

THE NEW GUILDED AGE

BY NATHAN SCHNEIDER

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ILLUSTRATION BY BOYOUN KIM



One afternoon in May, Chris Chavez, Jerone Hsu, and Dan Taeyoung splayed themselves out along a suspended I-beam and stray ladder on the roof of a pair of conjoined buildings on the Hell's Kitchen end of Fifty-fourth Street, talking about their co-working collective, Prime Produce (<http://primeproduce.org>), and the history of the world. The three entrepreneurs, who are in their late twenties and early thirties, were overseeing a total renovation of the structure beneath them. First built in 1919 as a garage, it was being transformed to include an art studio in the basement, an open-plan office and café at the ground level, and a room for workshops and meditation on the second floor. Chavez greeted construction workers by name as they passed by.

The three men began to tell me where they situated their plans, world-historically speaking. “It took a few hundred years to get over the hangover of the Industrial Revolution,” Chavez said. He explained that this hangover has lasted well into the digital age, manifesting most recently in the instability wrought by ever-looming waves of automation. It was now time, he and his colleagues believed, to restore a pre-industrial template to prominence. They’d decided to reinvent Prime Produce, a small non-profit that Hsu had founded some years earlier, by modelling it after a medieval guild.

The idea came to them in the spring of 2014, when they organized an entrepreneurship retreat on the grounds of Bluestone Farm, a community of eco-feminist Episcopal nuns in Brewster, about an hour upstate on the Metro-North. After some years engaged in varied forms of entrepreneurship, they were trying to figure out what forms of organization would best suit their peers’ shifting working conditions. Neither unions nor chambers of commerce seemed suited to a generation that increasingly can’t count on having a fixed place of work. The Reverend Leng Lim, a minister and executive coach who lives across the street from the nuns, suggested that Chavez and his compatriots consider looking into guilds.

From roughly the turn of the first millennium to the French Revolution, guilds operated as associations of independent craftspeople, setting standards for their lines of work and cultivating lively subcultures around their labor. Like today's lawyers' bars and doctors' associations, they typically held legal monopolies over crafts in particular cities; one guild's members might forbid non-members to make stone carvings, while another would control the market on locksmithing. Members were also expected to have each other's backs. In "Wage Labor and Guilds in Medieval Europe," Steven A. Epstein, a historian at the University of Kansas, cites a tenth-century guild that obliged members to rally for mutual defense and vengeance against clients who failed to pay up. "The members also swore an oath of loyalty to each other," Epstein writes, "promising to bring the body of a deceased member to a chosen burial site and supply half the food for the funeral feast." At least one of Prime Produce's ten other initial members told me that Chavez recruited him with a copy of Epstein's book in hand.

The guild doesn't have plans for funeral insurance just yet, however, and it won't be defining itself around a particular trade or industry. Its early joiners include an architect, an accountant, a food-and-beverage vendor, and a painter. As they work toward opening in 2016, their first order of business will be to figure out how to govern themselves. The typical co-working space these days is run by a company to which clients pay rent for use; by contrast, Prime Produce is exploring a model in which many members will be co-owners of a coöperative firm, which will manage the proceeds of their dues and pay rent to the sympathetic investors who own the buildings. Chavez told me that co-ownership can be a way to opt out, at least in part, of the pressures of the broader economy—to reclaim the former meanings of words, even, from before they were conscripted to capitalism. "The word 'company' doesn't need to exist in a market logic," he said. It used to be, simply, what happens when people come together.

Members of medieval guilds typically progressed in rank from apprentice to journeyman to master craftsman—distinctions still used by some trade associations today. Prime Produce will also incorporate three tiers, but based on levels of commitment, rather than on experience and proficiency. As a rite of passage, new members will each receive a pair of slippers to wear while inside the space—a "differentiating mechanism," Chavez said, between members and visitors.

Prime Produce isn't alone in looking to old-fashioned guilds as a means of social innovation. Some unions already hearken to them, at least by name, notably in the film industry. The *New York Times Magazine* recently suggested, too, that Hollywood's guild-like set-workers' unions, whose members often bounce from production to production, may represent "the future of work." Jay Z's Tidal streaming platform sold itself to consumers as a kind of guild for musicians, and a band of Silicon Valley business writers has organized itself into the Silicon Guild to help amplify each member's network and steer the conversation about technology.

As we talked on the rooftop, Prime Produce's founders freely mixed medieval

idiom with that of Silicon Alley. Taeyoung cited the computer programming guru Donald Knuth's dictum, "Premature optimization is the root of all evil." If they decided too much ahead of time, in too much detail, the idea was, they wouldn't be as flexible, as iterative. Hsu described what Prime Produce is doing as "crafted social innovation" and a form of "slow entrepreneurship." The guild's appeal wasn't just nostalgic to them but a way of navigating an often lonely attention-deficient economy, by cultivating habits of excellence and communizing resources like office space, companionship, and broadband. Adding to the stew of ambition and anachronism, Chavez referred to the old guilds as "catalysts" for a better kind of technological progress. "They blocked innovation that dehumanized work," he said. "Guilds were always responsible to people first."

Conventional wisdom holds that guilds in fact stymied efficiency and technological innovation. Epstein's book sought to correct that narrative, as does the work of the Dutch social historian Maarten Prak. Guilds, Prak told me, "were not opposed to innovation per se, they were opposed to machines taking over." When factory production replaced craft guilds, "work was transformed from rather boring to hopelessly boring." Products became cheaper and more uniform, with fewer workers required to make them. But gone, too, was the fingerprint of the craftsman. Prak stressed, however, the importance of what he called "formal anchoring" for medieval guilds—establishing arrangements with local governments—to sustain themselves "for a longer period than the enthusiasm of the founding members." Before long, to protect their craft, members found themselves needing to get involved in politics.

"It was a sort of deal between small businessmen and the authorities," Sheilagh Ogilvie, an economic historian at the University of Cambridge who is more critical of the guilds' legacy than Epstein or Prak, told me. Ogilvie stressed that guilds enforced an exclusionary economy, barring from their trades whomever they happened not to like, which often meant women, Jews, and immigrants. Adam Smith referred to the guilds' price-fixing practices as "a conspiracy against the public," and at the start of the French Revolution, they were among the first features of the *ancien régime* to be dispatched to the institutional guillotine. It was only in the last gasps of the guilds, after they'd lost their monopolies and had been forced to be less discriminatory, that Ogilvie thinks their nuisance was minimized.

Thus far, at least, Prime Produce's membership has considerable ethnic, gender, and occupational diversity. And rather than making political deals, it will seek leverage in the pooling and collective management of resources, in the synergy of the members' slippers and their ambitions for good works. Despite various delays and hitches, no one has yet dropped out. "The ingredient that plays a central role in all this is trust," Qinza Najm, an artist who plans to work in the basement studio, told me.

laid-back Salazar is a consultant and life coach who works with people on cultivating “purpose-driven careers, businesses, and lives.” He also organizes events for social entrepreneurs in the city, and plans to hold some at the Prime Produce space when it’s ready.

“I’ve heard a lot about guilds,” he said.

But when I asked about the slippers, he shrugged and looked at the founders uneasily. They smiled. They hadn’t told him about that part yet.

Watch: For thirty years, Phil Mortillaro has been making keys in the West Village.

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