For this issue on lands we have posed a series of key questions: should urban land be expanded or compressed? Who bears the costs and who profits? Does such an answer contribute to equality between city’s inhabitants? The responses here presented show that the notion of ‘urban land’ is a disputed territory where the point of view does matter, as it literally has urban-scale consequences.

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Dispersed or compact cities?
A false dichotomy

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In a film, British actor Dirk Bogarde was asked which of the two lobsters he preferred for lunch. After careful thinking, he replied: "both." We must say the same when presented with the alternative between dispersed or compact cities. The obvious answer is both, since they are not exclusive. Some (the minority) will prefer to live in high-rise buildings –hopefully with a good view– close to major accessibility nodes, such as subway or suburban train stations, stating feeling more secure and avoiding the need to take care of a garden. Others (the majority) will prefer to live in wide spaces with a yard or garden where children can play and where to eat outdoors with friends. The city must allow the freedom to choose lifestyles instead of forcing people to conform to a single way of living.

Those who choose to live in high-density areas do so mostly because of economy, since the land is more expensive in accessible areas and building high-rise is a strategy for reducing the impact of land-value on the price of flats. But they also suffer its drawbacks: annoying neighbors, the non-payment of common expenses with the consequent degradation of buildings, the impossibility to expand or improve the dwelling, etc. Those who choose to live in low-density areas do so mostly because of quality of life, since green areas improve the environment and allow for more flexibility to expand or improve the dwelling. The drawbacks are also numerous: longer commutes to work or services and higher dwelling costs. But here’s the thing: a goal for urbanism is to allow for people’s freedom of choice, provided that this choice does not involve costs for others.

The fundamental principle of planning is to achieve that 'the one who uses, pays – otherwise abuses.' In the case of those who choose to live in dispersed areas, they pay for the land, construction and urbanization (local roads, infrastructure, services, etc.). Water, sewage system, gas and electricity are paid according to consumption. They pay for
Urbanity and inclusion as possible worlds

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The question about the advantages of dispersed or compressed cities is answered from a critical assessment of the contribution to livability in the city: specifically, how are inclusion and urbanity guaranteed?

Inclusion means providing access to quality urban spaces, equipment and services to diverse socio-cultural groups. As quality urban spaces in Santiago –those centers that bring together working places and services– are not evenly distributed, and public transport network does not serve all neighborhoods equally, urban sprawl implies automatic exclusion of the inhabitants of most disadvantaged areas.

Densification, instead, when it happens in a context of good transport infrastructure and services proportional to a place’s number of inhabitants– is a generically favorable condition for inclusion. For instance, the downtown of Santiago has a wide range of cultural and educational facilities along with a dense public transport network that constitutes a value to draw upon if it is updated according to the ongoing densification process.

Urbanity, on its part, implies that a diversity of social groups share neighborhoods and that mixed uses exist allowing for a lively city on different hours and throughout the week. It might be thought that, generically, densification promotes urbanity. However, this would only occur if gentrification does not secure the dense areas of the city (centers) only for higher-income social groups or specific ethnic or age groups. The compact city does not automatically ensure urbanity. In the event that city centers are densified with an excessive residential load, the mixture of uses will cease to exist.

If urban sprawl implies reducing accessibility for those who have to unwillingly live where urban land is cheaper, it is undoubtedly negative. On the other hand, if urban densification involves increasing the cost of living for those
transportation as well as through fuel cost in cars and now through express-roads tolls. Streets maintenance costs, urban lighting, garbage collection, etc., are (or should be) paid through contributions and vehicle licenses. Those who live in compact areas also pay for maintenance through contributions, but not always for the additional costs imposed by using existing infrastructure.

The current problem, in both cases, is that there are negative externalities—costs not paid by users which are imposed to the rest of the population—such as traffic jams, pollution, over-use of existing infrastructure and equipment. The solution is to intelligently charge both congested streets when jammed as mobile and stationary sources of pollution, while charging also for additional construction unit (either housing, businesses, etc.) to cover the cost of expanding public schools, clinics, parks and infrastructure facilities. There should exist charts for universal charging instead of leaving them to the discretion of municipal authorities as they lend to corrupt practices.

Developed countries show that low-density urbanization generates less segregation, as land-value is lower. The same could be happening in metropolitan Santiago: that in peripheral developments located in communes such as Maipú, Pudahuel and Puente Alto there might exist less segregation than in more compact and central districts. The latter, deserves further studies before being confirmed or rejected. ARQ

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who wish to live in central locations, it becomes an excluding condition and therefore has negative effects.

Then, the questions that remain open are: who bears the costs of inequality and lack of urbanity that either densification or expansion can produce? Which and how should actors be involved in the production of urban space? How can they influence inclusion and urbanity in densification or urban sprawl? What is the appropriate degree of densification and expansion to ensure adequate livability and vitality standards? Which instruments can limit social segregation generated by gentrification both in the periphery and the center?

Neither option inherently ensures a city better than the other, but there is no doubt that a dense urban fabric can better promote inclusion and urbanity, unlike the extension to the periphery.

Densification and urban sprawl are two sides of the same coin and it is necessary to consider not only the appropriate degree of each, but also the systemic interdependence between both. ARQ

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