

Home
Essays
H&P
Books
YC
Arc
Bel
Lisp
Spam
Responses
FAQs
RAQs
Quotes
RSS
Bio
Twitter

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WHAT KATE SAW IN SILICON VALLEY

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Kate Courteau is the architect who designed Y Combinator's office. Recently we managed to recruit her to help us run YC when she's not busy with architectural projects. Though she'd heard a lot about YC since the beginning, the last 9 months have been a total immersion.

I've been around the startup world for so long that it seems normal to me, so I was curious to hear what had surprised her most about it. This was her list:

1. How many startups fail.

Kate knew in principle that startups were very risky, but she was surprised to see how constant the threat of failure was — not just for the minnows, but even for the famous startups whose founders came to speak at YC dinners.

2. How much startups' ideas change.

As usual, by Demo Day about half the startups were doing something significantly different than they started with. We encourage that. Starting a startup is like science in that you have to follow the truth wherever it leads. In the rest of the world, people don't start things till they're sure what they want to do, and once started they tend to continue on their initial path even if it's mistaken.

3. How little money it can take to start a startup.

In Kate's world, everything is still physical and expensive. You can barely renovate a bathroom for the cost of starting a startup.

4. How scrappy founders are.

That was her actual word. I agree with her, but till she mentioned this it never occurred to me how little this quality is appreciated in most of the rest of the world. It wouldn't be a compliment in most organizations to call someone scrappy.

What does it mean, exactly? It's basically the diminutive form of belligerent. Someone who's scrappy manages to be both threatening and undignified at the same time. Which seems to me exactly what one would want to be, in any kind of work. If you're not threatening, you're probably not doing anything new, and dignity is merely a sort of plaque.

5. How tech-saturated Silicon Valley is.

"It seems like everybody here is in the industry." That isn't literally true, but there is a qualitative difference between Silicon Valley and other places. You tend to keep your voice down, because there's a good chance the person at the next table would know some of the people you're talking about. I never felt that in Boston. The good news is, there's also a good chance the person at the next table could help you in some way.

6. That the speakers at YC were so consistent in their advice.

Actually, I've noticed this too. I always worry the speakers will put us in an embarrassing position by contradicting what we tell the startups, but it happens surprisingly rarely.

When I asked her what specific things she remembered speakers always saying, she mentioned: that the way to succeed was to launch something fast, listen to users, and then iterate; that startups required resilience because they were always an emotional rollercoaster; and that most VCs were sheep.

I've been impressed by how consistently the speakers advocate launching fast and iterating. That was contrarian advice 10 years ago, but it's clearly now the established practice.

7. How casual successful startup founders are.

Most of the famous founders in Silicon Valley are people you'd overlook on the street. It's not merely that they don't dress up. They don't project any kind of aura of power either. "They're not trying to impress anyone."

Interestingly, while Kate said that she could never pick out successful founders, she could recognize VCs, both by the way they dressed and the way they carried themselves.

8. How important it is for founders to have people to ask for advice.

(I swear I didn't prompt this one.) Without advice "they'd just be sort of lost." Fortunately, there are a lot of people to help them. There's a strong tradition within YC of helping other YC-funded startups. But we didn't invent that idea: it's just a slightly more concentrated form of existing Valley culture.

9. What a solitary task startups are.

Architects are constantly interacting face to face with other people, whereas doing a technology startup, at least, tends to require long stretches of uninterrupted time to work. "You could do it in a box."

By inverting this list, we can get a portrait of the "normal" world.

It's populated by people who talk a lot with one another as they work slowly but harmoniously on conservative, expensive projects whose destinations are decided in advance, and who carefully adjust their manner to reflect their position in the hierarchy.

That's also a fairly accurate description of the past. So startup culture may not merely be different in the way you'd expect any subculture to be, but a leading indicator.

■ [Japanese Translation](#)
