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The Space Hackers are coming!

from The Future We Deserve

In industrial societies, life has been organised into compartments.[1]

Ray Oldenburg identified the three most universal: the home, the workplace and the "third place", the playful, sociable, conversational space of the pub or the coffeehouse.

To these we might add the specialised spaces of industrial-era institutions: the hospital, where we are sent to be ill; the school, where we are sent to be taught; the prison, where we are sent to be punished.

This division of space is the counterpart of the division of labour. Pursued in the name of efficiency, in many cases it has long been counterproductive, as Ivan Illich argued 40 years ago. Hospitals are not generally a good place to get well. Schools encourage us to think of learning as something which takes place through artificial exercises, in isolation from the rest of society, and under duress.

Oldenburg saw that the third place was both the humblest and, in some sense, the most humanly-important of our compartments. We can push this further. What he called the third place is a native reservation of sociability, a surviving enclave of something which, in other times and places, has characterised almost every corner of human society.

For all the wonders industrial production made possible, it also meant unprecedentedly anti-social working conditions for the vast majority of people. Even in the rich countries, where the physical degradation of earlier industrialism is practically extinct, the subjection of working time to the goal of maximum productivity remains. Only the most radical of employers, willing to become fools to the logic of capitalism, can tolerate that which makes work more enjoyable while also less productive. (It will be objected that enjoyment increases productivity, but while this may sometimes be true, it is wishful thinking to claim it as a rule.)

Similar arguments can be made for the antisocial character of our homes, schools or hospitals.

What gives hope is that all of this is in flux, at least in the struggling countries of the post-industrial west. The converging crises of the early 21st century create new possibilities, even as the massive public or private sector developments which have shaped our towns and cities becomes rarer.

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1 This piece was written for Vinay Gupta's crowd-sourced book *The Future We Deserve* (2011). It is also a kind of manifesto for the work which I have done with Space Makers since 2009, and for the many like-minded people and projects I met along the way.

Under their feet, barely noticed, a new kind of spatial agent is emerging: improvisational, bottom-up, working with the materials to hand; perhaps unqualified, or using their training in unexpected ways; responding pragmatically to the constrictions and precarities of post-crisis living. Between the jugaad culture of the Indian village, the temporary structures built by jobless architects, the pop-up shops, the infrastructure-savvy squatters and open source shelter-makers, the Treehouse Galleries and urban barns and Temporary Schools of Thought, just maybe something new is being born.

We could call it the culture of the Space Hacker - because these new players have more in common with the geeks, hippies and drop-out-preneurs who gave us open source and the internet revolution, than with the architects, developers or property industries we have known.

Unlike Silicon Valley, though, these hackers have given up on the goal of getting rich. They are driven instead by the desire to make spaces in which they want to spend time - sociable spaces of living, working and playing - as they, and the rest of us, adjust to the likelihood of getting poorer.