Manufacturing and cultural production: Towards a progressive policy agenda for the cultural economy

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The cultural economy encompasses the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services based primarily on aesthetic or symbolic value (Scott, 2000). This covers a range of sectors in the visual and performing arts, music, fashion, design (e.g., architecture, graphic design), and media (e.g., film, television, radio, video games, book publishing).

1. Introduction

Policies aimed at the cultural economy have come to play an integral role in the urban development strategies of cities around the globe (Grodach and Silver, 2013; Hutton, 2008; Scott, 2004; Van Heur, 2010). Yet, conceptions of what constitutes the cultural economy remain polyvalent, meaning that policy imaginations, and resulting implementations, are fluid and divergent (Gibson, 2012). Urban policymakers have turned toward and interpreted the cultural economy in two primary ways: as an appendage of a larger creative or knowledge-based economy or as a means of enhancing consumption. The result has been a focus on programs to attract highly educated and skilled professionals often at the expense of attention to workforce inequality, manual workers and skills, gentrification, and the displacement of small, independent manufacturing businesses. In the context of growing labour market inequality and deepening urban cultural schisms, this paper seeks to redirect urban and cultural policy toward a more progressive research and policy agenda centered on material production. Our point of departure is to focus on the nascent intersection between the cultural economy and small manufacturing. This paper first provides a brief summary of the current approaches to urban policy and the cultural economy and the factors that have shaped policy decisions. Next, we discuss emerging attention around an alternative urban cultural policy agenda geared toward the cultural industries, small manufacturing, and craft-based production. Finally, we explore the relationships among cultural industries and small manufacturers and discuss the key research gaps and policy issues that will affect relationships and development oriented to cultural production and manufacturing at the city-region level.
based production. Opportunities abound to pursue urban economic development strategies that build upon, rather than eschew, industrial, migrant and working-class skills and legacies (Gibson, 2016), but they may be overlooked within constrained cultural economic policy-making overly focused on the so-called knowledge and creative industries.

In response, this paper seeks to redirect urban and cultural policy toward a more progressive research and policy agenda centered on material cultural production. As we discuss, key social and economic trends have positioned cultural and craft production as a significant but overlooked opportunity for more equitable urban economic development. Simultaneously, this is a chance for cultural policy to reinvent itself following a decade or more of consumption-based creative city strategizing. Our point of departure is to focus on the growing intersection between the cultural economy and small manufacturing. Research has recognized the changing nature and growth of urban manufacturing (Friedman and Byron, 2012; Helper, Kreuger, & Weil, 2012; Mistry & Byron, 2011; Sassen, 2010), but few specifically concentrate on the relationships with the cultural industries (Gibson, Carr, & Warren, 2015; Gu, 2012). Many have studied the cultural industries as a production system, acknowledging the cultural economy’s links to material manufacture (e.g. Scott, 2000; Pratt, 2004) and there is growing attention to independent craft activity (Anderson, 2012; Jakob, 2013; Luckman, 2015; Thomas, Harvey, & Hawkins, 2013), but little work has been devoted to the ways in which cultural industries interact with and perform manufacturing functions.

This paper first provides a brief summary of the current approaches to urban policy and the cultural economy and the factors that have shaped policy decisions. Next, we discuss emerging attention around an alternative urban cultural policy agenda geared toward the cultural industries, small manufacturing, and craft-based production. Finally, we explore the relationships among cultural industries and small manufacturers and discuss the key research gaps and policy issues that will affect relationships and development oriented to cultural production and manufacturing at the city-region level. Our contention is that more progressive alternatives to existing urban policy for the cultural economy should explore the interface between small manufacturing and cultural industries, and acknowledge and build upon both industrial and cultural legacies, with their associated human capacities. This, we argue, is necessary not just to remedy the false ontological severing of manual and cerebral/creative tasks within conceptions of economy (Carr & Gibson, 2016), but to pursue more equitable futures for cities that seem now more culturally, economically and spatially fractured than ever.

2. Urban policy and the cultural economy: knowledge industries and consumption

Two dominant narratives have driven urban policy around the cultural economy. One narrative frames the cultural economy as a subset of a knowledge or creative economy. The other narrative treats arts and culture primarily as consumption amenities that will attract arts and culture professionals working in the knowledge economy and often minority groups have been hit particularly hard due to the racial and ethnic stratification of urban labor markets combined with enduring segregation that created unequal opportunity (Wilson, 2009). In the United Kingdom the widespread promotion of creative industries as urban regeneration has overlaid existing entrenched class divisions, rather than replaced them – exacerbating social inequality (Davidson & Wyly, 2012; Hudson, 2005; Oakley, 2006). Framing the creative economy around primarily knowledge industries in these regeneration strategies across many places has thus contributed to a bifurcated and polarized economy of highly skilled professionals working in the knowledge economy and often minority and immigrant workforce in the lower wage services industries.

Related to this, a second policy streams looks to the cultural economy to drive consumption and play a role in place branding. Local governments now routinely approach culture as an amenity to attract tourists, increase consumption spending, and improve the city image (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007; Oakley & O’Connor, 2015). Cities across the world have spent considerable sums of money to develop arts
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