

→ Technology



Create Anything, Anywhere

Many people are innocently, and some unsuspectingly, participating in a great democratizing transformation. Using available technologies, we are redefining our personal time, job relationships, consumption patterns and relationship to the environment. This is creating different pathways for participating in our society and economy while also preserving our personal opportunities to thrive and become our best selves.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Neil Gershenfeld poses a deep question to all of us: "How will we live, learn, work and play when anyone can make anything, anywhere?"

In community shops we call Fab Labs, we have built utility items that support basic needs, including furniture, 150-square-foot structures and control systems for energy and food production. Community members across generations are raising the bar, building items with a huge impact on expenses that we normally toil many hours a month to support: housing near 1,000 square feet that supports zero utility bills, concentrated solar power (CSP) energy harvesting systems and community-scale food production using aquaponics and permaculture techniques. These are built with digital fabrication tools and permaculture design techniques available to everyone in the community.



BILL BOWEN

Community-level production can be very effective in allowing fundamental lifestyle changes for people who are looking to live within limits, but not poorly, and who want to have time for high quality-of-life experiences. In the words of professor, philosopher and practitioner Frithjof Bergmann, to live within a community "that would foster the development of impressive, splendid, admirable human beings." These personal, triple-bottom-line outcomes (people, planet, profit) are impactful now. As sociologist and trend watcher Juliet B. Schor said, "Work and spend less, create and connect more," in turn leading to "ecological benefits — emit and degrade less — and human ones — enjoy and thrive more."

What's important to note is that this is all being done with technology that is rapidly increasing in both power and accessibility, to the extent that what we use today will be considered laughably crude within a decade or two. What is happening today is powerful, but the impact of this advancing technology is only embryonic at present.

The opportunity for us to genuinely participate in this future is, amazingly, available to all right now. The relevant skills and perspectives can and are being

learned today. Those with a true understanding — who are immersed in that life — will create this future. And the profound question posed by Gershenfeld that I stated earlier can be, and more importantly needs to be, answered with deep contributions from all of us. ●

WHAT'S THE FAB LAB?

Created by a group of dedicated professionals at MIT, Fab Lab is a place where ideas become reality. Anyone with any level of experience can create anything. And through the online Fab Lab community, you can then share those ideas and collaborate with people half a world away. <http://fab.cba.mit.edu/about/labs/>

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READ/ *Fab: The Coming Revolution on Your Desktop — from Personal Computers to Personal Fabrication*, Neil Gershenfeld, Basic Books, 2005 ▶



BLAIR EVANS is founder and director of Incite Focus, a program that uses digital fabrication, agroecology and appropriate technology to empower communities. His project work and centers of community production can be found in the U.S., South Africa and Ethiopia, among other locations. He is a guru with the Fab Academy, a permaculture practitioner and instructor, and a superintendent of a group of charter schools using these technologies in place-based education.