





Making » » » Shift Happen

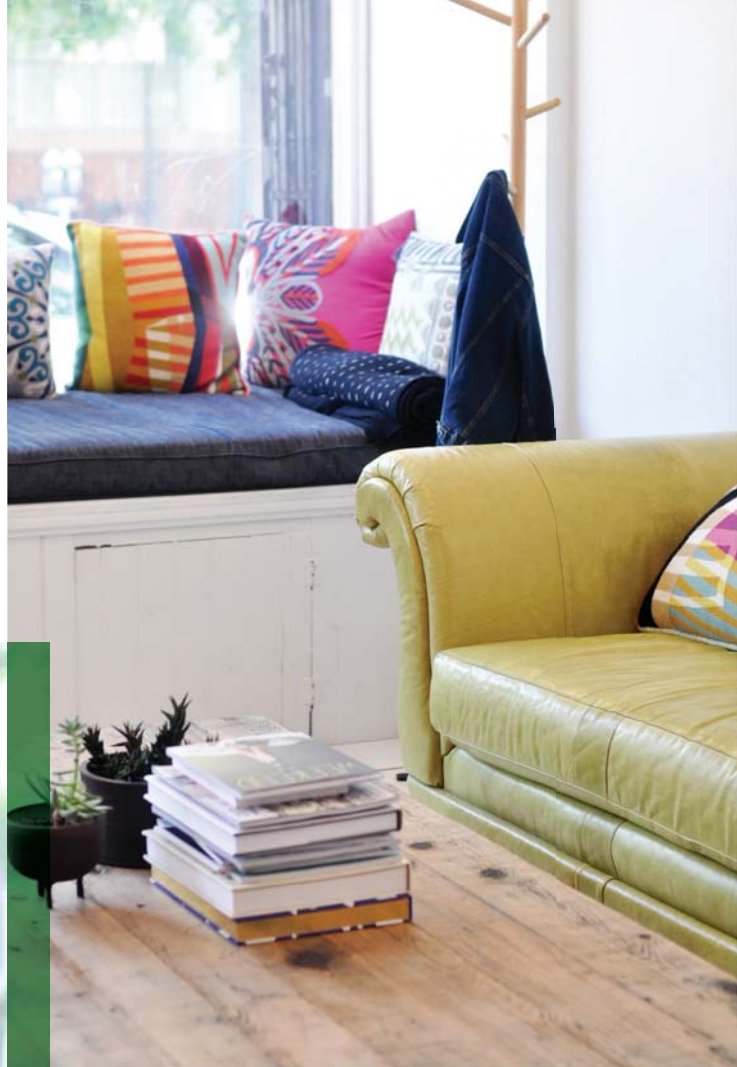
How Rena Tom and her community of creative professionals are changing the way we work.

■ WORDS JOSEPH HUGHES

On any given day at either of Makeshift Society's thriving locations in San Francisco and Brooklyn, you're likely to see designers, illustrators, photographers, crafters, writers, social media experts, architects and even accountants working side-by-side. Strike that: *Co-working* side-by-side.

Co-working, where independent professionals share a common workspace, has exploded exponentially since first gaining traction in the mid-2000s. According to a recent report from the Commercial Real Estate Development Association, nearly 800 communal spaces exist in the U.S., while membership in co-working collectives nationwide grew 117% from 2012 to 2013.

That said, Makeshift Society isn't just another co-working space. And its founder, Rena Tom, isn't just another entrepreneur. To see why, however, you have to start in the mid-'90s, years before the term "co-working" was even coined—and also years before Tom, a creative Pied Piper, put a fresh spin on the concept.



HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Communal areas mix perfectly with more private spaces to give Makeshift Society's San Francisco space a focused yet casual atmosphere. If members need some shut-eye, naps are only a short ladder's climb away in the loft.



SHIFTING ABOUT

"I have a rather wiggly career path," Tom says. "A lack of focus and a desire to know a little bit about everything seems to be my theme."

Her nonlinear career path began after studying mechanical engineering and English at The University of California, Santa Barbara. Tom, a self-taught web designer and programmer, first worked for several companies, and then finally struck out on her own. "I didn't fit in the corporate world very well," she says. "Perhaps presumptuously, since I was quite young, I wanted my voice to be heard and I felt like the hierarchy and culture at the various places I worked didn't allow for that."

Burnt out from web design and with a doctor's diagnosis of carpal tunnel syndrome, Tom re-evaluated her career choices, shifting her need to create from the virtual to the tangible world. She began making and selling jewelry, as well as small-batch custom wedding invitations, gaining a following in the process.

Tom soon moved to New York City, and in a new city filled with strangers and with a lot of time on her hands, she decided to take everything she knew about retail and establish Rare Device in Park Slope, Brooklyn. It was 2005, and Tom opened the shop with the intent to make her own jewelry in the back while selling it—and her friends' work—out front.

Rare Device's reputation grew quickly, drawing coverage from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Lucky*, *Real Simple* and *Martha Stewart Weddings*, among others. When Tom moved back to San Francisco in 2007, she opened a larger second location there. With partner Lisa Congdon's help, Rare Device grew beyond a simple storefront into something more, adding gallery shows, pop-up shops and other events. In 2011 and in the midst of the recession, the shop sold, with Congdon pursuing a career in illustration while Tom began a retail consultancy.

"Rena is exceptionally smart," Congdon says. "Her brain is always working. She's an engineer, always connecting both small and big ideas, forecasting into the future what people might be doing or needing or making." The ideas Tom connected next have had an impact far beyond her already impressive résumé.

SHIFTING INTO GEAR

In 2012, again feeling the same lonely ache that led her to open Rare Device, Tom recognized a need within herself—and her creative friends. A variety of conditions had conspired to grow the freelance population. And when someone leaves a company to work for themselves, they leave more than a job. They leave a community of people and the sense of collaboration within a common space. Tom sought to provide this diverse mix of freelancers, artists and small business owners a place to share and an environment that would allow their passions to prosper. "I realized that helping people improve their business was the most interesting thing for me," she says.

Her solution was Makeshift Society, a co-working space with a name that pays tribute as much to the ad hoc nature of Tom's idea as it does the collective of

members. "When I went to the informational meeting about Makeshift Society held at Rare Device (operating under its new management at the time), the energy in the room was electric," says early member Sarah Deragon, a photographer and creator of *The Identity Project*. "Rena was standing on a stool talking to all of us about the concept and what help she needed to make it happen. This was my first time ever meeting her—and from that moment on, I was in 100%!"

Soon, Tom, with the help of Victoria Smith and Suzanne Shade, established Makeshift's 1,000-square-foot creative clubhouse in San Francisco's Hayes Valley neighborhood in 2012. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves serve to both enclose a cozy conference room and divide the communal front of the space, which features long work tables, a couch and two window seats, from the back—home to smaller workspaces, lockers and a galley kitchen. When members need to recharge their batteries, they're a short ladder's climb away from a loft perfect for napping.

Tom's personality informs Makeshift's environment. There's a focused yet casual atmosphere that she told *Core77* is "relaxed without being pretentious and productive without being overwhelming." Printmaker and member Jen Hewett appreciates how Tom's willingness to listen has led to a space that feels much different than its counterparts. "Other co-working spaces seem to be very tech-driven, at least in San Francisco," she says. "Their setups and their programming are very centered around startup culture—which is often a culture of extroversion and self-promotion. Makeshift is far more diverse, more inclusive—and also more subtle. I think, in a way, Makeshift is an introverted space, if places can have personalities."

Kellie McCool, whose collective of designers and writers, CO/OP, uses Makeshift Society as a home base, feels right at home in Hayes Valley. "There is a creative energy at Makeshift that I haven't found anywhere else," she says. "I've found myself mistakenly telling people they should stop by 'my' office, meaning Makeshift—I feel that at home there. That is what people should be looking for. Other shared spaces don't seem to have a lot of personality."

SHIFTING EAST

Makeshift San Francisco's popularity exploded as its membership soared past 200, and Tom began fielding requests from creative entrepreneurs in other cities clamoring for a Society to call their own. She initially considered a second location in nearby Oakland, but a perfect storm of circumstances, her now-large network of contacts and the appeal of having an outpost on both coasts made New York City a natural fit.

"New York was always the choice for expansion," Tom says. "There is an ineffable kinship between Brooklyn and the Bay Area. We ended up in Williamsburg because of the density of creative professionals and the fact there didn't seem to be a lot of office or studio space there."

Williamsburg stood out because of its proximity to public transit and its many shops and restaurants, two factors Tom and her team considered when opening



A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

"Rena (pictured above) makes you feel empowered to accomplish anything," Stewart Scott-Curran says. "Even if it's something well outside your comfort zone or something you may have never thought about, her whole demeanor says, 'You've got this, and it's going to be awesome.'"





“The No. 1 reason we moved to Makeshift was for the community.”

A SHARED EXPERIENCE

“Our huge windows give people a shared point of reference, and that leads to conversation and shared experiences, which themselves are the groundwork for future collaborations,” says Bryan Boyer, Makeshift Brooklyn business partner.

the first clubhouse in Hayes Valley. Makeshift works best at ground level, and when Tom and New York City business partner Bryan Boyer found a beautiful space in a former Eberhard Faber pencil factory on Hope Street, the new location had a home.

“We sincerely want to be embedded in our community,” Tom says. “We locate our clubhouses on the ground floor in mixed retail/residential neighborhoods. This makes us much more part of the conversation on the street than, say, an upper floor in an office tower does.”

Boyer’s work in designing the Brooklyn space helps bring that conversation indoors. “The design of Makeshift Society’s spaces are meant to encourage connections between members,” he says. “Collaboration will happen in due course if people know each other beyond a cursory introduction, so the most important thing we can do is create an environment where people feel safe, comfortable and curious. The basic physical ingredients of a collaborative environment are nothing without getting the social parts right, too. You can build shared tables until the cows come home, but if you don’t have the right atmosphere that sparks connections, collaboration isn’t even an option because people haven’t connected.”

While the Brooklyn space is Makeshift through-and-through, it does differ, somewhat, from its San Francisco counterpart. Think of them as siblings, not identical twins. For instance, the new location is four times larger, clocking in at 4,000 square feet. The bi-level branch’s primary space is more industrial, features 17-foot vaulted ceilings and is naturally lit on

GRACE BONNEY, DESIGN*SPONGE

three sides by massive windows. The reconfigurable main floor features shared tables, couches, private phone booths and a unique cubed conference room whose wooden walls are actually dry-erase boards in disguise. The lower level offers a kitchen, conference room/photo studio, pin-up space and a series of dedicated desks for Makeshift’s most serious members.

One such member is Brooklyn-based writer Grace Bonney, founder of the popular blog Design*Sponge. “The No. 1 reason we moved to Makeshift was for the community,” Bonney says, whose blog boasts more than 75,000 daily readers. “It’s tough to have a job that’s 100% ‘head down’ all day in front of a laptop. The thing most of us love about blogging is that it gives us a chance to connect and collaborate with others—but that wasn’t happening in person. We all missed being able to meet new people, work with them and bounce ideas off of them. So for us, having a space like this means opening the door to new possibilities.”

The one drawback for Bonney? That she’s waited until this past year to start co-working. “The only thing I wish I’d done differently is join one of these spaces earlier,” Bonney says. “I think I felt pressure to have an

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRYAN BOYER & KIRA SIMON-KENNEDY (LEFT); PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIRA SIMON-KENNEDY & KELLI ANDERSON (RIGHT)



office as a showpiece of our company's success, when that wasn't the way we actually worked best. Now, we're able to cut overhead, work the way we want and meet new people to collaborate with."

One of the Brooklyn location's most talked-about amenities—its creative tool lending library—exemplifies the new possibilities Bonney envisioned when she moved Design*Sponge there. Tom and Boyer used the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter to raise money for the library, which upon completion will include a reference library of books and materials, audio/visual equipment for a variety of productions and art/design supplies, all available for members who need them but who may not have the space or means to own them.

Over the course of 30 days, nearly 450 backers came together to raise more than \$31,000 to support the library. They were thanked for their generosity with some unique rewards. Donors could get a poster designed by Kate Bingaman-Burt, a custom portrait by Julia Rothman (which became the wallpaper at the Brooklyn space), a sponsored shelf in the library or a Google Hangout with Makeshift creative advisers Bonney and Congdon.

"Kickstarter is a great measure of the extent of your network," Tom says. "We had many friends contribute, which also meant people designing rewards for backers or even just blogging or tweeting about our campaign. We tried to design the rewards to reflect our interests and the kind of programming and people that make up the Makeshift community. Our people are our strength, and the campaign was a great way to share that."

SHIFTING ATTITUDES

The idea that people are Makeshift's strength informs its membership structure. Those interested in working there can purchase single-day passes just as easily as they can plans that offer several days a month, a couple of days a week or, for the most dedicated co-workers, full-time, five-days-a-week access. "We have a very flexible membership structure to allow for people who work in bursts, and who don't need a co-working space all the time," Tom says. "We don't want to be your only choice; we want to be a node on your work route, which may also include the breakfast table, the coffee shop, a studio visit, a client's office and in line at the post office."

Since the start, Makeshift Society has meant something more than the name on the door. Both chapters host a variety of classes, workshops, lunches and mixers focused on the nature of "making" (skill-based education) and "shifting" (points of view via topics within the community's interest). One night you may learn calligraphy or block printing, while the next night you may learn business strategies or résumé writing.

"There's something for everyone," Tom says. "We also play with scale, which suits people's needs and personal styles. We'll hold one-on-one office hours, which is less intimidating for the introverts, and we'll throw launches and parties for the extroverts. Everyone finds their comfort level."

For Congdon, who regularly teaches an illustration course at Makeshift, this comfort level breeds a true sense of community. "I think the classes at Makeshift



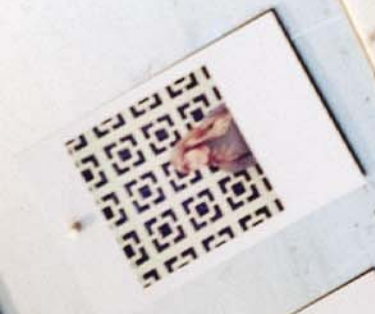
WHO DARES



**ROLL CALL:
MAKESHIFT TALENT**

"San Francisco has more people working in blogging, social media or other consultant work with tech companies, whereas in Brooklyn,

we're seeing more interest from people within the fashion and film industries," Boyer says. "In San Francisco, we have a monk as one of our members. In Brooklyn there are no monks, but we do have a magician."





Look Before You Leap

As it becomes a more viable option, co-working presents creative professionals with a new model of doing business. However, not all spaces are created equal. Here are six tips to remember as you consider co-working.

1. Be considerate.

“Working with others—at a co-working space or anywhere else—isn’t rocket science,” says Bryan Boyer, Makeshift Society Brooklyn co-founder. “It’s good to be aware of those around you, be conscientious and courteous and to be yourself. Remember that you’re sharing a space with others, and this means you may find yourself asking (or being asked) to respect the communal nature of the space, such as taking phone calls to the phone booth or outside.”

2. Know thyself.

“Co-working space isn’t a magic bullet,” says Design*Sponge’s Grace Bonney. “If you have problems sticking to a schedule and staying focused at home, it won’t necessarily be better at an office, where there are people and other things to distract you. But if you’re someone who is good at buckling down and focusing on work, a co-working space is the perfect way to have a quiet workspace where you can also meet other people and get new ideas. For me, it’s the best of both worlds.”

3. Stay flexible.

“Find a place that feels pleasant to you,” says illustrator Lisa Congdon. “One of the things I love most about working at Makeshift is how comfortable I feel there.

Rena and her team worked hard to create spaces that are warm, inviting, clean and quiet at the same time. Co-working spaces fall on a spectrum of relaxed on one end and formal on the other. It’s important to find a co-working space that fits your particular vibe on that spectrum. And that might mean testing a place out for a bit before you become a member.”

4. Put people first.

“Look at the people, not the space,” says designer Stewart Scott-Curran. “Are they interested in fostering collaborative relationships, or are they only offering a nice desk and free coffee? The classes and workshops that Makeshift offers give a good clue as to how invested they are in helping their members grow. Had I known that the right co-working space could be a breeding ground for projects, collaboration and support, I would have started co-working a long time ago.”

5. Be sociable.

“Look to see if the co-working space has classes or socials, so that you can get to know other members,” says photographer Sarah Deragon. “The community that is drawn to Makeshift is really invested in the space and other members being successful. Working for yourself can be incredibly isolating and Makeshift Society makes sure that you never feel alone, and that is super valuable!”

6. Remember: Location, location, location.

“Look at the surrounding neighborhood when choosing a workspace,” says Vicki Murley, San Francisco Makeshifter and Sprightly Books’ founder. “In this neighborhood there are several great coffee places and restaurants just a block or two away, and that makes work breaks all the more enjoyable.”



THE RIGHT MIX

“The most important thing we can do is create an environment where people feel safe, comfortable and curious,” Boyer says. “The basic physical ingredients of a collaborative environment are nothing without getting the social parts right, too.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRYAN BOYER (LEFT), PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH DERAGON (RIGHT)

are one of the things that set it apart from other co-working spaces," she says. "Beyond my course, there are other similar kinds of classes where creatives are sharing their knowledge and expertise—and this environment of sharing and support is what makes Makeshift special. We're not hoarding what we know, we're sharing it so that others can become successful as well. There is a sense that when one person succeeds, we all succeed."

Sharing what you know, Boyer says, is just as important as what you share—especially in an age where figuring out how to do something is as easy as going online. "We're finding that people really value in-person exchanges when they're at the most tender moments of exploration," he says. "We love doing events that help people open the door to something new, be that a new skill, a new personal connection or a new perspective."

These connections, and the fruit they produce, are why both Tom and Boyer not only run Makeshift Society locations, but also work there themselves. For the pair, this is as much by design as it is necessity. "The exchange of knowledge can flow both directions if we're down on the ground with people," Tom says. "Sometimes we lead and other times we encourage people to take the lead. Our members can learn both compromise and also how to run with a good idea—and for a small businessperson, both are valuable."

Boyer adds, "Really there's no other option for us, because we want Makeshift Society to have a face, to be approachable and to be invested in the things that we say we're trying to do. When we talk about helping freelancers and small teams up their game, we say it as individuals who are in the thick of it, too."

Being in the thick of it—whether "it" represents that early days of web design, the explosion of the maker movement or the rise of co-working—is truly Tom's natural element. She's quick to admit the path that got her there is anything but straight, yet Makeshift Society is exactly where she's supposed to be. "We wear our heart on our sleeve, definitely," she says. "We're proudly made by creatives, for creatives." **HOW**

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WEB EXTRA

Rena Tom and Bryan Boyer give their take on the larger movement of co-working and how Makeshift stands out. HOWdesign.com/November-2014