

# Constructing – and deconstructing – a hackerspace

Whether you call them “hackerspaces” or “makerspaces”, places like Dim Sum Labs are a focal point for unconventional, creative, tech-minded individuals to congregate and share their ideas and knowledge in order to produce new, innovative concepts and creations.

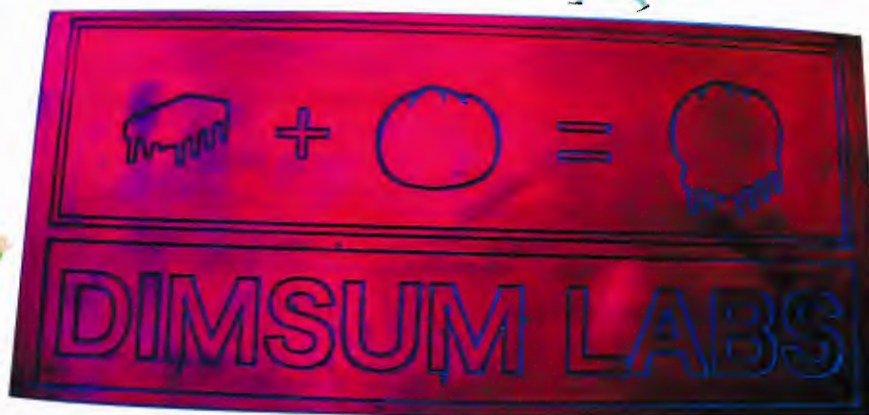
**Manolis Perrakis:**

Coming from Greece, Manolis is one of the DSL founders. A creative technologist working on magnifying and tracking movement of water particles under laser light to create digital sound. “We’re always debating and discussing. It would be boring if we all had the same opinions.”



**Folkert Saathoff:**

Coming from Germany, Folkert is involved on building an infrastructure which provides open access WiFi to street protesters during the umbrella movement. “As Hong Kong has many technophiles, the increasing struggle on the digital virtual domain would pull more people together to talk about it.”



**Adam Höse:**

A Swedish guy, working on a 3D printed system for drying his scuba gear. “Hacking has a political aspect to it, eg: the umbrella movement is hacking urban space.”



**Garret Linn:**

A New Yorker traveling and working in Hong Kong. As an independent filmmaker, Garret’s current project is helping artists to develop their own custom devices for digital creation. To him, the gist of maker culture is its backstage supporting community. “It’s not always about learning to be an engineer yourself, but to find engineers from the maker community to collaborate with.”



**Andy Kong:**

A local electrical engineer specialized in big LED screen design and security system. His maker projects include a Jet Pack Flying Bear and a robot arm backpack. “The maker community is a sharing community.”



Six people are sitting around the table. Several more crowd around a couch and chairs, facing towards the person in front who is doing the talking. The presenter demonstrates his creation while the others listen attentively. Mechanical tools, 3-D printers, electronic components and boxes are piled up at the side of a room half the size of a badminton court. Named after the popular Cantonese cuisine, Dim Sum Labs may be as small as the bite-sized dishes, but like them it packs a meaty, flavour-filled punch that belies its size. Despite its modest space, it is a place where unlikely minds meet and innovation thrives.

Founded in 2010 by a combination of locals and foreigners, Dim Sum Lab is Hong Kong's first "hackerspace" (also referred to as a hacklab, makerspace or hackspace), **a community-operated working space where like-minded individuals gather for peer learning and knowledge sharing.** It started off with only 5-10 members but has now expanded to around 30. As part of the global hackerspace movement, its members (aka hackers) come from all around the world to tinker with technology, work on their projects and learn from one another.

In the spirit of embracing hackerspace culture, I have decided to give hacking a try myself. I have therefore hacked this interview article: instead of writing a proper interview script and structuring it in proper paragraphs as is normal in the Chamber's magazine, I have deconstructed my three hours of recorded material. Like gleaning a thread by pulling the silk from a cocoon, I have stitched the pieces into various chapters to form a bricolage, aiming to reassemble and re-create the concept of an open hackerspace:

### What is hacking?

**GL:** Hacking is the process of re-examining expectations. For instance, hacking narrative is making narratives that people don't necessarily expect. That has nothing to do with computers...

**AK:** Mix-and-match skills. It's a community where you learn about something from people who know it. It's a **sharing community...** and a "making" movement these days. **You don't go outside to buy stuff. You come here and make it by yourself.**

**MP:** It's also about **not accepting the way the world has provided for you.** For example, with broken equipment with a specific function, we disassemble it and change the function to make it better. Or apply this when talking about art, words...

**GL:** Misusing tools is a big part of it.

**AH:** Taking something and using it in a way that it wasn't intended to be used.

The "hacker ethic" is known to be free access of information, distrust of authority and peer-to-peer learning. Often a contentious zone is the topic of freedom and its limits. What do you think?

**AK:** I'm writing an article about ethics. For example something you know how to make but shouldn't make, like a gun. In theory, you're capable of doing it, but you shouldn't do it.

**All:** Why not?

**AK:** It's not ethical. When people acquire wider skill sets, the question then becomes what kind of things should they make? For instance, if a criminal comes here and wants to learn how to pick a lock, will you teach him how to pick a lock?

**GL:** What you're talking about is learning and understanding of protocols. Whereas what we're doing here is what we do with the Internet, it's what we do with the computers, it's what we do with each other, it's what we do with the language. In other words, if you write a poem, you're hacking language. If that poem gets someone upset, that's hacking. There's no difference between writing a great poem and writing a piece of infectious software.

**FS:** The exciting thing about all of this is, because technology is around us so much, that people who understand it have so much more power than everyone else. **It's very important to have this discussion, otherwise people will only be behaving irresponsibly.**



**AK:** The public has to be educated about what technology is about. If we give something to a dummy, but he doesn't know how to use it, then it might endanger public security.

**GL:** Part of the problem about hackers is they're constantly pushing into undefined, unregulated territory. Constantly.



## How do you define a successful hackerspace?

**AK:** A successful hackerspace needs to have an **active member base**. It's a community.

**MP:** Right. It's a community-run space. **Without the community, it doesn't exist.**



**GL:** These guys promote themselves. I can go online and find them. If I want to hang out tonight with a bunch of painters, I can't go online and find out where the painters are hanging out tonight. But I could find where these guys are as they invite anyone who would like to show up.

I wouldn't have these kinds of ethical conversations with a bunch of painters. Seriously, because everything that you guys are doing is political, and every one of you has an ethic and morality. I think that's great! And more fun to sit down, pound on the table... This is the best part of all of these kinds of spaces. **These are open spaces, where people are willing to put up with freaks who show up out of nowhere. You don't see this everywhere, and not every community.**

## How significant is having a makerspace in an urban city like Hong Kong?

**AK:** It is different from a pure consumer society. It is like when you go to a museum, you see the creation of an artist. The creation belongs to the artist. I want to create my own stuff, and have my name engraved there. When I create something, I take care of it, conserve it. If it's broken, I'll try my best to fix it, because it's my own creation. I grow to appreciate the thing I create more and more.

**FS:** I think it's important to cultivate a maker culture in Hong Kong because rampant consumerism is all around us. In Hong Kong, there's very little public space where you can sit down and read a book without paying for a coffee at the same time. When everything is commercialised, it turns into a very boring culture. So anything that makes the environment better, be it music or art, or people making their own robots, or drones, is a good thing.



**Q:** So the maker culture is also a culture of creativity?

**AH:** Absolutely.

## Is Hong Kong mature enough to be branded as a "maker" city?

**MP:** Hong Kong is first and foremost a financial centre. It's also a small region. I don't think many people are interested. In Europe, there is social education that helps people have a better understanding about the maker culture.

**GL:** If you go to New York, all the supply shops that you guys take for granted do not exist. I work as a creative. **If I do not have access to things that I don't use, I don't think of using them for something new.** That's a terrible thing. In New York we used to have art supply stores where you would randomly learn about stuff. But in New York we don't have used electronics stores. There's no used part stores; there's no mechanical part stores. You have to buy everything on the Internet, all you have in New York at this point is the worst commercial stores, McDonald's, Starbucks... The parts supply stores are gone. I'm in Hong Kong now and I love it. I can go into these supply stores and there's piles of stuff. I see something and think, I want to play with that!



**Q:** In Sham Shui Po?

**GL:** Yeah, there's that, there's Mongkok, Wan Chai...

**AK:** It's relatively cheaper too.

**GL:** Not just cheaper, but available!

**AK:** Yeah, coming from Sweden, this is heaven! There wasn't a single shop where you could go to buy components [in Sweden].

**MP:** Something interesting is that we're getting a lot of start-ups and kickstarter start-ups coming here. They stop in Hong Kong, and then they go to Shenzhen to buy and manufacture their own equipment. **In terms of manufacturing and technology, Hong Kong is a very important place.**



**GL:** Yes, the resources in Hong Kong are fantastic for doing this kind of work. **E**