

DOSSIER: REFOUNDING URBAN-REGIONAL LATIN AMERICAN THINKING: NAVIGATING VARIEGATION, NEGATION, AND CONSTITUTION

REPOSITIONING URBAN-REGIONAL PLANNING IN BRAZIL: TERRITORY AND SCALES

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Abstract

What is the current place of planning in Brazil? From this initial question, the article sets out to problematize contemporary perspectives on urban–regional planning, drawing on its national trajectory alongside international debates. The central argument lies in the need to review the traditional approaches to planning cities and regions, in view of the specificities and recent transformations of the Brazilian urbanization process. To this end, the theoretical–conceptual framework draws on debates on scale to analyze emerging spatial practices and the key territorial dynamics shaping the country’s contemporary urbanization. Methodologically, the study traces the evolution of urban–regional planning in relation to successive development cycles, examines the conceptual and political disputes surrounding planning through theoretical and critical inquiry, and, grounded in an empirical approach, identifies points of convergence and relevant lessons for State action in territorial planning.

Keywords

State; Urban Planning; Regional Planning; Territory and Territorialities; Urbanization; Interscalarity; Brazil.

DOSSIÊ: REFUNDAR O PENSAMENTO URBANO-REGIONAL LATINO-AMERICANO: ENTRE VARIEGAÇÃO, NEGAÇÃO E CONSTITUIÇÃO

REPOSICIONANDO O PLANEJAMENTO URBANO-REGIONAL NO BRASIL: TERRITÓRIO E ESCALAS

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Resumo

Qual é o atual lugar do planejamento? Dessa questão inicial, o artigo lança-se a problematizar perspectivas para o planejamento urbano-regional, no Brasil, com base em sua trajetória nacional e em diálogos internacionais. O argumento central reside na necessidade de realizar uma revisão crítica das formas tradicionais de planejar cidades e regiões, tendo em vista as especificidades e as transformações recentes do processo de urbanização brasileiro. Para isso, adotou-se como marco teórico-conceitual o debate escalar como eixo condutor em relação às práticas espaciais emergentes e aos temas territoriais expressivos e consolidados na urbanização contemporânea do país. Metodologicamente, o estudo percorre a trajetória do planejamento urbano-regional à luz dos ciclos de desenvolvimento, examina as disputas conceituais e políticas por meio da teoria e da crítica e, pautando-se em um enfoque empírico, identifica pontos de convergência e aprendizados relevantes para a atuação estatal no campo do ordenamento territorial pelo planejamento.

Palavras-chave

Estado; Planejamento Urbano; Planejamento Regional; Território e Territorialidades; Urbanização; Interescalaridade; Brasil.

REPOSITIONING URBAN-REGIONAL PLANNING IN BRAZIL: TERRITORY AND SCALES¹

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Introduction

The trajectory of urban-regional planning in Brazil is closely linked to the circulation and adaptation of ideas, knowledge, and practices originating in Europe and the United States (Ribeiro; Cardoso, 1994), which, over the course of the twentieth century, were translated into regulatory frameworks and large-scale infrastructure projects. However, planning has taken shape not only through the production of the built environment. Cities and regions were constituted; public institutions and agencies were established; and private corporations were structured (Ferreira; Dantas; Simonini, 2018). These processes were shaped, directly or indirectly, by the geopolitics of authoritarian regimes (Rezende, 2012), as well as by technical-political actors and movements (Friedmann; Weaver, 1981), the institutional diffusion of methods and solutions (Feldman, 2021), medium- and long-term cycles of action aimed at addressing inequalities (Furtado, 2005), and the contradictions that culturally characterize Latin American (Gorelik, 2005) and Brazilian society (Ribeiro, 2023).

1. This article is based on a collaborative research study conducted by researchers affiliated with the following Brazilian public higher education institutions: IAU-USP, Unicamp, UnB, UFMG, UEM, UFRN, and Ufersa, within the scope of the Laboratório de Experiências Urbanísticas [Urban Experiences Laboratory] (LEU), registered in the CNPq directory. The research was supported by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) (Universal Call, Grant no. 407301/2023-2; research productivity fellowships, process nos. 307498/2023-9 and 305179/2023-3). This study was financed, in part, by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), Brasil. Process Number #2022/01583-9).

At present, planning stands at a crossroads shaped, first, by the impasses of a model widely employed throughout the twentieth century and grounded in the central role of the State; and second, by the convergence of multiple crises—economic, institutional, social, and environmental—that call for innovative alternatives to ensure its continuity. Strictly speaking, this is the very juncture at which the State itself now operates, confronted with new agendas and an increasingly diverse set of actors, amid conflicts and disputes of considerable complexity.

Therefore, in questioning the place of urban–regional planning in Brazil, this article aims to advance a critical reflection on its contemporary perspectives in light of its spatial–territorial configuration (Monte-Mór, 1994; Brenner, 2018). This reflection is anchored in an analysis of its trajectory within the national context, as well as in dialogue with international experiences and debates. The central axis of the argument lies in the urgency to critically revise traditional planning models, which, to a large extent, have proven inconsistent in the face of recent transformations and the specificities of the current Brazilian urbanization process. In this regard, the debate on scale has been adopted as a theoretical–conceptual reference, understood both as an analytical lens and as a potential method for rethinking planning processes. Such an approach not only enables a reading more attuned to the complexity of socio-spatial relations, but also helps to identify tensions, overlaps, and articulations across different scales of planning.

From a methodological standpoint, this study is grounded in the logical argumentation approach, outlined by Groat and Wang (2002), which structures the investigation through a coherent articulation of theoretical premises and empirical evidence in support of a central thesis or central argument. This approach is particularly suited to research that seeks to integrate distinct historical, conceptual, and practical dimensions, as is the case herein. Within this framework, the methodological pathway combines, on the one hand, a theoretically informed reading anchored in critical debates at both national and international levels, aimed at problematizing the epistemological and political foundations that have shaped—and continue to shape—the formulation of public policies and territorial planning instruments. On the other hand, it also examines concrete situations within the contemporary Brazilian context, through which recurring patterns, emerging innovations, and persistent challenges in the practice of territorial planning are identified. Thus, logical argumentation operates as a methodological framework that enables an organic articulation between theoretical analysis, historical critique, and empirical evidence, thereby supporting the construction of a perspective on planning in Brazil that is at once reflexive and forward-looking.

Among the elements highlighted by Groat and Wang (2002), particular emphasis is placed on the formulation of a priori arguments in relation to the topic addressed. From the central argument, the foundations that underpin the explanatory construction of the narrative are delineated, establishing a trajectory in a previously structured framework of thought. This foundation guides the development of an argumentative system oriented toward the production of new explanatory insights and the reinterpretation of established phenomena. The authors further emphasize that this form of argumentation transcends disciplinary boundaries by engaging connections forged through conceptual articulations, thereby fostering the expansion and increasing complexity of the object under investigation. Within this framework, territorial planning—here adopted as the analytical focus—is interpreted as a field in crisis, particularly given the advance of neoliberalism, which undermines its systemic character within the political arrangements in which it is embedded.

The search for alternative paths, in this context, extends beyond identifying the shortcomings of current planning practices—increasingly entangled in asymmetrical disputes—to incorporate contributions from other fields of knowledge, such as planning theory and geography. These contributions foreground dimensions that remain underexplored in contemporary theory, such as the question of interscalarity. It is therefore assumed that confronting neoliberal logics requires attention to their effects and mechanisms across multiple scales of action.

To develop the proposed analysis, the article is organized into four main sections. The first examines the trajectories of urban and regional planning in Brazil, highlighting key disputes and historical cycles. The second section discusses contemporary planning theories and their critiques. The third explores the interscalarity in the production of space, while the fourth offers a methodological reflection on the place of planning, taking scale as an analytical lens. The article concludes by synthesizing the main arguments and outlining possible avenues for further development.

1. Trajectories of urban and regional planning in Brazil: disputes and cycles

Since the early decades of the twentieth century, urban (Villaça, 2010) and regional (Tavares, 2021) planning has played a significant role in shaping the national territory through successive cycles linked to (geo)political, economic, and cultural forces. The Vargas periods (1930–1945 and 1951–1954), for example, promoted initiatives such as the “March to the West” (1938), the establishment of State-led agricultural colonies across different regions of the country, the Roncador-Xingu Expedition (1943), the creation of the Fundação Brasil Central (1943), and

the expansion of a road network that progressively replaced the railway system (Ricardo, 1970; Maciel, 2006), thereby configuring a new regionalized territorial structure.

The intensification of relations between Brazil and the United States, especially following the Washington Agreements of 1942, facilitated the incorporation of North American technical knowledge into various areas of national planning. Notable examples include the Cooke (1942) and Abbink (1949) Missions, which introduced structured proposals for the integrated management of river basins and their multiple uses (Chiquito, 2017). This approach came to inform public policies aimed at territorial development, consolidating the notion that territory could—and should—be systematically incorporated into planning in order to address multiple dimensions of development. The dissemination of developmentalist thinking in Latin America by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in the 1950s further consolidated this moment of mobilization toward economic modernization and industrialization. The transfer of the federal capital in 1960 stands as a paradigmatic example of these efforts which, as interior-oriented development strategies mobilized economic sectors in an urban–regional synthesis of the development project envisioned at the time.

These assumptions were gradually subsumed under the notion of national sovereignty, a process intensified during a new cycle characterized by the civil–military government (1964–1985). This period was characterized by the concentration of decision-making and investment at the regional level through new development superintendencies, including the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA; National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform), the Serviço Federal de Habitação e Urbanismo (SERFHAU; Federal Service for Housing and Urbanism), and later the Conselho Nacional de Planejamento Urbano (CNPUR; National Council for Urban Planning). Among other functions, these bodies directed the implementation of public policies for regional and urban development, with particular emphasis on metropolitan areas, development hubs, and major infrastructure projects in transportation, communications, and energy generation—such as the Trans-Amazonian Highway, the Cuiabá–Santarém Highway and Northern Perimeter Road; the Rio–Niterói Bridge; and hydroelectric plants such as Itaipu, Tucuruí, Itaparica, and Sobradinho, among others.

This period solidified an understanding of planning that moved between administrative, technical, and bureaucratic orientations. Although defining or conceptualizing planning across such an extended temporal span is challenging, it is possible to identify key institutions and agents that shaped or articulated these orientations, exerting a strong influence on both practices and the urbanization process.

With the publication of the Charter of the Andes in 1960, the Centro Interamericano de Vivienda y Planeamiento (CINVA; Inter-American Center for Housing and Planning) advocated planning as a rational process of organization and foresight, aimed at optimizing resources—especially in the territorial domain—across multiple scales: regional, metropolitan, and urban, under the leadership of the State (Cinva, 1960). In this context, professionals from architecture, engineering, sociology, law, and economics advanced physical–territorial planning as a doctrine grounded in the formulation of comprehensive plans, integrated through sectoral plans focused on industrial and agricultural development, infrastructure (transport and energy), housing, education, and public health, with impacts spanning regional, state, and municipal levels (IAB; Serfhau, 1966). These guidelines were implemented through the widespread formulation of Integrated Development Master Plans.

The military technobureaucracy, in turn, appropriated this logic by incorporating the hierarchy of administrative levels as an instrument for the diffusion of centralized decision-making (Ministério do Planejamento e Coordenação Econômica, 1967), directing investments primarily toward urban poles and metropolitan areas. This process consolidated a pattern of territorial dynamics—both economic and demographic—across all macro-regions of the country.

During Brazil’s process of redemocratization, new rounds of planning were initiated by social and class movements, as well as by progressive municipal administrations, marking the beginning of a new cycle. These initiatives were driven by provisions provided by the 1988 Federal Constitution, which, among other definitions, reinforced the decentralized and non-hierarchical role of planning, consolidating a new municipalism as a means to support a fragile horizontal federal pact—though one marked by asymmetries in fiscal capacity and resource allocation. Urban interventions and infrastructure works in favelas, communities, and informal settlements emerged as innovative public policies in the 1990s, including new participatory decision-making models, such as the Participatory Budgeting of Porto Alegre, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the City Statute (Brazil, 2001) emerged as the main landmark of democratic urban policy, reviving the principles and values of the Urban Reform Movement that originated in 1963. However, by being enacted extemporaneously, it offered solutions to pressing urban problems—particularly in larger cities and metropolitan areas—without effectively reversing the neoliberal logic established during redemocratization (Oliveira; Nicolini, 2024; Capasso; Pequeno, 2021). The revised municipalist movement assigned local governments a

more active role in the development and regulation of the increasingly financialized real estate market, while metropolitan realities continued to suffer from a lack of effective strategies to address structural problems, which had evolved considerably since the pioneering institutionalization of planning in the 1960s and 1970s.

At the regional level, the national policy of the Eixos Nacionais de Integração e Desenvolvimento (ENID; National Axes of Integration and Development) of 1996 influenced the Eixos de Integração e Desenvolvimento (EID; Axes of Integration and Development) across South America from 2000 onward, expanding geopolitical disputes; both policies became benchmarks for implementing neoliberal strategies at a continental scale. They were subsequently followed by initiatives promoting local productive arrangements, the modernization of logistical infrastructure to serve commodity markets, as well as concessions in rail, port, and airport sectors and broader infrastructure privatization. This period witnessed a proliferation of regulations, policies, plans, programs, and territorial actions—including Economic–Ecological Zoning (since 2002), the National Policy for Regional Development (since 2003), the National Program for Sustainable Development of Rural Territories (2003), the Citizenship Territories Program (2008), municipal master plans (since 2003), and integrated urban development plans (since 2015)—yet these initiatives were often overlapping, disconnected, and at times even contradictory.

Although the praxis of planning in Latin America—and particularly in Brazil during the second half of the twentieth century—was characterized by a dynamic formation of a technical corps committed to transforming territorial realities, its implementation occurred within a context dominated by the centralization of power and authority. This centralism, even when underpinned by formalized plans and strategies, tended to preserve the prevailing socio-territorial structure, neutralizing the socio-territorial contradictions that permeate the continent.

The conception of territorial planning promoted by the professional field consolidated during this period bears a close affinity with the structuring that took place within the European welfare state under the postwar social-democratic regime, whose origins trace back to the Weimar Republic in Germany (Ferreira, 2022). In Latin America, and particularly in Brazil, however, the replacement of this model by autocratic and/or authoritarian regimes intensified the instrumentalization of planning as a tool of political power for the elites.

Departing from utopian ideals, much of the planning experience in this context was grounded in the construction and dissemination of ideologies that, as a primary form of domination, transformed technical formulations into vehicles for advancing agendas only loosely aligned with concrete reformist actions (Vilaça, 2010). This ideological framework, frequently referred to as “modern myths”, unfolded in narratives such as the myth of development, of transparency,

and of State governance. The utopian normativity underpinning planning was thus subordinated to the exaltation of these myths, silencing social conflicts and struggles for socio-spatial justice (Limonad, 2021).

In this context, planning agents committed to social change and a corresponding political ethic encountered significant limitations, particularly in light of the resistance and pushback from interests opposed to advances in processes that promoted social justice. These conditions constrained the dissemination of a rational argument capable of sustaining such transformations (Souza, 2008).

This scenario illustrates cycles of transformation and the emerging complexities of planning in response to fluctuations in economic and political regimes, as well as exogenous interferences—particularly due to the dilution of a structure formulated roughly a century ago confronted by new agents, actors, and institutions at regional, national, and global scales competing over planning. Agendas incorporating social and environmental justice, intersectionalities, or socio-technical transitions appear to signal the emergence of a new cycle— one also guided by debureaucratization or soft policies, initiatives arising in response to the conceptual weakening of the urban and regional spheres.

2. Contemporary Theories and Critiques of Planning

Planning practices in Brazil were aligned with the principles developed within the international theoretical field of State-led policies in Western countries (Hall, 2016). The so-called “comprehensive planning” gained prominence in the first decade of the twentieth century in Europe with the creation of associations affiliated with the ideas of the British garden city movement. The International Federation for Town and Country Planning and Garden Cities, founded in 1924, and the Federation for Housing and Town Planning, established in 1926, both sought to balance rural and urban areas through planning. The “comprehensiveness” of initiatives in this context lay, on the one hand, in the breadth of the issues addressed—including aesthetic concerns, hygiene, climatic, economic, and sociopolitical problems—and, on the other hand, in the multiple scales of approach, from regional to urban, which integrated themes related to transportation, housing, and work (Domhardt, 2012).

In the United States, the formation of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) in the 1920s also applied a comprehensive framework to urban and regional planning theory and practice, particularly by recognizing that territorial infrastructure was primarily a planning issue. It may be argued that the exchange of knowledge between European urbanists—such as the Scottish Patrick Geddes (1854–1932) and the German Martin Wagner (1885–1957)—generated an urban praxis that revived the European regionalist tradition in new forms within the activities of the RPAA (Ciucci et al., 1975).

Originating in Latin America and Brazil, these frameworks spread during the first half of the twentieth century in the practice of planning cities and regions (Gorelik, 2022). In the 1960s, formulations directed exclusively on planning theory gained prominence. At that time, it was posited that the physical environment was an important determinant of social behavior, directly contributing to individual well-being—a notion that elicited more incisive responses from theorists advocating the systemic and relational aspects between the physical environment and all other intrinsic social and economic dimensions (Webber, 1973; Friedmann, 1973). Thus, the so-called systemic character of planning was theoretically consolidated, conceived as a structured process governed by specific interdependent relationships among its components, whose articulation aimed to achieve predefined objectives (Carvalho, 1976).

The development of regional planning in the 1950s and 1960s was also conditioned by this understanding of systemic character, exemplified in theories such as the Prismatic Theory in Public Administration (1969), proposed by the American academic Annmarie Hauck Walsh (1938–2007), which reinforced the debate between centralization and decentralization. According to this theory, government structures influenced the outcomes of implemented actions and could be conceptualized as a prism, refracting political forces operating within a multidirectional system (Aydos, 1978). By the 1970s, the proliferation of planning experiences and critiques of systemic ideal abstraction converged toward the construction of alternative approaches (Altshuler, 1973), such as the Disjointed Incrementalism Theory proposed by the American economist Charles E. Lindblom (1917–2018).

It is important to note that the systemic perspective was aligned with the directions established by the growth paradigm and the broader developmental apparatus inspired by Keynesian thought, which emphasized the leading role of the State in guiding planning policies (Azan, 2019). In the 1970s, the profound reconfiguration of the global economy—marked by the oil crisis, the dissolution of the Bretton Woods Agreement, fiscal crises of the State, and the emerging demands for social and political adjustments in opposition to the Keynesian paradigm—led to the role of the State being redefined. More broadly, these transformations revealed the collapse of the prevailing economic growth model (Harvey, 1994).

The neoliberal agenda, which emerged as a capitalist alternative in response to the crisis of intensive social-democratic development, not only highlighted the impossibility of reconciling economic growth with reductions in inequalities between the Global North and South, but also represented a decisive market-driven reaction aimed at maintaining capitalism as the primary regulator of the

global economy. The structural elements of planning as a method were weakened, as emphasis shifted from the “whole” to the “parts” within organizational thought. Propositions migrated from a systemic perspective to an incremental approach, and the territory came to be treated through fragmented actions—both public and private—characterized by dispersed tactics and locational privileges.

As a mechanism for circulating and reproducing capital, planning increasingly bypassed the intrinsic stages of the systemic process, focusing instead on the reproductive cycle in response to the crises in industrial production. Simultaneously, from the 1980s onward, the rise of neoliberalism reconfigured the role of the State, detaching it from territorial regulation and prioritizing the flow of capital. This shift enabled urban space to be incorporated into capital circuits, thereby increasing the importance of cities in the expansion of global capitalism and inverting the role of planning as a constituent element of postwar social democracy (Dardot; Laval, 2016; Mészáros, 2007; Sassen, 1998). The so-called “strategic” or “market-oriented” planning—particularly in its Catalan variant—consolidated the articulation between the State and private capital as a hegemonic approach. At the same time, critiques of more “traditional” planning models grounded in normative and bureaucratic frameworks intensified. These critiques reinforced the concerns of several progressive actors regarding authoritarian traditions—especially in Brazil—and the multiple, complex dimensions of low-social-capillarity approaches in the international field. Even the more innovative initiatives remained tethered to the hegemonic economic system (Fainstein; Campbell, 2012) and were largely rejected as a paradigm for potential planning reform. Since the development of the Theory of Communicative Action (1981) by the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1929–2026), which provided resources for more collaborative planning, emerging movements have gradually gained prominence within planning spheres.

Thus, advocacy planning directed its efforts toward lower-income and peripheral social groups, guided by socially-oriented interests, while simultaneously acting as a mediator between vulnerable groups and State and market agents within negotiated processes. Over time, subversive, differential, and counter-planning practices also emerged, seeking to reinterpret—or even to propose—critical perspectives on urban planning, particularly with regard to its structural function linked to the state apparatus (Randolph, 2016).

Since then, this third strand of planning has expanded in tandem with emerging movements, centered on so-called grassroots plans or those grounded in specific cartographies (Deleuze; Guattari, 2006). These initiatives proliferated from community-based and territorially embedded foundations, articulated

through local networks and situated knowledge. Unlike traditional institutional approaches—whether technocratic or progressive—this strand has been constituted in explicit contestation of the State, often adopting a stance of disengagement from formal decision-making arenas, as if political choices could be enacted outside State structures. This dissociation, however, has proven particularly fraught in the current context of deepening ultraneoliberalism and totalitarianism, in which the dismantling of public policies has heightened the vulnerability of peripheral territories.

In light of recent critiques and the recognition of new social actors, it may be argued that planning has become increasingly fragmented and weakened, often detached from concrete territorial realities, even as it continues to draw upon them for predominantly operational or identity-based purposes. Within this new configuration, territory is no longer understood as an end in itself and is instead instrumentalized to serve dynamics external to the subjects who inhabit and produce it, while increasingly subsumed under the logics of productive restructuring.

3. Territory and the challenge of interscalarity in the contemporary production of space

The contemporary process of urbanization—increasingly accelerated and expansive—has exposed the erosion of interscalarity in planning. In a context of intensifying territorial complexity, the disconnection between planning scales has produced responses that are frequently contradictory and poorly attuned to local specificities, thereby facilitating decisions aligned with hegemonic interests. On the one hand, it may be argued that, over the course of the last century, planning was reconfigured and, as an autonomous discipline, has become detached from territory through its alignment with market-oriented strategies and corporate management (Vainer, 2009; Harvey, 1996). On the other hand, given the private, State, and community efforts to assume a leading role in both conventional and alternative practices and plans, planning has clearly remained a contested—and thus active—field.

A sectoral approach, as a recurring practice in urban planning, tends to manifest through targeted interventions addressing specific demands for housing and infrastructure. It is generally closely linked to public policies—whether mediated, or not, by private agents or the social sector—and has produced transversal effects across the various vectors of spatial production and organization. This intervention logic contributes both to the reconfiguration of central areas in intermediate and large cities and to the implementation of

projects in peripheral contexts, such as those aimed at basic sanitation and the improved housing conditions in communities, including those in situations of extreme marginalization (Matsunaga, 2021), often beyond the effective reach of market dynamics. Moreover, it has directly shaped patterns of urban expansion and dispersion, as reflected in the territorial outcomes of the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* [My Home, My Life] Program, particularly between 2009 and 2014.

The impacts of these actions are further intensified when examined through an environmental lens (Costa, 2000). The reassertion of river basins as a territorial unit of governance, the functional attribution of drainage to natural systems, struggles for the preservation of natural heritage, and conflicts over the exploitation of natural resources, among other factors, all point to themes that have augmented the environmental debate in planning. Illustrative cases include disputes in the *Quadrilátero Ferrífero-Aquífero*—a mineral- and water-rich region in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte—addressed through innovative planning approaches such as the Green-Blue Network (Freitas; Chiquito, 2022); the expansion of the agricultural frontier in the southern Amazon driven by processes of urbanization through new towns (Trevisan; Oliveira, 2024); and regulatory contradictions that encourage occupation in environmentally sensitive areas—such as coastal zones, dune systems, and the surroundings of natural lagoons, as observed in the Metropolitan Region of Natal (Silva; Dantas, 2023). These conflicts reinforce claims for environmental justice (Acselrad; Mello; Bezerra, 2008), both as a means of confronting inequalities and as recognition of the cultural—rather than exclusively utilitarian—dimensions of the environment.

Another challenge posed by contemporary urbanization concerns the structuring of territorial planning mechanisms in Brazilian municipalities with small populations (Stephan; Maria, 2015), which account for 68% of the country's 5,571 municipalities (2025) and 43.73% of its territorial area. Despite the condition of extensive urbanization (Monte-Mór, 2005), many of these municipalities have not been required to establish formal systems of territorial regulation and management, and limited institutional structure and administrative resources further weaken urban regulation and development in such localities (Lage; Bernardini, 2024). Rural space, which typically comprises the largest share of the area of these municipalities, when addressed at all, tends to be treated superficially, thereby perpetuating the urban-centric bias of planning (Maluf, 2004) or allowing for overly permissive approaches to extensive agricultural and livestock activities. Municipalities that remain outside the formal urban physical-spatial planning system—structured around the instrument of the master plan—ultimately become subject to an overlapping array of regulatory frameworks originating at higher

levels of governmental (state or federal), endowed with greater economic autonomy and broader regional reach.

Within this same framework, the overlapping of interests, powers, and historical-economic linkages becomes particularly evident. This dynamic may be clearly observed in cities such as Serra do Navio, in the Northern state of Amapá, where the intertwining of different temporalities and scales of governance—local, state, and national—reveals tensions between the exploitation of natural resources, territorial management, and the preservation of the built heritage (Araújo, 2010). Founded in the 1950s as a modern project oriented toward mining, Serra do Navio has undergone successive transformations involving multiple levels of governance, with overlapping public policies that often lack effective coordination. This case thus invites reflection on the impacts of this loss of coherence across planning scales, highlighting how the interaction of distinct temporalities and fragmented governance affects not only territorial management but also historical memory and the quality of life of local communities.

From the accumulation of regional functions historically attributed to cities—such as central place, growth and development poles, intermediate city—and from the strategic designation of regions for economic development, it is possible to highlight how specific territories acquire prominence within the urbanization process, particularly through the overlapping of urban and regional dynamics. The Brazil–Argentina–Paraguay Triple Frontier (Beloto, 2023), for example, illustrates the convergence of geopolitical dimensions closely tied to natural resources and Mercosur, while the expansion of agribusiness has repositioned the Central-West region and the entire urban network of new towns established from the 1940s onward (Trevisan, 2011) within the circuits of commodity production.

From another perspective, yet producing similar effects, the expansion of national education policies has promoted the transformation of inland cities into regional hubs through the establishment of federal institutes and universities. This process has been particularly pronounced in municipalities located in the Northeastern semi-arid region, such as Pau dos Ferros (RN), situated at the junction of the states of Rio Grande do Norte, Ceará, and Paraíba. The impacts of this regional role have directly affected the everyday lives of local populations, reshaping social and economic dynamics (Campos, 2020).

In this context, understanding territory can neither be limited to technical or economic parameters, nor reduced to forms of cultural or situational exclusivity. Rather, it requires—among other considerations—the recognition of the multiple scales, temporalities, and sociocultural dynamics that underpin the conflicts shaping Brazilian urbanization. Reinstating the centrality of territory as both

an analytical and political construct entails restoring the capacity of planning to engage with local complexities and to operate on the basis of regional realities. An integrated, intersectoral, and structural approach may thus reconstitute planning as a social practice committed to territorial justice, environmental sustainability, and the promotion of genuinely inclusive development.

4. What is the place of planning? The question of scale as a possible methodological strategy

The trajectory of planning in Brazil reveals its impasses and challenges within a contradictory process marked by cycles of advances and setbacks. A critical theoretical perspective helps to elucidate the role of the State in planning throughout the twentieth century and how this role has shifted over recent decades. The multiple crises arising from the exhaustion of the capitalist system—most notably the climate crisis—combined with institutional and political instability and the constant risk of authoritarian regression, call for the reassertion of a systemic and structural view of territory. The practices discussed in the previous section also highlight the transversal character of the groupings—of actors, agents, themes, institutions, and so forth—that shape planning and which may be organized into several classes:

- governance: involving public, private, and hybrid arrangements;
- federal level: encompassing the federative entities—municipalities, states, and the Union;
- sectors: including social, cultural, environmental, economic, infrastructural, housing, and heritage dimensions;
- milieu: ranging from the natural to the metropolitan, including rural, rural-urban interface, peri-urban, and urbanized zones;
- concepts and categories: such as space, place, landscape, territory, urban, and rural;
- political-instrumental: expressed in plans, public policies, programs, and projects; and
- formal: relating to the urban and regional fabric, infrastructures, social structures, and spatial organization through centralities, sub-centralities, decentralization, and hierarchies.

In this context, the dimension of scale takes on a central role in apprehending the complexities that traverse the urban–regional planning process. By avoiding the instrumentalization of scale or the production of a form of scalar fetishism—or even scale-centrism (Brenner, 2019, p. 25)—these categories are understood to emerge, and at times to assert themselves, as a basis for rethinking planning.

Thus, a conceptual and operational reworking of the notion of “scale” is proposed within the scope of planning practices, moving beyond its conventional understanding as a merely hierarchical, cartographic, abstract, or comparative representation, and instead conceiving it as an analytical tool—a praxis, a relational standpoint, a social and political construction—capable of revealing the territorial realities shaped by the power structures that organize and hierarchize them. It is not, therefore, a matter of deploying scale as a normative device in planning, but rather of understanding it as the very terrain in which the conflicts that planning must confront are manifested. Hence, scale is approached as an interpretative prism through which reality may be refracted and recomposed from a critical and transformative perspective of planning, structured around five possible vertices: (i) scale as relation (Howitt, 1998); (ii) scale as viewpoint (Lepetit, 2016; Castro, 2000); (iii) scale as a critical and propositional agenda (Klink; Souza, 2018; Brenner, 2019); (iv) scale as a social construction (Marston, 2000); and (v) scale as analysis and practice (Brandão, 2018).

The starting point for reflecting on scale, according to the Australian geographer Richard Howitt, lies in its conception as relation. Although, within the geographical tradition, scale has been predominantly associated with notions of size (geographical scale) or hierarchical levels (such as systems organized across different territorial levels), Howitt proposed an expanded understanding by introducing scale as a relational metaphor. Accordingly, it should not be reduced to fixed or static units but rather understood as a network of complex and dialectical relations among different totalities—for example, the national scale, which articulates economic, cultural, social, and environmental dimensions and may extend beyond the boundaries of national territory. The focus of analysis thus shifts from isolated elements to the connections established between them—such as those linking a natural resource, its ecosystem, and the consumers of that resource across different contexts. Hence, for Howitt, scale should be recognized as an active process of constructing totalities, made possible precisely through the coexistence and articulation of multiple scales.

Subsequently, scale may be understood as the viewpoint adopted in approaching a given phenomenon, responsible for framing it either in terms of its general operating principles or its particularities. In this context, scale emerges as a methodological choice that guides engagement with the problem based on the level of information deemed appropriate for the organization of ideas, analyses, and plans, as argued by the French historian Bernard Lepetit (2016). When taken as a reference, it should not be reduced to mere representation, since it also conditions the perception and conception of reality. By its very nature, scale remains a

measure and may therefore be defined simultaneously by dimensional and phenomenological aspects, reflecting the inseparability of size and phenomenon, as emphasized by the geographer Iná Castro (2000). This definition encompasses processes governed by general and/or universal laws and those that emerge from the microcosm of communities, particular interests, and local specificities.

Scale, understood as a critical and propositional agenda for the formulation of State public policies, as discussed by the economists Jeroen Johannes Klink and Marcos Barcellos de Souza (2018), is grounded in the rescaling of the State in Brazil and the scalar transition initiated in the 1980s (Brenner, 2019). This rescaling is essential for understanding the emerging, diversified forms of interaction between different agents and the State. The proposal, however, rejects the idea of a single, totalizing explanation, challenging binary views such as global–local or global–national. This is because scalar and interscalar relations are, by their very nature, constantly reconfiguring. The focus thus shifts to the transformation of sectoral policies related to infrastructure and governance, which manifest through a range of processes—from corporate action to new network configurations. Infrastructure, as a financialized product, also reinforces power relations and mobilizes elites around these structures (Klink; Souza, 2018). Thus, the rescaling of the state and the transformations in public policies reveal the complexity and dynamism of interactions among diverse agents and scales, underscoring the need for more integrated planning that takes into account interscalar relations and local specificities, without reducing the phenomenon to a simplistic explanation.

Scale as a social construction, as proposed by the American geographer Sallie Marston (2000), enables an understanding of how tensions between structural forces and human practices dynamically shape scales in context-specific ways. Within this framework, scale is not merely a geometric or hierarchical concept, but a socially produced phenomenon in which elements such as capital, labour, the State, and relations of consumption and social reproduction constitute the primary domains of its construction. This process is closely linked to market agents, social leaderships, institutions, and political groups that compete over and negotiate power. Operating across different scales, these actors configure them in a multifaceted manner, within a broader supra-scalar horizon in which local and global interactions are intertwined, thereby revealing the intricacy of contemporary power relations. Scale thus emerges as a space of dispute and negotiation, continuously constructed and reconstructed in accordance with the interests and forces at play.

Lastly, scale as an analytical and practical method, as discussed by the economist Carlos Antônio Brandão (2018), emerges from the spatial dimension,

understood as a delineation of territory that enables the identification of the conditioning factors of social phenomena. It constitutes an interpretative lens through which socio-spatial processes can be apprehended. The scalar delineation, therefore, is not merely a spatial demarcation, but also a mechanism of control that underpins macro-level decisions and directly influences those at the micro level. In this context, according to Brandão, scales should be understood both as analytical planes and as spaces of transformative dispute. From our perspective, this is, fundamentally, the locus of planning.

Final remarks

Beyond the contours of its institutional configuration—profoundly shaped by external influences, economic cycles, and internal political disputes—a historical-critical examination of urban and regional planning in Brazil reveals the limitations of traditional paradigms in addressing the complexities of contemporary urbanization. The crisis of interscalarity, compounded by the sectoral approach to public policies, the capture of participatory instruments by private interests, and the fragmentation of governance structures, challenges both the effectiveness and legitimacy of planning as a State practice for coordinating multiple, often conflicting territorial demands. The terminological variations that have marked its trajectory—initially “urban and regional planning,” and more recently “urban–regional planning” or “territorial planning”—reflect not only shifting emphases and approaches over time (as demonstrated in this article), as well as the conceptual and institutional instability accompanying transformations in the field.

Within this context, adopting scale as a central methodological strategy should not be seen merely as a conceptual redefinition, but rather as an epistemological repositioning of planning itself. By treating scale as relation, viewpoint, a critical and propositional agenda, social construction, and an analytical and practical method, this framework proposes a prismatic model capable of apprehending multiple layers of the urban–regional territory and the power dynamics that traverse it. Hence, it seeks to shift the focus of planning away from normative, hierarchical, contestatory, or private logics toward a relational, innovative, and transformative approach to the public sphere.

Assuming the centrality of the scalar dimension entails recognizing that territorial processes are constituted through interscalar connections that not only inform planning decisions but also generate tensions, politicize them, and reconfigure them via bundles of diverse origins. In doing so, planning can be requalified as an ethical-political instrument capable of making conflicts visible, articulating actors, and fostering responses that are more coherent and grounded

in socio-spatial realities. Accordingly, approaching urban–regional planning through the lens of scale acknowledges its potential as a reflective and strategic practice. Repositioning it through territory, however, raises a new challenge: to position territory at the heart of planning.

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