

ACADEMIA

“Garage-Band” Science

Dr. Jakub Mielczarek

Faculty of Physics, Astronomy, and Applied Informatics Jagiellonian University

The Garage of Complexity supports everyone who wants to take risks – the kind that can turn into something magnificent, push one’s academic career onto a new track, blaze a nonstandard trail.



What if someone wants to make something new, but does not have the right space to do so? For instance, someone dreaming of starting their own rock & roll band? They will need to practice a lot, make a lot of noise and a big mess. They could do it at home, but if they want to maintain decent relations with their family, I’d advise against it: it takes a long time before the cacophony starts turning into real music. Renting a practice room is unfortunately costly. The only option that often remains is a garage. And a good option it is, as a place to creatively develop musical ideas, left alone, without any restrictions on time or decibels.

One can learn a lot in a garage – this is clear to anyone who has ever tried to realize their aspiration of becoming a rock star. You can bring in an idea that occurred to you under the shower just that morning, get your pals excited about it, and creatively collaborate to turn it into a fully-fledged song. You can also come in empty-handed and simply spend time messing around and improvising. Exploring uncharted musical territory, you never know when you might come up with that amazing riff that will captivate listeners and propel an unknown garage band into giant concert venues. Such things have happened hundreds of times, after all. And not only in the world of music. Many other great things were also born in garages. What would Silicon Valley be like if William R. Hewlett and David Packard had not tinkered up their HP200A audio oscillator in a garage at 367 Addison Avenue in Palo Alto? And who knows what Apple would have ever amounted to, if Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak did not have their garage in Los Altos.

So what is it about garages, anyway? It seems that four elements are important here: risk, community, creativity, and an enterprising spirit. But what if we add one more word: “science”? Unfortunately, particularly in the Polish context, it seems out of place in the proverbial noisy garage. But that is something we want to change. We dream of a kind of science that is the result of messy creativity and fruitful collaboration, that does not shy away from risky challenges, that yields innovative ideas with practical applications. What is this often not the case? Perhaps because we want to keep science uniform, inside a clean practice room, rehashing the

same old tunes? Sure, then it is easier to evaluate and compare, but it also lacks real creativity. It may sound OK for small performances, but will never draw big crowds. So what can be done to bring some verve back to Polish science? Could housing it in a garage really encourage risk-taking, stimulate creativity, foster a sense of enterprising community? We decided to find out.

For three years now, our “Garage of Complexity” experiment has been underway at Jagiellonian University (www.complexitygarage.com). Despite various difficulties, for instance a failure to grasp the metaphorical sense of the word “garage” (one of the potential spaces offered to us was actually a sheet-metal shack), the project has developed beyond our hopes. Today we have everything necessary to do garage-band science. We “make music” by supporting innovative projects, inspiring and educating researchers, bringing them together with businesspeople. By showing what is possible. Our Garage supports everyone who wants to take risks – the kind that can turn into something magnificent, push one’s academic career onto a new track, blaze a nonstandard trail. It may perhaps be a less secure pathway, devoid of checkpoints, without any guarantee of immediate gratification, but it leads towards the real, rather than secondary objective. Of course, risk-taking is a challenge, but it is easier when we are surrounded by people who share our passion, whose support we can count on. We strive to create such a community. Moreover, gathering together people who “play different instruments” (i.e. have different specializations) always leads to interesting results. The gene that is most strongly expressed among this community is the gene of creativity. And from there, an entrepreneurial spirit is just around the corner. Because if things have come this far, they should be brought to fruition: when conceptual ideas take real shape and begin to serve others.

Such is the approach we try to follow at the Garage of Complexity. We do not know where it will lead us. And although that involves uncertainty, we are continually rewarded by the sense of exploring uncharted territory. ■

PS: Once I had already finished this essay, I came to the conclusion that the set {risk, community, creativity, enterprising spirit} should also include one more element: being left alone.