



## Vertical Urban Factory

Nina Rappaport  
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By Their Factories You Will  
Know Them

Last year, I was involved in a graduation project for a student at the Delft University of Technology, addressing the loss of blue-collar jobs in Wales and England, both historically and more recently. The central issue was whether the third industrial revolution could be of any help to this region in terms of new small, customized modes of production that require smaller spaces for production. The student's idea was to develop a do-it-yourself system of local materials with which people could extend their tiny row houses to incorporate ateliers. This student was one of a few who were reflecting on the opportunities of the third industrial revolution and the reevaluation of craftsmanship in society.

Author Nina Rappaport has been one of the first to consider the topic in her seminars and design courses as well as in essays, starting in 2008, when she and Michael Tower ('00) addressed a very specific typology that called the "vertical urban factory." Rappaport has expanded her research and theories about factories in an extensive study on the Modernist history, the current state, and the future prospects of the urban factory and its environment in the book *Vertical Urban Factory*. This impressive tome, filled with rich imagery and diagrams, should be disseminated around the world to places where issues around contemporary industry are coming to the fore.

As Rappaport proposes, current industrial development, while marginalized in what she calls "process removal," can reveal the narrative behind the products we buy, and, as philosopher Hannah Arendt argues, it could also affect our attitude toward the world we all have in common. Urban factories might offer an opportunity to reintroduce the distinction Arendt made between "labor" and "work." The first produces consumer goods, or impersonal mass production, while the latter makes objects that affect our lives. For Arendt, a world-of-things that has staying power and personal qualities is important for political life, too. Politics maintains and

sustains the world, but in a world where everything has a short life span and no individual value, an attitude of sustainability makes little sense.

Rappaport addresses the prospects of contemporary factories in a very smart and humble way. She stays close to the factory's architectural aspects, its form, and materiality, rather than falling into the trap of making architectural conclusions from the largely intangible issues mentioned above. She shows how social issues, such as unemployment, sustainability, and the lack of community, are difficult to address in relation to blue-collar work today. The project is in contrast to the plethora of media images that often showcase "nice" production spaces such as those appreciated by the "creative class" or for "makers" who may have quit school to start a local craft brewery. However, Rappaport stays close to the assignment given by Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser, cited on the first page of the book: mankind is rather *Homo faber* than *Homo sapiens*. Man is a maker of things, he states, so "by their factories you will know them." Thus, Rappaport's concentration on factory buildings allows for the presentation of a broad range of topics: the history of labor, the horrific situations of the earliest industrial plants, the introduction of machines and mass production, the anxiety of laborers toward mechanization, mass customization, protests and revolutions, disasters in Bangladesh, and tax-free industrial zones.

Rappaport discusses the factory as a way to illuminate stories of the few factory owners who have utopian ideas for the social life of laborers and of the architect's openness to experimenting with forms, technology, and materials, which offered the opportunity to introduce the vertical organization of the factory (by the invention of gravity-flow mechanisms and later the elevator), in turn helping to construe factories not only as space-consuming entities concentrated at urban peripheries but as urban elements that can be dispersed around the city. Many examples are investigated in descriptions and diagrams, offering

a history of manufacturing, a narrative on the unprecedented changes in (our) working life, from material to immaterial and from mass production to customization. A series of key examples of industrial architecture from the Modernist period, such as Van Nelle in Rotterdam, Le Corbusier's Usine Claude & Duval, and Fiat's Lingotto factories, to the present, such as Lafayette 148 and recycling facilities by Ábalos & Herrera, identifies useful categories for contemporary factories, including the Spectacle, the Flexible, and the Sustainable.

Moreover, the book closes with a section on the future of the factory, drawing on the materials of her design studios and speculative concepts she has developed, including that of a hybrid factory-residential scenario. The urge to rethink the factory building model is clear: new ways of production and issues of sustainability and job creation push the factory toward retrieving its place in urban society. Through stimulating examples, one sees that the difficulty of this topic is not without regard to newer types of production but rather older ones that will still exist for at least the near future. What can be done to maintain these outmoded factories that are the locus of blue-collar work?

Allow me a small comment on the title: *Vertical Urban Factory* doesn't cover the content of the book by far. It is much more than a plea for vertical urban factories. As Rappaport says, it is a metaphor for more, as becomes clear in the final section of the book. I would suggest something else, since the book is no more and no less impressive: *The Architecture of the Factory: Modern Past, It's Contemporary State, and It's Urban Future*.

— HANS TEERDS

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