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Factory, studio, loft – there goes the neighbourhood?

Andy Pratt

Loft living

The loft has become synonymous with urban life and the contemporary phase of urban regeneration. It seems like a perfect solution, and a metaphor, for urban change: culture rescues the economy and becomes the leading edge of the post-industrial information society. The transformation that loft living represents also illustrates the tensions between culture and economy that animate urban practice and debate. This chapter takes a short journey through the recent history of lofts and art practice and points to a number of issues that require careful management: the balance between cultural production and cultural consumption; the tension between culture and the economy; the uses of instrumentalism; and the balance of exchange and use values within the real-estate development process.

Sharon Zukin's seminal book, *Loft Living*, shone a light on the transformation of Lower Manhattan in New York in the 1970s and encapsulated a trend that is continuing today throughout the world.[1] In this chapter I want to look backwards and forwards from this moment to draw out some lessons and insights regarding the processes of loft development and use and the implications for the users (residents, industry, creatives), as well as for the city (neighbours, citizens, businesses, politicians). The story is one of the intersection between the built form, its regulation and development, and its usage.

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[1] Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

From the Factory to SoHo

Before moving on, I want to pause in the 1970s and the art scene in New York. Here we had the legacy of Andy Warhol's Factory (Fig. 1) and the upmarket parties of Studio 54,[2] plus the successor 'Downtown scene' of artists such as Laurie Anderson, Trish Brown and Gordon Matta-Clark.[3] These artists themselves overlapped with an emergent music scene anchored in CBGB's,[4] but with strong links to the art scene through poet-musician Patti Smith and photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, the New York Dolls, and art-school bands such as Talking Heads and Television. An important part of these artists' practice, and the practice of the scene, was articulated through the studio and the loft as creative space. An epicentre of this activity was the area south of Houston Street (SoHo), although it extended northwards to the edges of the West Side Midtown in Chelsea and the Meatpacking District, and less so the Lower East Side. These areas had previously been a significant part of New York port activity, with warehouse districts and the core of the garment industries. Against the background of a wave of deindustrialization (which is code for a relocation of activities to Asia) and a governance crisis in New York, vast swathes of the inner city were emptied of their former uses and became derelict.[5] Migration out of the city, especially in New York, was a defining urban characteristic of the twentieth century; the notion of a doughnut of middle-class residents around a vacant and poor core is a recurrent theme and a challenge for policy-makers and residents.[6]

The liberalization of financial markets in the late 1980s gave rise to massive commercial reinvestment in Lower Manhattan, as well as bringing in considerable amounts of surplus capital. SoHo lies between the lower Downtown area (the Financial District) and Midtown (the entertainment district). Internet startups were a further fillip to New York's fortunes, and the mid- to late 1990s saw the emergence of 'Silicon Alley'.[7] By the early 2000s, only the very rich were able to have a foothold in Lower Manhattan, and the areas of Dumbo (short for 'Down under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass') and Williamsburg (on the opposite shore of the East

[2] The original Factory (1962–68) was in East 47th Street, a classic mid-town low-rent factory building that was later demolished; in 1968, 'The Factory' relocated to Union Square in Lower Manhattan, close to Max's Kansas City (a nightclub and restaurant).

[3] An artist-architect who specialized in 'sectioning' (or cutting in half) buildings.

[4] The CBGB (Country, Bluegrass and Blues) music club was on the Lower East Side; the Downtown scene was located in the area between Lower Manhattan and SoHo. The Greenwich Village area and Midtown became the new focus.

[5] Robert Fitch, *The Assassination of New York* (London: Verso, 1993).

[6] Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: the Postwar Fate of US Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

[7] Andy C. Pratt, 'New Media, the New Economy and New Spaces', *Geoforum,* 31 (2000), pp. 425–36; Michael Indergaard, *Silicon Alley: the Rise and Fall of a New Media District* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

River) entered the cycle of 'loft living',[8] squeezed between what Loretta Lees termed the 'financification'[9] of gentrification in Brooklyn and the suburban nature of the outer boroughs.

BoHo to BoBo[10]

A number of questions arise when we reflect on these trends. Perhaps the first is what was the spur for it, and can it be replicated elsewhere? Is it an example of an *arts-led* or *cultural* regeneration of the city? We'll come back to these points later. Before that, we need to look at the relationship between the built environment and art culture. Artists have always needed a place to work, and the studio is that space; one key characteristic it needs is light, perhaps another is price. In earlier periods, art was supported by patronage, and artists had residences, often in upmarket parts of town. The shift to modern art and its motifs of rebellion, challenge to institutions, and above all individuality was given a particular spin by the tradition of Romanticism that began in the eighteenth century. What is important for us here is the construction of the figure of the artist within Romanticism. Goethe's[11] figure of the self-destructive artist who perishes at his own hand, alone in a garret, for the sake of art, is emblematic. This is a figure that found resonance in the theatre and also in painting (Fig. 2).[12] It is also reflected in the articulation of the cultural notion of bohemianism – for example, in Puccini's *La Bohème* – and in the notion of 'art for art's sake'. Although there are many tensions between Romanticism and modernism, its legacy – examples of which can be seen in modern film, as in James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), and music, as in The Who's album *My Generation* (1965) – is 'live fast, die young'.[13]

The English poet Thomas Chatterton (1752–1770) and the Parisian artists were (correctly) portrayed as living in garrets – that is, a small, cheap room at the top of a house. In practice, the key thing for the artist is isolation and light (in the period of textile production, London's Huguenot silk weavers would have developed 'top shops' to work in the best light). However,

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[8] Sharon Zukin and Laura Braslow, 'The Life Cycle of New York's Creative Districts: Reflections on the Unanticipated Consequences of Unplanned Cultural Zones', *City, Culture and Society,* 2 (2011), pp. 131–40.

[9] Loretta Lees, 'Super-gentrification: the Case of Brooklyn Heights, New York City', *Urban Studies,* 40 (2003), pp. 2487–509.

[10] 'Bourgeois bohemians' (BoBos) was a term coined by David Brooks in his *Bobos in Paradise: the New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

[11] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. Bayard Quincy Morgan (Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2010).

[12] Alfred de Vigny, *Chatterton*, trans. Philip A. Fulvi (Toronto: Griffin House Publications, 1990).

[13] Of course, the nihilism implied in the title makes good copy, but Dean's character pursues a strongly moral line in the film – one that echoes Werther's alienation from a dull society that has let moral imperatives slide, acquiesced in contradictions, and no longer sees the truth of art. 'The Who' were a product of the art school movement in the United Kingdom and experiments with noise and fashion. The use of feedback and destroying instruments was integral. *My Generation,* which usually included these elements in performance, also contains the lyric 'I hope I die before I get old.'

the small garret poses challenges for modern art, especially Abstract Expressionism. It is difficult to articulate the need for freedom and movement and to create huge canvases, or sculptures, in a garret. Warhol captured the *zeitgeist* perfectly, combining the austere modernism of the Bauhaus and the excessive individualism of romanticism. It was not by chance that he called his studio 'The Factory' – both in homage to a re-articulation of mass production and as a critique of it, in addition to the fact that the site was actually an old factory. Truly, the loft in its current manifestation was born.

This rich cultural story, which is no more than sketched out above, is not the burden of Zukin's book, but it is a vital context for it. Zukin explores the cultural and social milieu and tastes[14] that were constituted through the inward-moving residential market in search of a 'gritty' art scene. Zukin's analytical genius was to balance the obsessions of urban researchers who were concerned with property prices, on the one hand, and cultural and social life on the other. Zukin offered a theoretical mediation, and hence a way to see how both were co-constructed through the means of the art world. Zukin's book was a precursor to a necessary re-examination of the complex relationships between culture and economy.[15] Thus Zukin shows us the process of pioneers occupying the factory spaces, copying the artists and living alongside and in sympathy with them. For new residents, this was an opportunity for high-modernist aesthetics of open spaces within older structures – a chance to intermingle with and share the culture of artists, art dealers and gallery owners. The development of the loft aesthetic of the vast open-plan space, with bare brick walls and large windows, in a space accessed by an industrial lift, is a construct of the time. Of course, the real-estate industry was not slow to see the potential to capitalize on this; they too recognized that it was necessary to pay attention to culture and milieu if they were to make their bricks and mortar sell. The consequence – that eventually demand would exceed supply and that prices would escalate – was obvious. A form of gentrification follows, artists – in many senses the 'hook' for development – are forced out of their lofts due to the prices, and residents move in; or, in the case of New York, new media start-ups and residents as well. Only the gallery owners survive, and the very successful artists, the new migrants, have the lifestyle, fuelled by cafes and restaurants. Eventually, not helped by the dot-com boom, the new media also move out, subject to another form of competitive bidding for real estate.

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[14] Zukin was writing before Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984; originally published in French in 1979), became better known in the English-speaking world. As she notes in the postscript to the second edition of *Loft Living* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989, pp. 203 and 208), Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' and the exploration of taste and cultural capital would have fitted the thesis well.

[15] Challenging economic determinism and voluntarism, and humanist approaches.

The challenges, which Zukin describes again in her later book *The Cultures of Cities,*[16] relate to the question 'whose city?' Is this a democratic, or event-functional, process of development? Is it a poor kind of economic instrumentalism that leads to sterility in once-vibrant urban quarters? Moreover, is it harmful to art and artists (who need somewhere to work, and play)? It is far from being a unique phenomenon – the same basic story has been repeated many times over, and I have written a similar analysis of the area of Hoxton Square in London, which first served as host to the Young British Artists (YBA), then to new media start-ups, and then to upscale loft dwellers.[17] Another study of loft development in the South of Market area of San Francisco has described similar developments.[18]

Art space

An interesting experiment has been happening in London, but also worldwide – the art space movement. Simply, the idea is to create self-managed space for artists. The artists' organization SPACE (standing for Space Provision Artistic Cultural and Educational), with studio spaces initially established by the abstract artist Bridget Riley in London's Docklands, spread to a number of buildings and houses that provided space for artists to work in, with controlled rents (because the buildings are held on a charitable basis, or in collective ownership). The movement was pioneered by SPACE and another organization called Acme Studios, although many others have followed.[19] Aside from grasping the real-estate question, they have taken on the logic of space management. In contrast to commercial developers, who want to maximize rental income with regular upward price reviews, art-building managers are curators of relationships; they are people managers and network facilitators, making sure tenants connect with one another where possible and identifying real services from which they can collectively benefit.

This is a model that has been seen all over Europe, with developments that now have familiar-sounding names – the cable factory, the custard factory, the chocolate factory, etc. (Fig. 3).[20] The collective management model has created communities within a building, and in most cases the success has led to second and third buildings. A common form of such development has been the takeover of converted factories, so that on the surface it looks like

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[16] Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

[17] Andy C. Pratt, 'Urban Regeneration: from the Arts "Feel Good" Factor to the Cultural Economy. A Case Study of Hoxton, London', *Urban Studies,* 46 (2009), pp. 1041–61.

[18] Helen Jarvis and Andy C. Pratt, 'Bringing It All Back Home: the Extensification and "Overflowing" of Work. The Case of San Francisco's New Media Households', *Geoforum,* 37 (2006), pp. 331–9.

[19] Nick Green, 'Artists in the East End 1968–1980', *Rising East,* 3(2) (1999), pp. 20–37.

[20] See Charles Landry, *The Creative City: a Toolkit for Urban Innovators* (London, Earthscan, 2000); Graeme Evans, *Cultural Planning: an Urban Renaissance?* (London: Routledge, 2001); and Hans Mommaas, 'Cultural Clusters and the Post-industrial City: Towards the Remapping of Urban Cultural Policy', *Urban Studies,* 41 (2004), pp. 507–32.

'loft-ification'.[21] However, the premises cannot turn into residential properties – the cycle is halted and they are managed in the interests of artists. Of course, they may well have local effects that benefit communities, but the power of ownership is critical here to security and sustainability. It is interesting to draw contrasts with different property management models. In Shanghai, there has been a rash of new art buildings developed from converted state textile factories. However, most are managed on commercial grounds like any other factory space; as such, the developments have not been that successful. In Yokohama, a different model with a more curated art district, the Bank district, offers another variant on a model of success. A number of studies by Markusen[22] have picked up on the same success trends, albeit in a different institutional context, in the midwestern United States.

Conclusions

Reflecting on the title of this book, *City as Loft*, this paper has sought to remind us to pay attention to the social spaces that exist within, without and between buildings and lofts: the streets and corridors, coffee shops and restaurants. These are also important parts of the creative ecosystem; or, to use another metaphor, part of the creative circulation system. However, such serendipitous innovation spaces are constantly under threat, as are the very workplaces of artists, the studios/lofts.

Loft dwelling seems to offer to scatter a magic dust of art and creativity over the derelict inner city, which has succumbed to outward migration of well-off residents and employers: deindustrialization and depopulation. Promoting, or simply enabling, loft development has a dual message. On the one hand, it looks like an invitation to fast-forward from deindustrialization into the cultural cutting edge of the information age, while on the other it is a form of private-sector gentrification. Both look attractive to politicians. But if we scratch beneath the surface, we see that residential development and artists' workspaces are not great bedfellows; in fact, the former may drive the latter out of the city. This chapter has pointed to the tendency for artists and creative workers to be used instrumentally in urban regeneration schemes. However, it also describes strategies that have been developed to break the vicious circle of property prices that regularly eject artists from the inner city.

There are a number of distinctions and interesting lessons to be drawn here. Firstly, the loft is a historically and culturally specific phenomenon, with its roots in Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism in the United States. Secondly, the economics of the art market require

[21] Residential gentrification of old industrial buildings.

[22] MARKUSEN, A. & SCHROCK, G. 2006. The artistic dividend: Urban artistic specialisation and economic development implications. *Urban Studies,* 43**,** 1661-1686.
MARKUSEN, A. & SCHROCK, G. 2006. The distinctive city: Divergent patterns in growth, hierarchy and specialisation. *Urban Studies,* 43**,** 1301-1323.

galleries and buyers; thus, an infrastructure of art dealing is important. Public and private galleries, as well as dealers, are part of this. The art scene on the one hand consists of social networks and socializing, and on the other of artists in extreme isolation. As for Warhol, and for all artists, openings and networking are vital. Social spaces are necessary to facilitate this. Moreover, this social life is attractive to others who want to be part of, or associated with, the scene. Hence the importance of the buildings to accommodate the art production, and the parties, and the social spaces between buildings to accommodate this. This is an urban phenomenon. With few exceptions, all of this does not take place on an industrial estate out of town. Factory 798 in Beijing might be cited as an example; however, it has generated its own urbanity of cafes and bars, even though it is not in the downtown area.

There is an important lesson here, and it lies in the focus on either art production or art consumption; and it echoes a concern with instrumentalism and its opposite. Consumption approaches to urban development have led to a focus on flagship icons that are in many respects 'loss leaders'. This may work for the city, but it rarely works for art institutions, who are given a white elephant and a huge capital budget, but no revenue funding. The result is starved art. Because these are sites of consumption, they are locked in competition with other new attractions, and there is a treadmill effect in which upgrading is constantly necessary – again drawing money away to capital projects, or non-core funding for revenue (to finance the next new thing). These factors tend to undermine and destabilize art production. Moreover, they construct failure of art projects; that is, they structurally undermine the possibility of sound management in art projects.

Refocusing on production puts art and artists at centre stage and seeks to recognize the need to curate and support development. This is not about determining art, but rather about facilitating experimentation and being tolerant of failure. It recognizes the importance of social networks and the fragile ecology of art production and art training. It also has links with the art world (public and private), but in different ways. However, what is key is that the self-destructive cycle of real-estate redevelopment is sidestepped and art production becomes a sustainable and sustaining part of urban life. This does not come at the cost of massive residential development, although that may be attracted, with the potential for regulation by traditional democratic planning means. Loft living is an attractive fashion, and cities and citizens may want to enable and encourage it; however, the relationship with a strong and vibrant (and in some cases seriously revenue-generating) art scene needs to be carefully managed.

We need to learn lessons, ones that real-estate developers noted early on. Culture sells – or, to put it less provocatively, there is a new and complex relationship between the culture, the cultural economy, and the wider economy. Culture is no longer either 'philanthropy at 5%', or the loss leader; in many cases it is a driver or an essential component of modern urban economies. The fact that the cultural economy is the third largest segment of London's

economy is a reminder of this point.[23] Moreover, evidence suggests that the cultural economy is one of the few that have been able to buck the recession.[24] The challenge is not to see culture in instrumental terms as a 'cash cow', but rather to engage with it, in all its troubling ways, on its own terms. This applies even more so to debates about buildings and the urban fabric. Architects, designers and planners need to work with artists' creativity, rather than seeking to box it off or sanitize it.

Captions

Fig. 1 Andy Warhol in The Factory, copyright awaited

Fig. 2 The Chocolate Factory (art studios; London); copyright author's own

Fig. 3 'Neo-Bankside': mock up of new 'lofts' next to Tate Modern, London; copyright author's own

[23] GLA Economics, *London's Creative Sector: 2004 Update* (London: Greater London Authority, 2004), p. 13.

[24] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *The Creative Economy Report 2010 — Creative Economy: a Feasible Development Option* (Geneva: UNCTAD/UNDP, 2010).