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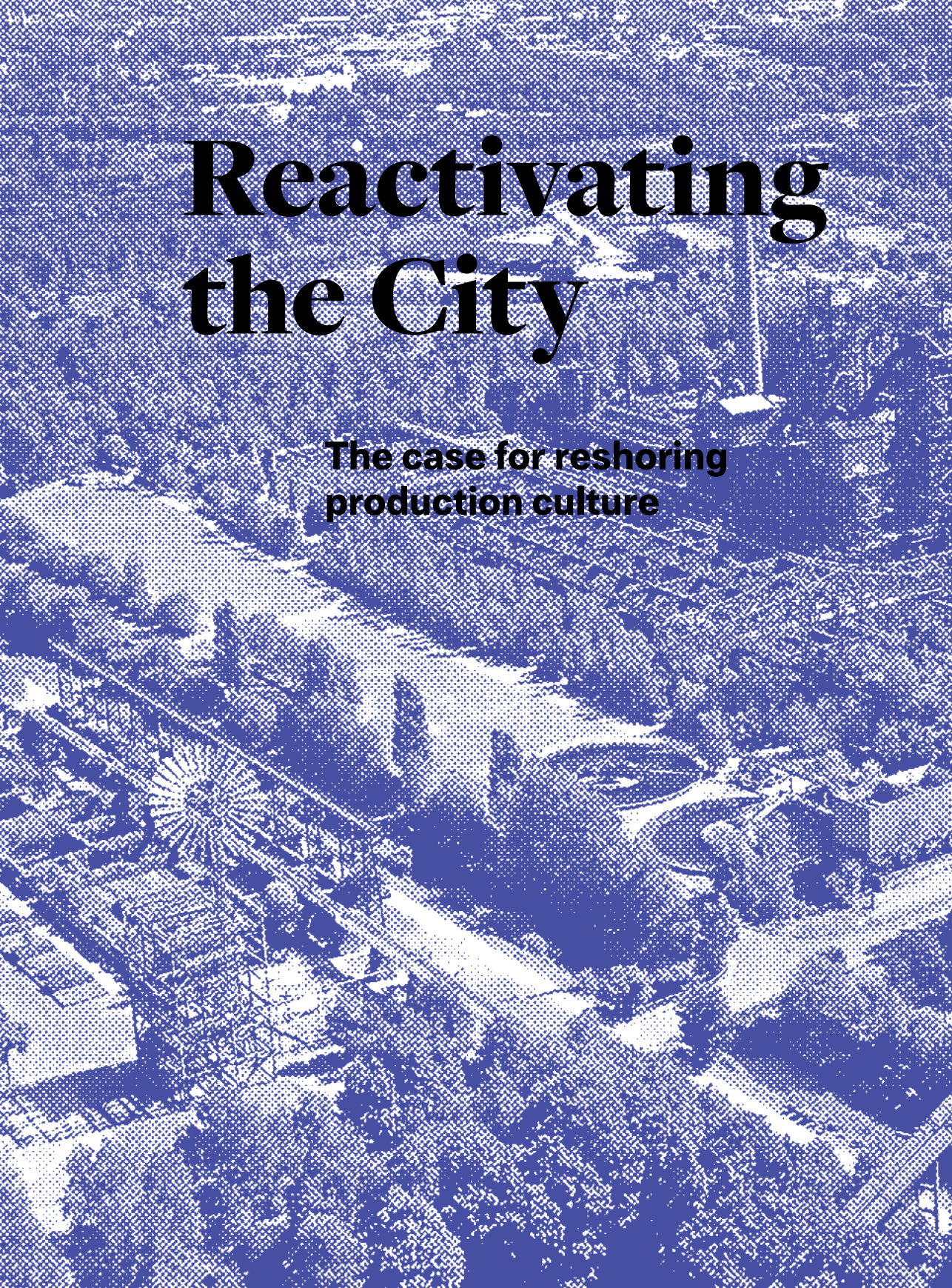
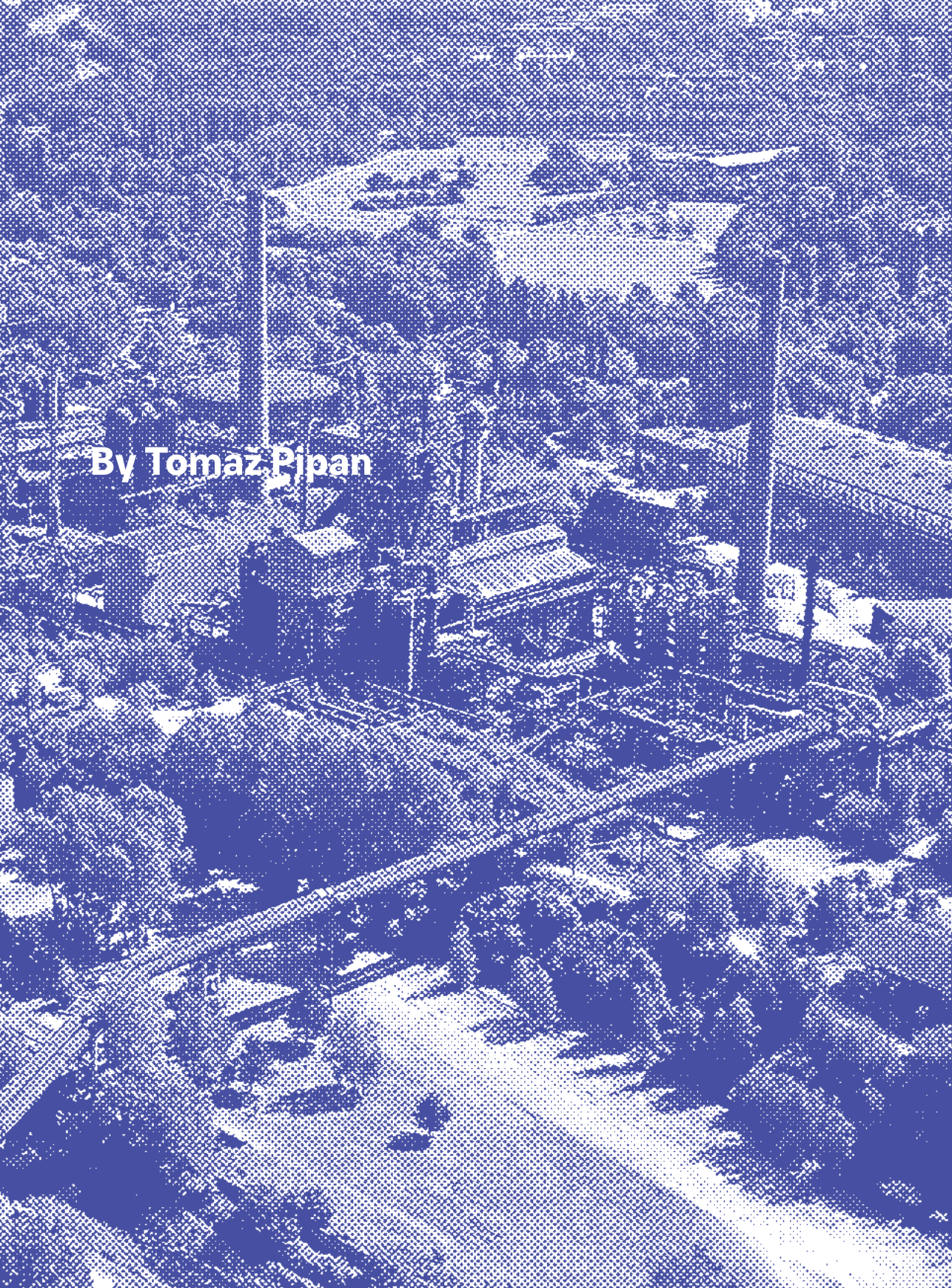
Reactivating the City

The case for reshoring production culture




By Tomaž Pipan

Reactivating the City
The case for reshoring production culture

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"City centres have been emptied-out of services for everyday life that are replaced by a flat service economy of bars, trinket shops, and hostels."

As Europe's post-industrial cities suffer from dereliction on the one hand and Disneyfication on the other, urban researcher Tomaž Pipan envisions a return to vibrancy in the reintegration of "production culture" to our urban centres.

The industrial cities of Europe and the USA have had varying levels of success in battling the deindustrialisation process. Since the 1940s, neoliberal attitudes have been the main force behind the slow but persistent abandonment of the automotive industry in Detroit and closing down of the coal and iron industries in the Ruhr region in Germany. The spectrum of revitalisation of cities and deindustrialised landscapes alike is usually a mix of knowledge economy approaches like the current boom in IT around the Silicon Roundabout at Old Street in London and in certain areas of Berlin, and the production of "artificial culture" catering for the rebranding of former industrial towns and areas for touristic purposes, like the Emscher Landschaftspark in Germany, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or the Royal Docks where Tate Liverpool is sited in that city.

Tomaž Pipan

Tomaž Pipan is a researcher and a practitioner. He has postgraduate degrees from the University of Ljubljana and the Architectural Association, London as well as a PhD from London Metropolitan University.

His doctoral thesis *Capacity of Industry for Civic Culture* is an in-depth study of industrial models of urbanisation in China and the West and their possibility for sustainability. Currently he is a post-doctoral researcher at the department for Landscape Architecture at the Biotechnical Faculty, Ljubljana University and is working on a project about industrial culture.

Previous page: Emscher Landschaftspark overview. © Udo Becker

This page: Emscher Landschaftspark light installation. © Michael Menschel


“We need to incorporate
a deeper understanding
of sustainability”


Alzheimer
Said - Weg

If we look firstly at the knowledge economy, we have to understand that it is not enough to create a co-working space with shared presentation and sofa networking areas and a communal fridge, fully stocked with goodies. For the knowledge economy to work, it needs a good basis in economic and managerial infrastructures [1] as well as a portfolio of international connections to global market.[2] Without these, the local, highly specialised, young and motivated project teams will have considerable difficulties in succeeding. This also represents problematic viability

Previous page: Emscher Landschaftspark. © Michiel Wijnbergh

This page: A high-ropes course, Emscher Landschaftspark. © Power-ruhrgebiet GmbH

for the start-up and co-working culture. And if we look down the service chain of such an economy, this non-viability extends to the infrastructure of a modern urbanite – the fair-trade latte macchiato, organic markets and fixie bike shops.

However, support for a knowledge economy in Europe is substantial,[3] only time will tell if it is sustainable and if

1 Gapper J (2016) *Europe's tech start-ups need to scale faster.* Financial Times, 20th January. (accessed 4 June 2016).

2 Komninos N (2002) *Intelligent cities: innovation, knowledge systems, and digital spaces.* London, UK; New York, NY: Spon Press.

3 Atomico (02:47:54 UTC) *The State of European Tech.* (accessed 4 June 2016).

it brings any significant contributions to the economy and culture of the city at large. [4]

Medieval Day, Ljublana.
© Mini Teater Archive

Secondly we need to look at the other component of the redevelopment mix: the culture serving the tourism industry. Through this mechanism an "artificial culture" is produced in order to fuel tourist centres. An annual *Medieval Day* in Ljubljana is a good case in point, where demonstrations of craftsmanship and technologies are put on for the benefit of tourists. This kind of culture differs from one where craftsmanship would be a part of everyday life. Supporting this kind of tourism is limited as the city cores are emptied of programmatic diversity, which is a basis and key feature of sustainable and resilient development. Similar fates have befallen the majority of historic city centres across Europe: from Venice to Vienna to Prague. The city centres are emptied of services for everyday life that keep cities functional and are replaced by a flat service economy of bars, trinket shops, restaurants and hostels servicing tourists that attend the "Disneyland" spectacle. A touristic "flat culture" emerges where artisans

4 Blau J (2014) *Europe's Tech Startups Take Off.* Research Technology Management 57(4): 7–8.

making embroideries – as a showcase of local knowledge in making and production – are a far cry from the cultural meaning that the craft know-how that accompanied city life used to embody.

But what do the industrial carcasses and European "Disneylands" have in common? All are symptoms of the narrowing of value towards economic gains without a strategic understanding of the robust framework needed to provide cities with resilience to economic change. For this we need to incorporate a deeper understanding of sustainability. Part of the puzzle is also retaining the knowledge, know-how and culture of making and industrial production. The culture innate in industrial production and craftsmanship has been abolished so completely that the only value we now see in it is utilitarian production for the sake of consumption. However, the know-how of workers and craftsmen stands out in its ability to make things in many different ways under many different conditions based on their experience and practice. [5] This brings about a culture that is accreted around daily practices and transcends the meagre act of

5 Sennett R (2008) *The Craftsman*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

producing an object for consumption. One of the crucial and significant shifts that supports this development is the emergence of "reshoring", or reintroducing domestic manufacturing to a country.

The cultural and economic benefits of reactivating "making know-how" are being confirmed by the global producers of household appliances such as General Electric (GE) and that all-time favourite referent, Apple Inc.[6] Reshoring processes in the last ten years have been shown to be an interesting step forward, but it remains to be seen how effective it will be on the economies of the Global North. A good case in point is the example of General Electric that brought the assembly of its water heaters back to the USA.[7] The connection between the engineering knowledge in the R&D department and the production knowledge of welding in the P&A department has been identified as critical to producing more efficient and cheaper products. This connection is not possible within the "offshored" global value chains stretching as far as the coastal areas of China.

Instead of life where the only measure of value is "utility of production" and "economy of culture", the approach outlined above brings the value of "production culture" back to our cities. As workers' conditions gradually improve in China – with increasing demands for more rights and higher payment – it is hard to imagine a continuation of the current socio-economic model.[8] Only by re-evaluating and reintegrating the value and knowledge of making as a cultural resource can we establish the richer life that supports resiliency and sustainable development of (new) city models. ■

6 Denning S (n.d.) *Why Apple And GE Are Bringing Back Manufacturing*. Forbes. (accessed 18 July 2013).

7 Fishman C (2012) *The Insourcing Boom*. The Atlantic. (accessed 18 July 2013).

8 Kaiman J (2014) *Strike spreads at Chinese supplier to Adidas and Nike*. The Guardian, 22nd April. (accessed 9 June 2014)