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The shape of urban expansion in a middle city in the interior of the pampa bonaerense from an urban-environmental historical perspective (1779-2021)

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In the last years, the disciplinary field of urban and territorial planning in Argentina has proposed to recover the classic questions about urban primacy and macrocephaly characteristic of the Latin American urban development matrix, which concentrates more than 50% of the population in some few urban centers. With the social-housing collapse of large metropolitan areas (recently exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic) and recent public decentralization initiatives, smaller-scale towns and cities are protagonists in the transition towards more equitable territorial development.

Despite such importance, the Latin American urban-territorial studies agenda has been concentrated on larger centers, especially in metropolitan contexts. In the Argentine case and in the context of the interior of Buenos Aires province, there is a large number of works that have been carried out in this type of city but whose historical approaches are temporarily limited from the XIX and early XX centuries. Other antecedents have analyzed the common elements in the urban structures of the Pampean cities and have outlined some problems related to the expansion processes registered until the 1970's. However, very few studies collect the impact of neoliberal policies in these types of cities, fully understanding the long time line between the beginnings of the foundations and the current stage.

Within the framework of these reflections, we start by recognizing the general context of environmental and ecological crises and the changes in population trends. The article focuses on smaller towns and cities, understanding the challenge that its study represents to move towards an improvement in the balance of the national territory and the creation of networks of sustainable cities. We ask: under what patterns and models have these types of cities been growing? With what results in environmental and social terms? Are



they ready to receive new populations? In the current context of ecological-environmental and economic-social crises, have they developed instruments aligned with the paradigms of sustainability and mitigation of climate change?

Considering the vacancies and questions, this work shows the results of a first approach, the analysis and systematization of the transformation processes that occurred in a low-density city in the interior of Buenos Aires based on the case study of the city of Chascomús (Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina). The general objective is to characterize the urban form of the expansion from the interrelation of the triad: history, territory and norm. That is, to analyze the effects of historical, economic and social relations; territorial and environmental characteristics; and the regulations, in the forms that urban expansion adopted throughout its history (1779-2021). The specific objectives of the article are: 1) to identify various trends that over time shaped the growth of the city of Chascomús in line with the prevailing urban dynamics, including production profiles, urban planning guidelines, regulatory instruments and impact on the natural ecosystems; 2) formulate a critical reflection on the way in which the growth of medium-scale cities as Chascomús has been thought and managed from urban policy.

The methodological design recovers and systematizes a large empirical base from primary and secondary sources. To determine building expansion trends, the focus is on how the subdivision, urbanization and building phases were combined in time and space. For this and from the combination of historical documents, aerial and satellite images, field work and surveys, only the new buildings were mapped. This allowed us to recognize three trends of urban expansion in Chascomús, according to a predominant type of vision and territorial exploitation: completion and compaction (1776-1945); widening and dispersion of the trace (1946-1989); and extreme residential dispersion and densification (1990-2021). At the same time, the interpretation and redrawing from various sources in parallel to the historical-environmental analysis allowed us to make the view more complex on what relationships were established between the urban, rural and natural environments in the formation and socio-territorial transformation of the city and its territory

Firstly, the study showed that, beyond the macro-economic contexts and current accumulation models, the main drivers of changes in dynamics arise from elements of the city's own history. The delimited temporalities correspond to a predominant type of territorial exploitation, but within these specific conditions are also recognized: –especially– its lagoon condition, the incidence of the railroad and the paving of Highway 2. This accounts for a city that, while observing a growth dynamic similar to medium-sized Latin American cities, it also shows a particular trajectory. For example, tourist activity - stimulated by the increase in the use of private cars - was, from the beginning, a dynamic element of the morphological changes of the city.

Deepening, it is worth reflecting on the relationship between the growth dynamics of the city and its planning, and the recording of local environmental conditions, that is, urban-environmental rationality. The initial moment of completion and compaction (1826-1945) effectively followed the guidelines outlined in the first Plans over ninety years. It registers the highest population growth rates (reaching over 50% in some years), concentrated in a limited area with a large provision of public green spaces and a relationship with the lagoon according to the period paradigm: engineering with strong nature impact. By then, the processes that took place responded to the consolidation of the agro-export model; and both the territory and its natural ecosystems were profoundly altered, as a result of extensive agricultural activities.

On the contrary, the period of widening and dispersion of the built matrix (1946-1989) reflects a dynamics of spontaneous growth, urged by the need for a city that belatedly developed in industrial terms and required labor; followed by an effort to regularize and normatively order an act already consummated. In this period, however, there is a slowdown in the population growth registered previously and an expanded urban growth, driven by popular subdivisions involving a large amount of land of productive value for local consumption. Once again, the changes in the productive profile of the territory promote new population dynamics that end up encouraging an inefficient and unregulated growth of the urban area; conforming to one of the characteristic aspects of Latin American urbanization, observable both in large centers and in medium-sized cities.

The current period (1990-2021) is characterized by contrasting trends of extreme residential dispersion and densification that express the urban form of the neoliberal accumulation model, but which are also



a legacy of previous dynamics. The study background together with the findings achieved, show that it is a characteristic feature of metropolitan contexts and also –with differences– of intermediate-scale cities. Chascomús belatedly observes the effects of popular subdivision initiatives that, on the one hand, in large metropolitan cities occurred in past decades and under different institutional arrangements - such as popularly oriented governments-. On the other hand, while these were the means of access to housing for the popular sectors; in Chascomús they have also been, depending on their location, an opportunity for the construction of second homes. Despite the fact that they remained inert for many years, the new regulatory frameworks did not visualize this problem, which could, at least, have been mitigated with new instruments or planning policies. In addition to the loss of productive soil for local consumption, in this period the loss of soil of high landscape and environmental value predominates.

Tracing the past, its marks and dynamics allow us to fully understand the imbalances that today cities face and provide us with new tools to advance in its point at issue. The dynamics portrayed confirms the socio-environmental contradictions in public policies for land use planning. The historical journey highlights the progressive State deregulation in growth patterns of cities, which is translated into the advance of urban development on spaces devoid of basic infrastructures or with environmental conflict. Building in peripheral areas, despite the existence of a large number of empty lots in urban areas equipped with basic infrastructure –or at least closer to them–, puts at risk the capacity and possibility of municipality to achieve the provision of basic services and equipment to these populations. Likewise, the study of the implicit form in the planning instruments reveals the absence of a guiding city model, also, the assignation of a low level to environmental dimension and a lack of definition on the projected city scale that must be cared for. With this, the questions asked, due to the new population trends, do not seem to achieve encouraging answers about the feasibility of balanced and sustainable urban growth.

Finally, the study of the evolution of Chascomús also sought to contribute - with an empirical basis in an average city that is not part of any metropolitan urban system - to the current questions that from urban and territorial planning are rekindled in relation to urban primacy and macrocephalic structure in the Argentine territory. The diachronic and synchronous description of the city, does not only contribute to the systematization of a little explored object of study, but also warns about the structural and multidimensional nature of this problem, which not only corresponds to the deficiencies of urbanism in large urban centers, but also to the absence of its own schemes and guidelines to think about the growth of smaller areas. The disarticulation observed between the national, provincial and municipal levels in the Chascomunense case illustrates a path similar to that of other intermediate cities. In view of this, the recent arrival of a new population in intermediate cities also deserves to be analyzed in line with the system of urban settlements that make up the country.