Repurposers

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The new generation of innovators seems willing to trade pristine landscapes for the messiness of city life.

Have we reached the point where place doesn’t matter in this age of ubiquitous communication?

//DAG// I’m surprised at the number of technology firms operating in recycled spaces: a new start-up in an old California sweatshop, a research center in a Lower East Side tenement that can’t possibly have a valid occupancy certificate, an Internet firm holding court in the remains of a mechanic’s shop.

“If I were starting a new tech firm, I’d go to Detroit in an instant,” Ben said. When, as a native Detroiter, I questioned his wisdom of starting a high-tech firm in the Motor City, he had an answer ready. “Land is cheap, transportation is good, and the state wants you to succeed. Besides,” he added, “everyone is going to be there, and no one would be brave enough to bother you.”

//EDD// Start-ups don’t enter urban centers to hide but to be inspired. Post-World War II America expanded outward, not upward. The suburbs came first, then, during my childhood, the exurbs. Families chose space and manicured lawns over proximity to neighbors, jobs, and grocers. There were white picket fences around the homes of budding technologists, who were separated from one another by garages. This trend hasn’t stopped—housing crisis notwithstanding, the suburbs aren’t empty—but those looking for creative environments might not find them in the suburbs.

Last month, I visited friends who work in old warehouses in two cities in transition: Berlin, Germany, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Bold art hung beneath the exposed pipes, and recycled tables were the sturdy platforms for the laptops. Undisturbed inside the old structures, developers and project managers were creating, or at least recycling.

There’s something appealing about building upon the old. Maybe when working in an industry that moves from one trend to the next within days, the building that has persevered through a century is motivating. Maybe the wide accessibility of past property—intellectual and physical—spurs a new kind of creation altogether. Or maybe the same generation that mastered the art of the Web video mashup simply prefers the irony.

//DAG// “The centripetal force of today’s cities is pulling the ambitious and educated back in,” writes a blogger for the Harvard Business Review. Such writers often contrast the abstract and virgin spaces of the Internet with the physical mess of their offices and homes. The Internet today holds a generation of standards, protocols, and common software tools that parallel the Detroit landscapes that beg for rebuilding.

The new generation of technological leaders might be building the software of tomorrow, but they’re also consciously recycling the concepts of their parents within neighborhoods constructed by their grandparents. Java is not novel to them, nor is Python or PHP and certainly not TCP/IP. These are the ancient landmarks on their intellectual landscapes: they’re the old buildings that provide a home for a generation of repurposers.

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