

An aerial, black and white photograph of a dense urban landscape, likely New York City. The image shows a variety of skyscrapers and buildings of different heights and architectural styles, packed closely together. The perspective is from a high angle, looking down on the city. The lighting creates strong shadows, emphasizing the three-dimensional nature of the buildings.

# Making New York

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Took my kids to Maker Faire. It was basically in the parking lot of the Hall of Science, near where we live in Queens. We have a family membership so we got to skip the queue and go in through the member's line. "Big crowd," I said, to the ticket person. "Oh, this is nothing," she said. You should see us in Austin or California. I guess New York City is not really a maker kind of place, or if it is, it's making something else.

My eight year old loved the knitting machines. We soldered some circuits together, but he burned his finger. The best fun was a strange tricycle contraption you pedaled with your hands and steered with your butt. He loved that. My three-year-old daughter loved the giant recreation of the Mousetrap game and the Lego 'robots'. She has a thing about robots. I did not love that there was only one place selling coffee and the line was endless.

One of the good things about maker culture is that it puts traditionally male and female kinds of hobby stuff side by side. My son can try knitting; my daughter can play with Lego robots. There's a subtle reconfiguring of the geek-hobby continuum going on. That's the good news.

On the other hand, it's not really about making things. It's like a homey version of what Nicholas Bourriaud called postproduction art. The stuff has already been made, you put it together. Like Ikea furniture, but, you know, fun. It probably isn't fun working in the factories that makes the circuit boards or the Lego bricks or the knitting machines.

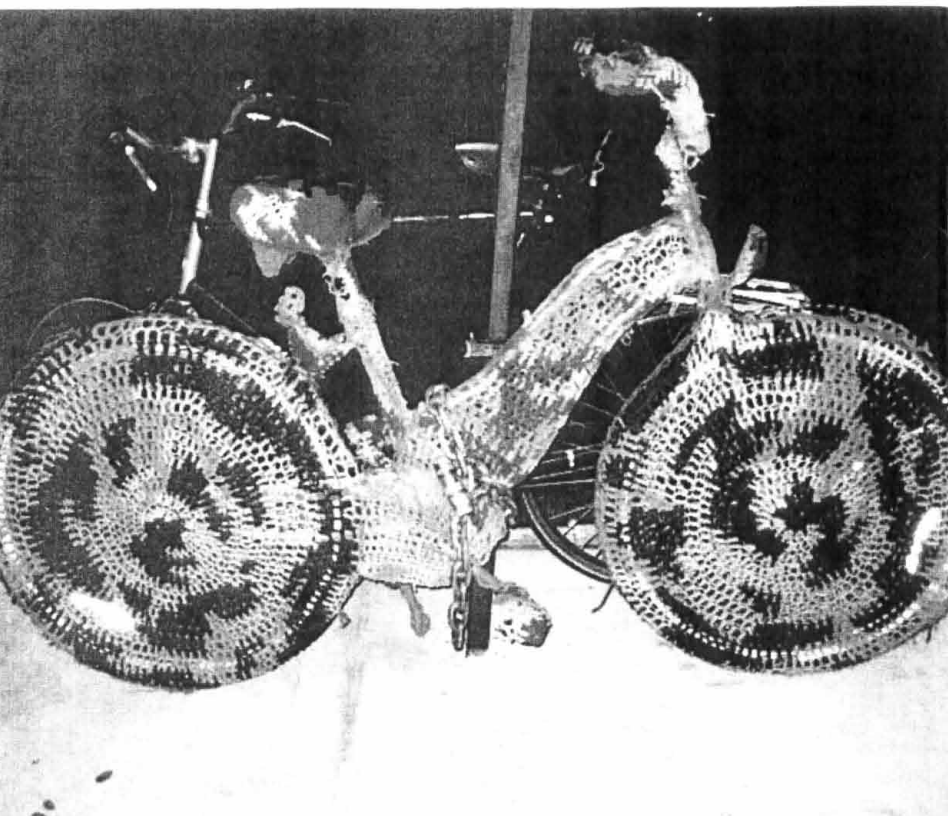
So there's a short-circuit. It's about a hobby culture and a teaching culture that nibbles around the edges of a world that is made elsewhere. It's supposedly good training for labor in the creative and tech industries. You play with the end products to figure out how to make better products.

I'm in favor of knowing how things are made. But maker culture seems mostly about basic concepts, in electronics, for example, or knitting patterns. It's not about actual processes. The handicraft part depends on an industrial part that remains unseen. It's a kind of fetishism.



It was fun though, at least for the kids. We 'made' a bunch of stuff, bought more stuff to make, and went home. Its hard to get into maker culture in New York City, however. We don't have dens or garages or spare rooms. Maker culture seems to assume a suburban everyday life, where there's space for some gratuitous making.

There is a maker culture in New York now, but its different. Ironically, it's not about mechanical or electronic things, so much as it is about food and leather goods and furniture. The name for it is Brooklyn.





Brooklyn is now home to all sorts of 'artisanal' industries, making everything from bacon to organic beard oil. It relies in part on proximity to under utilized upstate farm land. There is also an urban farming movement, big enough to at least supply some quality restaurants.

In a city so dominated by finance capital and its attendant services, this is both strange and quite inevitable. Brooklyn style maker culture actually makes things, but its things only rich people can really afford. It relies on a steady supply of rich people, living one way or another off this being such a money town.





Both of these maker cultures have their limitations, then. The Make Magazine or Maker Faire version really seems blind to the actual manufacturing of things, but it does at least open the door to a genuine popular culture about the material world. The Brooklyn maker culture really wants to get its hands dirty making things rather than just playing with things already made. But it doesn't scale. It makes a fetish of the artisanal quality of the labor as another way of avoiding the question of labor. ■

