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Genius

Twenty-six places in America that are inventing the future

By Michael Schrage | Nov 1, 1999

Welcome to the next American century. The landscape of innovation has never been more dynamic, diverse, or digital. Human capital has trumped financial capital as the essential resource driving change. So the places mapped here aren't only about ideas; they're about the reality that applying and spreading innovations is as important as the innovations themselves. In short, these labs, agencies, and institutions are shaping the rest of your life. They aren't the only ones, of course. We've limited them mostly to centers of science, technology, and design. We've been arbitrary and opinionated. The good news is that all these places are creating breathtaking change. The better news: This is just a start.

A. Department of Molecular Biotechnology. U. of Washington SEATTLE

Lee Hood's group designs the "machine tools" for tomorrow's genomic engineering Bill Gates helped recruit the team. Think he knows something? (www.mbt.washington.edu)

B. Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers MENLO PARK, CA

The world's top venture-capital company (Sun, Genentech, America Online, Netscape, Amazon.com). It's failed bets tend to be as interesting to study as its successes. (www.kpcb.com)

C. Departments of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Stanford PALO ALTO, CA

Heck with M.B.A.'S. Follow the swarms of undergrad engineering students, who'll be turning those outlandish business plans into the next generation of digital products and services. They'll do the real work. (www.stanford.edu)


D. IDEO PALO ALTO, CA

Nation's most influential industrial-design firm. (www.ideo.com)

E. Xerox PARC PALO ALTO, CA

Snottier digerati mock Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center as a "national resource" rather than a cutting-edge R&D facility. But the lab that shaped computing for two decades remains world-class in research areas from social learning to interface design to nanotechnology. (www.parc.xerox.com)

F. Pixar POINT RICHMOND, CA

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Toy Story 2? Who cares? Pixar inspires the world's best computer-graphics design.
(www.pixar.com)

G. Disney Imagineers
GLENDALE, CA

Current generation--from super-computer designers to computer-graphics wizards to mathematicians--guarantees the Mouse will lead in the technologies of pop culture.
(www.imagineering.com)

H. CalTech
PASADENA, CA

Though not traditionally a hotbed of entrepreneurship, CalTech is becoming Stanfordlike in its efforts to innovate, especially in biotech. Still one of the few schools where undergrads are typically smarter than grad students. (www.caltech.edu)

I. Gehry and Associates
SANTA MONICA, CA

Benchmark for integrating aesthetics driven architecture and computer-aided engineering, Bilbao everywhere? (www.foga.com)

J. Center for Evolutionary Psychology
U.C SANTA BARBARA

Mistah Freud--he dead. Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, and a powerful coterie of evo-psychs are kicking the neurons out of classical and cognitive psychology in favor of more Darwinian explanations for why people behave--and misbehave--as they do. (www.cep.ucsb.edu/)

K. Santa Fe Institute
SANTA FE

Blending physicists and economists with biologists and financiers, this center tries to figure out the hard math of complex systems, from the biosphere to the stock market.
(www.santafe.edu)

L. National Center for Atmospheric Research
BOULDER, CO

Warmer or cooler? To the extent climate trends can be identified--or even modified--NCAR will influence billions of dollars of investments. Weather is the Next Big Thing in the global marketplace. (www.ncar.ucar.edu)

M. Rocky Mountain Institute
SNOWMASS, CO

A pioneer in efforts to make energy markets more innovative, Amory Lovins's institute creates provocative concepts, from "negawatts" to hypercars, that energize even the stodgiest enterprises. (www.rmi.org)

N. Center for Twin and Adoption Research
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA, MINNEAPOLIS

Sometimes controversial, but twins are the best medium in which to explore the role of heredity versus environment in everything from aggressiveness to medical treatment to marketing.

O. Washington University/ Monsanto
ST. LOUIS

From tomorrow's genetically modified "frankenfoods" to seed design to PET-scan innovations, this academic/industrial complex constantly generates ideas that translate into markets. (www.wustl.edu or www.monsanto.com)

P. National Center for Super-computing Applications
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Supercomputers are the DEW line of digital exploration. What they do with high-bandwidth simulation now, desktops and the Net will be doing within a decade.
(www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/ncsa.html)

Q. Carnegie Mellon
PITTSBURGH

An unusual hybrid of hard science and technology and the performing arts, CMU is a petri dish of digital culture in which artists, techies, and even business types creatively crossbreed. (www.cmu.edu)

R. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency
ARLINGTON, VA

The Pentagon's premier venture capitalist and prototyper birthed the Internet and most of the best research in computer graphics, artificial intelligence, and new materials venture capitalists always watch what DARPA funds. (www.darpa.mil)

S. Entomology Labs
GAINESVILLE, FL

Hate insects? Fear that global warming will bring plagues of fire ants and Asian long-horned beetles? This USDA lab will lead the bio-war against bugs and manage the ecological tensions between insect friendlies and insect foes. (cmave.usda.ufl.edu)

T. Immigration and Naturalization Service
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Roughly half of U.S. graduate students in the sciences and engineering are foreign-born. The flow of human capital matters even more to innovation than the flow of financial capital. (www.ins.usdoj.gov)

U. Johns Hopkins
BALTIMORE

Still pioneers protocols for medical care and now also cutting edge in brain chemistry and gene therapy. Knows how to package innovations for the marketplace. (www.jhu.edu)

V. Financial Engineering program. NYU Stern School of Business
NEW YORK

What genetic engineers promise to do the human genome, financial engineers are doing to capital and credit markets. Exotic new financial instruments mastered here will affect both institutional and individual investors. (www.stern.nyu.edu)

W. Watson Labs
YORKTOWN HEIGHTS, NY

Heart of IBM's huge initiative to set digital standards in everything from memory technologies to silicon to wearable computing. (www.watson.ibm.com)

X. Center for International Development
HARVARD CAMBRIDGE, MA

Finance ministers of the Third World--America's growth market--turn to Jeffrey Sachs et al. for policies and tools to accelerate economic development and improve standards of living (www.acid.harvard.edu)

Y. Whitehead Institute
CAMBRIDGE, MA

Interdisciplinary approach to genomic research--bringing advanced math techniques to gene mapping and creating the first genetically engineered human cancer cell--has made it a mecca of medical genetics. (www.wi.mit.edu)

Z. MIT Media Lab, Computer Science Lab, Artificial Intelligence Lab
CAMBRIDGE, MA

This fractious trinity of digital innovators has carved out specialties--distributed cognition, things that think, encryption, software agents, and smarter networks--that make it a treasure trove for Silicon Valley headhunters. (web.mit.edu)

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