DISPATCH FROM SEATTLE; Computer graveyard and shrine; Buried among the old cables and laptop parts at this high-tech salvage shop is a museum devoted to the PC. Los Angeles Times January 14, 2008 Monday

HEADLINE: DISPATCH FROM SEATTLE;
Computer graveyard and shrine;
Buried among the old cables and laptop parts at this high-tech salvage shop is a museum devoted to the PC.

BYLINE: Stuart Glascock, Times Staff Writer

DATELINE: SEATTLE

BODY:

If there were a list of the geekiest landmarks to visit in Seattle, RE-PC would be near the top.

It's the place that old computers go to die.

Most are disassembled for parts, stripped down like wrecked cars at a junkyard. Some are recycled. But a select few escape.

They make it to a tidy room in the corner of the folksy high-tech salvage shop. That's the site of the RE-PC Computer Museum. It's a do-it-yourself personal computing hall of fame for brands that forged the modern computing era: Amiga, Atari, Commodore, Lear Siegler, DEC, Apple, IBM, Tandy, Xerox and more.

When RE-PC -- as in recycling personal computers -- opened in 1994, the early-model equipment came in when customers upgraded, said Steve Hess, who founded RE-PC with Mark Dabek.

"We have a fondness for all this history," Hess said. "We didn't have the heart to crush

these things."

Dabek and Hess started snagging the coolest of the old machines and setting them aside. What they ended up with is a small museum that captures the details and sweep of the technology that transformed how the world computes.

Exhibits include timelines, biographies of technology innovators, copies of early software programs signed by project teams and advertisements from the 1970s touting the brave new computer age. One 1979 ad boasted of a word processing program that "can create text and add, delete, center, recall lines and move text around on page or between pages."

A glass case displays mint-condition early laptops from Radio Shack and Epson. A huge hard drive from an IBM mainframe computer anchors one corner.

One case holds early pocket computers from Sharp, Casio, Atari and Sinclair -- said to be the first under-$200 computer. Mint-condition early personal computers line the walls, some with keyboard dust covers or felt-lined protectors for 5-inch floppy disc inserts.

One table holds an Apple II, a TRS-80 Model II, a light-blue Lear Siegler ADM-3A and a Commodore SuperPet -- a circa 1980 device described as "the first all-in-one, ready-to-use personal computer."

Although substantial, RE-PC's exhibits are tiny compared with the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, Calif., which claims the largest and most extensive museum for technology aficionados. Microsoft Corp. also pays homage to early computing pioneers in a well-designed visitor center at its Redmond, Wash., headquarters. Many online sites celebrate all things electronic.

But at RE-PC, everything is hands-on, and items on display were salvaged in most cases from customers who experienced the joys and frustrations of personal computing.

Most visitors find the museum by chance. To get to it, visitors pass through racks of used computer gear grouped by product category: monitors along one wall, power cables bunched together, piles of motherboards, stacks of "as is" for-parts-only laptops.

Mike Todd, an electrician, was shopping with a friend when the museum caught his eye. He ambled in and eventually lingered longer than his companion wanted to stay.

"OK, are you ready yet?" she called and pulled on his arm.

Todd thought the place was "very cool."

"I used to have a Commodore 64, like that machine right there," he said, pointing to one. "I would feel right at home with [it]. That's what I started out with."

Half of another couple browsing in the museum was animated by what he saw.

"Old computers are my hobby," said Ed Chang, a hospital lab worker.

"He drives me crazy with his hobby," his wife interjected. "He's into old stuff."

"I wish I had one of these," Chang said, turning his focus to a Digital Equipment Corp. PDP -- a powerful mainframe computer back in its day.

He marveled at the stylish machine. She rolled her eyes.

Another visitor, Raj Kaushal, a software tester at Microsoft, said the museum made him nostalgic.

"I used to have an Atari and an Amiga and a Commodore," he said, pointing each out. "It brings me back to my childhood and playing with floppy drives."

RE-PC opened as a place for Seattle's techno literati to trade and recycle computer stuff before every desk and lap had a computer on it; before the dot-com boom and bust. They became experts in mobile gizmos and gadgets a decade before iPods, iPhones, BlackBerrys and Wi-Fi.

Back then, Microsoft was selling a 16-bit, DOS-based operating system. Software companies such as Aldus Corp. and Visio Corp. were recruiting top programmers to the Pacific Northwest.

RE-PC blends flea market, working-class coffee shop (drip coffee only, no lattes), serious repair shop, technology recycling center and, of course, the museum.

Behind the museum's back wall, out of sight to customers, is the chop shop where old computers are torn down for parts. Remains of not-so-collectible hardware devices are piled 8 feet high on pallets, awaiting a trip to the recycler. The store processes 4,000 systems and about 12,000 monitors every year.

"We became what we became because there is such a large techno-culture in Seattle," Dabek said.

Surrounded by Seattle tech culture, RE-PC is in a 12,000-square-foot warehouse near the former Kingdome site.

From the entrance, if you look east, you can see Amazon.com Inc. About two blocks west stands the NFL stadium housing Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen's Seahawks. A few blocks north is headquarters for supercomputer maker Cray Inc.

"It would be nice to have a good large-scale computer museum in Seattle," Dabek said. "This place is as much the heart and soul of the computer industry as any place."

Only time, space and money keep them from developing a larger museum, he said. They have many more artifacts.

The Seattle area devotes formal museum space to art, music, flight, wooden boats and hydroplane crafts. For now, though, the city's informal monument to the PC transformation has a garage-band vibe -- and it was cobbled together by a couple of guys who run a swap meet for techies.

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stuart.glascock@latimes.com

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: TECHNOLOGY HISTORIANS: Steve Hess, left, and Mark Dabek founded RE-PC in 1994. "We have a fondness for all this history," Hess said. "We didn't have the heart to crush these things." Most visitors to the shop seem to find its museum by accident. PHOTOGRAPHER: Kevin P. Casey For The Times PHOTO: THE HALL OF FAME: Some of the earliest personal computers. Exhibits include timelines, copies of early software programs signed by project teams and advertisements from the 1970s. PHOTOGRAPHER:Kevin P. Casey For the Times

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