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The Elements of a Creative Environment: Was the Roycroft Campus of 1900 - 1915 a Hothouse?

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The Hothouse Effect premise

Ancient Athens, Renaissance-era Florence, and Germany's Bauhaus community that practiced between the two World Wars are all examples of what Barton Kunstler refers to as a hothouse. He defines a hothouse as an area where creativity flourishes wildly and magnificently, producing results that neither nature nor the usual round of human activity could ever anticipate.¹ Out of each of Kunstler's hothouse communities came extraordinary achievements and he theorizes that a hothouse is created out of a relatively rare confluence of forces – 36 factors within four dimensions, to be exact. The creative environment of Elbert Hubbard's Roycroft Campus at the beginning of the twentieth century satisfies criteria of a hothouse.

Elbert Hubbard and the Roycroft Movement

Elbert Hubbard, the charismatic, though oft controversial founder of the Roycroft Movement began his career as a salesman for the Buffalo-based Larkin Soap Company and worked his way up to the ranks of wealthy executive. Seeking an outlet for his creativity, Hubbard left Larkin at age 36 to become a writer. A trip to England in 1894 would prove to be pivotal for Hubbard: on that trip he visited William Morris' Kelmscott press and was inspired by the work produced there and the Arts & Crafts philosophy. What began in 1895 as a means of self-publication, the Roycroft Press would, within a mere twenty years, evolve into a community of 500 plus artisans, craftsmen, and other workers. The Arts & Crafts Movement was a response to the damaging effects of industrialism on society and artistic production in nineteenth century England. It favored a return to the values of the Middle Ages when hand-craft, the camaraderie of the guilds, and deep commitment to work made for a purer and simpler way of life.² The Roycroft Community, at its peak was comprised of printers, book binders, graphic artists, leather workers, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, carpenters, writers, artists, and hotel and office staff. It flourished in a congenial atmosphere held together by Elbert Hubbard's energetic leadership.

Category #1 Values / Mission

Kunstler begins with the fundamentals of an organization – its value system which serves to inform, motivate, and inspire the workers and shape the

¹ Barton Kunstler, *The Hothouse Effect: Intensify Creativity in Your Organization Using Secrets from History's Most Innovative Communities*. (New York, NY: American Management Association, 2004), 6.

² Marie Via, and Marjorie B. Searl, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1994), 1.

objectives that the organization will pursue and also, how it will pursue them. The author refers to these value-shaped objectives as the group's mission.³

Factor One analyzes the values themselves. Examples of values common to hothouse environments are: creativity, openness to ideas, integrity, and mutual respect among all members, honesty, dedication, and tolerance.⁴ In order to achieve the hothouse effect, virtually all members of the organization must commit to the values. Work of the group members and their leadership reflects and reinforces these values.

Before companies prominently posted their mission statements, Elbert Hubbard carved his into the doors and hung them from the exposed beams of his inn's dining room. The motto most synonymous with the Roycroft is "Head, Heart & Hand." Hubbard longed to develop a community of artists who worked with the 'heads, hearts, and hands,' as opposed to the gears and machinery of the day. Felix Shay, former Roycrofter, friend and biographer of Elbert Hubbard, quoted Hubbard on his impetus:

"In one obscure country village I have had something to do with stopping the mad desire on the part of the young people to get out of the country and flock to the cities... We have made one country village an attractive place for growing youth by supplying congenial employment, opportunity for education and helpful recreation, and an outlook into the world of art and beauty."

Factors Three and Six, vital impact and cosmic nature respectively, speak to the self-perception of the work being done in the hothouse organization. Kunstler theorizes that the workers have a sincere belief that they will, in some way, change the world.⁵

Felix Shay discussed the comparatively low wages paid to Roycroft workers; instead Hubbard paid a large outlay in happiness, contentment and opportunity. One need only look at those East Aurora buildings [those of the Roycroft campus] and learn something of their history to understand that it was almost a religious quality, and ecstasy, that went into the day's work.⁶ Many more examples exist of references to religion made when speaking of Hubbard and the

³ Kunstler, *The Hothouse Effect: Intensify Creativity in Your Organization Using Secrets from History's Most Innovative Communities*, 18.

⁴ Kunstler, *The Hothouse Effect: Intensify Creativity in Your Organization Using Secrets from History's Most Innovative Communities*, 21.

⁵ Kunstler, *The Hothouse Effect: Intensify Creativity in Your Organization Using Secrets from History's Most Innovative Communities*, 24.

⁶ Felix Shay, *Elbert Hubbard of East Aurora* (New York, NY: Wm. H. Wise & Co., 1926), 74.

Roycroft. Hubbard was nicknamed Fra Elbertus and liked to think of himself in the role of the ‘pastor of his flock.’⁷ The building housing the original printing press was constructed in the manner of an English country church (now incorporated into the Inn). Where Hubbard hung works of art, housed the library, and held informal talks with his workers was referred to as the Chapel. At a gathering called the Annual Convention of Immortals (a meeting of the Society of the Philistines – followers of Hubbard and his ideals), it was stated that ‘three hundred *pilgrims* were present.’⁸ The wording of an advertisement seeking an employee for its circulation department also suggests a lofty self-image: ‘Instead of a mere hundred thousand subscribers there is no reason why we should not have a million,’ ‘Its tone of affirmation is the dominant note of the times,’ ‘So we want a Man, or a Woman, one with the Salesman’s Itch, who is big enough to fade into the cause and abandon himself to it.’⁹

Category #2 Ideas / Exchange

Kunstler’s second category of hothouse dimensions explores how ideas and information pass from one person to another. The exchange of ideas in the hothouse community goes above and beyond the efficient and cost-effective networks established in most organizations, and instead seeks to expand and enrich the operations of its members’ minds and creative instincts.¹⁰ Notable historic hothouses have been highly sensitive to how ideas and information circulate throughout the community both in direction and tone.

Factor Ten concerns the notion of intellectual exchange. Kunstler believes that the most creative workplaces benefit from the broadest set of skills, knowledge, interests, and passions that its employees possess. Encouraging intellectual exchange sends the message that the entire range of knowledge and ideas can be applied to workplace challenges, thus enriching both the individual and organizational stores of creativity.¹¹

All-year round the Roycrofters (as the workers called themselves) operated a “Lyceum” which was to be an open sharing of ideas and talents–

⁷ Shay, *Elbert Hubbard of East Aurora*, 213.

⁸ H. Kenneth Dirlam and Ernest E. Simmons. *Sinners: This is East Aurora: The Story of Elbert Hubbard and The Roycroft Shops* (New York, NY: Vantage Press, 1964), 154.

⁹ Charles F. Hamilton, *Alice Hubbard: A Feminist Recalled* (East Aurora, NY: G. M. Hamilton & Sons, 1991), 8.

¹⁰ Kunstler, *The Hothouse Effect: Intensify Creativity in Your Organization Using Secrets from History’s Most Innovative Communities*, 61.

¹¹ Kunstler, *The Hothouse Effect: Intensify Creativity in Your Organization Using Secrets from History’s Most Innovative Communities*, 68.

original poems, essays, and stories were read, original compositions played, debates conducted. In the summer Elbert Hubbard elevated the stage of the orators: he chose a team of three boys to debate against speakers of nation renown, with three more notable debaters selected as judges. Who won and lost wasn't important – what was important was that from time to time the “boys” were given a glorious opportunity to match their minds against the ablest in America in free-for-all debate.¹² The Roycroft also maintained a tradition of artists teaching their area of expertise to other artisans and workers from other departments. Jerome Connors, an Irish sculptor and one of the more famous names to emerge from the Roycroft, was known to conduct classes in clay modeling.¹³ Elbert Hubbard would commonly share his expertise with his community as well. Gathering them all in the chapel on Sunday nights when he was on a break from his active lecture touring, he would “tell them of the cities he visited, the people he met, the sights he saw or maybe try out a new road lecture on them.”¹⁴

Related to intellectual exchange are factors Eleven and Twelve, the tapping of other divisions and the circulation of ideas. Within the organization, interdisciplinary exchange triggers more ideas among people, the more interwoven the exchange among practitioners from different fields, the more dynamic, numerous, and potent the ideas that emerge from this activity.¹⁵ Hothouse communities also create a system and environment to facilitate and support this exchange.

Within the Roycroft community, there were many examples of artisans working in more than one medium, notably Jerome Connors, Dard Hunter in furniture, copper, stained glass, pottery, ironwork, and book production, Walter Jennings, a leatherworker and metalworker, and Karl Kipp, who began his work in the bindery but excelled in the copper shop.¹⁶ It was said of Dard Hunter's infiltration into other areas of the campus, “...a new energy was added to the community in nearly every endeavor to which he applied his skills.”¹⁷ Louis Kinder, master leather crafter, trained new employees as well as Roycrofters wishing to transfer from other departments; part of Hubbard's philosophy decreed, “It is against Roycroft ideas to send anyone away who really wants to

¹² Shay, *Elbert Hubbard of East Aurora*, 218.

¹³ Via, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, 114.

¹⁴ Charles F. Hamilton, *As Bees in Honey Drown: The Love, Lives, & Letters of The Roycroft's Alice and Elbert Hubbard* (Tavares, FL: SPS Publications, 1973), 234.

¹⁵ Kunstler, *The Hothouse Effect: Intensify Creativity in Your Organization Using Secrets from History's Most Innovative Communities*, 70.

¹⁶ Via, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, 81.

¹⁷ Via, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, 125.

work, so if they cannot do one thing well we let them try their hands at something else.” It was common practice to “send over” employees from one department to another – some were multi-skilled and others were temporarily transferred to help out in some manner – but whenever possible, the loaned employees were those who had expressed a desire to learn an additional craft or line of work.¹⁸ Sharing of skills also took place after work hours. Felix Shay, who worked in editing during his term at the Roycroft, in his memoir recalls:

always there were volunteers to learn and volunteers to teach...once I developed the happy idea that I would like to learn how to make a stained glass window. I visioned Burne-Jones effects by my hands alone. Dard Hunter offered certain evenings and rainy Sundays to the sacrifice; he, the Master, would show me how. First, I must start on a lamp shade to learn to cut metal, to cut and match glass, and to solder corners. I tool six months to make the worst lamp shade in the world, and burned all my fingers to blisters before I was forced to admit I was not cut out for a craftsman. But to the last Dard offered practical advice and suggestions to the bungler!¹⁹

Category #3 – Perception / Learning

The third category looks at the processes that govern the generation and exchange of ideas. Perception represents the underlying structure that gives birth to ideas, while learning is what we do with those ideas - actively reconfiguring and transforming them. Of formal education, Elbert Hubbard thought little. He believed higher education to be artificial and favored education that would prepare a learner for life: as Robert Owens offered, “education from work, at work.”²⁰

Hothouse Factor Twenty asserts ‘everyone is a visionary.’ This factor advises leaders to encourage creativity to stem from any worker within an organization, following the example of Socrates who, as Kunstler reminds us, was a stonemason by trade. The greater the number of people who become educated as thinkers and creators, the more likely it is to achieve the critical mass of ideas

¹⁸ Via, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, 97.

¹⁹ Shay, *Elbert Hubbard of East Aurora*, 206.

²⁰ Freeman Champney, *Art & Glory: The Story of Elbert Hubbard* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1968), 124.

and practitioners needed to launch a new level of creative and productive activity.²¹

Central to the Arts & Crafts Movement was the involvement of ordinary, unskilled people in production – the premise was the work itself, the process of creation, was as important as the finished product.²² Elbert Hubbard staffed his endeavor by hiring artisans who then served as teachers and leaders of the “guild” that produced each object. The workers were mostly “unskilled” young people from the East Aurora area. It was a sort of atelier where hand-crafted furniture, brass and silver wares, and wrought-iron decorative pieces were turned out in surprisingly great quantities by unskilled artisans learning crafts under the tutelage of skilled artisans. The same was true of the expanded fine books business where young men and women learned the printing trade, how to bind and illumine beautiful books, tool leather, and etc.²³ Ambitious young apprentices learned quickly and could graduate to artisan status. A 1904 article called The Roycroft Shops a combination of work shop and school.²⁴

Factor Twenty-Three, holistic techniques and principles of perception brings in conscious techniques designed to enrich and enhance creative thinking. Kunstler offers each sense that we use or mode of thinking or perceiving that we apply “lights up” a different part of the brain, thus stimulating creativity.²⁵

In a 1979 interview with Muriel Jennings Case, a former Roycroft worker, she recalls: “at 10:00 and at 3:00, Mr. Hubbard would come in and say, “Everybody out,” and they’d get the medicine balls out and we’d have catch.”²⁶ In a more physically active version of the coffee break, Roycroft workers would take two outside recesses each day of ten minute stretches. Felix Shay remembers, “sometimes in the summer [Hubbard]’d wave the whole crowd from their tasks and take them for a walk across fields or hail out special groups for horseback rides, or a game of catch – but the work always seemed to get done, probably because no one paid attention – as a voluntary matter – to the eight hour day.”²⁷ Hubbard’s philosophy was to have a sound mind in a sound body one must give

²¹ Kunstler, *The Hothouse Effect: Intensify Creativity in Your Organization Using Secrets from History’s Most Innovative Communities*, 120.

²² Via, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, 15.

²³ Hamilton, *As Bees in Honey Drown: The Love, Lives, & Letters of The Roycroft’s Alice and Elbert Hubbard*, 211.

²⁴ Via, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, 59.

²⁵ Kunstler, *The Hothouse Effect: Intensify Creativity in Your Organization Using Secrets from History’s Most Innovative Communities*, 123.

²⁶ Young Yorkers Club, *Talk Less, Listen More: Visiting with Aurora’s Elders* (2003), 56.

²⁷ Shay, *Elbert Hubbard of East Aurora*, 71.

systematic attention to the conditioning of that body, which may be based on a similar one by Arts & Crafts founder John Ruskin. He proffered that ‘thinking persons should do some work with their hands and workers should be engaged in thinking.’²⁸

Factor Twenty-Four – immersion and osmosis, dictates that surrounding yourselves with creativity may not be a seemingly efficient work environment, but spawns and sustains creativity.

Elbert Hubbard’s dedication to immersing himself and his Roycrofters in culture and creativity seems to be inspired by a quote by Charles Darwin that was found in a personal scrapbook maintained by Hubbard:

*“If I had my life to live over again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once a week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.”*²⁹

Roycrofters were never at risk of ‘atrophied brains.’ Not only were workers encouraged to practice and present their own creative outlets, but figures from outside the community were invited to inform and inspire the workers with concerts, presentations, musical events, dances, and exhibitions. Lectures by Hubbard and others on varied subjects including travel, literature, religion, notable artists, temperance, vaccination, the suffragette movement, and “progress of the Negro” were a constant in the community.³⁰ Leon Varley, former Roycroft copper worker, recalls decades later: “I remember one time that big bell rang and this was when Mr. Hubbard was still alive. We all gathered down on the front lawn. There was an upright piano there and Carrie Jacobs Bond was there and she sat down at the piano and sang all of her songs for us. This was not unusual.”³¹ On a more subtle, though no less profound, note, it was said of the Roycroft

²⁸ Via, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, 16.

²⁹ *The Roycrofters, Elbert Hubbard’s Scrapbook* (New York, NY: American Book – Stratford Press, 1923), 52.

³⁰ Via, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, 14.

³¹ Young Yorkers Club, *Talk Less, Listen More: Visiting with Aurora’s Elders*, 309.

campus that there was a piano in nearly every room with lessons available for anyone and a library of over 5000 volumes.³²

Category #4 - Social / Play

In the final category, the hothouse effect draws heavily on areas of social activity for which less creative groups are not generally distinguished.

Factors Thirty, business model, and Thirty-One, leadership, operate hand-in-hand when the business model is the work of the leader. In the hothouse, a natural synergy between creative and financial elements emerges,³³ creativity depends on a business model that allows workers to focus on creative work with few distractions. Here creativity helps build profit, and profit validates and thus increases investment in creativity. The role of the hothouse leader is to establish a supportive environment for ideas and creativity.

Elbert Hubbard was a leader synonymous with the Roycroft Movement, but his business model was somewhat laissez-faire. Hubbard wasn't a businessman when measured by ordinary standards. There were no specified hours of employment for workers, no rules, no foremen, no time sheets, and no check on workers to see that they kept the pace or whether in fact they were working at all. Time off was taken without needing permission.³⁴ Hubbard also didn't mind if a piece didn't come out perfectly the first time. Imperfections were allowed as were the time and materials required for a second, third, etc. attempt. His business model seems to embody the motto: "The Roycrofters live by faith – and diligent work." As Hubbard's pre-Roycroft domain was sales, he employed numerous techniques from his days with the Larkin company in marketing Roycroft wares: selling subscriptions to publications, selling items "on suspicion", and combining items to sell what a customer might not buy separately.³⁵ Former Roycrofter Martha Schwartz recalls fondly the Goodie Box at Christmastime – a wooden box containing items that were grown on the Roycroft farm including apples and pears wrapped in colored foil, Roycroft pecan patties, cookies, and potatoes – and selling them for one dollar.³⁶ Hubbard's

³² Dirlam, *Sinners: This is East Aurora: The Story of Elbert Hubbard and The Roycroft Shops*, 141.

³³ Kunstler, *The Hothouse Effect: Intensify Creativity in Your Organization Using Secrets from History's Most Innovative Communities*, 157.

³⁴ Dirlam, *Sinners: This is East Aurora: The Story of Elbert Hubbard and The Roycroft Shops*, 191.

³⁵ Via, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, 11.

³⁶ Young Yorkers Club, *Talk Less, Listen More: Visiting with Aurora's Elders*, 282.

ability to make the Roycroft a profitable industry and his reluctance to micro-manage left his workers to pursue their creative endeavors.

Another Hubbard marketing tool was the use of festivals, as exemplified by Factor Thirty-Four. Kunstler sees festivals as a time of great group synergy and positivity which serve to renew creative energy.³⁷ The annual July Roycroft Convention, the New Thought Convention in August, and a mid-winter convention or revival were examples of festival events that Hubbard conceived of to generate enthusiasm both on the Roycroft campus and with the general public.³⁸ An issue of *The Philistine*, a Roycroft publication advertised a convention:

All Immortals and Subscribers...are especially invited to be present and join the gladsome glee. There will be three Formal Programs a day, but not too formal – morning, afternoon, and evening – when men and women of Note will speak, sing, recite, vibrate, and otherwise disturb the ether! There is always much good-fellowship at these Conventions. Introductions are tabu (sic). Everybody knows everybody else. Good will and the laugh in which there is no bitterness prevail. Music will be a feature. There will be gentle walks afield, tramps to the Farms and Camps, and demonstrations at the Roycroft Woodpiles. As for the Ideas – everybody is welcome to all he can bring and all he can carry away. Perhaps you had better not dress too fine – flannels, corduroys, khaki, stout shoes and a Smile!³⁹

These conventions were extremely popular, drawing a large crowd of celebrities and other Hubbard followers, and were the primary reason for the enlargement of the Roycroft Inn. A write-up in the East Aurora Advertiser of 1905 cites: “crowds of people arrive on every train and the Inn is taxed to its utmost capacity.”⁴⁰ Recollections of many former Roycrofters include these conventions as well as other events more specifically organized for the workers themselves. These included dances, an annual Christmas party, and picnics in the summer on

³⁷ Kunstler, *The Hothouse Effect: Intensify Creativity in Your Organization Using Secrets from History's Most Innovative Communities*, 165.

³⁸ Via, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, 11.

³⁹ Champney, *Art & Glory: The Story of Elbert Hubbard*, 182.

⁴⁰ Via, *Head, Heart and Hand: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters*, 12.

the shores of Lake Erie in Hamburg or aside Cazenovia Creek not far from the campus.⁴¹

Conclusion

Elbert Hubbard and his wife Alice failed to heed the warnings of imminent attacks on trans-Atlantic vessels by the German Kaiser and both would perish in the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915. Hubbard's eldest son, Elbert Hubbard II would take the reins of the Roycroft enterprise and guide it until its Depression-fueled demise in 1938.

In its years of peak performance under the direction of its captivating, though provocative leader, the Roycroft campus could be considered a hothouse community. Further proof exists of this environment meeting the hothouse theory requirements, but these are beyond the scope of this paper. Studying the Roycroft campus with regards to Firestein's Climate for Creativity Questionnaire, a measure of ten factors with some overlap with the Hothouse theory, the Roycroft seems to satisfy all ten.⁴² Elbert Hubbard, when opening his initial venture, the Roycroft Press, could not have forecast the growth and success of his venture, and did not consciously construct a 'creative environment,' but then neither did leaders of Kunstler's example communities. The geniuses to come out of the Roycroft, namely Dard Hunter, W.W. Denslow, Alex Fournier, and Jerome Connors, may not be household names like those of ancient Athens and Renaissance-era Florence, but the spirit of the Roycroft was more about the education of all instead of the illumination of a select few. The fact that the Roycroft not only pulled workers from the surrounding agricultural landscape, but also, via its reputation and that of Hubbard, attracted workers from all over the country and abroad supports the scholarship of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In his 1996 work on creativity he asserts a creative environment draws workers in two ways. Some are drawn to that place because that it is where the information is or where the action is happening. For others, that place may offer opportunities for learning that capture their interest.⁴³ Those who that worked in the Roycroft shops came with varying levels of artistic ability and craftsmanship. The creative environment made artisans out of unskilled youth and geniuses out of artisans.

⁴¹ Young Yorkers Club, *Talk Less, Listen More: Visiting with Aurora's Elders*.

⁴² Roger Firestein, *Leading on the Creative Edge: Gaining Competitive Advantage through the Power of Creative Problem Solving* (Colorado Springs, CO: Piñon Press, 1996), 183.

⁴³ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1996).

Former Roycrofters and authors Kenneth Dirlam and Ernest E. Simmons describe the legacy of the Roycroft as follows:

...and the East-Aurorans were no better and no worse when Mr. Hubbard was among them than ordinary villagers. Whereas their complete intellectual regeneration has not been accomplished, nor their metamorphosis into consummate artists and philosophers, much certainly has been done and generously for the broadening of their views, the improving of their standards, and the elevation of their ideals.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Dirlam, *Sinners: This is East Aurora: The Story of Elbert Hubbard and The Roycroft Shops*, 98.

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