

Informal and Community-Based Agglomeration: Development and Change in the Garment Industry of Buenos Aires

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Abstract

This article explores the interplay between formal and informal economic activities in the garment industry of Buenos Aires. Focusing on the emergent cluster in Villa Celina, it examines how immigrant-led social and economic networks intersect with policy shifts and economic pressures to shape production geographies. The case underscores the importance of informal and community-based practices in enabling clustering in low-tech, high-touch manufacturing. The findings enrich agglomeration theory by showing how industrial clusters in contexts of informality and limited state support rely not only on conventional drivers but especially on informal governance and adaptive place-based community networks. These embedded and often invisible dynamics sustain production and enable spatial concentration under constraint. Informal economies generate their own trust-based external economies, including shared resources and logistical systems, both of which support ongoing activity and attract formal firms seeking to tap into these networks. The study concludes with implications for rethinking zoning and regulatory frameworks to better accommodate inclusive and diverse forms of urban manufacturing.

Keywords

agglomeration; Buenos Aires; garment industry; immigrants; industrial districts; informal economy; labor; land use; manufacturing

1. Introduction

In the context of renewed interest in urban manufacturing, cities are rediscovering the value of local production. However, urban and industrial planning policies continue to bias advanced manufacturing and

Industry 4.0 agendas. While these matter, policy often neglects two interrelated factors: (a) the existence of low-tech, high-touch forms of manufacturing that play a vital role in urban economies by providing essential and local services (Grodach & Martin, 2021) and (b) the roles of informal and unregulated practices in shaping the spatial organization of productive networks, which are often pronounced in these industries.

The study of interfirm and spatial linkages between formal and informal activity gains relevance in the context of the growing attention to local production, as these linkages support the adaptability, inclusivity, and resilience of urban manufacturing systems. This focus may offer insights for creating economies that are not only technologically advanced, but also more equitable and localized (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). Informal and low-tech manufacturing not only enriches economic diversity, but also provides critical employment opportunities for urban workforces, particularly for marginalized and immigrant populations. This dynamic, however, is not without challenges. While these sectors create avenues for economic participation and offer a pathway for some workers to ascend within the production chain, they are often characterized by exploitative labor conditions, such as low wages, lack of social protections, and precarious employment. This duality underscores the complexity of informal manufacturing, where opportunities for empowerment coexist with the perpetuation of systemic inequalities. Addressing these issues requires balancing the support for economic mobility and entrepreneurship with efforts to combat exploitative practices and promote fair labor standards.

Aligning with scholarship that highlights how agglomeration drivers and outcomes can vary widely across sectors (Diodato et al., 2018; Faggio et al., 2017; Grodach & Guerra-Tão, 2024), this study examines the spatial interactions and networks of the garment industry in Buenos Aires, which combines traditional factory setups with a substantial informal outworker sector. The case is a compelling example of localized industry agglomeration comprised by a spectrum of formal, informal, and quasi-formal enterprises (Gomez et al., 2020; Guha-Khasnobis et al., 2006). This article traces the movement and development of garment production to the Villa Celina area. What began as a consolidated hub in the Flores neighborhood—originally established by Korean immigrant seamsters—expanded to Villa Celina, which has increasingly become a focal point for informal workshops in response to stricter regulatory control. We demonstrate that the garment sector in Buenos Aires is shaped by a complex interplay between formal and informal activities, influenced by policy shifts, economic pressures, and longstanding community dynamics.

By analyzing the dynamic interplay of formal and informal activity in shaping the garment manufacturing cluster alongside the impacts of planning regulations and property costs, this study reveals how these factors collectively reshape the economic geography of the metropolitan area. It highlights how the planning system interacts with informality through policy leniency to anchor production in key areas. These dynamics drive the relocation and consolidation of garment production, underscoring the intricate relationship between planning frameworks and the evolving landscape of formal and informal economic activities.

2. The Urban Garment Industry: Agglomeration Dynamics Between the Formal and the Informal

Garment manufacturing is highly flexible. Tasks including designing, pattern making, fabric selection, cutting, assembling, finishing, and adding details such as buttons and zippers, may be locally concentrated yet geographically dispersed into specialized segments. This flexibility helps the industry integrate into and

adapt to urban spaces with minimal industrial footprint. The garment industry is typically characterized by small firms (Scott, 1984), minimal adoption of advanced technologies (Gago, 2017; Montero, 2012), and a largely low-paid immigrant workforce (Arcos, 2013; Cregan & Kulik, 2022; Goldberg, 2014; Ludmer et al., 2023; Magliano et al., 2017; J. Montero, 2011; Sutherland, 2016). These features are found in diverse cities including Los Angeles (Bonacich & Appelbaum, 2000), London (Evans & Smith, 2006), Manchester (Warren, 2005), Prato (Ceccagno, 2012), Paris (Iskander, 2007), Amsterdam (Rath, 2003), Milan (Pisati et al., 2020), Johannesburg (Kesper, 2014; Rogerson, 2018), Melbourne (Burchielli et al., 2009; Cregan & Kulik, 2022; Delaney et al., 2018), Cali (Moreno-Monroy & Cruz, 2016), São Paulo (Buechler, 2013; Ikemura Amaral, 2022; Lesser, 2013), and Buenos Aires (Gago, 2017; Ludmer et al., 2023; J. Montero, 2012).

A defining characteristic of the industry is its reliance on subcontracted informal labor (Brien, 2013; Sassen, 2013) organized in small workshops or homes where workers assemble garments for larger companies (Cregan & Kulik, 2022; J. Montero, 2011). This structure allows firms to bypass regulations on worker protections and shift risks to subcontractors (Greig, 1992). Outworkers are individuals who carry out their work from home or in locations that are not typically considered formal business premises. These outworkers either receive materials delivered to them or collect them, then complete assembly tasks at home (Burchielli et al., 2009; Delaney et al., 2018). They return the finished products to the subcontractor, which often works under a larger firm. Outworkers are typically paid by piece-rate, have little control over profit margins, and bear all production costs, including overhead and running expenses (Burchielli et al., 2009; Chen, 2014; Delaney et al., 2018). Their isolation and lack of visibility may enable their exploitation in systems where they are essentially dependent workers or disguised wage earners (Burchielli et al., 2009; Delaney et al., 2018; Kellett & Tipple, 2000). Home-based outwork is viable due to the affordability and simplicity of sewing machines (Peck, 1990). Low entry costs make the industry volatile, with frequent new entrants competing with established small firms (Ludmer et al., 2023). Garment production remains labor-intensive, relying on manual skills and personal relationships with local suppliers (Cox, 1995).

While these features align with the conventional understanding of agglomeration economies, informal and unregulated activities are rarely theorized as critical to shaping agglomeration patterns. Classic agglomeration theory identifies advantages such as access to skilled labor, a cost-effective supply of specialized inputs, and localized knowledge spillovers (Duranton & Puga, 2004; Rosenthal & Strange, 2004). Other contributions have built on this work by addressing how “untraded interdependencies” (Storper, 1997) or the non-market-based relationships that influence economic activity and place-based social conventions (Blundel & Smith, 2013)—sustain agglomeration.

However, even this work tends to center on formal sectors and relatively stable institutional environments (Visser, 2009). As a result, the literature often under-theorizes how agglomeration operates in informal and institutionally fragile settings, where producers navigate weak regulatory support and infrastructural gaps by mobilizing kinship ties, trust-based exchanges, and adaptive spatial practices (S. Montero & Chapple, 2018).

Existing literature presents divergent views on the localized agglomeration effects of informality. Some scholars emphasize its positive contributions to employment, flexibility, and economic diversity (Duranton, 2008; Meagher, 2006, 2010, 2013; Moreno-Monroy, 2012; Mukim, 2014), while others point to its negative externalities, including congestion and the displacement of formal enterprises (Harris, 2014; Moreno-Monroy, 2012; Overman & Venables, 2005).

Recent econometric studies have sought to quantify agglomeration economies in both formal and informal sectors, but they typically treat these sectors as distinct and largely segregated systems. Tanaka and Hashiguchi (2020), using establishment-level data from Cambodia, find that informal firms significantly benefit from employment density, with productivity gains amplified by spatial network effects, whereas formal firms show little responsiveness to local agglomeration. Similarly, García (2019), analysing Colombian cities, demonstrates that employment density has a significantly positive effect on productivity and wages in the informal sector, while the formal sector exhibits much weaker agglomeration returns. By contrast, Matano et al. (2020) find that while urbanization and localization economies increase wage premiums for formal workers, only informal workers embedded within formal sectors experience similar gains. As Tran et al. (2024) emphasize, this variability underscores the need to move towards understanding the relationships—such as subcontracting and social networks—that shape how informal and formal enterprises interact within industry agglomerations.

Other studies have examined the spatial co-location or segregation of formal and informal enterprises, using spatial autocorrelation models (Moreno-Monroy, 2012; Moreno-Monroy & Cruz, 2016). These analyses provide valuable insights into proximity patterns but still conceptualize formality and informality as parallel and non-interacting categories, emphasizing statistical correlations over dynamic social and economic interactions. These studies rarely consider how informal firms and labour pools may act as pull factors attracting formal businesses, nor how informal institutions—including trust-based networks, kinship ties, and community governance—support the formation and persistence of hybrid production systems within agglomerations.

To address these gaps, we investigate the complex spatial and economic relationships between formal and informal businesses within Buenos Aires' garment industry. We examine the significant role of informal production practices and their strong reliance on a network of relationships and interactions to create pathways for survival, economic opportunities (Afroza et al., 2016; Alam & Houston, 2020; Fransen et al., 2023; Simone, 2004, 2008, 2013; Thieme et al., 2021; Waliuzzaman, 2020; Waliuzzaman & Alam, 2022), and innovation (Fransen et al., 2023; Nederhand et al., 2023; Phelps & Aritenang, 2023). A key dimension of these networks is their deep entanglement with immigrant communities, whose cultural and ethnic ties shape their operation (Caggiano, 2014; Gago, 2017; Kim, 2014; Parra Garcia, 2019). These interactions reflect a sort of social architecture (McFarlane, 2011; Simone, 2004) built on trust, reciprocity, and community arrangements (Caggiano, 2014; Fransen et al., 2023; Gago, 2017) rather than formal institutions or regulations. Such arrangements highlight how migrant communities mobilize shared cultural identities and practices to develop adaptive strategies and sustain economic activity in the face of urban and regulatory challenges, further underscoring the critical role of ethnicity and cultural cohesion in shaping informal economic geographies. Additionally, we analyze how urban policies influence this agglomeration by facilitating, restricting, or interacting with informal networks (Clever, 2002; Das & Poole, 2004; Roy, 2009), thereby shaping the spatial organization and trajectory of the garment industry across the city.

3. Methods

This article adopts a case study approach, focusing on the garment industry in Buenos Aires, where estimates suggest that between 60% and 70% of clothing is produced within informal productive units (Bertranou & Casanova, 2016; Campos, 2008; Lieutier et al., 2018). As such, Buenos Aires provides a rich context to explore

the socio-spatial dynamics between formal and informal enterprises and those in-between (Figure 1). We aim to study how these enterprises occupy shared spaces (Ludmer et al., 2023), the complex interactions between formal and informal production and commercialization circuits (Gago, 2017; Ludmer et al., 2020), and the ways in which regulatory differences across jurisdictions affect the spatial organization of production networks in the garment industry. Buenos Aires' garment production sector has undergone notable spatial transformations over the past few decades, shaped by a blend of regulatory shifts, economic pressures, and the evolving roles of immigrant communities. We trace the movement and development of garment production across the city's neighborhoods, from Flores—a long-standing hub established through the contributions of Korean and Bolivian immigrant labor—to the emerging center of Villa Celina, where recent waves of informal workshops have settled (Figure 1).

Central to this interaction is the role of the urban planning system, which, while designed to regulate land use and economic activity, may inadvertently accommodate or exacerbate informality. We analyze the impacts of enforcement changes and urban policies, to understand how the planning system interacts with the evolving landscape of formal and informal economic activities.

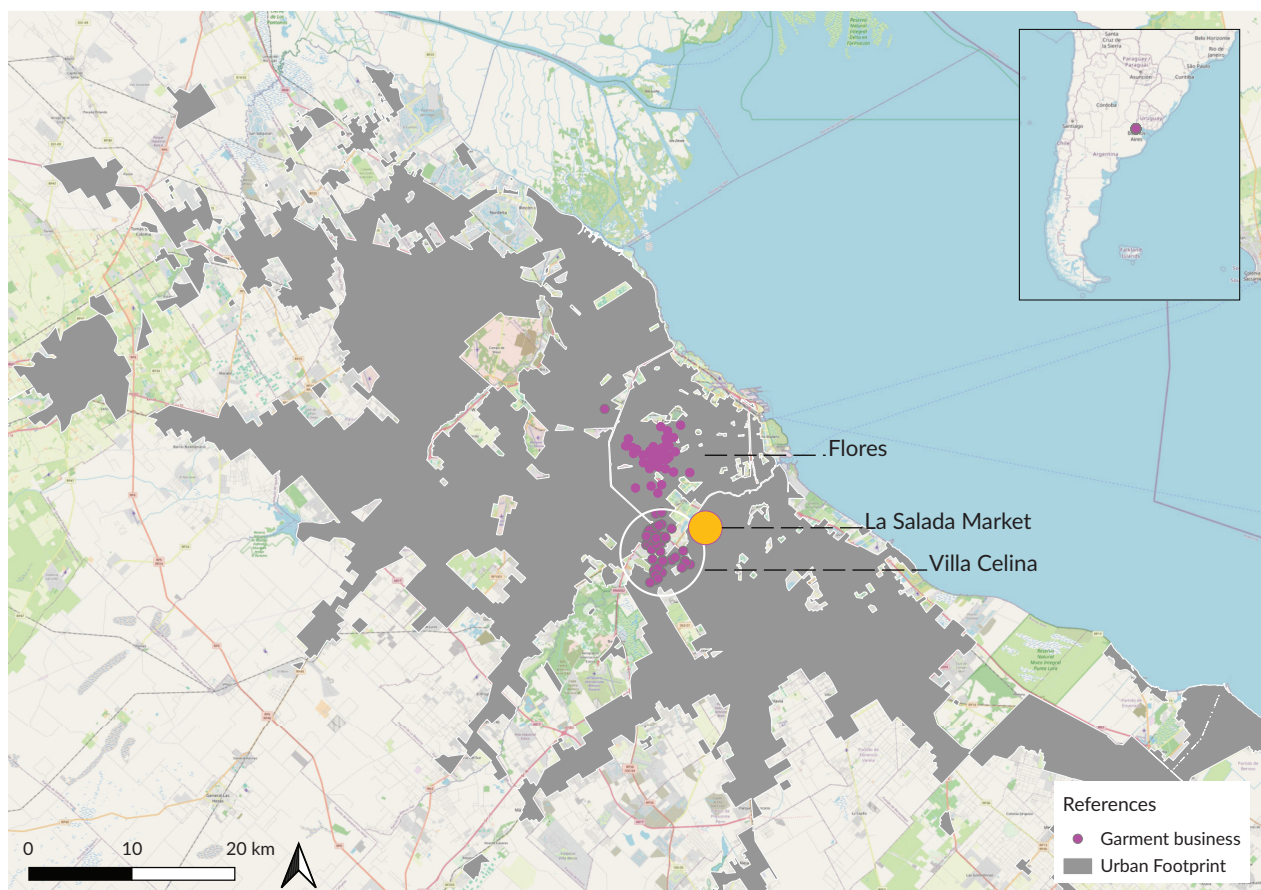


Figure 1. Spatial distribution of garment production units within the urban footprint of the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. Source: Author's elaboration based on Google search, desktop mapping, and field observations conducted in 2024. Basemap: OpenStreetMap.

The research is based on fieldwork conducted between March and July 2024, integrating in-depth interviews and ethnographic site visits to explore the spatial dynamics of formal and informal manufacturing

in Buenos Aires. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences, social and community networks, and informal institutions that shape the spatial patterns of the garment industry.

The data collection involved 18 in-depth interviews with garment producers, workers, business owners, and community leaders. The interviews provided rich details on how informal networks and community arrangements support or hinder business operations, and how participants navigate formal and informal regulatory landscapes. To ensure participant anonymity, fictional names have been assigned and are consistently used throughout the article. Additionally, ethnographic site visits were conducted to examine the physical and social environments of garment hubs, providing insights into the often-overlooked but tangible operational dynamics of these spaces. These visits documented how businesses adapt their spaces for production, implement informal logistics systems, repurpose urban infrastructure for unofficial activities, and rely on community-based communication methods to coordinate and sustain their operations. These observations were systematically recorded through notes, photographs, and sketches, providing context-specific insights into the spatial layouts and interactions between formal and informal enterprises. The analysis utilized thematic coding of interview transcripts and field notes, identifying key themes such as business development, locational decisions, zoning impacts, enforcement practices, real estate pressures, and community networks.

To complement these qualitative methods, the study incorporated spatial analysis using Google Earth Street View images to examine changes in the physical landscape over time. Comparisons of Street View imagery from 2015, 2019, and 2024 were conducted to identify visible transformations in garment production areas. The integration of these temporal snapshots enriched the qualitative findings, offering a dynamic view of the evolving urban fabric over the studied period. By integrating qualitative insights with spatial dynamics, the study reveals how informal governance structures influence business relocations, foster resilience, and support the garment industry's growth amidst formal regulatory challenges and real estate pressures.

4. The Spatial Dynamics of Buenos Aires' Garment Production Sector

This case provides insight into the dynamic interplay between community-based informal production networks and urban policies in reshaping the garment industry geography in Buenos Aires. Throughout the early 2000s, Flores solidified as the hub of garment production in Buenos Aires largely due to the integration of the Bolivian community into the local workforce (Gago, 2017; Parra Garcia, 2019). Initially employed as tailors in Korean-owned workshops, Bolivian workers gradually gained technical skills and knowledge in production processes, which enabled many to transition from tailoring to establishing their own manufacturing workshops (Kim, 2014; Parra Garcia, 2019). However, tragic workshop fires in 2006 and 2015 raised safety concerns and intensified labor and workplace safety inspections and stricter compliance checks for zoning and land use. These measures were often accompanied by evictions and closures of non-compliant workshops. These events initiated a notable migration of informal workshops from Flores to Villa Celina, where Bolivian entrepreneurs set up independent operations, transforming Villa Celina into a new garment production hub. Formal businesses followed the informal workshops, drawn by the labor networks and production chains that had consolidated in Villa Celina. This case highlights how community networks and social ties not only facilitated the relocation of informal businesses but also fostered the emergence of Bolivian seamsters as central figures in Buenos Aires' garment sector.

In the following sections, we delve deeper into these spatial shifts, to examine how policy responses, and community-driven networks collectively shape the landscape of garment production in Buenos Aires.

4.1. From Flores to Villa Celina: Industry Structure and Relocation of Buenos Aires' Garment Sector

The textile hub in Flores initially emerged from the concentration of Korean seamsters working in residential areas, which evolved into a wholesale and later retail commercial area (Kim, 2014, 2022). As a seamster interviewee explains:

The Korean owned his house, and the garage was the buttoning station. The house in the back had two workshops where we did the sewing; but everything was owned by the same person. There were around 16 of us in the house, and the wife of one of the workers who also sewed, was the one who cooked for all of us. (Victor, Bolivian seamster, May 2024)

As the garment hub in Buenos Aires expanded, Korean manufacturers began focusing on higher-value tasks such as pattern making, fabric cutting, and commercialization. To manage the more labor-intensive aspects of production, they subcontracted sewing and related tasks to Bolivian seamsters like Victor. These seamsters often lived and worked in precarious conditions, including sublets or squatted housing in informal settlements located near the hub. This proximity fostered a spatial and economic interdependence between the formal operations of Korean manufacturers and the informal labor of Bolivian workers within the local garment industry (Kim, 2014, 2022; Sassone & Mera, 2007).

Pablo, a Korean garment manufacturer, illustrates this division of labor:

I have my factory, where I've got my cutting table, storage for fabrics, and everything else. Here, I have the store and stock for sales. Generally, about 90% of the production is outsourced. Very few people handle both things. The factory does the patterns, the fabric layout, and the cutting, while everything else—sewing, embroidery, sublimation, finishing—is outsourced. (Pablo, Korean manufacturer, May 2024)

This transition highlights the interconnectedness of formal and informal sectors, where informal settlements and housing arrangements are not merely byproducts of the garment industry but integral to its broader ecosystem. The physical proximity of informal settlements to production hubs facilitates this relationship, allowing formal enterprises to leverage the flexibility and cost advantages provided by informal labor networks, which, in turn, sustain the industry's competitiveness.

The concentration of sewing workshops in Flores attracted a network of complementary activities, including fabric and trimming warehouses, commercial stores, and, more recently, unlicensed shopping galleries (Kim, 2022). This commercial expansion coincided with a sharp rise in the average sale price per square meter of commercial spaces. According to the land use survey report of the City of Buenos Aires (Gobierno de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 2022), prices increased by 172.6% between 2008 and 2017, from USD 1,561.2 to USD 4,256.6 per square meter, effectively more than doubling the value of similar neighboring areas. This trend underscores the growing demand and premium associated with this commercial hub.

However, a series of fatal fires in informal sewing workshops in Flores, which gained media visibility in 2006 and 2015, triggered a crackdown on clandestine workshops. This in turn prompted many workshops to relocate to Villa Celina, a neighboring jurisdiction with fewer regulatory constraints (Ludmer et al., 2023). The relocation of workshops has significantly reshaped the garment production geography. As a Bolivian workshop owner explained:

They cleaned up everything here [in Flores]. At first, it was the seamsters who used to come and pick up work here in Flores, but then [Villa] Celina suddenly took off, and now you have everything there: fabrics, threads, machinery. In Flores it has become very difficult because of the high rental costs. And then there's the issue of permits. Before, workshops operated in houses, but now if you do not have a permit, they might shut you down. (Alberto, Bolivian workshop owner, April 2024)

The rapid proliferation of informal garment workshops in Villa Celina highlights the adaptability and ingenuity of informal economies (Afroza et al., 2016; Roy, 2009; Simone, 2008; Thieme et al., 2021). These workshops, which are embedded within informal settlements (Gago, 2017; Parra Garcia, 2016), have created localized networks of production, distribution, and consumption. As a municipal officer vividly described, “We are flooded with workshops, completely invaded. You can tell by the number of fabric stores....Whenever you see a Kangoo van, you'll see five Kangoos [vans] parked, and that means they're here to buy fabric” (Pedro, Villa Celina municipal officer, May 2024).

While Villa Celina's rise as a textile hub is linked to regulatory pressures in Flores, it is also intrinsically linked to the emergence and consolidation of the largest and most emblematic market in Latin America: La Salada (Benencia & Canevaro, 2017; Gago, 2012; Girón, 2011). La Salada started in the 1990s as a grassroots effort by Bolivian seamsters and merchants who sought to establish a space for selling their goods, often produced in unregistered workshops (Benencia & Canevaro, 2017). Currently, the market occupies an area of 20 hectares, attracts around 50,000 visitors per day, supplies approximately 200 smaller markets across the country, and directly or indirectly generates employment for around 6,000 families (Gago, 2012; Massidda et al., 2010).

The market was established on abandoned land near the Riachuelo River, an area at the margins of the river and the society (Biehl, 2022) that allowed for informal activities to flourish due to weak state enforcement and affordable land costs. It operates as a massive event three days a week, with vendors selling a wide range of products, including clothing, footwear, and accessories—many of which are either locally produced or informally imported from countries like Chile, Brazil, and Paraguay (Parra Garcia, 2016). The goods sold at La Salada are often significantly cheaper than those in formal retail stores, making it a popular destination for lower-income shoppers and small retailers seeking affordable merchandise:

If you come here on a Saturday, you'll see buses coming from out of town, long-distance buses bringing people to buy clothes. Earlier today, I was at La Salada, and what is striking is that despite the economic crisis impacting consumption, La Salada is booming. You would not believe how many people were there today shopping, and how the place has grown. (Isaias, textile seller at Villa Celina, May 2024)

The market's activities are intrinsically linked to the wider garment production networks in Buenos Aires. These networks span informal workshops operated by seamsters to exclusive designer labels (Lieutier, 2010), creating a complex ecosystem of interdependence. This dynamic aligns with Sassen's (1993)

argument that informalization is deeply connected to larger processes of economic restructuring and polarization. On one hand, the growth of low-income populations fuels demand for affordable goods and services provided by informal markets like La Salada. On the other hand, the rise of affluent urban groups generates demand for customized, high-quality niche products, fostering a unique synergy between informal economies and advanced urban markets.

Leo, a textile seller with vast experience in the garment industry, elaborated on this relationship, revealing the fluid boundaries (Gomez et al., 2020) between formal and informal production circuits:

Sometimes workshops keep some garments to sell on the informal market, or they steal the design. The counterfeit goods from La Salada Market come from this. For example, around 2004–2005, Kosiuko [clothing national brand] was at its peak, and everything in La Salada was Kosiuko. But it was the same garments being sold in both places because the same workshops were supplying both the formal and informal markets. Even the labels were original. (Leo, textile seller, May 2024)

Informal workshops supply both markets simultaneously, blurring distinctions between counterfeit and original goods (Gago, 2012). This practice highlights how informal economies not only parallel formal markets but are often intertwined with them, leveraging shared production networks and resources.

La Salada has grown significantly since its inception, becoming a key node in the informal economy of Buenos Aires. It is deeply integrated into the lives of residents in the neighboring settlements, where the informal economy shapes both work and living arrangements. As a municipal officer from Villa Celina explained:

I can assure you that in the Hernández neighborhood, just across the river from the market, 70% of the people work at La Salada. They sew, sell, drive remises, push carts, or transform a room in their house into a storage space. (Sara, Villa Celina municipal officer, May 2024)

This proximity fosters a symbiotic relationship between the market and the relocated workshops in the surrounding communities, providing livelihoods while shaping the local economy. A Bolivian pattern maker reflected: “The truth is that most of us are here because of La Salada. If that market ever disappears, I do not know if there will be as much work around here” (Hugo, Bolivian pattern maker at Villa Celina, May 2024).

4.2. Social Fabric and Community Networks in Villa Celina’s Garment Sector

Villa Celina’s and La Salada’s growth can be linked to the economic adaptability of its manufacturers, who often work with limited resources but rely on strong social networks (Alam & Houston, 2020; Fransen et al., 2023; Simone, 2004; Waliuzzaman, 2020). As a Bolivian manufacturer and market vendor recalled:

When we started to produce to sell in La Salada, we didn’t even have a cutting table; we would layer the fabric on the floor and cut it with scissors. At first, there was always someone from the villa (slum) who came to our house with a machine to cut the pieces for us. (Aurelia, Bolivian manufacturer and market vendor, May 2024)

The reliance on collaborative labor and tools (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) underscores how these networks are deeply rooted in the social fabric that enables small-scale manufacturers to participate in and contribute to the thriving informal market. These networks not only facilitate production but also ensure the logistics of informal trade, covering transportation, security, and sales. As a Bolivian pattern maker from Villa Celina described:

The merchandise is taken to La Salada by car or remis. There are several *remiseros* who are familiar with the work and know how to avoid the checkpoints because, if they stop you, you need to slip them some cash to let you pass. Also, you have to watch out for people who might steal your merchandise or the money you earned at the market. (Hugo, Bolivian pattern maker at Villa Celina, May 2024)

The concentration of Bolivian immigrants not only sustains economic networks but also fosters a sense of community identity and cohesion (Pizarro, 2009; Sassone, 2009). This connection is evident in the concentration of Bolivian eateries, local festivities, and religious events that shape daily life in Celina, contributing to both social integration and the informal economy's resilience. The sector leverages a communitarian capital (Gago, 2017) that is both reinforced and celebrated through events like the Virgin of Copacabana festival and the Ekeko festival, which draw participants from across the region and stimulate the local economy.

These festivals are both culturally and economically significant (Seeliger & Turok, 2014; Simone & Pieterse, 2018). The Virgin of Copacabana festival, for instance, involves over 75 dance groups parading in traditional attire through the streets, bringing together thousands of community members. This event not only displays traditional Bolivian music and dance but also boosts local commerce, as vendors set up stalls selling traditional foods and other goods: "This generates a huge economy, all organized and capitalized by the community" (Pedro, Villa Celina municipal officer, May 2024).

Religious and social events in Villa Celina act also as informal marketplaces where workshop owners connect with seamsters in communal settings. These gatherings facilitate traditional labor practices, familial employment, and community-based supply chains, all of which are vital to the garment production and distribution network. By fostering these interactions, such festivities fulfill a broader social function, legitimizing the material, labor, and exchange relationships that underpin this migrant community (Caggiano, 2014; Grimson, 1999; Parra Garcia, 2019; Sassone, 2009, 2016). As a Bolivian sewist recalled:

My uncles would go to Bolivia every time they could. Whether it was for Carnival or other festivities in my uncle's hometown, they always went. Every time they went to Bolivia, they would bring new people, two or three at a time. They would offer transportation costs, food, and dwelling. Some stayed for only a short while and then left, but there was always someone who wanted to learn and later start their own workshop. (Eugenia, a Bolivian sewist, April 2024)

Eugenia's account aligns with the concept of chain migration within Villa Celina's informal garment industry, where migration facilitators (Hans, 2023) hold hierarchical positions over newcomers. These individuals assume travel costs, provide housing, training, work, and access to networks (Meeus et al., 2020; Wessendorf, 2022) while maintaining control and deriving benefits through dependency, loyalty, or reduced compensation. This mirrors the classic *padrone* system (Nelli, 1964; Pedone, 2005), blending opportunity

with exploitation (Kohlbacher, 2020; Wessendorf, 2022). The hierarchy is deeply rooted in the community's cultural and social fabric, legitimized through shared traditions and trust-based relationships, fostering economic integration while entrenching inequalities within the network (Parra Garcia, 2019).

This concentration of power is exemplified by the dual role community radio stations play as economic and social gatekeepers. Often controlled by consolidated workshop owners, these radio stations influence labor markets, advertise services, and reinforce communal bonds. The overlapping roles of media operators and business owners consolidate economic and social power in the hands of a few, shaping both the workforce and the cultural fabric of Celina.

Figure 2 illustrates two key phenomena: the rapid consolidation of the area within just five years and the pivotal role of the community radio station at its core. The station's central positioning underscores its function as a socioeconomic and cultural anchor, fostering local networks and community cohesion. Additionally, the architectural style in the area exhibits a strong influence of Freddy Mamani, the renowned Bolivian architect known for his neo-Andean aesthetic, which blends Indigenous heritage with contemporary urban development (Thorne, 2019). This architectural presence not only signals economic growth but also represents a deliberate assertion of cultural identity in the built environment.



Figure 2. Rapid urban consolidation and the role of communitarian radio at Villa Celina (corner of Olavarría St. and Roosevelt St.): (a) 2014; and (b) 2019. Source: Google Street View images: (a) <https://maps.app.goo.gl/BbhUYGyuqPqXV2iP8>; (b) <https://maps.app.goo.gl/wyVLAXsFtg6VbDHg9>.

The cultural and identity representations of a society of origin are pivotal in fostering and maintaining interpersonal connections and trust-based networks. This dynamic is particularly evident in Villa Celina, where business iconography and naming practices reflect the importance of trust-based relationships, especially in sectors complementing or intersecting with the informal garment industry. Services such as remis agencies, financial institutions, medical centers, legal firms, and community organizations frequently adopt communitarian names that reinforce cultural ties and foster trust within the community (Figure 3).

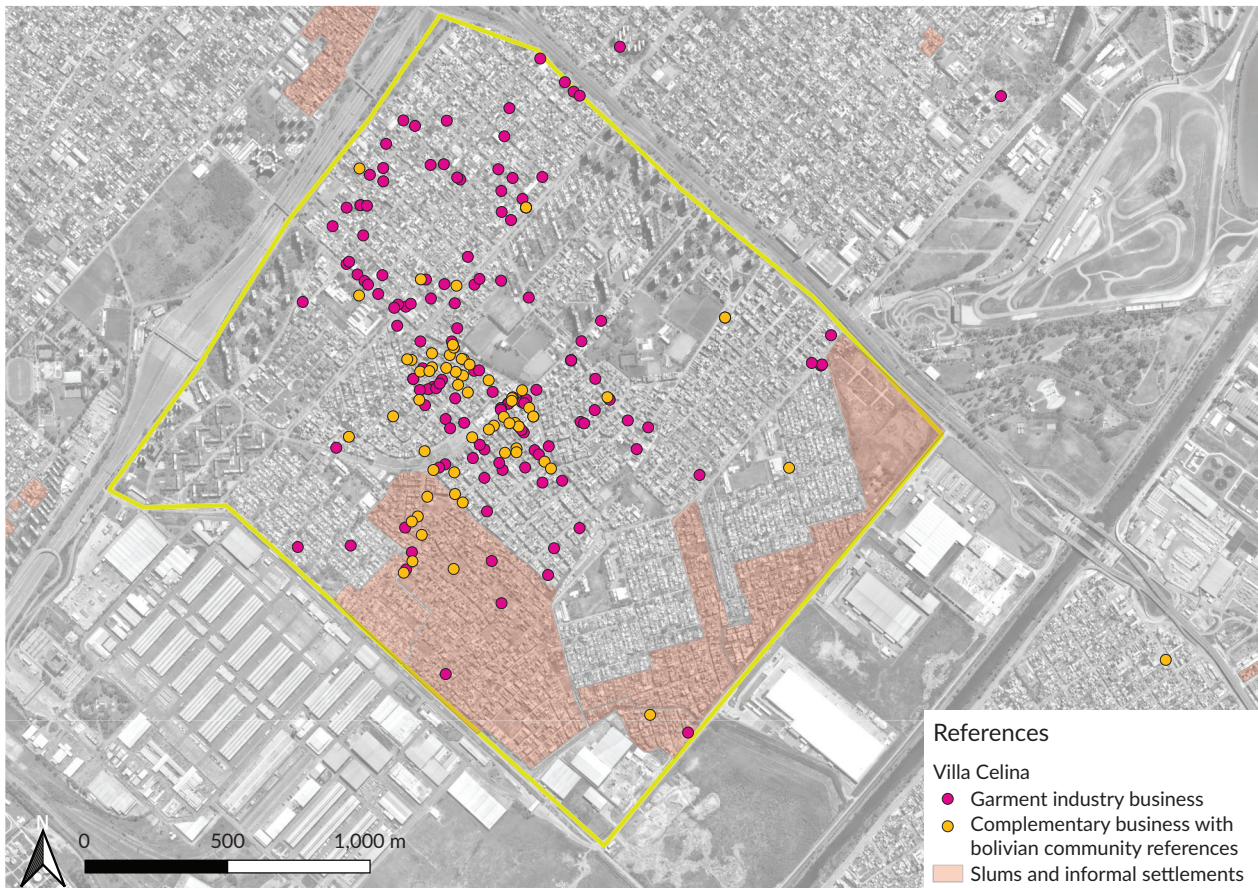


Figure 3. The ecosystem of garment and community-based businesses in Villa Celina (2024). Source: Author's elaboration based on Google search, desktop mapping, and field observations conducted in 2024. Basemap: Google Earth Satellite imagery.

These trust-based services play a crucial supporting role in the informal garment industry by providing essential logistics, financial aid, health services, and legal assistance. Together, they form an interconnected ecosystem of frugal practices (Fransen et al., 2023) that sustains the industry's operations and reflects how cultural identity and trust extend beyond production.

At the same time, this condition closes off opportunities for outsiders (Waliuzzaman & Alam, 2022). As an Argentine woman living in Villa Celina who entered the garment production business to earn extra income for her daughter's 15th birthday explains:

After a while, we could not keep up; it's very demanding work, and the Bolivian community didn't help us at all. We wanted them to do the sewing as they did for their clients in the city: We would cut,

prepare everything in bags for them, and they would take care of the sewing. But they did not want to sew for us. It is like they only help each other. (Mariana, Argentinean garment manufacturer, May 2024)

4.3. Economic Expansion of Villa Celina Through Informality

The expansion of garment workshops in Villa Celina has significantly boosted local employment, driven economic activity, and stimulated commerce there. Describing the scale of operations, a municipal officer remarked:

If you come here in the afternoon, you will see trailers unloading fabrics and armored trucks with police escorts, private security, and everything. They block off the street, and you must wait until they're done working. Everything is done in cash, and they have permanent police surveillance. (Pedro, Villa Celina municipal officer, May 2024)

Much of the money generated locally is reinvested in the community. As one Villa Celina trader emphasized: “The money made here stays here and starts being spent here. You see more businesses, more restaurants, more hardware stores, more eateries, more kiosks, more butcher shops—you start to notice it” (Alvaro, Villa Celina trader, April 2024). This dynamic illustrates how informal economies not only meet local production demands but also fuel broader commercial ecosystems, transforming Villa Celina into a bustling center of economic activity.

A key driver of this transformation is the blending of home and workspaces, which exemplifies the resourcefulness of small-scale manufacturers. “We bought the machine in installments, and my house turned into a workshop,” shared Mariana, a clothing manufacturer; “the dining room became a working table; we set up a board we bought from a neighbor, and there my son and daughter helped me spread out the fabric” (Mariana, Argentinean garment manufacturer, May 2024). This integration of domestic and productive activities not only sustains livelihoods but also involves family members, reinforcing communal ties and shared labor within households.

Further reinforcing this integration is the construction of new buildings designed to accommodate both families' living quarters and workshop facilities: “All these new buildings are both homes and workshops...you can already see that the new buildings are all narrow and deep so a cutting table can fit inside” (Pedro, Villa Celina municipal officer, May 2024). These dual-purpose structures demonstrate how informal production becomes woven into the physical and social fabric of the community, fostering a unique interplay between residential and economic spaces (Motta, 2014; Wainer, 2022; Ward & Smith, 2015; see Figure 4).

Site visits revealed the adaptability of these dwellings to support local economic activities (Figures 4 and 5). For example, homes near La Salada Market have been repurposed into storage units or *bauleras*, serving as merchandise deposits for market vendors. This adaptation mitigates the lack of on-site storage at the market, which operates only three days a week, and reduces risks associated with police checkpoints where goods and earnings may be confiscated. Other households have started selling fabric by the kilo, catering to small-scale garment makers who cannot purchase or store entire fabric rolls. Additionally, some dwellings have been transformed into eateries, serving neighborhood workers and visiting customers, further embedding these settlements into the garment sector's broader ecosystem.



Figure 4. Integration of residential and workshop spaces in Villa Celina (2024).



Figure 5. Economic innovation and spatial adaptations in Villa Celina and La Salada Market (fieldwork register, April 2024): (a) dwelling in Villa Celina adapted for fabric sales by the kilo; (b) carts parked at La Salada Market entrance during operating hours; and (c) dwelling near La Salada Market converted into storage units (*bauleras*) for garments.

Interviews and fieldwork observations show that most workshops operate within informal settlements (see Figure 3), where inadequate infrastructure and precarious living conditions pose significant challenges. These makeshift buildings often lack essential services such as electricity, water, and gas. Structural limitations further complicate workshop operations, with narrow streets hindering the movement of large quantities of fabric and materials. In response, an informal system of hand-pulled carts has emerged to navigate these congested areas, exemplifying the remarkable “frugal practices” (Fransen et al., 2023) of residents and workers.

As shown, informal settlements like those in Villa Celina are not merely spaces of hardship (Simone, 2008); they also provide an environment where informal production can thrive beyond the constraints of regulatory oversight (Bayat, 1997; Benjamin, 2000; Chakravorty et al., 2005; Simone, 2008). Urban geography scholars

have highlighted the ingenuity and resourcefulness (Dale et al., 2010; Simone & Pieterse, 2018) inherent in such spaces, advocating for a shift away from focusing solely on the physical limitations of informality to a more nuanced understanding of the adaptive strategies these communities employ (J. Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2005; Simone, 2008; Watson, 2009). These insights underscore the importance of recognizing informal settlements as dynamic, productive hubs integral to urban economies rather than solely as spaces of deprivation.

In recent years, Villa Celina has also become a magnet for textile warehouses and sales centers, supplying a manufacturing hub that has seen rapid consolidation. A municipal officer explained: “Around 10 years ago, what we call the Jewish merchants arrived, and they boosted the work of the previous Bolivian communities by establishing fabric warehouses” (Pedro, Villa Celina municipal officer, May 2024). This influx of merchants has significantly transformed the area, with a dynamic mix of formal and informal textile activities now firmly rooted in the local economy.

Larger warehouses, often developed by established merchants, “stand out as more modern and well-constructed” (Pedro, Villa Celina municipal officer, May 2024). In contrast, many other smaller workshops operate discreetly, hidden in makeshift buildings that blend into the surrounding neighborhood. These dual layers of visible and invisible production activities reflect the diverse and complex nature of Villa Celina’s textile ecosystem and the formal–informal continuum (Gomez et al., 2020) that shapes it.

A striking example of this dynamic is the expansion and relocation of a textile-importing company. Initially, the company operated exclusively in Flores, where it ran two large stores. However, as garment production shifted to Villa Celina, the company strategically expanded its presence, opening three new stores within a 150-meter radius in Villa Celina over the past five years. This move allowed the company to align with the geographic shift in garment production, capitalize on the growing demand, and integrate more effectively into the area’s localized supply networks. The decision to relocate was driven by a combination of logistic, economic, and regulatory factors. A textile business manager explained:

There was a time when Bolivians came all the way here to Flores to pick up the fabric cuts and take them back for sewing, but over time it became complicated, especially because of parking issues. They spent so much time driving around looking for a spot. Plus, the cost of rent in Celina is much lower. For example, what costs me 100 pesos in Flores costs me 10 pesos in Celina. I ended up renting a closed poultry shop in Celina; the owner would never have imagined it would end up being rented for 500,000 pesos. (Mercedes, textile business manager, May 2024)

The reduced cost of rent and proximity to workshops have made the area increasingly attractive; however, rising property prices and informal rental arrangements have introduced new challenges:

Nowadays, property prices in Villa Celina have gone up quite a bit, but they’re still much more affordable than in Flores. However, sometimes it is difficult to find a landlord willing or able to enter into a formal rental agreement. A lot of the land does not have proper papers, so it’s hard to set up anything formal. (Mercedes, textile business manager, May 2024)

This lack of formal tenure complicates transactions for incoming businesses, but it also helps explain why small-scale, low-tech producers have been able to remain in the area despite rising land values. In this sense,

widespread informal land occupation offers a form of spatial stability that protects these producers from displacement pressures (B. E. Robinson & Diop, 2022). In the process, Villa Celina has become an essential node in Buenos Aires' textile supply chain. As formal enterprises follow the movement of informal activities, capitalizing on established networks and localized demand patterns by leveraging the dense networks of suppliers, labor, and customers developed organically in Villa Celina, they contribute to the transformation of the area into a more consolidated and mixed production zone. As a textile seller observed:

Over the last five years, an interesting textile hub has developed in Celina. One of the first to settle there was a massive national company that produces everything in its factory in San Martín. Now, there must be at least 20 textile businesses in the area. (Leo, textile seller, May 2024)

The arrival of formal businesses, alongside the thriving informal sector, underscores the consolidation of Villa Celina as a key node in Buenos Aires' garment industry (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Villa Celina: People queuing outside a textile warehouse to purchase fabric (fieldwork register, April 2024). The queue in front of this textile warehouse reflects strong local demand and indicates the proximity of workshops operating within walking distance. The warehouse's stock, geared toward direct sale to individuals and micro-producers, signals a consolidated production hub supported by a dense network of small-scale garment makers.

5. Discussion: Insights From Informal Garment Clusters for Inclusive and Adaptive Urban Planning

The garment production sector in Buenos Aires exemplifies the complex layering of localized activities across a spectrum from formal to informal, deeply rooted in community networks, and adapting to shifts in policy and economic pressures. By foregrounding the dynamics of informal clusters, this study enriches traditional agglomeration theories, which often prioritize functional market-driven interactions. The case of Villa Celina reflects a particular configuration of agglomeration dynamics shaped by the interplay of formal

and informal economic activity. While proximity to labour, suppliers, and opportunities for knowledge spillovers continues to play a role, these benefits are mediated through dense social networks, informal economic practices, and adaptive land-use strategies. In this context, informality functions as an enabling infrastructure, offering both flexibility and protection to small manufacturers navigating displacement, labour market volatility, and institutional neglect.

This study demonstrates that informal networks, cultural cohesion, and trust-based arrangements play a significant role in sustaining economic clustering—especially in contexts where small-scale, labor-intensive industries operate in the interstices of formal and informal systems, under conditions of institutional fragmentation. Informal economies generate their own forms of external economies—including shared resources, logistical systems, workforce training, and informal financial support—that substitute for formal infrastructure, governance, and regulatory frameworks. These embedded mechanisms not only sustain production but also act as a pull factor for formal businesses seeking to access these local networks. This contributes to a more nuanced understanding of agglomeration, by complicating the assumption that clustering is primarily driven by formal sector dynamics and instead highlighting the intertwined formal–informal relationships and hybrid governance arrangements that underpin spatial concentration in contexts of institutional fragmentation.

Informal garment production in Buenos Aires relocated from the historically concentrated area of Flores to Villa Celina largely due to the movement of informal enterprises. This shift is driven by rising rental costs, increased regulatory enforcement, and, in some cases, forced evictions, all of which pushed home-based seamstresses and workshop operators to seek alternative, proximate locations. In Villa Celina, ethnic networks and community ties significantly influence relocation decisions, fostering an emerging cluster that offers more affordable and less regulated spaces. These community-based networks and informal institutions function as economic infrastructure, supporting resource circulation within the local economy and creating a safety net that allows businesses to adapt flexibly to market shifts. The vitality of Villa Celina’s garment sector relies on the strong cultural and social fabric of the predominantly Bolivian immigrant community. Communal events, local media, and social practices reinforce social ties, creating community capital that supports trust-based business relations. These relations in turn enable garment workers and enterprises to operate outside the formal regulatory framework while maintaining economic viability, and help individuals deal with unexpected events by providing a degree of stability amid unpredictable urban environments where resources are scarce.

The evolution of garment production hubs, such as the shift from Flores to Villa Celina, further underscores the temporal and spatial fluidity of clusters. The interplay of displacement, real estate pressures, regulatory leniency, and community arrangements reveals the complex forces shaping the geography of garment production in Buenos Aires. These dynamics reinforce the view that, in contexts like Buenos Aires, industrial clustering reflects not only firm-level agglomeration logics but also the influence of external pressures and locally embedded adaptive strategies (Gibson et al., in press).

The displacement of informal workshops from Flores, particularly following tragic fires and stricter regulatory enforcement, disrupted an established production cluster. In the process, Villa Celina emerged as a reactive form of agglomeration, offering displaced workshops a low-rent, low-regulation environment that allowed them to reestablish operations in a locally embedded context. The informal tenure system and

de facto land occupations in Villa Celina shield these low-tech, high-touch businesses from market pressures and speculative development, providing a relatively stable base for production.

A critical factor in this dynamic is the role of community-based governance structures, which function both as a protective buffer and an enabler of economic activity. These structures reinforce informal tenure systems, offering businesses a degree of security while maintaining adaptability. Similar to industrial zones in other high-growth, service-oriented metropolitan areas (Chapple, 2014; Grodach & Martin, 2025; Grodach et al., 2023; Martin & Grodach, 2023), Villa Celina's informal clusters demonstrate how de facto occupations create semi-stable spaces where businesses can establish, grow, and reproduce.

On the other hand, the relative absence of land use and business regulations in informal business clusters allows greater flexibility in non-traditional modes of operation. In contrast, formally zoned areas often impose strict land-use classifications and operational restrictions, limiting the types of activities that can take place in specific locations (Grodach & Martin, 2025). For instance, zoning laws might separate manufacturing from retail, restrict mixed-use spaces, or introduce long permit application processes that slow adaptation. By operating in loosely regulated environments, businesses in informal economies can experiment more freely with production processes, supply chains, and business models. They can rapidly adjust to shifts in demand, introduce small-batch or customized production, and adopt flexible work arrangements that might be constrained by compliance requirements in formal zones. This flexibility makes informal settlements fertile ground for economic experimentation and adaptive growth, as businesses can pivot quickly without the delays associated with regulatory approvals. However, this does not mean informal businesses operate in a vacuum. Rather than relying on state-imposed regulations, these businesses often function within alternative governance structures, such as social norms, community agreements, and informal enforcement mechanisms. These structures can provide predictability and stability while allowing greater room for adaptability than rigid formal regulations. At the same time, the lack of oversight can also lead to labor exploitation and unsafe working conditions, highlighting the precarious nature of unregulated production.

Ultimately, these spaces seem to offer a balance of benefits, combining some of the protective features associated with industrial zoning—such as shielding businesses from speculative pressures—with the flexibility to operate outside rigid regulatory frameworks. This raises critical questions for urban planning: Can lessons from these spaces inspire more adaptive and inclusive planning tools? How might planning systems blend protective zoning features with flexible regulations to support innovation while maintaining stability? Could hybrid zones be designed to shield cost-sensitive businesses from market pressures while fostering environments where enterprises can experiment and thrive? These questions challenge planners and policymakers to reimagine zoning as a tool for balancing economic resilience, equity, and inclusivity, learning from the ingenuity and adaptability inherent in informal urban economies.

The case of Villa Celina's garment cluster highlights the dynamic interaction between informal and formal economies and contributes to ongoing conversations in urban studies and economic geography. It engages with debates that question the formal–informal divide in planning frameworks, while also enriching discussions on industrial agglomeration by foregrounding the multiple social, spatial, and institutional forces that shape clustering in contexts of informality. As Simone (2004) has shown in other contexts, informality can function not as a regulatory gap but as a form of urban governance—one that enables resource sharing, adaptability, and localized coordination. Similarly, the practices observed in Celina align

with Gibson-Graham's et al. (2013, 2016) call to recognize economic diversity and the generative capacity of non-mainstream economies. By foregrounding the social, spatial, and institutional dimensions that underpin clustering in contexts of informality, this case offers insights into how planning can become more inclusive and context-sensitive.

Beyond the significance of informal activity to localized agglomeration economies, the key planning insight is the importance of more nuanced approaches to zoning and land use. Rigid zoning frameworks often fail to accommodate low-tech, high-touch production sectors—particularly those embedded in dense social networks and characterized by adaptive business models. Planners should consider hybrid zoning approaches that combine regulatory protections—such as shielding businesses from displacement and speculation—with greater flexibility in production, retail, and distribution activities.

Another important insight is that community-based governance structures can complement formal planning systems. Informal networks provide economic stability through trust-based relationships, informal tenure arrangements, and alternative credit mechanisms—functions that formal institutions often struggle to replicate. This does not imply a call for deregulation, but rather the need for more contextually grounded regulatory approaches that respond to the realities of diverse urban economies.

By reframing urban planning as both a facilitator of economic diversity and a safeguard for social equity, planners can develop frameworks that protect vulnerable production systems from speculative pressures while supporting the flexibility needed to sustain dynamic, network-driven economies.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study are based on confidential interviews and are not publicly available to protect the privacy and anonymity of participants. Access to anonymized excerpts may be considered on a case-by-case basis, subject to ethical approval and participant consent.

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