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**THINKING OF
SETTING UP YOUR
OWN BUSINESS?
HERE ARE THREE
CITIES THAT
ARE STARTUP
FRIENDLY AND
THAT COULD MAKE
YOUR LIFE EASIER.**

START HERE

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01 Charleston

The town of Charleston sits atop a narrow peninsula wedged between a pair of lazy rivers just a mile from the Atlantic. Life here is a picturesque snapshot of refined Southern living: dapper locals stroll along the Charleston Battery amid antebellum mansions and palmetto trees. Yet despite its languid air, this small, conservative town has proven rich in business acumen. The city has a young and ambitious population and an equally savvy city government set on developing local industry, from food to technology to design.

"I think there's this young creative class that's bubbling up and moving the city into a new era," says Brooks Reitz, a 28-year-old Kentucky native who moved to Charleston to join the city's culinary scene. "We're being met with enthusiasm and a real 'attaboy' attitude from the folks who came before us."

Commerce comes naturally to locals here. Through the 18th century, Charleston remained the wealthiest city south of Philadelphia, though its colonial roots date to 1670. Once a bustling port town, its early residents grew rich trading cash crops ranging from rice and cotton to silk and indigo. Yet over the years – in between some testing historical travails – the city has maintained a clearly defined, blue-blooded patriarchy that some argue has stifled growth in a town whose residents number fewer than 125,000. And yet it would appear the old guard is giving way to the promise of a new generation.

There's perhaps no one more well acquainted with the city's progressive spirit than Mayor Joseph Riley, a 70-year-old native whose love for Charleston has won him 10 consecutive terms in City Hall and countless honours, including the National Medal of Arts awarded by President Obama. "The first thing we did was make this a desirable place for creative people to live and work," he tells MONOCLE, sitting behind the desk of his high-ceilinged third-floor office at 80 Broad Street. "A physically beautiful, diverse, energetic place with a lively downtown and diverse cultural activities."

It's not uncommon to hear locals criticise Riley for issues ranging from his obsessive commitment to historic preservation (try painting your shutters the wrong colour) or the simple fact that he's been mayor for nearly 40 years. But there's plenty of reason he's likely to be re-elected for an 11th term and it has much to do with the environment he's helped create in Charleston. This part of his strategy – building a better city through rigorous preservation and wise civic investment – forms the basis upon which so many young professionals have chosen to locate in Charleston. In a poplin suit and tortoise-shell glasses, Riley recalls his own upbringing in Charleston, noting how many of his peers left the city for opportunities in places such as New York. "What's happened in the restoration of Charleston is that people don't want to leave now," he says. "I think the older

families recognise the value of their children and grandchildren being able to get a good job here."

Perhaps the most striking example of the city's recent progress comes in the form of the Charleston Digital Corridor (CDC), a public-private initiative launched in 2001 to house early-stage tech firms in a pair of smartly re-purposed buildings. Overseen by Bangalore-born Ernest Andrade, who doubles as the city's director for business development, the CDC serves as the mother church for Charleston's emerging digital businesses. Software firms such as Blackbaud laid the groundwork for the city's knowledge-based economy and Google's \$1.2bn (€909.4m) data centre in nearby Berkeley County has furthered Charleston's reputation as a tech hub, but it's the CDC that is likely to drive the next wave of innovation.

As Andrade drives MONOCLE along a stretch of road previously dominated by car dealerships, he points out a series of unremarkable buildings awaiting transformation by new firms. "I always tell people: 'if you ask me where things are going to be five years out, you can't afford to be there,'" Andrade says, highlighting the area's bold growth prospects.

Walking the halls of the CDC's headquarters at Flagship Two, Andrade points out offices occupied by people who have come from places such as Austin, San Francisco and London. The organisation will soon break ground on a third facility, a two-phase project partly funded by the city that is expected to cost \$10m (€7.6m). Much of the optimism surrounding the venture stems from the fact that local software firms such as People Matter and BoomTown got their start under the CDC and have each grown to employ staffs of more than 100. "The city has created an environment where creative people can thrive, and software people are creative people," says BoomTown's founder Grier Allen, "There's a natural connection between the software community and Charleston today."

Just a few miles away, historic districts such as Elliotborough and Cannonborough have become home to the city's creative class. This bit of town, as one local tells it, has become "one part Mayberry, one part Brooklyn". Amid a charming mix of 18th and 19th century clapboard homes, Fuzzco, an award-winning design firm has set up in a modern structure on Spring Street. Founded by partners Josh Nissenboim and Helen Rice, natives of St Louis and Charleston respectively, the firm's clients range from Mario Testino to a local soda maker. The pair met as students at Minnesota's Macalester College but found Charleston an ideal hub to run their company. "It was a really good move for our business," says Nissenboim. "The emerging design community really helped us grow."

Here, seated at a table made by local craftsman Michael James Moran (one of Fuzzco's clients), Rice echoes Nissenboim's sentiment. "It's a great place to start your business," she says. "There's a big community of people who support small businesses and fewer distractions than in a bigger city, so you can really focus on the things you're interested in."

Back at City Hall, Mayor Riley is not inclined to take Charleston's recent successes for granted. He's quick to acknowledge the challenges that persist in the city but seems proud of the direction in which his town is headed. Whereas many US cities dole out fiscal incentives to attract new business, it seems Charleston has taken a relatively restrained position on the issue of corporate welfare. "We have a local development corporation to assist with financing when needed, but no portfolio of incentives," he says. "Really what we have which is of greatest value is the place itself." — (M)



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