

***Greenwashing* and the Strategy of Real Estate enterprises in the
Commercialization of Nature**

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ABSTRACT

This essay integrates continued research, with the objective of analyzing the sustainable certifications and greenwashing practice that are being used to validate the exploitation of nature in the interest of capital. Based on a bibliographical and exploratory research of primary and secondary sources, it is proposed to discuss the phenomenon of the exploitation of the natural good and the ecological discourse by the real estate enterprises, bringing as a case study the MARAEY mega-venture, located in the Environmental Protection Area of the city of Maricá, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. In this context, the relation among legislation, urban policy and the maneuvers carried out by the real estate market with the public authorities and regulatory bodies is discussed.

KEYWORDS: Sustainability. Environmental Perception. *Greenwashing*.

1 INTRODUCTION

Long ago it has been reflecting on what there would be in fact environmental in the urban. Some studies point to the notion of risk, the debate about environmental degradation and the mapping of social and environmental inequality as issues that may elucidate the notion of nature dimension in the city. The advent of leisures, according to Alain Corbin (2001), introduced a way to appreciate and appropriate nature from the market bias, incorporating nature into the logic attributed to the capitalist city as an element that adds value to urban soil, which combines leisure with socio-environmental quality. On the other hand, what separates and what brings together the urban environment became increasingly difficult to measure. It is a matter of involving leisure, pleasure to a space strategy that no longer distinguishes the public from the private. The adaptation of the urban environment before the urban expansion and its perverse logic of urban soil reproduction is based on conflicts of scales and competences.

In addition, the discourse of sustainability, with emphasis from the Rio-92 Conference, it reinforces that the cities that have an urban design that allows the inhabitants to develop activities and maintain a lifestyle close to nature use the meaning of green in sustainable enterprises and demand that municipal governments have public policies associated with the practices of conviviality with nature. Based on this perspective, we might think that such practices make it possible to bring nature or even reintroduce the protection of the existing nature, in order to produce policies that are presented with postures for life.

However, in recent years, we have seen the growing emergence of enterprises that advance on natural environments, relying on the discourse that it is fundamental to enjoy nature at present. We have been living in a moment that loses the perspective of the transformation of urban environments without disruptions in which the discourse of rights is little recognized in planning instruments, such as in the Master Plans, laws of use and occupation of the soil, and even in the municipal sectoral plans. Several elements must now be associated with the legal and institutional framework that is guiding actions on the environmental issue in the country, such as climate, urban, environmental, health, energy and water scarcity. Currently, it is necessary to rethink urbanization, or rather the urban dimension in the environment and the nature dimension in the city.

In this recent context of capitalist production we warned about the incorporation of nature as merchandise, practically as an anchor of the expansion of the production process of the city, proposing differentiated forms of appropriation of the cities' green and water structures.

This essay integrates a continuous survey¹, with the objective of discussing the nature issue as a product to be consumed, as well as *greenwashing* practice as a strategy adopted by enterprises that appropriate and take advantage of sustainable discourse to sell a healthier lifestyle, having its effects on the landscape revealed by society's perception of nature. These are reflections that are based on a bibliographic review about the topic and its repercussion on a case study in the city of Maricá, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. It is expected to contribute to the contemporary debate on the subject from a critical and exploratory research perspective.

2 THE DISTANCING OF MAN AND NATURE AND THE CONSEQUENCES ATTRIBUTED TO NATURE

Milton Santos (1992) understands that nature has been rediscovered by the human beings at every moment of their existence. This is due to a progressive rupture between the "human being and the surroundings, accelerated by mechanization" (page 106) resulting from technological and economic globalization. For Santos (1992), the human being always used the nature to grasp the elements indispensable to his or her survival, the use was taken from each human group over a portion of the territory. That is, the resources obtained corresponded to a "specific model." However, this is lost with globalization, since the human being begins to be part of a whole, a system that dictates his or her ways of living, belonging and obtaining. According to the author, this system reduces the notions of work, giving value parameters (added value) to everything and everyone in the service of money; thus, "the artificialized nature marks a great change in history. Now, with technoscience, the supreme stage of human evolution is reached." (SANTOS, 1992, page 97). And complements that:

Now that all deeply rooted living conditions are being destroyed (A. Wellmer, 1974), the tension between objective culture and subjective culture increases exponentially and, likewise, the misconceptions of our perception, of our definition and of our relationship with the environment are multiplied (SANTOS, 1992, page 100).

Since the middle of the years 1980 and 1990, environmental thinking has gained space in social, governmental and business discussions with proposals that permeate notions of quality and maintenance of life from the protection of nature. This is the result of discussions on climate change and environmental crises promoted by the United Nations (UN) between the Vancouver 1976 Conference (Habitat I) and the Istanbul 1996 Conference (Habitat II), whose objective was to promote solutions to mitigate the environmental impacts caused by the growing and accelerated urban settlements (GROSTEIN, 2001). However, it is well known that discussions remain within a thought of preservation for those who can afford to obtain it, thus establishing the exploitation of the natural good for the benefit of the affection and well-being of a minority. This is also due to the change in the perception of man with the environment according to the change in the parameters of sociability occurred in neoliberalism (CASTELLS, 1999).

The creation of this neoliberal system obviously implied a lot of destruction, not only for institutional structures and powers (such as the supposed prior existence of a state sovereignty over political and economic affairs), but also on the structural relations of

¹ The current master's thesis, in progress, has been set in the research group City, Urbanization Process and Environment registered in the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), held in the Graduate Program of Architecture and Urbanism of the Universidade Federal Fluminense (PPGAU/UFF).

the workforce, social relationships, social welfare policies, technological arrangements, ways of life, belonging to the earth, affective habits, ways of thinking and others more (HARVEY, 2007, page 3).

Neoliberalism can be understood as an economic policy maintained by the State in order to promote business freedom from the maintenance of private property rights, individual freedom, free market and free trade, understanding that this is the way to achieve human well-being (HARVEY, 2007). Thus, it is possible to follow control both about the human being and about nature and space – at the service of “time of capital” (GONÇALVES, 2006, page 119) – and, consequently, the destruction arising from this process. Consumption becomes the great culture that feeds and motivates the neoliberal cultural process. That is, all socio-spatial development is intertwined with the demands of the business market, transforming everything into goods and consumer goods. Even the urban landscape becomes a currency from the valorization of objects and spaces to the market.

Then there is the need to preserve the environment and maintain the sociability produced by the neoliberalism. It was from this that the public and private sectors took advantage of this socio-environmental fragility to transform sustainability into a large promising and profitable business. Enterprises appropriate and take advantage of sustainable discourse to sell a healthier lifestyle. Linked to this opportunistic discourse, it is noticed the “creation” of nature as a product, being a marketing strategy that generates profit, allied to the ecological discourse of real estate enterprises. One can only associate the use of the notion of urban sustainability and strategies for implementing the city-company metaphor that projects in the “sustainable city” some of the supposed attributes of attractiveness of investments, in the context of global competition. Driving cities toward a sustainable future means in this case “promoting productivity in the use of environmental resources and strengthening competitive advantages.” (ACSELRAD, 1999, pages 81-82).

Because of neoliberalism, economic interests gain priority, affecting environmental preservation and transforming the landscape into a product to be consumed, and thus, the cities are perceived as merchandise, as well as everything that compose them. Acselrad (2013, page 237) collaborates with this thought, when he states that “the city is the preferred place for the realization of consumerism of goods. But, also, it is worth saying – with the advent of competitive urbanism – it is the place of consumerism of places.” Thus, it is easier to understand how sustainability can be used to favor the sale of the landscape, transforming nature into an ideological and ecologically correct product. The discourses, mainly socio-environmental, are used in favor of capital to enable projects and have approval of society, without necessarily being effective or materialized.

The socio-environmental vulnerability in large cities is notorious. It is observed that natural resources and landscapes are modified and increasingly exploited by the neoliberal development adopted by society, thus reconciling the growing expansion of cities with the preservation of the environment has been a great challenge. In this context of landscapes of natural environments as a product, the valorization of the environment aimed at exploration, the real estate market offering a “live very close to nature”, from the derision to the current urban-environmental legislation and the preservation to explore, we deal with the importance of having a truly more sustainable city planning, not limited only to discourse.

3 GREENWASHING AND CERTIFICATIONS AS MARKETING STRATEGY

Sustainability discourse is present in our reality through political discourses and large corporations, transforming sustainability into a big business. It has been increasingly frequent to see the real estate market appropriating natural landscapes and taking advantage of the cultures of traditional local communities to sell enterprises linked to a healthier lifestyle and a better quality of life.

With this opportunistic discourse, we have the “creation” of nature as a product to be consumed, the increase in advertising investment and the practice of *greenwashing*—a strategy that aims to create a favorable image of the product or enterprise in an attempt to persuade public opinion and circumvent the current environmental legislation, concealing or diverting attention on the negative environmental impacts generated by these organizations or people, as well as their activities or products, being a marketing strategy generating profit, allied to the ecological discourse of real estate enterprises.

Greenwashing practice is characterized when the population seeks to have a responsible relationship with the environment and industry or a politician presents “sustainable” practices, in order to persuade and delude them about their real intention. *Greenwashing* is a *marketing* strategy (HOFFMAN; HOFFMAN, 2008, page 67).

Figure 1: Nature as a slogan



Source: MARAEY, n.d.²

The search for a healthier and more sustainable life has been presented as faddish, boosting the real estate market and highlighting even more the commercialization of the landscape. Although the landscape is theoretically a good of all, its treatment as a consumer good by the private and public sectors has privileged the high-income class. In other words, the ecological movement is fashionable and becomes superficial. Such contradictory practice is used by large corporations and public authorities, being environmentally correct for interest. We have, once again, different perceptions about what it is to preserve and its real importance for each of these institutions that presents a logic “determined by the global policy of attracting

² MARAEY. **Residential, live in paradise**. Rio de Janeiro, n.d. Available in: <https://www.maraey.com/pt/maraey-o-projeto/>. Access on: June 12th 2022.

investments and not by the intrinsic value of the environmental issue” (GONÇALVES, 2006, page 15).

If we deal these discourses as advertising strategy or *greenwashing*, we can observe the use of some features:

Advertising clamors are used to convince the population that new suburban development promises a healthier relationship with nature, a more satisfying form of sociability and daily living, new life technologies and a bright location for future development (HARVEY, 2011, page 158).

For Foucault (1996) in *The order of discourse*, discourse is not simply what translates the struggles or systems of domination, but what is fought for, the power that we want to seize, and it shows that a discourse may not portray the legitimacy of actions, but rather the interest behind it. The ecological is subordinate to the economic, according to Gonçalves (2006, page 112) comments: “while ecologists talk about the rational use of natural resources, economists care about the price and exchange value of goods.”

Separating the human being from nature is therefore a way of subordinating them to capital. The worst thing is that more recently companies have appeared that sell “clean air”, “clean water” or real estate companies that sell clean landscapes, making use of ecological jargon in their advertisement (GONÇALVES, 2006, page 116).

With this, *greenwashing* has been shown to be more present in real estate projects, using improperly the concepts of sustainability in favor of the real estates valuation. These are the so-called green buildings, certified, bringing the idea of a more efficient, healthy and comfortable project. In this context, we have the increased demand for certifications, as an attempt to validate a discourse and convince the population that this project is totally viable and sustainable. However, it is important to point out that a certified or pre-certified building is not necessarily synonymous with integrated sustainability. It is possible to find projects that use only strategies for the use of materials and equipment, inside or outside, to achieve minimum levels of quality and certification, limited to meeting international standards, without really worrying about the region in which it intends to be inserted and about social factors.

Another issue on certification is the sale of the idea of sustainability and a lifestyle, in which the consumer finally has the opportunity to live in harmony with nature, without the weight of being taking advantage of it. A green strategy used by enterprises that aim to persuade the target audience, who can and is willing to pay for “green concrete.”

As an example of the influence of certifications on high-standard projects, we have the MARAEY mega-venture, which will be installed in the Environmental Protection Area of the city of Maricá, in the state of Rio de Janeiro – which will be approached in a more detailed way later – and which sought as a way to convince and validate its sustainable discourse in several pre-certifications, in addition to the creation of a seal of its own, Maraey Eco-Arch, as “a guarantee of sustainability throughout the enterprise”³.

However, it is very delicate to justify a discourse of supposed sustainable development in a project – in this case in an area of environmental protection of 840 hectares, which

³ The discourse can be checked on the company's website. Available in: <https://www.maraey.com/pt/maraey-o-projeto/>. Access on: June 12th 2022.

influences and is relevant to a whole region – with the aid of pre-certifications, especially when the certification is created by the enterprise itself and when we know that projects of this size and socioeconomic level are associated with the devastation of areas of preservation and fragmentation of the territory.

Figure 2: Own seal of MARAEY project



Source: MARAEY, n.d.⁴

4 CASE STUDY: MARAEY MEGA VENTURE

The real estate market has a great influence on the forms of management – including social – of the territory. According to David Harvey (2012, page 74), the “perpetual need to find lucrative ground for the production and absorption of surplus capital shapes the policy of capitalism.” That is, the real estate market helps to feed the capitalist dynamics and the growth of access to land incorporated by the real estate sector, favoring the urban transformation and influencing the modification of its landscape. As a result, we have the market boost, increasing demand for land for the implementation of all types of enterprise, including large complexes.

[...] the space produced is placed at the service of the accumulation of an economic power, which subordinates the others. Thus, we are talking about a political power that creates self-limitations for itself, in order to expand the capacity of wealth production, and a legal power that regulates, normalizes and regulates the limits of accumulation, and that are (re)updated from the new needs of capitalism (SANT’ANNA *et al.*, 2022, page v 490).

However, these mega-ventures need large areas, which are usually found in regions of environmental sensitivity, such as environmental protection areas (APA) or permanent protection areas (APP). Although these areas require specific and complex studies for licensing, these mega-ventures can often be made possible, relying on the support of the public authorities and regulatory bodies.

In search of a differential, these ventures bring environmental strategies with projects and, mainly, discourses, as a way to stand out in an increasingly competitive and demanding

⁴ MARAEY. **Acknowledgements.** Rio de Janeiro, n.d. Available in: <https://www.maraey.com/pt/reconhecimentos/>. Access on: June 12th 2022.

market, adapting their project to international trends of environmental certification and social responsibility.

Maraey mega-venture, which intends to be inserted entirely in the APA of the city of Maricá, is an example that confirms this logic. On its virtual page, we find the same discourse⁵: Concern for sustainable development and the three pillars on which they are supported – environmental, economic and social –, bringing integral sustainability to the project.

Figure 3: Main slogan of MARAEY project



Source: MARAEY, n.d.

This project launched by the company IDB Brazil, which is currently formed by a group of international entrepreneurs, led by the Cetya and Abacus groups, had not even considered the traditional communities inserted in the region of the APA of Maricá initially. However, as stated earlier, these enterprises draw strategies to stand out in the market and adapt to trends, which are currently focused on “sustainable being” or “living well and in harmony with local nature and cultures”, however, enjoying what they have best to offer.

As in all previous phases, this latest expansion of the urban process has brought with it incredible lifestyle changes. The quality of urban life has become a commodity, as well as the city itself, in a world where consumerism, tourism and the industry of culture and knowledge have become the main aspects of urban political economy. The postmodern tendency to encourage the formation of niche markets – both consumer habits and cultural forms – involves contemporary urban experience with an aura of freedom of choice, provided money is made (HARVEY, 2012, page 81).

Before it was called Fazenda São Bento da Lagoa and currently Maraey, the luxury enterprise was remodeled, changing its discourse, beyond the name. As stated on the project website (n.d.), the name Maraey was inspired by a Guarani indigenous legend: “The Land Without evil, a place where natural resources never run out and where one enjoys the well-being of body and mind; full happiness.” The change itself to a Guarani name is already quite problematic, given that the company takes advantage of and appropriates a culture, which at first was neither recognized in the project and that, even today, is still a great idea, we have no

⁵ The discourse can be checked on the company's website. Available in: <https://www.maraey.com/pt/maraey-o-projeto/>. Access on: June 12th 2022.

guarantee of its stay in the local in the future. We find once again the real estate market appropriating a culture as *marketing* to favor an enterprise.

According to IDB Brazil, the mission would be to turn the legend into reality and convert Maraey into an enterprise with environmental awareness, economic, cultural and social sustainability. Occupying an area of 840 hectares, with an investment of R\$ 11 billion, it will be a tourist, sports, commercial, business and residential complex of high standard. In this context,

[...] there is the emergence of new urban-metropolitan interstices, at the expense of the privatization of public spaces for access to the beach, for example, or even in the appropriation under the aegis of the public-private partnership of forest and mangrove reserves. These natural elements begin to integrate the real estate commodity through the aesthetics announced in advertising (BARBOSA; GOMES, 2016, page 344).

However, how can we back up such sustainable discourse when we intend to insert a luxury project entirely in an area of environmental protection, where we also find traditional communities existing on site?

Figure 4: Practices of local culture Figure 5: Fishing and indigenous community



Source: MARAEY, n.d.

The environmental protection area of the city of Maricá, in Rio de Janeiro, was created in 1984 as a result of the mobilization of scientists, environmentalists and local communities, who aimed to protect the region from the pressure of real estate capital, which was already happening at that time. On the site, we also find the traditional fishing community of Zacarias, which has lived in the site since at least 1797 and was recognized as a Historical and Cultural Heritage of the city, and the Guarani village Mata Verde Bonita. However, despite being recognized as APA, the area remained vulnerable to the pressures of the real estate market, because it is framed in a category that does not require expropriation, remaining as private property.

Currently, the Public Ministry of the State of Rio de Janeiro (MPRP), through the Civil Constitutional Resources Advisory, and the Community Association of Culture and Leisure of the Fishermen Zacarias (ACCAPLEZ), represented by the Public Defender of Rio de Janeiro, in addition to the scientific community working in the municipality, question the installation of the enterprise in environmental protection area, through lawsuits, and the license granted by the State Institute of the Environment (INEA), which contradicts the decision of the Superior Court of Justice (STJ) that prevents “all applications for licensing, allotment, construction or installation of any development in and around the APA of Maricá by the respondents” (PUBLIC

PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE OF THE STATE OF RIO DE JANEIRO, 2021, n.p.). Such actions have prevented the environmental licensing of the project, seeking to protect the restinga area and other ecosystems inserted in the APA of Maricá.

Thus, the effects of the judgment given by the 18th Civil Chamber of the Court of Justice of the State of Rio de Janeiro on instrument number 00228812-96.2013.8.19.0000, which determined the suspension of "all applications for licensing, allotment, construction or installation of any development in and around the APA of Maricá by the respondents", given the possibility of irreparable damage to the Environmental Protection Area in question if the desired construction is carried out at the site (PUBLIC PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE 2021, n.p.).

There is also a Public Civil Action (ACP) filed by the MPRP, on demand of the Environmental Preservation Association of Lagunas de Maricá (Apalma), against the state of Rio de Janeiro, Inea and the municipality of Maricá, in order to recognize the unconstitutionality of Decree 41.048/2007, which reduced from 300 to 30 meters the Marginal Stretch of Protection of Maricá APA' in its Management Plan.

Despite the lawsuits and the STJ's decision against the enterprise, in November 2021, IDB-Brazil officially launched the mega-venture, with the presence of the Mayor of Maricá Fabiano Horta, the executive secretary of the Ministry of Tourism Gustavo Tutuca, the Secretary of Environment and Sustainability of Rio de Janeiro Thiago Pampolha and the Governor of the State of Rio de Janeiro Cláudio Castro. That is, despite all the controversy involving the installation of the project in the Environmental Protection Area of Maricá – acting as a driver of changes in the region and commodification of the land – the project has the support of public authorities and regulatory bodies.

What is known is that the proposal of the implementation of the complex can cause territorial and environmental impacts at different scales, generating conflicts and disruptions, besides affecting the socio-spatial, economic and political dynamics of the region. In addition, the insertion of a project of such magnitude tends to attract the population, generate land valuation and increase the housing informality, which already exists in the area, and may have as consequences processes of gentrification and expulsion of the poorest layers, like that of the traditional fishing community and the Guarani indigenous village.

We observed, thus, a great problem in the implementation of a sustainable discourse, however, with practices based on a neoliberal ideology, which end up boosting the merchandized vision of nature and *greenwashing* practices in urban planning and contemporary social productions, collaborating for the society manipulation.

5 CONCLUSION

Currently the man-nature relationship is directly influencing the discourses and concepts of sustainability and nature preservation, favoring the implementation of large luxury enterprises that aim to exploit the natural good through distorted notions of capital culture. At the same time that society seeks an approximation with nature, the market takes advantage of this discourse to generate profit – often this approach is not done in a responsible way, due to the environmental perception that is shaped by notions of particular worlds, but it lands on a world cultural system, modeling ways of interaction with the environment and understanding about sustainability.

Thus, we cannot dissociate the fact that the perception of society in relation to nature has a great influence on the creation of the commodified city and the exploited and consumed nature. In fact, the high value attributed to urban soil, the vision of land as a commodity and the privatization of common spaces end up contributing to the worsening of environmental degradation.

This view of the landscape as wealth is undoubtedly deeply rooted in American ideology and reflects its cultural values. It represents the general acceptance of the idea that the land is first a form of capital, and only secondarily the home or a family inheritance. All this land, all resources can be sold at some point if the price is fair. This speculation with the land is an honorable way to make money. Such a vision is a clear mark of a society that is deeply commercial, pragmatic and quantitative in its thinking, and the landscape itself must reflect in itself such characteristics (MEINIG, 2003, page 41).

On the other hand, by incorporating a neoliberal discourse and its practices, the State tends to favor competitive market and private property, to free natural resources for private exploitation and to redirect public money to large companies. Thus, the inequalities generated by these practices can cause discomfort and questions and, more importantly, questions about how to resist this model of city management.

Knowing what kind of city we want is a question that cannot be dissociated from knowing what kind of social bonds, relationships with nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is much more than the individual freedom to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city (HARVEY, 2012, page 74).

We believe it is necessary to rethink the dimension of urban in the environment and the dimension of nature in the city to prevent practices such as these perpetuate themselves in the way of managing cities; especially, when we know that this problem is not unique to the area in question and that such practices are perpetuated by the market in several other places.

Therefore, it is necessary to seek and enable a more democratic city model, establishing a more participatory planning and a more comprehensible development and committed to people and the environment, and not to the working capital and interests of a class. Otherwise, we will only be strengthening the logic of environmental exploitation in favor of capital.

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