Reconciling Janus

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Agricultural land, industrial sites, trading estates or co-working spaces, fab-labs and other workshops for creation and production… The 'smart city' will have had a short life. Increasingly, European cities are bedding, as Brussels is, for a revival of their productive origins and position themselves as sources of nurture —producing, manufacturing and providing more than they dematerialise, digitalise and outsource. The factories and other manufacturers that have been relegated to industrial areas on the edge of cities —along with their corollary zones for waste management or storage, of data, archives, cars— are progressively, if still hesitantly, being reincorporated into the urban fabric. A few buildings, but above all a multitude of competitions —essentially ideas competitions— indicate that towns have everything to gain by this 'reinsertion' through typologies that cleverly combine functions that would previously have been considered incompatible —archives and housing, waste disposal unit and ski-slope, bus maintenance depot and student residences, etc.

While it's not a question of advocating the return of heavy industry, along with its much criticised mono-functional zoning, all those activities that in the past were hidden away —buried— in the backstreets of the city, are well advised to get back into the light. The ecological and economic reasons are obvious. These hybrid figures that engage self-production logics also make interesting food for thought in ensuring the profitability of much wanted real estate. But also, it is undoubtedly here that we find the social and urban diversity for which urban development zones and other so-called 'mixed' developments strive, without ever quite managing to achieve. Kristiaan Borret, master-architect ('bouwmeester') of the Brussels-Capital Region, highlights it thus: "Just as it is important for city children to know where milk comes from, they must also understand that behind a manufactured object is a profession that merits just as much visibility within our urban society. In a city that calls itself diverse, let's celebrate production." 'Productive' rather than 'smart', it is by giving value to their hidden face that European cities can arm themselves against the problems that are stifling them.