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Linda Cox

Linda Cox, AICP, directed the Municipal Art Society's Planning Center, which provides technical assistance to community-based planning efforts in New York City, through last November. Since 1994, she had been working on the issue of urban manufacturing, most recently helping to strengthen links between New York's design firms and production firms.

How did you become interested in the issue of manufacturing?

In recent years New York City put out two reports concerning industrial land. One was the waterfront plan, which forecast a lot of industrial waterfront converting to some other use. The other was the superstore policy, which was predicated on idea that there was a lot of vacant, industrial land that could be given over to other uses.

That made us wonder about the future of these industrial areas. We decided to look at future of manufacturing and discovered that while manufacturing has clearly diminished, and industrial areas are clearly ready for change, there is still manufacturing activity that should be reckoned with.

Why have you stayed with the issue?

I find the people and the topic endlessly engrossing. The manufacturers, the designers I've begun to work with in the design-production project and the people who are fighting to keep a place for them in New York City are fascinating—their ingenuity, their entrepreneurial energy, their very often unexpected level of dedication to their workers and the city, and their frustration that no one has noticed what they add to the vitality of the city.

Also, focusing on this issue turned out to be a way of focusing on some of the most critical issues for the future of New York. Where will the next generation of jobs come from? What is the future of all these industrial neighborhoods where homes and factories are intermingled? Although we don't always feel we are the ideal organization to be examining this issue, there don't seem to be other groups who are.

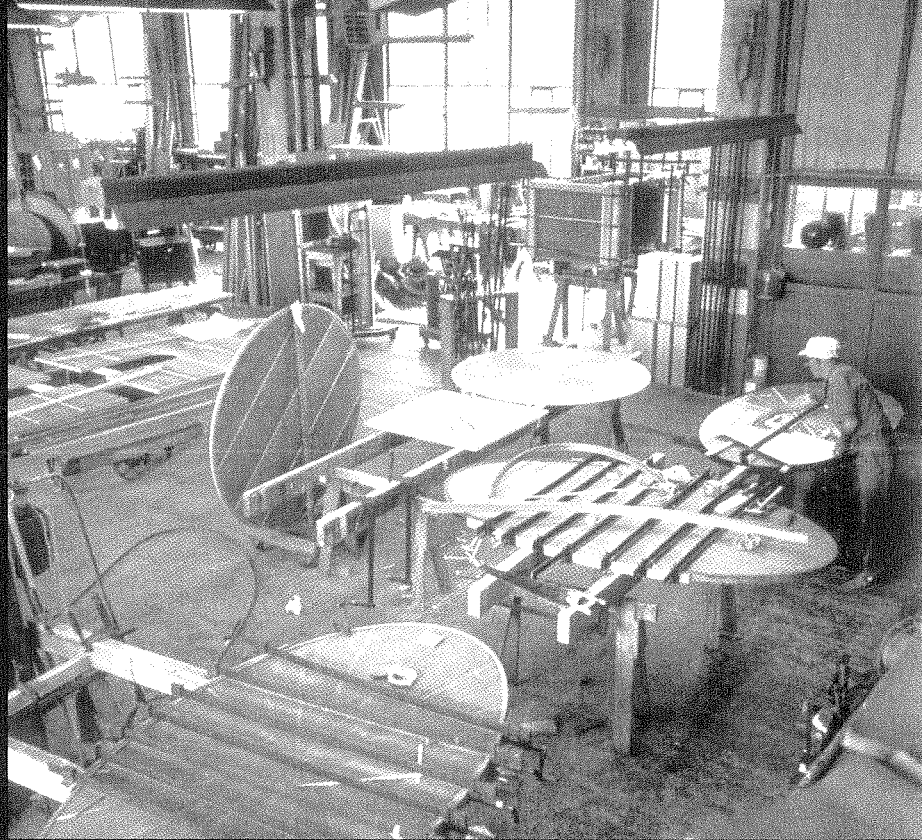
How did you define a community or a constituency for this project?

One of the things we know about manufacturers is that they are not organized as a community, nor are they well represented as a group, and they don't often turn up at urban policy discussions. That's part of what attracted us, that this group is not being heard in the public domain.

But it's also a two-way street. We did not start out with the idea of the design-production link, not even the idea of focusing on manufacturing. We just heard that it still mattered and there were issues worth focussing on.

How does this project compare to a traditional advocacy planning process?

We don't claim to be directly representing the point of view or interest or any particular group or community. That has risks. But it also frees us to bring a particular



Woodshop, New York.

Photo: Walter Sauer Courtesy: Municipal Art Society

point of view and to acknowledge the complexity of these issues. We can search for what makes sense, what seems possible, and look for how that links up with what other organizations are trying to do.

We can do that without having to check back to see whether we've mirrored the interests of a defined community. Many times, a community group is stymied from taking a strong stand because the points of view of various board members, or the group's constituents, cancel each other out.

Does a planner have to have a vision in mind for a process like this to be successful?

One of the hardest things about working this way is that it isn't obvious what to focus on or why, or what's the next step, so you want to be attuned to your surroundings and what they're telling you. You don't want to be driven only by some inner vision. I don't see myself as a visionary planner in that sense.

But you cannot operate without some kind of a gyroscope, or some sense of what its all for, what is the public good you have in mind. There has to be some set of preoccupations that drive this kind of work. For us, it has been the discovery that there is a sector of the economy that wasn't being worried about well, and should have been. By extension, this also concerns the physical well-being of the city, neighborhoods that are in the process of sorting out their future.