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Can our cities' thriving creative precincts be saved from 'renewal'?

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Publication Details

Gibson, C., Crosby, A., Grodach, C., Lyons, C., O'Connor, J. & Gu, X. (2017). Can our cities' thriving creative precincts be saved from 'renewal'?. *The Conversation*, 30 August 1-7.

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Can our cities' thriving creative precincts be saved from 'renewal'?

Abstract

Governments are busily rezoning our cities for high-rise apartments. The New South Wales government, for example, plans to rezone a 20-kilometre corridor in Sydney, from Sydenham to Bankstown, for urban density, in concert with a new metro rail line. Residents and community groups have reacted vociferously to the prospects of high-rise buildings in previously low-density suburbs. But there is another, overlooked dimension to the redevelopment. Much of it is on industrial land: pockets of old factories and workshops, portrayed as decrepit and in need of renewal. Our new project documents enterprises that actually use urban industrial lands. It's a story of surprising and largely hidden vibrancy at the interface between creative industries and small manufacturing. Planners and economic developers tend to assume manufacturing has left central cities and that manufacturing enterprises can simply locate to city-fringe greenfield sites. In reality, manufacturing is changing form, and often depends on - and benefits from - urban industrial lands. Despite the scale of renewal plans, no detailed knowledge exists of what will be lost, or of existing enterprises' needs.

Keywords

our, cities', thriving, creative, precincts, can, be, 'renewal?', saved

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Can our cities' thriving creative precincts be saved from 'renewal'?

August 30, 2017 6.11am AEST

At first glance, old industrial sites, like this one in Carrington Street, don't look like much. But they provide vital spaces for creative precincts to flourish. Paul Jones, Author provided

Governments are busily rezoning our cities for high-rise apartments. The New South Wales government, for example, plans to rezone a 20-kilometre corridor in Sydney, from Sydenham to Bankstown, for urban density, in concert with a new metro rail line. Residents and community groups have reacted vociferously to the prospects of high-rise buildings in previously low-density suburbs.

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Our new project documents enterprises that actually use urban industrial lands. It's a story of surprising and largely hidden vibrancy at the interface between creative industries and small manufacturing.

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Further reading: *Create to regenerate: cities tap into talent for urban renewal*

Planners and economic developers tend to assume manufacturing has left central cities and that manufacturing enterprises can simply locate to city-fringe greenfield sites. In reality, manufacturing is changing form, and often depends on – and benefits from – urban industrial lands.

Despite the scale of renewal plans, no detailed knowledge exists of what will be lost, or of existing enterprises' needs.

Manufacturing has a new, creative face

In planning reports for renewal strategies, industrial zones are seen as redundant because it's assumed that manufacturing is in a state of inevitable decline. This is false and misleading.

Employment, exports, enterprise formation and R&D investment statistics all point to manufacturing's endurance, as well as its transformation and increasingly diverse character.

Most manufacturers these days are small, agile and creative. Manufacturing is increasingly interwoven with creative industries, through innovation-driven additive manufacturing, craft-based

production, and bespoke maker scenes.

Cities such as New York and Portland are actively planning for this, because they recognise that the creative-manufacturing interface generates jobs, assists place marketing, contributes to liveability and enlivens local communities.



Mia Penn, aka The Raisin Did It, makes clothes from vintage and rare fabrics in Sydney. Her suppliers and support services are all within a 2.5km radius. Paul Jones

Further reading: *How can our cities match Europe's for finding value in their creative vibe?*

Creative-manufacturing favours older industrial sites

There is, however, a planning dilemma cities must face. Enterprises at the interface tend to locate in inner-city industrial zones. This is where other relevant enterprises are co-located and buildings are more suitable, often older and lower rent, with limited restrictions on noise.

Like-minded micro-enterprises sub-let workshops or pods within older factory complexes. They cannot afford commercial rents in stand-alone buildings. Older industrial zones also provide access to distribution and business networks, cultural venues and institutions, and final markets.





Carrington Road, Marrickville, the natural inner-city habitat of creative micro-enterprises and small manufacturers. Paul Jones

These are the very zones favoured for major “renewal” schemes. In practically every case, this means medium- and high-rise apartments. Retail space is provided, typically at ground-floor level (which often sits vacant for months or years).

Ironically, the presence of creative industries helps sell real estate. But such renewal schemes rarely, if ever, provide replacement workshop space zoned for industrial uses.

Carrington Rd, an unassuming creative-manufacturing hub

Our new report documents enterprises in one such industrial precinct in Marrickville, inner Sydney, that’s slated for redevelopment. A single 700-metre-long stretch of Carrington Road is home to more than 200 diverse micro-enterprises and small manufacturers.

These have strong local ties, employing an estimated 1,800 workers. Fifteen discrete enterprise clusters thrive there. These include theatre production, puppet and prop-making, furniture restoration, fashion and textiles.





Functional clusters in Carrington Road, Marrickville. Made in Marrickville report, 2017

What underpins this pre-eminent creative-manufacturing interface precinct? It's a combination of affordability, sympathetic landlords, industrial land use zoning, and a mix of small and large factory spaces with suitable features.

Proximity to the CBD, media corporations, major entertainment venues and iconic cultural institutions is vital. That's because these firms supply stage sets, install event equipment, rent studios for photography, television and film shoots, and perform at corporate functions.

The social and cultural milieu of surrounding areas is also crucial. These areas generate nearby markets for locally made fashion, jewellery and ceramics.

No consultation on a looming loss for the city

Shockingly, enterprises in industrial zones potentially affected by this latest renewal strategy are not being consulted before rezoning.

NSW Planning and Environment commissioned a consultancy firm to investigate employment impacts of proposed redevelopments throughout the Sydenham-Bankstown corridor. The report was a desktop study. Detailed site inspections "were not undertaken nor interviews or consultation with businesses in the Opportunity Sites".

When we visited Marrickville's creative-manufacturing enterprises, it became clear none had been consulted about the details of renewal plans for the precinct. They were unaware the closing date for public submissions was imminent.





Kings Knitwear, on Carrington Road, is Sydney's last woollen knitwear factory and supplies local makers and designers as well as national fashion brands. Paul Jones

Creative micro-enterprises and small manufacturers reported that city fringe relocation is not feasible. Rezoning this industrial space, one of inner Sydney's last, may force enterprises to close altogether. Others said they would move overseas.

The loss for Sydney could be tragic. As one artisan said:

If all the people who worked on this street worked in one company and were sacked, it'd be national headlines.

Similar processes are under way in Melbourne's inner north, an iconic part of that city's cultural profile. Rezoning in the name of urban density has given a green light to the conversion of old light industrial buildings into residential developments.

So, just as Creative Victoria establishes a Collingwood Arts Precinct to host creative practitioners, tenants next door have been evicted to make way for a 12-storey apartment block. The developer has now objected to the potential noise from local venues.

Learning from other global cities

Our project's next phase is to explore how other global cities foster creative and manufacturing enterprises.

Chicago has planned manufacturing districts and Portland, Oregon, has industrial sanctuaries. These are long-standing and successful examples of industrial land preservation. The German zoning system has also long mixed "non-disturbing" industry with other uses.

San Francisco's production, distribution and repair (PDR) zone attempts to accommodate the growth of small manufacturers. New, higher-rent office development cross-subsidises lower-rent industrial

space. Austin, Boston, Los Angeles and Nashville in the US and Vancouver, Canada, are pursuing similar policies.

In China, Shenzhen, the 21st-century “workshop of the world”, is looking to the “creative economy” not to replace but to enhance Chinese manufacturing prowess.

While growing cities like Sydney clearly need to plan for housing, another conversation in our cities is needed, not just about high-rise redevelopments, but about what’s at stake when industrial lands are rezoned.

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