



DIE ERDE

Journal of the
Geographical Society
of Berlin

Dystopian utopia between mountain and the sea? Second-home production along the Coastal Cordillera of Central Chile 1992-2012

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Manuscript submitted: 12 October 2015 / Accepted for publication: 08 February 2017 / Published online: 31 March 2017

Abstract

In recent decades, the expansion of the metropolitan areas in Central Chile has produced numerous forms, structures and functions. The amenities of the local environment and culture have been used to promote a utopia for future residents, including people interested in second homes. However, in many cases the migrants have suffered frustrations. They have found a dystopia instead of the promised utopia. By intensifying the metropolization of Central Chile, the real-estate sector has produced spaces similar to those from which the migrants hoped to escape. Pristine environments were transformed into polluted areas, suffering from rapid urbanization, noise, rubbish and an overload of visitors. In this paper, we analyse the socio-economic impact and the perception of real-estate development. Many of the new apartments, flats and houses are used as second homes, introducing and enhancing new forms of multilocality. The infrastructure is designed for full occupation, yet during many periods of the year it is not used, and those who live there all year round seem lost in large areas devoid of life.

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten Jahrzehnten erzeugte die Ausdehnung der Metropolen in Zentralchile zahlreiche Formen, Strukturen und Funktionen. Die Annehmlichkeiten der lokalen Umwelt und Kultur wurden dabei verwendet, um bei künftigen Bewohnern, auch solchen, die an einem Zweitwohnsitz interessiert waren, eine Utopie zu bewerben. In vielen Fällen führte dies dann jedoch zu Enttäuschungen bei den Zugezogenen, die statt einer Utopie eine Dystopie vorfanden. Durch die verstärkte Metropolisierung Zentralchiles erzeugte der Immobiliensektor neue Räume, die jenen gleichen, aus denen die neuen Bewohner weggezogen. Unberührte Umwelt wurde so in verschmutzte Gebiete verwandelt, die jetzt unter schneller Verstädterung, Lärm, Abfällen und einer zu großen Zahl an Besuchern leiden. Im vorliegenden Artikel untersuchen wir die sozioökonomischen Auswirkungen und die Wahrnehmung der Immobilienentwicklung. Viele der neuen Wohnungen und Häuser werden als Zweitwohnsitze benutzt und verstärken neue Formen der Multilokalität. Die Infrastruktur, die auf Hauptwohnsitze ausgelegt ist, wird jedoch einen Großteil des Jahres kaum benutzt, sodass jene, die ganzjährig vor Ort wohnen, sich in einem Ort ohne Leben verlieren zu scheinen.

Keywords real estate, metropolization, elitization, amenity migration, Chile, Valparaíso, Santiago de Chile

Rodrigo Hidalgo, Luis Daniel Santana Rivas, Andreas Haller, Axel Borsdorf 2017: Dystopian utopia between mountain and the sea? Second-home production along the Coastal Cordillera of Central Chile 1992-2012. – DIE ERDE 148 (1): 27-38



DOI: 10.12854/erde-148-28

1. Introduction

What really counts for a real estate object is location. The Chilean coast offers a pleasant Mediterranean climate (Morales and Allesch 1996) and location factors of high value: the geomorphology, the outstanding Mediterranean vegetation, a view of the Pacific Ocean with opportunities for many sporting activities, such as swimming, sailing, surfing and wind surfing, beaches with fine white sands, wandering dunes and the amenities of the coastal mountain range, with lakes, protected areas and options for hiking, mountain biking, or horse riding (George 1969; Castro and Hidalgo 2002). Picturesque restaurants offer fish, shellfish, steaks, local food and scenic views. Local culture is present in the fishermen's traditions, rodeos and other rural festivals and seems to be open for the participation of new residents. All these factors – which clearly impact on real estate prices (Sander and Zhao, 2015) – are incorporated into the real estate market by promoting a utopia (Cáceres and Sabatini, 2003) in which these amenities lead prospective buyers to believe that the utopia they want really exists. In their eyes, the home they are going to invest in is part of this utopolis.

After the purchase, many of them begin to realize that only part of the utopia is reality. The world beyond the walls and fences of gated communities or gated cities (Borsdorf and Hidalgo 2008) and the security installations of high-rise apartment buildings is different. These constructions follow the logics of postmodernity (Lefebvre 1980). Surrounded by gates and walls they are not associated with the towns or cities even though they are part of the urban fabric. Elitization, social exclusion and segregation disallow lively participation in local culture, the environment is severely corrupted – in its overall effect, this may be defined as dystopia, the antonym of utopia. Instead of utopolis the home buyers find dystopolis.

The objective of this paper is (1) to describe the processes by which utopolis is promoted, produced (Hidalgo and Arenas 2012; Hidalgo et al. 2014a,) and destroyed; and (2) to interpret the results in the context of metropolization, which has transformed the Central Chilean coast into an urbanized macrozone (Hidalgo et al. 2014b). The emphasis is on the municipalities on the coast – and along the coastal cordillera – of the V Region of Chile: Algarrobo, Cartagena, Casablanca, Concón, El Quisco, El Tabo, La Ligua, Papudo, Puchuncaví, Quintero, San Antonio, Santo Domingo, Zapallar and the metropolitan area of Valparaíso-Viña del Mar.

2. State-of-the-art and theoretical framework

Urbanization is a geographically diverse process which leads to an unequal development of urban and rural areas. In Latin America, where the capitals have been very important since colonial times, a second phase started with the immigration of Europeans in the mid-19th century, and a last phase, predominated by a rural exodus, started in the 1930s (Bähr and Borsdorf 2005). In Europe, a strong process of post-suburbanization started at the end of the 20th century, while in North and South America ex-urbanization is much stronger (Borsdorf 2005). These new trends have been interpreted by Lencioni (2011), Brenner (2013), De Mattos et al. (2011), and De Mattos (2013) as a result of the capitalist production of space as catalyst of the general urbanization. In a last phase, starting in the 1990s, the trend towards ex-urbanization (Cadieux and Hurley 2011) has been driven by people fleeing the noisy and polluted urban agglomerations in search of fresh air, beautiful and pristine landscapes and local cultures (Borsdorf 2009; Borsdorf and Hidalgo 2008). Moss and Glorioso (2014) call this amenity migration, McIntyre (2009) lifestyle migration (on the phenomenon's terminological diversity see Gosnell and Abrams 2011). Some of the amenity migrants transfer the mainstay of their life to the new locations, others prefer the multilocality and use the amenities of their new residences as second homes.

Following De Mattos (2010, 2013) the metamorphosis of space in Chile is a result of the neoliberal economic doctrine and has led to a new phase of capitalist modernization. Neoliberalism is characterized by deregulation, privatization, mercantilization and the new information technologies (Hidalgo et al. 2016). These instruments have created a global space of accumulation formed by transnational corporations which move and invest their capital at liberty.

Milton Friedman (1951) may be regarded as the leading exponent. With his monetarism, he advocated a macroeconomic theory and policy in which the supply of money and the velocity of turnover are determinants of the economy. As early as 1951 he defined neoliberalism as a strategy to overcome 19th century liberalism by a competitive order which would guarantee growth and functionality of the global economy. In this way, neoliberalism created a new form of international relations (Keohane 1984) and has been a driver of (political-economic) globalization. It has been the dominant political and economic

doctrine in most Latin American countries since the 1990s. In Chile, it started as early as in 1974. Similar developments to those presented in this paper can be observed in many other Latin American states.

Developers in these countries benefit from the neo-liberal practices and the relatively weak regulation norms of the state. They transform the built environment in the absence of an effective local government planning strategy and promote socio-spatial utopias in form of secure luxury dwellings within a nice environment. In this sense, they advertise a sophisticated marketing utopia as an idealized representation of space (Harvey 2000). That act of evoking either the utopia of the centrality and cultural heterogeneity in central areas (which promotes gentrification), the utopia of the spacious houses in a safe neighbourhood (leading to suburbanization) or exceptional locations in the countryside by the inclusion of urban conditions (leading to post-suburbanization) may be simply seen as marketing strategies.

However, these strategies lead to a loss of cultural heterogeneity in the central areas (by gentrification), a loss of public space in suburban areas or a loss of ecological biodiversity in post-suburban areas.

Although central urban quarters, gentrified by students and artists, are a favourite location for young urban professionals of higher social strata, in Chile the upper – and even the middle – class have since colonial times idealized the rural areas as regions of arcadia. In their utopic perception the rural zones are juxtaposed to the ‘hell of the city’, characterized by violence, danger, noise and pollution, whereas the rural areas seem to be a haven of silence, peace and scenic beauty (Williams 2001). In modern times the term utopia was philosophically first used by *Thomas More* (1516) describing a fictional island characterized by an idealistic society. The first use of the word dystopia was given by *John Stuart Mill* in 1868. He stated: “What is commonly Utopian is something too good to be practicable, but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable” (Stuart Mill 1868: 1517) – and called the resulting situation a dystopia. The concept of utopia and dystopia in urban studies was used by *MacLeod* and *Ward* (2004). They characterized the fortified and gated communities as intended to be utopian, but turned out as a dystopia. *Slaughter* (2004) tried to find paths for a future beyond dystopia. He included the environment in an integral agenda for the future.

Real estate companies in Latin America advertise their projects in the utopian way. The search of utopia distinguishes the contemporary Latin American elites who increasingly look for peri-urban or rural areas to live in – be it temporarily, periodically or permanently.

This is the starting point for the mercantilization of those regions by the large real estate corporations. Their marketing leverages the high quality of life in these areas, and the restructuring of the real estate sector, now dominated by global companies, have allowed marketing on a global scale.

3. Methods

In the quantitative section we concentrate on an analysis of data provided by the Chilean National Statistical Institute (INE), with emphasis on the censuses of 1992, 2002 and 2012. The occupation – permanent or seasonal – has been worked out from different census variables available through the REDATAM database system (software developed and maintained by the Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre to process census data). This information is complemented by data obtained from the websites of the real estate companies, such as Portal Inmobiliario, El Inmobiliario and Propiedades Emol (Fig. 1). These data were then analysed and interpreted by methods of descriptive statistical analyses.

In the qualitative section we conducted 151 semi-standardized interviews with the chairs of neighbourhood associations (4), residents (140), real estate agents (2), clerks of municipalities (4), environmental CSOs (1). These recorded interviews have been transcribed, coded and analysed using Mayring’s rule-based and inductive approach (Mayring 2000; see also Schreier 2012) to obtain a better understanding of the interviewees’ perceptions of residential projects. For this paper, we have focused the analysis of second homes.

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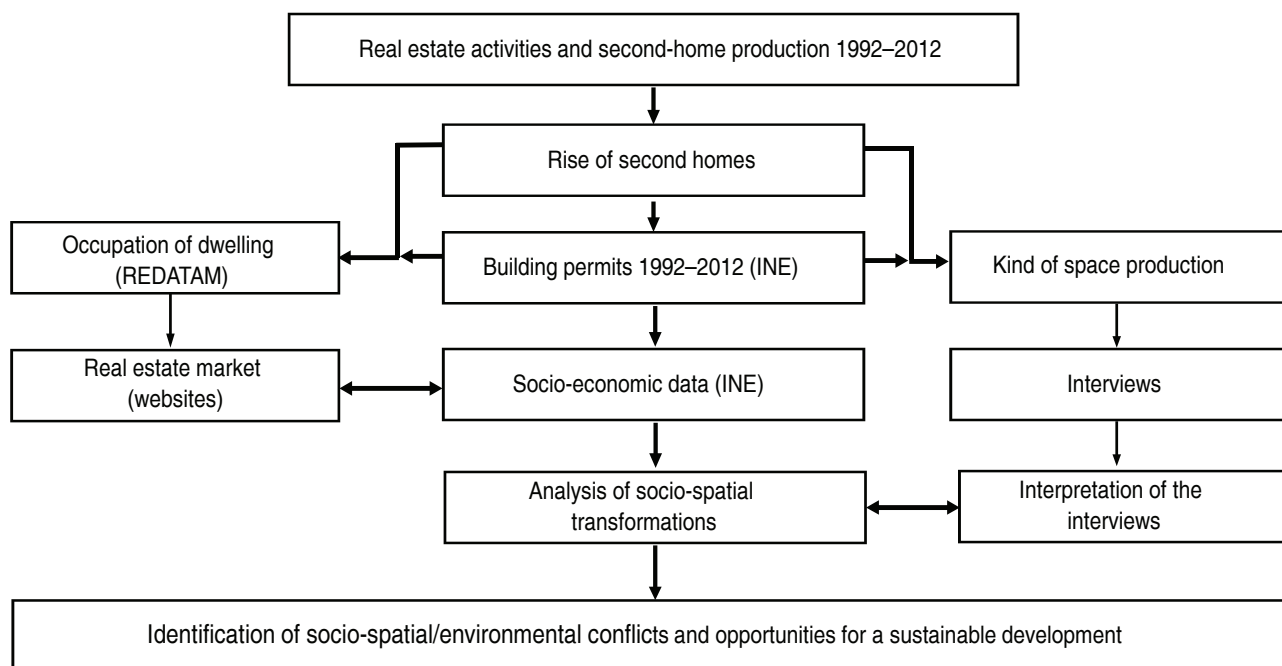


Fig. 1 Methodology of the study

4. Results

4.1 Metropolization and the production of utopolis

In the last decade the wider littoral (including some coastal cordillera communities) shows a demographic growth above the Chilean average (Chile: 0.8 %/y), with the exception of Cartagena, Valparaíso and San Antonio (Table 1).

The reason for the increase in population in the more attractive municipalities in the 1990s is the immigration of migrants from neighbouring countries, especially Peru and Argentina. In the case of Valparaíso, a counter-movement to the shrinking of its population is the result of gentrification processes (see Hidalgo and Janoschka 2014) after the inclusion of this town in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Borsdorf and Hidalgo 2013; Hidalgo et al. 2014c). The coastal towns of Quintero, Algarrobo, Santo Domingo, El Quisco –

Table 1

Annual population growth of municipalities in the study area 1992-2012. Coastal towns are bold, large urban agglomerations in italics, communities more than 10 km from the coast in normal font. Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas de Chile (1992, 2002, 2011)¹, calculations by the authors. Data can be accessed on the institute's website (www.ine.cl).

¹The data stem from the pre-census of 2011. Although it was declared unofficial, it provides a rough idea of sociodemographic conditions in the study area.

| Municipality | Annual population growth 1992-2002 (%) | Municipality | Annual population growth 2002-2011 (%) |
|----------------------|--|----------------------|--|
| Concón | 7.5 | Quintero | 3.1 |
| El Tabo | 6.2 | Algarrobo | 2.2 |
| El Quisco | 5.9 | Santo Domingo | 2.2 |
| Algarrobo | 4.7 | El Quisco | 2.1 |
| Cartagena | 4.5 | Puchuncaví | 2.1 |
| Casablanca | 3.2 | Concón | 1.9 |
| Puchuncaví | 2.8 | <i>Viña del Mar</i> | 1.5 |
| Zapallar | 2.7 | Casablanca | 1.5 |
| Quintero | 2.3 | El Tabo | 1.4 |
| Santo Domingo | 2 | Zapallar | 1 |
| Papudo | 1.9 | Papudo | 0.7 |
| La Ligua | 1.7 | Cartagena | 0.7 |
| <i>San Antonio</i> | 1.1 | <i>Valparaíso</i> | 0.4 |
| <i>Viña del Mar</i> | 0.1 | La Ligua | 0.4 |
| <i>Valparaíso</i> | -9 | <i>San Antonio</i> | 0.1 |

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| Region | Year | Length of paved roads (km) | Share of paved roads (%) | Density (m/km ²) | Variation 2001–2012 (%) |
|------------|------|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Valparaíso | 2001 | 1285.8 | 41.2 | 79.6 | 208.2 |
| | 2012 | 2677.4 | 83.1 | 165.8 | |
| Santiago | 2001 | 1573.8 | 47.7 | 93.2 | 170.2 |
| | 2012 | 2559.8 | 78.1 | 158.6 | |

Table 2 Paved roads in the Regions of Valparaíso and Santiago de Chile. Source: Ministry of Public Works (Ministerio de Obras Públicas de Chile 2001, 2012), calculations by the authors. Data can be accessed on the ministry's website (www.mop.cl).

and surprisingly also Puchuncaví –, where remarkable real estate investment has taken place, are the winners in the last decade.

Another important factor for migration to the coast is the improved accessibility from Santiago and Santiago Airport. *Table 2* lists the increase in paved roads between 2001 and 2012, in the Region of Valparaíso and in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago. Modern highways connect the capital with the coast within 1-2 hours travelling time.

Figure 2 reveals the intensity of immigration and population growth, *figure 3* gives an impression of the quantity of second homes. It shows the percentage of flats and houses unoccupied during the censuses of 2002-2011. With the exception of the agglomerations of Valparaíso, Viña del Mar/Concón, San Antonio and the towns of La Ligua and Casablanca, in 2002 the majority and in 2011 almost half of the dwellings were found unoccupied. In case of occupied dwellings without anyone there to be interviewed, neighbours informed us that the inhabitants were only out for some days or hours. For all data given for 2011 and 2012, it must be stated that they are quite uncertain because of the serious technical problems of this census.

To illustrate the intensity of housing development, *Table 3* shows the urbanization process in the municipality of Concón. Some photographs, taken from the websites of real estate companies, serve to visualize the promotion of utopolis (*Photos 1-4*). The advertising slogans and green rhetoric of real estate developers (*sensu Beuschel and Rudel 2009*), for instance in the case of Condominio Costa Cachagua (www.costacachagua.cl), stress 'the charm of your revival'. This condominium is the most innovative and successful holiday real estate project in Chile, first line on the sea front and without a motorway (San Alfonso del Mar).

Table 3 Creation of living space in the Dunas de Concón. Development of the dune started around 1995, Source: Borsdorf et al. 2016

| Year | Living space in new buildings (m ²) | Estimated share of second homes (%) |
|------|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1997 | 7855.34 | No data |
| 2000 | 3173.37 | 29.7 |
| 2005 | 5457.05 | 34.3 |
| 2010 | 4437.08 | 40.1 |
| 2012 | 8984.39 | 48.5 |



Photos 1-4

Real estate promotion of utopolis in littoral municipalities. From left to right, above to below: Altos Costa Cachagua at Zapallar, El Solar de Mantagua at Quintero, del Mar at Algarrobo and Papudo Laguna at Papudo with the largest artificial swimming pool in the world.

Source:

project websites (www.costacachagua.cl, www.elsolardemantagua.cl, www.sanalfonso.cl, www.pabudolaguna.cl). Snapshots of inactive websites can be accessed via <http://web.archive.org>

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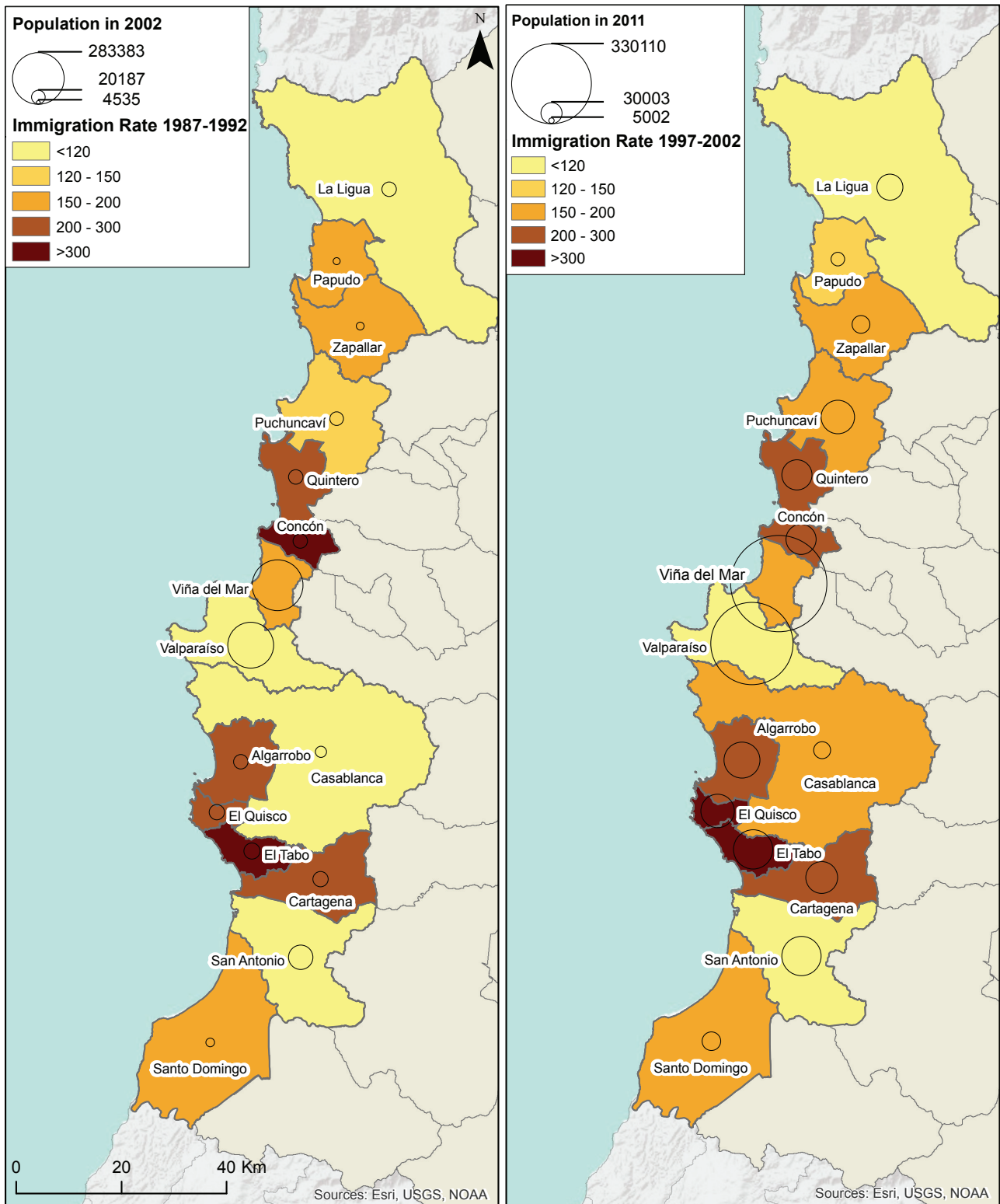


Fig. 2 Population in 2002 and 2011. Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas de Chile (1992, 2002, and pre-census 2011), developed by the authors. Data can be accessed on the institute's website (www.ine.cl).

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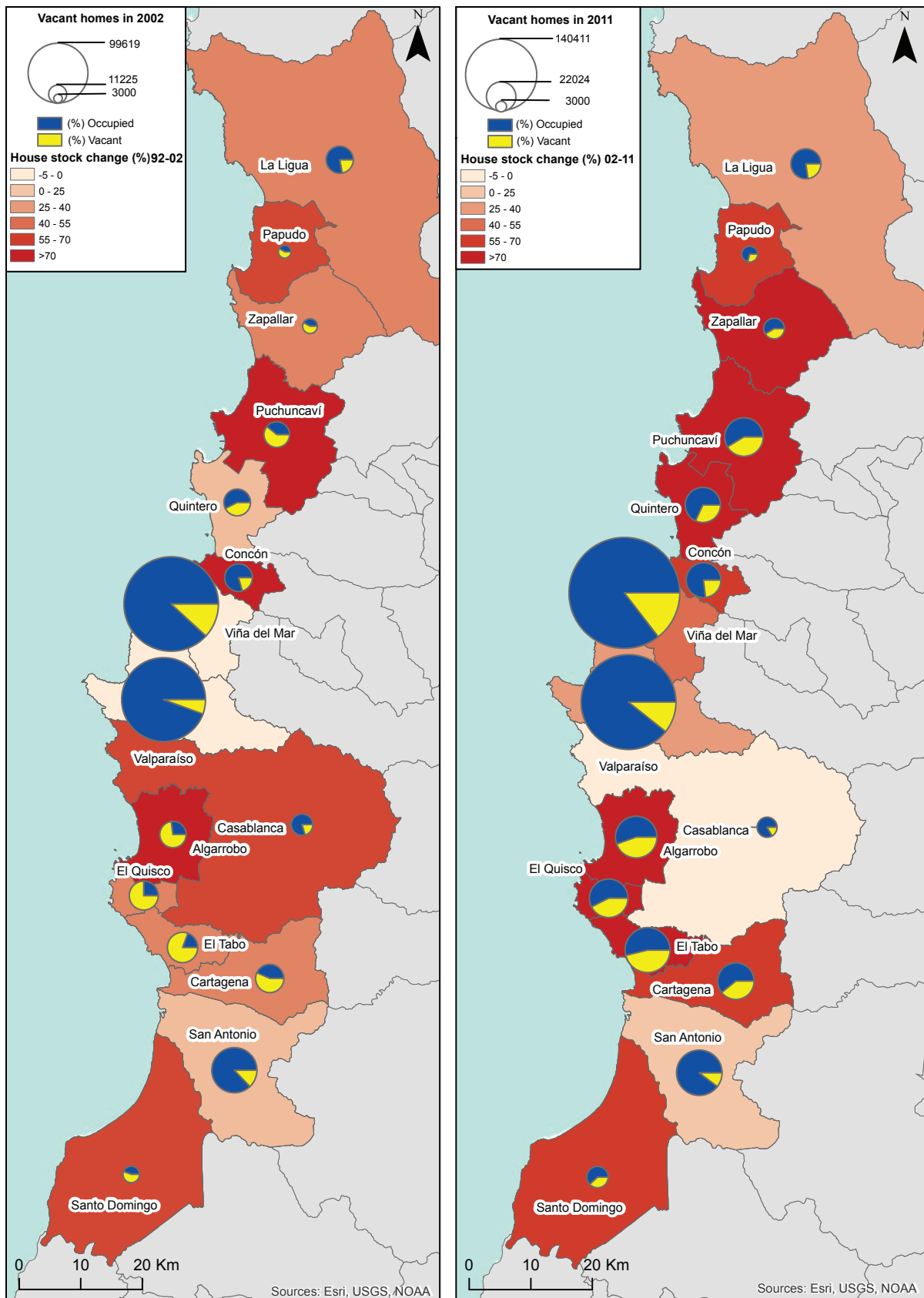


Fig. 3 Vacant homes in 2002 and 2011.. Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas de Chile (1992, 2002 and pre-census 2011), designed by the authors. Data can be accessed on the institute's website (www.ine.cl).

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4.2 A flash of reality: dystopolis instead of utopolis

Elitization, segregation, non-participation, urbanization of formerly pristine landscapes have already been mentioned. *Photos 5 and 6* give an impression of the intensity of the damages uncontrolled urban development cause even to protected areas, in this case the Natural Sanctuary of the Dunes of Concón. A deeper insight into the loss of landscape aesthetics, natural vegetation and fauna are given in *Borsdorf et al. (2016)*.



*Photo 5 Urbanization in the Dunes of Concón
(photograph: A. Borsdorf 2014)*



Photo 6 Sand-surfing in the protected area of the Dunes of Concón (photograph: A. Borsdorf 2014)

In interviews, the residents of El Tabo reflected on their perception of their well-being. Regarding the buildings themselves, they argued that “the new location is not at all optimal” and some believe “that many elements needed to answer the demands of the residents are missing.” With respect to the natural environment, some lamented that “the development brings problems of rubbish on the beaches and destroys the vegetation” and said that “the construction of buildings affects the landscape”: “The beaches are affected

(...), developments conflict with the landscape.” Some also “regret the loss of forest vegetation through the urbanization” and others highlight that “the danger of tsunamis is high, as we live close to the sea.” Residents from Concón stated that “there are conflicts, as some buildings are very high and hurt the landscape,” “there are conflicts with regard to the dunes and their ecosystem services,” and “the buildings interrupt the landscape.” They feel that “the environment has been severely degraded,” because “urbanization destroys the harmony.” Some also are “affected by the quantity of people, especially in summer.” In sum, the residents’ opinions convey a disappointment, which is reflected in their emotional relationship with both the built and the natural environment. If landscape is not exclusively understood as a factual environment, but, *sensu Berque (2013)*, as an expression of the human-environment relationship, then one can suppose that the residents’ desire for living in harmony with an intact environment is destroyed – by themselves. This “green sprawl” development is reminiscent of what *Cadieux and Taylor (2013)* call a ‘landscape of paradox’.

The residents’ fear of losing (cultural) ecosystem services in urban areas (*Anderson et al. 2015*) is confirmed by Chilean environmental experts. A representative of the CSO Ibermar, an international NGO to protect the abiotic resources and the biodiversity of Latin-American marine-coastal environments argued:

“In the Chilean case the conflicts are located on the Pacific shore. Multiple activities take place there which need to be compatible with the natural environment, which is a fragile space in environmental terms; (...) the impact determine the morphodynamics of the dunes, which act as regulators of ecosystems. The non-regulation of building activities also impacts on wetlands and other ecosystems; (...) the best solution would be to stop the real estate activities in fragile environments. However, this solution goes against the objectives of the real estate business in the coastal communities. It is necessary to create an integrative management of the territory, in which the competent actors will develop and control urbanization.”

The representatives of the municipalities are aware of the problematic lack of urban planning and non-participation of the new residents, as the following statements exemplify:

“At the moment our municipality is looking for a formula to control the real estate expansion, as it has to be curbed. (...) To this day there are no relations with the new residents, as they are mostly here only seasonally, they own second homes” (representative of Puchuncaví).

“The PRC 1990 Act does not respond to the actual phenomena in the community. However, a modification is under study. (...) We don't have contacts to the new residents” (representative of Casablanca).

“There is no effective relationship with the residents of the real estate projects” (representative of San Antonio).

“The municipality tries to curb real estate development and to conserve the natural conditions of the community. The idea is to create a community not only for vacations, but to focus on a consolidated living space for the whole year. Our municipality is looking for good contacts with the new residents by direct citizen participation on issues related to the natural conditions of the community” (representative of Zapallar).

These statements show that the municipalities are aware of the problems and search for effective steering and planning instruments for the future. The existing regulatory plans, the plan of communal development (PLADECO) and the secretariat of communal planning (SECPLAC) are still often neglected and seem to be weak instruments to secure a controlled development in the real estate sector. So there still exists an unequal division of power of the different actors involved in urban development and economic power overrides political and planning instruments.

5. Discussion

These few quotes show up the unexpected conflicts and a certain level of disappointment. In the case of residents, it does not go as far as realizing their own responsibility. However, in contrast to the local first-home residents, most of the other residents are quite satisfied with their decision to have a second home on the coast. Their subjective perception is by no means one of disappointment, so that the existence of a dystopolis is more or less an objective assessment. Rapid

urbanization and segregation hinder the integration into the community and have severe effects on the environment.

There is only one NGO fighting for the conservation of the natural environment. However, most of the municipality agents are aware of the problems and looking for better planning and control of the real estate development. The search for better participation of the new residents – which is needed to achieve socially and environmentally sustainable development (*La Rosa et al. 2014*) – exists in only one community (Zapallar).

The real estate boom has extended the urbanized area enormously. Between 1992 and 2011 the conurbation area at San Antonio grew by 122%, that of the Metropolitan Area of Valparaíso by 53%. The occupation of the littoral space damages the fragile ecosystems, for instance the sedimentation processes on the shore, the systemic interaction of shore and dunes, the vegetation and fauna. This is why the expectation of an utopolis has flipped to the reality of a dystopolis.

Natural hazards (earthquakes, tsunamis) are frequent in the study area. However, they do not seem a determining factor, neither for the advertisement nor for the residents. Drinking water is becoming scarce in Chile and especially in the semi-arid environment of the central regions, but the real estate companies do not acknowledge this problem. They trust in their marketing strategies and in the growing demand for second homes in the proximity of the metropolitan region of Santiago and take into account the amenities of the environment and the existing touristic infrastructure of the shore and coastal cordillera, which have made them a major tourist destination for many decades.

6. Conclusion

Real estate development on the coast and in parts of the coastal cordillera municipalities is driven by the supply and promotion of apartments and houses in vertical and horizontal gated communities and tolerated by the neoliberal market conditions. It damages the environment and social cohesion, and triggers processes of social exclusion, elitization and metropolization. Our analyses of these phenomena clearly demonstrate that the promised utopolis is turning into a dystopian reality (*Fig. 4*).

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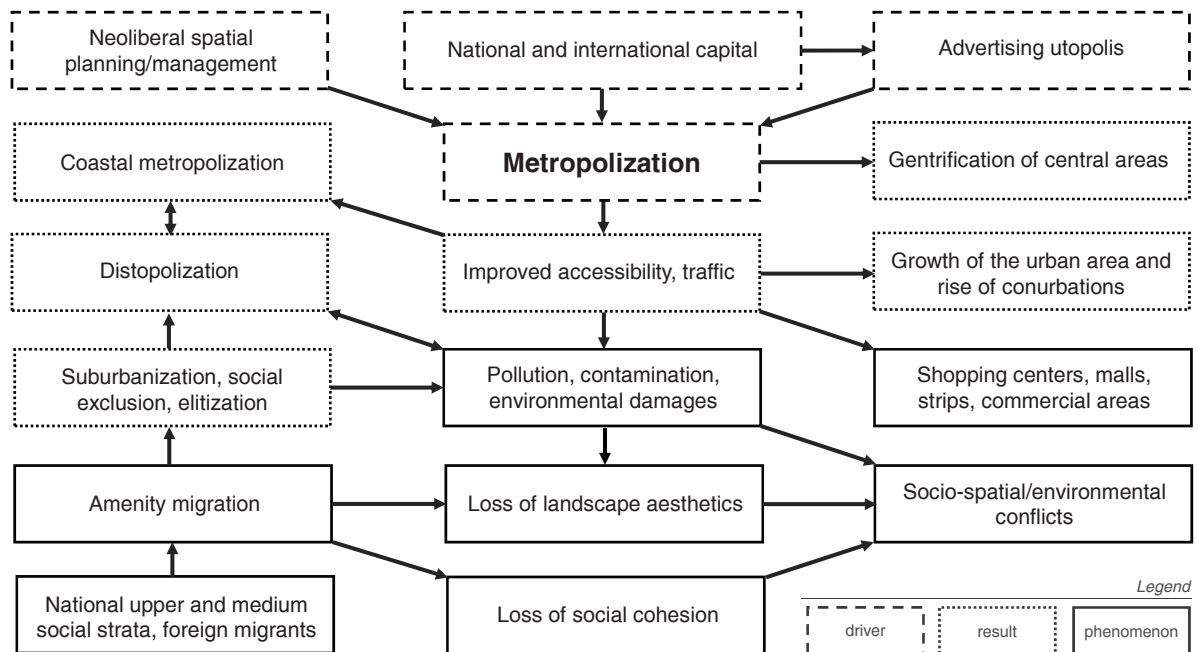


Fig. 4 Drivers and processes of metropolization on the Central Chilean coast. Source: own elaboration

The perception of these losses in landscape aesthetics, natural vegetation and fauna and geomorphology, the problems of pollution and contamination, the non-participation in the new social environment has not yet fully dawned on the new residents, most of them second-home owners, but it is only a matter of time before disappointments will become more pronounced and they become aware of the dystopolis and their own responsibility for it.

It is not too late to start programmes of sustainable development even in these fragile natural and social environments, but it is clear that such programmes cannot be expected by the real estate companies. This must be the task of the affected municipalities, who could clearly profit from operational methods to support siting decisions for sustainable rural second-home planning (Jeong et al. 2014). Stricter norms and rules for urbanization, active protection of the environment, starting with the control of the protected areas, integration of the immigrants into community programmes and activities, and motivating the new residents to convert their second home into the principal home may then enhance ecological, social and even economic sustainability. However, it must be stated that under the neoliberal system applied in Chile, municipalities so far have demonstrated quite a small capacity to solve social, economic and environmental issues. Thus it can only be hoped that the civil society – dwellers and local citizens – find to actions for environmental protection and social coherence.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the Chilean research funding institution FONDECYT for financing the projects *The transformation of central places: Commercial restructuring and residential gentrification. The case of Santiago, Valparaíso and Viña del Mar* (support number 1095222) and *Real estate and second homes: the city without limits in the towns of the coast on Valparaíso Region (1992-2012)* (support number 1120223). They also thank CONICYT/FONDAP for funding project number 15110020.

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