

Introduction

The use of empty space by artists is now well established as a method to bring new life to shops in many city centres. The *Empty Shop Network* commissioned Joe Turner - an activist, artist and writer - to consider how the same kind of thinking could be used to bring new ideas to the use of empty factory space.

Over the last few years, Joe has considered the sustainability of small clothing factories at home and abroad. This document therefore uses empty clothing factories in Coventry as a case-study to consider how artists could help to bring regeneration to our post-industrial landscape.

The Issues

Historically, Coventry has had a long association with textile production. Many centuries ago, the city built a name for itself with the production of *Coventry Blue* dyed fabric and intricate ribbons which were highly prized and sold around the world. In the twentieth century, Coventry became best known as a centre of motorbike and motorcar manufacturing, yet the textile industry was also continuing throughout this period. The Coultaulds fibre company operated from a large factory in the Foleshill district of Coventry from 1905 until the 1980s – at one point in the 1970s becoming the largest manufacturer of textiles in the world. In the 1960s and 70s, many small factories opened in the Hillfields and Foleshill districts of Coventry, producing all sorts of types of clothing.

In the last decade, the British clothing industry has been badly hit by increasing imports of cheap products. Working clothing factories in Coventry reduced rapidly to the extent that there are now very few in operation.

There seem to be two general patterns for how the clothing factories we see today survived into the twenty-first century.

Some big factories expand and continue to evolve ways to compete in the market by producing highly technological products – such as the New Balance sports shoe factory in Cumbria which produces 28,000 pairs of shoes and employs more than 200. This is the exception rather than the rule and many well known brands have moved some or all of their high value production overseas – such as Burberry, which closed some of their factories in 2009.

At the other end of the spectrum, tiny factories continue to operate. They are dotted around the country but are still numerous in Leicester and Greater Manchester. Strangely, these are often producing low value, low quality goods. They have been able to survive by offering rapid production to customers looking for quickly changing stock, such as market stalls.

These latter factories cause many social problems. As they usually employ small numbers of staff and so they are not often unionised. The work is classified as 'unskilled' and so attracts low wages, yet staff are only employed if they can demonstrate considerable speed and skill. In some areas, such as in parts of Leicester, it is common to see job boards outside of clothing factories looking for workers with particular skills.

Sometimes the work is seasonal, so workers may find themselves unemployed at times when there is no work and with long hours when there is. Many work on a piece rate (paid

on each garment produced) basis. In theory, this should add up to as much as being paid a wage, yet in practice it is hard to see it as much of a benefit to the workers as to the factory owners.

The most exploited workers in the UK garment industry are the homeworkers. In the UK this group are often totally hidden. They are usually women, usually from an ethnic group which means they are not allowed/encouraged to go out of the home to get work, often have poor language skills and usually have few other ways to make money than to sew at home. In practice there are more potential workers than there is work, so exploitation is rife. As they are not normally 'employed' or 'on the books' of factories, they report that they regularly receive less than minimum wage for their work and are forced to do additional unpaid work.

Making clothing in bulk is a skilled profession which requires significant amounts of training and experience, yet those who work in the industry in Britain today are one of the least valued groups of all workers. Many machinists work in a clothing factories because they are unable to work anywhere else. In a small city like Coventry, those who are still working in clothing factories are a fraction of the textile skill base as so many factories have closed and there is little work remaining in the sector elsewhere in the country.

So, how could artists bring change to the empty clothing factories and possibly bring hope to those who used to work in them?

The Unfactory

In a factory setting, artists have much to offer clothing machinists and clothing machinists have much to give to artists. Machinists are not normally expected to be creative, but to produce consistent products in the least possible time. Artists often lack the skills to turn their textile ideas into larger runs of clothing or may not have had the opportunity to spend time in a factory setting learning how to produce high quality clothing.

If the two groups can find ways to work together, we can build 'unfactories', which break through the traditional thinking of British clothing manufacturing.

The unfactory concept is that it is possible to imagine a manufacturing system which both offers *better pay and more stability for clothing machinists* as well as opportunities to *help artists to develop creative ideas*.

One critical aspect should be that the unfactory must be able to support itself and must be able to run as a 'profit-seeking' (if not actually profitable) enterprise, so it cannot depend on frequent injections of cash from grants. There is no space to set up a clothing factory for fun – this would offer false hope to workers and would ultimately fail. There is no substitute to finding products to make which have value in the wider community.

This vision of an unfactory would include the following aspects:

1. A production line which produced rapid turnaround, low volume, high quality garments.
2. A high quality training facility – enabling informal clothing manufacturing education on good quality machines to the growing number of people who want to know how to do it in a happy environment.
3. Shared artists space to develop new ideas.

The idea would then be that artists could develop new concepts for clothing ranges, which could be made up by the machinists. In time, the interaction between the artists and machinists would drive innovation and creativity as well as breaking down some of the walls between these groups. There would be an emphasis on experimenting with new ideas – such as offering bespoke services for fairly standard products (such as coats, jeans etc) which could be made up for individuals at the same kind of price that they might pay in higher end shops. This would then require additional staff – such as designers, pattern cutters, CAD operators, experienced customer-facing staff etc.

In addition, the factory line would be looking to find customers who were looking for rapid, custom and small orders and were prepared to pay a premium for this service.

Co-operation

The best model for an unfactory would be a co-operative, whereby all the users would buy into the business and have a share in the success of the model.

Co-operatives offer an alternative to the dominant capitalist model where a single 'boss' determines the direction of the business and everyone else is an employee. In a co-operative, each member holds an equal share of the business and is entitled to have a say in how it is run.

This could be difficult – in that there would be clothing machinists being paid (hopefully very well compared to other similar jobs) and artists paying to use the facilities, but it

should be possible to create a structure which values everyone and builds them up to be more than they might be otherwise.

Education

The educational aspect of the unfactory concept is important in that it opens the project to the wider community as well as being another revenue stream. Whilst there are courses in fashion provided by local Further Education colleges, these are often not suited to the demographic of people who want to learn how to make clothing. There are some examples of successful informal classes – such as the Make Lounge in London, where groups take short courses in a light-hearted and fun atmosphere. Many hen-nights are now spent learning a new skill over a glass of wine!

There is now a growing group of young people who are inspired by websites such as craftzine, etsy and the hit web TV show threadbanger to try making more of their own things – yet it is hard to work out how to do things on your own.

The curriculum would focus on finding space to help learners at whatever level they need. For many who do not have a large amount of equipment at home, this would involve getting to grips with simple equipment, making and mending clothing and learning how to do simple but effective crafts which they could continue at home. There might also be some kinds of self-help groups, where like-minded people could meet to share skills at the unfactory in a less stuffy environment than you might find in other places.

For more ambitious learners, there would be opportunities to learn how to become proficient on industrial equipment and the space for people to hire the industrial machines to complete their own ranges of clothing.

One way to fund the educational provision of the unfactory might be to offer a subscription service so crafters could come and use the machines whenever was convenient, in a similar way to going to a gym. An additional fee might be charged for a particular class or one-to-one time learning how to use a machine or complete a project. Depending on the staff involved, it might be possible to provide alternative craft parties, special events and other community resources to the local art and craft community.

Empty Factory vs Empty Shop

It might be tempting for artists to think that this kind of project would be suited to an empty shop. There are several reasons why this would not work.

First, an unfactory must become a business which makes money. If that happened, it would be unreasonable to expect shop landlords to offer free/low cost rents and so the project would quickly face a commercial shop rent. Factory rent is going to be much lower than full commercial shop rent.

Second, unless the project was very small scale, a manufacturing project in an empty shop is unlikely to be sustainable as it would not be able to hold industrial sewing equipment. Whilst there are examples of interesting uses of empty shops for production in Coventry – such as the Unity Panda project in the City Arcade, which aims to enable more people to get involved in a joint hand knitting project – these are not designed to be long term commercial enterprises. Having said all that, there may be opportunities to develop small knitting, sewing, tailoring and dressmaking operations – but again, these may compete with the small shops which already exist to fulfil those functions.

The unfactory difference

The main thing that would make the unfactory a successful project would be the ambience and outlook of the project. The space would be busy but welcoming. There would be space to eat and drink together, hopefully sparking up good conversations. Learners would feel that they had been enabled and inspired to fulfil their goals. Machinists would feel that they were finally being appreciated and rewarded for their skills. Artists would feel that they were engaged with an exciting project which offered them something totally different to anything they had experienced before.

This might be a hard thing to achieve, but the objective should be to develop a project which is economically sustainable and delivering sufficient value to meet the aspirations of everyone that works at the unfactory – whilst at the same time valuing everyone whom the project comes into contact with and seeking to find ways to accommodate those with varying needs and requirements.

Rough estimates of costs

A small range of sewing machines – including some to enable teaching on more simple machines together with industrial machines, knives, irons cutting tables etc might cost something in the region of £10,000.

Rental of a suitable small industrial unit in Coventry would cost at least another £10,000 per year.

So when there is a small team of machinists, a teacher and administrator, which is the minimum requirement to make this work, there would need to be a turnover of at least £200k per year. This could easily rise if there was a bigger unit, more staff and so on. The intention would be that the income generated from the production line would pay for staff costs – and subscriptions and course fees pay towards the other costs associated with the project.

It would therefore not be an insignificant project to plan and run. But with the right people and a shared vision, perhaps based on my thoughts here, I believe this is entirely achievable.