

Fall 2012

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EDMONTON COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

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The Citadel
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Creative Collisions

Startup Edmonton turns a downtown icon
into a high-tech hub

By Curtis Gillespie

Cam Linke and Ken Bautista
atop the Mercer Warehouse

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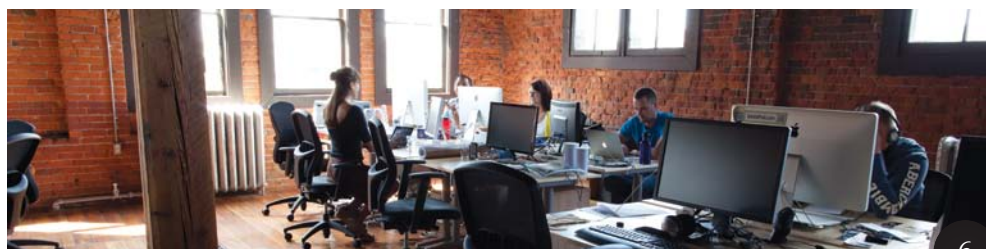
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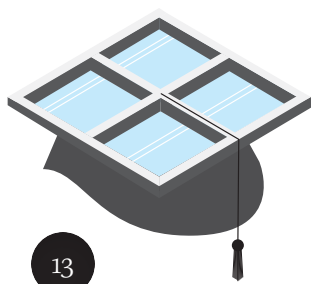
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Cam Linke and Ken Bautista were photographed atop the Mercer Warehouse by Terri Belley.

HIGH POWER

Startup Edmonton
turns a downtown icon
into a high-tech hub
By Curtis Gillespie



To enter the Startup Edmonton offices, on the third floor of the newly renovated Mercer Warehouse at the corner of 104th Street and 104th Avenue, is to be instantly transported to Soho in New York City or the Mission District in San Francisco, places where the reality and the fantasy of entrepreneurial activity collide. Funky retro downtown building? Check. Large airy office spaces? Check. Brick walls and open beam ceilings? Check. Plenty of hip, attractive, young people sitting at desks looking somehow both purposeful and idle at the same time? Double check.

The young entrepreneurs who created Startup Edmonton, Ken Bautista and Cam Linke, could pinch themselves when they stop and look at it, or at least they might if they ever stopped. Both men are high-energy, high-ambition Edmontonians with one overarching aspiration.

"Startup is about staying home," says the enthusiastic Bautista, 35. "We want to help create an entrepreneurial culture that allows people to say, 'Hey, I don't have to go somewhere else to make it.' We want to be part of the growth of a real entrepreneurial culture."

Linke — taller, younger, lankier, more laid-back — concurs. "Entrepreneurs shouldn't need to have to leave Edmonton to grow, to make the most of their idea. They used to feel that way, but now they don't have to. It's an exciting time to be here."

Linke and Bautista formally launched Startup in 2011 to fill what they saw as a clear gap in the city's entrepreneurial scope. There was not, and never has been, a shortage of ideas flowing out of Edmonton ("You can see Edmonton's DNA in businesses all over the world," says Bautista) and there were many mature companies operating at a high standard in our community. But what was missing was the connective tissue, the tangible encouragement that allows fledgling companies to make the leap out of the bird's nest of creative brainstorming and into the jungle of full-on business operations. In short, there was not enough mentoring and support.

"Entrepreneurs need investment and support at every stage of their development," Linke says.

Of course, Startup itself didn't arrive fully formed, or, more importantly, fully funded. They needed that early support themselves, and a substantial component of that support arrived in the form of the Social Enterprise Fund (SEF), which offered Startup a loan to help them, well, get started. They used the money to renovate their hip office space from a dilapidated century-old shell to the funky spot it is today, to furnish it and to consolidate their brand.

Jane Bisbee, executive director of SEF, isn't surprised to see Startup having early success. In fact, she banked on it. Literally.

"As a matter of fact," laughs Bisbee over coffee at the

Italian Centre, "I probably asked them tougher due-diligence questions than a bank loan officer might have."

Though incubated largely by the Edmonton Community Foundation (in partnership with the City of Edmonton), SEF is a stand-alone operation that exists to offer loans to organizations that would otherwise have difficulty raising capital from standard sources, such as banks. The loan is often used to help build a new facility, cover start-up costs, or offer business development support. Many organizations in the Edmonton area have benefited from SEF delivering on their mandate (such as, among others, CKUA, the Metis Capital Housing Corporation and ArtsHab), the core of which is that the organization in question must be doing something expressly designed to help create a better community.

Bisbee herself views social enterprise funding in general as a rapidly growing phenomenon that might be best described as "business with a mission."

And what is that mission?

"There aren't really any set rules or set definitions at this point. Not with us, and not really at the broader level, either. There's quite a bit of work going on right now across the country in which people are working to try and measure Social Return on Investment. There are conferences taking place, research being done. It's still very much in flux. But for us, for the SEF, it's pretty simple. We look at something and if we all have the same response — 'Hey, that's a good idea!' — then we'll probably help out if we can."

There wasn't much doubt at SEF that Startup was a good idea. Bautista and Linke opened their doors in the fall of 2011 and their immediate success demonstrated that a significant gap existed. Thousands of people have already taken advantage of their services, from their various membership levels (which offer desks, offices and mentorship) to their Demo Camps to the Hack-a-thon (wherein developers and designers share ideas and build apps in sprints) to the "Activate Your Startup" student program they ran at the University of Alberta in the spring of 2012.

It's off to a great start, but Bisbee recognizes the inherent irony that what Startup needed from SEF was essentially the same thing they envisioned as the core ➤



of their business: giving entrepreneurs the tools to go to the next level.

"We look at the business plan, revenue projections, customer analysis, the quality of the management team — all the things any potential funder would examine," she says. "The only difference between us and a bank is who our clients are."

An added advantage to offering financial support to Startup, though, was that not only was it engaged in essentially the same on-the-ground work as SEF, but that it resonated with the broader philosophical message of SEF and ECF. "We saw that what they were doing could be great not just for entrepreneurs, but for social entrepreneurs. They're helping build community."



coming out of places like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology over the last few decades were the direct result of disorganized work spaces in which people from radically different disciplines were forced to cross paths. This creative chaos model was so seductive (and productive) that Steve Jobs explicitly modelled his Apple campus on it.

If all this is news to Bautista and Linke in theory, it's not in practice. To them, it's obvious because they see the fruits of it every day. They are working hard to help foster something new in Edmonton, a culture in which great ideas are turned into great businesses here at home. The added benefit is that it builds community, builds capacity and builds reputations, all of which will contribute to one of Startup's great dreams.

"What we really want to see," says Bautista, "is for Edmonton to have multi-generational entrepreneurs, so that we have first, second and third-generation entrepreneurs working and being successful here in Edmonton. That way, new entrepreneurs will have role models and people to go to for advice, mentorship, possibly even investment."

Startup Edmonton is woven into the strands of numerous trends converging at the same intersection in the Capital — a growing warehouse culture, a burgeoning and youth-driven high-tech industry and a social enterprise network that is taking an assertive and businesslike approach to community building. Startup and the Social Enterprise Fund are part of the same movement at heart, a movement that is deeply complex and yet quite simple at the same time. It's about creating a new Edmonton based on the foundation of the old Edmonton. Our city is a frontier town of hard-working blue-collar people famous for their sense of participation and volunteerism, but that spirit is precisely what's animating the new drive towards modernity and urban density.

"It's not that complicated," says Linke. "We're just working hard at trying to become what it is we want to see around us." 🌀

If you are starting up a business venture with a community-building purpose, and would like to be considered for funding, contact the Social Enterprise Fund by calling 780-756-0660.

The Mercer Warehouse and its idiosyncrasies were also a key component of the Startup plan. The Mercer is the kind of building we used to tear down in our rush to the future.

Now that we're here, it's easy to see our folly and shake our heads at our past selves.

I first meet Linke and Bautista at Roast Coffeehouse + Wine Bar on the ground floor, which sits beside the Mercer Tavern.

"We loved the building right from the start," Bautista tells me. "We had to scrape decades of gunky old paint off the walls to find the brick underneath, but eventually we did."

More important than its bricks and mortar, however, is the philosophy and attitude they're using to influence the tone of the building. It's an open, casual environment where a code writer might run into a fabric designer, where a web designer might share coffee with a publisher. "There's a vision around warehouse culture right now," says Bautista. "You need some density, some random collisions. That's starting to happen in downtown Edmonton and the Mercer's a great example of it."

The random collision theory is gaining traction. In a *New Yorker* article published in January 2012, the power of brainstorming was discussed relative to its formal or informal manifestations. Formal brainstorming, the article concluded, was considerably less fertile than the "random collisions" Bautista talks about. In fact, many of the groundbreaking theories and ideas