

The ongoing changes in the Médio Vale do Paraíba fluminense Microregion originated with the adoption of neoliberalism policies by the Brazilian government

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The adoption of neoliberalism in Brazil in 1990 brought many changes to the country economics, productive activities and work relationships – hence, there are changes also in the urbanization process and spatial structure.

These policies deeply impacted the Médio Vale do Paraíba fluminense Microregion, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. This used to be an industrial Fordist region, where the first basic industries in Brazil were sited. In 1993, steel-maker company Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional (CSN) was privatized, which brought economic and social crisis to the region, followed by a productive and spatial restructuring.

The Microregion is strategically located within the triangle formed by the most important capital cities in Brazil: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte, which are not only significant consumer hubs but also financial centers.

Nowadays, after deep changes on its social processes, the Microregion has a new reality. Its economic-regional growth is based mainly on industrial developments which are sprawled through the territory. The sprawl changes urban structure and urban scale, and also creates new centralities.

This paper analyses the urban changes taking place in the Microregion starting from its restructuring, which was based on federal and local neoliberal policies to attract investments. These policies were influenced by global economics processes and deeply influenced the urban space.

The adoption of neoliberal policies by the Brazilian government and the subsequent reduction of federal intervention led to a void in regional development and industrial growth policies. The industrial and economic recovery of the Microregion was

underpinned by new fiscal incentive policies enacted by the local government - which included incentives to public funding and to the establishment of new industrial parks.

There is no regional articulation between the multiple municipalities of the Microregion, which leads to a destructive competition for private and public investments. Each state, not the federation, defines its own legislation for the creation, definition and organization of each metropolitan region and Microregion. On the other hand, as they grow, the metropolitan entities themselves become more relevant and the states lose their power of management. The urban sprawl in this region originates from the lack of articulation between the municipalities and also from their weak administration, related to the growth of neoliberalism and the lack of urban planning policies.

The Microregion restructuring started with the attraction of new industrial parks – related, mainly, to the mechanical engineering industry, which includes the automotive industry. These industrial plants were installed during the intensification of globalization, when production sprawl and global consumption were growing. These plants contributed to the region recovery but at the same time increased the competition between the municipalities.

Sprawled industrial developments demanded an occupation and organization of the region. They attract qualified manpower with higher wages – typical of this industry – and therefore the number of businesses, commercial and residential activities was increased. All these activities are now installed in sprawled locations, close to highways, and serve to a regional public. There is a strong contrast between these sprawled morphologies and the traditional, concentrated ones, originated in the Fordist period.

The sprawled urban forms and their architectural typologies are characteristics of the space of flows (defined by Castells, 1996) and they represent non-places (Augé, 1992), which are spaces of transience with homogenous architectures that are not related to the local culture and could be anywhere – in Brazil, in the USA or in Europe. In many cases, these sprawled buildings form new urban centralities, either industrial parks or the combination of various shopping centers, hypermarkets and buildings that offer other activities.

Social relations and lifestyles were initially located in intra-urban areas, now being expanded and sprawled into regional areas, due to the industries' global interests. Today, mobility plays an important role in people's lives.

The methodology of research consisted on a theoretical study and on an urban and regional analysis, which included spatial policies, to identify and examine the ongoing changes and their consequences in this Microregion. Also, field research was conducted to observe occupancy patterns, sprawled activities and regional commuting and lifestyles.

Theoretical and empirical elements were combined, confronted and then analyzed, and thereafter it was possible to reach a deep comprehension of the ongoing phenomena and their spatial consequences. The conclusions of this research are intended to contribute to this region's urban planning studies.

The results of this research show: 1) that federal and local policies, and also public and private investments, resulted on the restructuration of the Microregion and the sprawled occupation of the territory; 2) the process of urban sprawl in this Microregion is still growing and it includes mainly industrial activities, followed by commercial, service, institutional and residential; 3) urban and regional dynamics, including urban forms, are getting more and more complex, intensifying interrelations of different urban scales, inside and outside the Microregion; 4) urban activities tend to be more regional than local; 5) what determines urban sprawl are not geographical or administrative borders, but the commuting distances easily traveled by cars or company buses (that bring workers to and from the industrial plants); 6) the productive and urban restructuration originated from the installation of new industrial plants made these municipalities wealthier.