

What would you pay for an empty room?

By Kyle Chayka

1 As a kid, *Harold and the Purple Crayon* was one of my favorite books. With the utensil of the title, Harold could draw anything in the air and it would come to life: A tree, a skyscraper, even his own bedroom all popped into being from simple outlines. As a New Yorker for most of the past decade, I often think about how nice it would be. Whenever you need a seat, a bathroom, or an extra closet, you just draw it, and it appears.



2 On a recent afternoon I was walking down the Bowery on Manhattan's Lower East Side feeling like I could use a break and a phone charge. I stopped at a building I had never been in before, got a door code from an app on my phone, took the elevator up to the fifth floor, and walked into an austere yet luxurious room with a floor-to-ceiling view of the street that would be mine alone for the next hour and a half.

3 This pop-up work lounge appeared courtesy of Breather, a start-up that has raised \$25 million in funding to provide on-demand multi-purpose rooms in cities. Breather could be described as Uber for living rooms, or an hourly version of WeWork, a provider of workspaces for start-ups. But what Breather really does is turn physical space into a frictionless app with the same magic as Harold's crayon, that is, 14.

4 CEO Julien Smith and CCO Caterina Rizzi founded Breather in Montreal. Like WeWork (offices), Common (apartments), and Managed by Q (cleaning), Breather isn't so much a technology company as a tech gloss on a very old, very conservative business: the temporary meeting-room industry. "We're slicing multiple use cases into the same space, making space more democratic in the city," Smith says. Breather's team of designers redecorates, installing furniture from hip design outlets. Then it goes live on the app, with prices ranging from \$10 an hour for a desk in a shared workspace to \$150 an hour for a 24-person room. One of the selling points is sameness: no matter where you are, a Breather room will look like Breather, with similar design, amenities, and branding. If you're used to the aesthetics of start-up offices and uniformly renovated condos, you're going to feel perfectly at home. The Wi-Fi will always be good and you won't have to sit next to any strangers. It's yours for an hour.

5 Breather is part of the coming on-demand world. You will soon be paying for quick 'slices' of everything from cars and apartments to office

space and even cafe seating. Smith describes this condition as 'more democratic'. While it's true that getting an Uber requires less money upfront than buying a car, and a Breather less than renting office space, a more efficient distribution of resources is not necessarily any more 16. Breather creates a marketplace that excludes as many as it serves.

6 The Breather building on Bowery is down the street from the future site of a new 180-room Ace Hotel, which used to be the Salvation Army Chinatown Shelter. The shelter provided temporary space of a far different kind than the start-up, for people who do not have pockets that are deep enough to pay for an hour's office space or a quick nap on a designer couch. Next door, lines still form for meals at the Bowery Mission, no thanks to the online food ordering service Seamless.

7 'On demand' does not mean just anyone can demand it. By relentlessly turning any commodity into a short-term rentable product, these services downplay the role that stable public resources play in our lives. We use Uber instead of the subway, Breather instead of parks. And the less people use public resources, 18.

8 At the end of my allotted time (a \$120 value that I could never afford), I didn't want to leave the Breather room. I walked out onto the city street feeling a little calmer and more productive. A similar respite can be found in a coffee shop for \$3 or a bar for \$7. The fee isn't even hourly, but it might not come with designer furniture or a phone charger, and you won't be alone. As is the case with so many start-ups that continue to promote visions of democracy, how much of the future you have access to depends on how much you can pay for it.

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