

Maker Spaces and Co-Working

LAI Baltimore Chapter – February, 2016 meeting

On February 15th, Ilana Preuss and Amy Bonitz visited with the Baltimore Chapter of LAI to present an overview of the nascent, but quickly growing trend, towards Co-Working and Maker Spaces.

The venue for the discussion was, appropriately, the recently developed Co-Worker/Maker Space at 1400 Greenmount Avenue known as Open Works. Open Works is a collaborative work space facility designed to aid start-up entrepreneurs, artists and small scale manufacturers through a combination of affordable rents, shared facilities & equipment, and supportive services including education/training.

Ilana Preuss began with a presentation on her efforts to engender small-scale manufacturing through her company, Recast City (www.recastcity.com). Ilana works to foster smart growth within community redevelopment efforts. She opines that small scale manufacturers are largely overlooked by “the world of commercial real estate development”, and that the “maker movement” can be a key component to create the kind of smart, mixed use redevelopment that makes for healthy urban environments. In her work with various city and civic leaders, she is seeing a “rise of small, quiet, clean manufacturing businesses”, such as breweries, card makers, soap makers and textile and electronics manufacturers, to name a few. Her contention is that “Production in the city is key to having a strong local economy with strong neighborhoods”.

Trends that support small-scale manufacturing include, (i) a general trend towards self-employment, (ii) the ACA legislation (“Obamacare”) that has decoupled health care from employment to the benefit of small entrepreneurs, (iii) the “makers movement” is picking up momentum with more & more people looking for “cool stuff” instead of the mundane Pottery Barn type, mass marketed products, and (iv) more mediums for small-scale marketing have been made available by the internet, such as Etsy, Maker’s Row, and Custom Made websites.

Ilana observed that many small-scale manufacturers tend to cluster in small markets/downtowns and in neighborhood centers. The reasons for this, she opines are:

- Inclusive atmosphere of smaller towns/cities
- Aesthetic beauty of more rural, non-urban environments
- People-spaces (i.e. gathering spaces) are prevalent in smaller towns & village atmospheres and in neighborhood centers

Amy Bonitz of Baltimore Arts Realty Corporation (“Barco”) spoke next. Barco is a non-profit whose mission is to provide safe, affordable spaces for creative types, such as artists, designers, performers, and arts organizations. With Hopkins, MICA and Univ. of Baltimore as “anchor institutions” supporting Barco, the organization strives to develop spaces that “serve local community residents as well as a higher educated population”. The Open Works facility is one of Barco’s developments and is representative of the type of physical platform which helps encourage and support the “creative class”. Open Works contains approx. 34,000 Sf and was formerly a Railroad building built in 1930. The building has been completely transformed by Barco into a “maker space”, which:

- Houses small-scale wood, metal and textile manufacturers, 3D printing, and an energy efficient wood stove manufacture, among others
- Rents space in 50 SF increments on a month-to-month basis for \$175
- Provides educational offerings to both adults and children
- Supports the “Made in Baltimore” program

The space looks very professional, well designed and inviting (and was a great space for an LAI meeting!). Barco utilized creative financing to get Open Works developed, including New Markets Tax Credits, Foundation contributions, and Crowdsource funding.

Amy also touched upon the Station North Arts & Entertainment District as an example of a part of the City that has been positively impacted by the trend towards Maker Spaces. Small-scale entrepreneurs such as Baltimore Print Studio and the Station North Tool Library are bringing millennials into the formerly depressed area, helping to build a sustainable local economy there. This coupled with other re-developments like the Centre Theater are supporting the existing residents and adding to the local community by attracting the “creative class”.

After listening to Ilana and Amy’s presentations, our local LAI Chapter, and especially this writer, learned much about the trends towards small-scale manufacturing and Maker Spaces, and their impact on improving neighborhoods in urban and more rural environments. The Baltimore Chapter of LAI is most grateful for the education about a trend that has been transforming City neighborhoods under our collective noses.