

Tilt the scales

By coming together in maker spaces, craftspeople are realising their big ideas. Could they then challenge the dominance of mass manufacturing? *Francesca Perry* investigates. Illustration by *Jamie Jones*



A century ago, industrial workshops peppered cities like London. Found in railway arches and behind high streets, these spaces were where everyday objects were made, from chairs and tables to knives and forks. Inevitably, the 20th-century rise of mass manufacturing in big-box, out-of-town factories, followed by the rapid development of housing as the post-war generation grew up, began to spell an end to this constellation of predominantly family-run production hubs.

But in the 21st century, the rise of the 'maker space' is providing a growing middle ground for

production, which is neither mass manufacture nor bespoke crafts. In this new breed of workplace, makers have an opportunity to come together, share space and machinery, and produce work at an industrial – if not mass – scale, even as our cities get dominated by voracious housing development, leaving little space for manufacturing. Hubs such as Bloqs and Blackhorse Workshop in London, Portland Works in Sheffield, and Makerspace NYC in New York, show what it means to safeguard space for making in cities, as well as the challenges and benefits that come along with that. While



these spaces may not represent an alternative to mass production, they do have the potential for those who would have previously created individual pieces in separate workshops to speed up and scale up their output.

Billed as the UK capital's 'first open-access factory', Bloqs – in Enfield, north-east London – was set up in 2012 by a group of makers and artists who were forced to move out of their nearby live-work space due to rising rents. They wanted their new space to be shared, open and affordable for people to use.

'There was really nothing out there with pay-as-you go access,' recalls co-founder Arnaud Nichols. 'It felt as if there was no middle ground for individual makers or small enterprises without going overseas or needing to mass produce, with long-term commitment and major overheads. This ultimately thwarted innovation among a really creative community.' The group's plan, says fellow co-founder Al Parra, was 'to get the largest space we could and fill it with as many machines as possible.' Locating a warehouse in a riverside trading estate, they transformed it into a pay-as-you-go shared workshop where makers could come together to use machinery for however long they needed. Prices range between £30 and £118 per day for workspaces (large-build workspaces cost more) and between £5 to £43 per hour for specific machines. Parra sees Bloqs as the 'missing piece' that supports makers to move beyond solo production to something larger-scale, without having to invest in expensive equipment.

Bloqs now has 770 active members and occupies a 2,973 sq m purpose-built factory building next door to the original warehouse. This growth wasn't without its challenges: Bloqs' non-profit status and lack of precedent was 'difficult for investors to understand', says Parra. Nevertheless, the Greater London Authority saw its value to the local area and economy, granting Bloqs £1.35m from the London Regeneration Fund – designated to support the city's neighbourhood-based places of work – and enabling the concept to take root.

Just south of Bloqs, in Walthamstow, is Blackhorse Workshop, an open-access wood and metal workshop established in 2014 within a former manufacturing premises. The project, commissioned by the local council and developed by Turner Prize-winning architecture collective Assemble, aims to support local and emerging makers through access to affordable space and machinery, albeit at a smaller scale than Bloqs.

When deciding where to establish her lighting design studio Meseme, maker Riya Panchal felt that Blackhorse Workshop stood out for its 'affordability, accessibility and communal spirit'. She joined in 2021 and continues to produce lighting fixtures from the workshop as her brand grows. 'Being part of Blackhorse Workshop has imbued me with

the confidence, skills and sense of community essential to establishing my own studio,' she says.

Although the public appetite and political support for maker spaces in London is increasing, places like Bloqs and Blackhorse Workshop are still rare: the pressure for housing and eye-watering rents make it a challenging environment to thrive in. Housing in the city has been 'trumping' other land uses for a long time, explains Holly Lewis, co-founding partner of research and design studio We Made That. 'Research in 2015 showed that London's industrial land was being lost to other uses at a rate three times faster than had been planned for.'

Lewis, whose studio has undertaken extensive research on industrial uses of space in London, believes that it's vital to safeguard space for manufacturing in cities. 'Manufacturing space is what we need to feed, clothe, cleanse, furnish and entertain the populations of our cities,' she says. 'If it's all pushed out to peripheral, distant or overseas locations, we spend a lot of energy and carbon to ship it back in again. That means more lorries on the roads and poorer air quality.'

London is not alone in these challenges. Sheffield – once a manufacturing powerhouse, and the home of cutlery production – saw its industrial spaces decline in the 20th century as mass production moved elsewhere. Amid the de-industrialisation, many old factories were turned into flats. Portland Works, a 19th-century cutlery and metalwork factory, was threatened with such conversion in 2009 despite being in continuous use as a hub of manufacturing and crafts. The planned development prompted a campaign to save it.

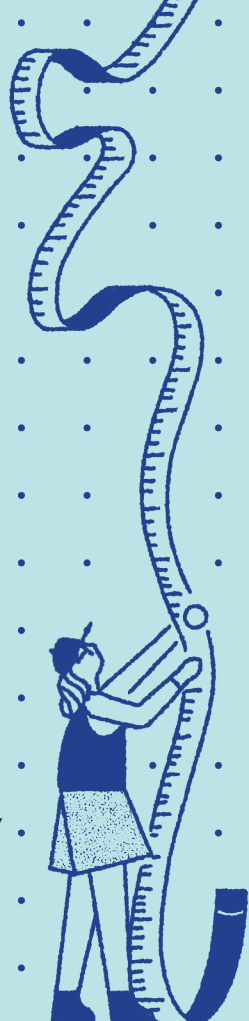
'It was one of very few places left in the city with a hammer licence, which allowed it to be noisy,' remembers Julia Udall, a Sheffield-based architect who played a key role in the campaign to save Portland Works, becoming its founding director. 'Many tenants had invested in machinery and fixtures that they could not afford to relocate.' A group of tenants and locals formed a not-for-profit organisation known as a Community Benefit Society to purchase the works in 2013, with more than 500 community shareholders. Subsequently, the Grade II-listed building was restored with the help of volunteers and is now



home to a maker space and workshops for 30 small businesses, from knife makers to cabinetmakers and jewellers. 'It's crucial that places within cities allow for the production of goods,' says Udall. 'We need spaces that aren't at the mercy of the market; that cannot be gutted by the pursuit of short-term financial gain.'

Over in New York, Makerspace NYC emerged from crisis a decade ago. Following Hurricane Sandy, which flooded their studio and metal shop in Staten Island, makers DB Lampman and Scott Van Campen decided to open their doors to the community, ultimately developing it into a non-profit maker space in 2013. Six years later, they opened a new, larger outpost in the Brooklyn Army Terminal, a former military base that was turned into a huge manufacturing campus in the 1980s by the city government and is now home to dozens of businesses.

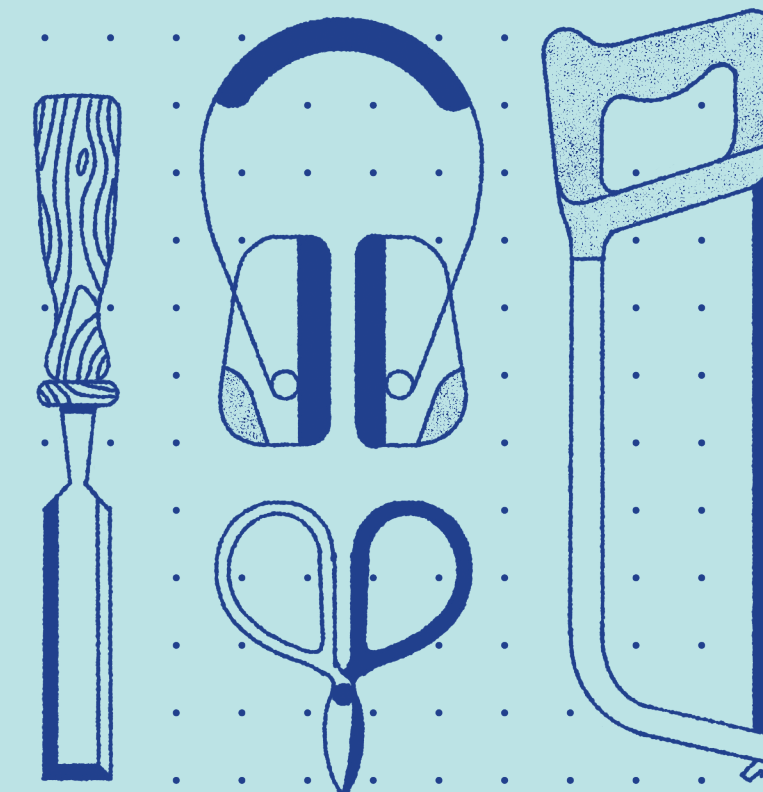
Across its two locations, Makerspace NYC has over 4,460 sq m of fabrication and studio space, hosting 320 members. Its mission is to provide the space that makers need as they grow their businesses. 'When we started, there really wasn't enough affordable space for makers and manufacturers in the city, but we're in NYC, so affordable space is definitely a constant challenge,' says Van Campen. 'Over the last 10 years several community [maker] spaces have opened up but



many of them have either changed their operations or did not survive the challenges of the pandemic.'

One of Makerspace NYC's members is design studio Alexis & Ginger, which makes furniture and interior objects. 'The space allows for us to explore and push material and forms in ways that would be difficult without that access,' says co-founder Alexis Tingey. As well as the affordable cost, the studio chose Makerspace NYC because of the diversity of tools available. 'It's incredibly convenient to be working on a piece in the wood shop and be able to walk next door to the metal shop to make accompanying hardware,' Tingey adds. 'Having that proximity is so rare in the city.'

What becomes apparent when looking at this new breed of urban manufacturing hubs is that they are not simply places of production: they are also centres of learning and community, both internally and externally. 'People meet, talk, share, and learn from each other,' says Nichols of the culture at Bloqs. Udall adds of Portland



Works: 'Such proximity and shared endeavours supports the cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches.' All these maker spaces host cultural and community events, and Bloqs and Blackhorse Workshop both have cafés for makers and locals alike. Education also plays a key role: Blackhorse Workshop and Makerspace NYC host courses and workshops for all ages, while Portland Works offers work placements for teenage students with special educational needs. As both our cities and the nature of industry continue to evolve, maker spaces such as these set an intention to breathe life into urban manufacturing, stitching it into the social and cultural life of the metropolis in ways that have long been absent. These spaces also tie manufacturing into the growing movement of co-working and the sharing economy, as space and resources come at ever-steepening financial and environmental premiums.

As Parra concludes, it's all about 'sharing, sharing, sharing', as a way to fight the climate crisis, to stake a claim in the city and to keep making alive. These aren't the factories of the past or present, but they have the potential to be important hyperlocal and flexible production hubs for the future, enabling diverse creativity and industry to thrive. buildingbloqs.com; blackhorseworkshop.co.uk; portlandworks.co.uk; makerspace.nyc