

By taking the light manufacture out of our urban centres, developers and industrialists have sapped the soul from too many cities. Thankfully some are taking matters into their own hands, says our editor-in-chief, Tyler Brûlé.

On a recent journey to the more easterly side of London, I spied the most curious thing. I saw someone making something. I'm not talking about a sandwich or a film or a website but a real person assembling and fastening a group of diverse materials to make a finished product. What was even more surprising was that there was a whole room of people measuring, cutting, folding and sewing. Some of them were listening to iPods, some were chatting quietly to colleagues and others were simply lost in their work.

The owner of this venture walked me around the rest of his works (housed in a former Royal Mail depot), occasionally stopping to unravel a bolt of fabric or pull out an exquisitely finished product. "You know that roughly 95 per cent of our sales are overseas," the proprietor explained. "I'm not quite sure buyers in the UK entirely get what we do here."

As I surveyed his little enterprise I suggested that it was not just buyers of his wares who should get with it but also suppliers, manufacturers, management consultants and government agencies. It wasn't until I was shuttling back to our offices 15 minutes later that it struck me that Mr Drake was operating one of the most modern, forward looking manufacturing ventures in the United Kingdom.

From the outside this maker of neckties and scarves (with odd other accessory thrown in) doesn't look like much. On the inside it's not up to much either. Built for function, the whole thing has the smell, and one might argue spirit, of post-war Britain. Which is precisely the appeal. As the UK set about rebuilding itself after the Second World War its industrial engine hummed at varying speeds – large parts of the defence industry transformed into the aerospace sector, vehicles of various badges rolled off assembly lines and onto Scottish built ships for delivery around the world, and from Los Angeles to Kobe men and women had Made in England stitched into their sweater, shirt and duffel-coat labels.

In its own humble way, Drakes London is a more modern example of that era and one that developed countries should be following. With design and provenance at the core of Drakes business (the London bit of the name is no phoney suffix), the company sees its base on the fringes of the City of London as essential to its overall brand message and client offering.

While I've long maintained that this is exactly what premium customers both expect and deserve, this is not the most interesting part of the business. Beautiful quality and smart patterns aside, the thoroughly modern part of the operation is not found via the most advanced sewing machines from Switzerland or laser cutting technology from Germany (there isn't any) but in the simplicity of the proposition – a London-based manufacturer of high-priced haberdashery that produces almost everything (scarves come from Scotland) where it says on the label, and an employer of skilled labourers all in possession of a specific craft.

Jolly Mr Drake could no doubt do much of his work in a factory in suburban Shenzhen for vastly reduced costs. Or could he? It's unlikely that Mr Drake would like to drag himself back and forth to Hong Kong airport on Cathay Pacific to keep an eye on the quality. It's also unlikely that Alberto from A.Gi.Emme in Como would be buying his scarves and ties in great quantities if they were made in China. And it's a very sure thing that the buyers from United Arrows wouldn't go anywhere near his product range if it wasn't 100 per cent made in the UK. He's not alone: in

Brussels Delvaux has its factory in the heart of the city. In Osaka Graf and Truck make their furniture in the city centre.

In the case of Mr Drake, his venture is more than just a quaint exercise in keeping the textile industry in the UK alive, it's also a functioning example that light industry has a place in the heart of cities and that consumers want to pay for handcrafted goods with a strong story behind them. Thanks to Richard Florida every city wants to be creative these days but developers and governments (and their advisers) must recognise that these same cities need factory floors to make things and skilled hands to stitch, mould, shave and craft them.

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