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The Vancouver socioecological fix: indigenous real-estate development as the city's imagination of sustainability, affordability, and reconciliation

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ABSTRACT

In Vancouver, the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations are constructing several large real-estate developments that will deeply impact the Nations and the city itself. Developments such as Señákw, Heather Lands, and Jericho Lands envision the construction of thousands of new apartments that will yield billions of Canadian dollars in profits from the Vancouver housing market. This paper is concerned with the enabling conditions for such developments found within the city of Vancouver's planning policies and underlying geographical imaginations. Through the application of the "socioecological fix", the paper describes how Vancouver's planning policies aim at fixing problems of sustainability, housing affordability, and reconciliation based on specific geographical imaginations. This results in the conceptualization of reconciliation as the profit-oriented construction of green and affordable real-estate. In light of scholarship that highlights the intertwined nature of colonialism and capitalism, the paper raises the predicament that the reconciliatory approach conceptualized in city strategies and actively pursued by the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh is envisioning reconciliation as the reproduction of Vancouver real-estate capitalism. How should scholarship contend with reconciliatory approaches that are both reproductive of settler-colonial capitalism, while also offering reconciliation in a concrete form?

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Introduction

In Vancouver, the x^wməθk^wəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwə-təł (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations are constructing massive real-estate developments that will have a deep impact on the Nations and the city of Vancouver. While real-estate development by the three Nations on whose unceded traditional territory the city of Vancouver is located is not inherently new, but going on since the early 1990s (Tsleil-Waututh First Nation, 2023), recent developments such as Señákw, Heather Lands, or

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Jericho Lands signify a massive change of scale. *Señákw* is currently constructed by the Squamish Nation through cooperation with major developer Westbank. The development is located on the Squamish Nation's Kitsilano Indian Reserve #6, a small 10.5-acre site close to downtown that the Squamish Nation reclaimed through a Supreme Court decision in 2001 as part of an original 80-acre reserve given to families now part of the Squamish Nation (Harris, 2017). Over the next 5–10 years, 6077 rental apartments, 20% of which should be affordable, will be constructed in 11 towers up to 59 storeys high, and the Squamish Nation is expecting about \$10 billion in revenues over the lifetime of the development (Nch'kaŷ West, 2023). The first two out of four construction phases are funded through a \$1.4 billion loan from the federal Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation's Rental Construction Financing Initiative, the biggest loan in the corporation's history (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2022, p. 33).

The Heather Lands and Jericho Lands developments are happening off-reserve on land that Musqueam, Squamish, and Tseil-Waututh have collectively bought back from the provincial and federal governments through a partnership and subsequently founded development corporation MST Development Corporation (MSTDC). Former federal lands, the 21-acre Heather Lands site and 38 acres of the 90-acre Jericho Lands site, are currently held together with Canada Lands Company (CLC), but CLC and MSTDC are planning the redevelopment of all landholdings together, with ownership fully going to MSTDC after rezoning approval from the city of Vancouver. After rezoning, which was recently approved for Heather Lands, the development will happen in partnership with Aquilini Development, another large Vancouver developer. The Heather Lands development comprises 2610 apartments, of which 540 units are social housing, 400 units are rental housing, and 1670 units are leasehold strata in towers up to 28 storeys (City of Vancouver, 2022c). The Jericho lands development is still in the planning phase and will only be built out over the next 20–30 years, but it will likely comprise 13 000 units in towers up to 49 storeys, 30% of which should be offered as affordable units (City of Vancouver, 2023a).

It is impossible to do justice to the many reasons for the Nations to pursue development and the cultural significance thereof from an outsider's perspective and this is also not the focus of this paper. Nevertheless, it should be highlighted that the Nations' leadership understands these developments not only as "land back" (Onishi, 2022), but importantly as major tools toward economic independence and self-sufficiency as they offer "a unique opportunity to financially support the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tseil-Waututh communities and enhance our quality of life through essential social programs" (Sparrow & Khelsilem, 2023). The Musqueam, Squamish, and Tseil-Waututh have been fighting for control over their traditional ever since they had been displaced from the largest part of them (Harris, 2017; Pasternak, 2015; Roy, 2007). Developments like *Señákw*, Heather, or Jericho are also an expression of that continuing political fight and its success.

Instead of focusing on the Nations' perspective, this paper focuses on the city of Vancouver's perspective and explores some of the preconditions that enable these developments to be imagined as fixing the city's problems in terms of sustainability, affordability, and reconciliation. I read the city of Vancouver's overarching imaginations of how to create a sustainable city, an affordable city, and a reconciliatory city as part of a socio-ecological fix (Ekers & Prudham, 2015, 2017, 2018) based on an analysis of Vancouver's

major strategy and urban planning documents, with supporting evidence gathered through semi-structured interviews. The central goal is to demonstrate how the intertwined ecological, material, and cultural natures of the spatial fix taking place here propagate a specific socioecological configuration of space. Geographical imaginations (Gregory, 1994, 1995, 2004) of how to become a green city, an affordable city, and a reconciliatory city are highlighted as specific cultural elements that are entailed in the city's policies and in that way become "congealed" (Ekers & Prudham, 2018, p. 20) in the built environment. The city of Vancouver's policies exhibit specific geographical imaginations of what green means, what housing affordability means, and what reconciliation means, and these imaginations are socioecologically fixed in developments such as Señákw, Heather, or Jericho.

This means that this paper is informed by Señákw, Heather, or Jericho, but it is focused on the perspective of the city and it predominantly works with city data. It finds that the "green" city continues to be imagined either as green suburbia, or as "eco-density" residential towers (Hutton, 2019, p. 47), which are now to be constructed in new parts of the city. The imagination of the affordable city propagates the construction of maximum supply, which equally encourages profit-oriented market-rate housing construction in the form of high-rise apartment buildings. Congruently, this sustainability fix (Castree & Christophers, 2015; McCann et al., 2022; While et al., 2004) and housing affordability fix enable continuous accumulation in the city's real-estate sector, a trend that started with the first settlers arriving in the region (Cowen, 2020; Gurstein & Yan, 2019, p. 219) and thus with the dispossession of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh. Simultaneously, city policies imagine reconciliation with the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh to function through offering what Baldwin et al. call an "entry into the dominant social order" (2011, p. 8), the participation in real-estate development. This permits the Heather, Jericho, and Señákw developments to materialize as the imagination of the green, affordable, and reconciliatory Vancouver.

While empirically highlighting the specific conceptualization of reconciliation as the for-profit real-estate development of a green and affordable city and with that the narrow confines, in which settler-colonial capitalism offers forms of reconciliation, is a valid contribution, the analytical insights of this paper are limited without broader engagement with the perspective of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh. The paper points to some of the enabling conditions for Indigenous real-estate development, and highlights dominant discursive structures within city policies, but the paper does not more deeply engage with the variegated meanings of the developments for Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh, and the Nations' agency in making these real-estate developments a reality. This paper engages but an aspect of how meaning, matter, and capital is fixed in developments like Señákw, Jericho, or Heather, and the following public statements are supposed to highlight that there is much more to this socioecological fix than the perspective of the city of Vancouver.

For the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh the developments seem to be perceived to hold the potential for a substantial increase in Indigenous power as the three Nations are bound to become "the most powerful developer in North America" (David Negrin, CEO of MSTDC, as quoted in: Fumano & Culbert, 2022), and the developments might create the revenue needed to fund infrastructure and services, and offer

the Nations a possibility to become financially independent. Programmatically, Khelsilem, Chairperson of the Squamish Nation council highlights:

“Seṇákw is [...] largely viewed through an economic development lens, which is, it’s intended to achieve highest and best use of the land. To create long-term economic value for the nation to be able to support our economic and social goals for our community” (Khelsilem, 2021)

Thus, while this paper delivers evidence of how settler-colonial capitalism offers a “reconciliation fix” without changing its order of operations, it also suggests that the participation in real-estate development in the extremely expensive Vancouver housing market, which is actively pursued by Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh is bound to offer the Nations substantial, tangible resources and political power. But, broader research that can contextualize Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh perspectives is pivotal should scholars wish to more thoroughly explore some of the predicaments of the intersection between capitalism and colonialism hinted at here.

Structurally, the paper first references literature on Vancouver as a “green” and unaffordable city (Jones & Ley, 2016; Kear, 2007; Peck et al., 2014; Quastel et al., 2012), before turning to literature on contemporary forms of settler-colonial capitalism and attempts at reconciliation within it (Coulthard, 2007, 2014; Pasternak, 2020; Somerville, 2021; Tomiak, 2017). The subsequent chapter discusses methodology, followed by an empirical analysis of three socioecological fixes embodied in Vancouver planning strategies: the green city, the affordable city, and the reconciliatory city. This empirical evidence enables the ensuing discussion regarding how such a conceptualization promotes reconciliation in a narrow frame of for-profit real-estate development. This, in turn, allows for a contribution to broader discussions about the (in)adequacy of capitalist approaches to reconciliation.

Vancouver: sustainable living in the green city

The conditions for socioecologically fixing capital in Indigenous real-estate are laid out by specific imaginations of what sustainability, affordability, and reconciliation signify in Vancouver. Vancouver’s identity as a “green” but also unaffordable city has been widely covered by critical literature, and a better understanding thereof will subsequently enable the discussion of the here-identified approach for reconciling with First Nations: socioecologically fixing issues of colonialism through real-estate development.

Vancouver urbanism is widely known for high-rise condominium towers and features such as density, livability, and sustainability (Peck et al., 2014). The literature highlights a specific understanding of sustainability in Vancouver, the city as a site where “cultural capital accrues [...] through personal enactment of sustainable urban lifestyles” (Quastel et al., 2012, p. 1068). Such lifestyles are promoted by a specific understanding of the role of nature in a “green” city (Kear, 2007, p. 324; McCallum et al., 2005; Peck et al., 2014, p. 390; Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018) that enables secure living in a “natur- esque”, ideal cityscape (Lees & Demeritt, 1998; as quoted in: Quastel, 2009, p. 712). Vancouver is understood as being embedded in culture but also close to “real” nature, the “wilderness” (Barnes et al., 2011, p. 307; Vanzella-Yang, 2019), profiting from its positive aspects, while keeping negative ones outside (Pohl & Helbrecht, 2022). In

Vancouver, an imagination of sustainability has come to signify living in a dense, artificially-greened high-rise cityscape, while also being close to and protective of “real” nature. This ahistorical categorization of wilderness (Baloy, 2016; Barman, 2005, 2007; McCallum et al., 2005) erases the role of Indigenous people in creating the region’s landscapes and depicts them as prehistoric peoples, separate from culture (Baldwin, 2009; Baldwin & Erickson, 2020; Simpson & Bagelman, 2018).

The “green city” idea has become the symbolic capital of a real-estate industry that is central to the region’s economy (Ley, 2021). The success of what Molotch (1976) has called a city’s “growth machine” (Hutton, 2019, p. 48; Ley, 2021; McCallum et al., 2005; Quastel, 2009, p. 703; Surborg et al., 2008) paired with the great influx of foreign capital (Barnes et al., 2011, p. 310; Hutton, 2019, p. 54; Ley, 2017, 2021; Olds, 1998) and the absence of provincial or federal government support for affordable housing provision (Gurstein & Yan, 2019, p. 219; Ley, 2021, p. 301) has led to a housing affordability crisis. Even though both levels of government have now re-enacted “historic” policies (Government of British Columbia, 2018, 2022, p. 3; Government of Canada, 2017, p. 3), Vancouver routinely features as one of the most unaffordable cities on the planet (UBS, 2022, p. 10), and the construction of condominium towers has often become the only financially viable form of urban development (Grisdale & Walks, 2022; Gurstein & Hutton, 2019, p. 15; Gurstein & Yan, 2019, p. 226; Harris, 2011, p. 718). Vancouver has become a “dual city” whose “sustainability” is only affordable to one segment of the population (Barnes et al., 2011, p. 297) and past city policies inspired by prevalent imaginations of sustainability such as the “sustainability-as-density” paradigm (Quastel et al., 2012) or the promotion of density along major transit lines are inherently linked to gentrification (Jones & Ley, 2016).

While the promotion of “sustainability-as-density” has precipitated tremendous change, density, and gentrification in the city, it has also narrowly focused that change (Quastel et al., 2012, p. 1056). Vancouver also exhibits continued suburbanization as the city “has neither transcended nor succumbed to its suburbs: rather, it has inventively recombined urban and suburban modes of development” (Peck et al., 2014, p. 389). The high-density downtown area with its condominium towers is made possible by the fact that large swaths of the city are zoned for single-family use (Harris, 2011, p. 718). Vancouver’s suburbia, another means of “green” city living with broad streets and large green spaces, has profited tremendously from the increase in land prices in the region. The suburbs have profoundly influenced urban development strategies through their resistance (Interview Journalist, 11/10/22; Crawford, 2022; Gold, 2022) to proposed changes in density or to their “green” character, thereby pushing magnitudes of change elsewhere.

Settler-colonial capitalism

To discuss the city of Vancouver’s particular approach to socioecologically fixing colonialism, and how this opens up a confined window for reconciliation, this paper draws from literature that explicitly engages with questions of redress in contemporary settler-colonial societies, and especially in the settler-colonial city (Hugill, 2017; McClintock & Guimont Marceau, 2023; Simpson & Hugill, 2022; Sylvestre & Castleden, 2022). It adds to debates around the intertwined and contradictory nature of capitalism and ongoing colonialism (Pasternak & Dafnos, 2018). Capitalist offerings for reconciliation

are met with skepticism, as such reconciliatory approaches are often based on the integration of First Nations into market relationships (Pasternak, 2015, 2020; Tomiak, 2017), which have been used for “greening” and “socializing” investment (Sommerville, 2021). Also, they are framed by planning practices and ownership relations that reinforce the colonial system of private property (Blomley, 2004; Dorries, 2022). But as Cattellino (2005, 2008) highlights in her seminal work on Seminole gaming, Indigenous capitalism can also be seen as a “vehicle[s] toward tribal economic power” that enables independence, self-governance and sovereignty (2008, p. 137).

Specifically, I engage with the argument that capitalism and colonialism are intrinsically intertwined (Pasternak, 2020, 2023; Sommerville, 2021; Tomiak, 2017; Whyte, 2017, 2018), and Glen Coulthard’s (2007, 2014) resulting deduction that the contemporary politics of recognition¹ embedded into the framework of settler-colonial capitalism are inadequate, as it reproduces colonial power relationships. Coulthard (2014) argues that, in a relationship of settler-colonial domination (67), contemporary forms of recognition are a form of settler-colonial territoriality (Sack, 1983; as quoted in: Coulthard, 2014, p. 7). While they offer Indigenous groups some form of access to power, they also enable the reproduction of the dominant capitalist settler-colonial system (Coulthard, 2014, p. 25) and the incorporation of Indigenous lands into it. As long as that system of domination is in place, “the structure of domination [... can be] modified, but the subject position of the colonized remains unchanged”, and recognition will come to be seen as what Frantz Fanon called “white liberty and white justice” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 39). The following description of the Vancouver socioecological fix highlights exactly what Coulthard means: A form of recognition, here called “reconciliation” takes place, seemingly naturally, as part of the predominant form of accumulation in Vancouver real-estate capitalism. Indigenous people are offered “an entry into the dominant social order” (Baldwin et al., 2011, p. 8).

Congruently, the here-described all-encompassing nature of colonial capitalism makes finding tangible reconciliatory approaches difficult, and it risks describing Indigenous peoples as passive and victimized without agency to navigate that contemporary system. If Indigenous values and economics are fundamentally anti-capitalist, and incompatible with market economies (Corntassel, 2012, p. 95) and Indigenous people who pursue capitalist reconciliation are “psycho-affectively” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 26) corrupted by the colonial system to pursue “white liberty and white justice” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 39), there can be no true recognition within capitalism. If “the delegation of land, capital and political power from the state to Indigenous communities” used for capitalist development is set to “reproduce the very configurations of colonial power” (Coulthard, 2007, p. 438/39), by “assuming that any subaltern group that is granted [recognition] will thereby acquire a subordinate articulation with a capitalist state” (Day, 2001, p. 189; as quoted in: Coulthard, 2014, p. 446), it is hard to see solutions within a capitalist system. What are we to make of a socioecological fix that addresses reconciliation by enabling continuous accumulation, while, at the same time, offering tangible power through the massive potential payout from large-scale real-estate development? While the predominant system of settler-colonial capitalism is in place without the consent of First Nations, these same groups now see the possibility to join, albeit only “on the right terms” (Pasternak, 2020, p. 313), by endorsing the “broader political project of neoliberalism” (Yeh & Bryan, 2015, p. 537).

The Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh have been deeply impacted by the intertwined powers of capitalism and colonialism (Simpson, 2022). There is no Señákw, or Jericho site outside of the city and its capitalist urbanism, and the Nations have fought and continue to fight for access to their traditional territory. The framework, and this is Coulthard's point, is already colonial. This, however, does not point to tangible improvements outside of the settler-capitalist system that substantially alters power relations at a larger scale (Simpson & Bagelman, 2018; Tomiak, 2023). As Shiri Pasternak highlights, "Indigenous peoples can, of course, both be grounded in their culture, and participants in a modern market society" (Pasternak, 2020, p. 313). While real-estate in Vancouver is deeply rooted in and enforcing the settler-colonial system, and the current politics of recognition are thus limited to the pursuit of reconciliation on plots of land that can bring value to the city's real-estate market, it is also a space navigated by the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh.

Methodological approach

To explore how the city of Vancouver approaches fixing its issues of sustainability, affordability, and how this opens up space for fixing reconciliation via Indigenous market-based real-estate development, the concept of the socioecological fix (Ekers & Prudham, 2015, 2017, 2018) is combined with Gregory's geographical imaginations (Gregory, 1994, 1995, 2004). Geographical imaginations are here understood to be "articulations between space and place" (Gregory, 1995, p. 464), cultural elements that embody the social performance of (unconscious) and multiple understandings of space (Gregory, 1995, p. 475). It is assumed that societal geographical imaginations find their way into city policies, which, in turn, decidedly shape the Vancouver socioecological fix. I thus read these geographical imaginations as one of many particular cultural aspects of a socioecological fix to explicitly highlight the importance of cultural understanding in how fixing problems and fixing capital is approached.

Michael Ekers and Scott Prudham remind us that not only capital is fixed in the (built) environment but that social and cultural elements are changing in response to capitalist crises of accumulation (Ekers & Prudham, 2015). A socioecological fix is not only a reaction to a crisis of accumulation, but also to a crisis of legitimacy, offering ways of fixing capital to fix problems. Geographical imaginations are one aspect that shape the way in which problems are diagnosed, and subsequently, how fixing them is being approached. In other words:

capital sunk into the landscape is also subject to social struggles that shape matter and meaning, including in socioecological registers, and [...] these struggles in turn comprise part of the ideological terrain of legitimacy and hegemony in a complex society. (Ekers & Prudham, 2017, p. 1371,72)

It is necessary to consider the political and cultural dimensions around spatial fixes (Ekers & Prudham, 2017, p. 1377), as these dimensions might help to explain the relationship between resistance and hegemonic circumstances; how for example a broad coalition of actors coalesces around the idea of pursuing real-estate development on Indigenous lands. As Launius and Kear (2019) show, financialization and a resulting spatial fix are heavily informed by cultural values and their negotiation, which makes a

purely economic perspective on a fix insufficient, as “the milieu of accumulation” (Ekers & Prudham, 2017, p. 1382) might change, but not necessarily its regime. This idea has been used to explore the ways in which capital is fixed in nominally “green” investments (Hazelett, 2023; While et al., 2004), thereby successfully blurring “the line between environmental stewardship and economic growth” (McCann et al., 2022, p. 5). Such ecological dimensions are also partly covered in this paper as part of the analysis of how geographical imaginations of sustainability or “reconciliation” shape the socioecological fix.

This paper thus explores one particular aspect of the Vancouver socioecological fix: how geographical imaginations found in the city of Vancouver strategies blur the line between issues of sustainability, housing affordability, reconciliation, and economic growth, and in that way present a way in which fixing capital in Indigenous real-estate simultaneously fixes the city’s problems. This is expressed in specific materiality, as “processes, materials, ideologies, and forms of knowledge [...] become congealed in actual landscapes and processes” (Ekers & Prudham, 2018, p. 20). From the perspective of the city of Vancouver, developments such as Señákw, Heather, or Jericho manifest as the material result of socioecologically fixing capital in Vancouver real-estate in a green, affordable, and reconciliatory manner, a configuration of space that is both material and cultural.

Describing geographical imaginations as one particular aspect of the Vancouver socioecological fix is an attempt to explicitly operationalize the cultural concept of geographical imaginations within the political-economic lens of a fix. This approach thus requires a methodology that is attentive to both cultural as well as political-economic elements. The core assumption is that the analysis of city documents and strategies, complemented by interviews with city officials allows for an understanding of the imaginations on which these strategies are based, and how imaginations shape city policies. These, in turn, propagate a specific fix, and that fix results in a specific materiality. This allows for an understanding of how culture materializes in city policies, and how it is eventually fixed in the cityscape.

The empirical analysis in this paper is largely based on material evidence provided by the City of Vancouver in a variety of strategy documents, building codes, and bylaws regarding sustainability, affordability, and reconciliation. Pivotal among these are the recently published Vancouver Plan and Broadway Plan (City of Vancouver, 2022a, 2022c), which provide an integrated perspective on the city’s planning for the first time. As part of an ongoing research project, semi-structured interviews with a variety of stakeholders were conducted. For this paper, 11 semi-structured interviews, mainly with city planners, were used as complementary data. It is helpful to not only seek imaginations within strategy documents that signify a more static reflection, but also to trace how the individuals that make up the city apparatus reflect on the city’s approach to sustainability, affordability, and reconciliation. By relying on two different data sources, the approach aims at a better understanding of geographical imaginations while also being receptive to political-economic data that comprise the socioecological fix.

The narrative presented below was constructed through interviews conducted in November 2022, followed by an in-depth qualitative content analysis (Gläser & Laudel, 2009) of the interviews and available documents. This approach allowed for coding within both types of data to follow a logic that combined deductive assumptions

with the necessary inductive flexibility. Geographical imaginations and political-economic elements were both coded separately, before being woven together into one narrative, which is presented in the following sections, each addressing one of the three investigated elements: the green, the affordable, and the reconciliatory city.

The green city

Imaginations of the green city in Vancouver express themselves in two different fixed urban forms: a dense, artificially greened CO₂-efficient environment, and a low-density, green suburbia. In their congruence, both understandings form a cultural-ecological dimension of the Vancouver socioecological fix. They enable Indigenous real-estate developments to be imagined as a part of the green Vancouver, as they promote high-density development as green, an imagination that is now extended in places outside of downtown.

As highlighted by the literature, Vancouver understands itself as having a green identity, as being “a leader in municipal environmental sustainability” (City of Vancouver, 2022b, p. 14; see also: City of Vancouver, 2019a, p. 10; 2022, 2; City of Vancouver & Vancouver Park Board, 2018, p. 2), and environmental stewardship as an intrinsic part of the city’s identity (City of Vancouver & Vancouver Park Board, 2018, p. 44). This is reflected in the importance of green spaces for the city, for example the “many green and leafy residential areas” (City of Vancouver, 2022a, p. 31, 345), but also the “wilderness” outside of “a city surrounded by forests, rivers, lakes and oceans” (City of Vancouver, 2022c, p. 14; see also: City of Vancouver & Vancouver Park Board, 2018, p. 5). This imagination of being in a privileged relationship with nature results in the propagation of specific “green” strategies.

The widespread desire to live in the natural environment of green suburbia (Siemiatycki et al., 2020) is a constant and powerful (Peck, 2011) factor in policy-making. Prevalent NIMBYism (Interview Journalist, 11/10/22; Crawford, 2022; Gold, 2022), the resistance to change, derives from an imagination critical of density and the associated loss of greenery. The Vancouver and Broadway Plans continuously reassure readers that the green character of the city and its neighborhoods will be preserved (City of Vancouver, 2022c, p. 31, 345) and people will be able to continue to enjoy living in “streets and parks accented with big trees and lush vegetation” (City of Vancouver & Vancouver Park Board, 2018, p. 5, see also: City of Vancouver, 2021a, p. 2,3). The fear of the loss of green space is also shared by some planners:

The city is getting really dense and that is not always a good thing. [...] we are really reducing any kind of green space you can have in a lot because you are trying to fit as much square footage as possible (Interview City Planner, 11/07/22)

If suburbia is resisting densification, this makes densifying places where this is possible more pressing: “It’s one of the reasons why heights are quite extreme because on the bits that you, parcels that you can develop, yeah, you’ve got to go to greater heights” (Interview City Planner, 11/22/22). To that end, a key concern of the Vancouver Plan is the construction of “complete neighbourhoods that provide safe and convenient opportunities to walk, bike and take transit for daily needs” (p. 102). Their efficient urban form, in terms of CO₂, is understood to be an important factor constituting a green

city. The propagation of high-rises is enabled by the city not yet accounting for embodied carbon emissions (in buildings) in its carbon budget (Interview City Planner, 11/16/22). Instead, the city focuses its emissions reduction efforts on the two main emission sources: heating (57%) and transport (37%) (City of Vancouver, 2021a, p. 4). This enables high-emissions investments in high-density residential towers to be imagined as green (City of Vancouver, 2021a, p. 39). “At the moment, I guess the argument is: if you add up more people near transit getting out of their cars [...], less and less operational emissions in the buildings. Those things outweigh the initial investment in embodied carbon and in concrete” (Interview City Planner, 11/22/22).

To secure the green character of these dense neighborhoods, policies seek to bring “nature back to the city” (City of Vancouver, 2019b, p.10) through green infrastructures (City of Vancouver, 2016, 2019a) that now feature prominently in the Broadway Plan and the Vancouver Plan. They are imagined to create “purposeful landscapes” (Interview City Planner, 11/07/22) that provide the population with the positive aspects of nature – ecosystem services (City of Vancouver, 2018a, p. 40, 2021c, p. 2) – while leaving out the negatives (City of Vancouver, 2016, p. 2.35). In this understanding, which intrinsically understands green to be “good” (Angelo, 2021; Wachsmuth & Angelo, 2018) even dense urban space can be “greened” through “the right managerial engagement with nature” (City of Vancouver, 2019a, p. 22). This allows for the selective integration of nature into the city while equally protecting “real” nature from the impacts of city life. Not all planners, however, agree on the potential for greening dense neighborhoods: “I mean, it’s my personal opinion. Yeah, but if you push the density too high and if you’re not doing something really extraordinary in some other way to counterbalance that, then if you’re doing business-as-usual development to a really high scale, there’s just a limit to what you can do from a sustainability perspective” (Interview City Planner, 11/16/22).

Thus, strategies exhibit a compromise between two factors that are understood to constitute a green city: the prevalence of “green” space and the idea of sustainability-as-density (Quastel et al., 2012). These two notions also result in two different green urban forms: low-density suburbia and high-density apartment buildings, with the continued existence of suburbia making the existence of high-rises necessary. The Vancouver and Broadway Plans approach this compromise by introducing more density into neighborhoods, but also by concentrating that density around transit hubs, leaving larger areas of the city untouched or subject to gentler densification. Together, the two modes of living form the imagination of a green Vancouver, of a city close to “real” nature, CO₂ efficient, all the while boasting a green character.

Even though sustainability-as-density is being employed in new places, imaginations of sustainability in the form of green esthetics or “eco-density” continue to shape the Vancouver socioecological fix. Whereas the green character of the city is, as will be argued below, extended by the incorporation of the imagination of green Indigeneity, which also makes Heather, Jericho, and Señákw appear greener, they more generally materialize the green city imagination. They are extremely high-density and built close to public transport options. Señákw close to downtown only offers very limited parking space and will contribute to public transport infrastructure (Nch’kaǵ West, 2023). The planning for Jericho includes a subway station for a not-yet-funded subway extension (City of Vancouver, 2023a). All developments boast managed “natural”

spaces, such as the award-winning design of Heather (Canada Lands Company, 2023, p. 27), and they take pressure off densifying “green” suburbia (Interview City Planner, 11/22/22, Interview Federal Planner 11/15/22; Nch’kaŷ West, 2023). Their sustainability, however, remains questionable because of their CO₂ balance. Without this imagination, no high-rise construction using large amounts of concrete could be imagined as “green”. This is not to say that the calculus is wrong, but it enables the “green” Vancouver to look as it currently does, and it enables Jericho, Heather, and Señákw to be imagined as part of the green city fix, a precondition for reconciliation via real-estate development.

The affordable city

Unaffordable housing is a structural feature of living in Vancouver. Whereas political-economic aspects dominate the “housing affordability fix”, measures taken still rely on imaginations of how the housing market functions. Taken together, these aspects enable a fix that entails continuous accumulation in the real-estate sector, as city policies and income are entirely dependent on successful private development. Fundamentally oriented around supply and maximum density, the imagination of the affordable city enables the Vancouverist high-rise urban form at Heather, Jericho, or Señákw to be understood as contributing to the provision of affordable housing.

The ongoing housing affordability crisis stressed in the literature is a dominant factor in shaping city policy (City of Vancouver, 2017b, 2022a, 2022c, 2023b: B-75). Its root cause is imagined to be “demand outstripping supply” (Interview City Planner, 11/22/22), and solutions envision providing more and the “right kind” of supply (City of Vancouver, 2017b, p. 5). However, the high-price market environment, which is dominated by private developers who build “almost all of the housing in the region” (Interview City Planner, 11/14/22), makes it unviable for developers to build affordable housing (City of Vancouver, 2017b, p. 39), and prohibitively expensive for the city itself (City of Vancouver, 2017a, p. 12). The city resorts to a limited set of tools that are all dependent on the continuous reproduction of the real-estate sector. The “empty homes tax”, for example, capitalizes on speculative housing investments in order to provide affordable housing (City of Vancouver, 2022b, p. 6). However, most of the affordable housing supply and city infrastructure is provided through Development Cost Levies (DCLs), which is “a charge on new development” (City of Vancouver, 2004, p. 9) and Community Amenity Contributions (CACs), through which developers finance the infrastructure necessary for new developments (City of Vancouver, 2004, p. 1). Another major tool, Inclusionary Zoning, requires “a certain percentage of the new development to be social housing [...] in exchange for additional density” (City of Vancouver, 2017a, p. 23). For larger developments, the inclusionary target is 30% of the residential floor area consisting of a “20% social housing target and minimum 10% moderate-income housing target” (City of Vancouver, 2021c, p. 11).

These tools all share a dependence on continuously high property prices: The higher property prices, development costs, and development profitability, the more money, infrastructure, and affordable housing the city receives. As one planner put it: “When we increase the value of the land, the city gets that back [...] So, I think it’s messy” (Interview City Planner, 11/16/22). The scope of this dependence becomes apparent in the city budget. Whereas the 2023–2026 Capital Plan allocates \$617 million for affordable

housing, city investment is only \$84.3 million, with \$520 million provided by private developers (City of Vancouver, 2023b, B-76,77). Similarly, the city's 2019–2022 Capital Plan (City of Vancouver, 2018b) calculated \$540 million for affordable housing, where \$537 million was contributed by private developers and only \$3 million by the city (17). Out of the \$455 million budgeted for affordable housing in the Broadway Plan, \$326 million will be provided by developers, \$129 million through partnerships with other levels of government, and no funding comes from the city (City of Vancouver, 2022a, p. 475,492). Even though the city can point to large investments in affordable housing, most actual provision happens through private developers and continuous accumulation (Hyde, 2022). For 2023, the budget sees city expenditures of about \$7.2 million for housing out of a total budget of \$1.9 billion. And as is typical for Canadian municipalities, property taxes account for 58% of the city's revenues (City of Vancouver, 2023b, B-30,42,43).

As Tom Hutton summarizes: "Cities have an institutional interest in redevelopment owing to the mix of economic, revenue, and taxation benefits accruing from projects" (2019, p. 66). The entire provision of affordable housing, infrastructure, and services is socioecologically fixed on the premise of a private market and continuous capital accumulation therein. This means that even though the city speaks of a housing affordability crisis (City of Vancouver, 2017a, 2022b), high housing prices are a structural feature of the provision of city operations, services, and affordable housing. This dependence and the failure of other levels of government to provide affordable housing makes the city follow strategies that cannot structurally alter how housing is provided or how much it costs. As one city planner put it: "we're caught" (Interview City Planner, 11/08/22). In the absence of other levels of government, this leaves affordable housing construction in the schizophrenic situation where affordable housing in large projects will only ever be built as a 30% afterthought of 70% "unaffordable housing". This obviously also leads to the propagation of high levels of density. Putting as much housing as possible on a parcel, often "near current and future transit hubs" (City of Vancouver, 2017b, p. 32), appears to be one of the only imaginable strategies for increasing affordable housing supply. In this sense, the affordable city implies the construction of profit-oriented high-density real estate in certain parts of the city. Heather, Jericho, and Seńákŵ embody this. They are high-density, will supply a large number of apartments, and will contribute to the city's affordable housing provisions through amenity contributions and by fulfilling the 20-30% benchmarks for social and below-market housing (Interview City Planner, 11/22/22, Interview Federal Planner 11/15/22). Seńákŵ is planned to provide 20% of apartments at an affordable rate (Nch'kaŷ West, 2023), calculated at 30% of the gross median income of the surrounding neighborhood according to CMHC standards (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2023), Heather's rezoning application was approved with offering 22.83% of floor space at some sort of discount (City of Vancouver, 2022c), and Jericho is currently planned with at least 30% of floor area being affordable housing (City of Vancouver, 2023a, p. 156). The developments operate within Vancouver's housing provision framework and their success in providing affordable housing is as limited as the framework is, but they are imagined to fix affordability problems. This represents an additional aspect in enabling the Vancouver real-estate-as-reconciliation fix.

The reconciliatory city

Reconciliation has not been [near the top of the agenda] until the last few years when the city declared itself a city of reconciliation. So, in all of our projects, it's now a consideration. (Interview City Planner, 11/22/22)

While the above discussions on imaginations of the green and affordable city only partially describe new aspects of the Vancouver fix, the consideration of reconciliation has emerged as a major factor since Vancouver declared itself a “city of reconciliation” in 2021 (City of Vancouver, 2021b, p. 3). Every city document starts with Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh land acknowledgements, city staff are trained to act in a reconciliatory manner (Interview City Planner, 11/14/22), and the importance of working with the Nations and urban Indigenous communities is continuously pronounced as an important aspect of the “process” of reconciliation (Interview City Planner, 11/07/22). However, it is also understood that reconciliation needs to take more concrete forms, what a Nation member also called “reconcili-action” (Interview First Nation representative, 11/23/22). City strategies, especially the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) Strategy (City of Vancouver and Vancouver UNDRIP Task Force, 2022), developed by the city’s predominantly Indigenous UNDRIP Task Force, imagine a material expression of reconciliation, a central idea being that First Nations have a right to “a slice of the pie”:

Over time, the City of Vancouver has generated enormous wealth from unceded lands and has expropriated lands, and has not compensated the rights and title holders. Recognizing Vancouver as unceded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh lands means addressing the inequities and loss created by land and resource dispossession. (City of Vancouver and Vancouver UNDRIP Task Force, 2022, p. 21)

The city thus promises to look into “ways to amplify and solidify meaningful Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh participation in building and sharing Vancouver’s economic prosperity” (City of Vancouver and Vancouver UNDRIP Task Force, 2022, p. 16). Real-estate developments are understood as a way of empowering First Nations while also helping to solve the city’s problems: “Currently, Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh are working to address housing supply and affordability through their own developments (e.g. Señákw, Heather Lands, Jericho Lands)” (City of Vancouver and Vancouver UNDRIP Task Force, 2022, p. 18). The developments are understood to be a manifestation of reconciliation in material and financial terms that is also in the public’s interest. Often rather implicitly, I have felt as if First Nation profit-oriented real-estate development is understood to be a social enterprise, as profits go to the Nations, who have largely been excluded from wealth accumulation in the city. Participation of the Nations in the region’s economy, and especially in profit-oriented real-estate development emerges as THE sign for reconciliation in Vancouver.

Imaginations of reconciliation also overlap with imaginations of the green city, especially in regard to water management: “The City recognizes that the Host Nations have responsibly stewarded the region’s lands and waterways to ensure prosperity for future generations since time out of mind. Since the arrival of settlers, our approach to water management has relied on tools that disrupted the water cycle, degraded natural systems, and caused the loss of important natural assets” (City of Vancouver,

2022a, p. 462). Relying on the Nations' expertise for water management, also a specific feature of Jericho's design (City of Vancouver, 2023a), "represents a unique opportunity to explore Indigenous reconciliation in the urban context through water" (City of Vancouver, 2019a, p. 100). The will to include First Nation perspectives on water management comes back to the imagination of Vancouver's relationship with nature. Because First Nations are Indigenous peoples, they are understood to have a special relationship with "real" nature, where "connection to land is inherent to culture" (City of Vancouver & Vancouver Park Board, 2018, p. 7). Therefore, the implementation of sound water management practices is imagined to be especially green not only on account of its environmental benefits, but also because it enables a more direct connection to real nature through the implementation of "Indigenous ideas". One city planner states: "we can indigenize our policies. So it's not just removing bias and prejudice, it's actually indigenizing. And so how we treat nature, the ecology, the environment, the world can certainly be influenced by Indigenous values" (Interview City Planner, 11/08/22). The idea that First Nation involvement in the development and city planning makes these processes greener reflects the idea of the "green Indian" (Sommerville, 2021, p. 653) and hints at the notion that the construction of market-oriented real-estate developments must automatically be greener if Indigenous peoples are involved, a stereotype also heavily catered to by the Señákw website (Nch'kaŷ West, 2023).

By offering First Nations an entry into the "dominant social order" (Baldwin et al., 2011, p. 8) of real-estate capitalism, and in the process also greening it, the Vancouver socioecological fix entails the idea of a reconciliatory capital switch, after Noel Castree and Brett Christophers' "green capital switch" (2015), which channels real-estate capital into the more social and sustainable circuits of Indigenous capitalism. By imagining reconciliation specifically in economic terms, and in terms of real-estate development, the idea is intrinsically linked to Vancouver's imagination of the green and affordable city. In their congruence, sustainability, affordability, and reconciliation form the Vancouver fix, the material expression of which are developments such as Heather Lands, Jericho Lands, and Señákw.

Reconciliation through real-estate development?

Through the Vancouver socioecological fix, the city manifests as green, affordable, and reconciliatory. This enables the continuous reproduction of the city's real-estate sector, and reconciliation is now understood to be an intrinsic part of that.

Strategies that implement measures for the city to become green or affordable both propagate the urban form of high-density residential buildings. Their development is functioning as a sustainability (Angelo, 2021) and affordability fix, whose expansion into areas outside of downtown continues to feed the growth machine (Molotch, 1976) of real-estate. Simultaneously, the consideration of reconciliation emerges as part of the Vancouver fix, enabling the profit-oriented development of the green and affordable city in the form of high-rises at Heather, Jericho, and Señákw. The Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh have come into (re)possession of various plots of land across the city on which the imagination of the sustainable, affordable, and reconciliatory urban form is materializing. The Nations can become part of the capital accumulation process of Vancouver real-estate by contributing the needed high-density developments

on their lands, maximizing their profits as economic reconciliation. The developments, in their material form, signify a socioecological fix to the city's problems as they stand for sustainability (-as-density (Quastel et al., 2012)), affordability, and reconciliation.

From the city's perspective, The Vancouver socioecological fix signifies a fix in its most classical sense of "capitalism trying to negotiate its inherent crisis tendencies to reproduce itself in perennially iniquitous forms" (Castree & Christophers, 2015, p. 379). The crisis of legitimacy in which the Vancouver model of city building finds itself in is socioecologically fixed as the set of imaginations that underlie it is extended, with the need for and will to achieve "reconciliation". Nothing is inherently changing about the system or its reproduction, but its socioecological configuration, meaning its cultural legitimization, is. The consequence is that new actors, the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh are bound to profit from the system. The Nations are to become powerful land developers wielding influence and reaping profits. Building a green city, providing affordable housing, and assuring reconciliation are, in Vancouver, not framed as questions of whether to accumulate capital, but of how to accumulate capital, and by whom. From the city's perspective, an intertwined sustainability fix (Castree & Christophers, 2015; McCann et al., 2022; While et al., 2004), a housing affordability fix, and a reconciliation fix can be achieved through the envisioned developments. This is not a normative statement to say that this is (or is not) effectively fixing these problems, but the intertwined and socioecological nature of these fixes creates a specific configuration of meaning and capital that allows the green, affordable, reconciliatory city to seemingly come into being in the material form of Heather, Jericho, and Seńąkw.

Is real-estate capitalism effortlessly integrating questions of recognition of Indigenous people into its circuits, thereby merely enabling its continued reproduction, or does the emergence of such developments signify a possibility for tangible forms of reconciliation? Settler-colonial capitalism seemingly relinquishes control over (small plots of) land (Sylvestre & Castleden, 2022), gives land back, while said land will become ever more deeply engrained into its circuits (Erickson, 2020, p. 113). Real-estate capitalism is receiving recognition as a social and green enterprise without solving any of its own contradictions, "producing a socio-ecological fix to make sure nothing really changes" (Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 222; as quoted in: Castree & Christophers, 2015, p. 379). In this way, the Vancouver socioecological fix "offer[s] specific forms of recognition that are inscribed from the outset, narrowly defining the field of regulatory interventions in ways that leave intact the broader relations underlying environmental disparity" (McCreary & Milligan, 2021, p. 726). The framing of reconciliation as part of the Vancouver socioecological fix naturalizes the use of small plots of repossessed land for real-estate development, and the question of alternatives remains unanswered. Following Coulthard (Coulthard, 2007, 2014) and the broader literature on settler-colonial capitalism, the ways in which Vancouver offers recognition to Indigenous groups become apparent. It offers reconciliation that simultaneously serves the reproduction of real-estate capitalism that was founded on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Cowen, 2020; Leonard, 2010). Only through a form of colonial amnesia (Gregory, 2004, p. 9ff), by not seeing the sheer complexity of ongoing colonialism, can reconciliation be framed within the confines of capitalism, and it excludes the incremental role that capitalism and accumulation by dispossession have played and continue to play in colonialism. Colonialism is placed in the past, and Indigenous peoples can become part of the

“dominant social order” (Baldwin et al., 2011, p. 8) through the patriarchal guidance of green (real-estate) capitalism.

However, this paper has largely focused on one particular side to this story, on the city of Vancouver, and the Nations’ story of reclaiming lands and working the settler-colonial system is only touched upon here. Engagement with reconciliation through the Vancouver socioecological fix also opens up space in a debate that is mostly relatively critical of capitalist approaches to reconciliation. The congruence of capitalism and colonialism (Coulthard, 2007, 2014; Pasternak, 2015; Whyte, 2017) suggests that true decoloniality has to be anti-capitalist (Simpson & Bagelman, 2018). While I agree with this analysis, it does not offer tangible solutions. Reconciliation as conceptualized here is deeply embedded in the circuits of capital accumulation, but it is also actively pursued by the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh and developing real-estate might enable them to provide meaningful services in their communities and become influential actors in the region’s real-estate business. From my external perspective, I am in no position to offer an assessment of what a decolonial praxis means in this context, but Indigenous culture should be “understood as unfolding in the present, with Indigenous people modifying and interpreting traditions in response to current circumstance and desires for the future” (McCreary & Milligan, 2021, p. 739), circumstances that are thoroughly embedded in the capitalist economy. Who but the Nations can decide what recognition means for them, or how their current political-economic situation should be navigated?

This paper cannot speak to the perspective of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh, nor assess the strategic choices that their leadership makes, but the paper highlights the narrow conceptualization of reconciliation in Vancouver. This conceptualization arguably supports the reproduction of the very system that is at the root of colonial problems, and one that is arguably not necessarily making Vancouver a green, or affordable city. At the same time, it also opens up space for increasing Indigenous financial capabilities and power. What are we to make of capitalist reconciliation that is likely allowing for an increase in Indigenous power? How can we judge approaches that enable recognition on narrow terms, yet equally enable a traditional spatial fix, without employing an essentialist perspective or by relegating reconciliation to a performative spectacle (Daigle, 2019)?

Conclusion

The Vancouver socioecological fix is adjusting to continuously enable accumulation in the city’s real-estate sector. The green city is imagined in the forms of green suburbia or “eco-density” high-rises, the affordable city in the form of maximum supply, and the reconciliatory city as one in which the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh benefit from the wealth accumulated through real-estate development. By relying on the concept of the socioecological fix, the paper has highlighted how geographical imaginations inform the city of Vancouver’s policies for building a green, affordable, and reconciliatory city, and that the structures of real-estate capitalism guide the search for fixing these issues. Reconciliation is understood as an act of building the green and affordable city through profit-oriented real-estate development carried out by First Nations. Drawing on literature concerned with ongoing settler-colonial

capitalism, the paper gives nuance to approaches of reconciling with First Nations as they present themselves in Vancouver. While the way in which reconciliation is conceptualized enables the reproduction of a colonial-capitalist system, it also holds the potentiality of power and resources that are actively pursued by the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh as they will likely profit tremendously financially and are bound to become influential real-estate developers. By highlighting this contradiction, the paper seeks to engage with the question of how to contend with settler-capitalist approaches to reconciliation in a scholarly way that goes beyond simple rejection or simplification. However, this quest is limited by this papers' focus on the perspective of the city of Vancouver. While it contends that questions of reconciliation are seemingly effortlessly incorporated into capital reproduction, further research with a focus on Indigenous agency and subjectivity might substantiate how Indigenous peoples are navigating that system, and how they are using it to pursue their agendas. But in order to draw further conclusions, research needs to take seriously and cover the agency of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh.

Note

1. I understand contemporary politics of reconciling with First Nations in Vancouver to be part of what Glen Coulthard calls the "politics of recognition".

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