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# Contested densification: Sustainability, place and expectations at the urban fringe

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The discourse of sustainability-by-density is dominant in urban policies and climate-friendly urbanism today. Yet, with current failures and disparities in the regulation of dense development and land speculation, the effects of such policies are not exclusively positive. In this article, we address citizen opposition to densification in urban peripheries of the Global North, especially in the North American context, with particular focus on a case at the urban fringe of the Montreal metropolitan area (Canada). We contribute to existing scholarship on a relational approach to urban sustainability with the objective of better understanding the narratives and governance dynamics that unfold in urban peripheries. In the case studied, the gap between residents' subjective experience of the ongoing transformations and the State discourses at different scales is particularly important, yet little understood after several years of public participatory meetings and two lawsuits. We develop the notion of situated expectations to show how actors entertain different expectations of the performance of State and citizen practices in favor of sustainability, which are grounded in their respective relationships to place, scale and the urban boundary. The lack of circulation and mutual recognition between these expectations makes the construction of coalitions and shared participatory governance practices much more problematic.

## KEYWORDS

urban peripheries, densification, urban sustainability, metropolitan governance, place, expectations, suburb

## Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a planning movement to contain urban growth in North America and shift away from urban sprawl (Filion, 2015). Yet, State efforts for compactness and densification have been interpreted as not only overseeing the private sector for environmental protection but also strategically reorienting real estate speculation and development, as part of the urban sustainability fix (While et al., 2004; Dierwechter, 2013; Anderson et al., 2022). In these transformations, local governments are alternately portrayed as either interventionist or geared toward unbridled growth (Peck, 2011; Harris and Lehrer, 2018). Indeed, densification can involve different regulatory approaches by the State resulting in correspondingly different effects on places, people, and the environment at different scales (Touati-Morel, 2015). This wide range of impacts contributes to the fact that the discourse around the universal benefits of urban

densification is being contested, with mistrust in the State's capacity to regulate growth in places that are being rapidly transformed by densification. Yet, this discourse of sustainability-by-density, and the erasure of politics around its implementation, remains dominant (Charmes and Keil, 2015). This is especially the case in a context of climate urbanism in which urban densification becomes both an imperative and an indicator of climate leadership (Rice et al., 2020).

In policies and debates around densification, both the complex geography of urban sustainability, and the structural processes of neoliberal urban development are often obscured (Charmes and Keil, 2015; Miller and Mössner, 2020). Considering densification to limit sprawl as part of the ideology of how cities can save the planet (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020), we are interested in the spatial and temporal politics involved in its promotion and contestation. In this article, we highlight the importance of situated expectations—regarding place, the State, and sustainable urban transformation—in the motivations of densification opponents and in the unfolding of densification-related conflicts.

We specifically focus on citizen opposition to densification in *urban peripheries* of the Global North, especially in the North American context. We embrace the agenda of de-centering scholarship and research from the city to critically interrogate the politics and subjectivities in urban peripheries in relation to discourses and expectations of sustainability developed with the central cities imaginary. We think that densification debates in urban peripheries shed light on the concrete challenges of both urban governance and grassroots coalition-building for the sustainability and climate adaptation of city-regions. What is happening in urban peripheries while urban sustainability-by-density is increasingly becoming a norm and mode of capital accumulation? What coalitions and alternative or complementary narratives are being developed or restrained? What governance and contestation spaces are mobilized?

We use conceptual elements derived from the literature that examines densification as a contested form of urban transformation to analyze and learn from a more-than-two-decade-long case of contested densification in the Montreal metropolitan region. Despite years of participatory public forums, around a hundred municipality-citizen committee meetings, and even two lawsuits, misunderstandings persist.

## Densification as a contested form of urban transformation

A critical literature has emerged on urban density and densification examined as a discourse and political tool—a hegemonic policy epistemology of virtuous sustainable development that needs to be deconstructed (Charmes and Keil, 2015; McFarlane, 2016; Pérez, 2020). Indeed, a historical review of how meanings of the term “density” have been radically transformed in urban planning standards shows that

it can be considered a tool of government and governmentality (Dierwechter, 2013; Pérez, 2020) that potentially imposes a *tabula rasa* worldview on places whose prior qualities are not only minimized but also stereotyped as a social evil. Whereas in the 1960s, urban renewal programs demolished densely populated neighborhoods in the name of hygiene, today low-density spaces are being transformed and rebuilt into condominiums in the name of sustainability. While ongoing efforts to contain urban sprawl are ecologically and socially crucial, the practical impacts of densification standards on places and people must be critically examined, given the current importance and effects of these standards, and the polarizations they generate.

To investigate these impacts, we consider densification as a form of (re)urbanization that is driven by capital accumulation processes while also being affected by situated cultures of planning and State regulation, as well as by citizens' place-making practices. This approach is based on the work of McFarlane (2016) who considered density not just as a sum of people, the built environment, and resources per hectare, but also as an assemblage of ideology, regulation, and (de)investment processes within a context of political economy and cultural politics related to attachments and everyday life. The three dimensions we outline in densification—capital accumulation, State regulation, and resident practices—are similar to the dimensions already outlined in the literature on the production of urban peripheries (Gilbert et al., 2005; Ekers et al., 2012). As argued by Gilbert et al. (2005), the result of these three governance forces is not predetermined. Since they can be in conflict, the product of their interactions for the transformation of urban peripheries will depend on situated power geometries (Massey, 2005) and respective expectations in places and city-regions.

In the following sections, we introduce the contested governance of densification in the urban fringe by presenting (1) the literature on densification policies and the impacts of such urban growth (and growth control) strategies, and (2) the literature on its contestation in urban peripheries. We follow with our conceptual proposal to analyse such debates in terms of *situated expectations*. Indeed, while we build on existing literature to articulate this socio-spatial construction of densification, our primary contribution lies in our emphasis on the importance of *situated expectations* as a key component of contested urban transformation. We then present and discuss our case study.

## Densification policies and growth (control) strategies

In recent years, densification has been discussed as a growth policy which receives more or less traction or contestation in

urban peripheries depending on local political constellations, the planning and regulatory culture and its proximity to developers, and the type of settlement (Phelps, 2012; Leffers and Ballamingie, 2013; Keil, 2015; Touati-Morel, 2015). Most large urban areas in the Global North have been developing densification policies, whether through an interventionist approach in terms of greater State control and the capture of the rent surplus for local infrastructure and services, or in a flexible and neoliberal style where market forces are prompted to densify their development projects without being closely monitored (Touati-Morel, 2015).

The densification objectives pursued by both the State and local authorities can be diverse, and the environmental arguments favoring density can be relatively “plastic” (Tonkiss, 2013; Charmes and Keil, 2015). Densification is, in principle, advocated to protect agricultural land and natural environments by curtailing urban sprawl and reducing automobile usage and hence carbon footprint. In fact, the environmental impacts and ecological value of densification very much depend on related State regulations, choices and investments—for example, public transit connections, location (close to or far from amenities, or potential threat to natural environments), and other incentives for environmentally-friendly habitation and mobility practices within city-regions (Tonkiss, 2013; Rinkinen et al., 2021). Miller and Mössner (2020) have convincingly argued that urban sustainability is often promoted with a focus on singular places, which obscures the complex effects that extend through space, and the wider political economy it contributes to, including regional dynamics of counter-sustainability. Filion (2015) shows the material, political and cultural inertia of car-dependent peripheries that remain unchallenged by current policies. For example, as Roy-Baillargeon (2017) points out, the density standards adopted in the Greater Montreal area were simply density requirements for housing, particularly for that close to public transit. This pressure to densify housing does not address its location in relation to highway infrastructures, nor where services, jobs, and businesses are located. This approach could therefore be confined to simply promoting residential real estate development on sites close to arterial highways and large commercial centers with limited walking access, thereby reinforcing automobility—a trend also observed elsewhere (Tonkiss, 2013, p. 41; Filion, 2015).

While a recent global systemic review of the scientific literature nevertheless argues that densification is positively correlated with more sustainable transport, it also indicates it is negatively associated with ecology, health, and social impacts, dimensions however much less studied (Pont et al., 2020). The norm of sustainability-as-density has been associated with gentrification and higher rents in some parts of Canada as well as elsewhere in the world (Quastel et al., 2012; Bunce, 2017; Rice et al., 2020). This is especially the case when provisions to ensure social and affordable housing

within densification projects are not explicitly included (Quastel et al., 2012; Miller and Mössner, 2020).

As Harris and Lehrer (2018) and Anderson et al. (2022) exemplify, change in urban peripheries is largely related to who actually controls the land, the powers of the growth-regulating authorities, and the actual practices of enforcement, exception, or negotiation that take place (2018, p. 307). In their study of densification policies in the Ottawa region (Canada), Leffers and Ballamingie (2013, p. 1) note that zoning is often explicitly used as a flexible policy tool for “achieving ‘highest and best use’ of private property” through an exercise of power that favors the market over community priorities. For his part, Phelps (2012) emphasizes a differentiation of urban periphery politics depending on each locality’s stage of maturity and demographics. While the “growth machine” hypothesis (Logan and Molotch, 2007) makes sense in new suburbs, the characteristics of territories and their transitions in more mature suburbs, or in suburbs transitioning to functional diversity, generate different political dynamics, depending on the sensitivities and aspirations of their residents. In old, stable and affluent suburbs, the mode of urban politics is more often than not a caretaker or anti-growth regime. Local politics is also different in exurbia where rural landscapes are being transformed from a productive focus to an amenity-economy with residents valuing nature conservation (Hurley, 2013; Taylor and Hurley, 2016).

All these aspects are further complicated by the multiscale politics of growth management. In many city-regions, it is the metropolitan scale of governance that has established city-regional standards for densification, smart growth, and transit-oriented development (TOD) (Filion, 2012; Dierwechter, 2013). This metropolitan scale interacts both with local municipal actors who play a role in urban planning, bylaws, and development, and with different growth coalition projects (McCauley and Murphy, 2013; Miller and Mössner, 2020). The political power of urban peripheries may be too marginal to effectively negotiate their political interests insofar as they are often “vulnerable spaces where rent-seeking strategies can be more aggressive and planning issues of environmental protection, resilience, and sustainable architecture are not self-evidently addressed” (Salet, 2015), or some economic interests may dominate. In some cases, densification and development pressures fall on areas with a history of deregulation and minimal inter-municipal oversight and cooperation (Peck, 2011; Miller and Mössner, 2020); in others, densification conversely occurs in areas with a local planning and regulation culture in which elites and/or grassroots mobilization groups operate within a political caretaker and anti-growth regime (Phelps, 2012).

Given the increasing pressure to develop climate-friendly forms of urban development (including in urban peripheries), we are interested in what metropolitan densification standards produce at the urban fringe in the

face of uncertain local capacity to regulate development (Harris and Lehrer, 2018). The literature shows that it is not because sustainability and densification standards are adopted at the metropolitan scale that local governments have the capacities, tools or interest to regulate development in order to protect environmental amenities or social qualities that residents of different socioeconomic demographics want protected.

## Ambiguous opposition to densification in urban peripheries

Density in the urban fringe is often perceived as antithetical to nature and rurality, and its ecological performance considered all the more questionable. For example, Cadieux (2008) dissects the debates and issues around this “urban edge planning” to highlight different conceptions of the problems and remedies inherent in “creeping urbanization”. Residents see their rural mode of habitat anchored in local, nature-stewardship practices as starkly opposed to the urban periphery densification mode that produces impermeable gray spaces, attracts exotic species, increases the use of automobile commuting, and disfigures the living environment. Opponents to densification in peripheries accordingly perceive densification as more destructive than their own relationship to place and land in the periphery insofar as they subscribe to different visions of nature and different scales to evaluate ecological impacts. Keil and Macdonald (2016) discuss land-use conflicts in greenbelts, including how consumption of land for development (including dense development) is seen as detrimental to creating or maintaining alternative metabolic relationships—for example, in the case of local agriculture, climate change adaptation, and other relationships with non-human life in the urban peripheries.

This is not new, of course. Historians Hays (1987) and Rome (2001) have argued that the urban fringe has been “a major battleground in the conflict between environmental and development objectives” in the post-war period (Hays, 1987, p. 95). Indeed, the transformation of the landscape brought about by massive suburbanization generated considerable opposition in North America, and was interpreted by Rome (2001) as a key element in the growth of the modern environmental movement in the USA and the adoption of environmental regulations for developers. The ambiguity in this movement lay in the contribution of suburbanites who, after directly witnessing the impacts of suburbanization, ultimately came to oppose it by demanding more policies to protect nature and open space and develop a better land ethic. In the early 21st century, Gilbert et al. (2005) reiterated a similar analysis for Canadian communities: “The irony of suburban and exurban development is that residents in their quests for ‘pristine’ nature

may become more exclusive, as well as agents who threaten ecological integrity at the same time as their vigilance enables environmental conservation” (2005, p. 382).

Local suburban and peri-urban mobilizations have built on science and used planning tools to protect ecological amenities in their living environment (Rome, 2001; Gilbert et al., 2005; Taylor and Hurley, 2016). In the process, participatory forms of environmental management and conservation were developed locally as an alternative—or at least a complement—to market self-regulation and universal State regulatory norms in decentralized spaces promoted for their potential to benefit from more deliberative input based on local knowledge and praxis (Sabel et al., 2000). In such processes, residents opposed development and its conservation-subordinating growth discourse and often partnered with planners and green advocates.

In recent years, however, an important contextual change has affected the reception of citizen opposition to development in urban peripheries. Indeed, opposition to dense development goes against the hegemonic norm of sustainability-by-density, which has become part of the urban sustainability fix (While et al., 2004; Goodling et al., 2015; Anderson et al., 2022). Charmes and Keil (2015) argue that the discourse of density as a new environmental norm serves the interests of growth-oriented coalitions by dismissing the opposition of residents who advocate preserving quality of life, the local environment, and the original vision of a rural setting or a suburban utopia. In this context, it has become more difficult to form coalitions between resident activists, planners, and progressive environmentalists.

For Charmes and Keil (2015), “the defensive politics of suburbanites vis-à-vis continuous development is not just a defensive stance of private interests” (2015, p. 589–590), it is also about defending the use value of urban space vs. its exchange value for developers and speculators (Logan and Molotch, 2007). Nonetheless, the defense of nature and rurality is still associated with the preservation of private property values. The representations of the places and aesthetics to be “saved” can be seen as typical landscapes of privilege for the white upper-class (Duncan and Duncan, 2003; Hurley, 2013). We think that understanding the meanings of such political activism requires a careful study of the representations and expectations of the individuals and groups involved in the particular contexts where densification is both a discourse of sustainability and a mode of capital accumulation with unequal State regulation.

In the climate emergency context, densification is increasingly proclaimed as the solution in cities and urban peripheries where negative impacts are being witnessed (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020; Rice et al., 2020). In parallel, low-density urban peripheries are also beginning to be considered differently in terms of their potential for nature-based solutions, green infrastructure for climate adaptation and carbon capture, and the implementation of circular metabolisms (Teicher et al., 2021). This trend could move policies closer to the visions

and practices of residents at the urban fringe as described by Cadieux (2008) as well as Keil and Macdonald (2016). However, these visions of an alternative role for urban peripheries do not currently seem to be nearly as structuring for policies and State instruments as the demands for densification (Wynne et al., 2020; Teicher et al., 2021).

In several studies, we see that the contestation of densification relates to different visions of nature and dwelling place (Cadieux, 2008; Ruming et al., 2012; Keil and Macdonald, 2016). At the same time, the governance of densification is also a factor in citizen opposition, as scholars speak of issues of political autonomy and local democracy, and people's faith in the State planning apparatus and regulation of developers. The literature shows that scholars and activists in different places have wondered to what extent densification is promoted as a mode of capital accumulation; what values are prioritized; how is the population's input included and represented; and who is privileged in these processes.

This brings us to our next section, which conceptualizes the expectations around the performance of governance tools mobilized for the densification of urban peripheries.

## Situated expectations

We have outlined above our conceptualization of the densification of peripheries, inspired by McFarlane (2016) and others: a process of development driven by capital accumulation, modulated by State regulations and situated planning cultures, and transformed, resisted or reproduced by resident place-making practices, in their interactions with the State and private developers projects. These different dimensions of the governance of densification are important not only in their past and present configurations. What we add to the current scholarly debates is how they are also important in their expected performance in the future, to transform urban peripheries and the wider urban structure.

In the paragraphs below, we discuss the spatio-temporal dynamics of the governance of densification, starting with the notion of expectations. We then discuss the key spatialities where tensions around densification crystallize, namely: the metropolitan scale of governance, the urban boundary, and place. Together, these concepts help us adopt an approach of situated expectations—with a situated understanding of densification conflicts that takes into account specific assemblages of actors and materialities, and their respective relationships to expected urban transformation.

## Expectations

The concept of expectations has been extensively discussed in the sociology of science and technology as “the state of

looking forward” with all the promises, hopes, concerns and perceived risks entailed (Borup et al., 2006, p. 286). This literature emphasizes how expectations can be performative inasmuch as they influence positions, debates, and decisions on plans or investment today. Oomen et al. (2022, p. 254) have reviewed different approaches that analyze “how images of and expectations for ‘the future’ structure decision-making and social organization.” To begin with, expectations operate not by their factuality but through their credibility for people—a type of prospection (positive or negative) that orients people's actions and evaluations of the current state of affairs. Expectations are accordingly formed through imaginaries and discourses that reinforce the credibility of a future state (for example, the credibility of a policy or regulation in terms of producing its promised effects), as well as through concrete practices that reproduce and circulate this imaginary. Second, expectations also come in the form of emotional investments and affects in relation to anticipated futures—notably, when a loss is anticipated. Finally, the material organization of society “structures what is thought as possible” (Oomen et al., 2022, p. 256). The materiality of a site, together with its landscape and infrastructure, display certain possibilities and encourage certain modes of anticipation more than others. Low-density and car-dependent environments are cited as examples of material obduracy that can structure imaginaries of the future.

If we return to our topic of contested densification, expectations could be nurtured by people's faith in the regulatory instruments of local governments or the State to deliver as planned, or by emotional investment in the anticipation of a loss during a place transformation. These expectations can be an integral part of people's reasons for either opposing, modifying, or contributing to a given densification policy. Yet, expectations are not free-floating phenomena. They are anchored in particular practices, experiences, and materialities (Borup et al., 2006; Oomen et al., 2022), and, especially, in particular geographies. In the following paragraphs, we discuss our proposal of three spatialities where densification conflicts crystallize, contributing to people's expectations of urban transformation.

## The metropolitan scale of governance

The first element in the different spatialities playing out in debates about urban periphery densification is the metropolitan scale of governance (at least in urban areas where it has been institutionalized). Geographers have discussed the power-laden politics of scale whereby competing representations define different scales at which problems ought to be understood and fixed (Brenner, 2002). The different protagonists in such politics naturalize certain scales as associated with greater expected future benefits. For example, in the early 21st century, the emergence of new forms of metropolitan governance were



extensively covered in the academic literature (Brenner, 2002; Boudreau et al., 2006). The metropolitan scale of governance was expected to reinforce a political community at the “right scale” and thereby improve cohesion across the city-region, enhance environmental protection, and accelerate economic growth (Brenner, 2002). This metropolitan scale of State action was politicized in relation to other scales, notably with the local scale where political autonomy can be idealized, and with the national scale where governmental agenda and standards are promoted (Boudreau et al., 2006).

This metropolitan politics of scale is related to density debates. Although the institutionalization of these new governance spaces involves issues that go beyond sustainability, planning regulations and standards around “smart growth”, transit oriented development and the control of urban sprawl were among their key outputs (Filion, 2012; Dierwechter, 2013). The concept of density came to acquire the status of a self-evident and indisputable standard of sustainability in the urban sprawl containment movement (Charmes and Keil, 2015; Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020). Density has accordingly become a primary regulatory tool along urban growth boundaries to bring “undisciplined” suburbs into line or to form cooperative arrangements between central cities and their suburbs to support smart growth.

In certain instances, particularly in the Greater Montreal region, the new State spaces were opposed by advocates of local autonomy who had different conceptions of democracy, local autonomy, and the need to protect local identities, especially linguistic ones (Boudreau, 2003; Tomàs, 2012). There were also older regional institutions which came in conflict with the new metropolitan entity. The desire for political autonomy and local power over place-making remains a defining issue of ambitions and tensions in urban peripheries (Boudreau, 2003; Peck, 2011). Its importance will affect residents’ emotional investment for or against the metropolitan scale of governance, its associated planning tools, and the expectations of their contribution to urban transformation.

## Urban boundary(ies)

Another spatiality that emerges from the literature on the redevelopment of urban peripheries concerns the boundary(ies) that demarcate the urban/rural fringe, where the very identity of the urban and the rural is negotiated at the edge of the metropolitan area. In post-suburbs and most dispersed city-regions today, the morphology does not allow for clear demarcations between urban, suburban, and rural areas. The “green” periphery space at the fringe, notably the greenbelts studied by Keil and Macdonald (2016), is “a negotiated space of societal relationships with nature that connect urban and non-urban activities” (p. 167). It is “a landscape created by the fusion of urban and rural ideas, processes, and materialities”

(Taylor and Hurley, 2016, p.2). Yet, urban growth boundaries or urban perimeters demarcating zones of greater density have become mechanisms of delineation that control which territories and natural environments are to be protected and which are to be developed and in what ways.

The urban perimeter is not only a boundary for policies to control urban sprawl, it is also becoming a boundary for development and real estate profitability, with land prices already skyrocketing in anticipation of the possible urbanization of agricultural land (Harris and Lehrer, 2018; Anderson et al., 2022). The strategy of directing growth into urban perimeters creates an even greater real estate boom in the intra-metropolitan space, given the higher profitability of dense real estate projects. This increase in property values can make it more difficult for municipalities to protect natural environments. This pressure is added to the inequalities and differences in the capacities and cultures of planning and development control in small municipalities on urban peripheries, as highlighted by Salet (2015).

In some instances of the urban-rural fringe, this development and densification pressure occurs in a context where, for a variety of reasons (including the promotion of green real estate, Hurley, 2013), rurality and access to green and open spaces are valued as integral characteristics of place enabling for certain relations between humans, fauna and flora that do not easily fit with a stark boundary between the urban and its outside. As a result, the regulatory context becomes an arena of negotiation and tension that accentuates the differences between metropolitan space (often characterized as urban or suburban) and its exterior (rural), where forms of attachment and relationships can be more diverse, complex, and fluid.

## Place

Geographers have indirectly discussed the performativity of expectations in speaking of how different framings of the past, present, and future of a place contribute to collective action and conflict. The past is recalled in how it shapes both a place’s present and its future possibilities, for example, in relation to the long-lasting and situated effects of colonialism, racism, and uneven development (McCann, 2003; Goodling et al., 2015; Ranganathan, 2021). A place-frame constitutes a selective representation of a given place propounded in a conflict and/or collective mobilization. It is a discourse that “voices a certain shared experience of place” (Martin, 2003).

Moreover, some politics of place cannot easily be understood by considering only discourses and representations. Studies in political ecology have shown the value of examining the everyday practices of place-making, dwelling, and community-building associated with subjectivities and forms of attachment

whereby certain lifestyles and representations are reproduced, transformed or invisibilized (Robbins, 2007; Cadieux, 2008; Taylor and Hurley, 2016). Everyday practices and attachments in places influence local cultures, and responses to development pressures (Martin, 2003; Gilbert et al., 2005). As Pierce et al. (2011) neatly summarized, a sense of place refers to the “affective experience of locatedness—of being here—[which] is iteratively created and recreated through social and political processes” (2011, p. 55). The affective expectations of densification relate to its perceived relationship to place and associated place-making practices in everyday life.

However, the politics of place should not be understood in a strictly local or territorial way. For Amin (2004), a relational politics of place can be understood as “different micro-worlds find[ing] themselves on the same proximate turf” (2004, p. 39), in which the prevailing power geometry makes certain micro-worlds, practices, and representations more audible than others. The different worlds that participate in the politics of place are not only locally defined, they can also be defined in terms of aspects such as a national identity, metropolitan norms of densification, global norms of biodiversity conservation, and political projects for a region or a city, all of which coalesce and meet in debates over specific sites or places (Pierce et al., 2011).

These three spatialities—the metropolitan scale of governance, the urban boundary, and place—are often involved in densification debates. Each of these spatialities enables us to study how actors respectively position themselves in relation to the role of the State and local governments, real estate development pressures, the dynamics of growth coalitions, and everyday practices in urban peripheries, and thereby understand the sociopolitical construct of densification (McFarlane, 2020), today and in the future.

## Methods

We chose to study these processes in the Greater Montreal region where they have been scantily documented in recent years despite the region’s tumultuous history of municipal amalgamation and metropolitan governance (Boudreau et al., 2006; Tomàs, 2012). We identified a case of contested densification at the urban fringe which was visible in the public sphere (e.g., in local and national media and planning events) and involved sustained citizen mobilization. We analyzed the following documentary sources: the local and regional press, urban planning documents, committee minutes and council meeting videos at the municipal level, and records of court proceedings and judgments. We also conducted 12 interviews with residents as well as with professionals and political representatives at the municipal, regional and metropolitan levels. Interviews and documents were coded in

Nvivo software using the following terms (“nodes”, Saldana, 2012): place, landscape, metropolitan norms, participatory committees, TOD and density. With this analysis, three different narratives of the same conflict were identified in the particular town studied. Each narrative consists in bundled segments of texts and interviews that show a recurring set of associations between place, metropolitan norms, participatory committees, and density. The urban boundary and climate change nodes were added during coding as well. Three distinct narratives of the conflict experience were produced by these methods, with each narrative representing a particular set of expectations of what urban transformations prevailing planning and governance practices were contributing to.

## Context and case study: Recent history of planning and place-making at the urban fringe

It is relevant to explain some aspects of the regulatory context and spatial planning culture in Canada before describing the locality and urban region where this contested densification took place. To begin with, there is no binding spatial planning at the federal level in Canada. Although Canadian municipalities are technically responsible for zoning and planning, their powers are constrained by their respective provinces. Municipalities depend on property tax revenues tied to development within their boundaries, which explains the dynamics of growth coalitions. Nonetheless, in the case of land use planning, the provincial government provides guidance that metropolitan, regional and municipal governments must follow according to a set of Russian-doll-type compliance mechanisms whereby local zoning bylaws must be consistent with the municipal plan, which, in turn, must be consistent with both the regional plan and the metropolitan plan. Historically, the provincial government in Quebec has also shaped municipal policy through municipal annexations, the creation of new regional and metropolitan authorities (particularly between 2002 and 2006 when mergers and demergers took place on the Island of Montreal and the Montreal Metropolitan Community (MMC) was established), and farmland protection policies (Boudreau, 2003). Although there are no greenbelts in Quebec (unlike in Ontario), Quebec’s agricultural land protection act has often been associated with reducing urban sprawl. In practice, however, this “legislation and its accompanying regulations clearly provide opportunities to pursue diffuse urbanism, sometimes even encouraging it, in spite of its denial in principle” (Côté et al., 2014, p. 391). While the protection of agricultural land in Quebec has reduced urban sprawl, mechanisms for agricultural zone exclusion and developer tactics to exert pressure on this front have

significantly compromised the amount of farmland in the province over time.

Mont-Saint-Hilaire, the town studied, is located 35 km south of downtown Montreal and is one of 82 MMC municipalities in the third ring of peri-urban municipalities around Montreal. With a population of 19,178 in 2020 ([Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2019](#)), the town occupies a land area of 44 km<sup>2</sup>, 40% of which is agricultural and about a fourth is a UNESCO-designated biosphere reserve (CMM, 2021). Initiatives to protect natural environments in the area go back a long way with Andrew Hamilton Gault's bequest of the mountain to McGill University in 1958, protests by artist Ozias Leduc against the mountain's degradation, and well before that by Abenaki people who used it for gatherings. The town and mountain is indeed on the Ndaqinna, ancestral territory of the Waban-Aki Nation, and "Wigwômadenizibo," its name in Abenaki, means "the small mountain in the shape of a house" ([Gault Natural Reserve McGill University, 2021](#)).

The town's residents, especially those who live near the mountain, are generally well-off. Since the 1990s and still today, the average income in the municipality is a little higher than the surrounding region, and much higher than that in the Greater Montreal region. In 2015, average household income was \$90,464, compared to \$85,664 for the local region and \$61,835 for the Greater Montreal region (2016 census). Moreover, these income levels are much higher in the district adjacent to the mountain.

Citizen mobilization against real estate development near the mountain goes back a few decades. In 1988, an *ad hoc* committee asked the city to slow down development near the mountain road, a mobilization that led to a moratorium on development in this area for 10 years. After this pause, one area at the foot of the mountain (Foyer Savoie, where a former education and health center for epileptic youth had been built in 1946 and subsequently closed in 1988) was targeted for residential development. In response to vigorous local mobilization, the municipality bought part of the area to restore it to a natural state and reintegrate it with the mountain's natural environment. One of the more specific reasons for doing so was to save the local habitat of the peregrine falcon, an endangered species threatened by mineral extraction on the other side of the mountain. With the help of local citizens, the built infrastructure was demolished (health center, parking lot, and tennis court), 7,000 trees were planted, and four ponds created, all within a new conservation park ([Réseau Nature](#)). This was an important event in the accounts of the people we interviewed. In 2002, another committee was created to protect the mountain's perimeter by proposing measures to conserve and expand the woodlands in the other residential and agricultural areas surrounding it. This led to large-lot residential zoning, which protected trees but further reduced lot affordability. Local actors also participated to forums to enhance the protection of all eight Monteregian Hills (including Mont Saint-Hilaire) in the Montreal area.

The town of Mont-Saint-Hilaire experienced its highest recent population growth in the period from 2001 to 2011, increasing overall from 14,556 inhabitants in 2001 to 18,200 in 2011, before stabilizing at 19,178 in 2020 ([Statistique Canada, 2012](#); [CMM, 2021b](#)). This growth was primarily accompanied by the construction of more single-family and semi-detached homes until the trend reversed in 2011. Whereas single-family home construction initially accounted for around half of all new housing starts in the municipality, apartment units began to dominate by 2011, accounting for two-thirds of new housing in 2020. There is now very little vacant land in the municipality that is not zoned agricultural ([CMM, 2021b](#)). The reduction in the construction of single-family homes makes sense given the metropolitan policies adopted in the last 10 years. Indeed, the Town of Mont-Saint-Hilaire is part of the MMC territory covered by the new metropolitan plan adopted in 2012, 11 years after the MMC's creation, a delay caused by political challenges to the adoption of an overall plan for the city-region.

The aim of 2012 metropolitan plan is to densify the built environment and direct 40% of household growth within its territory into 155 TOD areas ([CMM, 2012](#)). Compared to other major Canadian cities, Greater Montreal was lagging behind in adopting such a policy that had emerged as a model for turning the tide of urban sprawl ([Filion, 2012](#)). For the Greater Montreal region, TOD has been interpreted as a means of achieving consensus around the metropolitan plan, consolidating urban growth, and facilitating greater access to public transit and high-density development around commuter rail stations, thereby restoring property taxes to the municipalities concerned ([Maulat et al., 2018](#), p. 5). The case of Mont-Saint-Hilaire is noteworthy, given the active local mobilization against the metropolitan plan. Much of the discussion in Montreal and elsewhere has focused on the implementation of TOD areas near public transit stations ([Roy-Baillargeon, 2017](#); [Maulat et al., 2018](#)). On the other hand, the metropolitan plan also includes densification standards outside TOD areas, including in Mont Saint-Hilaire where they have been strongly contested and debated.

A few months after the MMC adopted its metropolitan plan in 2012, a real estate project for a zone adjacent to Mont Saint-Hilaire was submitted to the municipality, and the mayor presented the project to the population at a town meeting. While the future of the municipality's district near the TOD station did not generate strenuous objections, the future of the zone at the foot of Mont Saint-Hilaire stirred passions. In fact, Quebec's agricultural land protection commission (CPTAQ) had previously excluded the area from the revised permanent agricultural zone at the municipality's request, given that the municipality had included this area within its urbanization perimeter in 1992. Nevertheless, in response to significant citizen mobilization at the time, the municipality continued to protect this area under a non-development moratorium. As



soon as the moratorium ended, property owners in the area asked permission to develop. Adoption of the metropolitan plan brought these requests to the forefront, given that the plan called for higher density on this land. As a result, the future of this area and of development around the mountain became the municipality's main electoral issue in 2013 when the then mayor committed to "stop development on Mont-Saint-Hilaire land in order to analyze the Town's future" (Cour supérieure, 2018).

In conjunction with the specific debates about this area, the municipality set up a metropolitan planning and development advisory committee (CC-PMAD) in 2014 to study possible exceptions to the metropolitan plan. The terms of reference for the committee (composed of four citizens, three municipal councilors from the affected areas, and the town's director of land use planning and environment) were to provide input to the municipal council. The CC-PMAD (2014) convened 20 times, during which it consulted with various stakeholders to submit a progress report containing more than 179 recommendations to adapt the MMC plan to the town's realities and priorities (CC-PMAD, 2014). Although the committee was happy with the MMC plan's objectives to demarcate urbanization and curtail urban sprawl, it criticized the process and identified three flexibility measures that would, in its opinion, accommodate the Town of Mont-Saint-Hilaire's specific characteristics, including reducing density in certain areas and taking steps to protect landscape, ecology, and heritage.

In parallel, consultations in the town continued around the need for a new master plan, bearing in mind that this plan was now also required to comply with the MMC's metropolitan plan. The contested area next to the mountain has been one of the areas receiving the most comment in these consultations. In response to residents' representations in December 2016, the municipality announced that it would study the possibility of having no residential development in the contested Zone A-16 and even of acquiring it for conservation purposes. A new CASA-16 committee (composed of both citizens and municipal officials) to reflect on the future of the zone was also created and met a total of 52 times. Following this committee's recommendations and the municipality's announcement of strategies to exempt Zone A-16 from dense development standards, several owners in the area filed a lawsuit against the municipality.

We now present three narratives of this contested densification. The first representations are those heard from outside the town and in the court judgement, the second are those of the majority of local citizens involved, and the third are citizen experts who tried to connect metropolitan plan priorities with local residents' situated experiences and expectations. Each narrative is presented in relation to (1) the representations of the metropolitan scale of governance, (2) the boundary and place-making at the urban fringe, and (3) the expectations of urban transformation as a result of densification.

## Three narratives of contested densification

### An undisciplined suburb

On May 22, 2020, a Quebec Superior Court judge ruled against Mont-Saint-Hilaire in a lawsuit filed by owners of property in the contested area (Zone A-16). The judge concluded that two of the municipality's bylaws curtailing residential development in the area were inoperative. The property owners, who had been waiting for years to develop their land, had lost patience and were challenging the legality of the bylaws on the grounds that they constituted a form of disguised expropriation that ran counter to metropolitan plans for residential density in the urban perimeter. Their suit also challenged the municipality's actions (including the above-described committees) which "would have thwarted the development of a new residential district and the realization of the full market value of the properties concerned" (Cour supérieure, 2018).

The municipality defended itself by arguing that the zoning was temporary, pending the development of detailed planning for Zone A-16. In fact, this is what the municipality had been stating since 2016, namely, that the zoning is intended to "freeze" development, pending reports and the formulation of a specific planning program for the area [Ville de Mont-Saint-Hilaire (VMSH), 2016]. In 2018, the municipality had appointed a committee to evaluate different scenarios for the area. No landscape study or planning document was produced during this committee's 3 years of operation and 52 meetings. That is why the judge criticized not only the bylaws but also the participatory methods used to justify the development freeze. The CASA-16 committee was portrayed as being infiltrated with development opponents and deliberately stalling. In his decision, the judge stated:

The prolonged freeze on residential development in Zone A-16 thwarts the will of the legislator, the MMC, and the regional county municipality to concentrate new construction within the urbanization perimeter. In the Court's view, this is a clear case of "Not in my backyard (NIMBY)" syndrome. However, it is not a chimerical wish to concentrate urbanization zones outside agricultural land. Indeed, it is more than just lip service and wishful thinking; it is a national strategy to combat global warming by countering urban sprawl and adequately protecting agricultural land.

In this representation of the debates, the metropolitan territory is represented as the territory and coherent scale to combat climate change through residential density standards. Indeed, the judge pointed out that "the Town is behaving as if the fight against global warming does not concern its residents,

despite the fact that they are located within the MMC (in reality, the most densely populated area of Quebec).” The municipality’s actions were portrayed as those of an undisciplined child.

Is the municipality’s location on the boundary of the metropolitan territory problematized in this representation? What kind of fringe is Mont-Saint-Hilaire in this narrative? Two representations of Mont-Saint-Hilaire and Zone A-16 as a boundary space can be distinguished, which reinforce this discourse. The first boundary is the MMC perimeter. The MMC published its first 10-year report on its metropolitan plan in 2021. The report notes that the MMC’s greatest success within its boundaries in the past 20 years has been the achievement of its densification objectives and the reduction in single-family housing construction (from 70% of construction in peri-urban municipalities in 2002 to 15% in 2020). However, the less promising picture shifts just beyond the MMC perimeter where “residential sprawl based primarily on the construction of single-family detached homes with high space consumption” is occurring. This aspect is sharply criticized by the MMC’s elected officials at public meetings and in the media. This problematization of the boundary reinforces the importance of peri-urban municipalities, including Mont Saint-Hilaire, to “lead by example” and “educate the population” about the benefits of densification (CMM, 2021a).

The second interpretation of the urban boundary is that of urbanization arriving there de facto, once agricultural zoning in this area has been removed. In the court’s judgement, Zone A-16 is portrayed as being “sandwiched between two residential neighborhoods” (Judgment 2020, p. 7), and as being part of a “developable space since 1992,” when the municipality asked it to be removed from the agricultural zone. A government expert expressed a similar view.

In practice, density is often used as an excuse to simply not develop. It’s the argument that certain pressure groups use to reject development [...] The development of Zone A-16 is not urban sprawl. Urban sprawl means encroaching on an agricultural zone within the meaning of the agricultural land protection act. This is not sprawl, it’s an area that has been removed from the agricultural zone since 1992 and is therefore intended for urbanization [...] an area that has been slowly transformed over the past 30 years.

For example, according to this expert, Zone A-16 has been intended for development since it is no longer “zoned agricultural” under provincial law, even though the current usage of apple orchards had been retained and the municipality has not allowed any new residential development since then due to public objections. In this area “being transformed,” several interviewees spoke of tensions between residents and orchard practices, for example, complaints about pesticides, disruptive machinery, etc., which seem to have resulted in the abandonment of some commercial orchards. On the other hand,

another resident referred to an explicit tactic to minimize the importance of agriculture. He described how an investor, who was buying up land in almost all parts of the south bank of the river near the highway, bought an orchard, let it deteriorate, and then eventually razed it. In due course, when the road was being repaired, he used that land to store “earth, sand, gravel, pipes, road repair scrap, and so on. When you go to the former orchard in a strategic location, you find 18 inches of scrap... The municipality then says that the land needs to be developed because it’s covered with scrap.”

This story contrasts markedly with residents’ opposition in 1997 to the Foyer Savoie residential project also at the foot of the mountain, which culminated in municipal acquisition of a built area, and restoration of it to a natural state.

As a site exemplifying part of an “undisciplined suburb” that refuses to densify, Zone A-16 thus falls within a series of expectations about transforming metropolitan urbanization to protect agricultural land and densify near public transit—expectations to which it is also required to contribute. What matters more in this representation is the location of Zone A-16 within both the urbanization perimeter and the MMC boundary.

## Protecting place against the hegemony of metropolitan-driven development

The remarks made in various Mont-St-Hilaire settings—the town council, public participation, and citizen committees—are very different. Membership in the MMC is presented as a deal made by political elites whereby elected officials had to agree to join the MMC and comply with its planning and densification standards in order to have a commuter train station in their municipality. This incorporation into the “big city” seems absurd to the majority of citizens interviewed and the TOD procedures inefficient, albeit laudable. The view that people under the TOD regime “don’t have a car, so they take the train to Montreal, then they come back, picking up their baguettes on the way home.” is not highly thought of: “It’s never been like that because we’re too far away.” However, this is not necessarily the case, for statistics show a higher increased use of public transit from the town in the morning in the wake of TOD.<sup>1</sup> Yet, belief in this transformation of urbanization through a TOD vision is not very widespread among the people we met. Even though views differ on what the contested Zone A-16 should become, Mont-Saint-Hilaire’s mobilized residents and political elite are equally resistant to the “suburb” designation

1 From 2013 to 2018, outbound public transit use in Mont-Saint-Hilaire increased in the morning from 10% to 16.5% compared with an increase of only 10.8% to 11.7% for the southern ring of suburbs as a whole during the same period [Observatoire Grand Montréal (OGM), 2021, p. 43; CMM, 2012, p. 9; CMM, 2019, p. 9].

in which they are placed in this urbanization arrangement as well as to all its implications. They feel that the metropolitan framework favors real estate development and homogenizing, suburban-type growth.

It [the metropolitan plan] has become a handicap; it's become a white elephant; it never achieved the scale it was supposed to, and it's made all the vacant land in Mont-Saint-Hilaire subject to it. That's why we're being forced to densify around Highway 116, around public transit—not just the train, the bus too. And this changes the face of Mont-Saint-Hilaire. Mont-Saint-Hilaire is the river, it's the mountain, it's apple orchards. It's not Beloeil, it's not Saint-Bruno, it's not Longueuil—it's Mont-Saint-Hilaire. We're in the process of losing our identity and appearance—in other words, the reasons why people come to live in Mont-Saint-Hilaire in the first place.

The suburb label is associated with a series of elements, a place-frame from which the citizens want to dissociate themselves because it is not their rural living niche in the countryside. Most of the people we interviewed participated in the numerous public sessions to consult about Mont Saint-Hilaire's new master plan. Many were disappointed by the gap between the plan and its implementation. In the master plan, for example, an area at the entrance to the municipality was to be developed as a small heart-of-the-village-type commercial sector: "Following the consultation with citizens, the sustainable master plan proposed an ideally pedestrian street with exclusively local merchants, a bike path, a meeting place, neighborhood life, a sense of belonging, something warm and cuddly that really develops that feeling." Businesses like a small bakery have already set up shop there and the people we met appreciate them. Despite this guideline in the plan, the municipality allowed a large grocery store to open in the vicinity, which upset several residents: "That required parking, which meant that it was no longer a pedestrian street; the big-box store would have completely changed the area's image." The bakery owner sued the municipality, which led to an out-of-court settlement to move the big-box grocery store elsewhere.

Densification, in the minds of its opponents, is part of a cycle of growth and place transformation: "When asphalt and concrete invade our countryside!" (RAP citizen brief 2016, p. 7). Another often-cited example of unsuccessful participatory municipal planning concerns maximum density standards. In participatory workshops, citizens were asked to choose where they would be willing to increase the density of the built environment with minimum density thresholds the focus of these discussions. Mobilized citizens only discovered much later that the municipality can also set maximum density and building height thresholds—to preserve views, landscapes, and sensitive environments, for example. This is often cited as evidence of the bad faith of elected officials and the participatory process, which is only there to facilitate real estate

development. Densification is therefore associated with a laissez-faire approach to the development and quality of the built environment, while at the same time seemingly inconsistent with protecting landscapes, natural environments, and sustainable mobility. Some iconic scenes—views of the mountain when entering the town, the historic path to the mountain, the apple orchards, and so on—are disappearing and being replaced or hidden by condominiums. This "hurts people"—"they say that Mont-Saint-Hilaire is a nature, art and heritage town. That's the slogan on the map. However, when you come here and see two big modern buildings, all glass, four storeys high, you don't feel like you're entering a nature town."

What kind of fringe is Mont-Saint-Hilaire in this narrative? For the residents we met, Zone A-16 is a boundary space between the mountain's natural ecosystems and the low-density residential spaces around it. The challenge with this boundary space is about how to protect nature, mountain views, and the landscape as key features of the residents' living environment. It is also a boundary space between urban and rural—between the urbanized residential sectors and the agricultural zone with its remaining orchards. In the briefs from citizen committees submitted to the public consultation in 2016, Zone A-16 is described not as a pure nature and heritage place but rather as a strategic transition space whose rural character should be preserved, enhanced, and co-created with the residents.

Outside the participatory spaces to consult about planning (which almost the entire population has lost confidence in), residents also told us about certain concrete resident practices that shaped Mont-Saint-Hilaire as part of Montreal's urban fringe. These include: an agri-tourism project to showcase the history of the orchards and negotiate agriculture-landscape-urbanization; efforts to establish walking trails with rights-of-way on private land around the mountain; regulations to allow and encourage alternative plantings to grass on private property; and the construction of a museum (now managed by Indigenous leaders) to promote the culture and history of Indigenous communities in the area while also protecting and promoting a maple grove. A resident committee also succeeded in financing an independent study on the ecological value of the Zone A-16, to fill the gap of the local government inaction in this regard. These practices are described by residents as embodying a different relationship to life, place and land than what is proposed by local authorities. At the same time, some of these projects have encountered difficulties and opposition, linked to a desire to protect assets and privileges, and in some cases exclusive or racist views on the town's design and landscape—a resident recalled being harassed and threatened when developing his project of an Indigenous art museum, another speaks of wealthy residents opposing walking trails on their properties around the mountain, a planner laments that the protection of wood has gentrified the surroundings of the mountains. The interview segments show how such dynamics participated in residents' difficulties in creating a sense of collective identity around their cause of place protection.

In terms of expectations for the future, development of Zone A-16 is expected to strengthen a “vicious circle” that will force its development, in the absence of action by public authorities to purchase or strictly regulate the perimeter around the mountain where land values continue to increase. The place is expected to become homogenized and suburbanized, with nature and landscape on both public and private land being irreversibly sacrificed. The green, natural spaces around homes will disappear as soon as residents need to sell them. The pressure from traffic is also expected to rapidly transform the place, given the existing automobility system and the density-driven incoming population. The current size and form of the streets near the mountain are reminiscent of its history—narrow, non-linear, with little space to expand on either side. The people we met were worried that increasing pressure for more road capacity would further destroy the landscape and its rural character.

## Planning for a sustainable place in the MMC: Hopes and disappointments

Some of the people who participated in this lengthy dispute were deeply committed to protecting Mont-Saint-Hilaire’s nature and landscape *while also* believing in the metropolitan plan’s potential. Their reading of the plan was much more positive than that of other citizens because they saw that it also contained objectives to protect and enhance heritage, landscapes, and natural environments. Their expectations were that the planning and governance system would foster a sensitive and adapted approach to make metropolitan norms meaningful in the Mont-Saint-Hilaire context. In this narrative, experience of, and disappointments in, densification governance are crucially important.

One citizen involved in the consultation about the metropolitan plan had faith in its potential to protect landscapes, green areas, and natural environments. Yet, with time, he realized that objectives on these elements had absolutely no teeth when compared to compliance with density norms and zoning bylaws.

It’s all very well to talk about landscapes, but no non-compliance notices have ever been issued because nothing was ever done. So, yes, we identify landscapes, that’s fine on a map, but excuse my bluntness, we don’t believe any of it. There are a lot of things that look good in the PMAD [metropolitan plan], but in the end it just sits on the shelf. What counts is density.

For another person, densification of the contested zone went counter to the most basic tenet of sustainable, dense urbanism—“location, location, location”—because the zone was not adjacent to public transit. If these citizens expected the

metropolitan plan to contain some growth regulation levers, they were disappointed. Indeed, in the MMC’s eyes, municipal and regional planning bodies were the agencies responsible for developing a more modulated approach to densification, including the protection of heritage and green spaces. Although the MMC could not legislate in specific ways, the plan allowed for modulations and exceptions, if well documented and agreed to by municipal and regional political bodies. The MMC stressed the importance of respecting local autonomy in that regard, even if it recognized that in this case it was a supra-local issue relevant to the harmonious equilibrium between urbanization and preserving nature and landscape across all eight Monteregian Hills on the Montreal region’s south shore.

This metropolitan approach to let regional and municipal authorities handle the details of how to “regionalize density” (choosing where to densify more and less in the region while respecting the overall standard regionally) and preserve locally-valued landscapes and natural spaces contrasts with how the town mayor portrayed densification governance. He focused on a local/metropolitan dichotomy and repeated in municipal council that the metropolitan agency was imposing higher-density development. This infuriated some of the more expert citizens: “Not many people bother to focus on municipal policy in general because they’re already busy in their daily lives. So, if they take a minute, they’ll say it’s not the municipality’s fault, it’s the MMC’s.” Yet, they saw that there were ways for municipalities and regional authorities to demand modulations and conditions in relation to densification. Even though elected largely on this issue in 2013 and in 2017, the mayor did not take clear action apart from creating municipal-citizen committees and holding public participatory meetings to work on different planning scenarios.

Citizens (including local experts who had considerable confidence in local democracy) initially held a favorable view of reliance on participatory planning. We can recall the episode in which some of them had participated in the 1990s, and which others had been told about: the preservation and renaturalization of the Foyer Savoie at the foot of the mountain. In early 2000, people had also mobilized to design regulatory measures to protect and enhance wooded areas around the mountain. In other words, they had experienced fruitful and effective collaborations between citizen committees and the municipal council to protect nature, landscape, and culture.

The creation of a committee to reflect on how to adjust the metropolitan plan to Mont-Saint-Hilaire reality was thus welcomed. The recommendations of the first committee in 2014-16 were ambivalent: they supported the metropolitan plan but identified specific mechanisms to have it adapted locally, which required the approval of the regional authority (the regional county municipality). This did not seem more difficult to achieve than previous battles in Mont-Saint-Hilaire. Yet, the context of land speculation has changed. Restricting the right to develop implies a capital loss and the risk of being sued,



which did happen. Possibly because of this threat, the regional planning body was against the idea of modulating densities across municipalities or supporting the planning of an exception to the densification norm. In this context, the mayor created a second citizen committee for the contested area, which simply marked time even though it held 52 meetings.

In his ruling on the lawsuit in 2020, the judge particularly condemned the mayor's reliance on this participatory committee, which was characterized as a way to stall the planning and eventual development of the area. On the other hand, the people we interviewed had the impression that the mayor genuinely did not know how to deal with such a highly polarized conflict and was afraid to take a position on one side or the other. The minutes of this committee's meetings show that although the members did meet to work on scenarios and tactics, they struggled to find solutions. Yet, the fact that an *ad hoc* committee was responsible for designing scenarios to regulate conditions for the preservation or growth of a privately owned territory targeted for development is completely inconsistent with the extremely delicate nature of such a matter in the current context and political economy of development in Quebec municipalities. Municipalities are regularly sued when they wish to protect an area for nature, and many have recently argued in both the media and a metropolitan campaign for the provincial government's attention that (1) they only have a chance of winning cases against developers when municipalities' intentions are clearly spelled out in planning documents and comply with regional and metropolitan norms, and (2) the costs involved in land speculation situations are extremely prohibitive because they include estimated future profit.

Committee meeting minutes and associated documents show that the committee worked on two strategies: (1) to request the provincial government to commit to protecting the last remaining vacant lands in the Mont-Saint-Hilaire foothills, and (2) to mobilize the regional authority to give the area a special status that would allow it to be exempt from density standards due to its exceptional character in terms of biodiversity or landscape. These initiatives and their failures, as well as the political complexity of activating the mechanism proposed by the metropolitan agency whereby density is to be modulated through the regional authority, demonstrates how much work and mobilization are needed to halt or place conditions on development in urban peripheries, when these are located outside agricultural zones and identified in the metropolitan plan as spaces for smart growth.

Two years after the first judgment, a second court judgement permitted a new town mayor's team to make a detailed plan of the area to be developed, negotiate a plan for mixed low and medium-density development, and protect wooded areas. This was a relief for some but a disappointment for the citizens who had mobilized to completely halt this development.

In the Montreal region, densification standards were implemented to discipline dispersion in the suburbs and peri-urban areas, while facilitating speculation and development

where little municipal and regional regulation prevailed. The use of the court by developers reinforced a simplistic understanding of densification in the context of climate urgency, and the discursive context made it difficult for the opposition to gain support beyond the local scene. At the same time, the densification norm now seems to be essentialized, as reflected in this statement recently made by the leader of an environmental NGO: "Today, with few exceptions, to oppose densification is to place oneself in the camp of the destruction of nature. It's to be for climate change." This clearly reflects a strong politics of different expectations regarding densification and sustainable urban transformation.

## Conclusion

Resisting housing development at the urban fringe can be a complex challenge in a polarized context where misunderstandings around densification and its multiple relationalities persist. Our article confirms strong trends noted in the literature on the governance of densification and neoliberal peripheral growth, while focusing on the subjectivities of those who participate to its governance and contestation, especially their situated expectations of sustainable urban transformation.

Our case study concurs with the literature to demonstrate that the political economy context, coupled with the discourse and norms of urban sustainability, gives more political weight to a selective and territorial geography of sustainability-in-one-place (Miller and Mössner, 2020) through densification than to a relational vision that debates the interlocking relations in the place-making of localities under development pressure at the urban fringe. Here, this is not because the metropolitan scale of governance is weak and local political interests of counter-sustainability persist. Rather, the metropolitan norms of sustainability in the context of real estate frenzy seem to reinforce inequalities between local capacities to regulate growth locally, with local, regional and metropolitan political interests and agendas interacting in complex ways. These dynamics also seem to reinforce polarization and the persistence of misunderstandings around the different expectations of the fringe contribution to a sustainable urban region in the future.

The broader politics at stake relate to the construction of allyship and governance practices to contest misadapted densification as a form of capital accumulation, and the associated destruction of landscape, amenities and green areas valued in everyday life [and, potentially, for climate change adaptation]. The defense of privilege is not absent from such struggles—preserving a protected milieu, sometimes with an exclusive and conservative vision of their hometown. Yet, the tag of Nimbyism is used to discredit a broad range of activists demanding a more situated State regulation of densification, and the possibility to not develop at all. This underscores the relevance of the argument made by Charmes and Keil



(2015) that this discredit of local opposition as solely about privilege serves growth coalitions. Such dynamics do make grassroots coalitions for sustainable urban peripheries difficult. The confusion characterizing these types of mobilization that mix progressive and conservative ideologies and different visions of nature and sustainability need close attention. The relational perspective can help untangle what type of relations different actors are making to (un)link one place with others and the political economic processes beyond it; to preserve, reproduce or contest the various socio-ecological relations of which they are a part.

Theoretically, we argue that we can better understand these mobilizations and the challenges they generate through recognition of the different and situated expectations of sustainable urban transformation. When we speak of expectations, we refer to the faith in new norms, regulations and State planning instruments, but also in citizen practices of mobilization and place-making, to contribute to sustainable urban transformation, based on present and past experiences. These expectations are situated in the sense that they are affected by the materiality, relations, and meanings of the individual places to be transformed. Expectations also relate to political ideals of—and emotional investments in—the effective scales to regulate urban transformations. These preferred scales of governance produce concrete territorial demarcations around material and symbolic urban boundaries (of urban/rural living environment, of capital accumulation, of “residential” vs. nature or agricultural land), in places, which in turn affects how people perceive the past and current dynamics, and the future changes unfolding.

We could expect these expectations to circulate in planning, participatory and governance circles and be modified and reassembled in the movement (as argued in the policy mobility literature). However, what we observe is rather their *non*-circulation in the metropolitan space, and the relative confusion, polarization and misunderstandings that persist. The hegemonic norm of sustainability-by-density is very present, but the expectations of *how* it will or not contribute to sustainable transformation do not seem to circulate across the different sites and postures in the conflict. What we saw is that the political tensions, interests and affects around place and densification halted the circulation of the different expectations of how sustainable transformation could unfold. This in turn complicates the possibilities for coalition-building, co-production and the shared governance of densification.

The transformation of urban peripheries to reduce inequalities and climate change is an important and complex matter. Understanding the situated expectations and alternative imaginaries of sustainability in the urban fringe helps interrogate the current hegemony of density and unchallenged urban development.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary materials, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Comité d'éthique en recherche avec des êtres humains de l'INRS. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

SLVN wrote 85% of the manuscript, conducted the literature review, the analysis of the data and 50% of the data collection. J-PR has written 15% of the manuscript, contributed to the analysis of the data, collected documents and conducted part of the interviews. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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