

# Forms of urban change. Ongoing transformations and urban strategies in São Paulo

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*São Paulo, one of Brazil's most dynamic cities, embodies the contradictions of urban growth, where expansion and verticalisation are accompanied by rising inequalities. Neoliberal economies foster wealth concentration and gated communities, while subsistence economies generate low-quality, service-poor urban fabrics. These transformations affect both the material dimension of the city and the ways it is lived and imagined. Mooca, a semi-central district with a strong historical identity, offers a laboratory for observing different forms of change: rewritings, emptyings, and adaptations. Each highlights challenges and dilemmas of planning that the 2014 Strategic Master Plan only partially addressed, pointing to the need for new directions in urban governance.*

Parole chiave: São Paulo; urban change; urban planning

## Forme del mutamento urbano. Trasformazioni in corso e strategie urbane a San Paolo

*San Paolo, una delle città più dinamiche del Brasile, incarna le contraddizioni della crescita urbana, in cui espansione e verticalizzazione si accompagnano all'aumento delle disuguaglianze. Le economie neoliberiste alimentano concentrazione di ricchezza e gated communities, mentre quelle di sussistenza diffondono tessuti poveri di qualità e servizi. Questi mutamenti investono sia la dimensione materiale della città sia i modi di viverla e immaginarla. Mooca, quartiere semicentrale con forte identità storica, costituisce un laboratorio in cui osservare diverse forme di cambiamento: riscritture, svuotamenti e adattamenti. Ciascuna mostra sfide e dilemmi della pianificazione che il Piano Strategico del 2014 ha solo parzialmente affrontato, indicando la necessità di nuove direzioni di lavoro.*

Keywords: San Paolo; cambiamento urbano; trasformazione urbana

São Paulo is one of Brazil's most economically dynamic cities, marked by profound contradictions whereby urban growth often corresponds to rising economic and social inequalities and polarisation (Bhering, 2024; Gómez-Lobo, Dammert, De La Cruz, 2025). Urban change is also visible in the processes of expansion of the built fabric and the verticalization of the skyline, which, in recent decades, have altered the city's extent and appearance. On the one hand, neoliberal economies drive the concentration of wealth and the construction of increasingly fortified gated communities (Caldeira, 2000; França Neto, 2010); on the other, subsistence economies foster the spread of favelas and, more generally, an urban fabric lacking in quality and almost devoid of services<sup>1</sup>. The urban change is evident both in the material and physical dimensions of the city. It is visible in the ways the city is inhabited, and in the ways its services and public spaces are used and conceived. Gentrification, social displacement, and radical changes in living, working, and consumption embody these transformations. And, in a circular manner, they modify urban spaces, affecting the meaning of urban spaces themselves. Mooca is a semi-central district, its identity is deeply rooted in the history of the twentieth-century immigration from Europe and Italy, still recognizable in its buildings and traditions, and is an interesting laboratory for observing the forms of urban change. The opportunity for study and direct observation provided by the POLIMI-FAUUSP workshop<sup>2</sup>, from which this contribution originates, enables two operations: first, to recognise different forms of urban change in specific recurrent and emblematic situations in the district, showing the nexus between spaces, uses, populations and processes of transformation; second, to reflect on how these forms of change have been or have not been intercepted and/or assumed as objectives by the principal planning instrument of the city of São Paulo (the 2014 *Plano Diretor Estratégico* and its 2023 revision), thereby highlighting several key issues for the governance of the city.

## The *Plano Diretor Estratégico* 2014: critical themes, objectives achieved, and unmet

São Paulo, founded in 1554, became an urban phenomenon and a megacity only in the twentieth century, growing from 239,000 inhabitants in 1900 to 10 million in 2000, to almost 12 million inhabitants today (20.7 million in the metropolitan area). This vertiginous growth occurred within a short period, in a country marked by significant political instability. At the city scale,

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several plans have sought to regulate land use, urban growth, and its ‘verticalization’: from the *Plano de Avenidas*, developed in 1930 by Francisco Prestes Maia, to the 1968 *Plano Urbanístico Básico* (Base Urban Plan), which first addressed growth at the metropolitan scale, to the 2002 Regulatory Plan. With the new Brazilian Federal Legislation on cities in 2001, resulting from the 1988 Federal Constitution after the dictatorship, a new Master Plan was done. Its revision after 10 years brought to the 2014 *Plano Diretor Estratégico* (PDE) (whose review, in its turn, started in 2023).

The PDE was approved on 31 July 2014, and is regarded by many observers as a reference point for strategic planning (Anelli, 2018; Lobo, 2018; Back, Di Giulio, Malheiros, 2021). Such Strategic Plan outlined a perspective for the city to 2030, directing in particular urban growth and transformation to areas around public transport corridors called *Eixos de Estruturação da Transformação Urbana* (EETU). Several strategies substantiate the masterplan: the definition of volumetric incentives and land value capture instruments such as the so-called *Outorga Onerosa do Direito de Construir* (OODC), fundamental to feed the Urban Development Fund FUNDURB which financed public spaces and services; tools to secure a larger share of public housing, with the definition of the Special Zone of Social Interest (ZEIS) to promote the rehabilitation of precarious peripheral settlements or new social housing in central derelict areas; Transport Oriented Development policies in favour of public transport and urban growth around its nodes such as ‘active facades’ and incentives for local commerce; metropolitan-scale projects to develop decentralisation; policies aimed at dealing with environmental and heritage issues, establishing for example, Special Zones of Cultural Preservation (ZEPEC) trying to link planning tools with strategies to finance policies. Other strategies were aimed to broaden the participatory dimension in terms of transparency and information.

The gap between the principles declared and the measures actually developed (through tools as *Operações Urbanas Consorciadas*), however, is wide, and the assessment of the implementation is marked by light and shade. Indeed, alongside a substantial reorientation of urban growth along public transport’s corridors, increased revenues from land value capture, and reforms of parking, the results of the Strategic Plan, in terms of social inclusion and participation have been controversial (da Cruz, Marins, de Castro, 2019; Silva, Borges, 2019), as confirmed by the technicians with whom we discussed during the workshop<sup>3</sup>. Land value capture did not reduce development: on the contrary, additional Floor Area increased in the initial years of the Plan’s implementation (Leite *et al.*, 2023), and strong densification occurred, albeit unevenly distributed across districts (Santoro *et al.*, 2023).

Interventions in public space and mobility linked to major transformation processes fell short of expectations. Affordable housing production also remained limited within the transformation axes (EETU), with only modest use of the *Cota de Solidariedade* – the mechanism designed to deliver on-site public services and housing units as part of large urban transformation processes (Silva, Borges, 2019). Instead, obligations were largely monetised through deposits into FUNDURB (Prefeitura do Município de São Paulo, 2022). Thus, despite strong urban development, the very mechanisms intended to curb growing inequalities, foster

integrated projects, and finance services proved the least effective. Ultimately, the inclusive outcomes envisaged – particularly along the corridors – have remained weak and of limited impact (Nobre, 2023; Centro de Estudos da Metrópole, 2021).

Despite the intermediate review of the PDE (Law 17.975/2023), which redefined several aspects – such as the areas of influence of the EETU (referred to in the Zoning Law as ZEU, Zone of Urban Structuring) – critical issues persist. These concern, in particular, the uncontrolled effects of urban growth and ‘verticalisation’ outside the ZEU areas, the limited effectiveness of value-capture mechanisms for social housing, and the restricted scope of FUNDURB, often directed towards ordinary maintenance rather than socially oriented projects. Several of these issues are also evident in the Mooca district, where the POLIMI-FAUUSP workshop applied.

### Mooca: the district and the objectives of the plan

Mooca is a sub-prefecture situated in a semi-central area of the Paulista metropolis, within the bairros of Tamanduateí, which experienced pronounced demographic and industrial growth between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. The district’s expansion in the early 1920s was fuelled by European immigration, particularly from Italy, leaving enduring material and immaterial legacies. These include traditions rooted in southern Italian religious festivals, manufacturing enterprises of Italian origin such as the *Cotonifício Rodolfo Crespi*, architectural styles reflecting Italian influence, and the local football team, significantly named Juventus.

Mooca records medium-to-high sociodemographic indicators compared with the city average. It is a dense district, accommodating 3.1% of São Paulo’s population at above-average density, though it is also ageing, with 17.7% of residents over 60 (against 11.9% citywide). Socioeconomic conditions are relatively favourable: the Human Development Index is high (0.869), income levels and longevity are above the municipal mean, and vulnerability is low. The district hosts almost 7% of São Paulo’s formal jobs (about 296,000 posts), while 70% of workers earn between one and three minimum wages. Education and housing conditions are likewise better than the city average (Prefeitura do Município de São Paulo, 2016). The district thus concentrates significant economic, cultural, and social resources, while also exhibiting various transformation processes linked to the presence of disused or underutilised buildings and areas. Observed through the lens of urban dynamics, the district stands between two conditions: a city becoming increasingly vertical, zoned, gated, segregated, wealthier than average yet (falsely) preserved; and a city of ‘resistance’, where diverse functions, spaces of exchange, relational proximity, and memory reshape the urban fabric without necessarily preserving it, generating complexity and contradictions.

In planning terms, Mooca is included in the Strategic Plan’s *Operação Urbana Consorciada Bairros do Tamanduateí* (OUCBT), which covers industrial sites with high transformation potential and railway areas of historical and cultural value. The instrument seeks to integrate economic development, social inclusion, and environmental regeneration by converting disused industrial areas into new integrated urban hubs. Its aims include expanding public and social services for vulnerable groups; stimulating commerce and services to foster commerce and



1. Mooca. New gated and secured residential complexes. Author's pictures.

local employment; preserving cultural and landscape heritage; addressing drainage and soil contamination; improving accessibility and mobility, particularly connections to railway and metro stations; and promoting housing and land regularisation in precarious settlements. To these ends, the operational guidelines aim to enhance social assistance services; improve the quality of public spaces and facilities (in particular the Clube Municipal Mooca); incentivise the 'active façade' of buildings with ground-floor commercial functions; expand green areas; upgrade access to stations and pedestrian/cycle routes; and ensure greater urban security also through street furniture and lighting. On the ground, however, some transformation dynamics appear to be moving in a direction contrary to that envisaged by the plan.

### Forms of change: rewriting, emptying, adapting

Mooca offers an instructive laboratory for observing forms of urban change. By this expression we refer to the ways in which the material and immaterial dimensions of the city evolve through a complex interplay of economic, social, and political dynamics (Harvey, 1989; Lefebvre, 1974; Secchi, 2013). Despite the specificities of the district, its history, and the broader Paulista context, here it is possible to identify distinct dynamics at different stages of development that also recur elsewhere, thereby shedding light on central issues to the urban governance. With a degree of simplification that is useful for typifying situations, three forms of change can be recognised in Mooca.

*Rewriting / tabula rasa.* This first mode entails the complete erasure of traces of the past and the construction of new buildings

and spaces, thereby producing new ways of inhabiting. It is a process in which spaces and uses are effectively 'overwritten'. In Mooca, it is evident in numerous cases where the old residential and industrial fabric has been demolished and replaced with gated communities of vertical buildings authorised by the PDE, including outside the designated development axes. Here, urban change unfolds through the replacement of inhabitants – typical of gentrification – and through volumetric densification, that gives form to a new city while reshaping its social components and relations. These interventions, highly introverted and mono-functional, radically transform the relationship with the street and the very meaning of adjoining public space, despite the policies promoting 'active façades' (Russi, in this issue) and the allocation of funds to socially oriented activities (fig. 1). Such operations are driven by large real-estate developers and accepted by public authorities even beyond designated densification areas, both to recover resources and under market pressures, with the result that original residents are progressively displaced.

*Emptying/Simulacra.* The second mode consists of attempts – often unconvincing in design terms – to preserve selected material traces of buildings or places, which are reduced to simulacra in the name of safeguarding memory. The risk, however, is that once uses are completely transformed, such traces are emptied of meaning (Ayik, Cantaluppi, Martinelli, in this issue). In Mooca, these cases primarily concern buildings of public or collective function. A telling example is the shopping centre inserted into the former *Cotonificio Crespi* factory, where only the façade has been retained: the envelope survives as a hollow simulacrum of the past, while function and use have been entirely replaced, as



2. Mooca. Refurbishment, internal transformations, and changes of use. Author's pictures.

with the preserved chimney that now merely recalls a vanished productive activity. Typically, such processes are driven by a single operator within a regulatory framework that imposes protective constraints yet often fails to engage with the context or its potential, resulting in the complete overwriting of uses. In these situations, preservation that is limited to the building fabric raises questions about the meaning of the intervention. This is not a new topic in built-heritage conservation, but it also challenges urban planning – regarding the significance of buildings in their specific contexts and historical relations – and design culture, where shortcomings in the quality of the interventions are frequently evident.

*Adaptations and insertions.* The third mode occurs through incremental adjustments to the urban fabric, where spaces and uses evolve in processes of mutual adaptation. In urban villages (Ince, Oldani, Xiangxiang, 2026), this is visible in the insertion of small shops at street corners or in the closure of courtyards for collective use. Such changes are often initiated by residents through self-build practices or by small operators embedding themselves in the existing fabric. The agents of change are thus multiple, closely tied to end users, and interventions remain modest in scale, involving building alterations or minor shifts in use. With minimal involvement of public authorities, these transformations gradually accumulate, producing new balances over time.

### **Dilemmas and critical issues for planning**

The most evident issues underlying the 2023 Plan review, as noted by observers, concern the excessive ‘verticalisation’; the growing ‘introversion’ of residential complexes, with its

consequences on ground floors and adjoining public spaces; the increasing shortage of social housing and services; and the weakness of related financing mechanisms. These criticalities are also evident in the transformations underway in Mooca.

The processes of rewriting, emptying, and adaptation, there observed, illustrate three modes through which the district is changing. They are forms of urban transformation that differ in the size, characteristics, and ownership regimes of the concerned areas; in the scale and nature of the interventions; in the interests, roles, and financial capacities of the involved actors (major developers, small property owners, and the public sector); and, consequently, in their impacts on the district and the city. Although distinct, these processes reveal several dilemmas and pressing challenges for urban planning. The 2014 Strategic Plan sought to address some of them, though not always successfully, as the dynamics unfolding in Mooca clearly confirm.

*Rewritings*, characterised by the demolition and replacement of existing fabric with vertical gated condominiums, are closely linked to the PDE’s strategy of promoting densification along the public transport corridors called *Eixos de Estruturação da Transformação Urbana* (EETU). While the plan aimed to foster integrated, mixed-use environments with ‘active façades’, in practice these interventions often produced introverted, mono-functional complexes that intensified gentrification and weakened street-level life. In this respect, the PDE not only failed to counter such dynamics but, by legitimising densification beyond the designated axes and relying on revenues from land value capture, indirectly reinforced them. The rewriting processes in Mooca therefore highlight the need for anti-gentrification policies, incentives for ground-floor commerce, support for productive activities which are compatible with residential use, and people-centred public space projects.



3. Mooca. Changes in the urban villages. Author's pictures.

*Emptyings*, which preserve building envelopes while radically altering functions, raise questions about heritage protection and the challenge of balancing transformation and conservation. The PDE introduced instruments such as the *Zonas Especiais de Preservação Cultural* (ZEPEC) to safeguard cultural heritage, yet in Mooca these measures often proved formalistic, limited to retaining façades while allowing a complete rewriting of functions. This exposes a gap between regulatory constraints and design quality, as well as the weak integration of conservation into broader strategies for urban vitality. It highlights the need for approaches that combine memory with contemporary uses—unlikely to emerge without a genuine community involvement and a design culture capable of reinterpreting and actualising, rather than banalising or freezing, the city's material testimonies. *Adaptations*, finally, represent incremental transformations often led by residents themselves through self-construction, small-scale commerce, or reconfiguration of collective spaces. Although the PDE promoted social inclusion instruments such as the *Zonas Especiais de Interesse Social* (ZEIS) and the *Cota de Solidariedade*, it did not sufficiently value these small-scale adaptive practices. Instead, emphasis was placed on large-scale *Operações Urbanas Consorciadas*, poorly suited to recognising or supporting the resilience of local actors. This points to the need for more flexible regulations and for fiscal and economic incentives: regulations and incentives aimed to sustain bottom-up processes which are capable of preserving not only the urban form, but also the social fabric that inhabits it.

The plan's strategies were innovative in setting objectives for densification, social housing, heritage, and participation. However, the discrepancies between these forms of change and the way the PDE has addressed them reveal that their implementation

has been weak. Their effectiveness will ultimately depend on whether the revised Strategic Plan can be effectively translated into operational tools.

The dynamics observed in Mooca – analysed through these three forms of change – thus underscore the plan's limitations: its difficulty in countering gentrification, avoiding superficial heritage protection, and in supporting incremental, community-led practices. Above all, they highlight the need for heterogeneous and integrated instruments capable of addressing spaces and uses simultaneously. The nexus between space and use in the production of the city is well known. The case of Mooca reiterates the importance of interventions that fully account for these interrelations. As well, it highlights the importance of operating – in both strategic and, above all, operational terms – in a more integrated manner, linking the building, architectural, and urban dimensions with the social, economic, and commercial ones, with greater awareness of their reciprocal influences.

## Notes

1. In the State of São Paulo there are more than 3,000 favelas, compared with 1,700 in the State of Rio de Janeiro, and many are located within the urban area. Population Census, National Institute of Statistics (IBGE), 2022.
2. The São Paulo workshop – Critical descriptions, urban strategies, and design proposals for Mooca District was developed within the PhD Program in Urban Planning and Policy Design (uppd) of the Politecnico di Milano (polimi), Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, in collaboration with the Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo da Universidade de São Paulo (fauusp), held between November 2023 and June 2024 (Bruzzeze, 2026).

3. Several technicians from the Prefeitura of São Paulo actively participated to the workshop: Beatriz Bruno Mendes, He Nem Kim Seo, Fernando Ken, Giulia Matteo, Thais Miuky Nagata, and Tania Cristina Filgueiras.

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