



## CONTRADICTIONS OF THE COMPACT CITY: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS FROM THE CONTEMPORARY LOGICS OF SPACE PRODUCTION IN SÃO PAULO

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### RESUMO

Diante da crise ecológica e climática mundial, apresentam-se reiteradamente, no âmbito internacional, políticas voltadas à promoção de cidades compactas. Estas, segundo tais políticas, trariam ganhos socioambientais, como a diminuição das emissões de gases do efeito estufa pela redução nos deslocamentos motorizados. Tais consensos, no entanto, acabam por obscurecer as lógicas de produção do espaço e os interesses contraditórios que envolvem o adensamento, sobretudo em termos de intensificação da produção imobiliária, a qual não se encontra diretamente associada à democratização de territórios dotados de infraestrutura adequada. A partir do quadro exposto, o texto problematiza a concepção dominante de cidade compacta sob a perspectiva das lógicas contemporâneas de produção do espaço, iluminando as contradições que envolvem a centralidade do imobiliário em um contexto neoliberal. Adotamos como perspectiva uma abordagem dialética, buscando apreender a realidade a partir da análise de suas contradições. Além de revisão da literatura e documental, o caso de São Paulo é mobilizado como experiência empírica, na qual a adoção de políticas de adensamento se mostra insuficiente na resolução dos problemas socioambientais.

**Palavras-chaves:** Cidade compacta. Sustentabilidade. Produção do espaço. Mercado imobiliário. São Paulo.

### ABSTRACT

In view of the global ecological and climate crisis, policies aimed at promoting compact cities have been reiterated at the international level. They, according to these policies, would bring socio-environmental gains such as the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by reducing motorized travel. Such consensuses, however, end up obscuring the logic of space production and the contradictory interests that involve densification, especially in terms of the intensification of real estate production, which is not directly associated with the democratization of territories well-endowed with adequate infrastructure. Based on the above framework, the text problematizes the dominant conception of compact city from the perspective of contemporary logics of space production, illuminating the contradictions that involve the centrality of real estate in a neoliberal context. We adopt a dialectical approach as a perspective, seeking to understand reality by analyzing its contradictions. In addition to a literature and documentary review, the case of São Paulo is mobilized as an empirical experience, in which adopting densification policies proved to be insufficient in resolving socio-environmental problems.

**Keywords:** Compact city. Sustainability. Production of space. Real estate market. São Paulo.



## INTRODUCTION

Debates surrounding the urgency of promoting urban densification policies can be recognized at the international level since the 1990s, in the context of discussions on sustainable development (COSTA, 1999). Classic works, such as that by Rogers and Gumuchd-jian (2001), highlight that compact cities promote a reduction in motorized travel, the maintenance of green belts, better use of infrastructure, greater sociability, and greater economic efficiency. This agenda has gained urgency in the face of the ecological and climate crises, which impose a series of measures to be taken both from the point of view of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to new climate dynamics (JABAREEN, 2006; LITMAN, 2014; ROGERS; GUMUCHDJIAN, 2001).

Such debates have had consequences in countries in the global south, with the case of São Paulo being paradigmatic. Recent planning instruments adopted by the municipality, especially since the approval of the Strategic Master Plan in 2014, seek to reverse the expansion of the city's outskirts and encourage urban densification in consolidated areas, especially along mass public transport networks.

The consensus surrounding the compact city has been questioned in a series of works. Neuman (2005) argues that the focus given to urban form in discussions about sustainability is insufficient to deal with the complexity of the processes involving urbanization. In his text, the author argues that sustainability should be pursued in urbanization processes, rather than in the form of cities. Du, Wood and Stephens (2016) relativize the environmental advantages of compact morphologies by verifying, through a case study on Chicago, that dense and more vertical urban centers can contribute to more intense consumption of electricity and greater generation of solid waste. Recent works, such as those by Kim and Hyun (2018) and Rice *et al* (2019) highlight that urban densification policies can encourage exclusionary processes due to

the appreciation that accompanies the intensification of real estate production, with disputes over the production and appropriation of urban space.

Even considering the existence of works that challenge the consensus around the promotion of compact cities, we note that there is still incipient work in the literature that is dedicated to problematizing the urban form from the critical perspective of the space production. In this sense, this article aims to discuss how policies to promote urban densification fit into the broader framework of contemporary logics of space production. We are concerned with stimulating debate about the contradictions surrounding the development, dissemination and application of policies aimed at promoting compact cities. This approach involves, above all, problematizing the intensification of real estate production in a neoliberal context. One of the faces of neoliberalism, as far as cities are concerned, is the importance that real estate and infrastructure production assumes in the face of the prevalence of financial interests, with the totality of urban space being mobilized for accumulation (PEREIRA, 2018).

To undertake the proposed task, we used three research procedures, which unfolded in the structure of the text presented below. First, we carried out a bibliographical review considering both academic literature and public documents from multilateral agencies aimed at promoting compact cities. In these documents we sought to highlight the main arguments mobilized to defend the need to promote urban densification policies. Next, we sought to problematize such arguments in light of critical literature on the production of space, especially highlighting the current moment of capitalism, in which the built environment is increasingly subordinated to financial logics. Finally, we used to a study of the São Paulo Strategic Master Plan, approved in 2014, with a view to empirically understanding how policies aimed at urban compactness imply contradictions observed in reality. The text concludes with final considerations.

## The compact city in literature and on the political agenda

Abel Wolman (1965), in a classic work, point out that both the construction of the city and the maintenance of urban daily life involve the use of materials from nature and their subsequent disposal, generating impacts, such as pollution and waste accumulation. The construction of housing and infrastructure, the use of various energies for transport, the consumption of food and drinking water, among others, can be conceived as essential ecological flows for urban life, but which presuppose impacts on nature.

Rees and Wackernagel (1996) sought to quantify such flows and found an ecological deficit between the areas of concentration of urbanization and the total area of land on which they depend to survive. In this sense, the authors defined that cities with intensive use of natural resources can present important ecological deficits with nature, which implies risks for their sustainability. The authors' work suggests that compact cities can use natural resources more effectively through endogenous development that reduces dependence on distant areas.

Rogers and Gumuchdian (2001) defend the compact city as a promoter of sustainability. Cities, for the authors, must be able to internalize the flows of matter and energy, reducing the generation of pollutants and effluents. According to them, the compact city can be defined as "a dense and socially diverse city where economic and social activities overlap and where communities are focused around neighborhoods" (ROGERS; GUMUCHDJIAN, 2001, p. 33).

Deepening the debate, in ecological terms, Álvarez (2014) considers that cities, like natural ecosystems, would reach a climax stage of growth, which could not be transgressed without breaking ecosystem limits. In these terms, diffuse urbanization is understood by the author as a process that destroys areas of agricultural

cultivation and of buffering of the impacts of urbanization, thereby deepening the environmental crisis and threatening life in cities.

Litman (2014) emphasizes the adoption of policies aimed at promoting compact cities as a measure to deal with the climate issue. More compact cities would reduce motorized travel, avoiding greenhouse gas emissions.

It is in these terms that, as highlighted by the work of Bibri, Krogstie and Kärholm (2020), the compact city has become an urban planning paradigm over the last three decades<sup>1</sup> when it comes to tackling the ecological and climate crisis, becoming a highly accepted and globally disseminated thesis.

For Heloísa Costa (1999), the first document to politically propagate the idea that compact cities are more sustainable than other urban morphologies was the *Livro verde sobre o ambiente urbano*, published in 1991 by the Commission of the European Communities (CEC). In the United States, the highlights are Smart Growth, a public policy developed by the United States Federal Environmental Protection Agency, and New Urbanism, a movement formed from the coalition between urbanists and environmentalists which aims to promote the requalification of old neighborhoods and the promotion of new enterprises based on sustainability criteria. What these two currents have in common is an emphasis on the aspects of densification and mixed uses of urban land (KNAAP; TALEN, 2005; JABAREEN, 2006).

Following the experiences in central countries, there is also a case for promoting compact cities in peripheral countries. The study on urban density carried out by Acioly and Davidson (1998), in the context of Habitat II (held in Istanbul in 1996), already suggested that urban densification measures could be used as an alternative to reduce the costs of urbanization in peripheral countries, mainly because of the predo-

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to point out that discussions about a supposed ideal urban density, or the clashes between dispersed or compact urban models, have existed since the foundation of modern urbanism. In this text, however, we are focusing on the debate that has been going on since the 1990s, when the environmental issue took on a greater dimension.

minance of low-income populations and the need for investment in infrastructure. The authors, however, construct a dubious argument by stating that the state should not directly influence urban density, relegating to the market the task of conducting densification in accordance with the aspirations of demand.

A more in-depth study on the relevance of adopting policies to promote compact cities in peripheral countries was carried out by Jenks and Burgess (2000). The book organized by the authors has a compilation of articles and aims to analyze, from different points of view, the viability and relevance of the compact city model for urban development in the nations on the periphery of capitalism.

Jenks (2000) explains that the study did not reach a consensus, but that, in general, compact morphology was considered positive in terms of reducing infrastructure costs, making efficient use of urban land and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, especially by encouraging public transport. On the other hand, these cities have a large deficit of green and permeable areas, limiting the claim that the compact urban form would be more sustainable.

Different to Acioly and Davidson (1998), Burgess (2000) does not advocate the market as a definer of urban form. The author criticizes the transition from a planning model guided by regulation to a model guided by the ideals of competitiveness. According to him, this model drives concentrated investment, reproducing injustices and inequalities.

The dissemination of the compact city as a model that promotes sustainability can be found in recent documents produced by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat).

In 2016, Habitat III was held in Quito, whose main product was the document *New urban agenda*, outlining a series of objectives that should guide urban policies in the coming decades. Paragraphs 51 and 52 of the

document, which appear in the chapter “Sustainable and inclusive urban prosperity and opportunities for all”, makes it clear that a compact model of urbanization must be pursued by those cities that seek sustainability. Paragraph 51 highlights the need to ensure “appropriate compactness and density, polycentrism and mixed uses, through infill or planned urban extension strategies.” In addition, paragraph 52 states that it is necessary to guarantee “sustainable population densities and compact design and integration of new neighbourhoods into the urban fabric, preventing urban sprawl and marginalization.” (ONU-HABITAT, 2019).

In 2018, the 9th World Urban Forum was held in Kuala Lumpur, also within the scope of UN-Habitat, having as its product the document Kuala Lumpur Declaration on cities 2030, which also highlights a compact urban morphology. The document states that urban sustainability will be achieved through the adoption of measures that guarantee “appropriate compactness and density, diversity of uses, and revitalization of cultural heritage” (UN-HABITAT, 2018).

Having presented the theoretical foundations and the main documents that, at an international level, guide the adoption of principles of urban compactness as generators of greater environmental sustainability, it is worth deepening the critical analysis of such determinants in the contemporary context of space production.

## **Compact city and space production in the neoliberal context**

In addition to the ecosystem arguments for reducing the socio-environmental impacts of urbanization, it is necessary to question the political foundations of the compact city in a neoliberal context, guided by the deregulation of markets and a new role for the state in opening up frontiers for accumulation, especially through financial means. Moreover, in the face of these processes, the real estate sector has taken on a leading role and importance by enabling the mobilization of space as a commodity.

Works such as those by Oliveira (2009) and Ribeiro (2014), in analyzing documents from multilateral agencies, highlight the contradictory construction of sustainable development in its urban aspect under the auspices of neoliberalism. The authors highlight the conciliation of opposing objectives given, on the one hand, by the sustainability of cities, which is based on meeting local demands, strengthening participation and regulation and, on the other, the ideal of competitiveness of cities, which assumes the permeability of financial capital, which ends up imposing greater flexibility in state regulation. These contradictions define a framework in which socio-environmental sustainability policies are subject to financial determinations and possible returns arising from real estate businesses.

When we take the compact city as a sustainable model of urbanization, we must consider that, in a neoliberal context, such compactness essentially depends on economic stimuli and meeting the interests that involve construction. To this end, it is worth problematizing the current determinants that involve real estate production as a basis for urban compactness.

Lefebvre (2008) defines two main dimensions on the importance of real estate for the reproduction of capital and its survival in the face of crises: (1) real estate as a privileged sector for generating value, as it contains a considerable amount of variable capital in its organic composition; (2) real estate as an extension of rentier capital, associated with financial forms given both by the relationship with banking capital and by the capitalization of future incomes. These two dimensions are inherently associated, so that both act mutually to guarantee extraordinary profits that prolong the survival of capital.

Over the last two decades, many studies have been published toward understanding the centrality of real estate for the reproduction of capital, especially in association with the processes of financialization of the economy (FIX, 2011; PEREIRA, 2018; ROYER, 2009; RUFINO, 2012; SHIMBO, 2010; TONE, 2015). These works analyze various processes invol-

ving the structuring of real estate investment funds, the going public of development companies, as well as the formulation of advanced economic instruments capable of circulating the income obtained through the production of space in the global sphere. A point in common in these works is the selective and unequal action of financial capital in the territories, which means that the real estate production resulting from these operations deepens inequalities.

Concisely, we understand that three main conditions have allowed the compact city to be chosen as the dominant model of urban sustainability in a context where real estate and financial interests dominate. These conditions will be explained below. They will then be critically analyzed based on the empirical case of São Paulo.

The first condition concerns the fact that the compact city allows for a certain degree of consensus between real estate developers, civil society, and public authorities. The interests of the real estate sector would be served by the adoption, by planning instruments, of measures to intensify land use, which presupposes an increase in development activities. The interests of civil society would be served by a reduction in pollution, shorter distances and travel times, efficient use of infrastructure and maintenance of green belts. Finally, public authorities would gain from the application of instruments to recover real estate appreciation, becoming an important source of resources for investments.

The second condition is that the compact city promotes the adoption of new technologies and “eco-efficient” real estate projects, which at the same time contribute for a difference in urban projects that attract investors and allow the price level to rise. Projects that follow the principles of the New Urbanism, for example, such as mixed land uses, compactness, energy efficiency, among others, may require a range of green certificates, which stands as a differentiator for the real estate product and makes it possible to earn extra profit. Thus, projects designed under the principles of urban compactness have a better position in investment rankings, guaranteeing the appreciation of assets.



Finally, the third condition is that, in practice, discussions about compact cities on international political agendas do not define a scale of action, so that any projects that meet their requirements can be understood as compact. Compact cities can be produced in projects to requalify old centers, rehabilitate old industrial zones and even alongside new public transport networks. Even at the scale of the building, it can be argued that compact cities are built in mixed-use projects with high construction and housing density.

Next, in light of these three main conditions, we analyze the contradictions of the compact city in its materialization as a produced space in São Paulo.

### **The contradictory production of the compact city: the case of são paulo**

Since the beginning of the 2000s, proposals guided by the compact city model have been erected for São Paulo. Sepe and Gomes (2008), in a publication produced through a partnership between the Municipal Secretariat for the Green and Environment and the Center for Metropolis Studies, discuss the harmful effects of the continued peripheral expansion of the metropolis. The loss of vegetation in water supply areas, the occupation of slopes and valleys and the growing atmospheric pollution caused by center-periphery movements are some of the elements highlighted by the authors as indicative of the unsustainability of the diffuse urbanization model. In this sense, they state that, “on a macro urban policy scale, the consolidation of the compact city in the coming decades is characterized as the most important measure for mitigating and adapting the city to the possible effects of climate change” (SEPE; GOMES, 2008, p. 123; our translation).

Article 18 of Law No. 14,933, of June 5, 2009, which establishes the Climate Change Policy in São Paulo, defines that “the sustainability of urban agglomeration must be stimulated by municipal public authorities and guided by the principle of the compact city, fundamental to fulfill the objectives of this law” (our translation). In this sense, the same article defines guidelines, such as the densification of the city’s consolidated areas and the reduction in individual car travel (SÃO PAULO, 2009).

The consolidation of such principles, however, would be fully satisfied only with the approval of Law No. 16.050, of July 31, 2014, which defines the Strategic Master Plan (*Plano Diretor Estratégico* – PDE) of São Paulo, replacing the PDE previously in force, established through Law No. 13,430, of September 13, 2002. The 2014 PDE defined a series of instruments and strategies that guide the city’s growth in a compact way, especially by stimulating real estate production in territories equipped with infrastructure (SÃO PAULO, 2002, 2014).

The Metropolitan Structuring Macro Area (MEM), one of the eight macro areas defined by the PDE, delimited a perimeter between the Tietê, Pinheiros, and Tamanduateí rivers, where Consortium Urban Operations (*Operações Urbanas Consorciadas* – OUC) are in force and where the approval of Urban Intervention Projects (*Projeto de Intervenção Urbana* – PIU) is expected. Such instruments allow the private sector, associated with both the incorporation and production of infrastructure, to take a leading role in territorial transformation strategies, the consequences of which, according to the literature, are the deepening of inequalities and socio-spatial segregation (D’ALMEIDA, 2019; STROHER, 2019).

But the biggest innovation of the 2014 PDE in terms of promoting urban compactness was the definition of the Urban Transformation Structuring Axes (*Eixos de Estruturação da Transformação Urbana* – EETU), territories that delimit a set of blocks in a certain radius along mass transport networks. In the EETU, parameters are defined for greater building densification (with higher utilization coefficients and no height limitation), associated with an attempt to equalize population density (by defining maximum land shares per unit), and with encouraging the use of public transport (by limiting parking spaces per residential unit).

For the purposes of this study, we consider that the EETU reveals, in a didactic way, the contradictory materialization of the conditions set out in the previous section. It is worth noting that here we treat the aspects in a more general way, without exalting more specific details, which have been the subject of recent works (LIMA, 2021; MILITELLI, 2021).

Returning to the statement in the previous section, the first general condition that allowed the compact city to be chosen as the dominant model of sustainability is that it functions discursively as a measure of consensus between real estate, civil society, and public authorities. In the case of the EETU, as far as real estate interests are concerned, their demarcation made it possible to extinguish the stocks of construction potential then in force under the Zoning Law, approved in 2004 (SÃO PAULO, 2004). According to this law, each district of São Paulo had a maximum stock of construction potential to be marketed through the sale of Onerous Grant of the Right to Build (*Outorga Onerosa do Direito de Construir* – OODC). With the real estate boom of the 2000s, in many districts of the city the stock of construction potential had been exhausted, generating pressure for greater flexibility on the part of the sector. With the EETU, territories were defined for densification (with greater construction potential), in exchange for the extinction of stocks, which allowed the real estate sector to build more without pre-established limitations.

From the point of view of the public authorities, the extinction of stocks of construction potential represented the opportunity to significantly increase revenue through the intensification of the sale of OODC, which was even seen as a favorable measure for priority investments in measures to adapt to climate change (BORGES; FRANCO; FRANCO, 2022). The resources obtained through the sale of grants constitute the Municipal Urban Development Fund (FUNDURB), which defines housing and mobility as priority lines of investment.

Finally, the organized civil society called for measures to provide greater control over real estate production in the interior of neighborhoods, measures in favor of public transport, protection of water sources and bringing housing and employment closer together. As Bonduki and Rossetto (2018) highlight, it was precisely in this sense that urban densification measures, such as the EETU, worked as a possible way to reconcile these demands.

Regarding the revenue dimension, as Leite (2019) discusses, despite the undeniable public gains from FUNDURB investments, both the OODC calculation formula and the various discounts for popular market sectors end up limiting the possible gains with the application of the instrument, making its premise of capturing real estate appreciation by the State questionable. Furthermore, the author highlights, a hidden dimension of this logic is the growing dependence of the State on private investments, which means that public authorities have their investments conditioned by the intensification of real estate production.

As for meeting the interests of civil society, although the EETU seek to guide the city's growth along the transport axes, encouraging the use of public transport and reducing distances, such measures have encountered limitations regarding restrictions on access to real estate products offered on the axes, given the prevalence of real estate interests in setting high prices for products, enabled by the maximum capitalization of income, as will be further explored below.

The second condition refers to the fact that real estate projects aimed at the compact city encourage technological advances and product differentials, allowing higher prices, which makes such products restricted to higher income strata. As an example associated with the EETU, we can mention the set of six mixed-use developments that make up the *Eixo Platina* project by the developer Porte Engenharia e Urbanismo, located in the Tatuapé region, East Zone de São Paulo, within the perimeter of the EETU demarcated from Line 3 – Red of the subway, between Belém, Tatuapé, and Carrão stations.

We highlight the Platina 220 (Photograph 1), the most recently launched of the six planned in the project. According to the project's (PORTE, [2023]) website, in addition to mixed uses such as a hotel, offices, and commerce on the first floor, the building has several



Photograph 1 – Platina 220 Building  
Source: Personal archive. Photo captured on August 11, 2023.

items associated with environmental sustainability, such as solar energy, rainwater harvesting, landscaping with native species, green wall and low-impact paints, which contribute to greater thermal comfort, in addition to hotel units and commercial rooms, the building offers studio apartments with a floor area of 35 m<sup>2</sup> at a price of 700 thousand reais, that is, at a cost of 20 thousand reais per m<sup>2</sup>. The average price of these units indicates that these sustainability factors, associated with the compact city, even in a region outside the so-called Southwest Vector of the municipality (a financial centrality that extends southwest of the old center of the capital), classically recognized as the most valued from a real estate point of view, are confined to a restricted market range, and are not accessible to broader strata of the population.

From this point, we can also discuss the contradictions surrounding the third condition we identified, which refers to the scales of urban compactness. Densification on the scale of buildings or even neighborhoods, when it occurs in a way that is restricted to higher income classes, does not unfold, on a broader scale, in the containment of urban sprawl to new areas.

In the case of São Paulo, this contradiction is evident, given that the expansion of the peripheries continues to occur mostly from an informal urban land market. In 2020, the office of then councilor Gilberto Natalini (Green Party) released a document entitled *A devastação da Mata Atlântica no município de São Paulo* (The devastation of the Atlantic Forest in the municipality of São Paulo), which assessed the losses of Atlantic Forest in the municipality from 2014 to 2020. The dossier identified 160 cases of vegetation loss in the period, amounting to 725.1 ha of suppressed native forest (NATALINI, 2020). The main cause of deforestation has been the increase in low-income occupations. The horizontal expansion of slums accounted for 28.12% of the total cases (45 out of 160), while irregular allotments accounted for 48.12% of all cases (77 out of 160). According to the dossier, these subdivisions have been promoted in a criminal manner, with associations often analogous to the militias found in Rio de Janeiro (NATALINI, 2020).

These data contrast with massive real estate production in the EETU. According to data from the PDE Monitoring Platform (SÃO PAULO, 2016), between 2014 and 2020, the volume built in the Axis sectors increased from 85,775,238 m<sup>2</sup> to 91,550,528 m<sup>2</sup>, a gross increase of 5,775,290 m<sup>2</sup>, or more than 1 a million m<sup>2</sup> per year. The discrepancy between these two processes, on the one hand the densification of construction in consolidated areas of the city and, on the other, the continuity of peripheral expansion over vegetated areas, has as its centrality the difficulties faced by low-income sectors in accessing housing. This process illustrates the contradiction we mentioned: densification on the scale of buildings, and even neighborhoods, does not directly imply the control of urban sprawl, especially considering access to housing.



## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, based on the contemporary logics of space production, determined in a neoliberal context, we seek to problematize the consensus around the idea that policies aimed at promoting compact cities guarantee greater city sustainability in the face of the challenges posed by the ecological and climate crisis. Without pretending to exhaust these discussions, we hope to stimulate debates that put the logic of space production into perspective in a neoliberal context, transcending the mere defense of models that are internationally disseminated as sustainable.

We have seen that real estate has taken center stage in these proposals, a process obscured by the conciliation of contradictory interests under the idea of collective gains, both from the point of view of daily life in the city (reduced commuting, increased green areas in the urban environment) and from the point of view of the state (increased levels of revenue via instruments to capture appreciation).

The compact city, as an idealized proposal, materializes in a contradictory way, concealing the reproduction of inequalities, the emphasis on financial returns and even the effectiveness of such measures in containing unbridled urban sprawl and its damaging effects from a socio-environmental point of view. These contradictions, as we have seen, are evident in the case of São Paulo, where the intensification of real estate production in consolidated areas does not imply the democratization of territories or a democratic process of densification.

Beyond models and formulas, the construction of lasting relationships between the urban and nature requires transcending the centrality of real estate interests in the production of space, focusing on the construction of another project for society, based on values other than those defined by the commercialization of cities.

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