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Spacing the Post-Political Critique: Dealing With Politics and Spatial Dissonance in Suburban Planning

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Abstract

The article explores the spatial planning and development trajectory of Randesund, a district of Kristiansand, Norway, critiquing the dominant planning paradigm for its spatially blind and post-political tendencies. Drawing on Mouffe, the authors highlight how current planning practices prioritize procedural consensus while sidelining fundamental political contestations. To expand and nuance existing critiques of this procedural inadequacy in the post-political condition plaguing planning, and to resolve some of the democratic deficiencies it produces, we suggest a more spatially aware understanding of urban life, praxis, and development. Inspired by Lefebvre, the article suggests that the spatial code produced in Randesund also generates spatial dissonance, dissent, and strife—manifested in actions that are not, but ought to be, recognized as legitimately political, particularly from the perspective of planning.

Keywords

agonism; democracy; post-politics; spatial practice

1. Introduction

One aspect to consider when discussing the theme of this thematic issue—the impact and consequences of populism and anti-democratic movements on planning—is how previous planning ideals and the spaces they produced relate to politics and democracy. We argue that the soil in which populist movements grow needs to be examined through the lens of already established planning practices, and through the spaces and places these practices have produced. Populism does not arise out of nowhere but is, at least partially, a consequence of both present and earlier democratic shortcomings and failures in planning as well as the socio-material spaces that result from them.

We discuss space, politics, and planning in the suburban Randesund district in southern Norway while drawing on two different bodies of literature that both, in distinct ways, offer a critique of the Habermasian planning ideal and the tendency in much contemporary, communication-focused, and consensus-seeking planning to (a) eliminate dissensus (Mouffe, 2005) and (b) neglect space in favor of procedure (Lefebvre, 1991). The first strand critiques the Habermasian dialogue-centered planning ideal (Habermas, 2002) for leading to the elimination of dissensus (Rancière, 1998, 2010) in ways that constitute a form of post-political planning condition (Metzger, 2018). In this reading, compromise and trade-offs negotiated between vested actors and interests tend to discourage public participation (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012), and consensus-seeking arenas diffuse or eliminate political tensions inherent in "the potentially contradicting aims of social justice, sustainable development, and economic growth" (Haughton et al., 2013). However, we argue, in line with Davoudi (2018), that in these critiques there is an "over-emphasis on procedural aspects of planning" (p. 22). Planning is discussed as navigation within a discursive landscape, without recognizing that this process is integral to and subsumed by another operation: the production of space (Harikrishnan, 2022; Lefebvre, 1991). We argue that there are insights to be gained by combining these literatures. Consequently, in this article we aim to demonstrate why it is important, in critiquing the post-political condition, to include the spatiality of social relations and praxis, if we want to fully acknowledge the conflictual dimensions in planning and make urban planning more democratic and resilient to populist and authoritarian impulses (Fearn & Davoudi, 2022).

In relation to the ongoing development in Randesund and the theme of this article, our focus is not so much on what types of participation have been included in the planning processes—a common approach when discussing the democratic aspects of various planning projects. Instead, the core question concerns the extent to which dissensus has been allowed to generate political alternatives and to what degree the development has engaged citizens' passions regarding changes in their neighborhood. We argue that these questions are connected to how space is produced and shaped through the formation of spatial codes (Lefebvre, 1991) which dictate how places function and limit the *possibilities for imagination* within them. The spatial code of a place—how it is produced and lived—affects the horizon of the political, shaping what can be imagined as alternatives to what exists and what is being planned, and influencing the formation of collective identities capable of proposing alternative ideas and visions for a place.

The article discusses this relationship between planning, democracy, and space, through an examination of Randesund, a sleepy Norwegian suburb a 10-minute car ride outside of the city of Kristiansand. Randesund was a pastoral municipality that in the 1960s was turned into a car-based commuter suburb.

The two authors conducted three in-depth interviews in 2024: with the head of a development company, Drangsvann AS on May 5th, with two members of the Randesund Historic Society on August 30th, and the parish priest on September 17th. The interviews were recorded on a secure device with the approval of the interviewees. The interview quotations used in this article were translated by us. One of the authors has lived in the western part of Randesund with his family since 2005 and served as a member of the Randesund neighborhood council for two years. The empirical basis of this article also includes municipal planning documents, database searches in the local newspaper, and 23 journals from the Randesund Historic Society. Population figures were collected from Statistics Norway (https://www.ssb.no).

In the second section of the article, we provide background on the empirical case and present the recent establishment of a district center and the construction of a large housing area in Randesund. Section 3 examines the dominant spatial code that has guided the planning process of Randesund since the late 1960s. Resistance to this code emerges in articulations and discussions about the location of the district center and the need for future plans to include nature and identity, as presented in Section 4. However, and importantly, the implementation of the plans is also contested through spatial practices and the everyday lives of inhabitants, as exemplified in Section 5.

We argue that formally articulated demands influence the formal planning process far more than implicit demands expressed through spatial practices. We conclude that the full range of democratic needs and wants can only be made visible and acknowledged when, in addition to articulated demands, competing spatial practices are recognized as part of the spatial code and allowed to influence the planning process. Our case exemplifies a lack of spatial awareness in post-political planning theory which we contend requires greater attention.

2. Background: Randesund, Rona, and Drangsvann

Kristiansand, the largest city in the southernmost region of Norway, has grown from 27,760 to 116,986 inhabitants between 1960 and 2024. Much of this growth has resulted from mergers with neighboring municipalities, including the Randesund district in the eastern part of Kristiansand municipality, which grew from 3,094 to 22,853 inhabitants during the same period. The district was connected to the city by a bridge in 1957 and merged with Kristiansand municipality in 1965. Today, the area is predominantly a sprawling suburban housing and commuter district. Until now, locals have been largely dependent on longer trips, primarily by car, for access to cinemas, entertainment, restaurants, specialized shopping, and public services in downtown Kristiansand or to the regional shopping mall for shopping and leisure activities.

In much of the literature on spatial planning the task is to "shape the material 'urban reality' to which the rest of us then have to adjust" (Healey, 2007, p. 204). Planning is thus the practice of producing "spatial qualities," such as improved infrastructure, well-functioning public and commercial spaces, and accessible services to create more livable, functional, and aesthetically pleasing environments. Such spatial qualities in Randesund have been a topic of discussion in municipal plans for many years. Discussions have primarily focused on the scope, scale, and limited services offered by the regional center, Rona. At present, Rona (see Figure 1) is a nearly uninhabited and heavily trafficked area, serving more as a transit node at the intersection between the main route to Kristiansand and local roads leading to the housing areas of Randesund, than as a social arena. District centers in Kristiansand were intended to serve as commercial, cultural, social, and educational hubs, alleviating pressure on the city's main center. In the district to the west, Vågsbygd—today about the same size as Randesund—public and private planners successfully established Norway's first full-scale district center in 1977, which still functions, to some extent, as a unifying meeting place. In Vågsbygd, a stronger sense of pride, belonging, and identity seems to prevail compared to the east: "I think there is a job to be done to bring us together….When the church no longer is the central community-builder…then other governing bodies must bring all these actors together" (Interview with parish priest, September 17th, 2024).

Since 2006, however, efforts to upgrade Rona into a proper center with both private and public services in the heart of the district have gained momentum. A major property developer, Drangsvann AS, is the driving

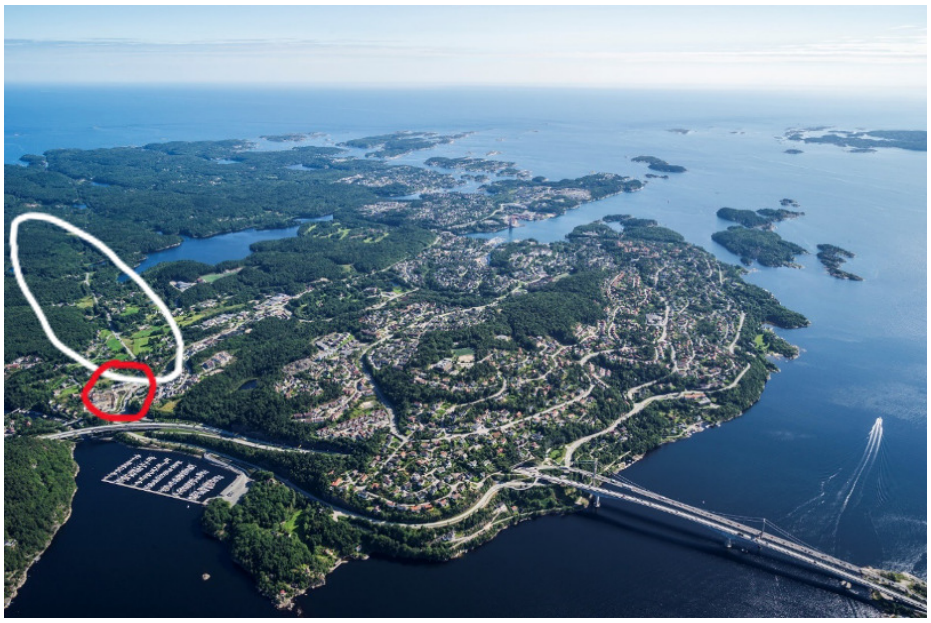

Figure 1. Randesund, connected by a bridge to the city of Kristiansand. The district center, Rona, is circled in red, and the planned Drangsvann housing project is marked in white (Martinsen, 2013).

force. Through an investment in 2006 of several hundred million NOK and the early-phase development of what is planned to be 1,800–2,000 residences in the vicinity of the district center, Drangsvann represents the largest housing development in southern Norway. People have already started moving into the area, and multiple other investors are currently developing facilities: "Our assessment is that when people and the pressure come, the market forces work" (Interview with developer, May 7th, 2024). Public planners are aligned with this process, where the current land-use plan, for instance, states that in Rona "it will be facilitated for a community center, library, cultural center, and swimming facility to serve the residents east of the…bridge" (Kristiansand Municipality, 2024a, p. 42). A large architectural firm recently won the competition for a residential project with 600 apartments in the immediate vicinity of Rona; and this firm is also responsible for planning a public square in Rona. Across the street from this square, another developer is preparing a meeting point that will include a gym, a food court, and a large grocery store. Finally, offices are being built in the immediate surroundings, where an area of 35 decares of land is allocated for commercial activity in the municipal plan's land-use section. The new projects will diversify the housing supply, services will be developed in the new center, and Randesund will most likely develop into more of a self-sustained district.

It is safe to say that public planners and developers now appear to be succeeding in their efforts to enhance the place qualities for most inhabitants of Randesund. In recent developments, there have been some discussions about the location of the new center, but overall, the dramatic transformation of the district and city is progressing surprisingly seamlessly, without either strong protests or notable support, for that matter, from the people of Randesund.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the plans and developments for the new and improved Rona Center, along with the large-scale housing project named Drangsvann, have been well received by the public. Notably, public disagreement, alternative ideas and visions for the district's future, protests, and unrest are largely absent.

Given the scope of the development and the significant impact it will likely have on residents' everyday lives, we find this noteworthy. For instance, it has recently been suggested that a secondary school should be moved from one of the older residential areas to the immediate outskirts of the Drangsvann housing project, yet this proposal met with almost no objections, despite the significant impact it would have on the everyday lives of pupils and their parents. We argue that the lack of public engagement in the planning of Randesund reflects underlying democratic deficiencies within the planning processes and in the spatial codes resulting from prior development.

3. The Spatial Code of Randesund

Public planning in Norway is regulated by the Planning Act of 1965, which provides rules and guidelines for the procedures of spatial transformation. Each municipality has a planning administration that prepares projects for the approval of the municipal politicians. The latter have the final say in what can and cannot be built. Each municipality must prepare and revise a zoning plan, that is legally binding, as well as a general plan that addresses the economic and social aspects. In the 1985 revision of the Planning Act (The Plan and Building Act, 1985) private developers were, for the first time, allowed to prepare their own plans, for political approval, and today only between 10 and 20% of new projects are initiated by the planning administration. This transition from publicly led planning to developer-led and partnership-based planning, with increased influence for private actors, is not unique to Norway but should be seen as part of a broader, albeit variegated, neoliberal trend in planning throughout Scandinavia (Brenner et al., 2010; cf. Baeten, 2012) and elsewhere (Sager, 2011).

Meanwhile, participation and stakeholder dialogues are increasingly important to both planners and politicians in relation to the production and revision of plans and planning documents. But as observed by Abram (2014), this does not prevent municipalities and planners from introducing "new organizational forms and policies that corresponded to the New Public Management, a process that could be understood as a form of neoliberalization" (p. 134), rendering many of the participatory elements in planning tokenistic. The challenge is that while communicative/collaborative planning has ensured more inclusion, it also "acts as a mechanism to assist the legitimization of neoliberal market logics" (Gunder, 2010, p. 303). Also, in "the cultural climate in Norway, with its emphasis on sameness and consensus" (Gullestad, 2002, p. 60), scholars find that "spatial planning processes…can increasingly be characterized as negotiated planning, dominated by private developers" (Hanssen & Falleth, 2014, p. 420).

Much of the literature on participation in planning deals with approaches, design, and methods for mobilizing and listening to diverse interests during the planning process. Inclusion in spatial planning is primarily a procedural question within what Lefebvre (1991) calls abstract space. Here, space is mainly represented (representations of space), for instance, through maps and plans, transport and communication systems, and information conveyed by images and signs produced by scientists, planners, architects, urbanists, and social engineers. "This is the dominant space in any society," Lefebvre (1991, p. 39) claims.

According to Lefebvre (1991), the modern abstract space of capitalism introduces a spatial code that "serve[s] to fix the alphabet and language of the town" (p. 47). Such a code is evident in our case, where recent developments bring to life the 1960s dominant conception of Randesund and its relationship to the rest of the municipality and region, a time when cars were introduced to Norwegians and Kristiansand

experienced economic and demographic growth. Three aspects of this conception are monocentrism, functionality, and growth.

3.1. Monocentrism

When the first general plan for the new municipality was approved in 1969, planners envisioned a single center in the middle of the district that would offer services to 50,000 inhabitants, including shops, a bank, a pharmacy, offices, cultural and social institutions, a church, youth and sports facilities, a library, doctors, dentists, a post office, a police station, both a taxi and bus terminal, and a gas station—all within walking distance or accessible by bus and car (Kristiansand City Planning Office, 1978). Adjacent to the center, plans included a secondary school, a high school, and a sports arena. Randesund was intended to relieve Kristiansand's demographic pressure. The vision was in line with Christaller's central-place theory and Patrick Abercrombie's conception of the urban region, with one center providing services of sufficient range to serve all of Randesund. This rationale seems to support the enduring idea that there should be one main center, located in Rona, even in such a large and dispersed district. From a New Urbanist perspective, where community-building is primarily seen as a response to the built environment's qualities, public planners viewed an attractive district center as important. This spatial vision of Randesund has only recently begun to gain traction as a spatial practice.

3.2. Functional Connection to Place

The role assigned to the newcomers that arrived from the late 1960s onwards is primarily that of consumers, commuters, customers, and clients of the municipality, rather than stakeholders or discussion partners in strategic planning. In the 1995 municipal plan, it is stated—more as a reflection of the times than as a problem—that:

> Kristiansand is in the process of developing a situation where the entire urban area is seen as a continuous cityscape with a balanced mix of nature and buildings, and with service functions located at attractive points….The basis for belonging and identification with local environments is therefore limited. (Kristiansand Municipality, 1995, p. 26)

The dominant code attempts to relate people to place in a purely functional manner. The spatial practices of newcomers stand in stark contrast to the way people in Randesund previously lived in close connection with nature. In the past, the local economy depended largely on land, sea, and forest resources (fishing, farming, forestry, hunting), which also shaped the local lifestyle. The oldest and relatively large cattle farms had been divided into smaller units, creating "an even distribution of poverty" (Collaboration Group for Cultural Landscape, 1990, p. 10), where "combinations of occupations have been a prerequisite for sufficient income….Secondary occupations have traditionally been rooted in fishing and maritime activities. Over the last 40–50 years, work related to construction, roads, and infrastructure has gained significant importance" (Collaboration Group for Cultural Landscape, 1990, p. 10).

For newcomers, however, nature as a resource and a nature-related lifestyle are no longer central. Instead, Randesund has developed into a low-density, automobile-oriented landscape, similar to the sprawling suburbs of post-World War II United States. Since the 1960s, public planning has conceptualized Randesund

primarily as a residential area for commuters working outside the district, with weak ties to place identity and local history.

3.3. Demographic and Economic Growth

The economic and demographic growth in Kristiansand and Randesund is also central to the dominant spatial code. In the 1969 general plan, when Kristiansand had 62,520 inhabitants, further growth was not only anticipated but actively planned for:

> The areas designated as residential by the general plan…provide sufficient building land until around 1990 or until the city has 80,000–90,000 inhabitants. However, even after this, development will continue, and at that point, the remaining areas in Randesund become a potential alternative. (Kristiansand City Planning Office, 1969a, p. 55)

Growth in Randesund was envisioned, not only to relieve pressure on Kristiansand from in-migration due to employment growth, but also to stimulate economic development within the district: "For Randesund to function as its own district, there must also be workplaces and land set aside for industry…around the inner part of Korsvikfjorden" (Kristiansand City Planning Office, 1969b, p. 7). In other words, growth is a taken-for-granted and central aspect of the dominant code.

The recent collaboration between public planners aiming to establish a district center in Rona and private developers is another example of this growth-oriented approach. Growth, in this context, requires no additional justification. As one developer stated:

> This area is regulated earlier for housing purposes….This is connected to the Randesund center in Rona, which is set aside as a district center for the eastern district. And then it is all about getting up a critical mass of people that belong to this center. (Interview with developer, May 7th, 2024)

For the center to grow and thrive, the number of people connected to it must increase, in an ever-self-reinforcing process.

A district with a monocentric structure, where people form attachments through the services they receive and where growth in workplaces, inhabitants, and services is a self-evident goal—this is the conceived space that planners and architects have attempted to impose as the dominant elements of the spatial code of Randesund ever since the first newcomers arrived in the 1960s. Planning actors have formed a strong consensus around this conception of Randesund, but not without resistance. Alternatives emerge, in the space of everyday life, which we will return to, but also at the abstract level (in representations of space) through deliberations over how to depict the district.

4. Planning and Procedure in Abstract Space

Dissonances within the dominant code can be observed in the struggle over how to represent the district in abstract space. We present two examples in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 below.

4.1. An Alternative Location for the District Center

In 2017, locals living south of the main road through Randesund began advocating for Korsvik as the location for the district center (see Figure 2). The oil-delivery industry in Korsvikfjorden had been downscaled due to the 2008 financial crisis, leaving undeveloped a large plot originally intended for office buildings for employees of one of the oil-delivery companies. This area gained attention when, as part of the 2016 municipal plan, a Danish architect highlighted Kristiansand's qualities as a coastal city. Inspired by this, a local architect designed a coastal town concept for the available plot in Korsvik, an idea that aligned well with initiatives already underway by the civil society district council, where two members of which lived in Korsvik. A proposed electric ferry route from Korsvik to downtown Kristiansand represented a potential reconnection with Randesund's coastal heritage. Public planners took the idea seriously enough to propose Korsvik as an alternative center to Rona, and funds were allocated to investigate the feasibility of an electric ferry.

The alternative location proposal, however, was swiftly rejected by politicians, who argued that Korsvik is too far away from the axis for public transport and that they must act responsibly toward "economic interests." This latter concern was not elaborated, but an indication can be found in a statement by the administration in 2003: "There are now two developers who wish to zone and develop in Rona, in the western part. This is an important initiative that must be supported, and it gives us the opportunity to establish the beginning of the Rona…center" (Kristiansand Municipality, 2003, p. 8). The developer of Drangsvann, commenting on this alternative suggestion, remarked: "Before launching a new strategy, you should lay out the facts and thoroughly examine it, because to change a strategy, that is an extreme step, and there should be very strong professional reasons to do it" (Interview with developer, May 7th, 2024). Despite extensive coverage in the

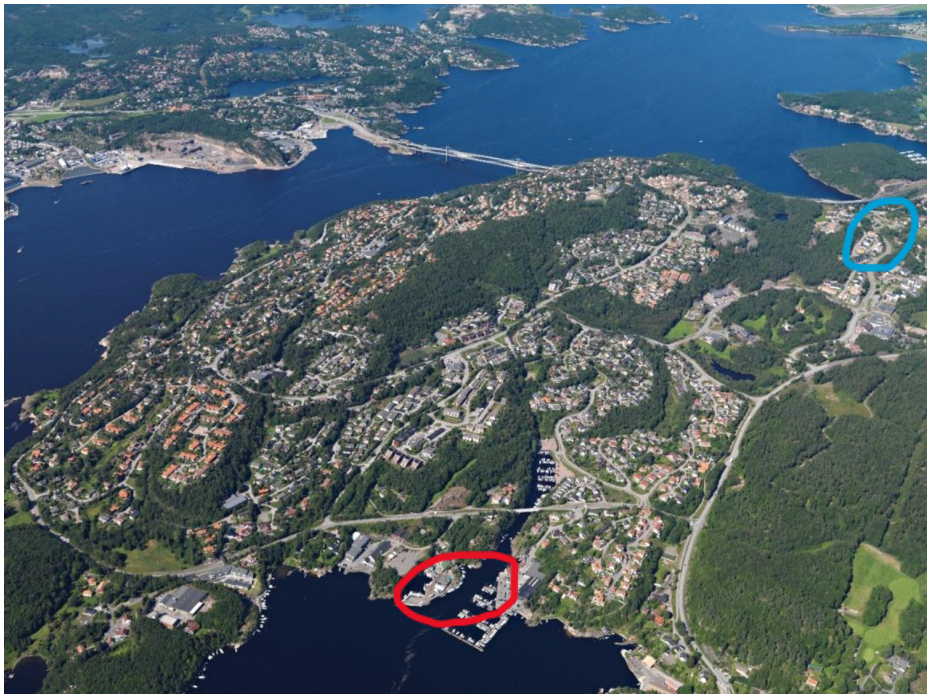

Figure 2. Randesund seen from the opposite side of the bridgehead, with the district center in Rona (in blue) and the proposed alternative district center, Korsvik (in red) (Martinsen, 2009).

local newspaper of the alternative location for a center, the proposal elicited little to no engagement from the general public. More than anything, people seem indifferent to such strategic questions regarding their district, except for typical NIMBY concerns related to toll roads, noise from the harbor, or traffic issues.

4.2. A More Nature-Based Spatial Identity?

There have been attempts to incorporate Randesund's history and nature-based identity into the spatial code. For a short period, the municipality supported a project in which a passionate local resident opened his farm to local schools to strengthen youth's "local historical anchoring" (Collaboration Group for Cultural Landscape, 1990, p. 31). Another example is a secondary school teacher who includes the history of a local mine—which employed 12 men between 1895 and 1912—in his teaching. Additionally, in the process of developing a district center in Rona, public planners began to address Randesund's history:

> Along Gamle Strømmevei [close to Rona] lies a cluster of heritage buildings. These are main buildings and buildings for operations from old farms dating back to the mid-1800s and early 1900s. In the canal at Rona and further into the Drangsvann area, there are significant values related to the preservation of biodiversity, cultural heritage, and outdoor recreation. (Kristiansand Municipality, 2003, p. 8)

In a newspaper article, local residents voiced similar concerns: "Generations before us created a diverse cultural landscape where nature was also cared for, a landscape that is good for us humans to live in" (Larsen et al., 2024, p. 31). Beyond these small objections, however, such concerns are not strongly emphasized in public discourse and do not contribute to the production of collective identities.

4.3. Dealing With Conflict Through Procedure

How should these local demands ideally be addressed? In discussions about participation in spatial planning, scholars compare the aggregative, communicative, and agonistic models of democracy (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010) and investigate how the users of space can be empowered in the meaning-making process. Mouffe and others have offered significant critiques of contemporary liberal and consensus-oriented ideals, both in politics broadly (Mouffe, 2005), in various urban geographies (Swyngedouw, 2009, 2011), and in planning (Lysgård & Cruickshank, 2013). This approach has been criticized for suppressing "politics proper" by erasing dissensus and limiting the imagination of radically different alternatives. Within this framework, conflict—essential to revealing the breadth of what is possible—is marginalized. By emphasizing consensus-building and pursuing solutions that are ostensibly best for all, the communicative ideal effectively removes the essence of politics—the horizon of possibility—from the process. However, Mouffe understands the we–they relation not as an obstacle but as constitutive for the formation of identities, and these collective identities are crucial for a well-functioning democracy. Planning, therefore, should involve not only consensus-building but also mobilization:

> Mobilization requires politicization, but politicization cannot exist without the production of a conflictual representation of the world, with opposed camps with which people can identify, thereby allowing for passions to be mobilized politically within the spectrum of the democratic process. (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 24–25)

Urban planning, then, is not only about spatial qualities; it "has to offer not only policies but also identities which can help people make sense of what they are experiencing as well as giving hope for the future" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 25). As such, planning can and should be producing (different) political subjectivities.

Some expressed demands have been acknowledged. Planners in Kristiansand took the suggestion of Korsvik as an alternative center seriously and forwarded it to the politicians, and in response to the calls for an emphasis on identity and history, the ongoing plans for the new center include a project called Rona Cultural Path. This is expected to "contribute to the transmission of history to future generations and new residents in Randesund, thereby fostering a stronger sense of place and identity" (Kristiansand Municipality, 2024b, p. 5). What has not emerged, however, is a strong alternative to the dominant code. The issue, in other words, is not primarily that oppositions do not exist, but rather that they have not evolved into what Metzger (2018) calls "fundamental political differences," alternative identities, or value-communities:

> Open societies do not seek to suppress or deny the existence of fundamental political differences. These must instead be allowed to find public forums in which they can be explored and articulated in ways that can contribute to "taming" potentially violent antagonism into democratically productive agonism. (Metzger, 2018, p. 182)

The absence of such a "conflictual representation of the world" in Randesund is problematic. Planners act in post-political ways when they assume that fundamental value conflicts can simply be resolved, and that value-free solutions exist. One of our informants accidentally addressed this issue, referencing religious identities: "Isn't there almost an invisible power in our time and our society, like, one that says almost implicitly that being secular is neutral, which is fundamentally wrong, if you ask me" (Interview with parish priest, September 17th, 2024). His point is that nothing is neutral, and that it is a mistake to lift some issues above the political. Power is then exercised when we reduce democracy, and planning, to a consensus-seeking arena, where objectivity is perceived to exist and where certain solutions are seen as inherently better than others. This is precisely what Mouffe and others are concerned about.

In Randesund, consensus has been achieved regarding the ongoing developments in the district, but only at the expense of avoiding, silencing, delegitimizing, and labeling alternatives as NIMBYism. On certain issues and solutions, there have been, as we have seen, dissenting views. The problem, perhaps, is that they have not materialized into the formation of distinct collective identities with alternative ideas about the planning of Randesund. Instead, dissent has been particularized and downplayed. An alternative location for the district center or calls for increased emphasis on Randesund's history are regarded as particular demands rather than elements or expressions of a fundamentally different spatial code.

To planners and developers, a solution is now within reach regarding the spatial formation of place qualities in Randesund. However, the process has failed to "acknowledge the role of 'passions' as one of the main moving forces in the field of politics" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 24). Mouffe's main objection would likely be that the process has responded to demands but failed to produce democratic subjects and to strengthen democracy. While we are sympathetic to this critique, what may be missing is a recognition of the impact of spatial factors on how citizens engage with planning, politics, and democracy, a topic we will now turn to.

5. The Spatiality of Post-Political Planning

In our view, democracy in planning cannot be reduced to procedural acts, negotiation, or conflict. Rather, it is integral to the everyday life and spatial practices of ordinary citizens. The abstract space of communication and meaning-making does not necessarily correspond to the passively experienced space of inhabitants and users (representational space). A mismatch may exist, even if the "users" of space remain passive and silent, and even if they "allow themselves to be manipulated in ways so damaging to their spaces and their daily life" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 51).

In the mid-1960s, the 3,000 inhabitants of Randesund were still predominantly farmers, fishermen, sailors, and, to a lesser degree, industrial workers (Sødal, 1985). The western and northern parts of the district were almost uninhabited. With the arrival of newcomers, however, "a moment comes when, through actions of masters or conquerors, a part of this space is assigned a new role" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 234). Planners "introduce a new rhythm, and a spatial code is developed that 'serves to fix the alphabet and language of the town'" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 47). However, the process by which people's lived space is overtaken, when concrete space is suppressed by abstract space, cannot, as with Habermas and Mouffe, be fully grasped by analyzing discourse and communication alone. It is a central critique of Lefebvre's that Western ideology overemphasizes the written word, "to the detriment of social practice" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 28). He thus rejects the idea that "social transformation can be brought about by means of communication alone" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 29).

The dominant code, partially outlined above, has not only changed the discourse but also produced several interlinked challenges for the district. The focus on growth has transformed what was once a small, pastoral area into one of the largest districts in Kristiansand. Suburban ideals have led to low-density sprawl and a car-centric lifestyle. People no longer connect to the built environment through a nature-based sense of place (Tuan, 1975) but rather through functional aspects, resulting in a commuting population with weak ties and connections to the district itself. It is within this landscape that the new developments and planning of Randesund must be understood. Much of the ongoing planning, in fact, aims to address and improve some of the deficiencies produced by earlier planning—particularly through a focus on "spatial qualities." However, the solutions are sometimes found wanting, and groups appear to produce space in alternate ways, revealing the existence of alternative spatial codes.

5.1. Pluricentric Development

There is a mismatch between the spatial vision for a monocentric and unified Randesund and the dominant spatial practice, where piecemeal area development has resulted in a dispersed settlement pattern. The first plans for Rona as a district center were launched in 1959, and the perception of this location as optimal has persisted, even in the face of a settlement pattern that pulls in the opposite direction. Rona is primarily a traffic junction, situated outside the areas where people socialize and live. The distribution of the four secondary schools indicates that populations are concentrated in the southwest and northeast of Rona, but not in Rona itself. Until now, the district has developed into a more polycentric landscape where support for a single center in the district has been weak, not least due to the emergence of a large shopping mall that rendered the district center redundant, and partly due to the failure to attract developers to invest in Rona. This hampers the cultivation of a common identity across the district.

> If someone asks: Where do you live? Then I would never answer Randesund….Some say, where do you live? Yes, I live in Søm. Ok, yes, and then there is one that lives in Tømmerstø and one that lives here and there. I live in Hånes and all that. So, I think there is something there—that it has become so fragmented. (Interview with Randesund Historic Society, September 18th, 2024)

While municipal planners have not abandoned the idea of a center in Rona, the newcomers who began settling in the district nearly 60 years ago live in car-based neighborhoods of single-family homes where the location of schools, grocery stores, five different religious communities, sports facilities, and, since the mid-1980s, a large regional shopping mall, have created a range of fragmented social and physical communities. This practice can be regarded as a "demand," even if it is not expressed in words.

We will now turn to how the youth are affected by this spatial structure.

5.2. Spatial Practices as Political Subjectification? Youth Mobilization and Uproar

It has been noted that Randesund lacks non-commercial meeting places beyond religious congregations and sports clubs. During the summer months, the marina and beaches by the lakes and ocean are popular gathering spots for youth. For the rest of the year, the regional shopping mall serves as a meeting place for Randesund's youth, although it is clearly commercial and distant enough from most residents to require motorized transportation. According to the municipality's own child and youth surveys (Léva Urban Design, 2024), even Rona Center is too peripheral for many youths to consider it a well-located meeting place, often necessitating a bus ride (p. 14). Meeting places are such vital parts of everyday life for young people that they often emerge informally, in temporary and spontaneous ways. One such meeting place for youth in Randesund has developed at the parking lot and a small football field outside a local church. This space has served as a gathering point for a diverse group of youth from various parts of Randesund and beyond. Sometimes, up to a hundred young people gather in the parking lot on Friday evenings to socialize.

This informal meeting place has not been without challenges, however. In February 2022, police were called to the parking lot following reports of violence and fireworks being set off by youth, aimed at other youths, with incidents occurring for several consecutive days (Ankersen & Damsgaard, 2022) and continuing sporadically since. The municipality responded by encouraging greater voluntary involvement from civil society, and by allocating increased funds to the youth outreach initiative Gatepuls, which dispatches adults and parents to patrol the streets at night and be available to young people.

While spontaneous uses, informal meeting places, and flexibility in urban space can be seen as crucial aspects of a vital and ephemeral city (Aspen & Pløger, 2015), from a political perspective, the appropriation of places can also be viewed as political acts, as a nascent form of political subjectification where collective identities are formed and political demands are (knowingly or unknowingly) made through the spatial practices of the group. Such acts, whether intentional or not, represent a demand by youth to be acknowledged as part of the political sphere, as political subjects in the Rancièrian sense. It is a pushback against the workings of the dominant code of the neighborhood. Rage and violence may be interpreted as a "revolt by the excluded" (Dikeç, 2017), in an urban setting that offers few avenues for their voices to be heard. However, punitive measures from police authorities, the municipality, and the district council in Randesund dismiss youth voices as non-political, relegating them to the realm of noise, nuisance, and victimhood—ignoring the implicit demands made through their spatial practices.

In the absence of articulated political engagement, some populist commentaries have emerged regarding the perceived youth issues in Randesund. The right-wing think tank Human Rights Service has advocated for harsher, more punitive measures to address the unrest and criticized the municipality's and police's "soft" response:

> Here, serious crime is supposed to be addressed not just with dialogue about the criminals' "needs and wishes," but the police are also expected to get involved—literally—by playing football and eating pizza. The whole approach is so feeble and marked by a victim mentality that it is bound to fail. (Dahle, 2022)

5.3. Trial by Space

Spatial practices, such as the car-dependent, dispersed lifestyle and the gatherings at informal meeting places for youth, represent an additional challenge to the Mouffean call for constructing collective identities through articulations that ultimately coalesce into strong alternative discursive formations. As we have demonstrated, however, configuration procedures within the realm of communication are bound by spatial practices. It could be argued that many of the above-mentioned planning theories do not fully integrate the role that space plays in social transformation; space is assumed to be more transparent than it actually is. Many aspects of spatial practice and lived space are incommunicable—or even kept secret—yet they are no less real.

The implication of acknowledging the spatial dimension for planning is that we need to expand the scope beyond discourse. Redesigning public discourse or aiming to transform antagonisms into open, contestable agonisms (Metzger, 2018; Mouffe, 2005) is not enough. The introduction of a new spatial code faces challenges, but not only on the abstract level. New concepts and ideas will always have to undergo the Lefebvrian "trial by space": "It is in space…that each idea of 'value' acquires or loses its distinctiveness through confrontation with the other values and ideas that it encounters there" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 416). The opposing spatial practices we have mentioned demonstrate the lack of approval of the spatial code—by space itself.

Democracy cannot be "saved" merely through "the production of a conflictual representation of the world" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 25), not if these representations still contradict concrete space. The contradiction between the present conception of Randesund on one side, and the dispersed settlement and the vital role of meeting places in the everyday lives of young people on the other, remains unresolved. Not only alternative ideas but also competing spatial practices must be welcomed into the planning process: "The possibility of working out counter-projects, discussing them with the 'authorities' and forcing those authorities to take them into account, is thus a gauge of 'real' democracy" (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 419–420).

6. Concluding Discussion

The spatial code designed, produced, and imposed by the planning apparatus in Randesund over the last half-century is characterized, among other things, by monocentrism, functionality, and a focus on growth. The most recent efforts to develop Randesund—by expanding the housing stock and strengthening the district center—build upon this code but also respond to some shortcomings produced over the decades, with a clear focus on enhancing spatial qualities for the district. As Rancière (2010) and Lefebvre (1991) suggest, space is more than a backdrop for human activity; it is an arena where politics can either flourish or be suppressed.

In Randesund, the dominant spatial code has contributed to a structured and predictable landscape—one that is, however, largely unresponsive to the lived practices and historical narratives of its inhabitants. The planning apparatus efficiently responds to glaring limitations and shortcomings in the existing code and adapts by producing plans for slightly better places: a more developed central district, more local services, etc. However, it fails to account for, and help articulate, dissenting and opposing alternative spatial practices. In doing so, it also fails to represent the heterogeneity of people and interests that inevitably make up a district the size of Randesund.

In *Dissensus*, Rancière (2010) states that the police, the powers that be, or, for the purposes of this article, the planning apparatus, "is that which says that here, on this street, there's nothing to see and so nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space for circulating is nothing but the space of circulation" (p. 37). In this context, these spatial metaphors can be taken quite literally and be linked to Lefebvre's notion of spatial codes. The spatial code of Randesund can be seen as producing specific spaces and ways of life. The weekly practice of parents driving their teenagers to the regional shopping mall so they can socialize could be viewed as an effect of the dispersed, car-centered sprawl with few amenities outside of housing in the district. It is circulation within the space of circulation. Rancière continues:

> Politics, by contrast, consists in transforming this space of "moving-along," of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen, and to be named in it. (Rancière, 2010, p. 37)

Alternatives to weekends at the mall do exist, as shown by the way youth in Randesund occupy parking lots and football fields in search of things to do and places to gather outside of the consumerist mecca of shopping malls. This is the appearance of political subjects: youth, and their effort to be heard. However, we have illustrated the failure of the planning apparatus to interpret these political subjectifications as anything other than noise. We contend that this "noisification" is the result of a narrow understanding of political subjectification. The planning apparatus acknowledges articulated demands as legitimate but fails to consider the everyday spatial practices of people as political demands made by political subjects.

Our critique of the planning practices in Randesund is not aimed at judging the municipal efforts at improving place qualities or infrastructure; rather, it challenges the underlying liberal rationality that narrows the scope of urban planning to procedural and consensus-driven goals. By failing to take spatial practices into account and by failing to create spaces and places where genuine political differences can surface, the planning regime limits democracy to a managerial activity in abstract space, sidelining the passions that drive active civic engagement and the formation of collective identities, as well as failing to account for the spatiality involved in such formations. Planners overemphasize the communicable, to the detriment of social practice—abstract space attempts to dominate the arena of lived space. This is reflected in the lack of a mobilized public voice in Randesund, where individuals and small groups with shared interests exist, yet fail to coalesce into a collective capable of challenging or reshaping the dominant spatial code. In a spatiality void of meeting places, where houses exist side by side, yet remain in isolation from each other by car-centric lifestyles, collective passions struggle to emerge.

So, although dissent exists in Randesund—manifesting in the gatherings of youth at parking lots and football fields, in local protests over place names, and in efforts to preserve local history—these acts remain

fragmented and isolated. The planning apparatus has thus far succeeded (intentionally or not) in particularizing opposition, preventing these pockets of resistance from coalescing into a broader, identity-forming movement that could introduce alternative visions for Randesund's future. This suppression of "fundamental political differences," as Metzger (2018) calls it, reflects what Mouffe (2005) terms a "post-political condition," where consensus-seeking effectively erases dissensus and stifles the emergence of democratic subjects. In this model, planning becomes an exercise in managing spaces for a hypothetical future citizenry rather than engaging with the voices of current residents who inhabit these spaces daily. What Lefebvre—and, to an extent, Rancière—helps us understand, however, is that the post-political condition of planning is both a-political and a-spatial. The dominant spatial code that has been produced in Randesund delineates the everyday life of its inhabitants, and it suppresses the passions needed to create collective identities in the first place. To understand the desires, needs, and wants of the populace in Randesund, dissonance within and against the spatial code—visible in disruptive forms of spatial practices—must be considered for what it is: nascent forms of politics and potential political subjectifications.

Ultimately, this case highlights the need to reconsider what democracy entails in the context of urban planning. We contend that democracy in planning should extend beyond procedural inclusivity; it should create spaces where alternative spatial codes and values are encouraged to emerge, supporting the development of distinct identities and collective aspirations. If it does not, planning risks becoming a fertile ground for suppressed needs, wants, and passions to turn to populism and authoritarianism instead. Dissent is always present, and a proper democratic form of planning needs to take dissent seriously. As Rancière (2010) asserts, true politics occurs when marginalized voices and unexpected subjects enter the field of perception, introducing new possibilities and reshaping the contours of what is seen, heard, and valued in a community. For Randesund, embracing such a vision would mean recognizing the legitimacy of dissent as a productive force within the democratic process, but also acknowledging that dissent often plays out not only through articulated demands but also through spatial practices in the realm of everyday life. Only by recognizing dissonance and disruption to the spatial code as legitimate political demands—expressed through practice—can a reconfiguration of the spatial code emerge, one that reflects the diverse experiences and aspirations of its inhabitants.

To sum up, this article addresses the theme of the thematic issue—the role of planning in anti-democratic times—through a call for planning to take space and the spatial practices of dwellers more seriously. We fear, in line with Davoudi (2018), that the communicative planning ideal has been incorporated into a post-political planning condition that is particularly vulnerable to authoritarian and anti-democratic impulses. It is therefore important to heed Mouffe's (2005) call to allow dissenting voices into the arena of deliberation. We also contend, however, that reconfigurations in the abstract realm of procedural negotiation are not enough. Care must also be given to concrete space and to the political moments where resistance to the spatial code is made manifest (Lefebvre, 1991), through dissonant spatial practices. That is, voices outside the formal arena of deliberation must be understood as legitimate voices of political subjects, and not merely as noise—even if their articulation comes not through formal demands but through their everyday spatial practices.

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Data Availability

Recorded interviews, along with municipal planning documents that have been digitized, are stored in one of the author's accounts on OneDrive, which guarantees the secure storage of University of Agder's data. The 23 journals of the Randesund Historic Society are located in this researcher's office.

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