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HOW TO BE SILICON VALLEY

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(This essay is derived from a keynote at Xtech.)

Could you reproduce Silicon Valley elsewhere, or is there something unique about it?

It wouldn't be surprising if it were hard to reproduce in other countries, because you couldn't reproduce it in most of the US either. What does it take to make a silicon valley even here?

What it takes is the right people. If you could get the right ten thousand people to move from Silicon Valley to Buffalo, Buffalo would become Silicon Valley. [\[1\]](#)

That's a striking departure from the past. Up till a couple decades ago, geography was destiny for cities. All great cities were located on waterways, because cities made money by trade, and water was the only economical way to ship.

Now you could make a great city anywhere, if you could get the right people to move there. So the question of how to make a silicon valley becomes: who are the right people, and how do you get them to move?

Two Types

I think you only need two kinds of people to create a technology hub: rich people and nerds. They're the limiting reagents in the reaction that produces startups, because they're the only ones present when startups get started. Everyone else will move.

Observation bears this out: within the US, towns have become startup hubs if and only if they have both rich people and nerds. Few startups happen in Miami, for example, because although it's full of rich people, it has few nerds. It's not the kind of place nerds like.

Whereas Pittsburgh has the opposite problem: plenty of nerds, but no rich people. The top US Computer Science departments are said to be MIT, Stanford, Berkeley, and Carnegie-Mellon. MIT yielded Route 128. Stanford and Berkeley yielded Silicon Valley. But Carnegie-Mellon? The record skips at that point. Lower down the list, the University of Washington yielded a high-tech community in Seattle, and the University of Texas at Austin yielded one in Austin. But what happened in Pittsburgh? And in Ithaca, home of Cornell, which is also high on the list?

I grew up in Pittsburgh and went to college at Cornell, so I can answer for both. The weather is terrible, particularly in winter,

and there's no interesting old city to make up for it, as there is in Boston. Rich people don't want to live in Pittsburgh or Ithaca. So while there are plenty of hackers who could start startups, there's no one to invest in them.

Not Bureaucrats

Do you really need the rich people? Wouldn't it work to have the government invest in the nerds? No, it would not. Startup investors are a distinct type of rich people. They tend to have a lot of experience themselves in the technology business. This (a) helps them pick the right startups, and (b) means they can supply advice and connections as well as money. And the fact that they have a personal stake in the outcome makes them really pay attention.

Bureaucrats by their nature are the exact opposite sort of people from startup investors. The idea of them making startup investments is comic. It would be like mathematicians running *Vogue*-- or perhaps more accurately, *Vogue* editors running a math journal. [2]

Though indeed, most things bureaucrats do, they do badly. We just don't notice usually, because they only have to compete against other bureaucrats. But as startup investors they'd have to compete against pros with a great deal more experience and motivation.

Even corporations that have in-house VC groups generally forbid them to make their own investment decisions. Most are only allowed to invest in deals where some reputable private VC firm is willing to act as lead investor.

Not Buildings

If you go to see Silicon Valley, what you'll see are buildings. But it's the people that make it Silicon Valley, not the buildings. I read occasionally about attempts to set up "[technology parks](#)" in other places, as if the active ingredient of Silicon Valley were the office space. An article about Sophia Antipolis bragged that companies there included Cisco, Compaq, IBM, NCR, and Nortel. Don't the French realize these aren't startups?

Building office buildings for technology companies won't get you a silicon valley, because the key stage in the life of a startup happens before they want that kind of space. The key stage is when they're three guys operating out of an apartment. Wherever the startup is when it gets funded, it will stay. The defining quality of Silicon Valley is not that Intel or Apple or Google have offices there, but that they were *started* there.

So if you want to reproduce Silicon Valley, what you need to reproduce is those two or three founders sitting around a kitchen table deciding to start a company. And to reproduce that you need those people.

Universities

The exciting thing is, *all* you need are the people. If you could attract a critical mass of nerds and investors to live somewhere, you could reproduce Silicon Valley. And both groups are highly mobile. They'll go where life is good. So what makes a place good to them?

What nerds like is other nerds. Smart people will go wherever other smart people are. And in particular, to great universities. In theory there could be other ways to attract them, but so far universities seem to be indispensable. Within the US, there are no technology hubs without first-rate universities-- or at least, first-rate computer science departments.

So if you want to make a silicon valley, you not only need a university, but one of the top handful in the world. It has to be good enough to act as a magnet, drawing the best people from thousands of miles away. And that means it has to stand up to existing magnets like MIT and Stanford.

This sounds hard. Actually it might be easy. My professor friends, when they're deciding where they'd like to work, consider one thing above all: the quality of the other faculty. What attracts professors is good colleagues. So if you managed to recruit, en masse, a significant number of the best young researchers, you could create a first-rate university from nothing overnight. And you could do that for surprisingly little. If you paid 200 people hiring bonuses of \$3 million apiece, you could put together a faculty that would bear comparison with any in the world. And from that point the chain reaction would be self-sustaining. So whatever it costs to establish a mediocre university, for an additional half billion or so you could have a great one. [3]

Personality

However, merely creating a new university would not be enough to start a silicon valley. The university is just the seed. It has to be planted in the right soil, or it won't germinate. Plant it in the wrong place, and you just create Carnegie-Mellon.

To spawn startups, your university has to be in a town that has attractions other than the university. It has to be a place where investors want to live, and students want to stay after they graduate.

The two like much the same things, because most startup investors are nerds themselves. So what do nerds look for in a town? Their tastes aren't completely different from other people's, because a lot of the towns they like most in the US are also big tourist destinations: San Francisco, Boston, Seattle. But their tastes can't be quite mainstream either, because they dislike other big tourist destinations, like New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas.

There has been a lot written lately about the "creative class." The thesis seems to be that as wealth derives increasingly from ideas, cities will prosper only if they attract those who have them. That

is certainly true; in fact it was the basis of Amsterdam's prosperity 400 years ago.

A lot of nerd tastes they share with the creative class in general. For example, they like well-preserved old neighborhoods instead of cookie-cutter suburbs, and locally-owned shops and restaurants instead of national chains. Like the rest of the creative class, they want to live somewhere with personality.

What exactly is personality? I think it's the feeling that each building is the work of a distinct group of people. A town with personality is one that doesn't feel mass-produced. So if you want to make a startup hub-- or any town to attract the "creative class"-- you probably have to ban large development projects. When a large tract has been developed by a single organization, you can always tell. [4]

Most towns with personality are old, but they don't have to be. Old towns have two advantages: they're denser, because they were laid out before cars, and they're more varied, because they were built one building at a time. You could have both now. Just have building codes that ensure density, and ban large scale developments.

A corollary is that you have to keep out the biggest developer of all: the government. A government that asks "How can we build a silicon valley?" has probably ensured failure by the way they framed the question. You don't build a silicon valley; you let one grow.

Nerds

If you want to attract nerds, you need more than a town with personality. You need a town with the right personality. Nerds are a distinct subset of the creative class, with different tastes from the rest. You can see this most clearly in New York, which attracts a lot of creative people, but few nerds. [5]

What nerds like is the kind of town where people walk around smiling. This excludes LA, where no one walks at all, and also New York, where people walk, but not smiling. When I was in grad school in Boston, a friend came to visit from New York. On the subway back from the airport she asked "Why is everyone smiling?" I looked and they weren't smiling. They just looked like they were compared to the facial expressions she was used to.

If you've lived in New York, you know where these facial expressions come from. It's the kind of place where your mind may be excited, but your body knows it's having a bad time. People don't so much enjoy living there as endure it for the sake of the excitement. And if you like certain kinds of excitement, New York is incomparable. It's a hub of glamour, a magnet for all the shorter half-life isotopes of style and fame.

Nerds don't care about glamour, so to them the appeal of New York is a mystery. People who like New York will pay a fortune for a small, dark, noisy apartment in order to live in a town where

the cool people are really cool. A nerd looks at that deal and sees only: pay a fortune for a small, dark, noisy apartment.

Nerds *will* pay a premium to live in a town where the smart people are really smart, but you don't have to pay as much for that. It's supply and demand: glamour is popular, so you have to pay a lot for it.

Most nerds like quieter pleasures. They like cafes instead of clubs; used bookshops instead of fashionable clothing shops; hiking instead of dancing; sunlight instead of tall buildings. A nerd's idea of paradise is Berkeley or Boulder.

Youth

It's the young nerds who start startups, so it's those specifically the city has to appeal to. The startup hubs in the US are all young-feeling towns. This doesn't mean they have to be new. Cambridge has the oldest town plan in America, but it feels young because it's full of students.

What you can't have, if you want to create a silicon valley, is a large, existing population of stodgy people. It would be a waste of time to try to reverse the fortunes of a declining industrial town like Detroit or Philadelphia by trying to encourage startups. Those places have too much momentum in the wrong direction. You're better off starting with a blank slate in the form of a small town. Or better still, if there's a town young people already flock to, that one.

The Bay Area was a magnet for the young and optimistic for decades before it was associated with technology. It was a place people went in search of something new. And so it became synonymous with California nuttiness. There's still a lot of that there. If you wanted to start a new fad-- a new way to focus one's "energy," for example, or a new category of things not to eat-- the Bay Area would be the place to do it. But a place that tolerates oddness in the search for the new is exactly what you want in a startup hub, because economically that's what startups are. Most good startup ideas seem a little crazy; if they were obviously good ideas, someone would have done them already.

(How many people are going to want computers in their *houses*? What, *another* search engine?)

That's the connection between technology and liberalism. Without exception the high-tech cities in the US are also the most liberal. But it's not because liberals are smarter that this is so. It's because liberal cities tolerate odd ideas, and smart people by definition have odd ideas.

Conversely, a town that gets praised for being "solid" or representing "traditional values" may be a fine place to live, but it's never going to succeed as a startup hub. The 2004 presidential election, though a disaster in other respects, conveniently supplied us with a county-by-county [map](#) of such places. [6]

To attract the young, a town must have an intact center. In most American cities the center has been abandoned, and the growth, if any, is in the suburbs. Most American cities have been turned inside out. But none of the startup hubs has: not San Francisco, or Boston, or Seattle. They all have intact centers. [Z] My guess is that no city with a dead center could be turned into a startup hub. Young people don't want to live in the suburbs.

Within the US, the two cities I think could most easily be turned into new silicon valleys are Boulder and Portland. Both have the kind of effervescent feel that attracts the young. They're each only a great university short of becoming a silicon valley, if they wanted to.

Time

A great university near an attractive town. Is that all it takes? That was all it took to make the original Silicon Valley. Silicon Valley traces its origins to William Shockley, one of the inventors of the transistor. He did the research that won him the Nobel Prize at Bell Labs, but when he started his own company in 1956 he moved to Palo Alto to do it. At the time that was an odd thing to do. Why did he? Because he had grown up there and remembered how nice it was. Now Palo Alto is suburbia, but then it was a charming college town-- a charming college town with perfect weather and San Francisco only an hour away.

The companies that rule Silicon Valley now are all descended in various ways from Shockley Semiconductor. Shockley was a difficult man, and in 1957 his top people-- "the traitorous eight"-- left to start a new company, Fairchild Semiconductor. Among them were Gordon Moore and Robert Noyce, who went on to found Intel, and Eugene Kleiner, who founded the VC firm Kleiner Perkins. Forty-two years later, Kleiner Perkins funded Google, and the partner responsible for the deal was John Doerr, who came to Silicon Valley in 1974 to work for Intel.

So although a lot of the newest companies in Silicon Valley don't make anything out of silicon, there always seem to be multiple links back to Shockley. There's a lesson here: startups beget startups. People who work for startups start their own. People who get rich from startups fund new ones. I suspect this kind of organic growth is the only way to produce a startup hub, because it's the only way to grow the expertise you need.

That has two important implications. The first is that you need time to grow a silicon valley. The university you could create in a couple years, but the startup community around it has to grow organically. The cycle time is limited by the time it takes a company to succeed, which probably averages about five years.

The other implication of the organic growth hypothesis is that you can't be somewhat of a startup hub. You either have a self-sustaining chain reaction, or not. Observation confirms this too: cities either have a startup scene, or they don't. There is no middle ground. Chicago has the third largest metropolitan area in

America. As source of startups it's negligible compared to Seattle, number 15.

The good news is that the initial seed can be quite small. Shockley Semiconductor, though itself not very successful, was big enough. It brought a critical mass of experts in an important new technology together in a place they liked enough to stay.

Competing

Of course, a would-be silicon valley faces an obstacle the original one didn't: it has to compete with Silicon Valley. Can that be done? Probably.

One of Silicon Valley's biggest advantages is its venture capital firms. This was not a factor in Shockley's day, because VC funds didn't exist. In fact, Shockley Semiconductor and Fairchild Semiconductor were not startups at all in our sense. They were subsidiaries-- of Beckman Instruments and Fairchild Camera and Instrument respectively. Those companies were apparently willing to establish subsidiaries wherever the experts wanted to live.

Venture investors, however, prefer to fund startups within an hour's drive. For one, they're more likely to notice startups nearby. But when they do notice startups in other towns they prefer them to move. They don't want to have to travel to attend board meetings, and in any case the odds of succeeding are higher in a startup hub.

The centralizing effect of venture firms is a double one: they cause startups to form around them, and those draw in more startups through acquisitions. And although the first may be weakening because it's now so cheap to start some startups, the second seems as strong as ever. Three of the most admired "Web 2.0" companies were started outside the usual startup hubs, but two of them have already been reeled in through acquisitions.

Such centralizing forces make it harder for new silicon valleys to get started. But by no means impossible. Ultimately power rests with the founders. A startup with the best people will beat one with funding from famous VCs, and a startup that was sufficiently successful would never have to move. So a town that could exert enough pull over the right people could resist and perhaps even surpass Silicon Valley.

For all its power, Silicon Valley has a great weakness: the paradise Shockley found in 1956 is now one giant parking lot. San Francisco and Berkeley are great, but they're forty miles away. Silicon Valley proper is soul-crushing suburban [sprawl](#). It has fabulous weather, which makes it significantly better than the soul-crushing sprawl of most other American cities. But a competitor that managed to avoid sprawl would have real leverage. All a city needs is to be the kind of place the next traitorous eight look at and say "I want to stay here," and that would be enough to get the chain reaction started.

Notes

[1] It's interesting to consider how low this number could be made. I suspect five hundred would be enough, even if they could bring no assets with them. Probably just thirty, if I could pick them, would be enough to turn Buffalo into a significant startup hub.

[2] Bureaucrats manage to allocate research funding moderately well, but only because (like an in-house VC fund) they outsource most of the work of selection. A professor at a famous university who is highly regarded by his peers will get funding, pretty much regardless of the proposal. That wouldn't work for startups, whose founders aren't sponsored by organizations, and are often unknowns.

[3] You'd have to do it all at once, or at least a whole department at a time, because people would be more likely to come if they knew their friends were. And you should probably start from scratch, rather than trying to upgrade an existing university, or much energy would be lost in friction.

[4] Hypothesis: Any plan in which multiple independent buildings are gutted or demolished to be "redeveloped" as a single project is a net loss of personality for the city, with the exception of the conversion of buildings not previously public, like warehouses.

[5] A few startups get started in New York, but less than a tenth as many per capita as in Boston, and mostly in less nerdy fields like finance and media.

[6] Some blue counties are false positives (reflecting the remaining power of Democratic party machines), but there are no false negatives. You can safely write off all the red counties.

[7] Some "urban renewal" experts took a shot at destroying Boston's in the 1960s, leaving the area around city hall a bleak [wasteland](#), but most neighborhoods successfully resisted them.

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(The second part of this talk became [Why Startups Condense in America](#).)

■ [VC Deals by Region](#)

■ [They Would Be Gods](#)

■ [Santa Clara Valley, 1971](#)

■

■ [Startup Jobs by Region](#)

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