

# Macrometropolitan dynamics in medium-sized cities: analysis of urban expansion in Atibaia/SP

## Dinâmicas macrometropolitanas em cidades de médio porte: análise da expansão em Atibaia/SP

## Dinámicas macrometropolitanas en ciudades de tamaño medio: análisis de la expansión urbana en Atibaia/SP

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**To cite this paper:** PROENÇA, A.; CARRILHO, M. Macrometropolitan dynamics in medium-sized cities: analysis of urban expansion in Atibaia/SP. *Cadernos de Pós-Graduação em Arquitetura e Urbanismo*, São Paulo, v. 25, n. 2, p. 50-65, 2025.  
DOI 10.5935/cadernosp.25n2p50-65

**Submitted:** 2025-03-24

**Accepted:** 2025-05-08



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## Abstract

This work analyzes the recent urban expansion in Atibaia/SP, understood as a medium-sized city within the context of the city-region paradigm of the São Paulo Macrometropolis. Based on the understanding of Atibaia's role as one of the main destinations for rural and natural tourism and, consequently, of the real estate market for second homes in Macrometropolis, a morphological analysis was produced on the growth of the city's urban fabric between the 2000s and 2020s. The methodology of the work was based on the interpretation of temporal aerial images in the indicated period, from which quantitative and qualitative data on the city's urban expansion were extracted, as well as on the survey of demographic and income data of the population. The results of the research indicated a growth in the urbanized area much greater than that of the resident population in the city during this period, in addition to a preponderance of the typologies of high-income subdivisions and gated communities aimed at high-income individuals. In this way, this work intends to contribute to the critical urban and regional studies of urban sprawl, segregated, monofunctional and private urbanization, which compromises natural remnants and areas of traditional rural production for the expansion of urban centers of little socio-spatial relevance.

**Keywords:** Atibaia; Gated communities; City-region; São Paulo Macrometropolis; Urban sprawling.

## Resumo

Este trabalho analisa a expansão urbana de Atibaia/SP tendo como referencial a inserção de uma cidade de médio porte no contexto de especialização socioeconômica própria ao paradigma de cidade-região da Macrometrópole Paulista. Tem como objetivo central compreender como as dinâmicas territoriais em escala macrometropolitana impactam na expansão do tecido urbano recente da cidade. A partir da compreensão do papel de Atibaia como um dos principais destinos de turismo rural e natural e, consequentemente de atuação do mercado imobiliário macrometropolitano de segundas residências, produziu-se uma análise morfológica sobre o crescimento do tecido urbano do município entre as décadas de 2000 e 2020. A metodologia do trabalho baseou-se na interpretação de imagens aéreas temporais no período indicado, a partir da qual se extraíram dados quantitativos e qualitativos da expansão urbana na cidade, bem como no levantamento de dados demográficos e de renda da população. Os resultados da pesquisa indicaram um crescimento de área urbanizada muito maior do que a da população residente no município neste período, além de uma preponderância das tipologias de loteamentos e condomínios fechados de alta renda destinados a um público de alto poder aquisitivo. Desta forma, contribui com os estudos urbanos e regionais críticos à urbanização espacialmente espraiada, segregada, monofuncional e privativa, que compromete remanescentes naturais e áreas de produção rural tradicional para a expansão de núcleos urbanos de pouca relevância socioespacial.

**Palavras-chave:** Atibaia; Condomínios fechados; Cidade-região; Macrometrópole Paulista; Urbanização dispersa e fragmentada.

## Resumen

Este artículo analiza la reciente expansión urbana en Atibaia/SP, entendida como una ciudad de tamaño medio inserta en el contexto del paradigma de ciudad-región de la Macrometrópolis Paulista. A partir de la comprensión del papel de Atibaia como uno de los principales destinos del turismo rural y natural y, en consecuencia, del mercado inmobiliario macrometropolitano de segundas residencias, se produjo un análisis morfológico sobre el crecimiento del tejido urbano del municipio entre las décadas de 2000 y 2020. La metodología del trabajo se basó en la interpretación de imágenes aéreas temporales en el período indicado, de las cuales se extrajeron datos cuantitativos y cualitativos sobre la expansión urbana en la ciudad, así como en el levantamiento de datos demográficos y de renta de la población. Los resultados de la investigación indicaron un crecimiento del área urbanizada mucho más grande al de la población residente en el municipio durante este periodo, además de una preponderancia de tipos urbanos condominales cerrados y dirigidos a la población de altos ingresos. De esta manera, este trabajo contribuye a los estudios urbanos y regionales críticos a la urbanización espacialmente dispersa, segregada, monofuncional y privada, que compromete remanentes naturales y áreas de producción rural tradicional para la expansión de centros urbanos de poca relevancia socioespacial.

**Palabras clave:** Atibaia; Urbanizaciones cerradas; Ciudad-región; Macrometrópolis Paulista; Urbanización dispersa y fragmentada.

## INTRODUCTION

**S**ince the mid-20th century, a paradigm shift has been observed in Latin American urbanization, marked by dispersed and fragmented urban growth characterized by the expansion of urban areas across the regional space through low-density morphologies (Guevara, 2015; Martner, 2014; Moura, 2012). However, this prevailing trend of territorial unification and homogenization, resulting from the deepening of the current stage of globalization, does not generate a "de-regionalized territory"; on the contrary, it further exacerbates traditional regional inequalities by inducing economic concentration in specific areas of the territory that, in general, have historically commanded the territorial process of economic expansion (Haesbaert, 2010).

These trends in urban territorial organization were accompanied by conceptual changes in urban and regional planning which, in the case of São Paulo, represented a shift from a territorial vision centered on regional development poles (Cordovil & Cestaro, 2016) to the creation of the *Macrometrópole Paulista* (MMP). This territory is characterized by intense spatial interactions among different metropolitan regions, urban agglomerations, and smaller cities, and appeared to be more aligned with the neoliberal economic policies that were beginning to take effect at the time. Within this new paradigm, there is a noticeable process of concentration of technological and scientific development



in areas whose infrastructures are more directly linked to the production chain—whether in places where productive structures are concentrated or along the main circulation axes of goods. In this context, a “winning region” is configured, reinforcing socio-spatial segregation in relation to the portions more distant from this metropolitan logistics (Tavares, 2020).

The concept of the MMP therefore sought to acknowledge and establish a framework of territorial planning for an area characterized by both physical and functional conurbation among different metropolitan regions, urban agglomerations, and micro-regions. It is important to emphasize that the MMP does not constitute a “larger metropolis,” but rather a new form of territorial organization based on the intensification of interrelations between cities and regions of different sizes and socioeconomic profiles (Lencioni, 2004). According to the definition of the now-defunct state regional planning institute, *Emplasa*, the MMP was conceived “not only as a physical-spatial, geographic, or economic entity, but also as a geopolitical construction, insofar as it constitutes a territory whose configuration is based on technical criteria and concepts incorporated by the State government” (Emplasa, 2015, p. 22).

In this context, systems of flows and circulation infrastructures gained prominence as key elements in the spatial organization of this urban-regional network, simultaneously integrating and specializing cities and regions with different social, economic, and cultural characteristics and vocations. Even small and medium-sized cities that are not physically conurbated with their neighbors began to play a role in the macrometropolitan framework, expressed in activities such as cultural or nature-based tourism, for example, technological agricultural industry, or the growth of second-home settlements (Proença and Santos Jr., 2019).

One of the main particularities observed in the macrometropolitan context is a notable increase in population migration dynamics at the inter-regional scale—between the different regions of the São Paulo Macrometropolis (SPMM)—surpassing the traditional internal migrations within metropolitan regions and urban agglomerations, typically from the center to the periphery of the same region. For Pasternak and Bogus (2019), the increase in migration between the regions of the macrometropolis was related to the search for lower land prices, locations more accessible in relation to regional transportation, and the ease of access to consumption centers, services, and leisure. This trend represents an increase in commuting between the regions that compose the macrometropolis, which in turn highlights the dynamism of municipalities of varied sizes and socioeconomic profiles.

One phenomenon associated with this scenario is the heating of the land and real estate market with a metropolitan profile in small and medium-sized cities, even those not directly included within the boundaries of a metropolitan region. This urban production tends to reproduce morphological patterns and constructive typologies typical of the metropolis, targeting both a public seeking weekend



second homes and those looking for a more “serene” urban context, yet with easy access to the services and jobs offered by the macrometropolis.

As noted by Arrais (2014), in recent decades there has been exponential growth in the real estate market for second homes in several of the country's metropolises, with particular emphasis on the São Paulo Metropolitan Region and its surroundings. The author also discusses the negative effects of this process, which exclusively serve the economic interests of real estate agents. A trend toward spatial and cultural fragmentation can also be observed in the small and medium-sized municipalities targeted by this real estate speculation, resulting in an exponential increase in the value of land, housing, and services, far beyond the socioeconomic reality of the local population (Arrais, 2014).

In smaller cities within the macrometropolitan context, rural or natural environments and landscapes are appropriated by the market for the development of small-farm subdivisions (*loteamentos de chácaras*) and large-scale gated communities, highly burdensome for public authorities and destined to house very few people. The role of the State is central in legitimizing this model of urbanization, especially through the uncontrolled expansion of the urban perimeter in order to stimulate real estate investments in new fronts of urban expansion (Bernardini, 2014). This reinforces a model of sprawled and dispersed city, with high costs of installing and managing infrastructure and public services, as well as low quality and underutilization of urban public spaces (Leonelli et al., 2019).

To analyze the impacts and relationships of this recent urban expansion of dispersed and fragmented settlements, linked to a typically macrometropolitan socioeconomic dynamic, a historical survey of the urban sprawl of Atibaia was carried out, based on primary data provided by the municipal government and the state government, as well as studies conducted by other authors on the city's urban history. Urban morphology methodologies were employed to identify the main elements driving expansion and to classify the typologies of urban occupation according to density and form of occupation (traditional subdivisions or gated communities). This analysis also included surveys of commercial products from real estate agents and tourism promoters to better understand the nature of the identified urban settlements. Additionally, census data from 2010 and 2022 on demographics and income were used, which, when cross-referenced with morphological classification, allowed for an analysis of urbanization trends in the city.

## HISTORICAL AND URBAN CHARACTERIZATION OF ATIBAIA/SP

The municipality of Atibaia currently has 158,647 inhabitants (IBGE, 2022) and is located in the interior of the state of São Paulo, 67 km from São Paulo, 60 km from Campinas, 90 km from São José dos Campos, 160 km from Sorocaba, and 134 km



from Santos. It currently belongs to the Bragantina Microregion (Emplasa, 2012), part of the São Paulo Macrometropolis, and borders the municipality of Bragança Paulista to the north; the municipalities of Franco da Rocha, Mairiporã, and Francisco Morato to the south; the municipalities of Piracaia, Nazaré Paulista, and Bom Jesus dos Perdões to the east; and the municipalities of Jarinu and Campo Limpo Paulista to the west.

The city, founded in 1665 along an axis of territorial expansion during the colonial period, was part of the route of the *bandeirantes* (explorers) between São Paulo and the mining regions that would later constitute the territory of Minas Gerais. Atibaia experienced more notable urban growth only from the 1950s onward, with greater acceleration from the 1970s. Its territory is crossed by two highways of significant regional and national flow: the Dom Pedro I Highway (SP-065), which connects the municipality of Campinas/SP to the Paraíba Valley (municipality of Jacareí/SP), and the Fernão Dias Highway (BR-381), which connects the city of São Paulo/SP to Belo Horizonte/MG.

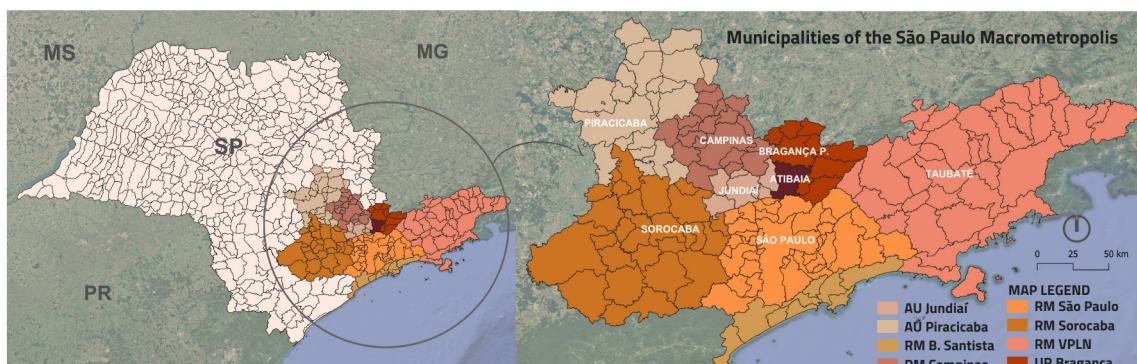


Figure 1: Location of the municipality of Atibaia.

Source: IBGE spatial data. Own authorship through satellite image (2024).

According to Passos (2013), the first notable signs of urban expansion date back to the 1950s, with the development of small-farm subdivisions (*loteamentos de chácaras de veraneio*) primarily aimed at the high-income population from neighboring regions and the state capital, São Paulo. Between the 1970s and 1980s, however, the city experienced a period of accelerated urban expansion driven by the emergence of new urban settlements associated with the consolidation of the Fernão Dias Highway. This process led to an increase in the urbanization rate from 39% in the early 1950s to 84% in the early 1980s. This period was characterized by the formation of residential neighborhoods with large-lot subdivisions, which continued to attract mainly residents from the capital seeking a slower-paced lifestyle (Passos, 2013).

The city began to be regionally recognized for its natural landscapes and pleasant climate, features that not only attracted tourists from neighboring municipalities but also boosted the growth of the real estate market for second homes and, more recently, for internal migration within the macrometropolitan context.



These characteristics established the transition of the city's profile: initially marked by vacation homes and second residences, but now also attracting new permanent residents. Many of these newcomers still carry out work, study, and leisure activities in other cities of the region, such as São Paulo and Campinas, yet choose to establish residence in Atibaia. Consequently, this has stimulated greater commercial and industrial development within the municipality itself (Passos, 2013).

Year	Population			% Urban Population
	Urban	Rural	Total	
1950	7.117	11.335	18.452	39%
1960	8.957	14.094	23.051	39%
1970	20.380	16.549	36.839	55%
1980	48.445	9.362	57.807	84%
1991	83.757	11.585	95.342	88%
2000	96.874	14.426	111.300	87%
2010	115.229	11.374	126.603	91%
2022	142.259	16.338	158.647	90%

Table 1: Evolution of the Population of Atibaia.

Source: Elaborated by the authors with data from IBGE, 2010 and 2022.

This transition in the population profile is reflected in the municipality's demographic growth data between 1950 and 2022, presented in the table above. One can first observe an increase in the concentration of population in urban areas between the 1970s and 1980s, rising from 55% to 84%, along with a significant increase in the total population between the 1980s and 1990s, from approximately 58,000 to 95,000 inhabitants. It was precisely during this period that investments in the city's construction sector accelerated, particularly in small-farm subdivisions (*chácaras de veraneio*) (Souza, 2022).

This process was also reflected in the physical expansion of the municipality, as shown by data indicating a prominent growth of the urban fabric starting in the 1980s (Figure 2). Between the 1940s and 1950s, the urban footprint was limited to the central area; however, between the 1970s and 1980s, urban expansion accelerated, advancing into areas that had previously been rural and extending beyond the immediate surroundings of the municipality's central perimeter. From the 1980s to the early 2000s, a large spread of the urban fabric can be observed, driven both by migration from other regions and by the consolidation of the city as a destination for second homes in natural settings (Passos, 2013).

It was during this period that the city's urban fabric consolidated into its current morphological pattern, marked by the dispersion of low-density residential settlements spatially disconnected from the central area. Specifically, since the 2000s, most residential neighborhoods have emerged from small-farm



subdivisions (*chácaras de veraneio*), where there was no need for an urban dynamic to support daily activities such as work, commerce, and transportation. Consequently, monofunctional neighborhoods were formed, inaccessible by public transport and lacking in population attractiveness beyond their residential use, thus characterized by a predominance of medium- and high-income, car-dependent residents.

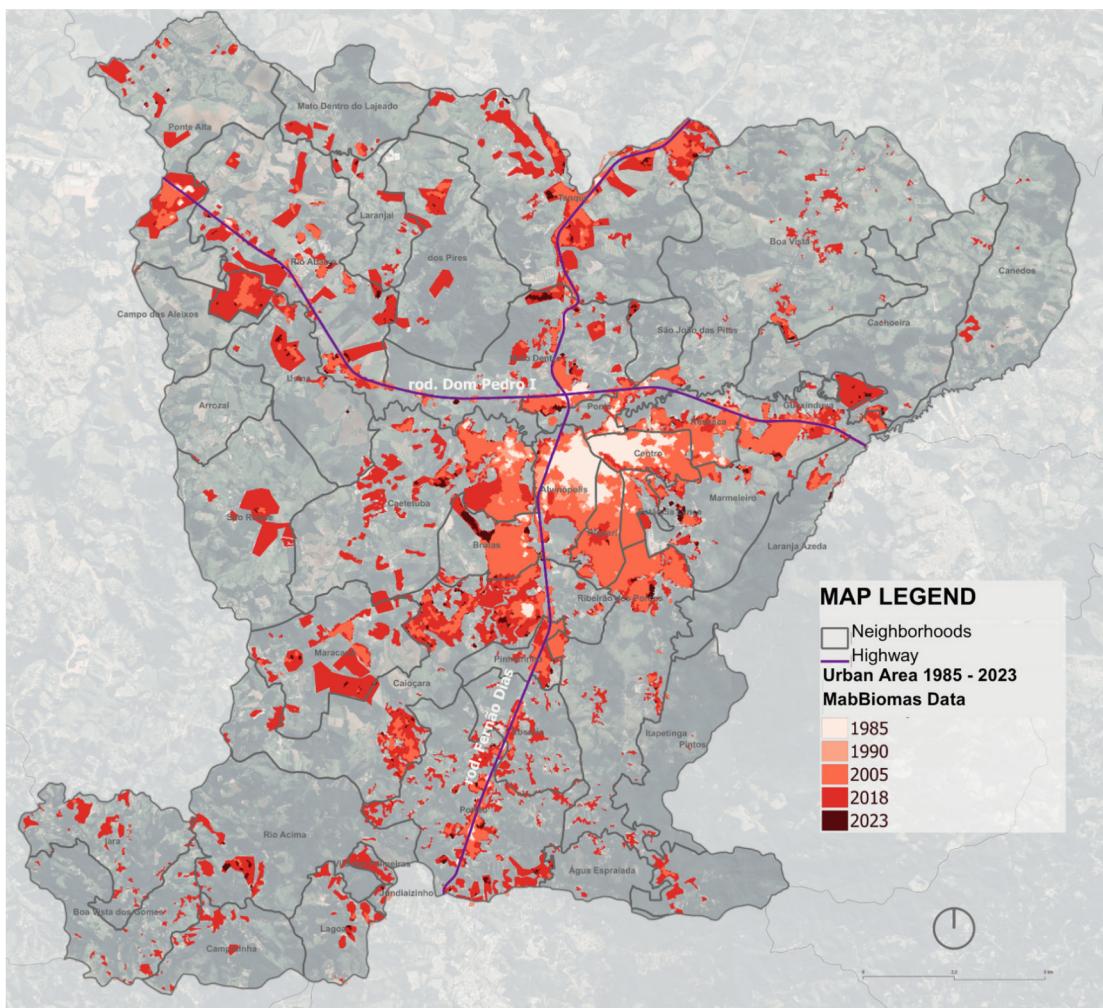


Figure 2: Evolution of the urban area of Atibaia (1985, 1990, 2005, 2018 and 2023).

Source: Spatial data of the urban area from Mapbiomas, adapted by the authors.

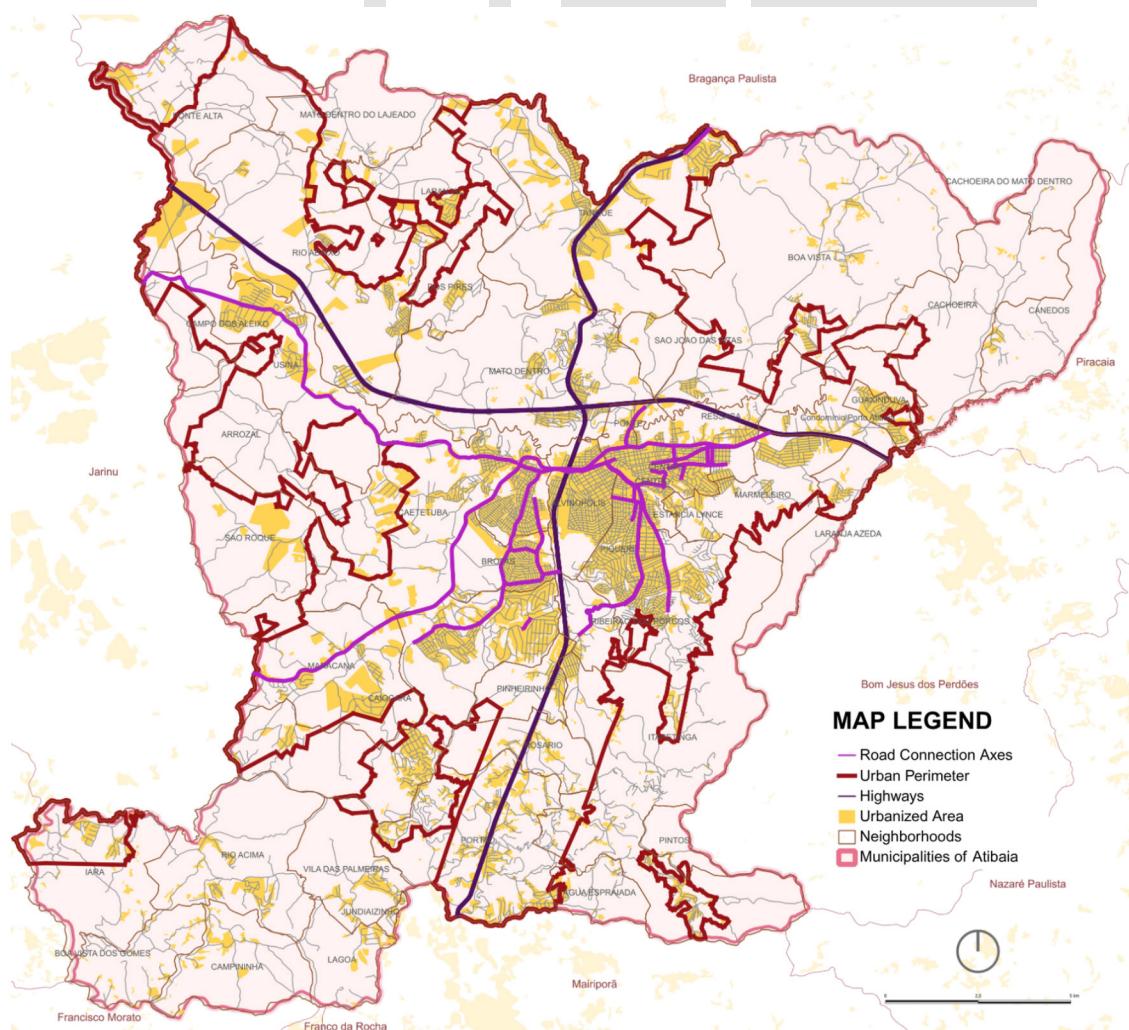
## ANALYSIS OF URBAN EXPANSION BETWEEN THE 2000s AND 2020

The analysis of the municipality of Atibaia is based primarily on the clear division between the formal and informal city (Maricato, 2000), with the Fernão Dias Highway as the main defining element, as illustrated in Figure 3. This highway is the city's primary connection to the state capital, São Paulo, and also links it to the rest of the Bragantina Microregion to the south and to other regions of Minas Gerais. The Dom Pedro I Highway, which connects the city with Campinas to the



northwest and the Paraíba Valley to the southeast, has had less impact on the historical trends of Atibaia's urban expansion, leading only to the more recent location of some gated residential communities.

The Fernão Dias Highway cuts across Atibaia from north to south and divides the "formal city" on the eastern side—where the main public and private facilities for collective use are concentrated, along with better-quality urban infrastructure—from the western side, characterized by neighborhoods that emerged spontaneously and autonomously, with high population density and local commerce. Both sides originated in similar timeframes (as can be seen in Figure 1), which exemplifies this unjust dynamic of space production: it was not due to excessive densification that the urban territory expanded, but rather the control of land by the real estate market, which has determined and continues to determine territorial occupation.



*Figure 3: General map of the municipality of Atibaia, focusing on the urban area and perimeter.*  
Source: IBGE spatial data, adapted by the authors.



Through Figure 4, one can observe urban densification along the north-south axis (Fernão Dias Highway) and the east-west axis (Dom Pedro I Highway), forming two distinct quadrants. The first, located in the central-eastern portion of the city—neighborhoods such as Centro, Alvinópolis, Estância Lyns, and Piqueri—is where commercial and service activities are concentrated, alongside mixed-use areas and more traditional residential neighborhoods that date back to the earliest stages of the city's formation. In this quadrant, the highest-income areas are concentrated in neighborhoods close to the city center, as illustrated in the map in Figure 4, following historical patterns of linear expansion associated with similar socioeconomic characteristics of the resident population (Villaça, 2001).

This quadrant also contains the historic center, the main nucleus of cultural activities in the city. It is also where avenues concentrating commercial and service activities linearly are located, connecting this area to more distant residential neighborhoods. In these areas are found some of the city's traditional high-income gated communities, such as Flamboyant, Reserva Arco Íris, and Porto Atibaia, adjacent to the emergence of new medium- and high-income residential developments, largely driven by the valorization of the landscape and proximity to the Pedra Grande State Park.

The central-western quadrant, on the other hand, presents a more fragmented and varied urban fabric, where industrial neighborhoods such as Caetetuba, Brotas, and part of Alvinópolis—located along the western side of the Fernão Dias Highway—coexist with traditional residential neighborhoods and gated communities. High-density neighborhoods such as Caetetuba and Brotas developed distinct morphologies, originating from the population seeking lower-cost housing alternatives linked to the industrial labor force (Passos, 2013). These urban settlements experienced accelerated occupation between the 1980s and 2000s, when commercial and industrial activities in the municipality became more dynamic. As shown in the map in Figure 5, these neighborhoods are characterized by a low-income population, whose urban conditions are further aggravated by circulation and accessibility barriers to central areas created by the Fernão Dias Highway.



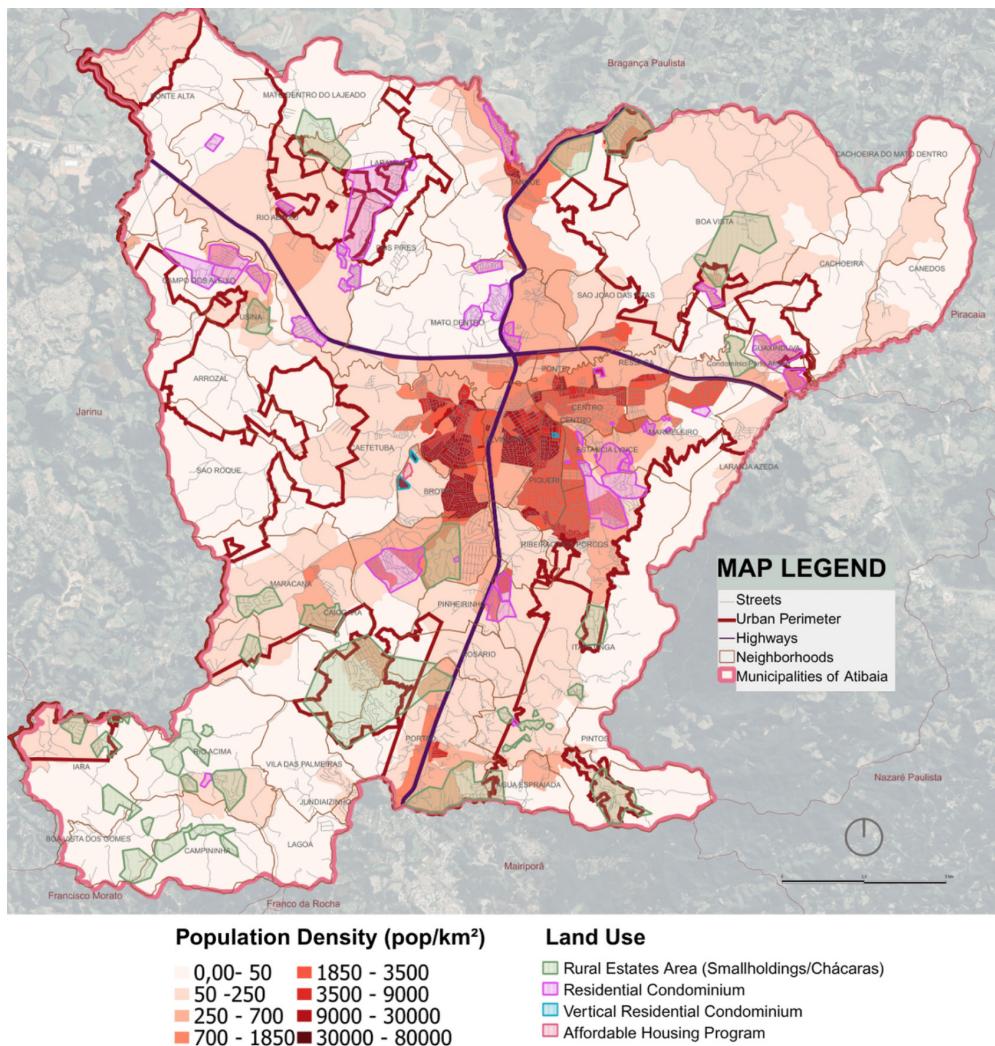


Figure 4: Population density map (inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>) [IBGE 2022] highlighting condominium and farm areas.

Source: Demographic data from the preliminary census [IBGE, 2022]. Condominium and farm areas mapped using satellite imagery.

Another notable morphological trend, as shown in the analytical map in Figure 5, is the emergence of gated residential condominiums and *chácara* subdivisions (country-house lots) along the Dom Pedro I Highway (east-west direction). These typologies are recurrent in contemporary urbanization, especially within the city-region context of the São Paulo Macrometropolis. This urban form is closely linked to individual motorized mobility and therefore accessed exclusively through avenues, roads, and highways. Consequently, it generates fragmentation within the city's urban fabric, encouraging private automobile use and contributing to the deterioration of public spaces (Caldeira, 1997).

The configuration of these condominiums is not necessarily homogeneous, although they share the common characteristic of producing exclusionary



dynamics in the city. Those located in higher-density areas tend to house middle-class residents, with medium-sized constructions and closely spaced lots. In the case of Atibaia, among the mapped condominiums, only four are vertical multifamily buildings—two of them in the city center, with a high-income profile, and two farther away, associated with low-income *habitação de interesse social* (social housing). While the social housing complexes present high density, those in low-density areas tend to host higher-income residents, featuring large-scale constructions and widely spaced lots within the condominium area. In Atibaia, these are also associated with proximity to the natural landscape.

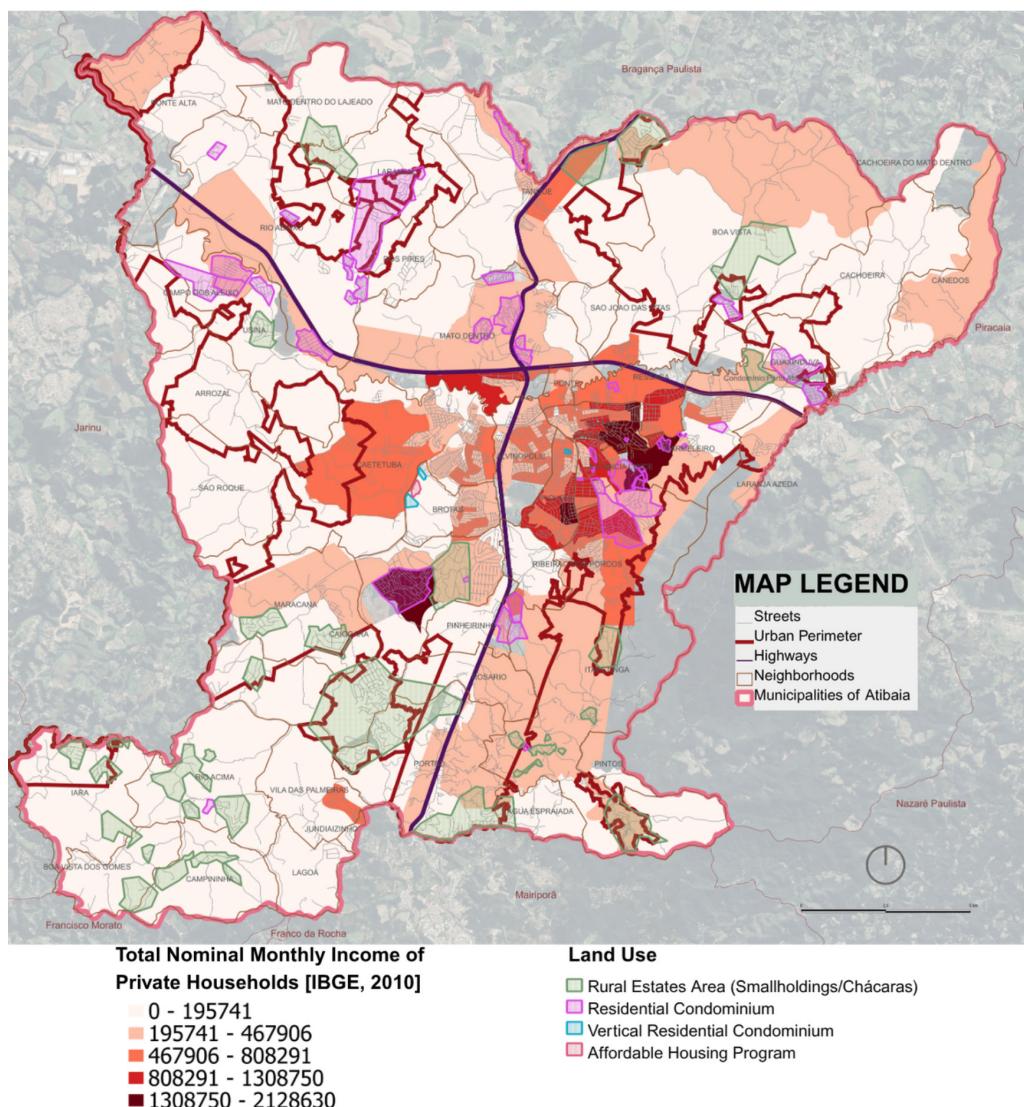


Figure 5: Map of income distribution by census sector [IBGE 2010] highlighting condominium and farm areas.

Source: Income data from the IBGE census (2010). Condominium and farm areas mapped by satellite image (2024).



From the comparison between Figures 4 and 5, one can observe a concentration of higher-income areas to the east of the Fernão Dias Highway, both in historic neighborhoods near the city center and in more distant areas associated with the proliferation of subdivisions and gated communities. The Dom Pedro I Highway has also consolidated itself as an axis for the expansion of these new low-density urban settlements, driven by the higher-income macrometropolitan real estate market.

Thus, it becomes evident that two simultaneous morphological patterns of socioeconomic expansion coexist, reflecting the operation of urban dynamics at two distinct scales within the city. On one hand, there is the traditional configuration of socio-spatial inequalities between center and periphery, with the Fernão Dias Highway as the main defining element and barrier separating traditional high-income neighborhoods to the east from the poorer peripheries to the west. This reflects the typical morphological patterns of concentrated urbanization, with a continuous and denser urban fabric.

On the other hand, this process coexists with a typically macrometropolitan trend of dispersed, discontinuous, and lower-density urban fabric. Such a trend is reinforced by a real estate market primarily targeting higher-income populations, in urban morphologies that spread into areas far from the consolidated urban fabric, fragmenting the territory, generating burdensome costs for public management, and underutilizing available public spaces.

It is also worth noting that there was a public-sector proposal to promote greater diversity and multifunctionality of land uses within the city's urban perimeter, emphasizing the overcoming of segregation between exclusively residential and commercial zones, as well as the incorporation of social housing into the existing urban fabric. This proposal emerged during a Master Plan revision process initiated in 2006, drafted twelve years later in 2018, and only approved in 2023, revealing the slowness of administrative processes and the constant obsolescence of planning instruments when compared to the pace of urban expansion. Furthermore, to date, no significant changes have been observed that reflect the proposed objectives, signaling ineffective implementation disconnected from the real needs of the population.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In Brazil, acknowledging that urban and rural property has, since its origins, been produced for and allocated to a limited group is essential to understanding the occupation of the territory and its resulting morphology of centralities and peripheries. Within the capitalist context and under the aegis of globalization, the process of capital production has reshaped systems of flows and circulation infrastructures between metropolises and the interior, in which small- and



medium-sized cities have gained relevance by assuming new roles within this urban-regional network.

In the case of Atibaia—mainly due to its proximity to the Metropolitan Regions of Campinas and São Paulo—there has been a strong influence of this new productive arrangement, directly impacting its urbanization and morphological configuration. Within this context, architectural and urban typologies that are typically metropolitan proliferated in the city, aiming primarily to serve populations from these larger urban centers who sought housing alternatives as well as rural and natural leisure opportunities.

The morphology of a city such as Atibaia ultimately results in an exclusionary urban dynamic, fragmented by highways, characterized by large gated condominium areas, monofunctional neighborhoods, commercial activities concentrated in central areas and specific avenues, and mobility largely limited to private automobile use. This scenario contributes to the inefficiency of public management and services, as it promotes the expansion of low-density urbanized areas, meaning increased territories requiring investment in the provision and maintenance of urban infrastructure for a relatively small number of residents.

It is also possible to observe the coexistence of two distinct urbanization trends: one following socioeconomic dynamics rooted in Atibaia's historical conditions of urban expansion, and another one driven by a real estate market catering to macrometropolitan demand. This phenomenon is the main driver of the economic valorization of areas previously disregarded by the local real estate market—which formerly constituted the city's informal periphery—yet which are now subject to speculation for the development of condominiums intended to meet the housing demand of other cities and regions.

The occupation of extensive areas by condominiums also prioritizes private spaces over public and collective spaces. On a broader scale, this tends to generate a cascading effect, whereby this model of fortified enclaves discourages investments in comprehensive urban improvements, since their residents may feel less dependent on the quality of public services such as security and transportation. Beyond reducing interactions among city inhabitants and devaluing shared urban infrastructure and services, this spatial phenomenon also entails significant negative socio-environmental impacts, as it occupies large tracts of land at the expense of natural remnants or traditional rural communities.

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