Vargem Grande Subdivision: Urban Interventions and Environmental Preservation

Submitted By: São Paulo City Hall



Organization Profile

Organization Name: Executive Secretariat of the Watersheds Program – São Paulo City Hall

Organization Type: Subnational government

Website: https://prefeitura.sp.gov.br/web/secretaria_executiva_do_programa_mananciais

Practice Details

Country(ies): Brazil

City(ies): São Paulo

Start Year: 2012

Ongoing: Yes

End Year: N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:



Relevant SDGs:



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Problem & Context

The Vargem Grande Subdivision, located in the Cratera da Colônia in Parelheiros/SP, faces the challenge of balancing environmental and geological preservation with the consolidated urbanization of over 40,000 residents. Occupation began in 1989 irregularly, with plots smaller than permitted by the Water Sources Protection Law. Despite the community's initial organization, uncontrolled expansion into permanent preservation areas created environmental risks, pressure on water resources, and conflicts between housing and conservation needs. Policy gaps include the absence of regulated housing areas in the region, ineffective oversight, and housing policies incompatible with local socioeconomic realities. These shortcomings contributed to irregular densification and overlapping urban and environmental precarities, now requiring integrated and sustainable solutions.

Solution Developed

The housing practice in the Vargem Grande Subdivision aimed to address irregular occupation in an environmentally sensitive area, balancing preservation with the right to housing. Target beneficiaries are approximately 40,000 established residents, many in vulnerable situations, focusing on resettling families in safe areas and providing basic infrastructure. Key objectives included promoting land regularization, ensuring sanitation, mobility, and public facilities, and valuing geological and environmental heritage through ecotourism and the creation of quality communal spaces. The solution incorporated innovative approaches such as tactical urbanism (rapid, targeted interventions), nature-based solutions for drainage and stream restoration, participatory projects in partnership with the local association, and integration between municipal departments and utility companies. This model combined social inclusion, environmental preservation, and sustainable development in a high ecological value area.

Implementation

The implemented actions included basic sanitation works, road rehabilitation, creation of squares (Praça Cívica and Praça Bem-te-vi), construction of bike lanes and leisure areas, nature-based solutions for drainage and stream preservation, as well as the proposal for an open-air museum and the future headquarters of the Cratera de Colônia Municipal Natural Park. Technical studies were also conducted to support land regularization.

Key actors included the São Paulo City Hall (Housing Secretariat, Programa Mananciais, and Secretariat for Green and Environment), responsible for planning, works, and environmental management; utility companies (SABESP, ENEL, IluminaSP, spRegula), providing technical and operational support; the community association ACHAVE, which coordinated residents and ensured social participation; and the architectural office Levisky Arquitetos, which developed the urban design projects. The process began in 2012 with initial studies under Programa

Mananciais, followed by masterplan revisions and field visits between 2016 and 2023, and continues with gradual interventions.

Funding came primarily from the municipal budget, with technical contributions from utility companies and community support. Institutional and interdepartmental partnerships were essential to integrate housing, infrastructure, environmental preservation, and social participation, ensuring greater feasibility and sustainability of the actions.

Enablers & Obstacles

The main drivers were local community engagement, political support expressed through the Programa Mananciais and the Cratera de Colônia Municipal Natural Park, as well as the New Water Sources Law (Law No. 9,866/1997) and the APRM Billings Specific Law (Law No. 13,579/2009), which recognized the consolidation of pre-existing settlements, allowing urban interventions in protected areas without compromising environmental protection. The availability of technical studies and geological data was also essential. Key obstacles included irregular expansion into preservation areas, land tenure fragility, and limited environmental awareness among some residents. These challenges were addressed through oversight, social registration, resettlement proposals in ZEIS, tactical urbanism, and environmental education actions, balancing the right to housing with the preservation of natural heritage.

Results & Impact

The results include the implementation of sanitation works and road rehabilitation, square revitalization projects (Cívica and Bem-te-vi), creation of leisure and active mobility spaces, and integration of the subdivision into the Cratera de Colônia Municipal Natural Park. Qualitative outcomes highlight improved urban conditions, strengthened local identity, and enhanced environmental awareness. Hundreds of families in risk and permanent preservation areas were registered, creating ZEIS resettlement alternatives focusing on low-income populations. This provides greater housing security and access to basic infrastructure previously lacking. Vulnerable groups, such as residents in precarious housing, experienced direct impacts on health, quality of life, and sense of belonging. In the long term, the practice strengthens the region's ecotourism potential, generates employment and income opportunities, and contributes to the local economy. Environmentally, it reduces pressure on preservation areas, protects water bodies, and conserves the crater’s geological heritage, balancing urbanization with preservation. The initiative thus promotes social inclusion, sustainable development, and positions the area as a reference for geotourism and urban planning in environmentally sensitive territories.

Replication & Scale Up

The mentioned housing practice can be replicated in similar contexts where precarious occupation patterns exist in water source areas. Successful replication can be achieved through

an integrated and coordinated action plan. Interdepartmental collaboration practices are also highly beneficial in these cases.

This housing practice is already a model of the Programa Mananciais and is being implemented in other areas.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has been fully adopted into formal policy frameworks and legislation, and is being implemented at scale with institutional support.

The Vargem Grande subdivision is part of the Programa Mananciais, which urbanizes precarious settlements in environmentally protected areas, helping improve reservoir water quality. All actions comply with environmental legislation and have support from the São Paulo City Government. The program uses an integrated plan including urbanization projects, public health, education, and cultural facilities, as well as parks and housing complexes.

Lessons & Takeaways

We would review the communication and community engagement approach, emphasizing from the outset environmental awareness, the importance of the Management Plan, and the integration of urbanization and preservation, to prevent occupation in risk and permanent protection areas.