

## Research Note

# Chasing the Locals in Urban Japan: An Anthropocentric Approach to Conceptualizing Multilayered Locals in Contemporary Tokyo

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### Summary

The term “local” often has positive associations, adding a warm familiarity to ordinary phenomena and items and creating “a sense of home.” Local communities, locally produced products, and local traditions carry sentiments of belonging, often capitalized on through branding strategies, policies, or even political propaganda. In contrast, this paper takes a closer look at dissonance and conflicting conceptions of the local. Because it is essential to critically rethink what constitutes locality, our central question is: How can we define a type of “local” that is not based upon the demands of a single (scientific) discipline or ideology like the “idealized image of the local community,” but on qualitative parameters and factors of influence? The goal of this research project, in which this paper is only a small but significant step on a long journey, is to get one step closer to an analytical understanding of the local in an anthropocentric sense, by rendering the local and existing conceptions through the layer of sensory possibilities and affective processes. This anthropocentric and sensory-sensitive approach to the local is achieved by analyzing empirical data from fieldwork in urban neighborhoods in Tokyo.

**Keywords:** urban space, local, anthropocentric, human scale, Tokyo, Japan

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## The Local as the Place to Be?

The conceptual distance between the three song titles “Home, Sweet Home,”<sup>1</sup> “Home Is Where the Hatred Is”<sup>2</sup> and—maybe even further—“Home Is Where You Hang Yourself”<sup>3</sup> may seem immense, but, as I argue in this paper, it is actually quite small when we understand home as an example of the “special local” through affect, interaction, and unavoidability. These contrary notions of the local (a place of harmony vs. a place of hatred) are not limited to music and art but also exist in the realms of academia and science, and might have amplified how some of us have felt during the recent pandemic. In these unusual times of restricted movement and working from home due to the pandemic, the local as refuge, as habitat, and as territory we live in is omnipresent—but the feelings of imprisonment and unavoidability are also part of a complex locality that we individually and socially constitute and participate in. Interestingly, there has been a strong emphasis on positive analysis of the local in recent decades. “Local community,” “local economy,” and “locally produced” are just a few of the buzzwords that pop up in papers in all fields, from sociology to economy but also prominently in political science and city planning (Gehl and Svarre 2013: 43).

Despite this frequent usage, the theoretical discussion about “the local” has still not advanced. But, rather than through a systematic approach, “the local” has been commodified in Japan in a way that links it to other eco-friendly buzzwords like “*gurīn*” (green), “*tezukuri*” (handmade/homemade), and “*eko*” (ecological). This connection is often made in academia as well, though perhaps not in such a striking or blunt way. Particularly in the broader field of social sciences, the “local community” has been promoted as the hope, safe haven, and even utopia for a sustainable and bright future. The local community functions as a positioning device depicting a social arrangement that holds up on a national or global level against complex post-industrial societies (cf. Brenner 2019) that are characterized by flux and constant (social) insecurity. Notwithstanding the fact that such a longing for an alternative in a post-socialist era is understandable, this vague idea of “local” is unsatisfactory to work with. Furthermore, such an idealistic approach does not seem to lead to a “theory of the local” but to a “dream of the local.”

In contrast, this paper connects different approaches to “the local” and renders them through examples from my own research in western Tokyo, drawing one step closer to a theoretical understanding of the local as a multilayered, scalar concept. Special emphasis is placed upon anthropocentric and sense-related layers that consider affective processes and sensory range. The approach is based on a “social-

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- 1 By John Horward Payne (lyrics) and Henry Rowley Bishop (composition) (1823); in Japan known as “Hanyū no yado” 塙生の宿; first published Meiji 22 (1889) in the Chūtōshōkashū (中等唱歌集) by the Tōkyō Ongakugakko (東京音楽学校) (see NDL, <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/855558/22>).
  - 2 By Gil Scott-Heron (1971).
  - 3 By Marc Bianchi aka Her Space Holiday (2000).

relational and situated understanding of affect” (Slaby and Scheve 2019) and space that acknowledges the temporary, fluid, and multilayered nature of spatial processes (Schmid et al. 2018). Further, the concept should cover, link, and combine the perspectives of individual humans and collectives in order that it may be applicable to different social science disciplines. The central question is therefore: How can we define a “local” that is not based upon the demands of a single (scientific) discipline or ideology like the “idealized image of the local community,” but on qualitative parameters and factors of influence? This inevitably creates a need to identify the layers and constituting elements of the local and to understand the mechanics and interplay of its different parameters. This research document depicts this theorization as a work in progress, because it should spark discussion and cooperation between the three research strains involved. As an intermediating paper, it can be linked to the discussion in area studies regarding the meaning of locality in Japan, prominently discussed at the “What Is the ‘Local’?: Rethinking the politics of subnational spaces in Japan” (2021-10-18~20) international symposium at the German Institute for Japanese Studies, Tokyo, and condensed into the book *Rethinking Locality in Japan: What Is Local?* (Ganseforth and Jentzsch 2021). This paper also includes questions regarding urban scale addressed by leading sociologists and geographers (cf. Schmid et al. 2018; Brenner 2019) and the growing but still fragmented literature that uses urban assemblage as method and theory for approaching these questions (cf. Wang 2019; McFarlane 2011).

The goal of this research project, in which this paper is only a small but significant step on a long journey, is to get one step closer to an analytical understanding of the local in an anthropocentric sense, by rendering the local in addition to existing conceptions through the layer of sensory possibilities and affective processes (cf. Purkarthofer 2020).

Based on the existing research regarding spatial perception (cf. Diaconu et al. 2011, Henshaw 2014, Hall 1990) and human-space relations (cf. Fukazawa et al. 2000, Gehl 2010, Paglen 2015), it seems reasonable to approach this topic through the lens of the everyday production of space (cf. Lefebvre 1991), aware of the (limited and learned) possibilities of perception and the human scale as a spatial range of interaction. But even though I am enthusiastic to read about the “good human scale” (Gehl and Svarre 2013: 43) and descriptions such as “the scenery is on a human scale. This is a good place to be—also for a town” (Gehl 2010: 32), I propose to hypothesize the anthropocentric local as an analytic category without assuming that a human scale is always positive. Therefore, the local should be anthropocentric—i.e. on a human scale—but should exist without a “*happy* community,” where common goals, harmony, and mutual understanding flourish; instead, it only needs a “*local* community,” where people might hate each other but still need to interact, because the local ties them together. Happiness as well as hatred are bound by the possibilities permitted by the free interplay of spatial and social chains (cf. Aichinger 2002).

## Localizations on Linguistic Grounds

When starting with the English word “local,” it is important to note that the word can be used as an adjective as well as a noun.

*Local*

*adjective*

Ⓐ Relating or restricted to a particular area or one's neighbourhood. [...]

Ⓑ (in technical use) relating to a particular region or part, or to each of any number of these. [...]

*noun*

Ⓒ An inhabitant of a particular area or neighbourhood. [...]

Ⓓ British informal. A pub convenient to a person's home. ‘A pint in the local’ [...]

(OUP 2020a)

This dictionary definition, as simple as it seems, already gives us some hints regarding the question posed by the organizers of the symposium “What is the local?” One answer could be that *izakaya* (Japanese dining bar/pub) around the corner (cf. Ⓓ). But this is satisfying neither as a scientific category nor as a concept to work with further. In addition, the answer cannot mean a person, which would necessitate changing the question to “Who is the local?” (cf. Ⓒ), to which the answer would be the “local person,” leading us to reasonably conclude that “local” is an adjective. Definitions Ⓐ and Ⓑ might seem similar in their inclusion of “relating to particular region or part [or area],” that the local is an adjective to “mark a spatial distinction.” More precisely, “local” creates an *inside* space distinct from all that is not this space, therefore *outside*. “The relationality of these ‘logical emergents’” (namely inside and outside) is a crucial characteristic of categorical distinctions<sup>4</sup> (Hillier 2007, 15; cf. 15–18). The difference between definitions Ⓐ and Ⓑ is that while Ⓐ refers to geographical spaces, like “neighbourhoods,” Ⓑ refers to general, abstract, or specific spaces, like “local pain” or “local memory.” Definition Ⓐ is therefore a sub-category of Ⓑ. The difference can be illustrated by looking at the corresponding antonyms, which read “general” for Ⓑ and “national” or “global” for Ⓐ (OUP 2020a). Ultimately, definition Ⓐ is what the symposium’s organizers had in mind when referring to the local and what should be discussed further in this article. Looking for an equivalent word in Japanese brings numerous examples from dictionaries, but leaves us with at least four meaningful entries<sup>5</sup> (Weblio 2018).

4 Of course, from an epistemological point of view, every act of cognition is the process of telling one thing apart from (all) the others (cf. Parson, Luhmann), but this need not be discussed here.

5 There are many terms that are in the wider sphere of “the local”—for example, *kyōdo* 郷土, which is used in local history *kyōdoshi* or local/folk literature *kyōdobungaku*, but that is referring to a “native place, birth-place” (the German term “*heimat*” seems like a suitable translation). This is normally not used in social sciences because it carries a strong ideological association with “folklore” and “tradition.”

The first, *kyokuchi* 局地, is an accurate translation of the noun “locality” and in compounds formed by adding *teki*, making it an adjective, it bears the meaning “local.” But the usage of the term is very limited, mostly in meteorology or medicine (NINJAL 2020d; Kotobanku 2018c).

The second, *rōkaru* ローカル, is an English loanword, easily recognizable as written in katakana. Even though it theoretically could have the same meaning as in the English language, it is predominantly used in compounds with other loanwords (e.g. *rōkarudisuku* local disc) or in specific fields like media, IT, broadcasting or advertising (NINJAL 2020c; Kotobanku 2018d). As with many loanwords, it is also used to highlight or emphasize something local as a stand-in for other terms that would not be so recognizable because they are not written in katakana.

The third, *chihō* 地方, is also a quite accurate translation and widely used in casual discourse as well as in such academic disciplines as social sciences, city planning, and geography (NINJAL 2020b). The shortcoming of this term is its fuzziness, which stems from the second meaning, “province, countryside” (Weblio 2018; kotobanku 2018b). Therefore, the adjective *chihōteki* could mean “local” as well as “provincial,” or both at the same time. Nevertheless, or maybe because of this lack of specificity, *chihōteki* appears to be the appropriate term for the Japanese-speaking scientific community.

Last, the term *chi'iki* 地域, with its meanings “an area; a region; a district,” has a broader meaning that is not a true translation of locality or local (NINJAL 2020a; Kotobanku 2018a). However, in compounds and as an adjective, it is often used to signify locality (“relating or restricted to a particular area” (OUP 2020b)) in a geographical sense. In contrast to *chihō*, the term *chi'iki* is not associated with province, rural, or countryside and therefore is often used as a substitute in scientific texts dealing with an urban setting.

Table 1 below summarizes these four possibilities for expressing the local:

**Table 1: Japanese Terms Used for “the Local”**

Romaji	Kanji/kana	Meaning	Equivalent
<i>Kyokuchi(teki)</i>	局地(的)	A locality (local)	b (incl. a, but not as common except for in meteorology)
<i>Rōkaru</i>	ローカル(な)	Local [loanword of the Engl. adjective]	a (mostly in media, broadcast, and IT, e.g. “local disc”)
<i>Chihō(teki)</i>	地方(的)	District, province (local)	a (incl. “rural, provincial”)
<i>Chi'iki(teki)</i>	地域(的)	District, area (local)	a (w/o the meaning “rural, etc.,” in contrast to <i>chihō</i> )

Source: (Weblio 2018; NINJAL 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; Kotobanku 2018a; 2018b; 2018d; 2018c).

Having explored the pre-existing linguistic conditions of the local and the corresponding signifier, it is time to elucidate the different dimensions of the

signifier. Accordingly, we will address the pre-existing dimensions of the local, that is, the basic sociospatial dimension, as well as the specific economic-agrarian, administrative-political, and discursive-cultural dimensions.

## **Of Borders, Axes, and Scales**

The basic meaning of local, as stated above, is something “relating or restricted to a particular area” (OUP 2020). This distinction is a relational, spatial one, demarcating one (smaller) area from a bigger area or a number of areas. But following the reasoning of philosophers (cf. Lefebvre 1991), geographers (cf. Soja 2010, Weichhart 2018) and sociologists (cf. Löw 2001, Weidenhaus 2015) who theorize space, the spatial distinction is a socially produced one. In other words, social relations, orders, and systems are realized in different dimensions like time, language, or space, which leads to the construction/production of the same. The architect Bill Hillier describes this relation as follows:

The origins of relational schemes of space lie somewhere between the ordering capacities of the mind and the spatial ordering inherent in the ways in which social relationships are realised in space. (Hillier 2007: 18)

This basic sociospatial dimension could be described as a substratum that is necessary to create the local. But the different preexisting definitions of the local are quite dependent on the social subsystems—for example the economic-agrarian in regard to “local food”—that project their distinctions and orders onto a sociospatial dimension. However, the production of locality is a special case, because at its core lies the construction of a border. In order to define the local as an analytical category, this border or margin of the local must be identified. Hence exploring some thoughts about borders is important.

While there is consensus among scholars in most space-related academic disciplines that space is constructed (as described above), it seems useful to identify this about borders as well:

Distinctions and therefore demarcations [borders] are not based on the “nature” of the distinguished or its attributes but based on the discretion of whoever draws the distinction. (Weichhart 2018: 51 [my translation])

But as Weichhart further explains, the borders of spatial entities are not always as distinct as lines on maps (distinct borders/“closed borders”) but also spectrum-like in form (“fuzzy borders”), creating a border belt of indeterminate belonging (Weichhart 2018: 49–54). Nevertheless, even if fuzzy, a border is a distinction that that separates spatial entities (cf. Weidenhaus 2015: 46). After clarifying this, an examination of localities follows.

When thinking about borders it is helpful to differentiate two axes on which spatial distinctions can work (see figure 1). The first way to draw a distinction is by distinguishing one spatial entity from its neighboring entities on the same hierarchical level. An example would be to recognize Setagaya-ku in contrast to its

neighboring wards Suginami-ku, Shibuya-ku, Meguro-ku and Ōta-ku. This axis of spatial distinction is called *horizontal* in the following text. The second way to segregate is to identify the hierarchical layer above and beneath the entity. To keep our example, Setagaya-ku is part of the City of Tokyo (higher entity) and contains internal regions like Kitazawa-chiiki or Kinuta-chiiki, but also the similar sounding Setagaya-chiiki. This axis is called *vertical* in the following text.

**Figure 1: Horizontal and Vertical Axes of the Local**



Source: Florian Purkarthofer

What becomes strikingly clear in this regard is the complexity of scalar questions, as they deal with lived environments that are “expressions of the multiscalar, polymorphic and restlessly mutating geographies” (Brenner 2019: 14), which preclude simple categorization on both axes. In other words, “geographical difference no longer represents the spatialization of particularity. It instead demarcates the distinctive yet constitutively relational positionality of any given space within an evolving, worldwide grid of interdependencies” (Brenner 2019: 260). The specific local, as one scalar unit in a sea of topological connected neighboring ones, is hard to delineate. Because of its interdependency with regional contexts embedded in global networks and regimes, which Brenner calls “metacontexts” (2019: 261), a long-term fixation of localities seems nearly impossible. To bring some analytical order to these ever-shifting local assemblages, I sidestep the straightforward approach of “a (single) local” with an attempt to understand the internal logics of disciplinary locals that contribute to the “layered process” of urbanization (Wang 2019: 5).

## Disciplinary Locals—Conflicting Layers of Locality

Beyond science and academia, several definitions of the local exist simultaneously. Depending on the social subsystem and the associated field, mode of interaction, and commodity, they produce a certain kind of local through distinction. This

subsystem’s localities are exemplified through the actual case of Setagaya ward in western Tokyo.

## Territories

First, we explore the administrative-political dimension, because it is strongly influential in everyday life and the urban fabric. This dimension is mainly concerned with the field of power that pervades society. Spatial manifestations of these fields are quite common (e.g. nation-states, municipalities, etc.), and seem clearly marked as borders, called territories (cf. Weichhart 2018: 54–55). But, as shown in table 2, the hierarchical structure and multifaceted nature of these administrative entities makes them complex. Furthermore, the use of “local” as a marker for sub-national territories is fluid and ranges from huge, internally diverse areas to small-scale neighborhood areas.

Starting from one address in the researched field sites, the multiple layers of administrative territories are explicated in table 2, illustrating the range from national to individual level. But, while the question of whether something belongs is quite clear on a horizontal axis—a place is either in Suginami-ku or Setagaya-ku—it is often unclear or disputed on a vertical axis.

**Table 2: Administrative-Political Spatial Distinctions (Vertical Axis)**  
(e.g., 〒156-0043 東京都世田谷区松原 2 丁目 4 2-7 Y S 第二ビル  
1F, かくれん坊, in transcription: Tōkyō-to, Setagaya-ku,  
Matsubara 2 chōme 42-7, YS daini biru 1F, kakurenbō)

Level			Example		
	English	Japanese	Transcription	English	
National/Country	国	<i>kuni/koku</i>	Japan	日本国	
Subnational/Region	地方	<i>chihō</i>	Kantō	関東地方	
Prefectural	都道府県	<i>to-dō-fu-ken</i>	Tōkyō	東京都	the local?
City/Ward/Town/Village	市区町村	<i>shi-ku-chō-son</i>	Setagaya	世田谷区	
Region	地域	<i>chiiki</i>	Kitazawa	北沢地域	
District	地区	<i>chiku</i>	Matsubara	松原地区	
Block number	番地	<i>banchi</i>	2	2 丁目	
Lot number	地番	<i>chiban</i>	42	4 2 番	
House number	号	<i>gō</i>	7	7 号	
Building name	ビル(館荘)	<i>biru (kansō)</i>	YS №2 Bldg.	Y S 第二ビル	
Floor number	F・階	<i>efu・kai</i>	1 <sup>st</sup>	1 F	
Name	店・名前	<i>ten・namae</i>	Kakurenbō	かくれん坊	

Source: Setagaya-ku 2018.

In this concrete case study in Setagaya-ku, the question is as follows: Is the city planning policy of Japan, Tokyo-to, or Setagaya-ku binding in the case of new

streets and the reconstruction of a train line?<sup>6</sup> And who is “involved or part of the local” and therefore entitled to speak for and pursue its needs and visions?

While the plan to build two additional train tracks between Yoyogi-Uehara Station and Izumi-Tamagawa to increase capacity (and reduce congestion on the commuter trains) was formulated as early as 1964, the final part was only realized in March 2018 due to massive protest by “local groups” who tried to slow down or stop the project (cf. Odakyu 2016; 2018). At the same time, many users of the commuter train (who lived farther away from the city center) awaited the construction of the additional train line with eager anticipation.

Regarding the planned construction of Road Nr. 54 in the same area, the question was more centered on the competence of administrative bodies. Even though this plan was also strongly opposed by residents, it was not as clear who or what this resistance was fighting against. The plan to build the street was established by the Tokyo Government more than half a century ago, but Setagaya ward seems obliged to enforce the plan. During the public and legal conflict, the position of Setagaya ward changed a few times, from opposing the “local inhabitants” to being their voice vis-à-vis the city government (cf. Takahashi et al. 2015: 46–58).

In both cases, the definition of the local is a crucial point for legitimizing claims and the right to be involved in decision-making, as well as for defining the border between the local and other areas one is not concerned with. From a city planning point of view these disputes can be described as NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) struggles, where a group attempts to prevent a generally useful undertaking in a particular area, but has no opposition if it is built somewhere else. In this case of destructive testing, the “backyard” would describe the local, by demarcating an area so nearby that what happens to it matters, even though someone might not be actively participating in another positive activity, such as community building.

Concluding from these actual cases, the local in the administrative-political dimension is characterized through distinct horizontal borders that divide an area in localities on the same hierarchy level, but also through a fluid use of the local to describe different asymmetrical relations between a bigger (national, supranational, etc.) and a smaller spatial entity. While the horizontal differentiation (arbitrary administrative division) determines quantitative research due to its influence on data collection, classification, and statistics, the vertical levels of locality are relationally structured and play a vital role in qualitative studies concerning citizen empowerment, participative planning, as well as populism and power relations.

## Places

The discursive-cultural dimension of the local is mainly concerned with the field of meaning as produced through narration and discourse. Names are addressed and

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6 Another contemporary example would be the conflict between the Japanese government, the prefecture of Okinawa, and the city of Nago about the relocation of Futenma air base to Henoko.

histories are written that identify a specific locality, a place, and add cultural value and meaning to spatial entities (cf. Weichhart 2018: 56–60). In doing so, place-related personal identities as well as group identities are constructed by relating identity to a place, a specific “local.” The borders of the local in this dimension are fuzzy through overlapping pluralistic views and process-like in form, depending on relation and reaffirmation.

To illustrate how the local is constructed in a discursive-cultural dimension, we will explore two different histories of localities within Setagaya: first, the first chapter of the book *DNA of Shimokitazawa* (2015), written by the journalist Takahashi Yurika, and second, *Furusato Setagaya o kataru: Kamikitazawa - Sakurajosui - Akatsutsumi - Matsubara* (1996), edited and published by the Setagaya ward.

Takahashi’s book includes a history of Shimokitazawa. In her view, it does not matter that Shimokitazawa is not a recognized locality in an administrative-political sense, but simply the name of a train station, nor is it even discussed. In clear contrast, she begins her prologue by saying “Shimokitazawa is the town in the center of Setagaya, where the Odakyu-line and the Inokashira-line cross” (Takahashi et al. 2015: 12). The local she describes as a place as well as a community is called Shimokitazawa, because it is the name people identify it with. In her not strictly chronological exposition, the “atmosphere” (Takahashi et al. 2015: 22), “culture” (Takahashi et al. 2015: 36, 67), and “identity of Shimokitazawa” (Takahashi et al. 2015: 60, 66) have a central position, and guide the reader through historical changes of architecture and inhabitants. In addition to a resident-based view, the book shares a strong focus on leisure, subculture, and consumption, inviting people who do not reside in the area to identify with the place. This might not be surprising, as the book was a product of the conflict regarding reconstruction of the Odakyu line and the new planned road and is obviously intended to promote resistance or at least spread sympathy for the protesters and the existing cityscape.

A history with a completely different view, but similar in its nature, is *Furusato Setagaya o kataru* [Narrating [our] Hometown Setagaya], published by the Setagaya ward and available for purchase only at the Setagaya Literary Museum (Setagayabungakukan 世田谷文学館) or the city hall. The intended audience is clearly identified in the preface as “the next generation” (Setagaya-ku 1996: 5) of residents. In addition, the authors of the book are introduced in the preface not by name but by their relation to the locality (and time-space):

[T]he ones who were born and raised in the late Meiji years until the mid Showa period [approximately 1900 until 1950], brought material and sources, discussed in round tables [*zadankai*] and talks and compiled this record. (Setagaya-ku 1996: 5)

According to this introduction, the texts that describe the history of every locality are easy to read and have a personal tone, as if your grandparents were telling you

about their childhood. The book series is divided into different smaller spatial entities (like Matsubara, or Akatsutsumi); it does not tell the story of Setagaya, but very particular stories of these spatial entities. Still visible in contemporary place names, Setagaya's structure is based on the villages that existed before the formation of the postwar district in 1947. Even though the purpose of the publication is quite different, local identity is conjured by sharing traditions, ambience, and memories. In addition, "local knowledge" and facts about local history are slipped into the story—for example, theories about the origin of the place name Matsubara (Setagaya-ku 1996: 101–103) or statistics about how many people (and households) lived there around 1870 (530 persons in 107 households) (Setagaya-ku 1996: 107).

The places that are created in the discursive-cultural dimension are fuzzy on a horizontal axis, only loosely drawing a line around the local, but instead creating a spectrum of affiliation, which often dissolves into other localities. On a vertical axis the spatial entities overlap each other, most of the time without conflicting. So how can borders between localities then be drawn or identified? Through contradiction and dispute, of course—through stating differences or independence. A quite literal example is the tagline on the poster for the 2014 published documentary *Shimokita 2003–2014 Shimokitazawa de ikiru* by Satō Mayumi 齋藤真由美, which translates as "Someday, to be independent." Of course, this is a statement designed to provoke and resist, but it also clearly draws a line by "othering," which means distinguishing us from them and vice versa. It also illustrates how the different dimensions of the local refer to each other, as the discursive-cultural dimension refers to the administrative-political in this example, to strengthen the argument and accrue additional credibility.

## Networks

The economic-agrarian dimension of the local is mainly concerned with the field of capital and is characterized by the practices of production, trade, and consumption. Locality is first a brand and an added value, second a variable concerning infrastructure and logistics, and third a form of influence through regulations and norms. Or, on a more abstract level, the economic-agrarian dimension can also be analyzed as a network, structured through linkages, circulation of goods, and interaction across disparate locations. Such networks are often multiscalar—spanning from the global to the national and local—but the borders of the smallest unit in this dimension are often constructed along the geographical concept of region (the next entity in size on the vertical scalar axis), which could be described as "[a]n area, especially part of a country or the world having definable characteristics but not always fixed boundaries" (OUP 2020b). For example, a coastal region with a strong dependence on fisheries or an area where specific fruits are cultivated would create a regional industry (*chiiki sangyō* 地域産業).

Here, the local is an indicator of the easy availability of a product or the short distance between a producer, merchant, and consumer.

One such example from the field site is a map showing the places where locally grown or produced agricultural products can be purchased (Setagaya Sotachi 2018). Even though Setagaya is a significantly urban district with a high density of inhabitants (over 15,000/km<sup>2</sup>), there are still fields (*hatake*) and farms and over 120 places where local products are sold, according to the *Setagaya nōsanbutsu chokubaisho mappu* [Setagaya agricultural product direct marketing map].

The idea that “eating locally means minimizing the distance between production and consumption” (Brain 2012: 1) coincides with the purpose of direct marketing as described in the map. Still, it is crucial to understand that the local—as used in “local product,” “locally grown vegetables” and so on—can be a discursive, culturally produced local but also a supply chain and economic-agrarian dimension-based local, or both at the same time. While the first uses “locality” as a brand, the second employs “local” as marker of proximity (in the region) and practicality (short supply chain). Roslyn Brain clarifies the difference as follows:

Locality vs. Local Foods

The terms sound similar, but local food is the better choice if attempting to purchase and consume goods in or near your geographic location. Locality foods have a brand associated with one locality/region (such as Utah’s Own or Fresh from Florida), but often source out nationally and/or internationally. (Brain 2012: 1)

Of course, local business means something different in the steel industry than it does in vegetable production, but nevertheless, the economic idea of locality as a regional network of production and consumption with a short supply chain in between should now be clear.

### Topology of disciplinary locals

To review, we have identified the multiple dimensions of definitions of the local and have illustrated the simultaneous existence and application of these locals through the case of Setagaya-ku in Tokyo.

One of the problems with these dimensions of the local is that they distinctly exist only as analytical categories, while they are actually intertwined and connected throughout their historical paths, or conversely, through hiding the circumstances and variables of their own formation as the city was shaped. This is quite normal, as “[e]very established order tends to produce [...] the naturalization of its own arbitrariness” (Bourdieu 2010: 164), but is counterproductive to a deeper understanding of and common ground for an interdisciplinary, multilayered conception of the local.

Nevertheless, table 3 identifies and summarizes some facts and characteristics of disciplinary dimensions of the local, which should provide a basis for developing

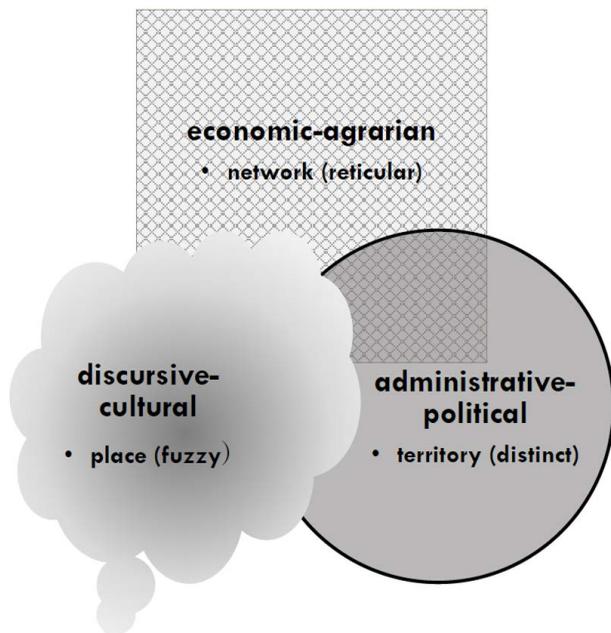
an analytic concept of the multilayered local to better understand, study, and distinguish local phenomena and communities.

**Table 3: Social Subsystems and Their Configurations of Spatial Distinctions (Localities, Borders)**

Social subsystem	Field of ...	Commodity	Action	Border tendency	Locality type
<i>Administrative-political</i>	Power	Rights Contract	Legislation Jurisdiction	Distinct	Territory
<i>Discursive-cultural</i>	Meaning	Identity History	Discourse Narration	Fuzzy	Place
<i>Economic-agrarian</i>	Capital	Goods Money	Production Trade	Reticular	Network

Source: Florian Purkarthofer.

**Figure 2: Disciplinary Layers of the Local**



Source: Florian Purkarthofer.

Since these dimensions (place, territory, network) can be also found, together with scale, in many other “dimensions of sociospatial relations” (Brenner 2019: 263–67), this is not an exhaustive list but an attempt to visualize these dimensions through concrete examples. It should be emphasized, however, that these dimensions are mutually co-formative and thus inextricably intertwined. Accordingly, the distinction between place, territory, scale, and networks must be

understood as a purely analytical device for deciphering the intricately interwoven layering of modern sociospatial relations; it is not an ontological demarcation (Brenner 2019: 267).

In short, we can try to understand the local as the scalar factor in connection with other modes of sociospatial relations, but we may get lost in a multilayered structure of the dimensions listed above and the respective scalar layers on the vertical axis. However, Henry Lefebvre (1991: 68–88), the influential forefather of most modern spatial discourse, addressed this problem by stating that

the local (or 'punctual', in the sense of 'determined by a particular "point"') does not disappear, for it is never absorbed by the regional, national or even worldwide level. The national and regional levels take in innumerable 'places'; national space embraces the regions; and world space does not merely subsume national spaces, but even (for the time being at least) precipitates the formation of new national spaces through a remarkable process of fission. All these spaces, meanwhile, are traversed by myriad currents. (Lefebvre 1991: 88)

While it may seem simple to identify the local—such as by placing a mark on a map—this does not advance the conception toward an anthropocentric local that takes into account the possibilities and limitations of human interactions and takes seriously their “qualitative chaos (the practico-sensory realm) presented by the perception of things” (Lefebvre 1991: 17). Therefore, the idea of the “perceived space” (Lefebvre 1991: 38) is reprioritized and combined with contemporary multisensory anthropology to add a more sensory-sensitive dimension to the existing discussion.

## **Towards an Anthropocentric Local**

After exploring the linguistic, axial, and disciplinary uses of the local, one thing becomes clear: it's a multilayered, complicated matter. Not only are there already several frequently used and finely nuanced terms to signify the local, but also a complex interplay of individual human cognitive potentials (the cognitive power of distinction) and societal spatial patterns. Moreover, the three dimensions outlined through the case studies above revealed differently structured, shaped, and confined localities which at the same time and in the same space, but on different dimensions/layers, overlap but are not congruent (see figure 2).

A lazy solution to the question “What is the local?” (or a way to circumvent the question) can be to rephrase the question to “Which local do we use?” While this might work in disciplinary settings, it is also not very enlightening, because the existing conventions already work, as long as one does not cross disciplinary borders. But the question remains unchanged if one is dedicated to research, work, or writing in an interdisciplinary or “antidisciplinary” (cf. Ito 2014) setting, or if one is to base the idea of the local on more than one disciplinary convention.

The (possible) solution I am advocating for here is to re-approach the local through parameters not based on disciplines, but on humans as individual and social beings,

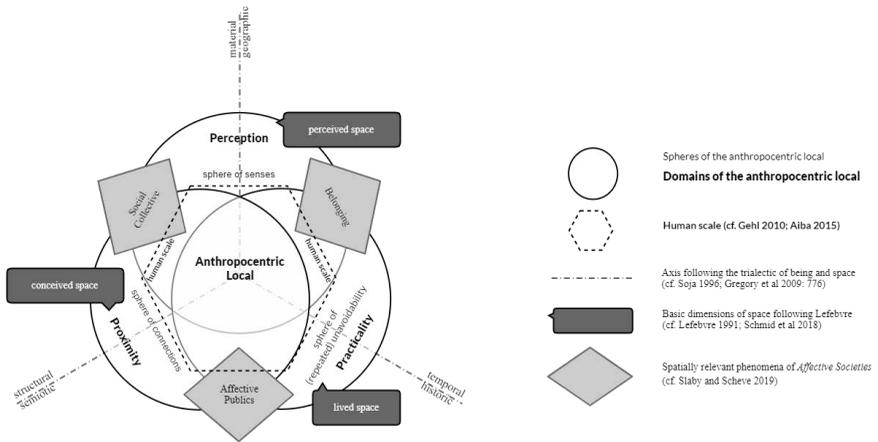
acknowledging their ability to grasp spatiality and to interact in and with spatial configurations. I suppose this humanistic or anthropocentric version of the local is in many cases already part of the existing definitions, but not explicitly or systematically, rather more as a forgotten signpost along the way. It is also worth noting that the anthropocentric local (AL) is not a replacement or substitute for the preexisting locals mentioned above, but an additional way of tackling the problem. Because the AL is still an experiment based on fieldwork conducted from April 2014 to March 2016 and from July 2018 until March 2019, with a few short encounters in between, it is not yet a full-fledged theory, more an attempt to think in an orderly way about the observed and the analyzed in a generalizable abstract form. AL aligns with Lefebvre's production of space (cf. Lefebvre 1991; Goonewardena et al. 2008; Gregory, Johnston, and Pratt 2009, 590–92, 775–76) and its modern interpretation and use in research about urbanization processes (Schmid *et al.* 2018; Streule 2016; Brenner and Schmid 2015; Gehl 2010; Aiba 2015), in addition to combining it with recent research about affective processes (cf. Slaby and Scheve 2019; Scheve 2019; Mattes et al. 2019; Lünenborg 2019).

The main idea is that AL is based on three spheres that are fundamental for everyday human life and that allow a (spatial) distinction through (gradual) falsification. Where these three spheres intersect, the local, in an anthropocentric sense, can be found, or precisely, could be defined that way. These three domains are as follows: (1) perception, or the sphere of senses; (2) proximity, or the sphere of connections; and (3) practicality, or the sphere of (repeated) unavoidability (see figure 3). But in sharp contrast to the preexisting conditions of the local, these analytic spheres constitute AL only in combination, not alone. Therefore, the local is understood as a multi-dimensional process that can be described through the framework of spatial production:

Following Lefebvre (1991/1974) we can distinguish three basic dimensions of the production of (urban) space (Schmid, 2005, 2008): (1) the production and transformation of material elements and structures (perceived space); (2) processes of territorial regulation and representation (conceived space); and (3) socialisation and learning processes (lived space). (Schmid et al. 2018:29)

These dimensions and the spheres work on the same level and also allow for integrating the affective phenomena of: first, “social collectives”—dynamic, fragile social forms based on structures that allow one to affect and be affected, and an understanding or realization of this connectedness (Scheve 2019: 268–70) connecting perception and proximity; second, “affective publics”—understood as “performative emphases that [...] are temporally and situationally sustained in the mediated and/or localized co-presence of actors” (Lünenborg 2019: 320), spanning proximity and practicality; and third, “belonging”—as the process of “sensing and making sense of one’s place in both spatial and temporal terms” (Mattes et al. 2019: 302).

**Figure 3: Analytic Spheres of the Local/Dimensions of Space/Spatial-Affective Processes**



Source: Concept by Florian Purkarthofer based on Aiba 2015, Gehl 2010, Gregory et al. 2009: 776, Lefebvre 1991, Schmid et al 2018, Slaby and Scheve 2019, Soja 1996.

The drawback to this approach is that this anthropocentric view works only in connection with human beings; even though biological, geometric, and logical considerations are involved, it is still a social scientist's analytic category. It also uses individual as well as collective (social) points of reference and qualitative data, which limits its (easy) use for quantitative approaches.

Nevertheless, while analyzing the fieldwork material, these structures and axes of the local begin to take a clearer shape. To formulate AL properly, the following section discusses perception as one of the three spheres and clarifies the necessity of this dimension for the AL. Finally, a condensed definition of AL is formulated, with the intention of stimulating discussion regarding the local.

### Perception: The Limits of Affection

Discussion of the anthropological local (AL) might best be begun by exploring the possible sphere of the senses (SpoS) and its limitations. This interest in the biological and cognitive possibilities of perception is one of the main distinctions between the AL and many other models of the local. Even though it might seem obvious, because we entirely rely on our perception, it is widely overlooked or ignored in social sciences.

This neglect of perception is rooted in the hegemony of the eye and the downgrading of other senses during the Enlightenment. The philosophical movement of phenomenology, following Husserl's writings at the beginning of the

twentieth century, somehow reclaimed the senses for their purpose. Nevertheless, or maybe because of those who followed and developed Husserl's ideas, phenomenology did not reintegrate the senses into the social sciences, but pushed them into the realm of self-reflection and literature. Only modern-day cognition science, an intersection of biology and psychology, (cf. Smith 2008), brought back the senses into an empirical, researchable realm (cf. Slaby and Scheve 2019). Still, there seems to be a fear of contact between the social sciences and perception, even though the social aspect of perception must not be underestimated.

To start our exploration of the SpoS, let's look into the biological-evolutionary basis of perception as formulated by the biologist C.U.M. Smith:

All organisms live in an environment full of changes, full, as it has been said, of 'happenings'. Some of these changes will be beneficial to the organism, others detrimental. Some will occur quite independently of the organism, others will be due to the organism's own activities. In order to survive, the organism requires the fullest possible information about what is going on. (Smith 2008: 33)

In other words, information about our surroundings is helpful or even necessary for our existence. And the more useful information we are able to acquire, the better the predictions we can make about our surroundings. However, our senses are not omnipotent, but limited to specific skills that are necessary to survive, and they also have spatial limitations. The biologist Jakob von Uexküll labelled this SpoS, restricted by the ability of the senses and spatial-temporal conditions, *Umwelt*:

Everyone who looks about in Nature finds himself (or herself) in the center of a circular island that is covered by the blue vault of heaven. This is the perceptible world [. ...]

Outward from the body, the senses of touch, smell, hearing and sight enfold man like four envelopes of an increasingly sheer garment. This island of the senses, that wraps every man like a garment, we call his *Umwelt*. (Uexküll 2001: 107)

While our contemporary use of *Umwelt* might be understood in the sense of nature that surrounds us (environment), the term actually refers to the perceivable share of the environment and therefore its individual picture/map of the environment. In this regard, Uexküll is quite close to Luhmann's system theory and information science (cf. biosemiotics, robotics), but far from phenomenologists like Heidegger. The SpoS could be understood as a collection of information on which basis, by "transform[ing] stimuli into properties," a world is (re-)created (Uexküll 2001: 108). As librarians might know only too well, a mechanism that organizes or selects the important from the less important information is necessary to process any given data. The same happens with our senses, where "specific features of the sensory world are 'extracted' as the sensory information streams upward through the brain. These features are aspects of the world which are of paramount importance to the animal" (Smith 2008: 38). We might use artificial sensors to detect phenomena our biological senses are not capable of detecting, but we have to translate this information back into a perceivable form. A contamination meter

(Geiger counter) does not let us perceive radioactivity, but creates noise or a visualization that correlates with radiation, which we are then able to perceive. The exact same thing is happening when we read a book or watch television or consume any other media: something we cannot perceive (at the moment) is translated into something that makes sense (cf. “Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung” Luhmann).

Another important fact described by Uexküll is that perception is learned, not a priori. In the process of adapting to our surroundings, for example, we learn “little by little, to see that familiar objects are not small but remote” (Uexküll 2001: 108). The stimuli for our nerve cells do not change, but our reasoning does, and therefore we no longer try to touch the moon. We learn to interpret the information we are receiving so that all our different spheres of perception conform with each other. It should be clear, then, that we are bound through our senses and are not able to escape their boundaries. These are the individual limits of perception.

However, another important limit of perception is covered above. It is the social boundary of perception.<sup>7</sup> This boundary came into existence with the development of civilizations or cultures. It is the adaption of one’s own *Umwelt* to an agreement about what the perception should be. This process can be viewed as a step beyond what Karl Jaspers understood as the discursive construction of the truth (cf. Salamun 2006: 75f).

[T]he idea of an objective universe, that embraces all living things, is undeniably very useful for ordinary life. The conventional universe, where all our relationships to our fellow human beings are enacted, has brought all personal *Umwelt* spaces under a common denominator, and this has become indispensable for civilized human beings. (Uexküll 2001: 109)

The problem is not that we learn to adapt our perceptions to those of our fellow human beings (mostly the dominant party’s view), but that we forget or deny that we are doing so. The learned perception, regardless of how crazy it might be, is then viewed as “normal” or “right,” and deviant perceptions are viewed as “madness” or “strange,” even “wrong” (cf. Foucault 1973). This does not mean that every person has to perceive things in the same way, but it limits the possibilities of what is sensible.

To summarize the SpoP it is absolutely necessary to be aware that perception, while always individual, depends on the process of learning. In the case of human beings, it is a double learning process, first to interpret the stimuli in accordance with experience, and second to interpret them in accordance with society. A second important point is that our perception of our surroundings, and therefore also the local, is bound to our senses. Additionally, information that we receive through analog or digital media has to be perceived through our senses. Finally, we cannot

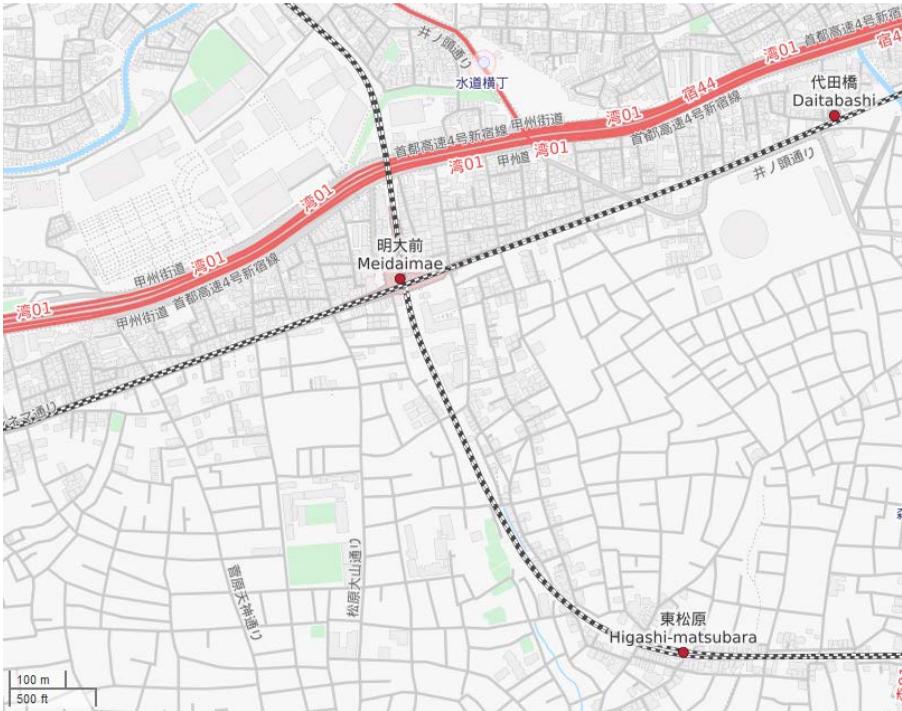
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<sup>7</sup> The social boundaries of perception are described in detail and tested in my dissertation thesis about the individual perception and social construction of space.

directly communicate perceptions in a way that makes another person feel what we feel. We can expose someone to the same stimuli, or describe a sensation to them, but doing so will not lead to an identical perception.

### **Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching the Local**

The local, as a matter of perception, is somewhere in the unspoken messiness of everyday life, but the borders of this type of local are difficult to distinguish. The method of destructive testing proved very fruitful in this regard, because it did not force people to decide what and where the local should be, but looked at where the thin line between the ignorable and the unignorable is drawn. Depending on the sense organ, this leads to different edges of the local, which by superposing them creates an AL sphere of the senses. The discussion that took place during the *machizukuri* workshop in Meidaimae (2014-06-21) is illustrative in this regard. In connection with the change of the Keio railway line, some street projects were also planned. Guided by Professor Aiba from the Tokyo Metropolitan University, the participants (about 20) were seated in a small group around tables, with a big map of the area in question. At the beginning, the inhabitants searched for their homes or the venue of the *machizukuri* workshop. After a short introduction by Aiba, the changes to the urban landscape as well as the use of the area around the planned elevated train tracks were discussed. Interestingly, as the discussion between the participants intensified, two groups seemed to form. One group was more concerned with the height of the train tracks and their structure, and the other group with the emissions and disruption that the trains could cause. Over the course of the event, it became clear that the people living north of the train line (next to the multilane street no. 20 *Kōshūkaidō*) were among others concerned about the reduced light and shadow because of their perception of the townscape, fearing that they might be trapped visually between the train and the road. In contrast to the people living south of the train line, they had relatively little fear of additional noise and pollution, because for them the train was the lesser of two evils (compared to the street). The participants resident south of the train line, in the quieter area, farther away from the street, perceived the train as loud and the street as untenable.

**Figure 4: Meidaimae Station and Surrounding Areas**

Source: OpenStreetMap 2021.

The venue of the of the *machizukuri* workshop—north of the street at Meiji University, Izumi Campus—was regarded by most of the locals as not “really” local, even though it was close. For those living south of the street, the unspoken but collectively agreed-upon northern border of “local” seemed to be the street itself, which served as a visual, olfactory and sonic barrier. This *machizukuri* workshop and the railway construction project also showed how the concept of “social collectives” (cf. Scheve 2019) helps to demonstrate how groups form based on level of affectedness, develop a relational self-understanding as part of a group, and then become a structuring force by self-localizing (against others). Jordan Sand’s description of the formation (through conflict) and development of the Yanase Residents Group in eastern Tokyo is a more elaborate example of social collectives (Sand 2013: 54–87). It also shows the transformation of such a tenuous cluster into a social movement that actively redefined their local through discourse and action, by creating and stoking an affective public (Lünenborg 2019).

## **Discussing Variations of the Multilayered Local: Urban Locals vs. Rural Locals**

In contrast to most contributions to the “What Is the ‘Local’?” symposium, which dealt with the local as a rural concept—or, more precisely, its application to a rural setting—this argument is developed based on case studies set in an urban area of a metropolitan region. Nevertheless, the proposed framework of an anthropocentric local is designed to work in both settings. I will briefly discuss scale and density in order to acknowledge the most important differences regarding the rural-urban divide in this context.

First, I argue that the human scale limits the local on a sensory (biological), infrastructural (material), and practical (temporal) level. And while the human scale does not vary between rural and urban settings, the settings and the structuring conditions that influence the human scale do vary considerably. Second, densities (population, building, and dwelling density) are key factors to differentiate the urban from the local through quantitative methods (cf. Andersson 2009; Dovey and Pafka 2014; MIT 2019). One kind of density that is often forgotten, or just not addressed in the social sciences with similar intensity (cf. Dijkstra and Poelman 2014: 2–15), is the density of information and its shape in rural and urban settings. I suggest using the concept of information density to understand why the borders of the local are different in rural and urban settings and why the “crisis of the local” in recently merged rural municipalities is best understood through a reflection of the urban local.

### **Coinciding Locals—A Rural Phenomenon**

All of the above-explained conditions of the local—the disciplinary (cf. table 3) as well as the anthropocentric—can be understood as referring to a specific kind or layer of information. If the borders of these locals and consequently the rift in information densities overlap, a singular local forms, consisting of different layers of the local that are joined through their similar borders. As an example, let us look at a remote Ogasawara village in the prefecture of Tokyo. It is located on the Bonin/Ogasawara island chain, nearly 1,000km south of the metropolitan region of Tokyo, and is home to around 3,000 inhabitants (cf. Long, Imamura, and Arai 2011; Long 2011). Because of the geographical, infrastructural, and administrative circumstances—its remote location in the Pacific, with only a single ferry connection (once every six days) to Tokyo (Takeshiba Pier)—the borders of the local are very much aligned along the inhabited part of the island. The administrative-political, discursive-cultural, and economic-agrarian locals coincide. The anthropocentric local also follows this border, even though on the islands there is a distinction between the two inhabited islands—the main island, Chichijima, in the north and the smaller Hahajima further south. While the two islands are separated by open sea, bi-daily ferries connect the islands and local unity as a social collective is provided through shared factors that affect the residents

(climate, infrastructure, history, etc.). The human scale can be found in population, building, and dwelling as well as perception, proximity, and practicality, which became quite clear during a local festival at the time of fieldwork in 2014. The destructive part of destructive testing is applied through structural conditions and the applicability to the locality clearly marks the transition—which is also collectively experienced while travelling on the same vessel for 24 hours.

In summary, the local, with its multilayered, relational, processual, and performative character, is here clearly distinguishable because the information density on all socially relevant layers is congruent. It is not always necessary to have 1,000 kilometers of open sea to establish a local, but this extreme example shows that a gap or rift in information density stabilizes the affective processes of belonging (“home”), social collectives, and publics and helps to create prevailing forms of locality.

### **Fragmented, Overlapping, and Alternative Locals—An Urban Phenomenon**

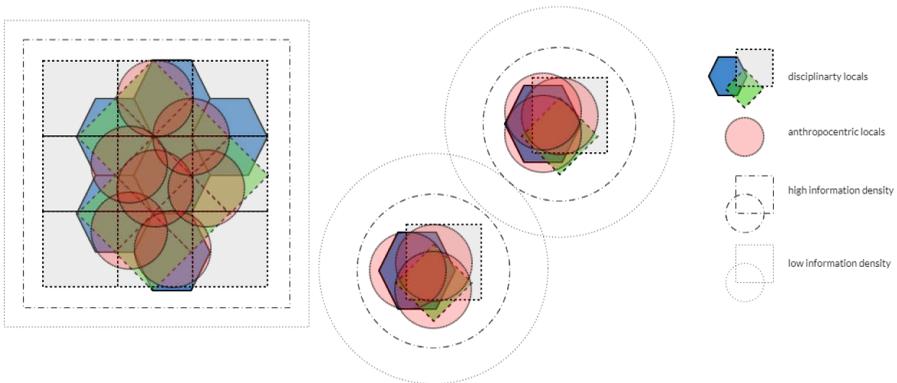
In contrast, in the metropolitan district of Setagaya, the one local dissolves; on the human scale of proximity and practicality, there is too much to perceive and therefore one must arbitrarily choose a local and conceive a fragmented and fractured spatial entity as the local. Despite the collective experience in Ogasawara *mura*, there is a large volume of cohesive information on nearly all layers. During fieldwork in 2018, residents of Daizawa 1 chōme (an administrative section with approximately 3,000 inhabitants) were asked where they did their daily shopping and accordingly what they consider to be part of their local (or home or neighborhood). The answers differed quite dramatically, giving the impression of individualized definitions of the local. The same can be observed regarding other layers of locality, which do not align but are diverse in shape, scale, and permanence. Only in cases where force was applied to social structures, such as a massive urban planning project, did the destruction reveal interpersonal rifts in layers of information, which often formed along the borders of personal feeling. Local protests groups can establish “affective publics” (Lünenborg 2019: 324–27) that allow for discourse and networks to be repeated and take a structuring role. The formation of the “Save the Shimokitazawa” protest group in the neighboring district of Kitazawa is a quite good example of this form of locality formation (Miura 2016: 159–69).

In summary, the urban local is indeterminate and fluid, eluding interpersonal and multilayered borders. Only under pressure is the local performed by a social collective, contributing to discursive and social processes and therefore enabling the formation of more stable forms of locality. Between these two amplitudes, every form of the local is thinkable and possible, but as shown above, the variables of information density and relationship to other possible locals should be

considered in understanding variations of anthropocentric locals in urban, suburban, and rural settings.

In abstract terms, the overlapping urban locals and coinciding rural locals have the same structures and mechanics (see figure 5). With their layers of dependency, different disciplinary locals and anthropocentric locals exist simultaneously. The difference is that if these locals (right) are surrounded by an area of low information density, creating a rift or discord, a socially shared idea of the local is supported. In contrast, the overlapping and laminal formation of locals (exceeding the single anthropocentric local in scale) allow for a seamless mosaic of locals, which only show their borders through conflict and friction during scalar processes.

**Figure 5: Overlapping Urban Locals (Left) and Two Coinciding Rural Locals (Right)**



Source: Florian Purkarthofer.

## Final Thoughts

What is spatial practice under neocapitalism? It embodies a close association, within perceived space, between daily reality (daily routine) and urban reality [... and] can only be evaluated empirically. (Lefebvre 1991: 38)

During our pursuit of “the local” through the small and winding streets of Tokyo, we have come to see the multilayered structure of disciplinary locals and concepts, demonstrating the complexity of urban space and the benefits and limits of scalar approaches. By advocating for an anthropocentric local, and thereby viewing the local and existing conceptions of it through a lens of sensory possibilities and affective processes, this paper has attempted to add an additional layered structure to this already complex system. Our goal has been to refocus the discourse back on human beings, and on their spatial practices and perceptions. In other words, I have tried to link material from my ongoing research with a current theoretical dispute

regarding scale in order to enrich the discussion with empirical examples, analyses, and critical thoughts developed in the field. Thus, the hypothesized anthropocentric local remains more an academic think piece than a full-fledged theory. While the ongoing pandemic is reframing and transforming many scientific discussions, I see strong evidence to support my approach of, first, emphasizing the conflicting multilayered locals and, second, identifying a solution to the over-boarding interdependencies in a highly globalized world by re-focusing on human beings, their lives and perceptions. Finally, as has become even more obvious during the pandemic, the (urban) local is an unsigned field—affecting us positively and negatively alike—and is therefore not necessarily “the place to be” but the ontological “place of being,” and might consequently be as messy as human existence itself (to theorize).

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