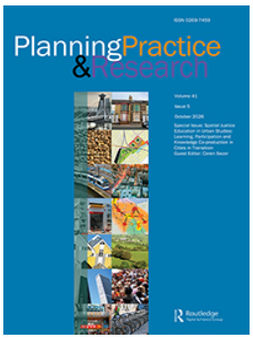

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Organisational practices shaping the role of spatial planners in a Swedish municipality

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to extend our understanding of how the role of public spatial planners is produced and reproduced within a municipal organisation. Drawing on structuration theory and a five-year ethnographic case study including individual interviews and focus groups, the paper analyses how planners' role in addressing a complex issue, such as urban segregation, is rolled out in a medium-sized Swedish municipality. The findings show how organisational changes and self-censorship favour a task-administrative planning approach over an integrated and holistic one among planners. This is maintained through two key practices: responsibility redistribution and diminishing practices.

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Public organisation; spatial planners; urban segregation; responsibility redistribution; diminishing practices

Introduction

The role of spatial planners in societal development has long been a subject for discussion, focusing on how changing institutional and ideological conditions shape planning practice (Forester, 1982; Albrechts, 1991; Grange, 2013). It has been suggested that different planning ideals emphasise varying roles for spatial planners (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2016), where one significant difference lies in whether spatial planners should actively advocate for values such as social justice and the reduction of urban segregation, or primarily facilitate decision-making processes (Fainstein, 2000; Campbell *et al.*, 2014). The planner role has been described as a *technocratic expert role* according to bureaucratic ideals (Faludi, 1973), as an *advocate role* focused on marginalised groups according to the reformist ideal (Davidoff, 1965), and as a *mediator role* between different interests and stakeholders following the collaborative planning ideal as formulated by Healey (1997). Research indicates that the role as a mediator heavily shapes spatial planners' own perception of the role (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2016). However, the conditions to enact such a role without favouring a market logic and powerful stakeholders in public organisations under strong influence of neoliberalism have been a recurring concern (Sager, 2009; Clifford, 2022). The neoliberalisation of local public planning authorities is seen through the entrepreneurialisation of local public administration (Harvey, 1989) and the increased focus on effectiveness, measurability and competition manifested in

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the emergence of New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1991). The current debate on neoliberalism points to how values and norms associated with the discourse, such as growth, competition, and individualisation, have become central logics in public organisations generally (Brown, 2018) and in spatial planning authorities, in particular (Baeten, 2012). Research has repeatedly demonstrated that market compliance and asymmetric power relations are prevalent in municipal practice (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2014; Loit, 2014), with the spatial planner's role increasingly becoming that of a facilitator of growth and attractiveness rather than advocating for social justice (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012).

Within this debate, the spatial planner has been described both as a victim and a villain. While spatial planners have been seen as enactors of a neoliberal agenda, they have also been shown to be sidelined through the trivialisation of their expertise, with the profession described as being in crisis (Grange, 2017). This as part of an ongoing politicisation of planning based on neoliberal ideals, where the legitimacy for spatial planners to raise critical issues based on professional judgment and conflicting planning ideals has decreased (Grange, 2013). In Sweden, concerns regarding similar tendencies have been raised by the trade union for planning architects based on increased frustration and ethical stress among municipal spatial planners (Westrin, 2024).

Against this backdrop, this paper advances understanding of contemporary planning practice by examining how organisational practices within a local public planning authority shapes the role of municipal spatial planners in their everyday work, drawing on an ethnographic case study. We use decreased urban segregation as an example of a policy ambition that requires spatial planners to actively advocate for values such as social justice. In the Swedish planning system, the municipal responsibility to address social inequality in spatial planning is stated within the first paragraph of the Planning and Building Act (PBA) (SFS 2010:900). The challenges in operationalising such ambitions concerning specifically urban segregation within the Swedish planning system practice have been previously identified (Loit, 2014; Thörn, 2023; Svensson *et al.*, 2025). By empirically examining how the planner role in handling urban segregation is produced and reproduced, while maintaining a focus on organisational-level practices, the paper complements structuralist analyses of contemporary planning practice and addresses a gap in existing research (Özogul *et al.*, 2025).

The research was based on a qualitative case study in Borlänge, a medium-sized municipality which has been described as one of Sweden's most segregated (Delby & Halth, 2023). At the time the study was initiated, the municipality had a political goal to reduce urban segregation and use spatial planning as a tool (Borlänge Municipality, 2020). A novel aspect of the research design is the collection of qualitative data via an ethnographic study, as the first author of this article was employed within the organisation as a spatial planner while part-time going through doctoral education. This has given her the opportunity, over five years, to participate in meetings as well as observe and conduct countless informal conversations with planning practitioners, where lived experience has enriched the analysis (Adams *et al.*, 2015). Previous studies examining the planner has in municipal practice have mainly been based on interviews with planning practitioners (e.g. Grange, 2013; Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2016; Clifford, 2022) and quantitative studies (e.g. Othengrafen & Levin-Keitel, 2019), missing out the subtle signals and unspoken culture given through lived experience. While institutional

analyses and structural approaches to power and governance have generated substantial understanding of what is taking place, an ethnographic study grounded in practice theory, recognising the importance of both structural conditions and agency, can provide a more nuanced understanding of how these dynamics are enacted in everyday practice.

In the next section, the article turns to the neoliberalisation of Swedish municipalities. While neoliberalisation is not treated as the primary object of analysis, it provides an important analytical context for understanding the organisational conditions within which the studied municipal spatial planners operate. This is followed by our theoretical framework that explores how social practices within a local planning authority shape and reproduce the role of spatial planners. The methodology is then presented, together with a description of the organisational characteristics of the planning authority under study and the analytical process. The results section examines how a task-oriented administrative approach appeared to be privileged over a holistic and integrative approach within the studied organisation. This is analysed through two types of social practices: responsibility redistribution and diminishing practices. Finally, the findings are discussed, and the paper's main conclusions are presented.

The Swedish planning system and its neoliberalisation

The Swedish planning system is primarily founded on a municipal planning monopoly, including the statutory requirement that all 290 municipalities maintain a comprehensive plan covering their entire territory. This plan outlines the main principles of spatial development to facilitate the coordination of diverse interests and ensure sustainable development. Physical planning is subsequently regulated through detailed development plans, which establish the legal framework for the development of specific land areas (SFS 2010:900). The Swedish planning system has its foundation in the social democratic welfare regime, where spatial planning is framed as a technocratic and bureaucratic practice grounded in rational–comprehensive ideals and public sector authority (Maudsley, 2022). Several scholars have analysed the neoliberalisation of the Swedish planning system, highlighting a shift from welfare-state regulation towards market-oriented governance, increased reliance on private actors, and more entrepreneurial forms of urban development (e.g. Grundström & Molina, 2016). It has been noted that comprehensive planning has evolved from being largely static and primarily a descriptive document focused on land-use allocation, to becoming an integral component of strategic planning processes (Fredriksson, 2011). However, the increased focus on strategic planning, understood in terms of collaboration between diverse actors to achieve shared development goals (Albrechts, 2004), has been described as part of neoliberalisation, whereby planners are expected to strive for consensus rather than raising critical perspectives (Olesen, 2014).

There are also several political initiatives aimed at simplifying Sweden's statutory planning process, often justified by arguments about shortening timelines and creating more flexible detailed development plans (Maudsley, 2022). Within this context, the relevance of planners' professional competence has increasingly been questioned. Grange (2017, p. 286) phrases it as follows: 'Much seems to indicate that there is reason to question Swedish planners' ability to act as independent guardians of democracy,' as originally envisaged in the legislation. This development can be understood as being

aligned with a broader transformation in the role of public practitioners in line with NPM, characterised by predefined tasks, standardisation, and performance indicators, where decisions risk becoming locked into predetermined procedures rather than guided by professional judgement (Hood, 1991). While this development is well researched, there is still a lack of research that sheds light on the everyday practices of planners within their organisational contexts.

Understanding the planner's role through social practices

The spatial planner role is not static but shaped through the interplay of formal and informal structures, and institutional expectations enacted in everyday practices (Grange, 2013). Already in Howe and Kaufman (1979), Howe & Kaufman described how the role could be understood as both technical (value-neutral) and highly political (value-laden), while the role in practice is hybrid in the sense that it is in movement between these two poles (Howe, 1980). By adopting a practice-oriented perspective, we focus on everyday work situations where planners manoeuvre within structural constraints to enact their occupational role (Filion, 2020). We draw on structuration theory, which emphasises that agency is exercised within the context of routinised actions, norms, and power relations (Giddens, 1984). Social practices are the recurrent actions individuals engage in that are part of everyday life, central to both the production and reproduction of social structures (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). Social production occurs when individuals participate in practices which acquire meaning through interaction within specific social contexts; meaning that structures such as institutions or norms do not exist independently of the activities which constitute them. Social reproduction refers to the process by which these activities become patterned and routinised over time, thereby contributing to the durability and persistence of social order (Giddens, 1984, p. 60). The acting of agents within social practices is then not predetermined or forced within this school of thought but is shaped by allocative and authoritative resources involved in the agents' reflexive monitoring of action (Giddens, 1984, pp. 258–262).

Thus, the role of planners emerges through interactions in meetings, collaborations, and informal exchanges, as well as symbolic actions such as naming of units and organisational charts (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). These social practices within the workplace are shaped by institutional logics, socio-cultural values, and the planner's own professional ideals and resources, where planners are understood as 'neither superheroes capable of fully controlling the land-use development process, nor villains responsible for its deficiencies' (Filion, 2020, p. 258). Central to the agency exercised by planners within structural constraints are the planner's own ethics and perception of their role, since everyday practices involve balancing competing demands – such as political priorities, market pressures, and normative commitments to equity – while maintaining legitimacy within the planning system (Forester, 1982, 2023). Balancing different values and handling dilemmas are seen as key components of planning work, where the task of the planner includes identifying affected concerns, filling them with content and balancing them against each other in the formation of a land-use plan (Bakunowitsch *et al.*, 2024). Hence, planners operate within a web of formal structures (e.g. laws, regulations, and organisational hierarchies) and informal structures (e.g. professional norms, networks, and cultural expectations) that both enable and constrain action. For example, statutory

planning frameworks may prescribe procedural steps, while informal expectations about efficiency or consensus-building influence how planners communicate (Healey, 1992) or behave in meetings (Vigar & Schoneboom, 2025).

Ideal types of spatial planners translated into approaches in everyday work

Within the presented theoretical framework, the normative ideal types of spatial planners identified in previous research gain relevance, as spatial planners can assume multiple roles reflecting different planning ideals (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2016). To empirically identify the enactment of different spatial planner roles, planning ideals are here operationalised as *approaches* among practitioners while balancing affected planning concerns and planning problems grounded in specific assumptions about knowledge, values, and governance. Healey (1997) describes approaches as institutionalised practices and discourses which shape how actors interpret their roles and responsibilities. Thus, an approach is both a normative framework (what planning ought to achieve) and a practical logic (how planning is operationalised), making it a useful lens through which to analyse tensions between ideals and organisational realities. This idea shares similarities with how Giddens (1984, pp. 5–14) distinguishes between discursive consciousness as the capacity to articulate and reason about one's actions, and practical consciousness, highlighting how action is guided by tacit knowledge and skills which enable individuals to ´knowhow to go on´, often without being able to verbalise this knowledge. In addition, unconscious motivations refer to deeper desires and emotional dispositions which may influence behaviour, even if individuals are not compelled to act on them.

Based on previous planning debates, two broad approaches can be identified: a task-oriented administrative approach and a holistic, integrative approach. The former is rooted in the traditional rationalist-bureaucratic model, which emphasises a technical and scientific ideal of decision-making, portraying planners as neutral experts who apply comprehensive analysis to achieve optimal solutions (Faludi, 1973). The holistic and integrative approach, by contrast, is grounded in reformist and collaborative ideals, where planners are expected to actively advocate values such as social justice, sustainability, and democratic participation, despite the challenges of balancing competing interests and power relations within the planning process (Davidoff, 1965; Healey, 1997). Rather than treating these approaches as competing normative ideals, this study explores how they are reproduced, challenged, and transformed through the everyday practices of planners situated within a specific organisational context.

Methods

This paper is based on a five-year ethnographic case study of the work carried out by Borlänge municipality's urban planning administration between autumn 2020 and spring 2025. The empirical work has autoethnographic elements insofar as the first author partly studies 'her own' practice due to her background as a spatial planner and employment within the studied organisation, enabling insight into everyday practices from an embedded, reflexive perspective (Adams *et al.*, 2015). Observations and reflections were documented in a field diary throughout the study period, where tensions and

emotions experienced in the role as an employee within the same organisational setting as the interviewees added an analytical layer. The researcher's role and areas of interest were made transparent to the employees and politicians involved, and the researcher was, for most of the time, embedded within the group of spatial planners working with comprehensive planning. The researcher was presented as both a critical interactive researcher and a spatial planner, with the critical approach entailing the questioning of what is taken for granted (Syssner *et al.*, 2016). The practical enactment of the role has meant prioritising listening over speaking and refraining from presenting solutions, while not hesitating to raise questions, challenges, and critical perspectives with the aim of deepening the understanding of the situations at hand to enrich both the empirical material and the practical learning. The recognition that knowledge, behaviour, and attitudes change over time and across contexts, and that the researcher is part of this social process, is regarded as one of the strengths of the ethnographic method (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The embedded presence of the researcher within the studied organisation may have influenced the situation under study by bringing forward conversations and perspectives that might not otherwise have emerged. This has been addressed through the triangulation of different qualitative methods and by grounding the analysis in previous studies. To gain analytical distance, the research process has also included periods of physical detachment and ongoing reflexive consideration of the researcher's role and influence on the studied work context and its actors, supported by peer debriefing within the academic community and systematic documentation in the field diary.

In addition to the fieldwork, the empirical material includes 16 semi-structured interviews with practitioners and politicians within the municipality (see Table 1). The interviewees were strategically selected based on their relevance for understanding the handling of urban segregation issues and the planner's role. Interviews 1–12 were conducted during 2021–2022 to provide initial orientation regarding how issues

Table 1.

Interviewees	1	Strategist (administrative support)	Sep 2021
	2	Spatial planner	Oct 2021
	3	Strategist (urban planning)	Oct 2021
	4	Strategist (public housing company)	Oct 2021
	5	Strategist (administrative support)	Nov 2021
	6	Spatial planner	Nov 2021
	7	Strategist (education)	Nov 2021
	8	Manager urban planning	Dec 2021
	9	Manager urban planning	Dec 2021
	10	Spatial planner	Dec 2021
	11	Politician	Jun 2022
	12	Politician	Aug 2022
	13	Project leader	Sep 2023
	14	Spatial planner	Apr 2024
	15	Manager urban planning	May 2024
	16	Project leader	Jun 2024
Field Diary		62 pages between 2020 (Oct) – 2025 (Apr)	
Meetings during field work		Unit meetings (every second week Jan 2021-Dec 2024) Workplace meetings (every month Jan 2021- Apr 2025) Operational planning days (once a year)	
Focus group interviews		4:13 h recordings 13 participants	

concerning urban segregation are handled within the organisation. The remaining four interviews were conducted to gain insights into a specific urban development project where one initial goal was to reduce urban segregation. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. As an insider researcher present in the municipality's everyday work, the empirical material also includes numerous informal conversations, including follow-up conversations with the interview persons. Conversations deemed important to the case were later documented in the field diary.

To create a deeper understanding of approaches to working with urban segregation issues in planning based on the learnings so far, two focus group interviews were conducted at the end of the study period in autumn 2024. The purpose was to further explore the participants' *experiences, opinions, wishes* and *concerns* arising from tensions and dilemmas identified during the fieldwork (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999, p. 5). Participants were invited based on lessons learned from the ethnographic work and the interviews. In one group, we gathered *strategists*, working with either comprehensive planning or specific thematic issues spanning the entire municipal organisation. In the other group, we gathered practitioners with the title *architect*, where most of the group work with spatial planning in the form of detailed development plans. Both focus group sessions lasted two hours with two main themes: i) roles and responsibilities to address urban segregation and ii) steering and management of the work. The sessions were recorded and reviewed several times afterwards.

Ethical reflections and considerations have been a continuous and often complex aspect of the research process. The risk of exploiting individuals involved in an ethnographic study is a crucial issue, particularly since the researcher occupies a position of power as the person who documents and interprets the everyday life being observed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, pp. 274–275). This challenge became particularly salient in the present study, where my dual role as both colleague and researcher required ongoing reflection on issues of trust, representation, and the potential consequences of producing and communicating research findings. Results and analyses were repeatedly discussed with participants, both to enrich and validate the material and as a way of critically examining my own interpretations and reducing the risk that participants' experiences would be misrepresented. Ethical considerations also included how participants were informed, provided consent, the storage of research data, and how quotations and job titles are presented to minimise the risk of identification. These considerations often involved balancing the ethnographic ambition to provide rich contextual descriptions against the need to protect participants' anonymity within a relatively small organisational setting. An application for ethical approval was submitted to the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Registration number: 2021–03150). The application was dismissed as the project was deemed not to involve sensitive personal data and therefore did not require formal ethical review. Nevertheless, ethical issues remained a central concern throughout the study and required ongoing judgement in both fieldwork and analysis.

The studied municipality

The studied case is Borlänge Municipality, which by Swedish standards is a medium-sized municipality with 51,425 inhabitants in 2024 (Statistics Sweden, n.d.). The

municipality is located in central Sweden and is a relatively young town which emerged during the country's industrialisation and was centred around two major manufacturing industries. Together with the neighbouring city of Falun, Borlänge forms the urban core of the region and has historically experienced population growth until 2020, when this trend reversed, and the population has declined slightly each year since then (Borlänge Municipality, 2025). This decrease is largely attributed to low birth numbers and a national tightening of migration policies; Borlänge has traditionally received a relatively high proportion of newly arrived refugees (Borlänge Municipality, 2025, p. 7). In 2022, it was also announced that one of the town's two major manufacturing industries would close, resulting in the loss of approximately 440 jobs.

The municipal organisation in Borlänge is divided into different departments due to the areas of responsibility in local welfare, such as education, social services, elderly care and urban planning. The urban planning department, which constitutes the focus of this study, underwent several organisational changes during the study period. These changes are introduced here and subsequently analysed in the Results section.

The occupational group of *spatial planners*, which serves as the term for the studied group throughout the remainder of the paper, was originally located within the same organisational unit. It included planners working with comprehensive planning, detailed development planning, and other policy and planning activities concerning the physical environment. Within the group, there are spatial planners with different educational backgrounds, such as architects, geographers and engineers working with spatial planning according to the PBA. During the various reorganisations, other groups of practitioners came to be important for understanding how the spatial planner role changed. These groups were organised in *municipal real estate* – responsible for the development, construction, and management of municipal facilities; and *land and development* – charged with the ownership and development of municipal land and ground lease agreements. In Figures 1–4, we illustrate the organisational changes with particular focus on the changing placement of the spatial planners. These changes are later analysed based on how they contributed to the redistribution of responsibility for strategic issues concerning spatial planning.

Analytical process

The analysis was conducted in five partly overlapping and iterative steps (cf. Fletcher, 2017). First, the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and focus group notes were read and discussed collectively by the authors. This initial engagement identified three themes: (i) organisational change; (ii) the formal and informal bypassing of spatial planners' expertise; and (iii) the exclusion of urban segregation from the organisational agenda. The latter was evident, for example, in how formal assignments defined planners' remit and legitimate planning content, as well as in informal interactions reinforcing these boundaries.

In the second step, we worked abductively to interpret these themes through concepts from structuration theory, particularly the enactment of authoritative resources and modalities of domination in organisational practice. Organisational change and the formal dimensions of bypassing planners' expertise were interpreted as manifestations

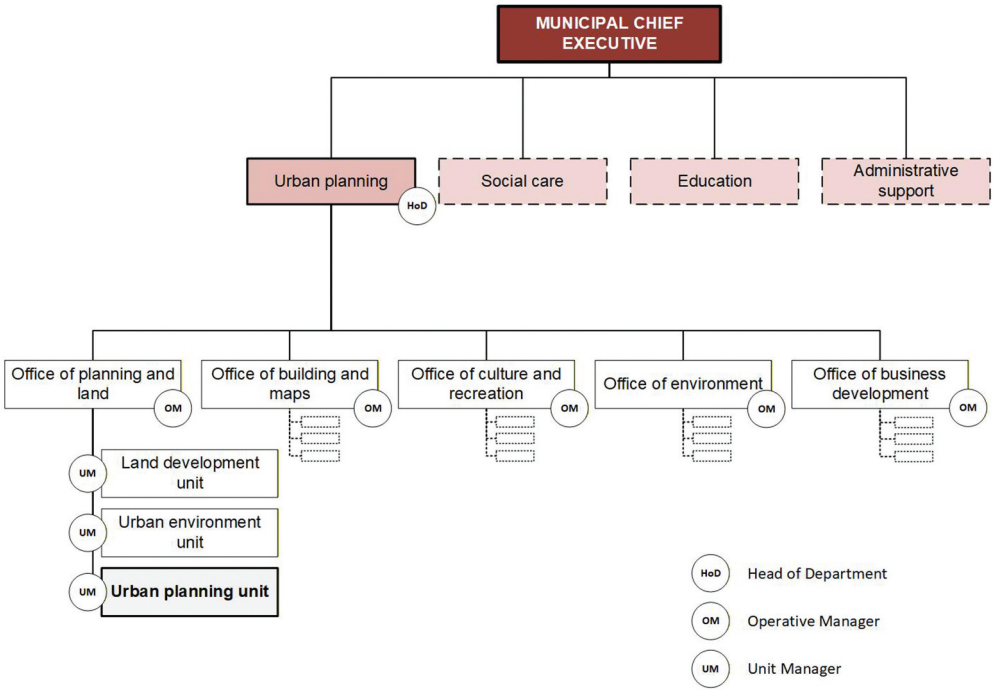

Figure 1. Simplified sketch of the organisation when the study started (placement of all spatial planners in bold). The spatial planners working with comprehensive planning and detailed planning were located here together within the urban planning unit.

of such authoritative resources, consistent with research showing how managerial control, centralisation, budget constraints, and hierarchical structures shape professional discretion and judgement (Hrelja, 2011; Guo, 2024).

In the third step, we developed the concept of *responsibility redistribution* to capture a recurring pattern whereby responsibility for defining problems, setting priorities, making strategic decisions, and representing organisational knowledge shifted from planners to managers, strategists, or administrative systems. The concept highlights how responsibility is reallocated among organisational actors and how this may influence whose knowledge and perspectives inform decision-making. It differs from studies of organisational marginalisation, which focus on how actors become marginalised (Lawrence & Corwin, 2003; Mulinari, 2015), and from research on how governance arrangements reshape responsibility (Clifford, 2022). Institutional resource redistribution, in turn, refers to processes through which authority, responsibilities, and resources are reallocated across organisational domains, often in response to reforms, austerity measures, or changes in governance arrangements (Cloutier *et al.*, 2016; Slade *et al.*, 2022).

In the fourth step, we examined how these dynamics were reproduced in everyday work. This resulted in the concept of *diminishing practices*, referring to situated micro-practices through which planners' expertise becomes less visible, influential, or consequential. Examples included self-censorship around urban segregation and routine interactions in which planners' knowledge was bypassed or given limited consideration.

Unlike concepts such as professional devaluation, inter-professional competition, or institutional resource redistribution, diminishing practices draw attention to the everyday enactment of organisational relations through which professional expertise may be rendered less influential in practice (Noordegraaf, 2015; Bucher *et al.*, 2016; Cooke, 2026).

The final step involved analysing these concepts in relation to the broader organisational and institutional context, drawing on both the theoretical framework and insights generated through the ethnographic fieldwork. Particular attention was paid to the neoliberalisation of public organisations and the diffusion of New Public Management (NPM) governance forms (Clifford, 2022; Grange, 2017). Interpretations were further refined through triangulation across data sources and continuous dialogue with municipal participants.

Identified social practices and changed meaning of ´strategic´

The findings draw on empirical examples to illustrate how everyday social practices contributed to the reproduction of a task-oriented administrative approach in the studied municipal organisation. The analysis is structured around the themes that emerged from the analytical process and interpreted through the concepts of responsibility redistribution and diminishing practices.

Organisational changes

During the years of fieldwork, several reorganisation processes occurred within the studied case (see Figure 1–4), which our analysis suggests reinforcing an administrative task-oriented approach. This is understood as part of the marginalisation of an integrative holistic approach through a redistribution of responsibility, regarding which issues within the studied organisation are framed as *strategic*. The reasoning is based on an identified conflict in how different groups of employees interpret roles and responsibilities for ´strategic issues´ in spatial development. Those involved are spatial planners and the groups of employees working with real estate and land development. Interviewee 6 elaborated on the experienced differences:

> We have, in the planning group, a picture of what the spatial planning process looks like: which strategic documents and goals we need to consider, and our role in this flow. And we therefore expect that ´municipal real estate´ understands its role in the flow. But they don't – because they don't consider strategic documents (. . .). There is no structured way of working, there are no processes, and much of what happens is constantly ad hoc. (. . .) We go over each other's heads; we find it very hard to establish a common language. (. . .) I don't understand what they're saying, and they don't understand what I'm saying. (. . .) And they probably feel the same too: "But why . . . ? What are you talking about now? Why wouldn't you just take a plot and build . . . ? We need to build 20 supported housing units for individuals with disabilities here now. Get it done, hurry up, for God's sake, it's urgent." To which we respond: "No, no, no, that's not possible – you need to investigate this and that."

The perspective articulated here by the spatial planner reflects what we understand as an expression of the integrative holistic approach, where needs such as development and location of supported housing are analysed and weighed against existing strategic

documents and various planning issues. The interpretation of *strategic* for the spatial planners is connected to this reasoning. In contrast, the perspective articulated in relation to the municipal real estate unit represents an administrative task-oriented approach, where the clearly defined task of constructing a specified number of service home units is in focus. The term *strategic* is interpreted by this group as delivering on identified needs as quickly and as economically as possible in line with NPM-logic. Both approaches are considered equally valid according to different logics and their different missions; however, the prioritisation between the two – and the reduced mandate to apply an integrative and holistic approach for the spatial planners as a result of the reorganisations – is of particular interest and will be further developed below.

The ethnographic method allows us to identify how subtle signals during the three reorganisations influenced and ultimately reduced the mandate for spatial planners to enact the integrative holistic approach in everyday work. The organisational division and naming of offices and units are central to this process, where the first observation concerns the division between spatial planners working with detailed development plans and those engaged in comprehensive planning (Figure 2). Following this reorganisation, the office where comprehensive spatial planners were located was renamed Strategy and Development, with the placement of the comprehensive planners in the office being used as an argument for the name. As a result, spatial planners working with detailed development plans experienced disregard when raising issues concerning town-

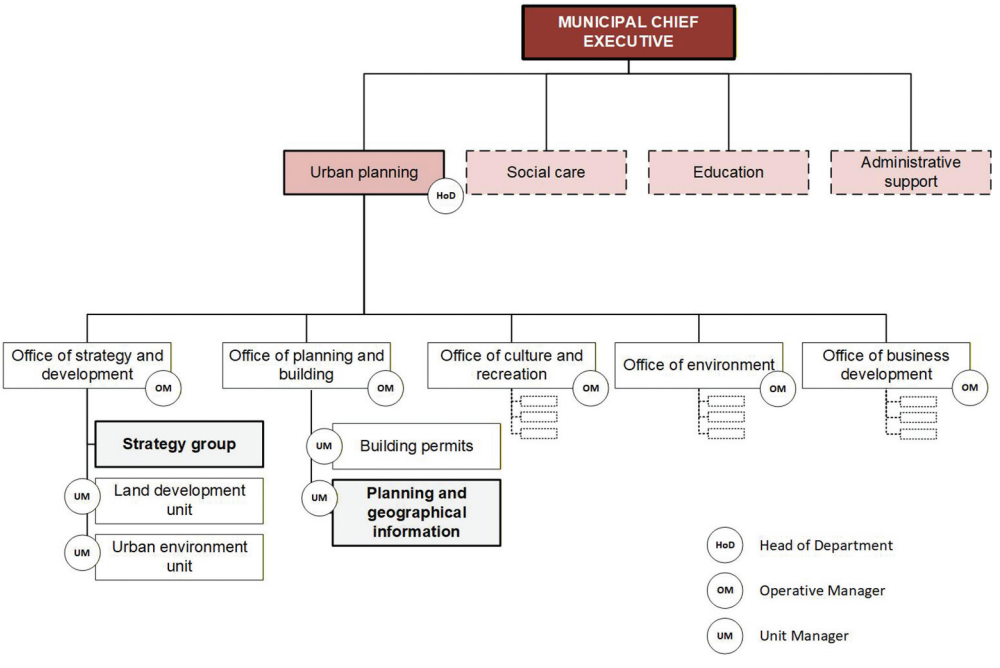

Figure 2. After a reorganisation in April 2023 (placement of spatial planners bold). The group of spatial planners were divided depending on whether they worked with comprehensive planning or detailed development planning. The comprehensive planners were placed in a group directly under the office manager for strategy and development, whereas the detailed development planners were located in a unit called ´planning and geographical information´.

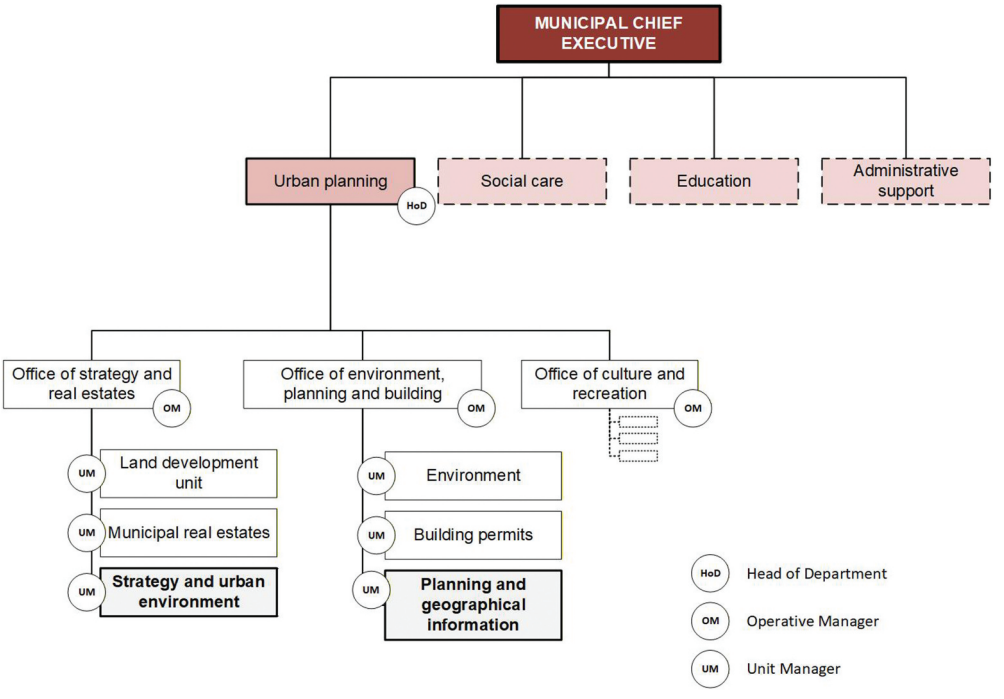

Figure 3. After a major reorganisation in January 2024, the urban planning department became three offices. within this structure, the spatial planners working with comprehensive planning were placed together with civil servants responsible for the urban environment, whereas detailed development planners stayed in the same unit. as part of this reorganisation, the office for business development was ´upgraded´ to a staff function directly under the municipal chief executive.

wide coherence, in meetings with representatives from the land and development unit. The spatial planners expressed that the land and development group was wrong to claim that only they are entitled to work strategically just because their office is called 'Strategy and Development'. According to the field diary (30 August 2024), a spatial planner shared that, since the reorganisation, there have been several situations in which land developers have said, 'Stop right there, we're the ones handling strategic issues', when spatial planners have tried to take a broader approach to an area. The spatial planner argued that the land and development group only has responsibility for land strategy (i.e. purchasing and selling municipal properties), whereas spatial planners must be able to switch between different levels of analysis of an area to make the best compromises in a detailed development plan.

The second organisational change of importance to understand the identified responsibility redistribution practices was when the comprehensive spatial planners were moved back to the group working with detailed development plans. However, the unit they left retained the term 'strategic' in its new name, Strategy and Real Estate (Figure 4). Thus, the term strategic was separated from comprehensive planning and created further tensions within the organisational practice. At a staff meeting with the strategy and real estate office, before the last reorganisation, the manager described how upcoming changes would clarify that the

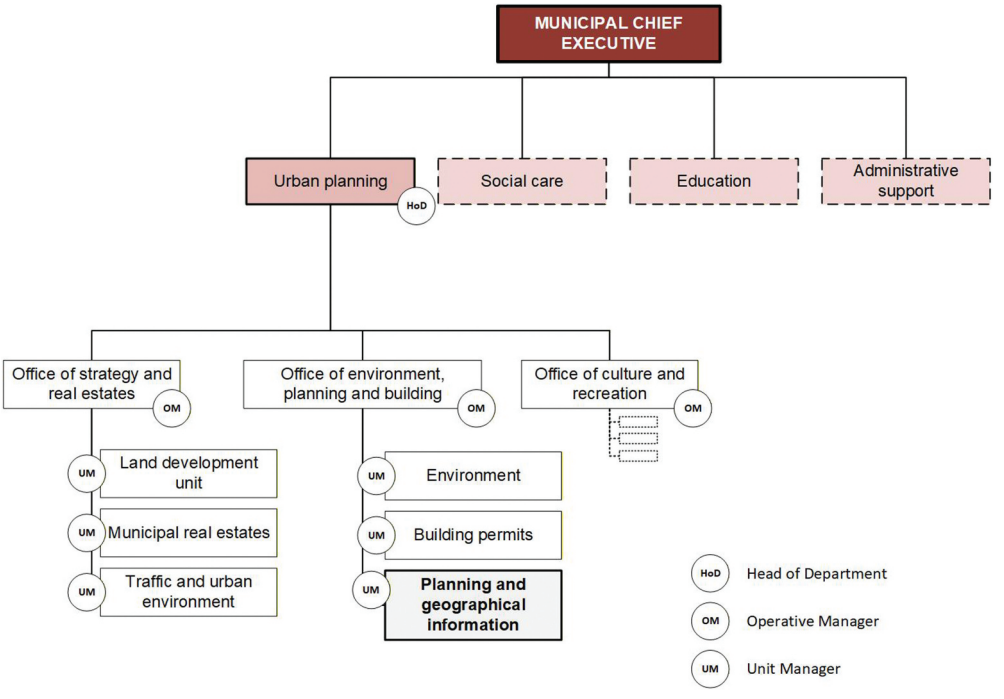

Figure 4. After an adjustment of the organisation in January 2025, all the spatial planners were once again gathered in one unit in the Office of Environment, Planning and Building (placement of spatial planners bold).

responsibility for strategic issues would fall on strategy and real estate after the reorganisation and that spatial planners should act as regulatory authorities (Field note, 10 October 2024). Later that same day, a discussion was overheard at the office where the detailed development planning spatial planners expressed how they were relieved that the comprehensive planning spatial planners would come back to their unit, as this comes with a mandate to address strategic issues. However, after the third reorganisation was completed (Figure 4), the tensions persisted, and the spatial planners continually experienced how their organisational position was held against them when raising integrative holistic perspectives. In everyday work, this could take the form of redistribution of responsibility practices, such as the comprehensive planning spatial planners not receiving information regarding development ideas before the formal planning application from municipal real estate (Field note, 7 July 2025).

We consider the manoeuvre, which saw 'strategic' becoming separated from both the comprehensive planning and detailed development planning spatial planners, as reducing the scope for spatial planners to raise issues rooted in an integrative holistic approach. The practices involving redistribution of responsibility for strategic issues lead towards a planner's role as that of technocratic bureaucrats or facilitators working to enable ´orders´ from developers. Within this context, the term ´strategic´ is used to describe an economic rationality associated with neoliberalism, aligning with

the tasks and roles of municipal practitioners working with land development and real estate.

Bypassing of planners' expertise

The redistribution of responsibility through organisational changes and renaming of the offices is understood as a foundation for diminishing practices, as spatial planners who were not included in the Strategy and Development office were questioned by others when trying to apply an integrative holistic approach. Within the group of spatial planners, we find a diversity of perspectives, educational backgrounds, and knowledge where the individuals take on both an administrative task-oriented and an integrative holistic approach in their daily work. However, it is when acting according to an integrative holistic approach that tensions occur. The approach is closely connected to the way in which spatial planners describe the *ethical compass* instilled in them through their education and the guiding principles of the PBA. During the focus groups, spatial planners highlighted how this ethical compass often results in them being perceived as 'difficult' when raising issues based on professional judgement. A planner noted that they are sometimes excluded from meetings or other contexts because they are regarded as 'obstacles'.

> Spatial planner 1: It's a bit unfortunate, if I were to put it bluntly, that we're perceived as a hindrance in these processes. That's why we aren't asked. Our input should be highly relevant. But then they know there's a risk of getting a response like "No, this is in the national interest for cultural heritage" or that there are certain things we need to consider . . .
>
> Spatial planner 2: Yes, people want it to be simple, to see it in one step. Not to have someone there making it more complex . . .
>
> Focus group 2, 25 Nov 2024

Fieldwork observations contextualised the planners' perceptions. Managers and colleagues in other areas, often informally, described the planners as negative or rigid in their opinions on organisational changes and in raising concerns during planning processes. This has taken the form of different comments and various humorous nicknames for the corridor where the planners sit, which have sometimes been overheard by the planners (Field note, 24 February 2023).

There was also a formal tendency to bypass the planners' perspectives, whereby projects closely associated with spatial planning were carried out without the involvement of the spatial planners. For instance, none of the spatial planners was involved in the work with a development plan for the central square, a fact which was repeatedly criticised by the planners due to the square's importance for spatial integration and as a meeting place (Field note, 6 May 2023). Thus, bypassing spatial planners in both informal and formal ways demonstrate a redistribution of responsibility and diminishing of legitimacy, which gains importance both in terms of the message it sends to spatial planners and to the rest of the organisation regarding the value of the planners' competence.

Exclusion of urban segregation issues from the agenda

When discussing issues of urban segregation in general, most spatial planners adopt a holistic integrative approach to planning during both fieldwork and the focus group interviews, emphasising the importance of understanding spatial planning in the context of broader societal perspectives. Counteracting urban segregation and social injustice is viewed as an integral part of planners' mission, while guided by an ethical compass. However, when it comes to one's own work, an administrative task approach tends to take over based on arguments that the politically decided mandates, on which planning activities are built, must explicitly refer to specific measures. This standpoint underlines the need for particular wording within formal planning missions, where issues concerning urban segregation are rarely mentioned. The lack of support for raising issues concerning urban segregation during daily work was stressed, as there is often a 'client' with specific requirements and a limited timeframe to deliver the plan. The spatial planners describe how this leads to issues being prioritised, which could in fact result in the plan being appealed against (Focus group, 25 November 2024).

We understand this reasoning, grounded in the lack of formalisation of urban segregation issues, to be another example of diminishing practices; formal assignments and official memoranda define and delimit the framework for what is considered legitimate planning content. This diminishing of which issues are considered planning issues is reinforced in everyday informal conversations, where signals about which issues 'belong' in the planning process are communicated subtly and systematically. Largely, urban segregation issues depend on the individual and whether they have the knowledge and support to raise matters which are not explicitly requested. During the focus groups, the support for such acting was questioned. As one spatial planner expressed: 'I don't think my immediate manager has ever uttered the word segregation!' (Focus group, 25 November 2024). This reinforces the perception that a planner's role is characterised by limited scope for holistic integration, standardised assessments, and predetermined decision-making procedures rather than openness to more thorough and professional assessments.

During the fieldwork, a concrete example emerged illustrating how perspectives on urban segregation were overlooked, which was also mentioned in one of the focus groups. The example concerned the process in which a spatial planner was preparing a response to a planning inquiry which politicians would later decide on before it became a formal planning assignment. At this stage, the planning architect is expected to assess the inquiry based on strategic and governing documents as well as legal provisions. However, on this occasion, the spatial planner initially intended to include a professional assessment regarding urban segregation. The proposed measure was considered likely to eliminate a meeting place between a socio-economically strong and a socio-economically weak neighbourhood. Ultimately, the spatial planner decided not to raise this issue in the memorandum, reasoning that there was insufficient time to problematise at that level within the time slot allocated by the political committee. This example illustrates how formal structures, such as time limits for agenda items in committee meetings, can become an argument for planners to apply self-censoring and leave out analyses based on an integrative holistic approach. The two approaches are both operating at the same occasion, but ultimately the integrative holistic approach is not prioritised.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we illustrate how an administrative task-oriented approach to spatial planning may gain traction over an integrative holistic approach through social practices involving (i) responsibility redistribution and (ii) diminishing practices within the studied municipal organisation. Based on the case findings, the implications for the role of spatial planners and their capacity to address issues such as urban segregation can be understood in two interrelated ways.

Firstly, we conceptualise the administrative task-oriented approach and the integrative holistic approach as distinct ways of enacting the role of the spatial planner, each anchored in different planning ideals. We understand the responsibility-redistributing practices identified in the case study as contributing to the production and reproduction of these role enactments. By repeatedly relocating responsibility for defining problems, setting priorities, making strategic decisions, and representing organisational knowledge away from spatial planners and towards other organisational functions, these practices redistribute authoritative resources and become implicated in the ongoing negotiation of who is authorised to exercise strategic judgement within the organisation. Through their repeated enactment, they reinforce understandings of the legitimate role of the spatial planner and thereby reproduce a task-oriented administrative approach, characterised by compliance, throughput, case-handling efficiency, and adherence to formal procedures and organisational boundaries. This approach can be understood as broadly aligned with bureaucratic and neoliberal ideals. The interpretation is situated within the context of contemporary municipal organisations, where principles associated with NPM have become increasingly influential and may reinforce bureaucratic forms of planning practice. In this context, the bureaucratic role of planners may create conditions through which neoliberal rationalities become routinised, echoing earlier critiques (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Grange, 2017).

Secondly, our findings highlight subtle organisational signals enacted through diminishing practices, through which organisational structures are reproduced in everyday interactions. These practices occur through both formal and informal bypassing of spatial planners' expertise, as well as through forms of self-censorship among planners themselves. As illustrated by the changing meaning attached to the notion of 'strategic', these interactions contribute to ongoing negotiations over which forms of knowledge and professional judgement come to be recognised as legitimate within the organisation. The findings suggest that planners orient themselves towards administrative expectations even when expressing dissatisfaction at the level of discursive consciousness, demonstrating how practical consciousness may sustain organisational arrangements that actors simultaneously question and reproduce. Reduced access to authoritative resources for raising issues beyond dominant organisational priorities may further contribute to the self-censorship observed among planners. These insights help to understand why issues requiring an integrative holistic approach may struggle to gain visibility in planning processes, even when planners recognise the negative consequences of prevailing practices. In this way, the study advances understanding of how organisational structures may position planners as facilitators of needs defined elsewhere, rather than as active contributors to urban development (cf. Grange, 2013). However, this study also contributes

to a deeper understanding of how such outcomes may emerge and be reproduced despite planners being aware of their implications.

Throughout the paper, we contrast the administrative task-oriented and integrative holistic approaches while recognising that planning practice rarely reflects a strict 'either-or' distinction, as both approaches may be justified under different conditions. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that contemporary organisational routines, incentive structures, and organisational framings within the municipality tend to privilege the administrative task-oriented approach among the studied planners. The prominence of this approach may also be understood in relation to broader market-oriented developments that have characterised spatial planning in recent decades, potentially reducing the emphasis placed on deliberative, distributive, and place-based forms of integration (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012). In the studied case, organisational reforms may be interpreted as responses to industrial closures, population decline, and increasing pressure to 'do more with less', accelerate decision-making, and signal responsiveness. The findings point towards an increasing alignment of organisational structures and work processes with the expectations of market actors, reflected in the redistribution of responsibility for strategic issues and in the relocation of the business development office closer to municipal top management during the study period. Within this context, statutory planning procedures, together with the broader perspectives often mobilised when planners enact an integrative holistic approach, may come to be associated with delay and organisational friction, thereby complicating implementation-oriented ambitions.

Based on this reasoning, we interpret responsibility redistribution and diminishing practices as contributing to the production and reproduction of a municipal spatial planner role that aligns with neoliberal discourse. Through responsibility-redistributing practices, responsibility for complex and cross-sectoral issues, such as urban segregation, may gradually be relocated away from spatial planning. The decoupling of strategic work from everyday planning considerations may reduce planners' discretionary space for integrating equity-oriented concerns that may resonate with their underlying professional motivations, symbolised by the ethical compass. Through practical consciousness, issues such as urban segregation may gradually come to be bypassed as planners learn, through repeated interactions, which issues are recognised as legitimate organisational concerns and which are treated as lying outside the planning mandate. As opportunities to address concerns beyond formal planning assignments become increasingly limited, such issues may increasingly come to be treated as non-planning matters. Perspectives extending beyond the defined operative task may become framed as political or overly complex, while speed, efficiency, and the fulfilment of service requests are increasingly positioned as desirable organisational values. At the level of discursive consciousness, shaped through practical consciousness and fostered by NPM-related organisational conditions, integrative and holistic perspectives may, in this context, come to be perceived as normative, slow, or risky whereas a task-oriented administrative approach appears more compatible with dominant managerial and neoliberal framings of the planners' role.

Through the applied methods, this paper illustrates the dense web of formal and informal structures within which municipal spatial planners navigate. In policy rhetoric, the PBA, and education, planners are encouraged to uphold equity and

strategic integration, as manifested in the ethical compass, while within operational routines and organisational practice, they may be positioned as slowing processes and acting as obstacles. Raising issues of urban segregation as a spatial planner can, in this context, be perceived either as a matter of professional judgement or as going beyond the assigned formal mandate. Highlighting how spatial planning can contribute to or counteract urban segregation and social inequality may be regarded as a central aspect of the professional remit of spatial planners when approached from an integrative and holistic perspective. However, the organisational positioning of spatial planners, together with the prevalence of an administrative task-oriented approach, illustrates how such considerations may require explicit support in planning assignments or backing from senior management to remain salient in everyday practice. In the absence of such support, planners may find themselves reluctant to voice concerns that fall outside the immediate scope of assigned tasks, despite recognising their relevance.

By drawing attention to these everyday organisational practices, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how professional judgement is enacted, negotiated, and at times constrained in municipal planning work. While derived from a single case and not intended to be statistically generalisable, the findings provide analytical insights into how organisational structures are drawn upon and reproduced through everyday planning practices. In line with structuration theory, they illustrate how professional judgement emerges through an ongoing interplay between organisational arrangements and the situated actions through which those arrangements are sustained, negotiated, or challenged. As such, the study may contribute to understanding similar dynamics in other planning contexts and provide a basis for further research into how organisational practices influence the possibilities for integrative and holistic planning.

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