mindspace, designed to give companies a place to comfortably bring clients and investors, while holding fast to the central idea of community. (Orit Arfa)

We feel that because it's kind of like cubicles, we're very productive, but the nice thing about it is that we can go outside, eat lunch on the roof or meet people here – Ronit Friedman

you're either missing opportunities, not meeting enough co-investors, or you're missing innovation."

Sosa is on the cusp of expanding globally to extend its network to other cities, with a preference for Israeli innovations. It is proud of its location in south Tel Aviv and sees itself as a catalyst for expanding the hi-tech hub beyond Rothschild Boulevard and fostering the gentrification of that area of the city.

"There's also some kind of magic that comes from the place," Oron says, noting that partnerships and new ideas often develop in the corridors.

IF SOSA is like a prestigious grand temple to the start-up, and the other collaborative spaces demand hefty membership fees, what about those individuals who are struggling just to pay rent in an increasingly expensive city and who may have a simple idea for a start-up, or may be writing a book or starting a new nonprofit? There are low-income options as well.

The municipality-sponsored and -operated Mazeh 9 (named after its street address) is an option for the more destitute workshippers who may not be able to afford that cup of coffee, let alone an office space. The first floor of this quaint, refurbished Bauhaus structure houses a long cafeteria table and cushioned nooks for walk-ins. The second floor offers coworking space for a minimal fee for entrepreneurs with a socially conscious idea. Other floors offer gallery space and classrooms for public use, with fees varying according to the nature of the event.

Misanthrope on Frishman Street is like the "shtiebl" of coworking spaces, although as one can tell from the name, the word "coworking" does not necessarily apply. With simple wooden chairs and tables situated in rows, much like pews, the workshippers could rent a space for just NIS 10 an hour or NIS 80 for the day, including all-you-can-drink coffee and tea (and yes, there's a simple espresso machine), and fruit.

No, you won't get the happy hour, you won't get the interactive bustle, but you will get the chance to contemplate your work and get something done – after all, it's where I wrote this article.



Taking lunch at WeWork. For a break, WeWork-ers can also play ping-pong on the roof. (Courtesy)



Laboring away at WeWork. There are low-income options as well, such as the municipality-sponsored and -operated Mazeh 9. (Courtesy)

not a real-estate business," asserts Roy Oron, Sosa's global CEO, from a leather lounge chair in the spacious, loft-style common area. During the interview, entrepreneurs are pitching their ideas to a group of Asian investors in the glass-encased conference room next to us. This "shark tank" experience is a common occurrence at Sosa.

"Yes, you need the physical space or interaction is limited, but for us it's almost a commodity," says Oron. "We're working beyond that."

Sosa was conceived by pioneers of the venture capital industry. Oron himself

is a business developer with decades of experience in the start-up community both in Israel and abroad, having previously served as vice president of business development for AOL in Israel. He sits on the acceptance committee of leading accelerators in Israel.

"I realize that maybe the most important added value you can give your start-ups is close support in terms of business development, investments, international networks, etc.," he says. "All these innovators constantly need to interact, because if you don't interact with different stakeholders,