



Mobility is the new ultimate form of freedom. Freedom from routine, traditional values, and geographic restraints. Today's creative class thrives off a lifestyle that enables it to work six months in a shared office in Berlin, spend the summer in a caravan in Chile, and show up in time for the next project at a temporary desk in New York.

This growing trend has generated visionary ways of designing products and spaces that facilitate a nomadic yet high-tech life. From a modular dwelling system on wheels to an inflatable classroom in a repurposed dumpster, this book compiles a wide range of flexible spaces and innovative products that define today's nomads. Through innovative technology, and by (literally) thinking outside the box, the designers behind these concepts give people the freedom to call the entire world their home.

What might currently be perceived as an exception is rapidly becoming the rule. *The New Nomads* explores a phenomenon that has an imminent impact on the work of architects, city planners, product designers, and employers worldwide.



gestalten  
 ISBN 978-3-89955-558-5  
 9 783899 555855

**"To take advantage of serendipity travel light."**

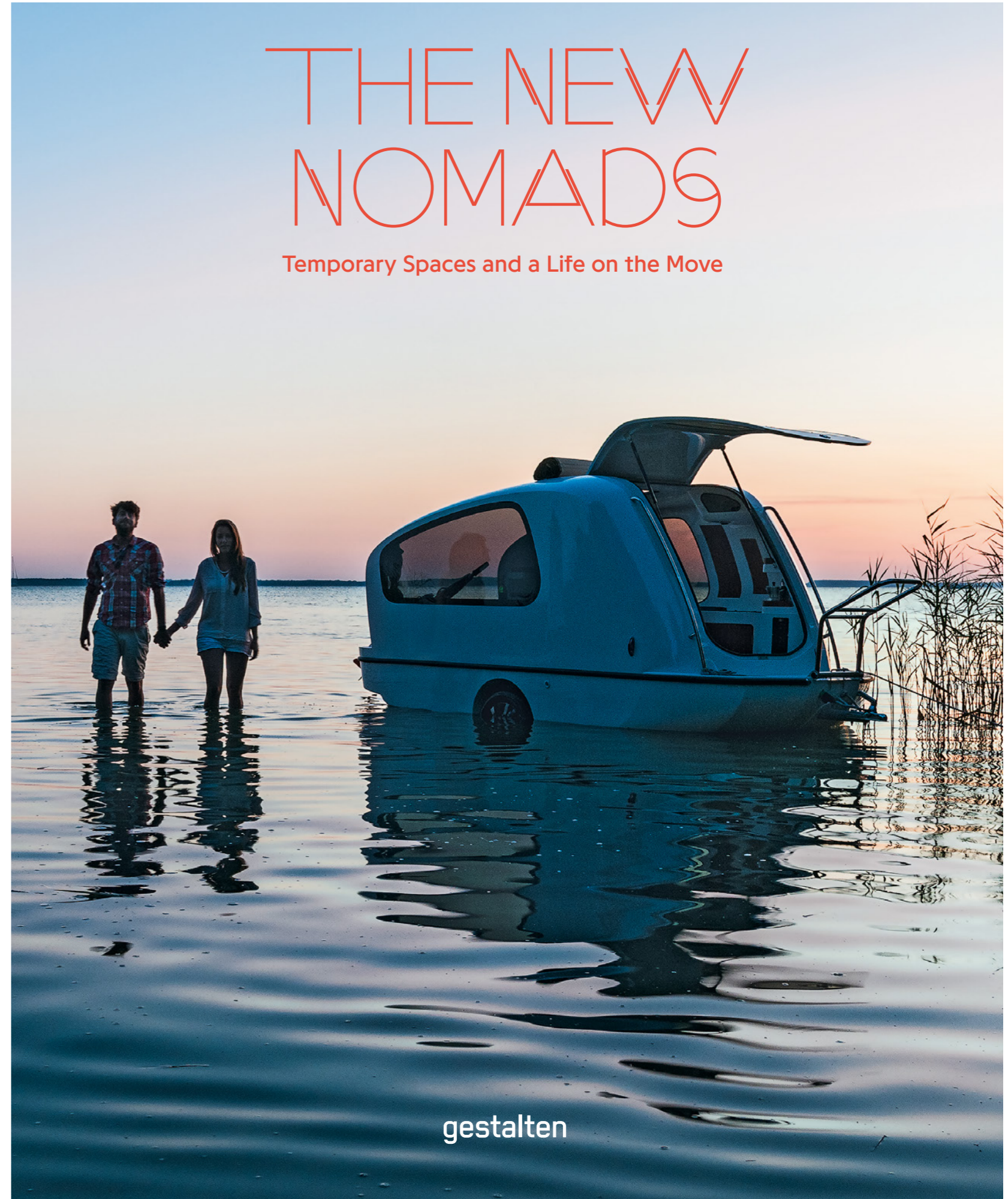
Digital Nomad  
 Interview with Jan Chipchase (→ P. 204)



Temporary Spaces  
 and a Life on the Move

The New Nomads

gestalten



# THE NEW NOMADS

Temporary Spaces and a Life on the Move

gestalten



(Preface)

## Going Global Thoughts on the New Nomad Phenomenon by Shonquis Moreno

“To take advantage of serendipity, travel light,” says designer Jan Chipchase. The globetrotting, problem-solving consultant is alluding to values—mobility, sustainability, well-being and (self-) discovery—that lie at the heart of a cultural shift that has been taking place over the past decade: The desire to break both into and free of urban life. We want to be urban, but not bound by the old codes of the city. We want to exploit a historically unprecedented degree of personal freedom and Chipchase himself is a case in point. His officeless office consults for clients on their home turf, setting up temporary research studios in more than 40 cities each year—in a Dubai skyscraper or on a mountainside in Myanmar. To travel light, he has even designed a durable, discreet duffel bag that he sells online. How Chipchase packs for the road—if he can’t carry it, it doesn’t come—says everything about the roads he hopes to travel: Wheeled luggage can only be wheeled over flat ground.

There are others like Chipchase, a tribe, a diaspora, or simply the like-minded who expect to shape the world instead of the world shaping them. We are the new nomads. Even in our railroad flats, studio apartments, and English basements, we are (re)turning to the life of the hunter-gatherer. We are merchants on the Silk Road trading in ideas, herders grazing the higher slopes in midsummer. And to be mobile, we slough the burden of our stuff, our places, our habits. We want to think our way out of the proverbial box and into a yurt or sailboat instead. We are not following the seasons, or the food sources, or the exotic spices, or the straight path. We are following serendipity.



### We Will Be Ephemeral

In part, we are making the best of a serendipity forced upon us by circumstances and uncertainty. We may be living and working longer, but events of the day remind us that life is short. The generation coming up has seen the volatility of markets, faiths, politics, and our own nature and learned to take nothing for granted. Indeed, the nomad is an early adopter, a wayfinder on the frontiers of change. Historian Karl Scheffer once described Berlin as a city “condemned forever to becoming and never to being.” But, in every city “becoming” has become the way we are. Some of us are getting comfortable with the notion that the journey—via plane or train, 60 Mbps or 20, T4 or Four Square, Ethernet, or Chat Roulette—is the destination.

Throughout history, every culture has represented itself through unique architecture—from the Colossus of Rhodes to the Roman Colosseum and Babylon’s hanging gardens to the Crystal Palace. People lived and died in the same village, sharing common bloodlines, sometimes claustrophobic relationships, and with faith in the rewards that conformity would bring. Temples, palaces, the





inflatable Cloud room on your shoulder and flat-pack Adrian Lippman's FoldFlatShelter. They are facilitating our movement the way the airport sleeping pod by Arch Group does. Once the ultimate nomads, shipping containers like those used in Poteet Architects' Container Guest House are becoming permanent homes that speak to our need for compact spaces and more efficient living. Tengbom Architects gave Swedish university students everything they need to live well in their 10 Smart Square Meters dormitories. They are making spaces versatile and sustainable: a living room turns into a guest room, an office into a kitchen. Architects are designing open-plan multidisciplinary coworking offices that could be the seeds of a nomadic culture to come. The projects we see presented here, responding to the habits and habitat of the new nomad, are practical, human scale and experimental—but above all a product of their time.

Pyramids: these monuments expressed a society's power, established hierarchy, and showcased its innovations, while decorative arts movements formed around interior design, furnishings, and objects that conformed to these same ideas and ideals. In renaissance Italy, architecture was girt with ornament; by Adolf Loos's day, ornament had been declared a crime. In Manhattan, boardrooms scrape the sky, declaring the power of those who have risen to the top floor, with the panoramic and observing corner office representing highest authority. At times, however, the powers-that-be were questioned and a worm tucked into the code: Midcentury designers conceived of the open-plan office and modular furnishings to cultivate a more democratic environment (one that would only take hold much later). The rural poor had been pouring into cities where everyone was a stranger and the competition for resources fierce since the nineteenth century. By 2008, half of the world's population had migrated to urban areas. By 2050, urbanization is expected to consume more than 80 percent of the developed and 60 percent of the developing world. In the meantime, with the arrival of the Internet and the knowledge worker, hierarchies and geography have quickly begun to become irrelevant.



### Untethered From Tradition and Technology

Technology has made the flow of communication constant, business global, and friendships virtual. It promises to free us from workplaces and lets us reinvent them; improves industrial production but makes a luxury of the handmade; lets us micro-manage our relationships on-screen while making us appreciate a physical person across the table.

We are free to roam, literally, even when "roaming" is not free and long distance calls cost nothing on Skype. Magazine subscriptions come to our tablets wherever we are. Via Airbnb we



now share beds and houses. We share and overshare everything on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, then fumble periodically with our privacy settings. We can tune in to Al-Jazeera from Sacramento and the BBC from Johannesburg. We can spend money from anywhere on the planet with PayPal, pay our Brooklyn bills and our American taxes from Istanbul with online banking, and soon digital currencies will make being a citizen of the world—and an identity thief—even easier.

On the one hand, privacy is dead: ambient intelligence will soon mine public space for "useful" information. Wearables like Jawbone UP3 track our most intimate biological data 24/7 and will soon provide prognoses too. We can use that data to make healthy lifestyle choices, but will someone else use it too? On the other hand: Long live privacy! A Frenchman has won the right in a European court to be digitally erased from Google's Internet search. Will it become possible to secure our messaging, our finances, and our reputations, or to become simply anonymous again?

### Out of the Box Into the Cloud

Some people embrace these changes, some of us hate them, some love to hate them and others hate loving them. Nomadism is more a state of mind and a way of living than it is generational, gender-based, discipline-dependent, or geographical. In fact, the old demographic segments are not very useful anymore. The young and wealthy still adopt innovation the earliest, but age, gender, and income are losing their commercial relevance: The elderly make up

the fastest growing demographic online and account for the bulk of web purchases. Whoever the new nomad is, he or she is creative but not necessarily an artist; she is a business consultant or social entrepreneur, a software developer, or a venture capitalist. He is someone like Dutchman Pieter Levels, who decided to launch 12 web start-ups in 12 months from as many cities—out of a single backpack. One of those start-ups was NomadList.io, which allows itinerant knowledge workers to browse world cities according to monthly cost of living, temperature, safety, and Internet connection speed among other criteria. Moving from being locked into a job to being constantly on the move is no longer creepy or criminal—it's cool.

Consider the fact that 50 percent of occupations may be redundant by 2030: print journalists, travel agents, lumberjacks, tax collectors, and even florists. In many fields, youth is privileged over experience and it is unlikely that workers will have only a single job in a lifetime. Once upon a time, our parents and grandparents held down a single job and owned a single house. Building a home bequeathed to the children was a testament to a family's success. In these more dynamic times, however, we are becoming renters and summer cottagers, building or commissioning architecture and micro-architecture to escape in even while standing still. We are bootstrappers and DIYers. We save money and make friends by living in close quarters with multiple roommates: Sleeping Pods by Sibling provide private bed-closet alcoves whose small size is offset by generous common space. Today we are more likely to construct a tree house outside Bergen for holiday use, take a caravan around the world for a few months, co-own a garden plot in Berlin, or erect a prefabricated starter home designed by Dutch construction company Heijmans on a vacant urban lot in less than 24 hours.





## An Object in Motion Stays in Motion

Our increasing wirelessness at the personal level along with a relatively low cost of transportation has made nomadism possible. We are the frequent fliers. With a concurrent rise in the cost of living and real estate—according to Nomadlist.io, it now costs over 4,386 euros per month to live in Omaha, Nebraska but only 515 euros to live in Bangalore—nomads are looking for or creating alternate ways of living that emphasize fulfillment and well-being. Mobility demands architecture that is portable and versatile, with multifunctional objects and furnishings no matter how small. Sometimes the structure is actually mobile: It has wheels or wings or ambulatory legs like the Walking House by N55. Designers are experimenting with prefabricated and flat-pack homes, portable wooden kiosks and shacks, snow shelters, cantilevering hotels, and crocheted cabin concepts that allow users to explore the nomadic life at their leisure, sometimes while remaining in one comfortable spot.

In Jagnefalt Milton's thus-far conceptual project called A Rolling Masterplan, buildings move through the city of Andalsnes, Norway on new as well as existing railway tracks according to the seasons or events. Manuel Dominguez has imagined a nomadic city, dubbed Very Large Structure, that moves on caterpillar treads seeking optimal economic and physical conditions for its population. Room-Room by Encore Heureux + G. Studio is a hut pedaled around by bicycle that can be lain on three different sides, giving the occupant three different views out. Sometimes, we just want our space to be so convertible that it feels as if we have moved houses entirely. A hybrid of architecture and furniture, Liu Lubin's ziggurat-shaped Micro House in Beijing is made of three fiber-reinforced foam modules that are so light the inhabitant can flip them around to convert the living room into an office or bathroom. Urban planning is expediting local

transportation in original ways too: Glow-in-the-dark strips were embedded in a recently completed bike path connecting Eindhoven to Neunen in the Netherlands, charging during the day and then glowing for eight hours through the night.

There are more and more innovative ways through ever-smarter technology to bridge the distance that separates so many of us from our loved ones: Skype and Facetime offer some reconnection, allowing empty-nest parents to stay in touch with their children or friends to catch up across



time zones. The Good Night Lamp is a pair of lamps that form "a physical social network" even when separated by continents: When the Big Lamp is switched on, the Little Lamp is too, wherever or with whom it may be. Teledildonics are sex toys that let long-distance lovers interact in real-time via data-enabled devices. The OhMiBod Remote is a Wi-Fi-enabled app that allows the user to control his or her partner's "personal massager" from anywhere in the world while the Crave Duet Lux vibrator boasts a built-in USB connection for charging and 16GB of storage. Conversely, Eenmaal is a pop-up restaurant that only hosts people who are by themselves, billing itself as "an attractive place for temporary disconnection," demonstrating our growing interest in bridging the distance with our analog selves.

Nomadism is a commitment to opt out of the conventional "in the box" way of doing things. The old social contract is no longer delivering

on its promises, if it ever did: the American dream was just that. Instead it is a choice to opt into the one-person dinner table, the Cloud and the coffeehouse, or, say, the Ace Hotel lobby in Manhattan where on any given afternoon a dozen people of varying age can



be found working on their own or in small groups; the glow of open laptop lids looking much the same from Berlin to Boston and Beirut to Bloemfontein. Whether on the road, off-road, or momentarily still, nomads need spaces in which to physically (re)connect with the world and major cities have begun to offer similar environments in which members of the creative class may meet. H&M and Starbucks may be iconically global, but there is also a globalization of less corporate bodies. The independent coffee shop has a familiar air, if not face, from Omotesando to Marrakech. International events like TED Talks or TEDx or in the design world Pecha Kucha evenings, where each person presents 20 slides for 20 seconds each, contribute to the networking culture of the nomad. For members of this group it can be easier to navigate on that global level. They have more in common with people they meet at a design conference in Kuala Lumpur than with people living in the same building back "home."



## En Route is the New Office

In Belle Epoque Europe, travelers touring the continent used to rent hotel rooms for weeks at a time. After all, it took 15 days on a steam-driven passenger liner to reach New York from London in the mid-nineteenth century and the first transatlantic flight was not until 1919: It took 23 days and 6 stops to make it. Today, with flights from Istanbul to New York clocking in at 10 hours, business has become increasingly international and economies entangled. As workers travel more frequently, en route has become the new office. Creatives are a case in point: for some, in-flight is one of the few opportunities to unplug and focus. New York designer Karim Rashid, who travels up to half the year, has said he can fill a 100-page sketchpad during a transatlantic flight. Artist Nina Katchadourian makes art using only materials she finds in-flight. Seat Assignment features a series of Old Master-like selfies called Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style. They depict Katchadourian costumes from the seventeenth century in airline napkins and inflatable neck pillows.





corporate ladder without putting other options to the test? The average American worker today stays at a job for just over four years; the youngest workers are expected to halve that. The new nomad knows that job-hopping can expedite her professional development, not retard it, and be more satisfying to boot. She tries on a variety of roles, titles, and workplaces, learns new skills and finds the best (read: most fulfilling) fit. Nomads are not waiting for the corporation to deem them of value; they are searching for their own and are willing to risk it all to do so—financial security, a nuclear family, two cars in the garage—which are not guaranteed anyway. They are not paying their dues. They are shopping.

When not in the air, we may increasingly work from compact home offices, but the nomad is also working on Jeju Island or in Chiang Mai (Nomadlist.io monthly cost of living and average connection speeds: 1,627/60 euros Mbps and 560/20 euros Mbps, respectively) or “wintering” in, say, Phuket where Thai visa policies are generous and visas free. Before she arrives, the nomad has mined contacts there or gotten the lay of the land from someone who has gone before her through social media. This allows her to prepare not only her infrastructure ahead of departure—renting a room or an out building from a local, maybe through Airbnb—but also a social network that is ready on arrival. These new friends can recommend a local yoga instructor or the strongest coffee, so that she is part of the community before even setting her watch to local time or setting up office—her laptop—in a cafe corner. When the nomad leaves, she leaves behind digital breadcrumbs for the next nomad to follow. It recalls the first half of the twentieth century when some of the finest writers and artists seemed nationless—to the point of fighting in other countries’ wars—the difference being that Hemingway had to ship his typewriter to Madrid and Havana (on a ship) and lost a suitcase full of manuscripts along with all carbon copies on one short rail ride between Paris and Lausanne.

Now we have the freedom to move between workplaces or the freedom to not have a workplace at all. Millennials, along with nomads of earlier generations, will make up more than 75 percent of the global workforce by 2030. Businesses are beginning to understand that performance will become more important than attendance in the office, that giving workers opportunities to collaborate will be a requisite, and they have even begun to negotiate “unlimited” vacation time. And why climb an arduous

## The Much More Bearable Lightness of Being

Experiences mean more but weigh less than things. Nomads are less concerned with the stuff they own and more with the stuff they can do or make. The minimalists slough their



(Preface)



belongings, selling them on Krrb or auctioning them on eBay, challenging themselves to slim down to fewer than, say, 100 items (and a couple of boxes of sentimental “baggage” stashed at their parents’ houses.) In his book *Stuffocation*, British trendwatcher and author James Wallman points out that people who have lived through extreme scarcity are exceedingly frugal. It was the rise of the advertising industry in the mid-twentieth century that trained us in conspicuous consumption, which we are finally, Wallman argues, starting to turn into an experience economy instead.

As if to aid in this effort, some developers are hawking smaller apartments whose “intimacy” they compensate for by offering (sometimes pay-per-use) amenities and services that bring urban entertainment and convenience into the residential tower. One Istanbul developer commissioned a variety of public rooms for one building, including a cushion-clad Playstation room, a cigar den, a cinema, and a stargazing perch. Sloughing belongings to fit in these modern spaces is the path of least resistance. How much space and how much privacy do we need in an apartment we sleep in for only three months of the year? What do we need when we are only staying for a few days, a few weeks, or a season?

Some people will tell you that the things they value most live on their laptops or in the Cloud already. Even those who do not seek to



be itinerant in any sense, can now digitize their music, photographs, accounting, and books. It becomes natural to live more lightly and more flexibly, to literally take up less space on the ground. The digital nomads who take these tools for granted are those who



pass seamlessly between city and countryside, coast to coast, and juggle multiple assignments at once: run a design-build studio between New York and Los Angeles, surf in Rio on the weekends, design shops in Sao Paulo during the week, or move to Tel Aviv from New York to cut on commute time to Milan manufacturers. Nomads do not want television. They text a lot and do not own a landline: Google’s New York office shed its desk phones when it found that most of their employees were operating almost exclusively on their cellphones anyway.

Nomads are individualists, curious and open-minded, sophisticated and comfort-seeking, pan-cultural and multinational. They create work that is distinctly local while scouring the globe (and the Internet) for new ideas. They are romantics, idealists, and optimists who do not accept limits; instead they invent new ways around them and have the tools to do it. Think of the ambitious Seasteading Institute, co-founded by a former Google engineer and a PayPal co-founder, which is trying to establish floating cities that would serve as



facilitate person-to-person communication and collaboration instead of maintaining the chain of command. The idea that we will be phasing out of paper and boxes into more open-plan settings is not new. There have been stabs at this since midcentury: Gino Valle and Herbert Ohl's 1968 Multipli modular office furniture for Fantoni did this and more recently Konstantin Grcic's workplace collection for Vitra, which focuses on mobility, convertibility, and versatility. The idea is to enable coworkers to work together more

permanent, autonomous testing grounds and whose inhabitants would experiment with alternative social, governmental, and legal systems. Then there are the body hackers of Silicon Valley and beyond, bringing virtual values into the physical world: perfecting the human being by experimenting on themselves with everything from implanted magnets and supplements to modified Tibetan tea (in which yak butter and tea are replaced with Irish butter and coffee). They are not just thinking outside the box—for them, there is no box at all.

## The Broken Hierarchy and Sharing

Once upon a time that box was a cubicle, and if the cubicle was mostly public space, the desk in it was a personal object; now the near-obsolescence of both signals the decay of hierarchy (and has become a source of some confusion as 50-year-olds find themselves being managed by 27-year-olds). Increasingly, desks and offices must be designed to



organically, like a brain—all the synapses firing in reaction to each other—than a beehive, which is more mechanical.

A perfect picture of this flattening hierarchy is the "superdesk" designed by Los Angeles-based architect Clive Wilkinson for New York Internet ad agency The Barbarian Group. In this

office, an endless desk forms the fabric of the whole interior—walls, desks, ceilings, conference rooms, and lounges. Having worked with TBWA/Chiat/Day and Google previously, Wilkinson designed an 3,35-meter-long work surface made of plywood and medium-density fiberboard that arches through the office, promoting flexibility and connecting 125 employees, including the chairman who works while standing (another growing trend, now that sitting is known as the new smoking.)

In coworking spaces, unrelated but thoroughly vetted creatives from various disciplines rent shared office space that tends to be furnished with more multiperson tables and sofas than desks and with labs and workshops as much as work surfaces. The Agora Collective is a community in Berlin based on diversity and social ties that features a laboratory kitchen, shared space for freelancing creatives, and collaborative artistic residencies. In a glass-walled, open-plan cabin in the woods designed by Raumlaborberlin, students of architecture, social and political science, economy, activism, art, and music came together to imagine the future of communal living. But coworking is also happening spontaneously in found locations: Breather is an app currently available in New York, Montreal, Ottawa, and San Francisco that allows users to locate unused urban spaces to rent for as little as 30 minutes and access them by way of the NFC keyless entry system.

Right now, however, co-working spaces, popping up around the globe, represent the prototype interior for the urban nomad. They offer



a variety of equipment, tools, and services to address the needs of diverse workers, whose like-mindedness draws them together as a tribe. More than any other environment, these may be the spaces in which the nomadic culture could coalesce and evolve into an active, identifiable demographic with common interests, methods, and goals. For now, nomadism may simply be a way of living and thinking, but the coworking spaces of today have the potential to become the labor unions and politically influential or activist bodies that will represent the globetrotting freelancers of the future. They are also the incubators of startups, social enterprises, etc.

## Blurred Roles and Rituals

These changes entail not just the blurring of traditional roles and relationships but a blurring of activities, spaces, and spatial programs. In the public sphere, the hotel lobby has become the new living room, office hours are leisure time, and the office the new cultural hub. Fashion is the new uniform and textiles are armature. The rucksack contains an entire room with a view and airplanes are the new buses. The separation of domestic rooms according to function does not make much sense anymore either: The kitchen has morphed into the living room, the bed has become a desktop, and the bathroom a spa. What amenities does a living room need if the inhabitants conduct daily video conferences there? Graham Hill's Life Edited apartment, designed by two Romanian architecture students, converts radically to

fiteight rooms into 39 square meters: The living room and office become the bedroom. Ten stacking chairs and a telescoping dinner table are contained in a small cabinet, while a guest room, replete with bunk-beds, folds out of a gliding wall. Even when obsessively organized, it is all a little confusing, but nomads can live with that. In fact, chaos, miscegenation, and inversion are preferable. Glossy shelter magazines have been joined by publications like *Apartamento*, *Dirty Furniture*, and (online) *Freunde von Freunden* that are more relevant to the wider public than *Architectural Digest*.

### Back to the Land

Though many nomads have come to the big city from somewhere less urban and find that they thrive there, they want to contain nature too. Literal or notional, the results are a hybrid of the hinterland and the cosmopolitan. Bivouac by Thomas Stevenson allows users to pitch a tent on city rooftops. Park(ing) Day, inaugurated in San Francisco in 2005 but now celebrated annually in cities worldwide, momentarily transforms metered parking spaces into public parks and art installations floored with Astroturf and furnished with lawn chairs.

At times, this journey back to nature occurs from the safety and comfort of home, at the community garden down the block, or in the co-ops that form around urban or indoor farming



projects. Suburban Tipi by John Paananen lets users set up a space of solitude in the living room. CAMP Daybed by Stephanie Hornig is a sleeping bag-like upholstery for the couch that makes a few minutes of reclining feel like a little journey.

Some city dwellers, however, want to leave city limits and slot back into nature momentarily (which may account for the wild popularity of tree houses in recent years.) Antoine by Bureau A is a hut camouflaged as a rock, portable by truck that fits into the landscape as if native to it. Likewise, the mirrored hut called Lookout by Process Craft may look man-made but it allows its occupant to disappear into the landscape in the very act of observing it. Professional escapists exist too, like Miscellaneous Adventures who host workshops with titles like Winter Camp or Woodland Woodcarving Skills. There is also Alastair Humphreys, who takes urbanites on mystery one-night micro-adventures which he bills as “a refresh button for busy lives.” He calls it, not 9-to-5, but “5-to-9 thinking.”



### A Softer World

Will these cultural shifts free nomads to assume the burdens of a fraught world or will their kind—eternally leaving in pursuit of their own happiness—disperse and hunker down? New York designer Stephen Burkes of Readymade Projects is a nomad who is shouldering the burden. Though constantly on the move, Burkes synthesizes what he learns out in the world and back at home, and applies the results to commercially and artistically viable objects and environments. Synthesis and fusion may be the strongest creative forces wielded by the nomad, who responds to the proliferation of screens and gadgets by imbuing them with the handmade and the haptic and vice-versa. Burkes visits makers around the globe, learning their traditional methods and teaching them how to bring their skills to the contemporary international market. In the process, he creates—often soft, often woven—craft-influenced modern design for clients like Missoni, Moroso, and Roche Bobois. Any single Readymade product or environment is an amalgamation of cultural traditions, handcrafting techniques, and local or ad hoc materials. This means that while most of us are seeking shelter in a time of crisis



and uncertainty, the nomad is exposing himself to a world that may not be nearly as vast as the web, but which can sometimes feel that way.

“We are an unstitched society suffering from a lasting socio-economic crisis that has made us ferociously protective and egocentric,” trend forecaster and curator Lidewij Edelkoort has said, using textiles and techniques like weaving, felting, knitting, and draping as metaphors and objects of comfort and safety. “It is time for mending and gathering, thus restoring the fabric of society: picking up the pieces and bringing them together in a patchwork of possibilities; a quilt of substance, able to absorb shock and fear.”

In this sometimes fearful world, unburdened and embracing an unprecedented freedom of movement, will nomads ever stop searching for home, hoping to find it on a tide of serendipity? The answer is no, and yet home has become an idea more than a place, an idea that we can carry with us without even knowing it is there. It is a collection of memories, half-truths, and complete fictions that are the construction materials of an architecture we build, demolish and rebuild, renovate, and retrofit in our minds. It is a collection of experiences and people, not a collection of things. Unlike serendipity, home is something we make, not find. And it only becomes more precious and knowable if we leave it sometimes to go far, far away. ●

