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## This week in Chicago

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### 1871, Chicago's new tech hub

The Merchandise Mart welcomes digital start-up companies. *By Erin Chan Ding*



1871 tech center located on the 12th floor in the Merchandise Mart is a space aimed at housing startup companies. The name 1871 comes from the year of the Great Chicago Fire (1871) and it's goal is to house up to 400 companies.

Photo: Michael Jarecki

Coasting on a Razor scooter, Web entrepreneur Jesse Pinho navigates the 50,000 square feet of cement and glass that is 1871, a collaborative space on the 12th floor of the Merchandise Mart opening Wednesday 2. Funded in part by venture capitalist J.B. Pritzker and a \$2.3 million state grant from the 2009 Illinois Jobs Now! capital plan, the tech hub is being marketed as a potential fountainhead for future Web giants.

Named after the year of the Great Chicago Fire—and a tribute to the rebuilding and ingenuity it spurred—1871 aims to help Web innovation coalesce in this so-called Silicon Prairie. Thus far, the space has brought in early-stage companies like Pinho's Mobicart, a sort of reverse Groupon that connects existing buyers who want specific items with vendors who will discount the goods. The other 30 start-ups renting desks and workspace at 1871 include Groovebug, a personalized, digital music magazine; ProOnGo, which tracks expenses; and Zyndeo, which will allow users to search for homes based on exacting specifics, like an aversion to carpet or an affinity for kitchen islands.

"This is a start-up," says Kevin Willer, president and CEO of the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center, which is managing operations at 1871. "It's a start-up for start-ups."

It's a concept that's common in tech-heavy cities like San Jose and San Francisco, but 1871 was designed "to be Chicago," according to Todd Heiser of Gensler, the downtown architecture firm responsible for 1871's aesthetics. A boxy pattern on the carpet evokes the downtown grid, a curving glass wall (which can be written on like a whiteboard) echoes the bends of the Chicago River, and diagonal light fixtures pay homage to angled city roadways like Elston and Lincoln Avenues.

"We looked for [1871] to be the voice of the people that occupied the space," Heiser says. Those people consist of entrepreneurs but also teaching-oriented start-ups like Code Academy, which conducts Web development, design and coding courses out of a glass-walled classroom. Code Academy cofounder Mike McGee says he's excited just "being in a space with like-minded people who want to do amazing things."

Adding to the synergetic environs, 1871 will provide seminars, mentorships and workshops for its members. Willer also envisions bringing in venture-capital firms and angel investors to mingle with entrepreneurs looking for funding.

More than 300 start-ups have applied for membership to 1871, says Willer, who expects the space to house about 400 people at full capacity. The nonprofit charges \$125 to \$400

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a month for membership, depending on whether the rented area is shared space during nights and weekends or a reserved spot that includes conference-room access, a lockable cabinet and a work table with power outlets.

Before moving into 1871 in April, Pinho had been working on Mobcart out of his Wheaton apartment—and various Starbucks locations. But he doesn't miss the incessant squeal of a coffee grinder. "I know I work with a lot more focus and energy when I'm here," says Pinho, clad in an emerald T-shirt and sporting a wisp of a soul patch.

A few yards away from Pinho's work station sits Frank Muscarello, the CEO of MarkIT X, which helps businesses and individuals trade hardware. The two are already planning a future collaboration.

"The fact that I'm sitting right next to him is just insane," Pinho says. "I'm always hearing him making deals and stuff, and it's so energizing."

With that, Pinho gives a broad smile, hops onto a red-wheeled scooter and glides back to his laptop.

April 26, 2012

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