FACTORY NOSTALGIA: INDUSTRIAL AESTHETICS IN THE DIGITAL CITY

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INTRODUCTION:

Standing here, you are at the centre of a quiet but fundamental shift in the workings of Kitchener's economy. Let your imagination wander back to a time when Kitchener was an industrial powerhouse, shipping goods around the world: leather products, furniture, buttons, luggage, felt, rubber boots, hockey skates, tires, televisions sets ... Perhaps you can hear the sound of the plants clustered along this strip, cranking out their daily quotas.

Notes from industrial walking tour of Kitchener, Ontario.[1]

While environments as such have a strange power to elude perception, the preceding ones acquire an almost nostalgic fascination when surrounded by the new.

Marshall McLuhan[2]

Material Cities/ Symbolic Cities

Cities are material and symbolic entities. Cities are built and re-built. Office towers and condominiums sprout up in former industrial sites, spurred by foreign and local investment. Roads and pipes – the city's material infrastructure – age and crack and are repaired, upgraded, or in some cases, left to decay for lack of finances or political will. Cities are more than just matter, however, but are symbolic as well, occupying the private and collective imaginaries of citizens. They are image-symbols and increasingly, identifiable and marketable brands. As former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg famously put it, Manhattan is a high-end luxury product.[3] In Kevin Lynch's 1960 book *The Image of the City*, he argues that the city is not a thing itself, but an object of collective perception, a product of "being perceived by its inhabitants."[4] The city produces "*imageability*:" the quality in a physical object that renders the object memorable and notable in the mind of the viewer.[5] The idea of the city as image has been echoed elsewhere. Michel de Certeau famously described Manhattan from the perch of the World Trade Centre, noting the way that the city comes to view as a coherent object from above. The height "makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text."[6]

For de Certeau, viewing the city from above provides an imaginary anchor making the city legible as a concrete image that presents the fiction of seeing and knowing the city like a "voyeur-god." More recently, Janine Marchessault and Michael Darroch argue that even though cities are not images, "they are images before they are cities."[7] Images and metaphors of cities, therefore, are crucial in shaping the material life of cities. Ben Highmore makes a similar claim arguing that the metaphors we use to imagine cities are not "a poetic substitute to a more fundamental reality, or a veil of symbolism that we can poke through to get to a real reality behind it, but [are] part of the material stuff constituting the real city."[8] Metaphors become material in Highmore's formulation. This is evident in the circulation of global city

brands that serve as models for design in other cities: "New York style lofts" are advertised in Berlin, South Beach condominiums are promoted without irony in Toronto, and most dramatically, replicas of famous European towns and cities are rapidly built in China.[9] Nearly seventy years after the first planned suburbs in Levittown, New York and the realization of the economic and environmental costs of urban sprawl, images of nature, the country, and the fantasy of a less hurried life continue to drive the suburban expansion of cities. Images and symbols thus drive much of the material life of cities but they also give us clues to the psychology of cities. A city's insecurity with itself may drive the appeal to model itself on more robust global icons, or to puff up its own local histories and landmarks, or build towering skyscrapers to compete in an increasingly competitive marketplace of cities. Examining the prominent images and metaphors can thus be a way of mapping the history and future of cities.

My concern in this paper is with the industrial as a symbolic motif in design strategies for urban renewal projects. In a number of cities across Europe and North America, now-defunct manufacturing sites and industrial areas in cities have been re-imagined as trendy live and workspaces. In many cases, these former industrial hubs house workspaces and workers in the post-industrial or information economy.[10] While there is a global dimension to the industrial image in new urban design, my particular focus here is on the Canadian cities of Kitchener-Waterloo. The small "twin cities" are interesting case studies as they have recently shifted from an industrial economy to a predominantly post-industrial, information economy and have endeavored to further expand their digital and high-tech industries. Amidst this transition, the two cities have taken significant steps to re-appropriate former industrial sites for the projected new media enterprises and start-up companies. Within many new urban design projects, the industrial history and aesthetics of these former spaces has been stressed in graphic and nostalgic ways. The industrial thus serves as an important symbol in the construction of the post-industrial or digital city envisioned by planners and politicians.

Industrial Aesthetics and Commodified "Grit"

By using the term industrial aesthetic, I refer primarily to the appropriation of former sites of industrial manufacturing within contemporary urban architecture and design. In many cases across the globe, former factories have been re-made in various ways that preserve the outer or inner structure of the building, making the building's former history a prominent part of the building's new identity.[11] This industrial aesthetic recalls what Christine Boyer refers to as the Machine City, the motifs of industrial design that emerged in late nineteenth and early twentieth century modernity, and which are "ingrained in the way we represent and imagine (or have represented and imagined) the modern city."[12] Aesthetic elements of the Machine City are closely wed to industrialism, most vividly depicted in a number modernist films in the 1920s and 1930s such as Modern Times (Chaplin, 1936), Man with a Movie Camera (Vertov, 1929), and Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (Ruttman, 1927). These films feature key elements of the industrial aesthetic, namely, a focus on the machines, gears, and technology of modern industrial manufacturing. (Figure 1). While there have been some creative re-appropriations of industrial spaces in the contemporary period such as mixed-use art spaces and community centers,[13] many re-designs are driven by large-scale capital investment from residential and commercial real estate developers. In many cases, the building's manufacturing history is explicitly highlighted in the re-design, such as in the name of the building or in graphic lettering on the façade. In Toronto for example, a number of condominiums in former industrial areas of the city proudly bear the name of the product made at the site, such as The Candy Factory Lofts or The Feather Factory.

Figure 1. Modern Times (Chaplin, 1936)

The transformation of older industrial spaces into trendy lofts is not without historical precedent. Sharon Zukin argues that the conversion of defunct factories into lofts in New York City began in the 1970s and was seen as a way to bring capital investment and residents back to neglected parts of the downtown core. This materialized primarily in the building of the now-ubiquitous urban loft that preserved a number of aesthetic elements of the former industrial space: exposed brick and beams, high ceilings, and open-concept units. The reception among many architecture critics at the time was positive: "Industry was dead; long live loft living – in its space."[14] Zukin argues that there was an important aesthetic component to the appeal of loft living. She notes that the timing of this design strategy was crucial since the sweatshops that existed in many of the buildings before certainly did not carry "romantic" associations while in use. The appeal of the industrial as aesthetic motif or image in the loft era, however, was directly tied connected to the manufacturing and squatter history of these spaces.

> On the one hand, artists' living habits became a cultural model for the middle class. On the other hand, old factories became a means of expression for a "post-industrial" civilization. A heightened sense of art and history, space and time, was dramatized by the trend-setting media.[15]

For Zukin, the industrial aesthetic became particularly attractive for professionals in the post-industrial workforce and served, ironically, as an icon of post-industrial society. Andrew Ross makes a similar claim about the conversion of former industrial spaces into high tech workplaces in the 1990s. He argues that the city, and in particular, the gritty industrial spaces that previously signified poverty and blight emerged as new signs of "urban chic" for workers in high-tech and new media.[16] The gritty aesthetic of former factories was linked to a bohemian squatter-artist identity that, as Ross claims, helped to justify the blurring of work-leisure boundaries in new media labor. The aesthetics of the industrial age thus became nostalgia-commodities for the new economy, fashionable icons for workers in the information economy.

Dead Industry, New Media: Some Canadian Case Studies

In Canada there has been a close link between the development and promotion of new media companies and the re-appropriation of former industrial spaces. Indeed, the re-use of industrial urban space in Canada seems to express the desire for a post-industrial civilization articulated by Zukin. A number of new media companies have appropriated former industrial sites, encouraged by large financial incentives from government and serve as catalysts for broader re-development and employment in the area. For example, the French gaming company Ubisoft was encouraged to open their North American headquarters in a former textile plant in the late 1990s in Montreal. (Figure 2). This was facilitated by large tax breaks and labor subsidies that contributed both to the success of Ubisoft and the rapid gentrification of the neighborhood.[17] Similarly, the provincial government in Ontario offered Ubisoft two hundred and sixty million dollars to open a studio in a former industrial neighborhood in Toronto, while critics in Vancouver have hailed the growing videogame industry for reclaiming neglected industrial spaces and contributing to neighborhood diversity.[18] In all of these cases the former grit of the industrial neighborhoods of the downtown is an important selling point for local governments looking to lure international high-tech companies to underdeveloped areas in the urban core.

Figure 2. Ubisoft headquarters, Montreal

This link between the industrial and the high tech is notable in the small cities of Kitchener-Waterloo, about an hour west of Toronto. Kitchener, historically more working-class than its sister-city, Waterloo, has recently worked hard to promote high tech and digital industries to replace now-departed manufacturing industries such as Bauer, Electrohome, Uniroyal, and BF Goodrich.[19] The local governments of both cities led aggressive campaigns to re-brand the region as a high-tech innovation hub referred to locally as "Canada's Technology Triangle."[20] One of the central areas under development is a former industrial area in the downtown core that has been recently dubbed the Warehouse or Innovation District. Employing the rhetoric of the "creative city" made popular by Richard Florida,[21] the city of Kitchener has developed an economic strategy that aims to recruit young "creative types" to a regenerated and trendy downtown. According to a city document, "[W]e are rebranding and fostering the Warehouse District as one of the province's premier multi-disciplinary centers of innovation, with the potential to accommodate as many as 19,000 more dreamers and doers."[22] The centerpiece of the re-development of the downtown is the Tannery Block, a former tanning factory that dates from 1849. (Figure 3). This building houses a number of established new media companies such as the Canadian headquarters of Google, as well as a number of other start-ups. One of the most important tenants in the building is Communitech, a non-profit technology incubator with close ties to the University of Waterloo. Indeed, this seems to be a major incentive for Google's presence here, as it can benefit from being close to some of the better start-ups energy and engineering talent form the university community. [23]
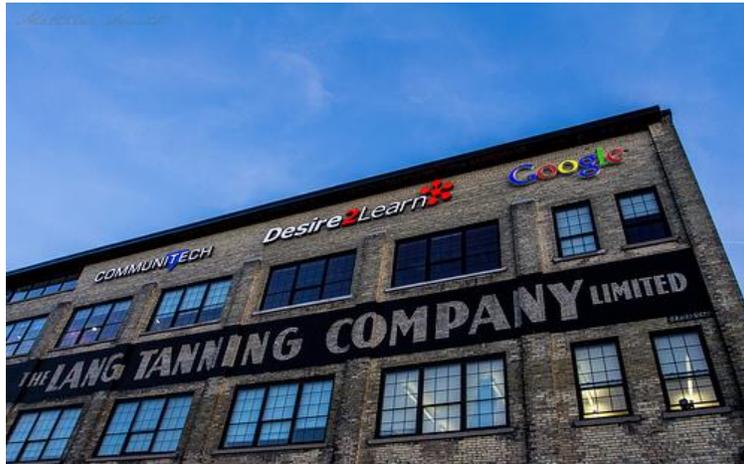
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Figure 3. Tannery Building, Kitchener

The building emphasizes the area's industrial history through a number of icons. The original font of the Tanning Company has been restored on the building's side and it features exposed brick as well as industrial relics displayed prominently in the main atrium. (Figure 4). The history of the building is also evident in the marketing language used by the building's developers. Similar to the lofts described by Zukin, the aesthetics of the building are key aspects of its appeal. The developer describes the building as a "retro-trendy" space that features hardwood and exposed brick.[24] This "retro-trendy" discourse is mirrored by an appeal to "creative" professional workers lured by these spatial aesthetics. The ideal tenants would be "designers, lawyers or accountants -- people who want funky office space, people who have interesting retail space."[25] The developers also emphasize that the re-development would work to recover the spirit of the space by clearing it up of disrepair and junk and unlock "its inner beauty." In this discourse, the building's industrial charms are revealed through a kind of selective archaeology. Isolated material remains of the space are re-situated and re-imagined as aesthetic and historical objects that constitute the new and revitalized atmosphere for working professionals and their clients.
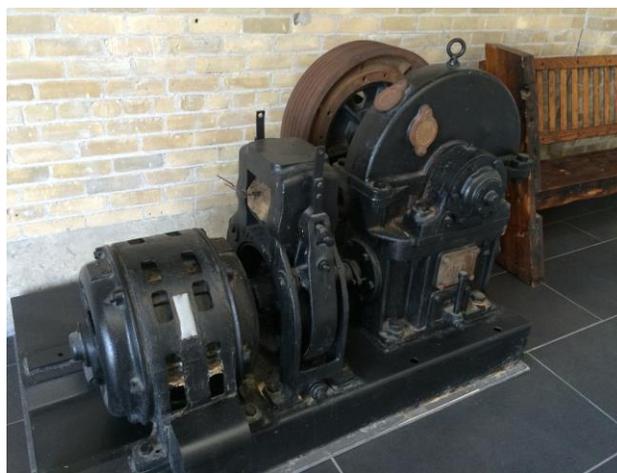

Figure 4. Tannery Building, main lobby

Industrial Symbols, Digital Futures

There is a close link in these projects between the imagined glory of now-dead industry and the hopes for a renewed urban core rooted in a post-industrial, digital economy. Near the Tannery Building is another large-scale renovation project currently taking place in what was a former rubber factory. Known as the Breithaupt Block, the project promises to be a unique work and live that will be a "centre for innovation and creativity a full city block in size"[26] (Figure 4). On the developer's website, the former rubber building is marketed as a future site for similar start-ups and tech companies. One of the notable discursive features about the ad for the Breithaupt building is its confluence or history and futurism: it celebrates the industrial history of the space at the same time that it projects the future of work in a post-industrial city. The building's logo features its slogan: "the evolution of the workplace" at the same time as it features a decidedly "retro" font with the words "established in 1904" written underneath. As a visual text, the logo capitalizes on two different temporalities: the industrial history of the space, here re-worked through the lens of nostalgia, and the envisioning of a post-industrial work, described here through the imagined evolution of work and the heavily sought-after "creative types." Again, the industrial and the post-industrial are closely wed, imagined as part of the same urban evolutionary process.

Figure 5. Breithaupt Block, Kitchener

For many local city councilors, the industrial re-design of Kitchener-Waterloo is seen as a primary means of regenerating the downtown core. New media and high tech companies are key elements in the regeneration of both local economy and former industrial centers. This is reflected in the discourse around these projects that stress the role of new creative workers and enterprises, since the lure of "creative" professionals is a key feature for success in the information age. For instance, the Breithaupt Block advertises its space as "creative space for creative people." Supporters of these projects see the promise of new economic growth, the retention and attraction of young workers, and the renewal of the urban core. Former industries are important materially and symbolically within this envisioned transformation to a post-industrial economy. The renovation of former industrial spaces mark a material change in what were formerly neglected regions of the city and thus represent newly infused spaces of capital within the city. They also profit symbolically from the former energy and economic strength of the region's industrial "golden age." This represents a nostalgic and sanitized version of local industrial history that eschews the consequences of these forces: environmental pollution, worker injuries and bodily toll, and the increasing mobility of global capital that precipitated their flight from the region. In spite of these issues, the region's industrial past is imagined as a robust economic force, whose spirit is transferred to the hoped-for digital

economy. This is evident in a local industrial walking tour that invites visitors to imagine Kitchener's former role in the global economy when it was "an industrial powerhouse shipping goods around the world."[27] The industrial and post-industrial are closely linked here: the presence of Google and other new media companies promise to return the region to increased global relevance and local prosperity.

These new urban design projects may also seen as forms of "commodified grit" similar to processes of gentrification in other global cities. From this angle, the industrial motifs are merely examples of current trends or fashions in urban marketing and design, trends that contribute to a "consumable" image of place and space within the city. We can broaden this to include revitalized parks like the High Line in Manhattan that also play on the nostalgia of a bygone era of iron and steel. It is important to note that these spaces are not oriented to working class people who populate the symbolic landscape of these spaces, but at upwardly mobile professionals in the creative industries. Working class places are thus re-imaged as consumable motifs for the post-industrial workforce. As Marc Augé claims, these spaces are "non-places" because they have been emptied of their authentic rhythms and culture and are instead sites of nostalgia and mediation for tourists and locals alike.[28]

The City Through a Rear-View Mirror

McLuhan's theories of media and culture offer another insight into the emergence of these hybrid industrial/post-industrial urban spaces. For McLuhan, the technological present is disorienting and difficult to apprehend. For this reason, we often apply lenses from the past to make the present legible: "We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future."[29] McLuhan was deeply concerned with the changing sensory conditions of electronically mediated life and the increasingly mediated city. In this way, he shares concerns with earlier urban theorists such as Baudelaire, Benjamin, and Simmel, all of whom were concerned with the radical re-ordering of the senses within technological modernity. The obsolescent past becomes an important way-finding map for a culture undergoing technological and economic transformation. From this angle, the industrial aesthetic can be seen as a nostalgic form of design that recalls a vision of the industrial city rapidly giving way to the digital city, a city that is increasingly mediated through ubiquitous digital technologies.

The industrial as an aesthetic form recalls not only a powerful economic force, but also robust material and bodily forms currently on the decline in the digital age. Steel, iron and manual labor give way to plastics, silicon, and screen based interfaces, and immaterial labor. Local production and processing facilities give way to global manufacturing circuits. As North Americans become increasingly disconnected from the sites and spaces of large-scale manufacturing, industrial aesthetics in contemporary design recall an era with more integrated proximity between labor, product and city. This seems to be the desire at heart in these new development project: to shrink the distances and mediations that currently make-up the global manufacturing economy and create new and intensified work/ live clusters. These buildings occupy an intriguing space in the digital city: nostalgically recalling the materiality of the industrial age - the iron machines, the bodily labor and sweat - at the same time as they embody the aspirations for a post-industrial: the technological wonder and economic promises of smart applications and new media software. Within this transformation, the industrial is not wholly obsolesced by the digital but returns in aesthetic form. Obsolescence, as McLuhan wisely noted, "is not the end of anything; it's the beginning of aesthetics."[30]

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