At first, the view from the train was bleakly urban. But as we neared the city center, I expected the industrial outskirts to give way to office and apartment buildings, restaurants, and shops, as in other cities. But no! Through the train windows, right in the center of town, I saw factories, cranes, marshalling yards, piles of gravel, and barges.

I shouldn’t have been surprised—Cleveland is a port. To reduce transport costs, refineries, smelters, and factories are sited as close to rivers and harbors as possible. And in Cleveland, this means the center of town. What’s surprising is that so many other cities have shed their heavy industries and reclaimed their river- and lakefronts.

Light industries, including the lightest of all—knowledge-based industries—don’t need to be near harbors. The much-touted death of distance, brought on by the cheapness of telecommunications, means a worker with a modem can be anywhere. Greenwich’s burgeoning hedge-fund industry is based 40 miles from Wall Street, for example, sparing hedge funders a time-consuming commute without disadvantaging their communications.

But is distance really dead? Google, that most 21st-century company, began work earlier this year on a vast data center in Oregon—not in trendy, microbrew-quaffing Portland, but in the modest town of Dalles. At the heart of the center, two buildings the size of football stadiums will house server farms. To cool the servers, the center will draw power from a hydroelectric plant on the nearby Columbia River. Cheap energy brought Google to Dalles.

There’s another sense in which distance remains alive. If you’re a knowledge worker—a computer programmer or an editor, like me—the ability to work anywhere doesn’t mean you’ll set up your broadband wireless computer and work just anywhere. As much as you can, you’ll choose your location. In the 21st century, the best locations might be by rivers and lakes, as they were in the 19th, but this time for recreation rather than transport. You might not set up your laptop in Dalles, Oregon; instead, you might opt for Bend, Oregon, whose pleasant climate and environs have attracted thousands of newcomers in the past decade.

Even theoretical physicists, whose mental abstractions tend to make them indifferent to environment, are succumbing to the pull of place. Twenty-seven years ago, the US National Science Foundation funded a fledging center for theoretical physics at the University of California’s Santa Barbara campus. At the time, UCSB was hardly at the top of the UC, let alone the US, pecking order. But the campus is on the Pacific Ocean, and the institute is as close to the beach as environmental regulations allow.

The institute is thriving. Its director, David Gross, was lured there from Princeton, and in the institute’s 25th anniversary year, he shared the 2004 Nobel physics prize for his work on quark confinement.

Today, the distance that matters isn’t to a harbor, but to a power plant—or the beach.

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