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Hackers need space to innovate

WIRED: The Government should fund a technology collective to generate some fresh thinking, writes **Danny O'Brien**

THE FIRST hacker space I can recall was the L0ft: a Boston loft shared by a hat-making company and a group of grungy security experts and computer underground figures with names like "Mudge" and "Kingpin".

The L0ft lasted from 1992 to 2000: a group of smart minds working on slightly edgy tech plans together in a shared environment: wiring together wireless networks long before anyone was thinking of WiFi, sketching out potential attacks on the internet that got the US Congress worried.

When the L0ft started, it was hard to get hold of the technology you needed to hatch such plans, unless you had the right job. And in 1992, it wasn't easy to get a job unless you were the right sort of person. The L0ft people weren't right in that sense - although their work predicted a great deal of what was to happen in the dotcom boom.

In 2008, you see tattoos and piercings on chief executives and company presidents in Silicon Valley, but the jobs are beginning to edge away again. Just the right time for the return of the idea of a "hacker space", a co-operatively run tech workspace that isn't for business, and not quite for pure fun. That's what's happening at Noisebridge in San Francisco's Mission district.

A rented apartment, the space has been commandeered by a group of hardware and software enthusiasts who are paying \$80 a month each to pool their resources, and kit it out with high-speed internet, strange hardware and stranger friends.

The truth is that hacker spaces have never quite gone away. In Europe, where the movement has closer ties to the squatting collectives of Germany and the Netherlands, hacker spaces have existed for many years.

C-Base in Berlin and ASCII in Amsterdam were founded in the mid-1990s and survived for over a decade; long enough to pass the knowledge back to the US. Inspired by visits to European hacker spaces, New York technologist Bre Pettis founded NYC Resistor in Brooklyn in 2007. A similar crossover contact between European and west coast coders spawned Noisebridge last month.

What do you do in a hacker space? Gossip, compare notes, learn and teach seem to be the key activities: coders sit around and help each other, or wave their hands explaining their latest idea.

In any other field, most projects being conducted in these places would be an art, a craft or a hobby. But hacker space projects tend to float between all of those labels. One person works on wiring San Francisco's public transport notification system into Noisebridge's audio, so late-night hackers can hear when the next train is due. In New York, coders have worked with knitting and textile enthusiasts to see if there's a potential crossover in their two worlds. Tutorials at Noisebridge include lessons in "processing", the computer language used by modern artists to built interactive works, and hacking the Arduino - a hardware platform used by artists and roboticists alike.

None of these ideas are intended to make money. Indeed, hacker spaces are supposed to take some of the pressure away from the money-grabbing pursuits of the wider Silicon Valley world. There's a cheap "starving hacker" rate at Noisebridge for those who don't have much cash; the hardware is mostly donated.

The return of the hacker spaces may be a sign that the brightest minds in America's tech community are preparing for their cyclical hibernation - in a week where Yahoo has shed 10 per cent of its employees, and there are more shutdowns than start-ups, places like Noisebridge and NYC Resistor look like refuges.

Not that anyone here views them in such a negative light. Dozens have signed up to be members of Noisebridge, and the community has enough regular dues to pay its high San Francisco rental costs. Despite being the initiator of so many tech innovations, the city has never had an open hacker space, and the excitement around the arrival of Noisebridge is high.

The European hacker space movement is also experiencing a revival. After losing one of its key Dutch collectives, ASCII, in 2006, dozens are now springing up across the continent.

Which leaves the obvious gap in this transatlantic movement: is there room for an Irish hacker space? With Dublin real estate prices, unless someone fancies an old-fashioned squat, perhaps not. But European hacker spaces haven't turned away indirect government funding in the form of arts grants and a space doesn't have to sit in the most expensive urban environment. Anywhere with a fast internet pipe will do.

If the Government wants to inspire some forward-thinking development work by the next generation of Irish students, it might do well to seed a couple of grungy looking spaces with a sound system and a few LCD screens donated from a Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment spring clean.

It might be the cheapest way to come out of this downturn with a few bright ideas.



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It's the city of division and



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The fungus
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