

# The urban creative factory - creative ecosystems and (im)material design practices

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## Introduction:

### The urban thing as a planetary phenomenon

In today's increasingly global and interconnected world, over half of the planet's population now live in urban areas. Further profound changes are on the way, particularly regarding the size and spatial distribution of this population. For instance, it is estimated that by 2050, urbanised areas will accommodate 66% of the world's population, effectively reversing the rural-urban population distribution found in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (UN 2014: 7). While this 'urban thing' seems to become a planetary condition, there is great diversity in the nature of the world's urban areas. Thus it is misleading to characterise this as a unified urban phenomenon. As such, Saskia Sassen proposes to substitute the term *urbanity* – a notion overly charged with Western expectations - for *cityness*, a term better able to accommodate forms of urbanity other than the very large body of urbanism developed in the West (Sassen 2008: 85).

Cities themselves are considered to be important drivers of development and poverty reduction in both urban and rural areas, as they concentrate much of the national economic activity, government, commerce and transportation. Equally, they provide crucial inter-rural, inter-city and international cross-border links. Yet increasingly this multifaceted role is being overturned, with urban areas tending to accumulate wealth and amplify inequalities in comparison with the rural hinterlands they border. In turn, as attractors for hundreds of millions of the world's poor, cityness commonly equates to sub-standard living conditions and concentrated, extreme poverty.

In the evolution of urban phenomena, the new international division of labour (Froebel *et al.* in Hardy 2013) plays a crucial role. The de-industrialisation of most of the advanced capitalist countries was a strategic response to the twin crises of declining profitability and overproduction, which surfaced in the 1970s in the form of stagflation and synchronised global recession (Smith 2012: 40). The de-industrialisation of the Global

North was combined with the industrialisation of selected developing countries, themselves providing a low-wage workforce, labour-intensive production and expanded markets for industrial products. Yet despite a general redistribution of industrial productivity towards the 'Global South', as Jane Hardy (2013) argues, global workers remain "powerless in the face of mobile capital" for capitalism's dynamic pursuit of profits and reduced costs means a constant recalibration in the geographic distribution of industrialised labour in the 'South'. As such, issues of production and concomitant accumulation are crucial factors shaping urban terrain for the 'North' and 'South' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As industrial production has been predominantly outsourced – although perhaps not permanently or irreversibly - it warrants asking: what 'industries' have been left for the Global North to elaborate? what is the mode of production in the so-called developed cities? and what conditions do the workers engaged in this production experience?

Assuming a central position in the urban economies of the developed world are entertainment, cultural and creative industries, financial and business services, and new technology development. Filling the vacancy (in both economic and spatial senses) created by de-industrialisation, these cities have sought to capitalise on cultural, symbolic, and creative economies, themselves defined by "immaterial and/or biopolitical production" (Souliotis 2013: 91-92). In attempting to describe the processes of these types of productions, coupled with the notion of "cognitive capitalism" and its attendant "knowledge economy", this paper proposes the notion of the *urban creative factory*, understood as a critical definer of contemporary urban things. To better understand the key aspects of the urban creative factory, the paper will proceed in three parts. Firstly, building on an analogy introduced by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (1994) – that the contemporary metropolis itself be considered a factory – the paper will examine the nature of biopolitical production and the new affectual economy attending it. Secondly, in this context it will attempt to locate various groupings of productive subjects in the biopolitical city beyond traditional and limited understandings of class struggle. Thirdly, thinking through the role of 'creativity' and social production in post-

Fordist, economic conditions, a depiction of contemporary ‘work’ will be offered, one that draws attention to the forms of solidarity and exploitation that the urban gives place to. In conclusion, building on this provisional cartography of the urban creative ecosystem, the paper will propose a corrective understood as a *designing commons*.

## 1. The urban (as) factory

The argument pursued in this section is that contemporary, developed urban milieus are commensurate with factories – in other words, they are sites of sustained, ongoing production. Insisting on an analogy between cities and factories, Hardt and Negri argue that the urban factory’s product is design (of objects, services, concepts):

The factory can no longer be conceived as the paradigmatic site or the concentration of labor and production; laboring processes have moved outside of the factory walls to invest the entire society. In other words, the apparent decline of the factory as a site of production does not mean a decline of the regime and discipline of factory production, but means rather that it is no longer limited to a particular site in society. It has insinuated itself throughout all forms of social production, spreading like a virus. All of society is now permeated through and through with the regime of the factory, that is, with the rules of specifically capitalist relations of production. (Hardt & Negri 1994: 9)

An equivalent of the factory, the contemporary metropolis, by this reasoning, telegraphs the tensions and economies of an earlier regime of production across large swathes of territory. Yet, Negri and Hardt see in this transformation of the metropolis an intensification of *biopolitical* production – that is the positing of an artificial commons (inclusive of languages, images, knowledge, affects, codes, habits and practices) (Hardt & Negri 2009: 250). Importantly these relational commons, as everyday, constituent parts of the metropolis, are “entirely inserted in and integral to the cycle of biopolitical production”, production that makes cultural life itself a matter of economic management and capitalisation. Hence the space of economic production, along with “*the passage to the hegemony of biopolitical production*”, is made to precisely overlap with the space of the city producing in turn what amounts to a “biopolitical city”.

### a. The biopolitical city

Building on practices that enabled the factory to operate as a contained entity for enacting total economic optimisation and management, the biopolitical city in turn is established as a generic site for immaterial production, a place where non-linear, deliberately open, and networked lines of production draw in and orchestrate the metropolis, making it a place of expanded living labour and its social spaces commodities. Under post-Fordist regimes of production, older labour solidarities once harboured by the factory are broken down leaving variable and shifting conglomerations of workers and work routines. Whereas the factory once left the production of cooperative and able workers to the State or the home, the productive procedures underwriting the biopolitical city

now take hold of the subjectivity of producers directly, with the intent of profiting from the reproduction of the entirety of living labour. Over and above the production of commodities, at greater stake is the production of lifestyles and identities. As Jason Read argues, “[t]he contemporary factory is the ‘social factory’” with production being “disseminated across social space as the production of affects, relations, and desires” (Read 2003: 159). Hence, in spatial and temporal terms it is no longer necessary or useful to replicate a division between the factory and the city, or to demarcate the time of production (clocking in and out from the working day) with that of consumption; the factory is made to assume a diffused state, one that merges with the urban milieu in total.

In this context, the immaterial labour and inventive capacity of design takes on new significance. The social factory is in key ways a design factory. With its mandate to shape and reconfigure material conditions relative to social ones, design has become a paradigmatic discipline, one capable of mobilising a raft of affecting and effecting social relations integrally tied to the reproduction and transformation of subjectivity, and with it divergent and flexible redeployments of labour. As Christopher Hight has developed in conversation with Hardt, design with its generation of immaterial goods, particularly forms of knowledge, image, and affect, has meant for architecture a shift from being a service profession centred on problem-solving to becoming a “research based practice focused upon innovation” (Hight 2006: 71). In this way design defines for itself a hegemonic role by asserting the primacy of immaterial generation in material production – a hegemony capable of taking the social body itself as a subject of design.

### b. New affective economy and biopolitics

Design more generally effects a variety of corporeal and cognitive consequences on the lives, bodies and minds of the post-Fordist workers, one entirely consistent with biopolitical power. In other words, design is integral to a shift from the older, disciplinary forms of governance associated with capitalist production (the Fordist factory) towards an emerging affective economy of innovative and flexible social/productive relations (the post-Fordist, distributive work field) that capitalises on surplus value extrapolated from immaterial generation and design-led transformations. Literally operating everywhere and at any locale – though typically applied in urban places since this is where producer-consumers are most prolific – immaterial production sets up a problem of valuation, a problem of how to measure an affective surplus associated with the proliferation of a designed commodification of life itself. As Negri puts it:

The more the measure of value becomes ineffectual, the more the value of labor-power becomes determinant in production; the more political economy masks the value of labor-power, the more the value of labor-power is extended and intervenes in a global terrain, a biopolitical terrain. [...]The more the theory of value loses its reference to the subject ..., the more the value of labor resides in affect, that is, in living labor that is made autonomous in the capital relation, and expresses-through all the pores of singular and collective bodies-its power of self-valorization. (Negri 1999: 79-80)

As such, biopolitics is a regime of governance concerned with *bios* or life and finds immediate expression in the control of and over populations.

Contrary to forms of governance centred on controlling or prohibiting actions, biopolitics as Michel Foucault first articulated aims to develop the productivity and resourcefulness in any given life so that it may better deliver broader societal utility (Foucault 2008: 317). More than a form of power defined by negation and proscription, biopolitics answers to an always open incitement to optimise and invent. Akis Gavriilidis glosses the inciting nature of contemporary governance this way: “Authoritarian power talks to its people”, explicitly encouraging them to “talk, communicate, express their... sexuality and their... imagination, so as to better... be(come) [them]selves” (Gavriilidis 2006: 6). As such contemporary sovereignty can be thought to follow a hydraulic mandate for as Gavriilidis again puts it, power “lets biopolitical forces express themselves and, at the same time, canalizes them, defining *a posteriori* borders (which, one should not forget, are simultaneously also prerequisites)” (Gavriilidis 2006: 6).

## 2. Workers and producers

As the previous section argued, producing subjects are integral with social production and its wielding of affective labour. The proliferation of subjectivities and the increasingly cognitive nature of labour in the biopolitical city have tended to eclipse traditional collectives, class affiliation, and workers representation. Yet it is important to acknowledge that not everyone has become or is becoming a cognitive worker, or that these workers are any less caught in exploitive economic structures. As Jennifer Cotter argues:

[C]ontrary to the claims of digital [and immaterial] movements which displace “labor” with “knowledge” and “services” as the basis of “value” in capitalism, there has not been a fundamental transformation in wage-labor/capital relations or the fact that profit is the product of the theft of the surplus-labor of all productive workers, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, etc. (Cotter 2008)

To understand the nature of this on-going appropriation of surplus-labour, and to conceive emancipatory strategies, it is necessary to attempt a variant typology of individual producers and political subjects, for despite the general erosion of traditional collectives, commonalities and interests persist. This section considers the most prevalent of actors maintained by the biopolitical city. Although they are closely linked, each characterisation highlights a different focus, identifying specific features associated with the contemporary productive mechanisms of the urban factory.

### a. The precariat

Firstly, as Guy Standing (2011) describes, there is a distinctive socio-economic group of persons precariously precluded from the economic agency. The term he uses to describe this aggregate of persons is “the precariat”, a neologism that combines the adjective ‘precarious’ and the noun ‘proletariat’. According to Standing, class has not disappeared, for even if the world has moved towards a flexible labour market, inequalities have grown. What emerges instead is “a more fragmented global class structure” (Standing 2011: 7). Hence, the precariat is a “class-in-the-making”, one consisting of people “who have minimal trust relationships with capital or the state” (Standing 2011: 8). Further, the precariat cannot rely on the older

underpinnings of the welfare state and “has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty” (Standing 2011: 8). For Standing, while the precariat remain for now a complex and vague group, questions of class struggle underpin their constitution.

### b. The virtual class vs a cognitariat

Secondly, as Franco (Bifo) Berardi (2009) has identified, a key post-Fordist labourer is the info-worker or technician engaged in knowledge production and circulation. Mobilisers of semiotic flows, these info-labourers work the digital interfaces of the social factory, posing images of happiness perpetually beyond reach. As such for Berardi, “the social factory has become the factory of unhappiness: the assembly line of networked production is directly exploiting the emotional energy of the cognitive class” (Berardi 2009: 90-92). Equally, info-workers, while sharing in the deferred promise of (virtual) happiness, experience a diminution of corporeality. As a “virtual class” – a class without substantive identification or material, collective expression or representation – they collectively lack social corporeal substance. For Berardi, what is needed is a recognition of this de-corporealised condition and the development of a concerted solidarity latent in the mental labour of the biopolitical city – the becoming-substantive of a cognitariat (Berardi 2009: 104-105).

### c. Creative class

Thirdly, as Richard Florida (2002) has proposed, a particularly poignant actor-group in the neo-liberal drama is the “Creative Class” – comprising workers rich in knowledge associated with design and broadly defined, creative endeavour. The distinguishing characteristic of the creative class is that its members engage in work whose function is to “create meaningful new forms” (Florida 2002: 38). This class has two distinct constituencies: the “super-creative core” which includes scientists, engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers and architects, as well as the thought leadership of modern society (writers, editors, cultural figures, and more); and the “creative professionals”, who work in a wide range of knowledge-intensive industries, such as high tech, financial services, legal and health care professions and business management. In Florida’s view, this group of workers are economically highly valuable and depend on particular urban conditions – places of social gregariousness and networked ease, places, that is, where talent, technology, and tolerance are drawn into close and comfortable proximity. Yet despite Florida’s appeal to the primacy of the creative class, he misses a key factor in post-Fordist, affective labour – a bifurcation in the apparently affluent creative worker, one that sees the promise of secure tenure of employment on one hand, pitted against short-term and tenuous conditions of engagement on the other. Increasingly it is the latter that is favoured by the creative industries with the consequence of a growing “proletarianisation” within creative work – a disenfranchisement that brings the creative class into proximity with the precariat (Hesmondhalgh 2012: 69).

### d. Multitude

Fourthly, Negri and Hardt offer a depiction of an ontologically specific, counter-social body apposite to the biopolitical city – the multitude. Rather than a class *per se*, the multitude for Negri and Hardt composes the metropolitan productive, collective “social body” *par excellence* (Hardt & Negri 2009: 254-255). At once singular and multiple, it forms the very

precondition for a commons, one that despite a plethora of interests, desires and affectual relations, holds together without social contract or unifying bond. Free of a “unity-in-consensus” (Thacker 2004), the multitude’s aims and interests are co-axial, running along side by side according to tangential, networked lines of flight that self-organise. As Negri and Hardt describe the collectivity that results:

The common is both material, rooted in the ongoing contestation over the production of “life,” and (because of this) affective and experiential. But the multitude’s self-organization does not automatically imply self-governance. What underlies both is [...] the fundamental relationality -- or connectivity -- of bodies, affects, and subjects. (Hardt & Negri 2009: 254-255)

The multitude, with its strong relation to the commons, introduces novel characteristics into biopolitical production, and producers’ agency. Thus, the multitude has the capacity to play a vital role in any reconsideration of production, for which design and immaterial labour are hegemonic.

#### e. Is class agency possible?

While the above descriptions indicate particular groupings of subject/worker-types, the question remains: do they have the potential to act as coherent or consolidated classes? Moreover, can the concept of class itself usefully intervene in contemporary struggles around labour, production and the biopolitical shaping of life? In other words, can class still be understood as an organisational strategy capable of intervening in the political sphere? What the above descriptions make possible is recognition of how labour and production constitute common interests in the biopolitical city. At stake is the ability of producers to claim back the value of their productive endeavour. Framing ‘workers’ this way serves to identify a raft of common interests submerged in the means of production. Currently, cognitive workers have the possibility to possess the means of immaterial production, and progressively perhaps, even of material production. Potentiated by the re-appropriation of the means of production is a shift from older forms of workers’ exploitation, to new forms of collective management, ownership and circulation of the products of the biopolitical city. Rather than class division, post-Fordist labour may find common cause and measure in the production of an all-encompassing life sphere, a sphere finding greater representational validity today in the commons and its multitude.

### 3. Re-addressing production and creativity within the factory

The assertion that the metropolis is the key post-Fordist site of production, and yet the metropolitan multitude constitutes a social body in excess of post-Fordist info-workers, is made more profound given the ways in which production is increasingly linked to creativity. On one hand, recent theories on city creativity have emphasised the role of the creative human capital for the competitiveness of the cities (Florida 2002: 11), and the urban transformations invoked by creative forces within the metropolitan system (Zukin 2010: 17). On the other hand, the emergence of the entrepreneurial,

creative worker as a dominant figure in the cognitive, immaterial domain (Lazzarato 2006: 133) shows up as a figure dependent on ecosystems of collaboration, networking, and distribution within the urban factory.

#### a. Urban antagonism and the informal creative economy

The biopolitical production and affective labour framed above sets in play enhanced competitive pressures between cities, not only at the level of their economic power and productive capacity, but at the level of their symbolic capital – in other words, at the level of their imagined cultural and historical prestige. David Harvey links this development with post-Fordism, flexible specialisation, globalisation, and the collapse of the post-war socio-political settlement (Harvey 2002: 97). A new economic and social order has emerged, one organised around consumer markets in symbolic goods (for example clothes, cars, food, music, art, etc.), which respond to new forms of social distinction and identity. Harvey sees this as a “cultural fix”, one worked out particularly at the level of the city where spectacles, festivals, shopping experiences, and ethnic food quarters transform the derelict industrial places of the developed world into centres of up-market cultural consumption.

Recognising the implicitly uneven geographical development of capitalism, Harvey points to the significance of mechanisms like monopoly rent – a circumstance arising when “one exclusively controls some special quality, resource, commodity or location and can therefore extract rent from others” or uses marketing and advertising to create a sense of uniqueness exploitable through rent (Harvey 2002: 94). As capitalism reduces spatial barriers through innovations and investments in transport and communications, many local industries and services lose their local protections and monopoly privileges. In response, cities are forced to compete internationally at the level of their unique identities – what Harvey refers to as their “marks of distinction” – rather than according to the products they produce. The uniqueness and authenticity of local culture, heritage, and tradition are more and more entangled with attempts to reassert a symbolic monopoly based on non-replicable conditions. In this way cultural and creative industries are routinely drawn into convergence with place-specific characteristics to better assert internationally addressed “marks of distinction” (Scott 2000: 11). As Allen Scott notes, tying product brands to the monopoly powers of place-identity is often a precondition for their success globally (Scott 2000: 11). So complex is this intertwining that, as Harvey (2002) puts it, one cannot be sure whether this tendency should be attributed to an ongoing “commodification of culture” or a “culturalization of capitalism”.

Cities, given their ability to process knowledge and manipulate symbols, are becoming the new global economic powerhouses. Further, competition is developing not only between cities (and regions), but also within the same city (or region). Given the culturalisation of cities, specific urban areas are becoming more attractive to creative workers than others due to their special characteristics and perceived sense of authenticity (Zukin 2010: 15). Place, as a privileged locus of culture and image, becomes for them the field in which they build their social relationships and from which they draw symbolic value to incorporate into the self-brand and the brands for what they produce. Yet this process of symbolic agglomeration in specific urban areas is far from a friction-less process, as gentrification in fact erodes authenticity, transforming neglected places into happily consumed homogeneous ones. As Susan Sassen puts it, “We are becoming a planet of urban glamour zones and urban slums” (Sassen 2007: 6) – a dichotomy that has come to starkly replace an older tension between suburbs and city centres.

Creative workers themselves also become “marks of distinction” both for specific areas within cities and for whole cities internationally. Florida in fact captures this neoliberal transformation of city spaces with his “Creativity index” (Florida 2002: 253), a measure seeking to describe concentrations of talent, technology and tolerance, themselves taken as preconditions for social and economic prosperity in cities. Another less neo-liberally assimilative approach is found in Harvey’s theory of the collective symbolic capital which questions, rather than seeks to expand, the types of collective immaterial value and desire produced with urban place-branding (Harvey 2002: 102). In fact for Harvey, the conglomeration of creative informal workers and the creative ecosystems they compose has a multiplier effect and value in excess of the professionalisation of city places. As Sassen similarly sees it, “urban knowledge capital” enables an unforeseen and unplanned mix of expertise and talent, which can produce a higher order of information (Sassen 2009: 56). Hence, from the perspective of creative ecosystems - as opposed to the dominant theories of the creative industries - at stake is more than measurable economic activities composing a city’s economic capital; what can be seen are a plethora of divergent, yet co-cooperative, creative and productive relationships diffused throughout the urban factory.

#### **b. Creative workers developing ecosystems**

The entrepreneurial workers/citizens of the urban factory contribute to what Sassen sees as a specialised and networked “urban economic creativity”. Agglomeration and networking play an essential role in the creative workers’ professional evolution. Hesmondhalgh accepts this position yet refers to this “obligation to network” in a negative way as a force that threatens creative autonomy (Hesmondhalgh 2012: 171). The key issue remains that networking is still linked to a specific place and the physical co-presence of involved parties. This explains why creative workers still need a specific urban location to work despite their work increasingly being globalised and digitised. What these locations provide is density and centrality, critical factors for social connectivity, proximity to customers, and for contracting and subcontracting chains.

Given the discussion of the hegemony of immaterial production above, knowledge itself can be seen to have become a key component of the organisational cycles of labour. Further formed is a specialised relationship between knowledge and design, the latter being a decisive factor driving creative labour. Nevertheless, digital design tools are themselves changing, making possible smarter, parametric tools with simpler interfaces. The relationship between knowledge and design is being blurred and transformed. The implications of this condition are increasingly challenging authorities, while favouring user’s involvement and expert-user collaboration. By these accounts, new design processes and construction practices demand greater user participation and co-operation, openness, ad hoc customisation of designed objects, an awareness of the interrelatedness of design decisions, plus new types of performance and efficiency of design products. These imperatives diversely dispersed across the fabric of the urban factory constitute the *sui generis* complexity of the urban order.

### **Epilogue: towards the production of designing commons**

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Given this radically different way of living implied in the urban commons,

one is unavoidably called on to interpret the relationships between productivity and creativity. Currently, what is being observed is an overturning of their traditional distinction and opposition – with creativity being associated with the notion of joy, accomplishment, achievement, and productivity with efficiency, rationality, and profitability. In the present state, creativity operates as an enhancement of productivity. In other words, the former extends the capacity of the latter, capitalising further on the minds and souls of a networked populace. Based on this, one potential aim would be to redefine what emancipated human capital could be if not captured in regimes of alienation. If the product of contemporary, cognitive labour, namely design, were to be understood in terms of the commons, the tension could be shifted from authorship to co-authorship. Then, the dissolution of authority into collaborative and collective processes would become responsible for setting rules, regulations, parameters, and not specific and finalised layouts. Hence the abovementioned design procedures would provide the preconditions for the multitude to appear.

As one of the emerging forces of production, design becomes explicitly interdisciplinary, even from the beginnings of a design problem. The expert-user distinction comes apart, with users being more and more able to develop and materialise their own designs, without mediation and advocacy or, perhaps, within pre-established boundaries of freedom of thought and decisions. With procedures and roles transforming, designers face a generative complexity – an unstable process of design and networked responsibilities. Whether aware of it or not, they themselves are drawn into a common, productive multitude: a non-homogeneous productive class of workers. What new tendencies and possibilities appearing in design seem to be indicating are that “a low tech-knowledge intensive collaborative perspective” (Papalexopoulos 2011: 1) will lead to a digitally-driven horizontal re-politicisation of design and creativity. This new type of design, understood in terms of the commons, has the potential of establishing new grounds for solidarity, social participation, and creative disagreement in collaboration.

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