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# Why An Informal Global Network Is Betting The Future Is Local

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**Georgina Wilson-Powell** 🐦

Editor of pebble magazine. All about sustainability. Fashion, food, travel and design with an ethical edge.

Imagine a future where your furnishings and clothes are made locally by artisans and makers who live on your street. Your food is grown a rooftop away and your energy is created by your immediate neighbours. For [Fab City](#) this hyper-local future is not a fantasy, it's the way to make cities sustainable.

Locally productive, globally connected. Those two tenets are at the heart of the open source network that is Fab City. A collaboration between the Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia, the MIT's Center for Bits and Atoms, the Fab Foundation and 12 cities (plus two countries and several regions), the Fab City vision is simple - for their members to be 50% sustainable by 2054.

### Going circular

At the heart of Fab City's vision is the idea that the global manufacturing network doesn't make sense, commercially or sustainably. It's disrupted our relationship with how things are made and with how food is produced. Its idea for cities of the future is that they become local production hubs - manufacturing things, food and energy. The only commodity moving between them? Shared knowledge. Rather than imagining the city as one large factory or Victorian-style mill town, residents would be encouraged to store energy through rooftop panels, tend and use integrated vertical gardens and have local libraries of things - which could be powered by digital fabrication and 3D printing. Think more a medieval system of artisans creating products or offering services next to the people who need them, cutting out transportation emissions and costs and more importantly reducing waste (the phrase a 'high-tech Middle Ages' has been banded about online).

"We operate with a concept called 'data in-data out' - which refers to a vision of cities being less dependent on shipping physical items to each other but

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## Why An Informal Global Network Is Betting The Future Is Local



Fab City's project co-ordinators. "If you think about it, the current model for manufacturing is pretty insane. Shipping items two or three places around the globe and clocking up carbon emissions has a huge impact. The vision for Fab City is that a city would become a self-sufficient factory to the largest extent possible and make sure the solutions and the data is shared by other cities."



Credit: Christian Villum

### The maker movement

While many might not be aware of it, the global maker movement is continually thinking, tinkering and testing new tech that can change parts of our lives - from small hacks to redefining whole industries and it's this network of makers that the Fab City project draws inspiration from.

There are just over 1,000 Fab Labs all over the world. You or I could pop along and use their machines to create prototypes of just about anything. At Fab Lab London for instance there's everything from 3D printers to sewing machines, tools to lasers, with experts on hand to guide your creation.

"A Fab Lab is similar to a maker space but the while the latter often caters more for an exclusive audience, perhaps a university or a research institute, the Fab Lab is open to anyone. Anyone can go along and learn about new technology, 3D printing and more. Plus all data is shared, so knowledge can be scaled up between the labs across the world," explains Villum.

### So what makes a Fab City?

12 cities, including Amsterdam, Shenzhen and Detroit, have all pledged to become Fab Cities. They have some major pillars to tackle - moving to a locally based manufacturing eco-system, using less and recycling more, using distributed energy production, developing urban permaculture, creating closer collaboration between local governments and civic groups and

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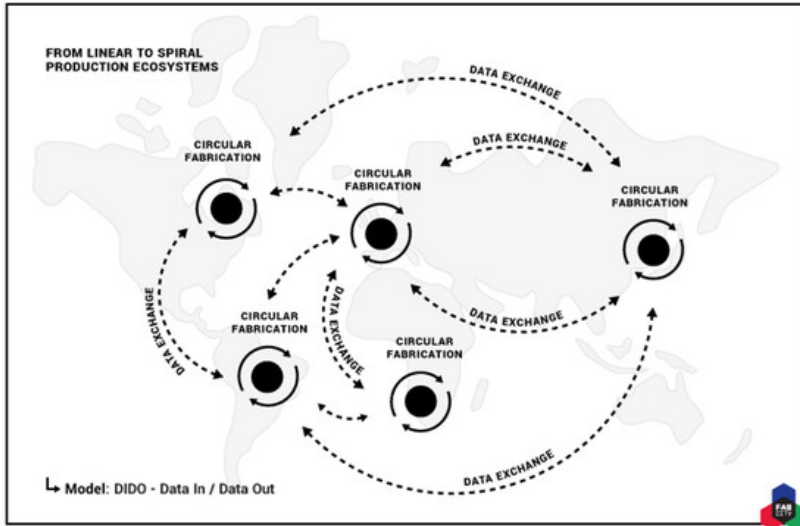
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The network has developed a credible index to measure the various verticals of doing all this, from public transport to air pollution and ranks the cities in real time on how they're achieving. In a nutshell, the index defines this project, which is highly data and design driven.



Credit: Fab City

### Making the future work for everyone

It's not enough however for city governments, mayors or even Presidents to sign up to targets way in the future, amidst presentations and promises. For cities and societies to change, everyone needs to be involved - from the construction worker to the hacker - and in Fab City's vision the city can no longer be a place of passive accommodation. Instead people need to be involved in small scale local industry, urban farming and re-evaluating their relationship to their local environment.

"It's a change in mindset which is happening gradually already. What we want to create is a framework that allows citizens to step into a more active role," says Villum. "Fab City won't be a perfect path forward to unite the world but it will aim to get as close to that as possible by ensuring there are no divides or exclusions, as a society we need everyone to be involved."

A longer version of this article was originally published on [pebble magazine](#). For more on sustainability sign up to pebble's weekly newsletter [here](#).

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