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Debate Article

Getting back into the "business of making things". On the promise and perils of the "productive city"

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Abstract

In recent years there has been much talk about a return of manufacturing (and production at large) to cities in advanced capitalist countries and the many benefits this can bring to urban economies and communities. This trend is reflected in the fact that the idea of the "productive city" is increasingly doing the rounds in urban planning and policy discourses. But what exactly is meant by this idea and which "urban producers" are actually being referred to when it is propagated? This debate article starts from the premise that not only the potentials but also the pitfalls, conflicts and contradictions arising from the current discourse on urban production and related ideas warrant critical investigation. Following on from this, it argues that the idea of the "productive city", in its current form, should not be seen as an innocuous idea to be embraced but as a starting point, indeed as a heuristic, for exploring the future of making in cities, as well as for a more general debate about what makes 21st century cities "productive" and what kind of "productivity" urban policy and planning practice should strive for.

Keywords

urban manufacturing, urban production, productive cities, urban making

Introduction

For decades, the decline or even exodus of manufacturing in cities dominated debates, and for decades it was – within advanced capitalist countries at least – a common occurrence in urban planning and political discourses that the contribution of manufacturing to urban economies and communities was neglected or downplayed. In recent years, however, there have been increasing signs that this is beginning to change, with more and more academics calling for a reappraisal of urban manufacturing – and urban production at large –, and more and more cities professing to strengthen it. Indicative of this is the emergence and subsequent popularisation of the notion of the "productive city", which is increasingly alluded to in planning and policy discourses. It is linked to the increasing calls for urban planning and policy that enables, promotes and celebrates the "productive" economy of cities, and the assumption that this, and the resulting greater presence of manufacturing in cities' urban fabric, will bring numerous benefits. This debate contribution does not question the very

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existence of these benefits and is very much sympathetic to the idea of thinking about contemporary cities again with material production in mind. However, it argues that this should not prevent us from also critically engaging with the pitfalls and problems that arise from the current buzz around the idea of the "productive city"; an idea that, as this article argues, should not be embraced uncritically but rather be seen as a heuristic to engage with – and discuss – the promise and perils associated with it.

On the “death and life” of urban manufacturing

A German proverb has it that "those who have been pronounced dead live longer". For cities as places of material production this phrase seems very appropriate. Until well into the first decade of the 21st century, it was common in urban discourse, at least in Europe and North America, to view manufacturers in cities as a dying breed and the idea of urban production as a relic of the past with little or no bearing on the new urban economy (see i.a. Läpple, 2020, 20).

The extent to which such perspectives were grounded in reality was always debatable. For despite the undeniable effects of economic restructuring and deindustrialisation that gripped advanced capitalist economies and cities within them in the second half of the 20th century, many cities, of course, retained a substantial industrial base, and even those that did not have by no means deindustrialised completely. London is a case in point. The capital of the United Kingdom is today widely regarded as the epitome of a "global city" driven by service sectors, knowledge, and consumption but even though the city is no longer the industrial heavyweight it once was, it still boasts a rich network of businesses that produce or process material goods (Ferm and Johnson, 2017). However, it is fair to say that the widely held notion that urban manufacturing has had its day as cities' economies shifted to intangible sources of wealth generation has proved immensely powerful. Powerful as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, in that it led planners and policy makers, in addition to widespread reservations about manufacturing as a supposedly dirty, undesirable form of land use and negative attitudes towards blue-collar jobs, to show manufacturing a cold shoulder, sometimes even actively contribute to its demise, and thereby make it come true.

Centrally located industrial sites were considered "underutilised", manufacturers’ ongoing contribution to urban economies and communities received little attention, and in many places the prevailing view was that industrial uses, if at all, belonged on the city fringe or that a quasi-total deindustrialisation of the urban economy was inevitable and only a matter of time anyway. Modernist planners, in their quest to tame the supposed chaos of early and mid-20th century cities and make them more orderly and efficient, had done their bit to remove urban production from the urban fabric or relegate it to separate zones, in line with the prevailing idea of the time to divide cities into separate zones for separate uses (Mabin, 2003). It is not without a certain irony, however, that after the modernist dogma of functional

separation fell into disrepute and the idea of "mixed use" took its place (Coupland, 2005), planners, under different auspices of course, continued on this mission. The idea propagated, among others, by Jane Jacobs in her masterpiece "Death and Life of Great American Cities" (1992 [1961]) that "the fix is in the mix", that is, that urban functions should wherever possible be brought together rather than being separated, became a truism in those years. However, this did not change the fact that urban manufacturers in numerous contexts continued to be pushed out of central urban locations and less and less land was made available for industrial activities.

The example of New York City, once one of the United States' greatest blue-collar towns, amply demonstrates this. Several scholars have shown that the spectacular decline of its industrial sector – manufacturing jobs alone plummeted from over one million in the 1950s to less than 200,000 in the 2010s (Center for an Urban Future, 2015) – is by no means solely attributable to broader processes of economic restructuring and shifts in the geography of manufacturing, but rather also intrinsically tied to real estate dynamics, property and land speculation and deliberate decision making in the city's political arena (Greenberg, 2008; Moody, 2007, Wolf-Powers, 2005). In other words, for several decades, city officials have been actively involved in enabling and encouraging new, mostly upscale commercial and residential developments on or near industrial sites, whether through zoning changes or exemptions, economic development initiatives, tax subsidies or place marketing efforts. And for several decades, city officials have been directly or indirectly contributing to "industrial displacement" (Curran, 2007) and the avoidable destruction of industrial enclaves as well as mixed-use neighbourhoods where industry and other uses used to co-exist (Wolf-Powers, 2005). For a long time, such developments, repeated countless times in cities around the world (De Boeck, and Ryckewaert, 2020, 352), went largely unchallenged. Manufacturers and their employees, who saw their livelihoods threatened or destroyed, often lacked political clout. And most planners and urbanists seemed more interested in the question of how cities could navigate and excel in the new "post-industrial", service-driven urban economy than in figuring out how to support remaining manufacturing businesses, let alone how to reinvigorate cities' industrial base and reintegrate material production into the urban fabric.

It was only in recent years that this has begun to change and that calls were getting louder for urban production to be given a second look (Läpple, 2017). This is due to a general reassessment of the role and potential of manufacturing for 21st century economies and signs of a comeback of urban manufacturing, however modest, in some places, driven by a new generation of "urban makers", high-tech manufacturers and other businesses at the interface between traditional manufacturing and the creative industries. Along with far-reaching technological changes - from artificial intelligence to 3D printing, robotics and the Internet of Things - the latter change the face and image of manufacturing, helping to bring new attention and appreciation to the "business of making things" in both policy and academic circles. This

becomes evident, among other things, by the fact that "urban production" or "urban manufacturing" is increasingly the object of research projects and academic publications, as well as the current popularity of another concept that is increasingly making the rounds: the notion of the "productive city".

A new concept making its way

The idea of "productive cities" as such is not an entirely new one but until recently the term was more commonly used for "productivity" in the sense of efficiency, output and value creation than for the production of material goods. It was only in the last decade that a different meaning of the term began to take hold, which focused on the latter. Several developments contributed to this. Some cities have used the term to indicate a renewed focus on material production in their policies. An example is Vienna, which in 2017 published a sectoral concept entitled "Productive city" (Stadt Wien, 2017) concerned with the provision of attractive and affordable locations for urban production, or Brussels, whose municipal planner in 2018 published a brochure entitled "Brussels. Productive city" (Borret, 2018) summarising efforts to date to increase the presence of the “productive economy” in the city. Around the same time, the idea of "productive cities" and with it the reintegration of production into the urban fabric was also the theme of the fourteenth edition of "Europan" (Europan, 2017), the world' s largest biennial design competition for young designers, according to its organisers, and shortly before that it was the topic of an issue of the German planning journal "Stadtbauwelt" (2016) and, related to the latter, of a congress in Berlin.

Testimony to the fact that the idea of the "productive city" has entered mainstream political discourse, and undoubtedly the pinnacle of its rise to prominence so far, is meanwhile its inclusion as one of the guiding principles in the New Leipzig Charter (EUMUM, 2020). Adopted at the end of 2020 as a policy framework document to promote integrated and sustainable urban development by the EU member states' ministers responsible for urban affairs, it embraces a broader understanding of the concept of the "productive city". But it still places particular emphasis on reintegrating production into cities and urban areas, promoting low-emission manufacturing and enabling and encouraging new forms of mixed-use development allowing for the production of physical goods. A similar perspective also characterises the International Building Exhibition 2027 (IBA’27) which currently takes place in the region of Stuttgart in southern Germany. Launched in 2018, it aims to deliver and showcase dozens of ground-breaking architectural and urbanistic projects, large and small, by the time it concludes in 2027, so as to influence urban development discourse and practice across the region and beyond, and has made the idea of the "productive city" one of its core themes (IBA'27, 2019). The starting point here is different from many other places in that the Stuttgart region has always had and continues to be highly industrialised. This being the case, the IBA is not so much concerned with reindustrialising the region, as is the case in Brussels,

for example, but with developing new building typologies and spatial concepts aimed at bringing industry and other uses back together and harnessing the potentials that recent scholarship has attributed to the re-integration of manufacturing into mixed-use urban environments.

On the potentials of urban production

These potentials are – as for example the recently completed JPI Urban Europe-funded "Cities of Making" project has shown (Cities of Making, 2022; Croxford et al, 2020) – both numerous and varied. Concerned with the future of urban manufacturing in European cities and exploring the benefits of manufacturing for 21st century cities and, conversely, the role that urban centres play or could play in manufacturing for the 21st century, "Cities of Making" demonstrates that strengthening manufacturing in cities "may offer a raft of potential benefits" (Cities of Making, 2022) - economically, environmentally, and socially. The project highlights the importance of manufacturing in diversifying urban economies and building economic resilience as well as the enormous economic expectations associated with new trends in the world of manufacturing, such as those described by terms such as "advanced manufacturing", "Industry 4.0" or the "fourth industrial revolution" (Busch et al., 2021). It shows that the presence of manufacturing is an important element of the "ecosystem" influencing the location decisions, productivity, and ability to innovate of other sectors supplied by manufacturers, and emphasises the opportunities that the sector can offer for economically disadvantaged urban communities and the promotion of social cohesion. For instance, by providing comparatively secure and well-paid jobs for a wide range of workers and enabling workers with lower levels of educational attainment and experience to acquire skills "on the job" and climb the economic ladder.

From an environmental point of view, strengthening production in an urban context is seen as vital to the transition to urban circular economies and the achievement of net zero targets by reducing, among other things, transport and especially delivery kilometres and curbing sprawl and land consumption. And the list of benefits does not end here. Not only the researchers involved in the "Cities of Making" project, but also other recent contributions on the topic (see i.a Davies, 2020; Nawratek, 2017) have argued for instance that urban production can also generate additional footfall, vitality and economic impulses for city centres and high streets and, especially if it makes production processes visible and tangible, can also contribute to making urban spaces more attractive and interesting. And finally, especially if they are community-oriented (e.g. organised as social enterprises or cooperatives), it can open up new spaces and pathways for interaction, learning and the sharing of goods and skills.

The "productive city": an idea whose time has come?

With these and other benefits increasingly reflected and discussed in expert circles and higher levels of government, be it the European Commission's (2020) “European industrial strategy” or the Biden administration's “Made in America” agenda in the US (Gangitano, 2022), expanding support for manufacturing, it is not surprising that urban production is receiving more attention by many local planners and policy makers. Especially when considering what is already happening on the ground, with many places seeing a surge in new businesses preferring urban neighbourhoods to traditional industrial areas outside or at the outskirts of cities. These include small and independent "urban makers" targeting urban consumer markets, as well as high-tech manufacturers and other companies at the interface of traditional manufacturing and the creative sector that rely on a well-educated urban workforce, access to universities, research facilities and amenities, and proximity to businesses they work with or for.

At the same time, it's important not to get carried away: although recent developments such as the COVID 19 pandemic and the Ukraine war raise many questions about the future shape of the international division of labour and globalisation, the economic restructuring of recent decades will not magically disappear or reverse itself completely, and for this reason alone many industrial sectors and businesses are not likely to return. And of course, many manufacturers remain that, because of their size or the nature of their operations, cannot easily be integrated into the urban context and where it would not benefit either them or their hypothetical neighbours if they were relocated in more central urban locations: think meat and chemical processing plants. However, the number of industries and businesses that "are not only city-compatible but also city-affine" (Läpple, 2017,24), that is, that deliberately seek urban locations, is increasing due to greener and cleaner production and transport methods and a general shift away from large-scale industrial production, heavy machinery, and massive infrastructure towards flexible and specialised production. And there is evidence that this trend is welcomed by city dwellers. With most people living in cities no longer making things for a living, many seem to relish the opportunity to see how others do it, and research into consumer preferences indicates a growing demand for locally made, high quality products and craft-based production (Manufuture, 2018).

This is one of the reasons why particularly "urban making" is in many places today firmly part of the vocabulary and toolbox of urban marketeers and space for makers and (light) industries are being incorporated into a growing number of urban development projects on different scales. Rotterdam is developing a mixed-use "Makers District" as a "testing ground and showcase for the new economy" (Rotterdam Maker District, 2022), Newark is reportedly developing its first "Makerhood" (Nonko, 2020), an affordable mixed-use project with light manufacturing spaces and housing, and London recently witnessed the opening of Bloqs, a social enterprise described as the UK's first "open access factory", which forms part of a multi-

billion pound “mixed-use” regeneration scheme (Wainwright, 2022). Realised with public sector support and boasting 32,000 square metres of workspace and £1.3 million worth of equipment for a variety of trades, it is the most ambitious of several so-called dozens of makerspaces in the UK capital so far, offering small entrepreneurs access to support and technology. Smaller mixed-use projects in London that offer space for manufacturing, such as 415 Wick Lane (dRMM, 2022.) or Queen's Yard in Hackney Wick (jestico + whiles 2022), meanwhile show how urban manufacturing can be reintegrated at a more granular level into the urban fabric by accommodating it above and alongside other uses.

Conceptual ambiguities and contested realities

Considering all these developments, it is hard not to agree with proponents of the "productive city" that it represents an idea whose time has come. Especially when also taking into account that recent disruptions in global supply chains and related developments may well make strengthening local production more and more a matter of need than of want. Yet it is also an idea that raises several questions, both conceptually and in terms of its implementation. As far as its conceptual substance is concerned, it is worth noting that the term "productive city" remains vague and ill-defined. In other words, we are dealing with what is commonly referred to as a "fuzzy concept" (Markusen, 2003), opening possibilities for misunderstanding or misuse. "Productive" can mean different things, and while the notion of the "productive city" appears to be increasingly used to refer to the production of physical goods, this is by no means always the case, as the researchers behind the "Cities of Making" project point out. Instead, the term is also used to refer to jobs rather than physical production, or is employed to encompass logistics, urban agriculture, energy systems and so on, in addition to manufacturing. Complicating matters is that the term "manufacturing" itself is surrounded by ambiguity, that the boundaries between manufacturing and other sectors are far from clear, and that it is hard not to notice amid the hype surrounding the "productive city" that some industries and businesses receive more recognition and attention than others (Croxford, 2020, p.23).

When urban manufacturing is discussed and the idea of the "productive city" is promoted, it is important to ask what kind of producers and products are meant, who is politically valued and supported and who is not (Novy, 2022). At times, it is not sufficiently appreciated that urban production is about more than the "city-savvy" tech and maker scenes that seem to attract most of the attention these days and that many new projects and initiatives aimed at reintegrating manufacturing into the urban fabric are aimed at. Other businesses too are dependent on urban locations, provide good jobs and contribute to urban economies and communities in myriad ways. While makers of, say, artisanal premium gin, handmade porcelain tableware, vegan luxury scented candles or organic lingerie may be considered "nice to have", it is worth remembering that there are other, more traditional manufacturers – as

well as other industrial sectors like repair and recycling – that may be less trendy, but are ultimately much more essential to the functioning of cities.

This is all the more important when considering the pressure these companies face in cities and the difficulties they are confronted with. In London, as in many other cities, high-tech manufacturing, and the urban maker scene, producing everything from food, clothing and textiles to furniture and household goods, appear to be on the up. However, a recent report by the Centre for London (2022) shows that this is not the case for many more traditional manufacturing businesses, and that the lack of suitable, affordable land and the ongoing repurposing of industrial land for housing and other, more profitable uses are standing in the way of a manufacturing renaissance on a larger scale. According to the report, London has lost a quarter of its designated industrial land in the last twenty years alone and most new projects, be they makerspaces or mixed-use developments incorporating space for light-industry use, are not aimed at or suitable for more mundane but essential operations that keep the city functioning.

Of course, there is nothing "elitist" about making things per se. However, considering how, where and to what end particularly "urban making" is extolled these days, it is understandable that it is viewed with suspicion by some. New companies often locate in neighbourhoods where rents are affordable and if, as is often the case, they mainly produce high-priced goods and serve a wealthier clientele, it should not come as a surprise that residents on lower incomes may not always welcome them with open arms. Some neighbourhoods in East London, for example, or rather communities within them, continue to suffer from extreme poverty and deprivation to this day. Against this backdrop and given the gentrification pressures many of these neighbourhoods face, residents can be forgiven for seeing the arrival of, say, a microbrewery selling organic craft beer for £10 a pint less as a "welcome addition to their neighbourhood" than as "not for them" and a potential threat. When, as is often the case, such newcomers are moreover showered with praise for their (supposed) creativity and entrepreneurial spirit, while long-established but less fashionable businesses, even though they have sometimes been contributing to the local economy for a long time, are denied this kind of recognition or are even displaced by the dynamics sparked by their new neighbours, the injustice comes full circle (Novy, 2022).

The "productive city" as a heuristic

Many important premises on which the new interest in urban production is based and which give impetus to the idea of the productive city are beyond dispute, starting with the observation that the long-held portrayal of urban production as a "relic of the past" is itself just that. However, this does not change the fact that the current discourse on urban production – and what is ostensibly being done for it in cities at present – also raises many questions. Whether it will actually take the form of a "progressive socio-political and economic

project" (Nawratek, 2017, 15), as its proponents hope, or rather end up as yet another neoliberal place marketing ploy, will depend not least on what local decision-makers do. Therefore, what is the case for other high-flying ideas before them – "creative cities", "resilient cities", "green cities" and so on – also applies to the idea of the "productive city" and associated concepts: engaging with them necessitates to be mindful of how "discourses comprising what good planners are supposed to support and encourage" can be twisted and manipulated to further problematic ends to further problematic ends (Gunder, 2016, 218).

For the time being, it might perhaps be best, then, to think of the "productive city" not as an idea, let alone as a model to be embraced without scrutiny, maybe not even as a fixed idea as such, but rather as a heuristic. In other words, a "thinking tool" and, along with it, an opportunity for a - pardon the pun - hopefully productive debate about the future of making in cities, about what makes 21st century cities "productive" and what kind of "productivity" urban policy and planning practice should aspire to.

Conflict of interest

The author serves as a member of the Curatorial Board in an advisory capacity for the International Building Exhibition Stuttgart-Region 2027 (IBA'27).

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