Repurposing vacated spaces in post-industrial cities

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Abstract:

This research seeks to understand how post-industrial production and consumption systems are being re-defined to meet the needs of novel social contracts in cities that are themselves in processes of reinvention. Many rust-belt cities in the US Midwest are undergoing major transformations through technological innovations and cultural change. As manufacturing activities declined or moved away, large swaths of vacant land and buildings are left in their wake, posing a major challenge for urban regeneration. These vacant spaces lack economic activities, business interest, and social capital, and can blight their surroundings. But, they also present opportunities for novel systems of interaction, as technological innovations are revolutionizing the activities and choices of urban dwellers, upending existing systems of production-consumption, leading to new urban configurations. Considering the new dynamics of interaction between technology and culture in the new economy, what do these empty spaces imply for the resilience of cities? How can they be leveraged to create pathways towards sustainable and resilient cities?

On Chicago's Southside, The Plant is a former meat-packing factory that has been converted into a collaborative community of food and beverage businesses. More than a dozen small, start-up businesses lease space at the facility, and have organically established material trades through informal agreements. Led by Bubbly Dynamics, the building owner, and Plant Chicago, an education and research non-profit, the members of this community are exploring strategies and processes to build a circular economy. This involves the creation of closed energy and material loops, such that materials are continuously reused, and the dissemination of knowledge and benefits with communities surrounding the facility, and across the city more broadly. Our research investigates how collaborative innovation processes around material reuse, community engagement and knowledge creation are being developed and disseminated. We examine the challenges that tenants and organizers face in this process, and explore frameworks to enable them to more effectively implement the circular economy at The Plant. We further examine how these lessons can be more widely applied to similar systems attempting to utilize social and environmental innovation to rebuild resilience in cities. By doing so, post-industrial vacant spaces can be regenerated, and become places where a city's infrastructure is transformed into platforms for sustainable development. This can enable the emergence of novel technological and cultural practices to support creative and sustainable initiatives in urban regeneration processes.