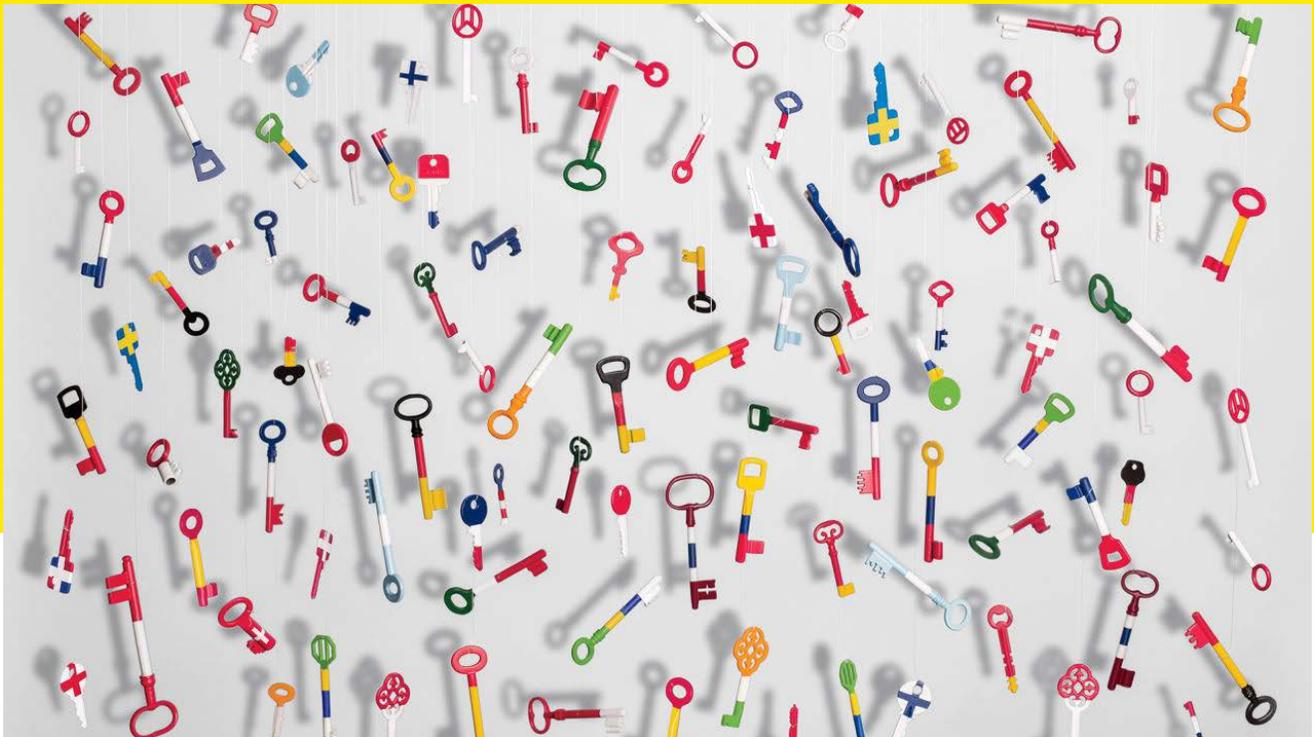


LONG READ

Can Airbnb Unite The World?

After the attacks in Paris, Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky is redoubling his efforts to expand his business—and close the cultural gaps between us.



[Photo: Carolin Wanitzek]



[MAX CHAFKIN](#) | 01.12.16 | 6:00 AM

They'd come from 110 countries, including Cuba, New Zealand, Kenya, and even Greenland. They'd spent \$295 for three days of talks, parties, and sightseeing

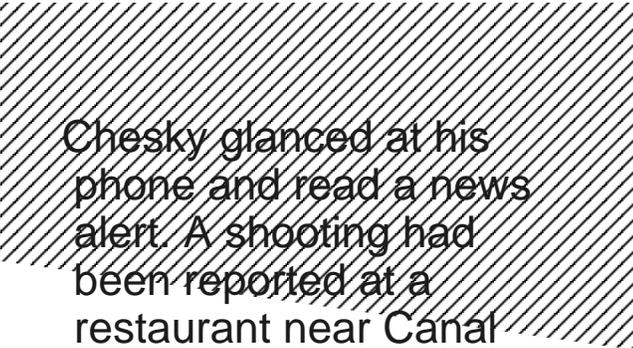
as part of the second annual Airbnb Open. On an unseasonably warm November afternoon, they gathered in a tented, football-field-size arena in Paris's Parc de la Villette, 5,000 wildly enthusiastic hosts who offer apartments and bedrooms for rent on Airbnb. The company's CEO, Brian Chesky—a compact and well-built 34-year-old with an aquiline face, muscular neck, and square jaw—spoke to them. "Share your homes, but also share your world," he said, explaining how Airbnb's competitors in the travel industry had lost touch with their customers, boxing up their guests in tacky hotel rooms and antiseptic resorts, as if the goal were to ensure that nothing remotely interesting happened. He urged his hosts to strive to be different and give guests a real sense of what life in a foreign country is like.

Later that evening, Chesky gathered with his parents, his sister, his girlfriend, his cofounders Joe Gebbia and Nathan Blecharczyk, as well as Airbnb's first 40 employees, at a rented Airbnb apartment in the 18th arrondissement for a catered dinner to celebrate. The company has more than 2 million listings and a valuation of \$25.5 billion, which makes it bigger (at least on paper) than any hotel chain in the world. The nine-year-old brand lost money in 2015 in part because Chesky spent lavishly to attract hosts, but financial documents that leaked last year suggested it was on track to book \$900 million in revenue, with projections rising to \$10 billion per year, by 2020. (Airbnb collects up to 15% of every booking from guests and hosts. The company expects to be profitable this year.) Chesky counts Jonathan Ive, Marc Andreessen, and Bob Iger as friends. He is reportedly worth \$3.3 billion. He recently appeared on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*. Now he was surrounded by his family and closest friends in one of the world's most vibrant centers of culture and intellectualism, which also happens to be Airbnb's biggest market.

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He glanced at his phone and read a news alert. A shooting had been reported at a restaurant near Canal Saint-Martin, the picturesque waterway two miles south. When he looked again, a few minutes later, there were reports of explosions at the Stade de France, the big soccer stadium, and mass shootings at sidewalk cafés elsewhere in the city. Now everyone in the room was staring at their phones.

//////////////////// Terrorists, still at large, active shooter, curfew,



Chesky glanced at his phone and read a news alert. A shooting had been reported at a restaurant near Canal Saint-Martin.

stay indoors—these words flicked across Twitter feeds as the death toll grew. Gunmen took control of the Bataclan, a 19th-century concert hall a few blocks from the first shooting that also happened to be in the same neighborhood where many of Chesky's employees were staying. Photos and videos posted to social media sites showed victims fleeing and bodies lying in the street. By the

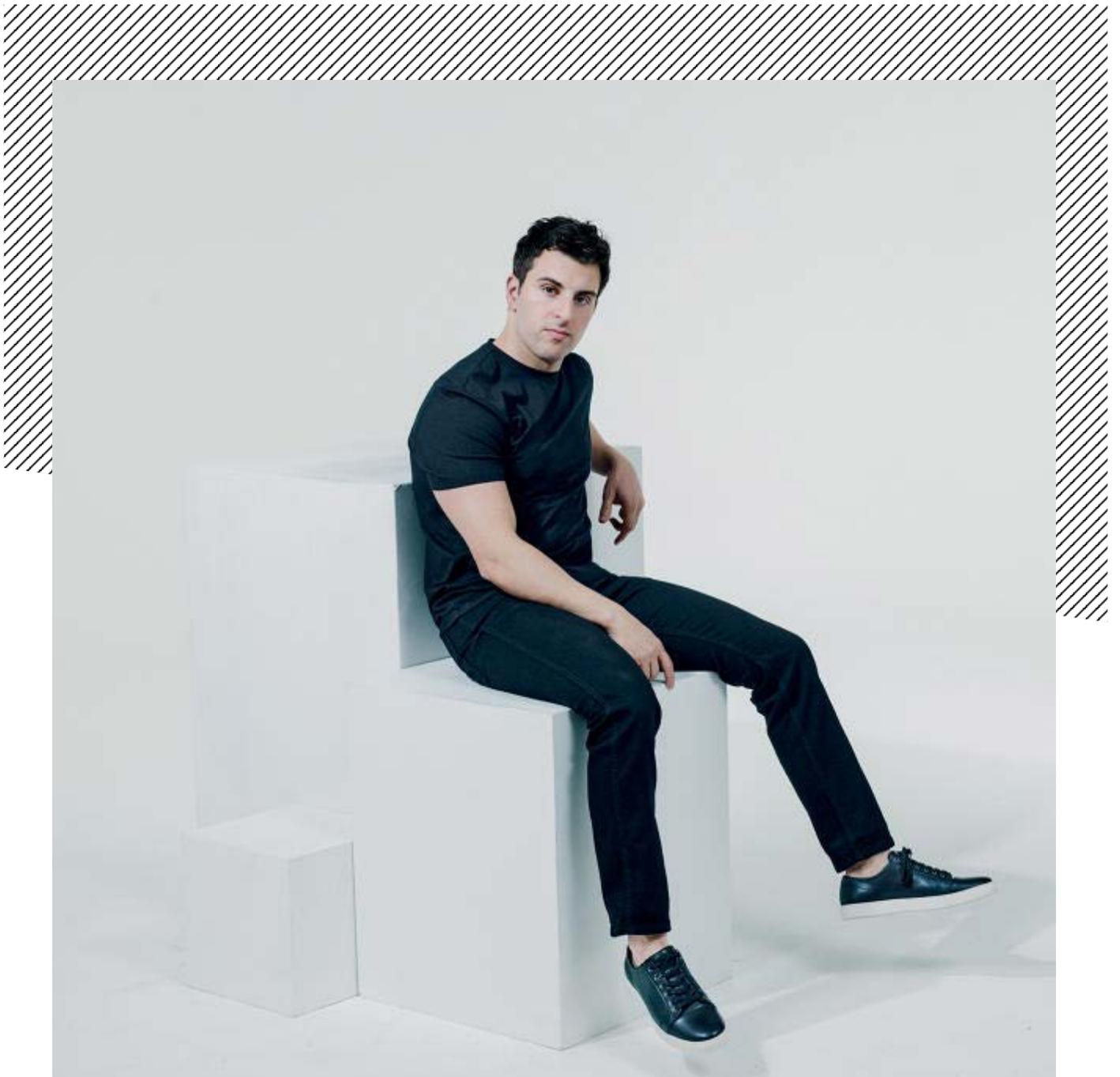
end of the night, terrorists affiliated with ISIS had killed 130 people in coordinated assaults around the city.

Chesky breathed. He walked upstairs, through the master bedroom, and into the shower. He shut the glass door, sat down on the tile, and called Airbnb's security chief. "The one thing I was very focused on was being calm," he tells me several weeks later. "I was trying to basically figure out how to account for 645 employees and 5,000 hosts. The gravity, the responsibility I had in that moment—it hits you." Airbnb staff set about contacting every employee and host who had come to Paris for the Airbnb Open. None had been hurt.

Chesky didn't think about business much that night, but eventually, the implications of what had happened began to sink in. Clearly, the coordinated attacks might put a damper on potential travelers' wanderlust, which had ramifications not only for his company's bottom line but for its entire ethos of openness and inclusivity. Plus, the attacks had come at a time when Airbnb was already facing more peaceable challenges such as newly emboldened competitors and ongoing regulatory hurdles. In the months before the Paris event, Chesky had been forced to spend more than \$8 million campaigning against a San Francisco ballot measure, Proposition F, that would have severely limited the ability of Airbnb hosts to rent out their apartments—and similar political fights are simmering in New York, Berlin, and Barcelona. "We are on this brink of greater legitimacy," Chesky had told me at the start of the conference. "But we're not there yet."

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On the other hand, Chesky had recently begun to mobilize what had long been a largely underutilized asset: the hosts themselves. There are more than a million of them around the world, many of whom regard Airbnb with an almost religious devotion. Chesky plans to turn this group of believers into active participants in his business, as well as spokespeople for a new vision of travel. It's a wildly audacious marketing project that will determine the future of his company—and its culture-bridging ideology.



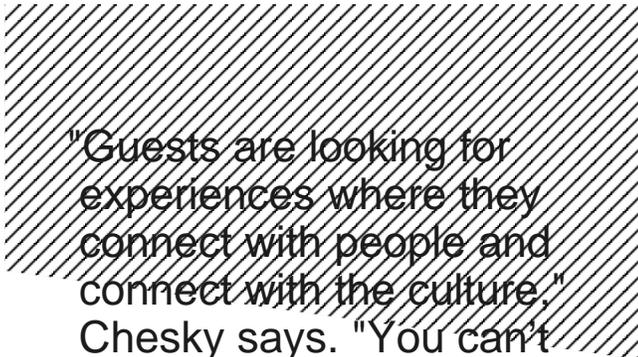
"This company is first and foremost about the hosts, not the guests," Brian Chesky says. *Photo: João*

Canziani; Grooming: Julie Dy; styling: Danny O'Neil at Artist Untied; set design: James Whitney at Artist Untied

The Airbnb headquarters takes up three floors of a former battery factory in San Francisco's SoMA neighborhood and houses roughly 1,100 employees, but its secondary function hits you as soon as you walk in: The place is a museum. Chesky, an art school graduate, designed the conference rooms as exact replicas of more than a dozen of the most significant Airbnb listings, including the nearby apartment where he and his cofounder Joe Gebbia were living when they rented out three air mattresses during a design conference to help pay the rent. (Chesky still lives there, periodically offering the couch to travelers for \$40 a night.) Dollhouse-like dioramas of well-known listings greet guests near the lobby, and framed artwork lines the walls throughout, accompanied by museum-style didactic panels that offer an interpretation. An entire wall is dedicated to exploring the creative origins of Airbnb's new logo, and another exhibit attempts to imagine what Airbnb's flag might look like if the company were a country. One possibility: AIRBNB IS THE NEXT STAGE OF HUMAN EVOLUTION, overlaid on a scientific illustration that shows our progression from apes to cavemen to humans. None of this is done with much of a sense of humor, and as I mull the March of Progress, I wonder if there has ever been a company with such an expansive sense of its own importance. Even Coca-Cola's famous "Hilltop" ad—"I'd like to buy the world a Coke / And keep it company / That's the real thing"—had a certain sense of proportion.

As idealistic as this is, it's also the point. "How could you be cynical about humanity and join Airbnb?" Chesky asks during an employee orientation. "When we started this company, people thought we were crazy. They said strangers will never stay with strangers, and horrible things are going to happen." This is no exaggeration: During Airbnb's first year in business, every venture capitalist Chesky pitched turned him down, and few guests were willing to risk staying with people they'd never met. Chesky and his cofounders relied on storytelling to make the idea seem friendly and, crucially, safe. It was a tall order, but Chesky is a gifted storyteller. "He's incredibly charismatic," says Jeff Jordan, a board member and general partner with Andreessen Horowitz. "He just draws you in. There's this elegance in how he describes the business and how he envisions the future."

Chesky grew up outside of Albany, New York, and spent most of his childhood shuttling between two different worlds—ice hockey and art. Hockey came first: His parents had him on skates at age 3 and playing in a tyke league by kindergarten. He was small for his age, but he made up for it with skating skills and general toughness. Deborah Chesky, Brian's mother, remembers Brian suffering a collarbone fracture when he was 15 years old, after getting thrown into the boards violently during a game. Chesky was still in pain when he returned to the ice, six weeks later, in time for the state hockey playoffs, and broke his collarbone again. "He was going to be the next Wayne Gretzky," she says. "And if that didn't work out, there was art." By middle school, he was spending whatever time he had off the ice sketching paintings at the Norman Rockwell Museum, an hour's drive from his house.



"Guests are looking for experiences where they connect with people and connect with the culture," Chesky says. "You can't automate hospitality."

The dissonance between one of the most physically demanding pursuits and one concerned with emotions and beauty went unremarked by Chesky's parents and teachers—in upstate New York, everyone loves hockey—but Chesky noticed it. He didn't talk sports when attending figure-drawing classes on Saturday mornings, and he left the sketchbook full of nudes at home when he went to practice. "They were fairly

incompatible worlds," he says when I meet him for lunch at the Modern, Danny Meyer's upscale restaurant inside New York's Museum of Modern Art. "I basically had these two lives."

At first this made him uncomfortable, but by the time he got to the Rhode Island School of Design, he'd learned to own it. He took up competitive bodybuilding, becoming possibly the first art school student to make it to the finals of the Collegiate National Bodybuilding Championships. He also dedicated himself to improving RISD's moribund hockey team.

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The Nads, as the team was called, was, technically speaking, a club hockey team,

with the name a joke designed to make fun of the machismo of sports. (The team's cheer: "Gonads! Gonads!") Chesky thought it was hilarious, and he eventually became captain. "The first thing we did was brand the Nads," he says. With an irrepressible smile, Chesky tells me that as part of this, he created a new mascot, Scrotie, a 6-foot-tall, anatomically correct penis with a red cape. He takes out his iPhone and shows his redesigned logo, a hockey stick with two unfortunately placed pucks. "It was kind of like my first startup," he says. It also introduced him to Gebbia, an industrial design major one year below Chesky who took a cue from the Nads and launched a school basketball team, the Balls. By the time Chesky graduated—as the school's commencement speaker, he opened his talk by stripping off his gown and flexing his biceps—he had helped endow his alma mater with a whole collection of similarly themed teams: the Jugs (women's soccer), the Sacs (men's soccer), the Shafts (lacrosse), the Strokes (swimming). "There's like a whole franchise now," he says.

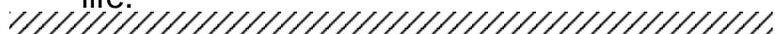
Chesky's experience in college may have been his first startup, but it also gave him a taste for testing limits. "Is this too much?" he asks, after sharing these anecdotes. He shoots a look at Airbnb's communications chief and then shrugs. "I can't help myself."

In the company's early days, Chesky and Gebbia famously photographed each Airbnb listing personally, which helped strengthen the company's bond with its hosts while conveying to guests that its listings were trustworthy. More recently, Airbnb has created a set of standards designed to give prospective guests a sense of greater predictability. Hosts who earn good reviews and who respond to booking requests quickly receive a digital badge identifying them as a "superhost" in Airbnb search results. Those who, among other things, include hotel-like amenities—Wi-Fi, a desk, and basic toiletries—are marked "business travel ready." In Paris, Airbnb announced partnerships with a number of electronic lock companies that will allow hosts to check in guests without physically showing up to exchange keys. All of these features, Chesky says, are being developed so that hosts can devote more time to delivering a great experience for guests. "Guests are looking for experiences where they connect with people and connect with the culture," Chesky says. "You

can't automate hospitality."

This idea is central to Chesky's vision of the future. To date, Airbnb's growth has been driven not so much by "experiences" as by the appeal of its listings, which are generally cheaper than hotel rooms and located in more attractive neighborhoods than the business districts where hotels are usually found. Or, perhaps, where hotels were usually found. Developers are currently building eight new hotels in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, for example—a New York neighborhood that is huge on Airbnb but has not traditionally been well toured. Meanwhile, big hospitality brands, like Accor, have vowed to make their rooms more unique to keep up with consumers' changing tastes and are trying to evolve their concierge programs to reflect a more local sensibility. "Hotels can compete on price and convenience, but less so on the relationship with the host," says William Carroll, a recently retired clinical professor at Cornell's School of Hotel Administration. "That's why Airbnb is pushing the mystique of staying in someone's house."

Now Chesky wants to go further. In October, the company emailed users about a pilot program, Journeys, that packages a three-day homestay in San Francisco with an airport transfer, meals, and day trips for \$500. Chesky declines to comment on the new offering—"We're testing a lot of things," he says—but speaking on stage in Paris, he urged hosts to offer their guests extra services for free, such as airport pickups, walking tours, and snacks. "What's special in your world isn't just the home you have," he says. "It's your whole life."



Checking In

When it comes to total number of rooms for rent, Airbnb dwarfs the world's biggest hotel chains.

- 1 AIRBNB:
2,000,000+
- 2 MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL:
1,112,613 (749,990 from Marriott; 362,623 from Starwood; merger announced in November)
- 3 HILTON WORLDWIDE:
745,074
- 4 INTERCONTINENTAL HOTELS GROUP (IHG):
726,876
- 5 WYNDHAM WORLDWIDE:
672,000
- 6 INNSUITES HOSPITALITY TRUST:
*598,000 **
- 7 ACCOR HOTELS (FRANCE):
543,366
- 8 CHOICE HOTELS INTERNATIONAL:
*504,961 **
- 9 JIN JIANG INTERNATIONAL (CHINA):
*360,000+ **
- 10 HORMEINNS (CHINA):
311,608
**As of June 2015*



Nancy Rosales, Host, San Francisco

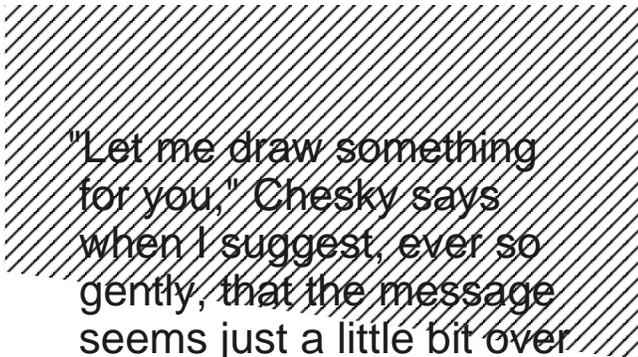
Of course, there are limits to this approach. Most Airbnb hosts are not full-timers, and while the idea of sharing their world may hold some appeal, many just want to make the rent and get to work on time. And so Chesky has tried, in addition to helping with practicalities, to convey to hosts (and potential ones) that Airbnb is important even as a concept. The company launched an ambitious rebranding effort in 2014 that scrapped a straightforward

text logo for an abstract symbol, endowing it with a weighty name and backstory. Chesky characterized the *bélo*, a made-up word created with the help of a London branding agency, as "the universal symbol of belonging," and encouraged hosts to display it prominently in their homes. ("We wanted something that transcended language, transcended culture, transcended geography," he said in a video about the rebranding.) He also gave Airbnb a new tagline: "Belong Anywhere." "Cities used to be villages," Chesky wrote in a blog post. "Everyone knew each other, and everyone knew they had a place to call home. But after the mechanization and Industrial Revolution of the last century, those feelings of trust and belonging were displaced by mass-produced and impersonal travel experiences." Many joked that the *bélo* looked a bit like *Scrotie*. Chesky laughed off the comparison and pushed the message even harder.

"Let me draw something for you," he says when I suggest, ever so gently, that the message seems just a little bit over the top. He grabs my notebook and sketches a simplified version of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Typically represented as a pyramid, Maslow's hierarchy says that people are motivated both by basic needs (like food and shelter) and more transcendent ones (like "self-actualization,"

which is found at the very top of the pyramid). "Most of our advertising is here," he says, pointing to the bottom of the pyramid—and noting how Airbnb routinely buys Google ads targeted at people searching for rooms and apartments in specific cities. Airbnb's more conceptual marketing, he says, is aimed at "the most passionate people," and is intended "to turn on the right people and turn off the wrong people."

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What Chesky means by the "right people" are the hosts. They are, as Chesky often says, his company's product, as well as the key to its growth. "This company is first and foremost about the hosts, not the guests," he says. "We"—that is Chesky and his cofounders—"were the first hosts. We are them." If this seems a bit cultlike, well, that's the point. Chesky's head of community is Douglas Atkin, a former advertising agency

executive known for his work on JetBlue and for writing a book that draws business lessons from cults like Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church and the Hare Krishna movement. "We're an ideologically led brand," Atkin says.

The thing about cults is that they tend to inspire passionate opposition when messages intended for their followers inevitably trickle into the wider world. Proposition F, for example, generated weeks of negative headlines in San Francisco, and at one point Chesky had to apologize for a series of passive-aggressive billboards Airbnb had purchased to try to help defeat the measure by reminding voters that its hosts pay hotel taxes to the city. But Chesky has become a skilled communicator and shown a willingness to compromise. Whereas Uber, another disruptive sharing-economy service, prompted riots in Paris during which cars were overturned and burned, Airbnb has stirred only minor controversy there. In August, Paris officials agreed to allow the company to collect tourist taxes on behalf of its hosts, essentially legalizing the service in the city. In fact, feelings were so warm that deputy mayor Jean-François Martins appeared on stage at the Airbnb Open calling Paris's status as Airbnb's biggest market "a special honor."

On the morning of November 13, the second day of the Airbnb Open, Chesky's chief marketing officer, Jonathan Mildenhall, led the audience through a raucous group boogie-down to Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody," followed by a screening of the company's latest television spot—a 60-second commercial that had aired immediately after Caitlyn Jenner's emotional acceptance speech at the ESPY Awards gala in July. ("Is man kind? Are we good?" asks narrator Angela Bassett, as a toddler waddles toward a window. The viewer is invited to "sit at [Airbnb hosts' tables] so you can share their tastes; sleep in their beds so you can know their dreams.") The campaign had been called "wildly pretentious" and "existential bordering on absurd" by Adweek. But here in Paris, Mildenhall, a former Coca-Cola executive who has said he was inspired by the "Hilltop" commercial, got a standing ovation. As the crowd erupted, Mildenhall dropped to his knees, as if in prayer. He later called it "the best moment of my career."

The hosts I met at the event seemed similarly moved. (This is yet another way that Airbnb differs from Uber. Most Uber drivers seem to look at Uber as a business partner. Airbnb hosts tend to be true believers.) "Airbnb speaks to a big part of who I am," said Michele Martinez, a textile designer and former real estate agent who began renting out rooms in her Brooklyn loft in 2010 and who now has built a life around Chesky's service. She is close with a group of two dozen hosts who "have drunk the Kool-Aid," as she put it. She also organizes regular meetups, attends city council meetings on behalf of the company, and starred in a political ad designed to rally support in New York for the company.

Air Bed and . . . Tree House?

Company data reveal a colorful picture of Airbnb's global ecosystem.



Click to expand

This is a model that Airbnb hopes to replicate. Two days after successfully defeating

Proposition F, policy chief Chris Lehane announced that Airbnb would help fund "home-sharing clubs" in 100 cities around the world, essentially formalizing the kind of meetups that Martinez already organizes. In a triumphant press conference, Lehane, a famously pugnacious Democratic Party operative who was Al Gore's press secretary, noted that Airbnb users represented a robust voting bloc. He compared them to, among others, the National Rifle Association and the National Education Association. The reference to two of the most polarizing and powerful lobbying groups in the country was seen by many as a threat. But in Paris, Chesky again played peacemaker. On stage, he announced the release of a new manifesto, the Airbnb Community Compact, that promises that hosts will pay their lodging taxes and that in cities with a housing shortage, Airbnb will not work with hosts who acquire multiple apartments and turn them into short-term rentals.



David Jacoby, Host, San Francisco

The moves are aimed at soothing city officials and housing activists (while giving political talking points to hosts) and could help Airbnb gain wider regulatory acceptance, but they won't do much to address harder questions about how the company is changing neighborhoods. Part of the appeal of Airbnb to travelers is that it puts you in a regular neighborhood rather than a touristy one—you get to "live like a local," as the company often promises—but

many people worry that a proliferation of Airbnb listings could take all the charm out of that charming residential enclave. (In August, a New York magazine blogger surveyed pedestrians on a Williamsburg street corner and discovered that only one in every four people lived in the neighborhood.) Moreover, it's not clear that Airbnb will be able to reconcile its "Belong Anywhere" ethos with the politicalization of its host community. "We want to stick up for our hosts, and we want to do it in a way

that's consistent with our narrative and our values," Chesky had told me after the first day of the Paris conference. But he admitted, with a sigh, "There's a tension."

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We were sitting in the back of a minivan, and Chesky let his normally imposing frame slump into his seat, his head falling toward the window. It was dark, almost dinnertime, and we passed over the cobblestone road in front of the Louvre and crossed the Pont du Carousel. We moved into Saint-Germain, a left-bank district where Chesky and his girlfriend, Elissa Patel, who until recently was a community manager at the photo-sharing startup Frontback, like to stay when they come to town. "This is our neighborhood," he said, after a few moments of silence. "There are artists' studios everywhere. It's incredibly cool."

His choice of words—our neighborhood, with all the implications of familiarity and home—was deliberate. Everything Chesky says is deliberate. "I think a lot of people, when they travel to a city, they're made to feel like tourists," he explained. "And I think when you have a great Airbnb experience, you kind of start to feel like you live in the neighborhood. You don't feel like you're just wandering around."

The following afternoon on stage, Chesky showed the audience a series of snapshots of his parents' travels through the city earlier in the week. There was a picture of a double-decker tour bus, a cheesy boat ride, and the line at the Louvre. Chesky treated each clichéd scene with comic derision. "Every year, 30 million people go to Paris," he said. "They look at everything, and they see nothing. We don't need to go to monuments and landmarks to experience a culture. We can actually stay with people." He presented another montage, a second day on the town during which his parents were accompanied by Airbnb's top hosts as guides. Mom and Dad had coffee at a sidewalk café; they took a walk in a garden; they drank and danced at a cozy Parisian boîte. They looked like locals. "Maybe we should not travel to Paris," Chesky offered. "Maybe what we should do is live in Paris."





Photo: João Canziani; Grooming: Julie Dy; styling: Danny O'Neil at Artist Untied; set design: James Whitney at Artist Untied

That night, I sat at a bar eating dinner alone. When the news of gunfire less than a mile away began to trickle in, a young woman in the restaurant asked, desperately,

if the manager could bring down the metal gate. But there was no gate, so we locked the glass doors and waited in a state of apprehension. I texted my wife and told her that I loved her. I thought about my 8-month-old daughter. At some point, hours later, the manager started pouring wine, and I fell into conversation with a cook who'd gone to high school in Arizona. Then I walked back to my apartment through an eerily empty city. CNN said that some of the perpetrators were still at large.

In the weeks since, I have found it hard to talk about that night, and to write this article. Describing Airbnb's mission at all in relation to the violence in Paris seems in some sense ridiculous, like writing a story in 1971 about how Coca-Cola would end the Vietnam War with its message of peace and harmony.

And yet, Coke's "Hilltop" ad, which is regarded by many as the greatest TV commercial of all time, did turn out to be sort of true, at least in some small way. "You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the president drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too," Andy Warhol wrote in 1975. "All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the president knows it, and you know it, too." Global capitalism, propelled by big brands like Coke, helped usher in a period of relative calm and unprecedented wealth in America and in many parts of the world. We saw the ads and we believed them; and in believing them, we kind of made them real.



More recently, we've started turning against mass consumerism. We are not all the same, and no longer do we want to pretend to be. This is evident in millennials' obsession with social media self-expression and in their preferences for artisanal goods. It's evident, more ominously, in the growing popularity of nativist politicians



NP Promsawadi, Host, San Francisco

and fundamentalist groups like ISIS.

Airbnb, which offers travelers an experience that is more unique and localized than the cookie-cutter offerings of most hotels, has benefited from the shift in consumer preferences to smaller, more localized ideas and products. All Airbnbs are emphatically not the same, and they're not even all good—hence the need for hosts and guests to review one another. But that texture, Chesky argues, makes travel better, and maybe makes us better, too. His message is that by experiencing distinctly local norms and ideas, by coming to the understanding that the world is varied and rough and interesting, we will learn to see ourselves and others with more humility. "I don't want to suggest that people living together creates world peace," Chesky tells me, a few weeks after returning from Paris. "But I will say that [living in close proximity to people from other cultures] does make people understand each other a lot more. And I think a lot of conflicts in the world are between groups that don't understand each other."

As a longtime user of Airbnb, I have often felt that Chesky's marketing message—"Belong Anywhere"—can sound a bit naive. My choice of an inexpensive homestay instead of a hotel room won't make me a local in any meaningful sense, nor, necessarily, will booking a walking tour on the Airbnb of the future. And yet, after Paris—where locals used a social media hashtag, #PorteOuvert ("open door"), to alert frightened foreigners of safe houses; taxi drivers turned off their meters to

take people to safety for free; and President François Hollande quickly vowed to take in more Syrian refugees in the coming years—I've begun to wonder.

That's the other thing about cults: They stop being cults once enough people believe. Today, Airbnb is a good business with great marketing. But maybe it's more. Maybe it's the real thing.

A version of this article appeared in the February 2016 issue of Fast Company magazine.

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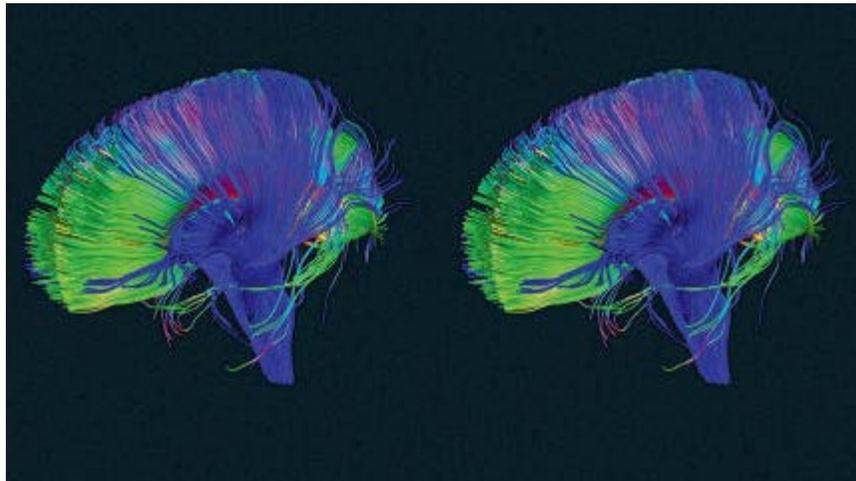
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