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EDITORIAL

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Planning for Locally Embedded Economies in the Productive City

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Abstract

Various economic activities (urban agriculture, industries, services) are conceivable in the productive city. This thematic issue attempts to highlight especially urban production/manufacturing as tangible manifestations embedded in their local settings because they are conflict-ridden, emanate distinctive spatial characteristics, and require complex planning processes. Therefore, we called for empirical case studies of such locally embedded economies with the productive city. As the contributions in this thematic issue emphasize, these activities can relate to high-tech (e.g., platforms) but also to low-tech (garment) and high-touch industries (e.g., crafts, fashion). However, they all rely on the embeddedness of local economies in urban spaces as an enabling environment in the productive city. To fully realize these local embeddings, the productive city calls for alternative understandings of production, investment, and legal/planning frameworks entangled in zoning overlays or (informal) mixed-use developments, orchestrated by means of digital technologies in a sustainable way (by circular economies, through environmental benefits). Simultaneously, the current (largely anecdotal) corpus of conceptual and qualitative case studies leaves unresolved the question whether the proposed ideas, visions, and guidelines for locally productive urban quarters are in fact achievable or merely reflect the wishful thinking of political agendas. More studies and improved methodological approaches are needed to operationalize the local significance and multipliers in order to objectively and statistically capture the genuine impacts of these sectors.

Keywords

industrial and commercial planning; local economies; mixed-use development; productive city; urban and architectural design; urban crafts; urban production

1. Introduction

Current guidelines of urban development (e.g., EU Urban Agenda, The New Leipzig Charter) in Western economies (e.g., the US, EU, Australia) have shifted their focus from functionally separated areas within cities towards integrated, resilient, inclusive, livable, sustainable, and mixed-use urban quarters (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2020). These ideas are based on several contemporary spatial visions, imperatives, approaches, and models such as the compact city (Breheny, 1992), the city of short distances (Wegener, 1994), the 15-minute city (Moreno, 2016), and mixed-use development (Rowley, 1996) along with the rediscovery of local economies (Birkhölzer, 2000; Henn et al., 2020; Läpple & Walter, 2003) and urban manufacturing (Brandt et al., 2017; Grodach & Martin, 2025; Läpple, 2013)—both the guiding themes for this thematic issue—that feed into the image of a productive city (Gärtner & Meyer, 2023; Gärtner et al., 2021). The Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (UN SDG) are proclaiming these "locally embedded economies in the productive city" if we combine SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), and SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production) and place it in the urban or city frame of SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities; König et al., 2021; United Nations, 2015). The resurgence of the productive city and its local economies is driven not only by novel technologies that reintegrate and re-embed tangible production into inner-city areas, but also by democratic, multi-level governance principles, including place-based participation, co-creation, and local/near-shoring for the urban commons—thus preventing industrial displacement and commercial gentrification. A key element is an active property policy that secures current and future industrial and commercial services of general interest (*gewerbliche Daseinsvorsorge*; Avdikos & Pettas, 2021; Bundesministerium des Innern, 2020; Heider & Siedentop, 2024; Lingenhöle et al., 2025). In Section 2, we review the evolving rationales and understandings behind the productive city and locally embedded economies. Section 3 lays out the essence of contributions in this thematic issue and value-added for theory, methods, and empirics in pertinent discourses. Section 4 highlights limits, ambivalences, and ambiguities around productive cities, their embedded local economies, and underlying assumptions, before we briefly conclude.

2. Revisiting Debates Around the Productive City and Locally Embedded Economies

The concept of "productive cities" and "local economies" has a much longer history than contemporary debates might suggest. Productive cities have existed since ancient and medieval times, when craft-based guilds created tangible local economies, and later, during industrialization, factories shaped the image of the industrialized city (Gärtner & Meyer, 2023; Läpple, 2003). Throughout most of the 20th century, the term was rather used analytically as "productivity" from an economic perspective in the sense of efficiency, output, and value creation detached from empirical and concise context (Fogarty & Garofalo, 1988); in a more stylized way its spatial concentration in urban areas and cities was more prominently summarized as agglomeration economies based on localisation and urbanization than for the actual production of material goods (Novy, 2022; Suwala, 2023). The current meaning of the "productive city" and "local economies" evolved based on seminal contributions about both the economic and societal revival of "left-behind" or "deprived" inner-city areas (e.g., Jacobs, 1962; Tomaney & Pike, 2021; Witherspoon et al., 1976) and about the inner city as a "re-embedding context" in times of globalisation and blurring of boundaries. Rather than leading to a dissolution of spatial ties, these processes have resulted in an increased dependence on specific spatial—particularly urban—contexts, where untraded interdependencies emerge and innovation relies on tacit knowledge and cultural production in post-industrial cities (Gertler, 2003; Läpple, 2003; Storper, 1995).

Both discourses can be seen as a countermovement to the tendency towards an increasing spatial separation of functions and monotony in urban areas, as heralded by the Athens Charter (a document advocating rational principles of town planning from 1933).

This origin also explains why the concept of "local economies" attempted to avoid a separation into purely economic, social, and ecological viewpoints and was tied to concepts of social economy, solidarity economy, third sector, community economy, and ethnic economy. According to this understanding, the local economy refers to new forms of economic activity and local strategies of self-help that are closely tied to meeting the basic needs of people (Birkhölzer, 2000; Läpple, 2003). Later, the understanding took another turn, when Saskia Sassen criticized the focus of local economic policy on large companies in the advanced sectors of culture and services and the neglect of urban manufacturing industries (Sassen, 2006). In this context, the potential of the local economy through urban production was emphasised, including service–manufacturing linkages and networks that promote a new urban economy, stabilise social structures in cities, and strengthen local, circular, and resilient economies against the turbulences of global markets. This occurs through re-embedded businesses as well as through the generation of locally bound, unique, and tacit knowledge bases, innovation, and creativity within inter-urban competition (Läpple, 2013; Oinas, 1997; S. O. Park, 1996). These trends have recently been accelerated by the pandemic, the polarization of global trade, and the associated vulnerability of global production networks, but also by the maker movement that combines traditional crafts with modern electronics, programming, and digital fabrication (Kimura et al., 2020; Lane & Rappaport, 2020; Martin, 2021; Wolf-Powers et al., 2017).

By and large, the definition of a productive city based on locally embedded economies culminates into the following understanding: Locally embedded productive cities are comprised of small and medium-sized enterprises with tangible goods, non-disruptive craft business, low-emission high-touch artisanal production, and also high-tech customized start-ups or maker companies with prototypes or small production batches bound by service–manufacturing linkages and networks that reintegrate these activities with the help of advanced, smart and sustainable technologies into urban areas. This ensures local supply and transforms inner-city areas into attractive, multifunctional spaces for mixed use. To achieve this, a key component of urban planning must be the creation of innovation-friendly environments and opportunities for local and regional production (Gärtner & Meyer, 2023; Gärtner et al., 2021; Grodach & Martin, 2025; Henn & Behling, 2020; Henn et al., 2020; Läpple & Walter, 2003; Schwappach et al., 2023; Wolf-Powers et al., 2017). Hereby, the local scale is brought to the fore as local orientation, e.g., "neighbourhood economy with primarily local orientation" (Krummacher et al., 2003), local embeddedness, e.g., "locally embedded economy" (Läpple & Walter, 2003), or local roots, e.g., "locally rooted family firms" (Basco et al., 2021). Cities have used these imperatives to create guidelines on how to plan, design, administer, and operate cities with locally embedded economies, how to increase the presence of the productive economy in the city, how to reintegrate production into the urban fabric through digitalization, circular and innovative manufacturing technologies, and how to provide attractive and affordable locations for urban production (Ferm et al., 2021; Grodach & Martin, 2025; Meyer, 2023; Rappaport, 2016; Suwala et al., 2021). Examples include "Productive City" in Vienna (Stadt Wien, 2017), "Productive City" in Brussels (Borret, 2018), "Produktion in der Stadt" in Berlin (Erbstößer, 2016), "Quo Vadis Werkplatz?" in Zurich (INFRAS, 2017), "One New York: The Plan for a Strong and Just City" (OneNYC, 2015), or "Our Productive City" in Brisbane (Brisbane City Council, 2022), among many others.

3. Contributions to This Issue

Against this backdrop, the contributions in this thematic issue deal with pertinent building blocks around the constitution and characteristics of the productive city and its locally embedded economies as played out in in-depth encounters from a planning perspective, such as: governance issues within regulative frameworks when dealing with noise conflicts or while organizing urban manufacturing clusters (Daels & Grodach, 2025; Kim et al., 2025; Meyer et al., 2025); design issues when planning for the transformation or adaptation of formerly industrial sites or setting up novel urban commercial or industrial areas (Rappaport, 2025; Suwala et al., 2025); mixing issues as manifested in mixed-use development of commercial buildings or courtyards (Lingenhöle et al., 2025; Rappaport, 2025); collaboration issues when spatially organizing commons-based peer production or informal and community-based networks in the garment industry are at stake (Daels & Grodach, 2025; Kim et al., 2025; Liodaki et al., 2025); digitalization issues when orchestrating of digital platforms or peer production is necessary (Kim et al., 2025; Liodaki et al., 2025), or sustainability issues when platforms are used for circular economic measures or when the environmental benefits of urban manufacturing are brought to the fore (Angstmann et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2025). All contributions build on the embeddedness of local economies in urban spaces as an enabling environment in the productive city (see Table 1). In this embedded realm, they call for an alternative understanding of production (e.g., by including care work), investment (e.g., directed toward the commons), and legal structural frameworks, to be administered (e.g., noise conflicts; Meyer et al., 2025; Suwala et al., 2025) or organized through mixed-use development (e.g., commercial courtyards, Lingenhöle et al., 2025; Rappaport, 2025; Suwala et al., 2025) and orchestrated by means of digital technologies (e.g., platforms; Kim et al., 2025) or informality (e.g., community ties; Daels & Grodach, 2025), in a sustainable way (e.g., circular economy, environmental benefits; Angstmann et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2025; Liodaki et al., 2025).

Table 1. Main rationales, methods, fundamental results, and foci of the contributions to this thematic issue.

Authors	Main Rationale	Methods	Fundamental Results	Foci
Daels & Grodach	The study investigates how informal and community-based networks shape the spatial organization and economic dynamics of the garment industry in Buenos Aires.	Case study approach, integrating qualitative and spatial analysis (18 in-depth interviews, ethnographic site visits, spatial analysis using Google Earth).	Informal networks and flexible settlements provide the necessary embedded environment for blending work and housing next to enabling resilient, adaptive, small-scale manufacturing to garment producers after a relocation due to rising rental costs and stricter regulatory enforcement.	Governance, Collaboration
Kim et al.	The study lays out a typology of platform ecosystem orchestration strategies that best represent existing circular fashion platforms and explores how each type coordinates participant interactions to foster localized resource flows in urban contexts.	Exploratory approach for own dataset (34 platforms desktop research, expert recommendations, participation fairs, examination network members).	Four main types of platform ecosystem orchestration in circular fashion: (1) Market orchestration for textile reuse (local), (2) Supply chain orchestration for textile recycling (local), (3) Network orchestration (local), (4) Data analytics orchestration (non-local).	Governance, Collaboration, Digitalization
Liodaki et al.	The study explores the phenomenon of commons-based peer production (CBPP) from a geographical perspective and focuses on its spatiality, materiality, and implications for place-based development by addressing power relations and fostering just and sustainable futures.	Non-exhaustive literature review of the spatial dynamics, materiality, and socio-economic impacts of CBPP through post-colonial, uneven development, and feminist geographical theories.	CBPP calls for an alternative understanding of both production (where reproductive labor, such as care work and emotional support, power, and gender dynamics are included) and investment (as transvestment by redirecting resources from market cycles to commons cycles) from a place-based perspective to foster local resilience, sustainability, and community-led initiatives.	Collaboration, Digitalization, Sustainability

Table 1. (Cont.) Main rationales, methods, fundamental results, and foci of the contributions to this thematic issue.

Authors	Main Rationale	Methods	Fundamental Results	Foci
Meyer et al.	The study explores the integration of urban manufacturing into German urban land-use planning, focusing on mixed-use strategies, legal approaches, and the role of court decisions in resolving noise-related conflicts.	Structured document and qualitative content analysis of nine preparatory land-use plans (2007–2018) and 87 binding land-use plans (2011–2021) from 23 large German cities and 15 court decisions (2016–2021).	Land-use plans and binding land-use plans inadequately protect urban manufacturing from residential pressure and noise conflicts; court decisions expose planning gaps and call for stronger legal frameworks and solutions (zoning transitions, green buffers, and noise protection) to prevent industrial gentrification and support SMEs.	Governance, Mixture
Angstmann et al.	The study unearths key arguments for the environmental benefits of urban manufacturing and focuses on its contributions to carbon, resource, and space efficiency to promote sustainable urban economies.	Systematic literature review based on 163 relevant articles from the Web of Science and Scopus databases (1993 and 2024) by MAXQDA software for coding and categorizing findings.	Urban manufacturing can enhance carbon, resource, and space efficiency through proximity (agglomeration), circular practices (less emissions), and innovative land use (vertical production), though benefits vary by technology, context, and implementation challenges.	Sustainability
Lingenhöle et al.	The study proposes a "New Berlin Mix" in the city's commercial courtyards based on diversity of use, integration of the productive economy, and vibrant urban spaces from a functional mixed-use development perspective.	Mixed-methods analysis (desktop research, on-site inspections, quantitative inventory, GIS geoferencing, qualitative ex-post interviews) of 35 commercial courtyards in Berlin.	The original Berlin Mix is dying out in the inner city, but a modified version exists, with Autonomous Courtyards on the outskirts often showing higher diversity of use and productive economy integration, challenging traditional understanding of mixed-use concepts in inner urban areas.	Mixture

Table 1. (Cont.) Main rationales, methods, fundamental results, and foci of the contributions to this thematic issue.

Authors	Main Rationale	Methods	Fundamental Results	Foci
Rappaport	The study portrays successful examples from various cities that demonstrate the potential of mixed-use developments for urban manufacturing and calls for an adaptation of building and zoning codes to integrate light manufacturing with residential and commercial uses, revitalizing urban spaces.	Case studies (author's former research through exhibitions, books, essays, and fieldwork) of mixed-use projects in Europe and the US were examined to identify successful models and strategies for integrating light manufacturing into urban areas.	Modern light manufacturing can be integrated into cities through novel technologies, visible production, mixed-use zoning overlays, and hybrid building types, strengthening local economies while fostering community engagement and equitable neighborhood–industry connections.	Design, Mixture
Suwala et al.	The study focuses on planning and designing publicly owned commercial courtyards from an integrative mixed-use development perspective in Berlin.	Mixed-use imperatives and experimental design of three planned commercial courtyards in Berlin using a multi-methods approach combining locational analyses next to urban, architectural utilization concepts, and expert interviews.	Various types of hybrid commercial courtyards will be proposed: (1) innovation-oriented; (2) mixed-use craft, cultural-creative, and manufacturing-based; and (3) socially anchored commercial courtyards with childcare facilities. For successful implementation, balancing societal demands with logistical and economic considerations within long-term planning horizons and collaboration between public authorities, stakeholders, and urban planners is necessary.	Design, Mixture, Governance

4. Limits, Ambivalences, and Ambiguities

Although the contributions to this thematic issue illuminate diverse pathways for strengthening locally embedded economies in the productive city, current debates and literature often add to an (anecdotal) corpus of conceptual and qualitative case studies and leave unresolved the question of whether the proposed ideas, visions, and guidelines for compact, sustainable, mixed-use, and locally anchored urban quarters are in fact achievable or rather reflect wishful thinking driven by political agendas. More studies and improved methodological approaches are needed to operationalize local significance and multipliers to objectively and statistically capture the genuine impacts of these sectors and alternative encounters (see for exceptions: Brixy et al., 2024; Meyer & Schonlau, 2024; J.-I. Park, 2023; Piegeler & Spars, 2019). Planners and decision-makers should be aware that urban production is a highly heterogeneous construct, drawing on a wide variety of economic activities (Meyer & Schonlau, 2024). Even if one sixth of all companies and employment, for example, in Germany are attributable to city-affine sectors as an approximation for urban production/manufacturing (Piegeler & Spars, 2019), studies also confirm that statistically urban production significantly lost ground in urban context in all types of urban areas (Brixy et al., 2024; Centre for London, 2022) also as a result of planning frameworks and agency that favored service activities and led to industrial displacement and commercial gentrification over several decades in most cities of Western economies (Novy, 2022). In addition, there is rising criticism towards concepts underlying the productive city, such as the compact, 15-minute, or city of short distances, pointing to exclusiveness, fragmentation, and squandered opportunities (Casarin et al., 2023; Glaeser, 2021).

5. Conclusion and Outlook

In this context, the thematic issue seeks to make three key contributions. First, highlight that the productive city and its locally embedded economies shall be built on a contemporary and alternative understanding of production and investment, taking not only the novel silent technologies but also (reproductive) labor and/or the commons into account. Second, legal and planning frameworks should adopt a more courageous stance toward mix-making, mixed-use development, zoning overlays, and innovative planning approaches. Third, more studies are needed to statistically capture the genuine local impacts of these alternative and heterogeneous encounters, to gain credibility and legitimation for both science and society, and to move beyond an anecdotal corpus and a rather wishful thinking of political agendas.

LLMs Disclosure

To ensure responsible AI use and maintain publication integrity, we disclose using DeepL (version 25.8.2) and ChatGPT (version 5.1). Both tools were used to translate selected parts of the article, which were then manually verified by researchers; these tools also enhanced our manuscript's grammar and style in those parts.

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