Linda Cox, AIA, directed the Municipal Art Society’s Planning Center, which provides technical assistance to community-based planning efforts in New York City, through November 1978. She has 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 concerned with 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 the 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 had 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 engaging. The manufacturing sector has been on the rise, and the design community is becoming interested in the environmental and social aspects of manufacturing. This has led to a rethinking of the role of manufacturing in the city.

How did you define a community for the sake of this project? One of the things we know about manufacturers is that they are not 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 didn’t 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 focusing 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 interests of any particular group or community. That has risks, but it also frees us to bring a particular 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 missed the interests of a defined community. Many times, a community group is frustrated with a project that’s not taken seriously, or that is taken quite seriously, but in ways that don’t have a strong network of stakeholders who are involved.

Does a planner have to have a vision in mind for a project like this to be successful? One of the hardest things about working this way is that it is obvious what to focus on or why, or where the next step is. So you have to be flexible, to go out and talk to people and find out what you’re not doing.

But you can’t operate without some kind of a framework, or some sense of what its all for, what is the public good you hope to achieve. And there’s such a range of interests that this kind of work is hard. For us, it has been the discovery that there is a sector of the economy that wasn’t being acted on at all, and that should have been. By extension, this also concerns the physical well-being of the city, neighborhoods that are in the process of getting out their future.