



Conference Urban Production 14-15.11.2019

After tackling urban inclusion and urban ecosystems, in 2019–2020 Metrolab Brussels is focusing on urban production. This polysemic term can mean at least two different things. First, in a very broad sense, it refers to the way in which urban forms are produced—whether on a daily basis or over the very long term—by social players who have access to highly contrasting resources, in relationships of solidarity and competition, domination and resistance, negotiation and conflict. While the city is a produced space, embodied in the morphology of built space, it is also a productive space, in which a series of factors and players all take part in the production and circulation of materials.

Metrolab's 2019–2020 conference will deal precisely with the relationships that are created in cities today—and more specifically in Brussels—between these two faces of urban production: the production of the city itself, and production within the city.

The first day of the conference will be devoted to this complex relationship, which will be examined using three complementary approaches. The first goal will be to clarify the uncertainty that currently surrounds the notion of productive activity, in both conceptual and regulatory terms. Not only does this conceptual uncertainty give decision makers and economic players leeway to decide which activities take place in the urban space, it also makes research more challenging; as such, it calls for clarifications in order to address urban production issues in a more rigorous way.

Second, the speakers will question the ways in which activities seen as innovative or creative (referred to in the North American literature as 'Industry 4.0') emerge and are supported and legitimised. Examples of such activities include graphic design, publishing, advertising and ICT, but also microbreweries and artisanal chocolatiers, whose common points are that they rely on small-scale production units, require little space, and call upon qualified labour. These activities currently receive support from regional and European social and economic policies that promote active citizens and 'makers'.

Lastly, at a time when regional, national and European authorities foster a reindustrialisation of cities, we should look into the potential to maintain existing productive activities or implant new ones within the urban fabric. In this perspective, speakers will discuss not only the structural factors involved in urban deindustrialisation in developed capitalist countries, but also the obstacles to the reindustrialisation of the cities involved, such as competing uses for urban plots and buildings (residential, commercial, leisure, etc.) that are often more profitable and therefore able to yield higher rents. They will also look at the spatial and economic consequences of the presence of industrial activities that are characteristic of cities (production of building materials, agri-food industry, auto repair, etc.), both in terms of nuisance and resources. Lecturers examine how such activities are integrated into the urban fabric, with a particular focus on the types of cohabitation with other activities and the relationships involved.

The second day of the conference will include a morning tour of industrial sites implanted along the Brussels Canal, followed by analysis and reflection workshops dedicated to the place of productive activities in Brussels' urban fabric. Each workshop will cover a specific territory: the first will deal with the area surrounding the Vergote basin and the Northern Quarter, and the second with Cureghem and the area surrounding the Biestebroek basin. In both cases, participants will be encouraged to reflect on the forms of cohabitation between productive activities and other urban functions, and to examine the establishment and real-world expression of the relationships between public authorities, initiatives supporting productive activities, economic agents, and the residents themselves.