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EDITORIAL

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The Role of Planning in 'Anti-Democratic' Times

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Abstract

This thematic issue seeks to bring the urgent questions raised by the current "anti-democratic turn in history" into conversation with the ambivalent nature of planning practices. What role can planning assume when society moves in a more authoritarian direction, and what responsibilities do academics bear?

Keywords

academics; anti-democratic; authoritarian; critical; planning; pluralism

We opened the call for this thematic issue in 2023. At that time, both Freedom House (2021) and International IDEA (2022) had published reports warning of a global decline in democracy—and, even more alarmingly, that we were on the verge of entering an "anti-democratic turn in history." In response to these developments, we began to explore the shifting landscape, raising questions about the connections between anti-democratic attacks, white supremacy, and silence (Grange, 2023) and the growing urban precarity (Listerborn, 2023). Since then, the situation appears to have deteriorated further. In its most recent report, Freedom House (2024, p. 1) emphasizes that "pluralism is under attack" and highlights a sharp decline in overall freedom. Similarly, International IDEA (2024) concludes that we are now living in an era of radical uncertainty. These developments raise critical questions about the role of planning in increasingly anti-democratic times, as well as about the responsibilities of intellectuals. What role can planning assume when society moves in a more authoritarian direction? Can it be anything other than an extension of the state? And what responsibilities do we, as academics, bear in a context where pluralism is under siege and critical perspectives are being eroded within universities?

This thematic issue seeks to bring the urgent questions raised by the current "anti-democratic turn in history" into conversation with the ambivalent nature of planning practices. While planning is often valued

for its capacity to support democratic processes and promote equitable resource distribution, it can also serve as a mechanism for deepening inequalities (Fainstein, 2009) and even enabling authoritarianism (Fearn & Davoudi, 2022). Although neoliberal planning has in many respects been characterized as undemocratic (Taşan-Kok & Baeten, 2011), we are now witnessing a growing prevalence of explicitly authoritarian planning strategies—particularly in connection with environmental extraction and large-scale infrastructural investments by global actors (Fernandes, 2022). This trend is especially pronounced in regions commonly referred to as the Global South, making it increasingly relevant to speak of "modern-colonial geographies" (Duer & Vegliò, 2019). Practices such as land-grabbing and settler colonialism are not new; they are rooted in longstanding colonial histories. However, the current scale, intensity, and brutality of such practices—combined with a striking lack of political accountability—underscore the urgency of renewed critical engagement.

The Israel–Palestine conflict has increasingly affected the core of democratic institutions—universities not least—where it has played out in tensions between students, university leadership, and national governments. In 2024, pro-Palestinian student protests spread rapidly across the globe, notably in the United States. The students' demands to university administrations included the termination of all collaborations with Israeli academic institutions, public condemnation of Israel's ongoing invasion of Gaza, and the provision of educational support for Palestinian students. At several universities, faculty members and researchers expressed solidarity with these demands (e.g., WASSAP, 2024).

There were, however, numerous reports of confrontations between riot police and demonstrators on university campuses, with thousands of students either detained or prevented from exercising their right to protest. At Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden, for instance, the administration decided to ban any political manifestation on campus. The university leadership justified this decision as a necessary response to the escalating violence in the Middle East and the polarization the conflict was seen to risk provoking. Similar measures in other contexts prompted the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to affirm that students have a legitimate right to freedom of expression. Pro-Palestinian protests also took place in countries such as Argentina, Japan, and across Europe—including France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Finland, and Sweden. Subsequent assessments concluded that student rights had been violated on multiple occasions (UN, 2024).

In the U.S., conflicts over the boundaries of permissible speech within academia have been ongoing for several years. University presidents at some of the country's most prestigious institutions have either been pressured to resign or have voluntarily stepped down in the face of mounting controversy. Perspectives related to trans, queer, and racial justice have increasingly been subject to censorship.

Since the U.S. presidential election in November 2024, which saw Donald Trump re-elected, a series of political decisions have been made that reinforce Freedom House's conclusion that pluralism is under attack. All government programs related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have been dismantled, and associated staff have had their contracts terminated. Leaders of pro-Palestinian student movements have been detained and either deported or threatened with expulsion. The Trump administration has also made colonial claims of a highly controversial and provocative nature, directed at both Greenland and the Gaza Strip. In addition, several universities have been explicitly targeted, accused of being "liberal bastions" promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. In response, federal funding to these institutions has been cut. Pluralism is, without doubt, under direct threat—and so too is the autonomy of the university sector.

With this thematic issue, we aim to highlight how the ongoing "anti-democratic turn"—within which planning is deeply embedded—restricts freedom of expression and curtails democratic participation in relation to key democratic institutions. Ana Pajvančić-Cizelj focuses on the case of Novi Sad and the erosion of democracy in Serbia, describing an "autocratisation-driven" urban transformation. Her analysis identifies a shift from neoliberal, economically motivated exploitation toward a model rooted in political domination. Democratic backsliding in planning is also addressed in the Hungarian context by Lea Kőszeghy, Bálint Hilbert, and Adrienne Csizmady, who examine the consequences of integrated urban planning after 2010, marked by a significant decline in local autonomy. Luana Xavier Pinto Coelho and Lorena Melgaço contribute a postcolonial perspective on precarious settlement upgrading in Brazil, tracing the links between the country's authoritarian planning history and the logic of racial capitalism. Together, these contributions illustrate both enduring and emerging power structures that reinforce anti-democratic tendencies within planning practices.

Issues of colonial legacies, Western self-perceptions, and discourses around the "authoritarian other" are addressed in the commentary to this thematic issue, authored by Myrto Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou, Adriana de La Peña, Laleh Foroughanfar, Jennie Gustafsson, Lorena Melgaço, and Chiara Valli. The authors explore the dissonant discourses that emerged when the city of Malmö, Sweden, hosted the Eurovision Song Contest in May 2024—where the official slogan "*United by Music*" starkly contrasted with the grassroots campaign "*Malmö Against Genocide*." The city's massive securitization, carried out in a distinctly authoritarian fashion, disproportionately targeted the pro-Palestinian solidarity movement in certain neighbourhoods.

Emil Pull and Jørn Cruickshank, drawing on a case from Kristiansand, Norway, highlight a different kind of democratic constraint—one rooted in what they define as post-political and spatially blind planning tendencies. They argue for the need to develop a more spatially attuned understanding of urban life, practice, and development. Tanja Winkler, in turn, explores alternative democratic pathways by introducing the concept of "*democracy otherwise*." Her contribution looks beyond conventional forms of local activism to consider alternative democratic planning practices. Although no simple solutions are offered, these contributions provide important insights that can inspire planners to learn from the diverse democratic experiences found across the Global South. This, in turn, requires a willingness to *unlearn* taken-for-granted assumptions and to challenge the rigid dualism between the Global North and South.

Already three decades ago, Stuart Hall (1993, p. 361) emphasized that the ability "to live with difference" would be "the coming question of the twenty-first century." We can only conclude that his prediction has proven accurate. The capacity to live with difference appears to be in as steep a decline as democracy itself. With this thematic issue, we aim to draw attention to the urgent need to critically examine both the role of planning and the responsibility we, as academics, bear in times of anti-democratic attacks. We conclude that the need for open, free, and autonomous universities—where political dialogue and pluralism are not only welcomed but actively fostered—has never been more pressing. In parallel, there is an urgent need to discuss the role that planning will play in the future reconstruction of Ukraine and Palestine. How can we ensure that, when that day comes, planning will be harnessed to support democratic processes and the equitable distribution of resources, rather than serving as yet another tool to perpetuate inequalities? Among the many institutions that will need to be restored or rebuilt in these countries, the university sector stands out. If these institutions are to become truly free and autonomous, we as academics must be at the forefront, demonstrating the crucial role that intellectuals can play in defending pluralism in the face of growing threats. This thematic issue offers a series of insightful articles, each contributing in different ways to this essential dialogue.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Autocratisation-Driven Urban Transformation: The Case of Novi Sad, Serbia

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Abstract

Autocratisation is on the rise, undermining democratic institutions and reshaping sociopolitical landscapes worldwide. This article situates urban transformation within this trend and argues that urban transformation should be reconceptualised, particularly in countries facing advanced democratic erosion, such as Serbia. It proposes a shift from the prevailing focus on neoliberalism and economic exploitation towards an emphasis on autocratisation and political domination. To lay the groundwork for this reconceptualisation, the article explores how urban spaces, institutions, discourses, and actors contribute to both democratic erosion and resilience. In doing so, it links contemporary urban transformation directly to the process of autocratisation. As a case study illustrating the relevance of this new approach, the article presents preliminary empirical findings from Novi Sad, a second-tier Serbian city, focusing on the waterfront redevelopment and other major infrastructure projects that exemplify democratic erosion and provoke democratic contention.

Keywords

autocratisation; democratic resilience; Novi Sad Waterfront project; railway station canopy collapse; urban planning

1. Introduction

Democracy is facing a global decline often referred to as the "third wave of autocratisation" (see Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). This trend is evident in Europe, where EU candidate countries (such as Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) and over 20% of EU member states (including Hungary, Poland, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Greece) are experiencing significant democratic erosion (Bochsler & Juon,

2020; Boese et al., 2021). Autocratisation is a process in which political actors individually or collectively undermine democratic principles, making political power more arbitrary and repressive, often under the guise of legality (Tomini et al., 2023). They rely on democratic institutions, rather than overtly authoritarian measures, to erode democratic norms (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). About 70% of cases in the third wave of autocratisation involve this gradual institutional erosion, with Hungary and Serbia as prominent examples (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

The debate surrounding the new wave of autocratisation in Europe is shaped by methodological nationalism, providing a broad picture of political trends at the national level based on state-level institutions, such as elections, parliaments, and the media. A more nuanced, spatially sensitive approach that recognises sub-national variations has been less explored, particularly within urban spaces. This is partly due to the widespread assumption that cities serve as "islands of resistance" against authoritarianism (Aksztejn et al., 2024; Buzogány & Spöri, 2024), overlooking their role in consolidating autocratic power.

This research aims to fill that gap by examining how urban spaces, institutions, discourses, and actors contribute to democratic erosion and resilience. It links urban dynamics directly to autocratisation and shows how this process drives urban transformation and how different urban actors attempt to counter such trends. The focus of this study is Novi Sad, a second-tier city in Serbia, the Novi Sad Waterfront project (NSWP), and other major infrastructure projects, such as the railway station reconstruction, that exemplify democratic erosion and provoke democratic contention.

While urban megaprojects (UMPs) are often promoted as economic achievements or criticised for fostering economic injustices, this research focuses on their role in democratic erosion. UMPs are not only tools for economic gain but also for consolidating autocratic power and right-wing populism (Beveridge et al., 2024). At the same time, they provoke public opposition, making them key arenas for studying both democratic erosion and resilience at the urban level. This article argues that urban infrastructural projects are crucial sites where democratic erosion unfolds and where reservoirs of democratic resilience may form in response. Despite their political significance, UMPs have been underexplored in political science and are often viewed primarily through an economic lens as manifestations of neoliberalism in urban studies.

The structure of the article is as follows: Following the introduction, the second section reviews the existing research on UMPs in the Balkans. The third section presents the concepts of democratic erosion and resilience within the urban context. The fourth section introduces and analyses the NSWP, while the fifth section presents the methodology. The sixth section discusses the results, and the final section summarises and concludes the article, underscoring the further need to explore the relationship between cities and autocratisation.

2. UMPs and Planning in the Balkans: Between Neoliberalism and Autocratisation

Most of the recent literature on UMPs in the Balkans draws from the example of the Belgrade Waterfront project (BWP) constructed by Abu Dhabi-based investor Eagle Hills, shifting the debate towards geopolitical relations and new patterns of neoliberal globalisation in this region (Koelemaij, 2021). It has been argued that "the introduction of specific legal and policy instruments in Serbia under neoliberal economic pressures is a key source of the future change in the metropolitan tissue" (Zeković et al., 2018, p. 159). The BWP is being

driven by the pursuit of extra profits for developers in a context of "wild neoliberalism" in which "authorities become partners to foreign investors; spatial planners lack the strength to resist such partnerships, allowing public interest to be drowned in the whirlpool of private sector needs" (Perić, 2020, p. 220). Similarly, it has been argued that social movements resisting this project, such as Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own, are built on a "platform[s] of resistance to neoliberal state-building," with a strong emphasis on social inequalities resulting from intensive economic stratification (Džuverović & Milošević, 2021, p. 199). Thus, the project is mostly viewed within the context of deregulation and neoliberal globalisation.

This focus on neoliberalism, which seeks to explain urban transformation in relation to capital accumulation, may be excessive and misleading in Central and Eastern Europe (Gentile & Sjöberg, 2020; Kinossian, 2022), especially in countries experiencing significant democratic erosion, such as Serbia. In contrast to Western-based UMPs, which are driven by entrepreneurial and globally competitive local governments and explained primarily through the lens of neoliberalism (Swyngedouw et al., 2002), UMPs in Central and Eastern Europe are particularly significant for nation-state politics (Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2019; Kinossian & Morgan, 2023). As Olt et al. (2024) attest, many urban infrastructure projects in Hungary primarily reinforce neo-patrimonial relations rather than accumulating profits for capitalists. Thus, post-socialist megaprojects "often say more about political ambition than of burgeoning markets, good investment climate or a strong role of private capital" (Kinossian, 2022, p. 1244).

This dynamic may be missed by research focused only on capital cities as centres of intense urban concentration, especially in the European context with a more balanced network of cities. This raises the question of the unique role second-tier cities—the largest cities in a country, excluding the capital—may play in autocratisation. Given the focus on the capital, authoritarian control may be less pronounced in secondary cities. This scenario may make it easier for urban movements and opposition groups to organise, albeit with fewer resources. Additionally, national governments may employ diverse strategies in different locales, potentially allowing for isolated pockets of freedom (Koch, 2022), and second-tier cities may play a role in this case. They may serve as democratic facades strategically deployed to bolster regime legitimacy on a wider scale. Conversely, second-tier cities may also function as playgrounds for realising autocratic projects, with coalition-building efforts often serving as test beds for the national level (Massetti & Schakel, 2021). However, detecting these dynamics proves challenging due to a lack of previous research.

3. Democratic Erosion, Resilience, and UMPs

Democratic erosion is the modal tactic of the third wave of autocratisation and refers to the gradual but substantial undermining of democratic norms without abolishing key democratic institutions (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Contrary to the widespread belief that autocratisation occurs suddenly and violently, contemporary democracies erode through subtle, gradual changes as seen in Hungary, Poland, Serbia, and North Macedonia (Freedom House, 2024). They have been experiencing a continuous process in which political parties exploit structural deficiencies to tilt the electoral playing field through the use of illiberal governing practices while maintaining competitive elections (Kapidžić, 2020). The key mechanisms of democratic erosion identified in the literature (Boese et al., 2021; Dahl, 1984; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023) include undermining or subverting democratic institutions and procedures and targeting or co-opting opponents.

Democratic resilience is the ability of a democratic system and its institutions, political actors, and citizens to prevent or respond to external and internal challenges, stresses, and assaults (Lührmann & Merkel, 203). It is based on the safeguards of democracy, which include the formal electoral process and voter turnout, freedom of expression and association, a free press, and an independent parliament and judiciary (Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). Democratic resilience can be manifested as resistance against autocratisation and defined as any activity or combination of activities undertaken by a dynamic set of often interconnected and interacting actors who, regardless of their motivations, attempt to slow down, stop, or reverse the actions of those responsible for autocratisation (Tomini et al., 2023).

The following section explores the various ways in which democratic erosion and resilience relate to urban spaces, institutions, actors, and discourses. This analytical approach is based on the ASID model for analysing socio-economic development (Moulaert et al., 2016). The four interconnected concepts—agency, structure, institutions, and discourse—are crucial to understand socio-economic development in space, as they encompass actions, constraints, guiding institutions, and discursive practices. In this article, the ASID model is adapted to the specifics of urban infrastructure research by replacing the "structure" dimension with "space." To more effectively identify urban actors, the "agency" dimension is modified to "actors." Following Moulaert et al. (2016, p. 169), our analytical framework, therefore, consists of:

1. Space (spatial structures), referring to "those aspects of natural and/or social realities that cannot be changed by a given individual or collective agency in the short to medium term within a specific spatial context";
2. Institutions, referring to a "more or less coherent set of routines, practices, rules, and sanctions governing specific domains of action";
3. Actors, defined as agents of "meaningful human behavior, individual or collective, that significantly impacts the natural and/or social worlds, either directly or through mediation by tools, institutions, or other means";
4. Discourse, that is, the "production of intersubjective sense-making."

3.1. Spaces

The construction of UMPs radically transforms residential areas, abandoned industrial sites, and urban commons by altering their functions, socio-ecological structures, and aesthetics. It can contribute to autocratic consolidation as a regime secures the support of economic oligarchs through lucrative construction contracts and legitimises itself before domestic and international audiences by projecting an image of progress through highly visible spatial symbols. This can be purely speculative, as the regime capitalises on the profit expectations of financial actors and the desire for change expressed by the citizens, as seen in the Skopje 2014 project in North Macedonia (Mattioli, 2020). The socio-spatial consequences include gentrification, residential segregation, and spatial injustices, which arise from increased land values and the displacement of vulnerable populations (Monte-Mór et al., 2020, pp. 1–4; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). Deepening inequalities erode trust in political institutions and can lead to a rejection of democracy, creating a fertile ground for authoritarianism (Stiglitz, 2023). Conversely, redevelopment areas can serve as foundations for mobilising resistance and resilience, given the place attachment and identity that citizens develop with these spaces. The creation or preservation of such counter-spaces is crucial for building alternative political imaginaries and fostering oppositional publics (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2018).

3.2. Institutions

UMPs are often implemented through regulatory exceptions that undermine democratic processes in urban planning (Can & Fanton Ribeiro da Silva, 2023; Perić, 2020; Zeković & Maričić, 2022), typically by bypassing or manipulating public consultations and citizen participation. This bypassing of standard procedures can marginalise public input and weaken institutional checks and balances, thereby triggering wider democratic erosion in society, reducing democratic control, and expanding the political dominance of autocratic leaders (Staletović, 2022). However, these findings have not been directly connected to the broader erosion of democracy. Instead, planning manipulations have been interpreted as driven by external pressure—the interests of private investors outweighing the public good and explained within a neoliberal context.

3.3. Actors

Urban actors are individuals and groups with specific interests in the city, acting within economic, political, cultural, or social spheres. UMPs involve a range of actors, including citizens, economic actors (such as investors and developers), political actors (such as decision-makers, political parties, social movements, and citizens), and experts (in architecture and urban planning). In this dimension, "democratic erosion" can be conceptualised as the centralisation of the decision-making process towards the central level of government (Coppedge, 2017; Ergenc & Yuksekkaya, 2022) and the power dynamic involving the suppression of freedom, targeting of opponents, and co-opting of support (Goodfellow & Jackman, 2020). By contrast, urban civic engagement and networking between oppositional urban movements and local governments can be observed as urban manifestations of democratic resilience (Matthes, 2023; Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2022). This kind of urban contention can force incumbents to acknowledge electoral defeat, challenge electoral fraud, tie opposition actors to citizens, and create effective mobilisation structures (Norton, 2024).

3.4. Discourses

UMPs are legitimised through hegemonic discourses (Kaye-Essien & Bhuiyan, 2022) shaped by elite visions for the future. These narratives often portray the ruling class's interests as universal benefits, accompanied by excessive optimism and the misrepresentation of social advantages while downplaying the challenges involved (Casellas & Lehtonen, 2024). This can obscure corrupt practices within UMPs while emphasising the regime's capacity to generate economic prosperity, as seen in the narratives of urban boosterism. In an era of rising authoritarianism and populism, these discourses may be influenced by nationalism, climate scepticism, and the "gender backlash" (Siemiatycki et al., 2020) that justify social exclusion and reinforce existing hierarchies. Conversely, urban discourses framed around democratisation and environmentalist narratives, as well as non-normative counter-narratives generated by oppositional and marginalised groups and individuals, can also reflect democratic resilience.

4. Novi Sad Urban Infrastructure Projects: Contextual Remarks

The sociopolitical context in Serbia is shaped by the blocked post-socialist transformation (Lazić, 2000) that began in the 1990s, during which the country experienced civil wars and waves of democratisation and de-democratisation. Since 2014, Serbia has been classified as a hybrid regime with ongoing democratic erosion (Castaldo, 2020), that has only recently been challenged by anti-corruption, student-led protests

(Beširević, 2025; Zaharijević, 2025). The significant backsliding began in 2012 under Aleksandar Vučić's government, characterised by attacks on the independent judiciary and essential safeguards, ultimately leading to the breakdown of the electoral process (Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). Over the last decade, provincial and local autonomy has deteriorated under the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS; see Đukanović, 2016; M. Petrović, 2010). The SNS has maintained complete control over all major urban centres in the country. The national government plays a central role in urban transformation in Serbia due to the high centralisation and concentration of power within the ruling party.

This political context frames or exacerbates post-socialist urban transformation (J. Petrović & Backović, 2019), which is marked by increased socioeconomic inequalities, rising urban poverty, informal urban practices, illegal adaptations of urban spaces, a more permissive approach to planning, and urban depopulation in non-capital cities (M. Petrović, 2005; Stanilov, 2007). Although heavily influenced by European trends (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2024) spatial planning in Serbia and across the Western Balkans continues to be deeply rooted in its historical trajectory (Berisha & Cotella, 2024). Such a legacy is often associated with a democratic deficit in these societies, which can be exploited to fuel further democratic erosion in a new wave of autocratisation (Bunce et al., 2009).

The construction and urban planning sectors are key areas in which corruption thrives, both in Serbia (Ristanović, 2023) and across other Western Balkan countries (Mattioli, 2020). In Serbia, this is enabled by key weaknesses in the spatial planning system, which include inadequate implementation of spatial plans and a lack of horizontal (and vertical) coordination (Zivanovic & Gataric, 2021). A report from an independent agency, the Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute (RERI), emphasises that corruption in the planning and construction sector in Serbia involves:

> The abuse of public authority in the process of drafting and adopting urban and spatial plans, as well as in issuing permits and approvals for construction and project implementation. This occurs through actions, inactions, or direct violations of laws and procedures, leading to significant harm to the public interest, undermining democracy and the rule of law, and threatening public resources and human and civil rights. At the same time, it facilitates the pursuit of interests by individuals or select groups. (Ristanović, 2023, p. 7)

The report identifies several mechanisms that violate institutional democratic procedures and enable corruption in this sector in Serbia. These include the fragmentation of planning documents in which planning acts are divided into separate sectoral areas or territorial parts, obstructing the assessment of the planning solutions' mutual impacts. RERI also notes deficiencies or the outright absence of strategic environmental assessment reports. Planning hierarchies are reversed, and lower-level plans that violate planning regulations are legitimised by their inclusion in higher-level planning acts, thus tailoring public interests to individual agendas. The abuse of special planning procedures shortens timelines and circumvents mandatory early public insight, and deviations from technical documentation and building permits create significant discrepancies between approved plans and actual construction. Furthermore, the lack of relevant inspection services exacerbates these issues. Together, these mechanisms contribute to a system that fosters corruption and undermines public trust in the planning and construction process.

Although such violations of democratic procedures are often seen as a result of investor-driven urbanism in which public interest, represented by democratically elected officials, is subordinated to private economic

gains, they also contribute directly to the centralisation of power in the ruling party, reinforcing authoritarianism. Control over urban planning and construction allows the regime to strategically develop certain areas while neglecting others, thereby displacing or suppressing communities critical of the government and rewarding loyal supporters. Authorities can further ensure that urban infrastructure aligns with their political agenda, as seen in the prioritisation of churches, national monuments, and other symbols of ideological significance. As they position themselves as the primary gatekeepers of the planning process, political interests may even take precedence over the private economic interests of investors, who are compelled to align their projects with the regime's political goals. Additionally, corruption in planning fosters patronage networks in which government officials reward loyalists with lucrative contracts and favourable treatment, creating a cycle of dependence and support that sustains the regime (Vuković & Spaić, 2022). Ultimately, authorities benefit from being perceived as the drivers behind major infrastructure projects, which legitimises their rule and presents a façade of urban development.

This façade broke in November 2024 when a newly reconstructed train station canopy in Novi Sad collapsed, resulting in the death of 16 people. The reconstruction was a part of the major infrastructural project—the construction of a high-speed railway connecting Belgrade and Budapest—carried out through contracts based on an intergovernmental agreement between Serbia and China. These agreements are exempt from domestic laws requiring public tenders, allowing for direct negotiations with subcontractors, often under confidentiality clauses. The investor of the reconstruction project was a state-owned company, Serbian Railways Infrastructure, the main contractor was a Chinese consortium, while most subcontractors who conducted the reconstruction were Serbian firms with close ties to the ruling party ("Đević ATP Vojvodina," 2024), a pattern also observed in Hungary (Szabó & Jelinek, 2023). A series of procedural and financial irregularities during the reconstruction (Transparency Serbia, n.d.) raised suspicions of corruption, suggesting that the regime exploits intergovernmental agreements and urban infrastructure projects as a means to divert public funds to loyal individuals in exchange for their support, thereby reinforcing its control at the expense of public well-being and safety. The authorities' refusal to disclose full documentation related to the reconstruction or to hold those responsible accountable triggered nationwide student-led anti-corruption protests, which are still ongoing. This underscores the deep connection between urban infrastructure projects and the persistence of the authoritarian regime, while also highlighting their potential as sites of resistance.

Novi Sad, the administrative centre of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Serbia's key agricultural region, has a population of approximately 350,000, making it the country's second-largest city. Like many other Serbian cities, Novi Sad's industry collapsed in the 1990s and only began to recover in the 2000s. The city is developing unequally, with a booming construction sector amid the lack of basic infrastructure in the urban peripheries, such as sanitation or sewage systems, and many substandard or illegally constructed buildings (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2019; Pušić, 2008). Overbuilding, environmental neglect, and luxury housing developments have deteriorated living conditions and deepened inequalities, contributing to urban de-development (Hughson, 2015; Pušić, 2008). Unlike urban development, which enhances infrastructure and quality of life, urban de-development leads to the degradation of urban spaces and quality of life, manifesting in the loss of cultural heritage, displacement of residents, and environmental degradation.

The NSWP is an example of this trend. It was developed as a counterpart to the larger and more widely recognised BWP. However, being situated in a second-tier city, and not yet realised, it has attracted less

attention in the literature despite the wide public discussion involving academia and professional organizations. Both the Belgrade and Novi Sad waterfronts are large-scale, state-led UMPs in which private investors construct exclusive and luxurious housing complexes along the riverfronts, yielding substantial profits and creating opportunities for corruption. In both projects, the state unilaterally amends or bypasses local democratic procedures and institutions, such as land use regulations and public participation in urban planning. The BWP was developed in a populated urban neighbourhood through land rezoning and alterations to the general urban plan (GUP). The violent removal of buildings occurred to accommodate investors, effectively excluding the local community from decision-making processes. A critical incident in 2016 saw a group of masked individuals unlawfully demolish private buildings within the designated project area while the police remained unresponsive to the citizens' pleas for help. These dramatic events in which the rule of law was suspended and citizens' rights were violated serve as an example of democratic erosion contested by a series of protests that grew into an urban movement called Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2022).

In Novi Sad, a similar process of authoritarian control over urban politics and the emergence of contentious urban movements is underway. Unlike in Belgrade, the developer of the NSWP is a domestic investor with close ties to the authorities, making it particularly suitable for analysing urban transformation in the context of autocratisation.

5. Methods and Analytical Approach

This exploratory study addressed a case that has not been widely examined before. Thus, we relied on one recent article discussing the NSWP (Čamprag, 2024) and insights from the practice, coupled with the qualitative analysis of secondary data obtained from various sources, including media content, urban planning documents, expert reports, and official statements from politicians and city authorities who advocate for the NSWP, as well as from investor representatives, opposition leaders, activists, and experts who oppose it. The data were interpreted within the conceptual framework of democratic erosion and resilience taking place within urban spaces, institutions, actors, and discourses to point out how those elements are mobilised to consolidate and challenge autocratic tendencies. The materials analysed were collected during the long-term monitoring of the project preparation process, which began with the initial steps towards the adoption of the Novi Sad GUP, in which the project was proposed and later approved in 2022, continuing through to the present. Although this work did not rely on the collection of primary data, it offers a new conceptual framework for further research on autocratisation in urban settings. Furthermore, it mapped out key spaces, discourses, institutions, and actors through which autocratisation unfolds by using the case study of the UMP in the second-tier post-socialist city of Novi Sad.

6. Results: NSWP: Spaces, Institutions, Actors, Discourses

6.1. Spaces

The NSWP plans to construct a luxury residential and commercial complex with buildings up to 20 stories high, spanning an area of 22 hectares in the abandoned post-industrial zone of the former city shipyard along the Danube River. Low-value industrial land is being sold to investors and converted for high-value residential and commercial use, thereby realising substantial profits within a short time frame. In 2017, the shipyard was

privatised and sold to Galens, a local company with close ties to the city authorities. According to estimates, the NSWP will include around 2,299 apartments, with the total planned building area covering 39,600 square meters (Prica Kovacevic, 2022).

The planned complex will be situated near Liman—a neighbourhood built during the socialist era, following the urban planning practices of the time. These practices ensured the development of social infrastructure within the residential blocks, such as health centres, community spaces, libraries, kindergartens, and parking spaces. Since the NSWP plans to build luxury housing but lacks similar facilities, not only would it exacerbate spatial inequalities, but it may also overburden the social infrastructure of the neighbouring post-socialist district. Liman is an oppositional neighbourhood in which a prolonged struggle has been waged to gain control over the lowest levels of local self-governance, namely the local community councils (Ostojić, 2024).

In addition to the new residential and commercial complex, the plan also includes a major overhaul of the city's road infrastructure, including the construction of a new bridge to connect the city centre with the Fruška Gora Corridor, a project that is already underway and being built by the Chinese company.

The project is situated on a natural reserve area along the Danube, which is crucial for ecosystem preservation and flood defence. This low-lying area of land adjacent to the Danube is subject to flooding and plays a critical role in natural water management. Close to this site is Šodroš, a green urban oasis with significant social and ecological functions, including biodiversity protection, which will be radically transformed due to the planned spatial interventions. The place attachments to the urban space targeted for redevelopment by the NSWP play a key role in mobilising citizen groups against the project.

6.2. Institutions

The NSWP was facilitated through the undermining of democratic procedures in urban planning and control and the manipulation of key institutions. The key aspects of democratic erosion are evident in the procedures surrounding the adoption of the Novi Sad GUP, which preceded the project, as well as in local, national, and international regulations concerning environmental protection along the Danube riverbanks and in political control over public companies, such as public water management.

The Novi Sad GUP for 2030 facilitated the NSWP. The plan states that "the former shipyard, located in a highly attractive and valuable location, has not been functional for many years, which raises the need to reconsider the purpose of this land" (Conic, 2021). Serbia's Law on Planning and Construction provides only two mechanisms for public participation in the planning process: early public insight and public insight with an accompanying public hearing of the Planning Commission. However, the way these mechanisms are defined allows institutions to disregard or misuse the regulations, reducing public participation to a mere formality devoid of any meaningful influence on the planning process (Stojić et al., 2020). In the case of the GUP, the city of Novi Sad skipped one of the most crucial steps in drafting and adopting planning documents: organising early public insight. This omission deprived the public of the opportunity to influence planning decisions and propose alternatives, thereby violating legal procedures and the principles of public participation (Rajić, 2022). Institutional non-transparency and the reduction of public participation to the bare legal minimum create fertile ground for corruption to thrive (Ristanović, 2023).

Furthermore, this project expands flood-prone areas and increases the city's exposure to climate change risks, which are especially pronounced in the Balkans. This implies violations of environmental regulations. Construction at this location directly violates Serbia's Regulation on Establishing the Spatial Plan for Areas of Special Purpose of the International Waterway E 80—Danube (Pan-European Corridor VII), adopted in 2015. This regulation commits the state to (a) restoring sections of the Danube and its tributaries to their natural state, including re-establishing floodplains, reconnecting wetlands and retention areas, and minimising the impact of new projects on the physical degradation of ecosystems, and (b) protecting, conserving, and restoring biodiversity and various habitats, particularly for rare and endangered species, as well as the unique ecosystem of the Danube Delta. Although the regulation mandated the initiation of protection processes and the designation of this area as a protected natural asset, the city of Novi Sad never issued a protection act, nor was the area designated as protected by the Provincial Institute for Nature Protection (Stojković Jovanović, 2020). This inaction was preceded by a report claiming that the area lacked the characteristics necessary for protection, which was never made publicly available (Stojković Jovanović, 2020).

In addition to breaching the 2015 regulation, the project violates several national and international laws, agreements, and protocols, including the Water Law, the Public Property Law, and the Environmental Protection Law. These violations concern the exploitation of a floodplain area with an ecologically significant ecosystem along an international waterway (Stojković Jovanović, 2020).

The construction of a bridge over the Danube in Novi Sad exemplifies these systemic regulatory failures. The bridge project overlaps with several protected areas. In this case, RERI discovered falsified data intended to bypass the preparation of a strategic impact assessment report. Under Serbian law, such actions constitute a criminal offence (Ristanović, 2023). Despite the irregularities, the Institute for Urbanism of Novi Sad announced early public insight about the bridge's planning document (PGR) concept only three weeks after the decision to create the PGR was made. The public review lasted from 29 June to 13 July 2020, a period that severely limited meaningful public participation.

The designation of the bridge project as one of national importance triggered the application of the Law on Special Procedures for the Realisation of Construction and Reconstruction Projects of Linear Infrastructure of Special Importance for the Republic of Serbia. This designation obligates all state authorities, local governments, companies, public enterprises, and other institutions to expedite the issuance of relevant acts without delay, leaving no room for thorough public participation or compliance with environmental standards. After the public water management company issued a negative opinion on the project, the director of the company was dismissed, after which the decision was revised to a positive one. A similar scenario unfolded at the national level: The Jaroslav Černi Institute, Serbia's leading research institution in the field of water management, issued a positive opinion on the planned work, which came shortly after the institute was privatised earlier in the year (Ranocchiari, 2022).

6.3. Actors

The main investor of the NSWP is Galens. This is a domestic investor operating mainly in Serbia and focusing on large residential and commercial complexes in Belgrade and Novi Sad, as well as in winter tourist resorts across the country. The company is the principal investor in the majority of new residential and commercial developments in Novi Sad, and it has effectively driven the city's spatial and infrastructural transformation

since the mid-2000s: "In Novi Sad alone, Galens owns tens of thousands of square meters of both construction land and green spaces or fields on the city's outskirts, which, over time and through regulatory changes, are reclassified into building plots" (Lalić, 2021). Property prices in these new residential complexes are significantly higher than in other parts of the city that were developed before the 2000s transition period, increasing socio-spatial inequalities.

While the city government serves as the primary promoter of this project through its urban planning institutions, the relationship between the local and national authorities reflects a high degree of centralisation. In other words, the local government functions merely as an extension of the national government in this case, as it lacks real power and autonomy in decision-making related to the project. Despite prolonged urban contention lasting over seven years, urban politics in Novi Sad remain largely under the control of competitive authoritarian governments and the opposition has only recently secured a seat in the local parliament.

The massive deforestation that preceded the NSWP triggered a series of protests, which grew into the Ecological Front urban movement. Initially organised as the informal citizen group Dunavac-Šodroš, activists established the Šodroš Survival Camp at this location in an effort to prevent deforestation (Ranocchiari, 2022). This initiative helped consolidate various neighbourhood movements that had long been fighting against similar spatial interventions in different parts of the city, which led to the formation of the citizen movement Bravo. This demonstrates that spatial transformations initiated or facilitated by an authoritarian political regime drive the consolidation, unification, and scaling up (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2022) of urban movements, positioning them as one of the main opposition forces against the autocratisation at the local and national levels.

6.4. Discourses

The legitimisation of various urban infrastructure projects in Serbia by the ruling party is taking place through two primary discourses, both aimed at justifying such interventions to the public.

The first discourse revolves around devaluating spaces built or developed during the socialist era, which are typically the focus of reconstruction efforts. These spaces are often discursively framed as neglected, underutilised, and dangerous, paving the way for their transformation under autocratic leadership. The second discourse draws on narratives of Europeanisation, linking new spatial interventions to Europe and the path towards it.

In the case of the BWP, this narrative is apparent in numerous statements by officials, who described the area where the project was developed as devastated. This discursive cleansing of spaces is emblematic in Serbian political life, encapsulated by the slogan "Snakes, Rats, and Drug Addicts," which Šterić (2021) identifies as a mechanism contributing to state capture. Simultaneously, urban infrastructure projects are often branded as European, standing in stark contrast to the degraded post-socialist infrastructure. The BWP, for example, has been repeatedly positioned as a counterpart to urban developments in European cities. This is evidenced by Serbian President Vučić's claim:

> Now we have a magnificent part of the city with the most beautiful promenade, even better than Vienna's. I promise that in five years, with water purifiers and sewage systems, the Sava here will be as clear as the Danube in Vienna. ("Vučić i Alabar na objektu," 2023)

At the opening ceremony of the reconstructed Novi Sad railway station, which was originally built in 1964, the provincial government's president highlighted that the reconstruction was carried out according to European standards (Serbian Progressive Party, 2024).

In the case of the NSWP, the discourse involves the cleansing of a post-industrial and post-socialist shipyard around which the project is planned. The former mayor of Novi Sad described this area as "rusty shipyards" and dilapidated barracks of bankrupt construction companies ("Miloš Vučević: Grad ne," 2020). Considering that some of these companies were privatised during the democratic transition of Serbia in the 2000s when the current opposition was in power, the spatial transformation has also been used as a political targeting tool. The intersection of Europeanisation narratives and post-socialist transformation is further reflected in a statement by the former mayor of Novi Sad and the then-current Serbian prime minister:

> I assume someone back then would have argued that the shipyard should supposedly be preserved as a symbol of the city, even though it hasn't operated in 15 years and is falling apart. But look at what major European and global cities have done with defunct shipyards—they've transformed them into the most attractive zones for business and living, like London and Copenhagen. ("Vučević announced the construction," 2019)

To further test the idea about the double discoursive strategy of urban autocratisation in postsocialist cities, future research should integrate primary data collection, such as interviews with urban actors or discourse analysis, while adopting a more comparative perspective to strengthen the generalizability of findings and extend their relevance beyond the Balkans.

7. Conclusion

While previous studies have primarily analysed large-scale infrastructural projects in post-socialist countries through an economic lens—viewing them as results of external neoliberal pressures or investor-driven urbanism—this article argues for a political reconceptualization, demonstrating how these projects are fundamentally shaped by internally driven autocratic transformation. The value of this perspective was demonstrated through the case of major infrastructural projects in Serbia's second-largest city.

The NSWP illustrates how the transformation of post-industrial spaces into high-value urban developments is directly related to the erosion of democracy under autocratic rule. It highlights corruption, deepening socio-spatial inequalities, disregarding community needs, and undermining democratic urban planning practices, as well as institutional manipulation and violations of environmental regulations, which are all related to the broader erosion of democratic governance. The legitimisation of projects such as the NSWP relies on dual discourses: the devaluation of socialist-era spaces and narratives of Europeanisation. By framing socialist infrastructure as neglected, unsafe, and obsolete, the regime has created a rhetorical foundation for its autocratic spatial interventions. This discursive strategy also targets the opponents by associating them with the previous government, accusing them of neglecting the infrastructure and failing to

modernize it. Simultaneously, the regime employs the narrative of Europeanisation to position such projects as aligning with European standards. These intertwined discourses not only justify controversial projects but also serve as political tools for consolidating the regime's power and discrediting its opponents. However, these interventions have also catalysed the rise of social movements, uniting opposition forces to challenge autocratisation at the local and national levels. Autocratisation-driven urban transformation, thus, accelerates democratic erosion within cities, but also serves as a powerful catalyst for the consolidation of democratic resistance and resilience.

Attempts to maintain a democratic façade through legitimisation, appeals to European standards, keeping but bypassing democratic planning procedures, and controlling expert bodies vividly illustrate the third wave of autocratisation in urban settings. The argument developed here is that spatial transformations in countries undergoing autocratisation need to be viewed as political processes. Understanding how cities and their infrastructures are mobilised as political tools in the process of autocratisation and its reversal is a crucial topic for urban studies and has yet to be fully explored. However, this approach should be seen as complementary, not alternative, to existing frameworks focused on neoliberalism. It does not dismiss the economic context but redirects the attention to the political realm that enables it—a realm that has become increasingly important as autocratisation intensifies.

This article suggests that, contrary to prevailing assumptions about the deregulation of urban planning under neoliberalism—which emphasises the expanding role of private actors—the development of major urban infrastructure projects in Serbia is predominantly driven by an autocratising state. Violations of democratic procedures, institutional control, project promotion and its use for political purposes, and the targeting of opponents all point to greater, rather than lesser, state involvement in infrastructural transformation. Considering the recent case of the railway station canopy collapse in Novi Sad, which had the potential to escalate into one of the largest and most serious protests against the autocratic government in Serbia, it becomes clear that urban infrastructure must receive more—if not central—attention in research on autocratisation and the possibility of its reversal.

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Conflict of Interests

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Urban Planning in the Context of Democratic Backsliding: The Case of Hungary

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Abstract

This article explores the potential and limitations of integrated urban planning (IUP)—a key concept in the spatial planning paradigm of the European Union (EU)—in the context of democratic backsliding in contemporary Hungary. Following the country's democratic transition from 1989/1990, which included the establishment of local governments with extensive mandates, among others, in urban planning, IUP emerged as a planning paradigm related to Hungary's EU accession in 2004. However, since 2010, significant democratic backsliding, including a decrease in local autonomy, has affected urban planning in Hungary. This article reveals how trends associated with democratic backsliding challenge the principles of IUP and, drawing on a survey and semi-structured interviews with urban planning practitioners, explores their impact on IUP in practice. The analysis identifies key factors influencing the implementation of IUP principles in this context, including reduced local political and economic autonomy, inadequate local government funding, the rise of individual bargaining in urban development, and non-negotiated top-down project allocation. While the findings are based on empirical evidence from Hungary, they may provide valuable insights into identifying risk factors concerning IUP in other contexts as well.

Keywords

autocratisation; democratic backsliding; Hungary; integrated urban planning; local development; local governments; urban planning practice

1. Introduction

Democratic backsliding (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021) fundamentally alters the political, social, and economic context of urban planning, which is highly contingent on such contexts (S. Fainstein & Novy, 2023; Metzger

et al., 2014; Tsenkova, 2014). This article aims to identify specific factors through which democratic backsliding affects urban planning practices, particularly integrated urban planning (IUP).

In Hungary, the contextual factors of urban planning have undergone significant changes in recent decades. The fall of state socialism in 1989/1990 brought about a substantial shift, including the reintroduction of a plural democracy, a market economy, and the establishment of a highly fragmented system of local governments with a wide range of autonomy, including in urban planning. Related to the country's EU accession in 2004, with the increasing role of EU funding in urban development, a new planning approach became increasingly embedded in Hungarian urban planning: IUP, the strategic planning-based spatial planning paradigm of the EU, with key principles including a vision-based approach that engages all relevant aspects, interests, and actors, as well as the integration of planned interventions across policy areas, government levels, and also spatially and temporally (Albrechts, 2006; Holden, 2012; Kotzebue, 2016).

Since 2010, the landslide election victory of the right-wing Fidesz party, under the successive governments of its leader Viktor Orbán, the political, economic, and social context of urban planning in Hungary has undergone further changes. Significant democratic backsliding began, with the European Parliament declaring in 2022 that, due to the breakdown of democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights, Hungary can no longer be considered a democracy but rather a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy (European Parliament, 2022). Analyses differ in terms of the conceptual framework applied to the current Hungarian political system. Besides the concept used in the cited European Parliament report, other concepts include autocracy (without any adjectives; Kornai, 2015), externally constrained hybrid regime (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018), simulated democracy (Lengyel & Ilonszki, 2010), populist democracy (Pappas, 2014), illiberal populism (Kukovič & Just, 2022), diffusely defective democracy (Bogaards, 2018), authoritarian state capitalism (Scheiring, 2021), and autocratic legalism (Scheppele, 2018). Despite conceptual debates, the main trends of a transition from liberal democracy to an increasingly authoritarian system can be clearly defined. These include an institutional structure that favours government forces and significantly reduces the probability of a democratic change of government (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018); concentration of power with the prime minister as the sole power centre; the political capture of various social sub-spheres, with the prime minister and government forces asserting control over the extraction and distribution of resources (M. Csanádi, 2022); legislative backsliding (Sebők et al., 2023); lack of separation between the legislative and executive branches of government; weakening of institutions designed to protect the rule of law; restrictions imposed on freedom of expression and association—including political attacks against NGOs; the development of feudal-style relations between the state and economic actors; and reduced political and financial autonomy of local governments (Kornai, 2015).

Our research aimed to explore the impact of democratic backsliding on urban planning practice in Hungary, with specific regard to IUP. In doing so, we highlight the systemic factors that shape recent urban development projects, which often fail to respond to local needs or consider the local social, economic, and environmental contexts. Examples include mass housing and office constructions that disregard the local socio-spatial fabric and architectural heritage, and fail to provide a balanced functional mix and sustainable mobility options; tourism and housing projects in protected natural areas that damage the environment and restrict locals' access to natural resources; oversized sports facilities the maintenance of which strain municipal budgets; and expensive tourism investments in economically deprived areas where more socially targeted public interventions would be needed (see Olt et al., 2024).

While cross-national analyses concerning the development of planning systems involving Hungary are available (Nadin et al., 2021; Nedović-Budić, 2001), their spatial and temporal scope is broader, and they do not focus on country-specific underlying factors. Additionally, a systematic analysis of the impact of democratic backsliding on urban planning, specifically on IUP, which remains a key concept in the spatial planning paradigm in the EU (Čamprag, 2024), is lacking. Through such an analysis, we hope to shed light on some key risks that an increasingly centralised and authoritarian context poses to IUP. Given the current global political trends, with several countries experiencing democratic backsliding, this may provide useful input for the analysis of urban planning and the identification of factors that pose challenges to IUP in other local contexts as well.

This article begins with a critical overview of IUP from a planning theory perspective, based on the notion that although it is at the core of EU spatial development policies, its theoretical foundations are rarely discussed. It presents IUP as the key urban planning paradigm of the EU and its principles, which serve as the theoretical basis for the empirical analysis. It then reviews the major changes in Hungary since 2010 that have influenced urban planning and discusses how these developments challenge the core principles of IUP. This is followed by an analysis of urban planning practices based on quantitative and qualitative empirical research, including a survey and a series of semi-structured interviews with urban planning professionals conducted between 2021 and 2023. In its conclusion, the article identifies the key factors hindering the application of IUP principles in the context of democratic backsliding in Hungary.

2. IUP From a Planning Theory Perspective

2.1. The Roots of IUP in Planning Theory

IUP is considered by planning theory to be a response to contemporary urban challenges resulting from major global trends (Albrechts, 2006; Suvák, 2010). These include significant societal transformations such as the globalisation of the economy and culture, the weakening of nation-states and representative democracy, the transformation of traditional social structures, and the increasing influence of social movements. Further transformations posing fundamental challenges to urban planning include the impacts of climate change, shifts in production processes—including the rise of innovation and flexibility that intensifies competition among localities—and technological advancements, particularly in information and transport technology, which also necessitate an urban planning response. Within the EU, urban planning must also address the simultaneous objectives of reducing socio-spatial disparities, enhancing economic competitiveness, and ensuring environmental sustainability, while the emphasis on place quality and the tension between local/regional identities and supranational integration add further specific challenges. In this context, instead of regulatory, bureaucratic planning systems—which find multifactorial, rapidly occurring changes difficult to follow and tend to try to reduce rather than manage complexity—a more strategic, development and implementation-driven approach has emerged, based on the premise that complex problems in a changing, complex environment require coordinated, integrated responses (Kotzebue, 2016).

The so-called new planning paradigm, emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s, brought about a shift from a top-down to a bottom-up planning approach, grasped by various concepts, including communicative, participative, transactive, deliberative, and collaborative planning (Anaafo & Appiah Takyi, 2021).

Strategic planning, which originated in the corporate sector, began influencing urban planning in the 1960s and 1970s in response to socio-economic changes. Western European and North American countries adopted this model to better navigate dynamic external conditions and uncertain futures. Its influence declined in the 1980s due to neoliberalism and postmodern scepticism towards planning (Albrechts, 2006; S. S. Fainstein & Fainstein, 1997) but re-emerged in the context of urban regeneration projects around the millennium, designed to respond to rapid, fragmented, and chaotic urban changes.

The principles of IUP can also be linked to the planning theory literature on community participation. A detailed discussion of the extensive literature on this topic is beyond the scope of this literature review; however, it is important to highlight that public participation as a relevant exercise in urban planning is derived from a changed recognition of the nature of urban planning in several important aspects: (1) urban planning is an inherently power-related activity embedded in power relations and has a significant impact on the distribution of advantages and disadvantages (Albrechts, 2003; Flyvbjerg & Flyvbjerg, 1998; Forester, 1989); (2) no single, clearly definable public interest exists that could guide planning decisions; (3) relevant interests and values are diverse—there is no single key player who, based on specific expertise or political position, is aware of all of them and can incorporate them into planning; (4) there are many sources and forms of knowledge and experience relevant to planning, all of which are legitimate; and (5) instruments of representative democracy alone are insufficient to channel all relevant interests, values, knowledge, and experiences into the planning process, necessitating the application of other mechanisms too.

2.2. Definition and Key Principles of IUP

There is no single definition of integrated urban development planning. According to the literature (Albrechts, 2006; Holden, 2012; Kotzebue, 2016), IUP is a spatial-social process that is guided by a vision concerning a given territory; aims to identify actions and tools to achieve it; focuses on a defined (limited) number of strategic areas; is transformative; is preferably driven by the public sector; identifies and engages key aspects, interests, and actors (both public and private) and may reinforce and override existing power relations; is integrated horizontally (across policy areas and departments), vertically (between levels of government, organisations, and policy actors), spatially, and temporally; and considers power structures, uncertainty, and competing values. Furthermore, an important feature of IUP is that it is a circular process from planning to implementation, monitoring, feedback, and the corresponding reiteration of plans. We use the above key principles of IUP as the theoretical framework for our empirical analysis.

2.3. IUP as an EU Planning Paradigm

Theoretical debates concerning IUP include questions regarding the novelty of the approach, its presentation as a purely procedural framework without making explicit its embedded normative values concerning sustainable development, social equity, and economic competitiveness, the weakness of its theoretical foundations, and the lack of research on its effectiveness (Allmendinger, 2009; Holden, 2012; Sandin, 2020).

Notwithstanding such critiques, IUP has become a key concept in the spatial development policy of the EU since the 1990s (Nadin et al., 2021; Pastor-Seller et al., 2023) and continues to serve as a guiding approach to urban planning. A detailed analysis of EU norms, rules, and regulations concerning IUP is beyond the

scope of the present article. Key source documents include the 1999 European Spatial Development Perspective, which provides the first high-level recognition of IUP, describing integrated spatial development with the sectoral, spatial, horizontal, and vertical cooperation of actors as key to fulfilling the aims outlined in the document (Committee on Spatial Development, 1999). Details of IUP as a planning approach were elaborated in the Leipzig Charter in 2007 (Territorial Agenda 2030, 2007), which includes the consideration of all relevant concerns and interests, the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, a vision-based approach, and coordination between spatial, sectoral, and temporal aspects of urban policies. The Charter also recommended that European cities develop integrated urban development programmes for their territories. It also was influential in the formation of the Urban Agenda for the EU, launched in 2016, which, referring to the Charter, confirms an integrated approach to urban development as its guiding principle (Urban Agenda for the EU, 2016). More recently, the New Leipzig Charter, adopted in 2020, reaffirmed the integrated approach as a key principle of good urban governance and the need for cities to establish integrated and sustainable urban development strategies as a response to newly emerging global challenges (Germany's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2020). The Territorial Agenda for 2030, referring to the New Leipzig Charter, called for the development and implementation of integrated place-based strategies, with cooperation across sectors, levels of government and governance, and engaging local communities (Territorial Agenda 2030, 2020).

Spatial planning remains within the competence of national states in the EU. However, the management of shared visions concerning sustainable development, social and economic cohesion, and the need for transparency and coherence among national administrations and planning procedures connected to the management of EU (co)funding for spatial development to achieve such visions requires common concepts and planning procedures. Therefore, such concepts and procedures, outlined in the aforementioned documents, were added to or merged with existing national planning systems (Maier, 2012).

3. Key Post-2010 Changes in Hungary Affecting Urban Planning and Resulting Challenges to IUP Principles

3.1. Decreasing Local Autonomy

A significant shift in Hungary's urban planning landscape after 2010 involved changes to the mandates and funding of local governments. Following the end of state socialism in 1989/1990, a decentralised local government system was introduced, granting each settlement, regardless of its size, the right to form its own government. This "one-municipality-one-government" principle aimed to establish local autonomy after decades of centralisation. Local governments were entrusted with wide-ranging responsibilities, including authority over urban development, spatial planning, public services, public administration, and local economic development (Országgyűlés, 1990). Despite its ambitions, the system faced criticism early on. One key issue was the mismatch between the broad responsibilities assigned and the often-limited capacity of small municipalities, many of which lacked the necessary financial and administrative resources. There were also shortcomings in institutional frameworks for spatial coordination and regional planning. Another persistent concern was the inadequate funding of local governments. Debates centred on whether local authorities received sufficient resources to fulfil their duties, and the degree of their financial autonomy, with the related issue of the balance between earmarked funds and those freely distributable. Furthermore, questions arose regarding the central government's role in mitigating disparities between municipalities in

different socio-economic positions, and consequently, differing revenue collection potential, through the redistribution of locally collected revenues (Hegedüs & Péteri, 2015; Kákai & Kovács, 2023).

After 2010, the Hungarian government initiated significant centralisation in public service provision, including education, healthcare, and public administration. Many responsibilities were transferred from local governments to deconcentrated state bodies, diminishing the role of locally elected leadership (Pálné Kovács, 2021). This deprived local governments of competencies relevant to strategic urban planning and increased their dependence on the central administration. In the context of decreasing mandates, state funding to the local government sector declined. A major change occurred in 2013 when the long-standing system of normative, population-based subsidies was replaced by task-based funding (Hegedüs & Péteri, 2015). Central subsidies often fail to cover the full costs of mandatory services, forcing local governments to allocate their discretionary funds to the provision of such services. Parallel to this, the influence of individual bargaining in local governance and development funding increased (Hegedüs & Péteri, 2015). These developments have weakened local autonomy and are viewed as a key aspect of Hungary's democratic backsliding (Kornai, 2015).

3.2. Changing Power Relations Between the Political Power Centre and Economic Actors

Concerning economic framework conditions, a major shift involved the transformation of the range of domestic and international key economic actors, partly in line with the government's explicit political goal of strengthening a loyal "national capital class" (Scheiring, 2021), and partly related to its endeavour to establish closer ties with and acquire development funding from non-EU countries, notably China. These developments were accompanied by an expansion of project-based and politically driven, "recombinant" redistribution of resources (Czibere et al., 2017). The state also reasserted its central role in spatial development, particularly through large-scale public investments. Such an increased centralisation of economic control and restructuring of power dynamics between political and economic actors are considered key features of Hungary's democratic backsliding (Scheiring, 2021).

3.3. Changes in the Urban Planning System: EU Convergence With Legal Inconsistencies

The fall of state socialism in 1989/1990 brought extensive political and economic changes that necessitated the reform of Hungary's urban planning system, mirroring broader trends in post-socialist countries (Nadin et al., 2021; Tsenkova, 2007, 2014). In the early 1990s, strong scepticism towards planning emerged, as a reaction to the previous era's centrally planned economy (Maier, 2012; Nedović-Budić, 2001). Simultaneously, global trends necessitating the reconsideration of planning (Albrechts, 2003; Suvák, 2010; Tsenkova, 2014) and the influence of EU policy paradigms—amplified by Hungary's EU accession process—began to shape planning practice. Elements of IUP, such as public participation, were increasingly introduced, and strategic approaches to planning appeared in select localities (Kőszeghy & Ongjerth, 2009). IUP principles were first formally required for EU co-financing of urban rehabilitation and were later integrated into the planning system during the 2010s (Magyarország Kormánya, 2012). Such a shift towards the increased significance of strategically based, multisectoral, multiactor development planning marked a major change in a planning culture with strong traditions of physical planning perceived as a professional, technical exercise, lack of embeddedness of public participation and spatial coordination, long-standing practices of resource-driven planning (G. Csanádi, Csizmady, Kocsis, et al., 2010; Gébert & Bajmóczy, 2017;

Kőszeghy, 2010) and a conformative planning system characterised by pre-assigned land-use rights via binding—and upon requests related to new development initiatives, amended—general plans (Berisha et al., 2021).

Despite extensive political and economic transformations after 2010 and legislative changes in urban planning, IUP formally continues to serve as the urban planning paradigm in Hungary. Major legal changes include Government Decree 314/2012 (Magyarország Kormánya, 2012) which legally introduced IUP to the national planning system by requiring the elaboration of integrated settlement development strategies; Act No. XXXIX of 2021 (Országgyűlés, 2021) and the associated Government Decree 419/2021 (Magyarország Kormánya, 2021), which streamlined the set of planning documents to two, one for development and one for construction/zoning regulation; and Act No. C of 2023 (Országgyűlés, 2023), which aims to consolidate Hungary's legal framework for urban planning and construction (see Hoffman, 2018). According to Act No. C of 2023 (Országgyűlés, 2023, § 80), municipalities are required to create a development plan that is "integrated, strategic, and territorially based." This legal provision also makes explicit references to further principles of IUP as substantial requirements for such plans, such as a vision-based approach, the formulation of strategic development goals and operative measures to achieve them, the concentration of interventions in predefined action areas, and the spatial and temporal coordination of objectives and interventions.

While the legislative framework in Hungary continues to recognise IUP as the paradigm for urban planning, notable inconsistencies have emerged in the relevant legislation with the revised regulation of "priority investments," a legal instrument that significantly impacts local governments' planning autonomy. Originally introduced in 2006 (Országgyűlés, 2006), the concept aimed to accelerate EU cohesion fund absorption and facilitate large-scale, job-creating investments by designating them as "investments of priority national economic importance." These projects benefited from simplified administrative procedures but were criticised from the outset, among others, due to loosened rules on public participation. Subsequent legal reforms broadened the scope of eligible investments. Today, any project involving EU or national funds can be designated a priority investment, including investments in national security, energy, education, culture, healthcare, social services, ecclesiastical buildings, national memorials, and brownfield redevelopment. Crucially, these investments are not obliged to comply with with local development and zoning plans. This provision, in practice, allows investments that override local development and zoning plans without consultation with local authorities or any other local stakeholders. The centrality of this instrument in the current urban planning system is underscored by the fact that when a public referendum initiative aimed at repealing its legal basis was launched by opposition parties and NGOs, the government responded by pre-emptively revoking the relevant legislation and simultaneously transferring the legal instrument to the new Law on Construction, thereby preserving its applicability under a different legal framework (Országgyűlés, 2023; Átlátszó, 2025).

The re-emergence of the state as a central actor in local development may pose a risk in urban planning. In Hungary, many state-funded projects—including those labelled as "priority investments"—have been delayed or cancelled since 2022 to cut central budget spending (Építési és Közlekedési Miniszter, 2023). The rationale for these decisions lacks transparency: projects with clearer economic relevance were halted, while some sports and representative building projects have continued.

3.4. Measures Referring to Crises Further Limiting Local Autonomy

Due to the imbalance between operational costs and decreasing funding, as well as the uncertain availability of development resources, Hungarian municipalities have become increasingly dependent on mobilising their own revenues, particularly from local business taxes, to fulfil their responsibilities (Pálné Kovács, 2020). However, their financial autonomy has been further constrained in recent years by state interventions justified as crisis responses, such as those introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. These included bans on increasing or introducing local taxes, the abolition of tax reliefs, the halving of the local business tax for small and medium-sized enterprises, and the removal of the car tax. Additionally, there was an expansion in the number of municipalities obligated to pay a "solidarity contribution" to the central budget and an increase in the contribution required by those with higher revenue capacities. These measures have not only reduced municipal revenues but also significantly limited the proportion of non-earmarked funds in the budget of municipalities.

Moreover, in some cases, local revenue capacities were further undermined through the establishment of "special economic areas," where business taxes were redirected from municipal governments to county authorities. Though this measure, introduced in 2020, was discontinued in 2025, it was replaced by a new system whereby municipalities must transfer the growth in their business tax revenue (vis-à-vis 2024 levels) to a spatial development fund. This fund will be disbursed at the microregional level via a competitive tendering process, likely increasing the role of individual bargaining in resource distribution.

4. Hypotheses

Based on the analysis of post-2010 changes, we hypothesise as follows concerning their impact on the implementation of IUP principles:

> H: In the context of democratic backsliding, the strategic nature of urban planning and the implementation of key principles of IUP are limited.
>
> H1: The centralisation of service provision, including public administration functions, has introduced new coordination needs in urban planning, as state organisations tasked with former local government mandates have emerged among relevant actors. This alone would not compromise—only complicate—coordination, however, as IUP needs meaningful cooperation, it poses a risk in case of non-cooperation of such actors.
>
> H2: Due to decreased financial revenues, local governments face an increased need for external funding, both public and private. This undermines local governments' potential for urban planning responsive to local needs, as they must adapt to the preferences of external funding sources. This compromises the implementation of IUP, particularly as a process that identifies and engages key aspects, interests, and actors.
>
> H3: The increased role of individual bargaining between local governments and other actors concerning local development projects, alongside the practice of top-down project allocation using the legal instrument of "priority investments," is incompatible with several core principles of IUP,

including a vision-based approach, sectoral, spatial, and temporal integration, and effective public participation. According to certain analyses (M. Csanádi, 2022; Fazekas & Tóth, 2016), such a system opens up possibilities for corruption, however, as such a phenomenon could not be explored with the applied methodology, we will not deal with the presence, operation, and role of such practices.

5. Methodology

The analysis is based on quantitative, as well as qualitative data: a survey and semi-structured interviews conducted among planning professionals working in Hungary.

To gain a comprehensive view of urban planning experiences and opinions in Hungary, an online survey was conducted in 2023. The sample included urban planners registered with the Hungarian Chamber of Architects, municipal chief architects responsible for local urban planning, county chief architects overseeing municipal planning within the state administration, as well as professionals working in spatial planning companies and universities. The total sample frame consisted of 749 individuals, of whom 355 provided full or partial responses. Although the findings are not representative of the entire professional community, they are suitable for identifying opinion trends among Hungarian urban planning professionals.

To gain a more in-depth understanding of urban planning practice and to gather more thorough empirical material on the complex issues we intended to explore, 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2021 and 2023 with mayors, chief architects, urban planners, and other experts from diverse settlements differing in size, economic profile, and location.

The operationalisation of measuring the implementation of IUP principles was consulted with urban planning practitioners.

Concerning the survey results, quantitative analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS software. In respect of the qualitative empirical material from the semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis was performed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) through Atlas.Ti software. In the analysis, we applied pattern matching (Hak & Dul, 1999; Sinkovics, 2018; Trochim, 1989) to explore how current Hungarian urban planning practices align with key principles of IUP. This method involves the precise identification of patterns based on theory, the acquisition of observed patterns, and an attempt to match these. The theoretical patterns used were the principles of IUP identified in Section 2.

6. Impacts of Post-2010 Contextual Changes on Urban Planning Practice

6.1. Implementation of Key Principles of IUP

First, we examined practitioners' experiences concerning some key principles of IUP, referring to the definition provided in the literature (Albrechts, 2006; Holden, 2012; Kotzebue, 2016): (a) sectoral coordination and the coordination of "hard" (e.g., infrastructure) and "soft" interventions (e.g., interventions in education, development of employability, etc.) to explore the implementation of the principle of horizontal integration; (b) spatial and temporal coordination to explore the implementation of the principle of spatial and temporal integration; (c) vertical coordination to explore the implementation of the principle of

vertical integration; (d) the monitoring of implementation and feedback based on monitoring results, to explore whether the principle of IUP being a circular process from planning to implementation, monitoring, and feedback and the reiteration of plans based on such feedback, is applied.

According to the survey results, these principles are rather partly, then well implemented, however, principles vary in terms of the thoroughness of implementation (Figure 1). Principles embedded in administrative planning procedures—such as vertical, sectoral, and spatial coordination—are more thoroughly implemented, unless overridden by simplified "priority investment" regulations. In contrast, principles linked to funding mechanisms, such as coordinating "soft" and "hard" interventions and aligning interventions over time, are implemented less effectively. The most poorly implemented principle is the monitoring of project implementation, crucial for providing feedback for future planning processes and improving strategic alignment over time.

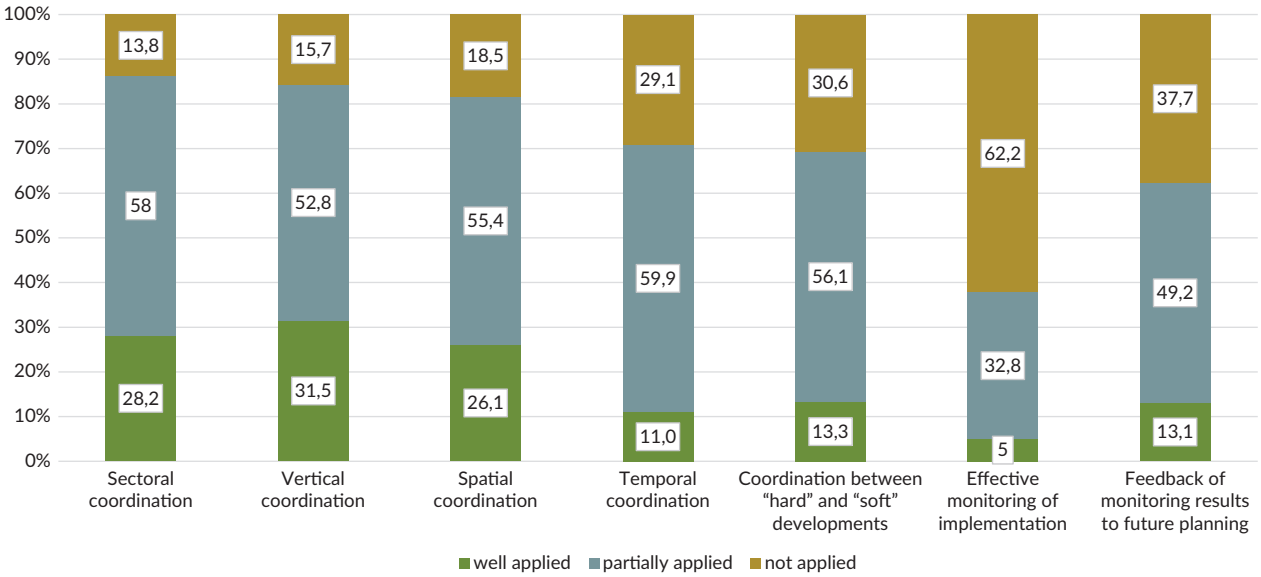

Figure 1. Practitioners' experiences regarding the application of key IUP principles. Notes: Respondents could indicate whether respective principles were "well applied," "partially applied," or "not applied" in planning practice, according to their experiences; number of valid responses: 178–184. Source: Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Sociology, 2023.

Interviews suggest that the partial implementation of IUP principles can be interpreted as a limited and inconsistent application, with specific difficulties stemming from the changing urban planning context since 2010. A key challenge lies in vertical and sectoral coordination, particularly between local governments and deconcentrated central government bodies. Interviewees highlighted frequent and unclear changes in task reallocation, resultant confusion about responsibilities, and inefficiencies, such as the slow or inadequate performance of deconcentrated bodies. In some cases, planning practitioners also reported the reluctance of deconcentrated bodies to cooperate:

> The responsibilities were so scattered that for a very long time, even those involved didn't know what their tasks and mandates were. (interview 41)

> They [the government office] are not making things easy for us. The building authority is obstructing us at every turn, and they expect us to comply perfectly with everything, even though I think it's almost impossible to achieve. (interview 31)

Interviewees identified limitations to spatial cooperation as an important problem. Limiting factors mentioned include the legal framework, which fails to incentivise cooperation among local governments, and the lack of clear mandates and effective coordination capacity at the middle level of public administration. Furthermore, individual bargaining in resource allocation appeared in interviewees as a factor which severely limits the motivation of local governments to cooperate, as they compete for available resources. Consequently, collaboration between local governments is often limited to the fulfilment of formal legal requirements, such as planning consultations, rather than meaningful engagement. Despite this, some cooperative efforts exist, particularly where shared problems, such as those concerning suburbanisation or tourism, encourage joint action:

> Everyone is trying at all costs to increase their own revenue sources, and from that point onward, it's quite difficult to reach any consensus on anything. (interview 14)

> We have a multi-purpose municipal association consisting of eight settlements, with our municipality serving as the centre. Unfortunately, due to the narrowing scope set by legislation, it is now only basic social tasks we now jointly handle. Nevertheless, this still provides such a strong cohesion among these eight settlements that it has manifested in broader cooperation, experience sharing…and even, in some cases, financial assistance over the past years. (interview 39)

Besides horizontal, vertical, spatial and temporal integration; and the application of the principle of IUP being a circular process from planning to implementation, as key principles of IUP, to test our hypotheses, we examined planning's ability to respond to local needs and the participation of stakeholders, referring to the literature's recognition of IUP as a process that identifies and engages key aspects, interests, and actors (Albrechts, 2006; Holden, 2012; Kotzebue, 2016).

6.2. Responsiveness to Local Needs

Survey results reveal a mixed picture regarding local needs vs. external influences in planning. Nearly two-thirds of respondents stated that plans often reflect local needs well, while one-third believed this occurs only occasionally. Concurrently, 60% noted that plans are frequently adjusted to satisfy external expectations, regardless of local needs. Resource dependency was also highlighted as a concern: nearly half of the respondents reported frequent adjustments of plans to available resources, and another half indicated this occurred occasionally. Overall, the findings point to the significant impact of external expectations and resource dependency on the responsiveness of planning to local needs (Figure 2).

Interview findings emphasise that resource scarcity and resulting resource dependency significantly shape planning. Plans are frequently created or adapted to match available funding opportunities, especially as tenders tend to support only a limited scope of interventions, rather than actual local needs. This often leads to misaligned development projects and inefficient resource utilisation:

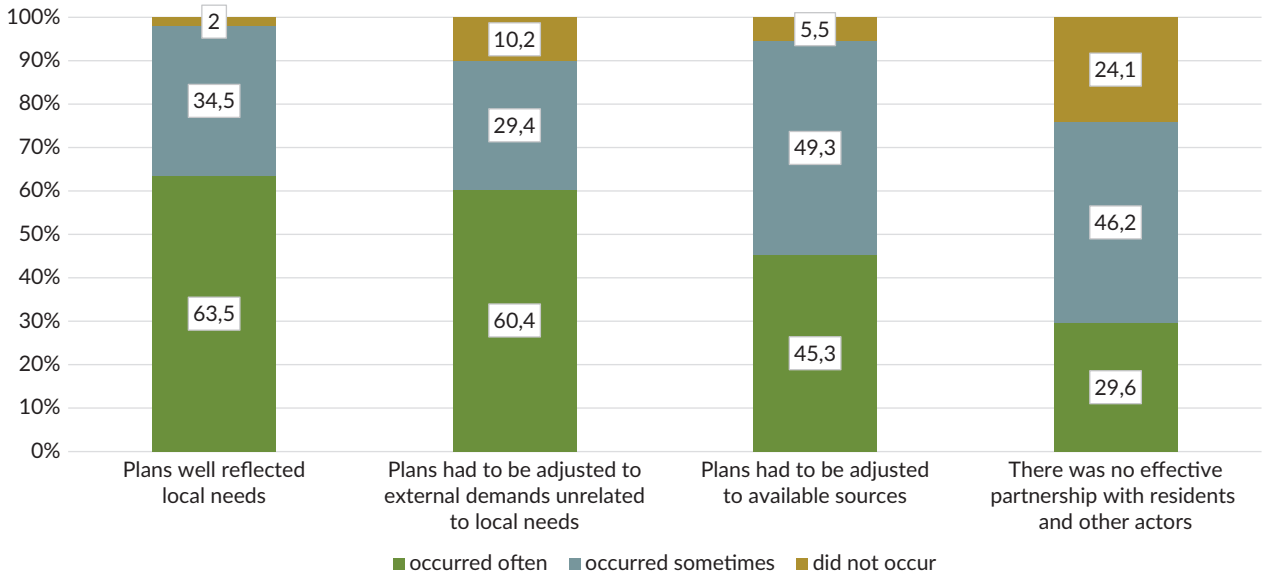

Figure 2. Practitioners' experiences concerning planning vs. local needs and partnership with residents. Note: Number of valid responses: 197–201. Source: Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Sociology, 2023.

> Either there is a deal behind it, or the state declares something like "this will come to this city"; things do not necessarily stem organically from local needs, or maybe this is the case in some localities, but not in others. (interview 37)

> Interviewer: "Is there any development that would be necessary but not included in the plans?" Interviewee: "If there are no resources available for it, then yes." (interview 3)

6.3. Public Participation

Nearly one-third (30%) of the survey respondents reported that effective partnership with residents frequently lacked according to their planning experiences, while nearly half of them reported that it sometimes lacked (Figure 2). In terms of difficulties of partnership, factors mentioned by respondents—both in the survey, and in the semi-structured interviews—were similar to those found in earlier studies on Hungarian urban planning (G. Csanádi, Csizmady, Kocsis, et al., 2010; G. Csanádi, Csizmady, & Kőszeghy, 2010; Kőszeghy & Ongjerth, 2009). These include attitudinal and knowledge-related factors, such as a lack of recognition of the importance of participation by local governments, local governments' fears concerning public participation, and low resident motivation, particularly in case of higher-level plans, as well as systemic issues, including difficulties in incorporating different types of knowledge and language, and lack of time for effective public participation. Additionally, several interviewees pointed out that with the increasing prevalence of individual bargaining and top-down project allocation, the group of actors excluded from decision-making has expanded. Notably, in some cases, the range of actors without access to decision-making on local development may include local governments themselves, besides local residents and NGOs:

> [With priority investment projects] they literally rewrote district building codes, overstepped the structural plans of [the city]… so they simply did not consider the intentions and will of the local

governments. They were not even consulted, so they were not even allowed to express their opinions. (interview 33)

6.4. Impact of "Priority Investments" on Local Planning

As contextual information suggested that "priority investments" were a key instrument limiting the strategic approach to planning, we explored practitioners' views on this issue. In the survey, we examined the impact of the legal instrument in six dimensions: its potential in responding to local needs, its impact on local government autonomy, on the development of the local economy, on solving social and transportation problems, and on the environmentally sustainable development of the given locality (Figure 3).

The overwhelming majority of planning practitioners view the legal instrument of "priority investments" as detrimental to local government autonomy, with 75% indicating a negative impact and only 4% considering it positive. Almost two-thirds of planners have a rather negative view of its impact on solving local social problems, and half of them assess its impact rather negatively concerning responsiveness to local needs and ecologically sustainable development. More favourable views appear in two areas: addressing local economic and transport problems. This relative positivity aligns with many projects classified as "priority investments" falling under economic development and transport infrastructure, alongside projects with less obvious relevance concerning their public benefit.

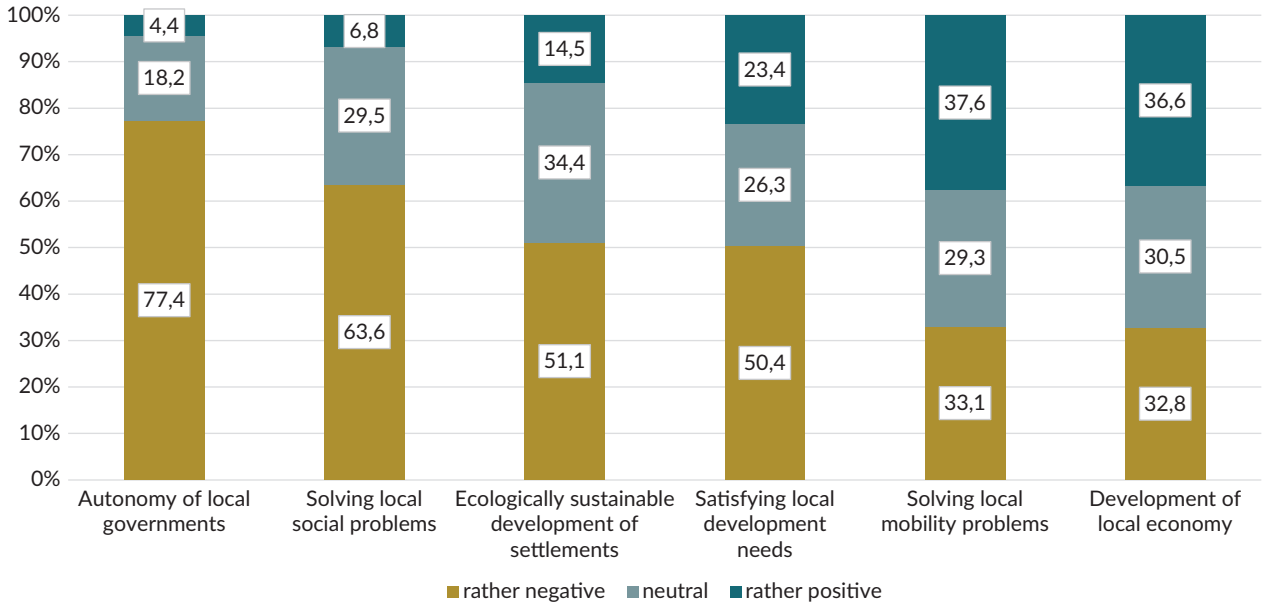

Figure 3. Practitioners' views on the impact of "priority investments." Note: Number of valid responses: 134–140. Source: Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Sociology, 2023.

The interviews identified the lack of stability in the regulatory framework as a further barrier to implementing a strategic approach to urban planning. Frequent changes to key legislation—covering urban planning, construction management, local government financing, and instruments like "priority investments"—often occur through "omnibus laws": single laws covering several, often unrelated topics, that are difficult to track, even for professionals. Moreover, such changes are typically made without meaningful consultation, offering stakeholders minimal time to comment or allowing them only to learn about new

legislation post facto, upon its immediate entry into force. This unpredictable environment undermines the utility of long-term strategic planning and discourages the use of resource-intensive planning processes. Interviewees noted that the Integrated Settlement Development Plan, a central document of IUP, has lost much of its relevance under these conditions. Still, some practitioners continue to view it as a helpful tool for identifying and guiding local development interventions.

Additionally, Hungary's economic instability—particularly the devaluation of the Hungarian Forint against the euro—adds uncertainty to urban planning, as planned interventions may become unfinanceable and require revision:

> Two days ago, I met a colleague from a different county, and he showed me a letter from the county government commissioner stating that a law had come into effect three weeks ago, but its implementation deadline is just one week away. (interview 35)

> We…decide to start developing industrial parks, but maybe the day after tomorrow Mr. Lázár [the Minister of Construction and Transport] changes his mind and says, "okay, from now on, the designation of industrial parks belongs to the state, as well as the revenue." (interview 11)

> In practice, the central money distribution system operates completely independently of integrated urban development strategies….In practice, the message is that these plans are not important. (interview 37)

6.5. Power Relations in Planning

To explore power relations in planning—recognising that urban planning is fundamentally embedded in power dynamics (Flyvbjerg & Flyvbjerg, 1998; Forester, 1989) and that IUP specifically acknowledges the need to consider power structures (Albrechts, 2003; Kotzebue, 2016)—we asked practitioners about the potential of various actors in urban planning to shape planning according to their preferences (being aware that this is only one aspect of how power manifests in planning; Figure 4).

According to the survey findings, local mayors—elected representatives in Hungary's local government system—are perceived as the most influential actors in urban planning. However, the influence of central government actors, such as the area's parliamentary representative, the sectoral minister, and the prime minister, closely follows, highlighting the constrained autonomy of local self-governance. Professional actors are viewed as having limited influence: only 43% of respondents believed that chief architects can significantly impact planning decisions, and just 34% said the same about planners. Additionally, neighbouring settlements were seen as having minimal ability to assert their interests, while residents and NGOs were also perceived as having limited influence.

Interviews confirm that mayors play a central role in shaping the local development agenda, often influenced by informal local power holders, such as prominent business owners. This key role is sometimes manifested by a local monarch-like perception and role performance:

> The governance of the settlements incredibly depends on the individuals in charge. (interview 37)

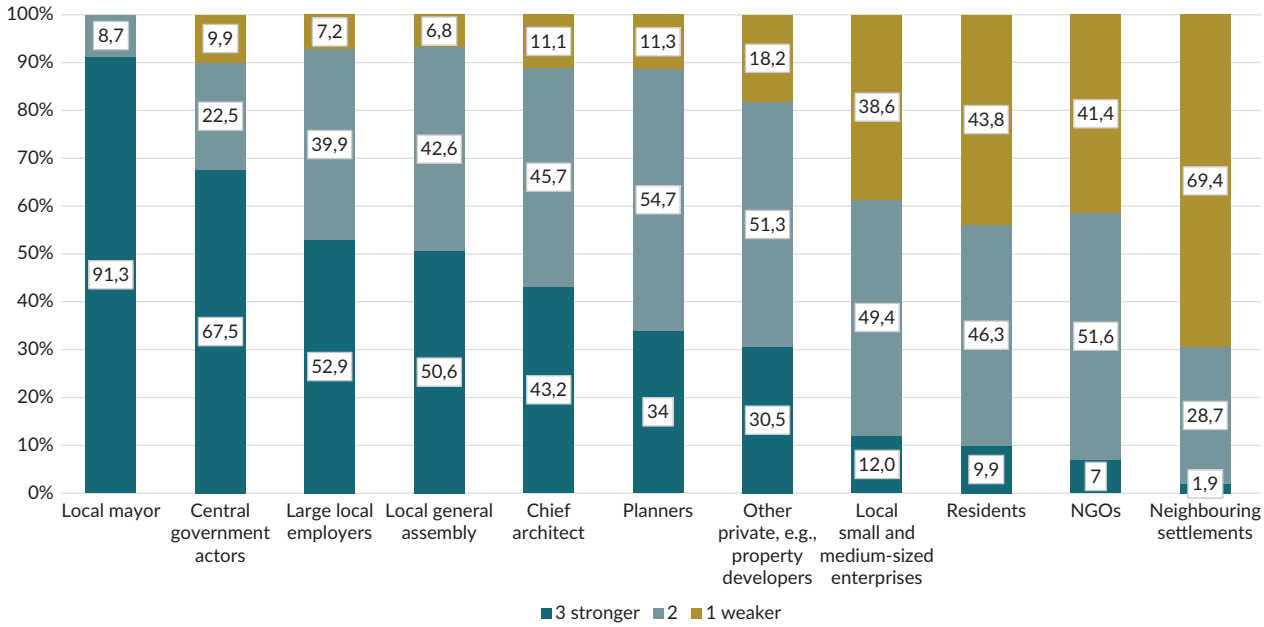

Figure 4. Practitioners' views on stronger and weaker actors in the planning system. Note: Number of valid responses: 158–168. Source: Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Sociology, 2023.

> The mayor…operates a cabinet, and within the cabinet, the [handling of] funding applications operates within the framework of a department or office. This naturally considers the often unwritten, but conceptually existing ideas of the city's leaders. (interview 16)

> The mayor believes that he should make all the decisions. He is the one who knows how things should be done, and who can secure funds through various tricks, political connections, and lobbying. He is the one who can leverage these resources, and everything else is just a technical issue—figuring out how to make something out of them. (interview 32)

The political affiliation of local mayors and parliamentary representatives significantly influences individual bargaining processes that shape local development opportunities. A change in political leadership often results in an immediate shift in a municipality's capacity to attract development funds, as observed in several municipalities, including the capital Budapest, where opposition party mayors replaced those from the ruling party in the 2019 local elections. Beyond party affiliation, local power dynamics also vary by settlement size, i.e., in larger cities, power tends to be more evenly distributed among stakeholders, allowing professionals and experts to exert greater influence in planning processes:

> So, basically, today, what the government says is: Look, I like you, you'll get 200 million forints to fix those five streets [or] I don't like you, you'll get nothing; let the residents come to you to complain. (interview 11)

> We maintain a very good relationship with the county leaders. Now, the government has decided to set up certain development funds that operate through the county, allowing us to apply for grants…. For example, we secured funding for a nursery from leftover funds….In this regard, they helped us significantly. We are truly grateful for this, and our Member of Parliament also supported us. (interview 38)

The limited role of professional actors was also emphasised:

> Professionals in a mayor's office are also in a completely vulnerable position. There is only one thing to do: serve local politics, and that's it. Zero, zero, so it's a very devalued role. (interview 32)

Interviews highlighted the significant influence of central government actors, including their capability to override local planning documents. Beyond the locally elected MP, practitioners cited interventions by the sectoral minister and in some cases, even the prime minister. These examples illustrate the high level of centralisation in the system and an exercise of power where political power dynamics between specific persons play a key role in decisions concerning localities:

> Very often, there is a hot-headed mayor or an MP who comes up with an idea like building the Eiffel Tower in the centre of [city X], you know? Or if not, then at least Disneyland or something similar, or let's construct Notre Dame, you know? (interview 32)

Such power relations are reflected by market actors often communicating directly with central government actors, as the strong players in local development, about their planned investments, while local governments may remain in the dark until they have no room for manoeuvre, e.g., when the project is labelled as a "priority investment":

> It's not that we didn't get to the [settlement development] contract [with investors]; we didn't even reach the negotiation stage. (interview 40)

To explore practitioners' preferred power structure, we asked about the potential influence of different actors in an "ideal planning system" (Figure 5). Results show that practitioners envision a power structure

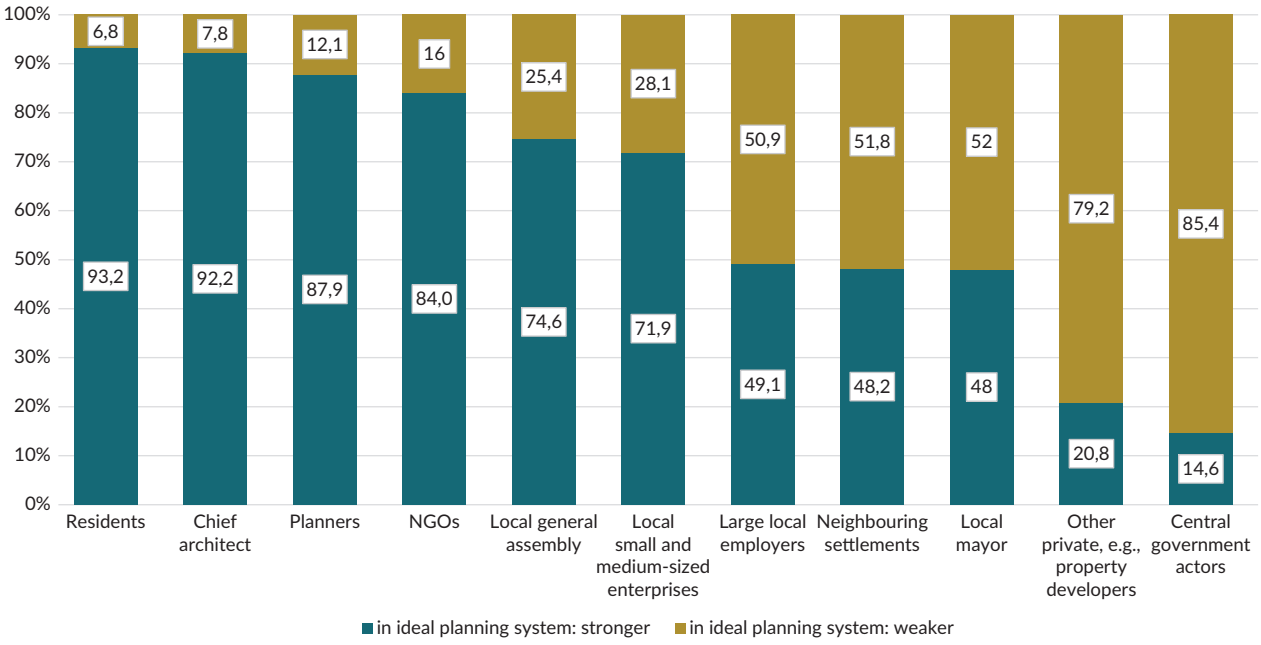

Figure 5. Practitioners' view: stronger and weaker stakeholders in an ideal planning system. Note: Number of valid responses: 113–146. Source: Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Sociology, 2023.

substantially different from the existing one. According to the survey, 85% would reduce the influence of central government actors in local planning, and nearly as many would curb the power of large economic actors, such as property developers. Meanwhile, practitioners would prefer a much more significant influence of local residents, NGOs, and professional actors such as local chief architects, the relevant local government department, planners, and other planning-related professionals. A similar proportion of practitioners also envisage a greater role for local general assemblies and small and medium-sized enterprises in urban planning. While the difference between the actual and ideal role is much less significant for local mayors, more than 50% of respondents would prefer to reduce their influence in urban planning.

7. Discussion

Our results identified specific factors through which democratic backsliding affects urban planning practice and limits integrated urban planning, underpinning the context-dependence of planning in Hungary (Albrechts, 2006).

Consequent to the centralisation and ongoing reorganisation of public administration, with the increasing role of deconcentrated bodies concerning the administrative affairs of local communities—factors contributing to the decreasing political autonomy of local governments, one of the components of democratic backsliding (Kornai, 2015)—the need for vertical and sectoral coordination in urban planning has increased, and non-cooperation of deconcentrated bodies, which some surveyed practitioners encountered in their practice, poses a difficulty as we hypothesised (H1). The empirical research identified additional challenges to implementing IUP principles arising from these changes. These include the unclear rationale behind task reallocation, ambiguities concerning the mandates of respective organisations, and the deconcentrated bodies' inability to perform or slow the execution of tasks transferred to them from local governments.

Empirical findings confirm that problems with local governments' funding, relating to both the level of funding and the underlying logic of local government financing, and the resulting exposure to external funding—factors contributing to the decreasing financial autonomy of local governments, another component of democratic backsliding (Hegedüs & Péteri, 2015; Kornai, 2015)—worsen the responsiveness of local development to local needs, as local governments have to adapt to the preferences of funders (H2). The most spectacular examples of this include state-initiated developments either based on bargaining between local actors and the central government, or carried out as interventions implemented in a top-down manner, and, especially in the case of local governments with poor access to public funding for local development due to political tensions between local and central governments, a strong need to adapt to market actors' preferences. At the same time, resource-driven planning is widely present in the planning practice.

The deterioration of local self-governance, as one of the key components of democratic backsliding (M. Csanádi, 2022; Kornai, 2015), is spectacularly expressed in the processes through which the emergence of individual bargaining (Hegedüs & Péteri, 2015), and the practice of top-down investment allocation through projects labelled as "priority investments," systematically and comprehensively undermine the implementation of IUP principles (H3). In the case of individual bargaining, the political affiliation of local mayors and MPs, along with their relationships with central government actors deciding on resources, are

key factors, overriding urban development considerations. Regarding participation, such practices may push local governments themselves outside the scope of participants involved in the planning procedure. The weakening of the position of local governments is reflected in market actors negotiating planned developments directly with central government actors in some cases, rather than with local governments, which may become aware of them only after the project allocation decision. In such an environment, the role of professionals is decreasing: planning documents developed according to IUP principles do not effectively guide local development due to a lack of resources and/or the uncertain planning context.

An important result of the empirical research, highly relevant due to its spatial development impact, is that the emergence of individual bargaining systematically reduces the motivation of local governments to engage in spatial coordination. Local governments compete for resources, and those who succeed tend to keep the resources they gain for themselves in a resource-poor environment. Although there are examples of cooperation between local governments—often between those with limited or no access to development resources, or where access to sources, especially EU funds, requires cooperation—in most cases, local governments pursue an individual rather than a cooperative strategy to access sources. This has a precedent in the state socialist era, when the state was the largest and most exclusive development force, leading local councils—the local level of state administration, in the absence of local self-governance—to compete for state development sources, with individual formal and informal bargaining mechanisms being a typical form of resource allocation (Vági, 1982).

In addition, the uncertainty of the planning context, characterised by frequent legislative changes, non-transparent legislative procedures, and, in some cases, ambiguous legal content, which reflects more general trends of legislative backsliding (Sebők et al., 2023), as part of democratic backsliding, emerges as a significant factor limiting the application of IUP. The increased role of the state in local development through state-funded interventions adds a specific economic component to the uncertainty of the planning context, as the state may decide to withdraw resources based on economic or political reasons. Within such a context, many interviewed practitioners consider the development of planning documents based on IUP principles to be irrelevant.

The analysis has focused on the implementation of procedural principles of IUP, with less emphasis on their implicit normative content. However, the available empirical findings suggest that limitations concerning the implementation of procedural IUP principles also restrict the articulation of its normative expectations, contributing to the ongoing debate in the literature regarding IUP's technical vs. normative nature (Holden, 2012). Based on the available empirical material, this could only be hypothesised; to examine this, focused research using other methods, such as case studies, would be required.

Finally, our analysis does not suggest that no context-specific factors had a potentially limiting impact on the implementation of IUP principles before 2010, nor that no other factors currently have an impact. However, the analysis aimed to identify the factors that emerged after 2010 related to democratic backsliding that impacted the implementation of IUP principles.

8. Conclusion

The analysis confirmed that democratic backsliding (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021), through various factors, systematically constrains the implementation of integrated urban planning, the key spatial planning paradigm in the EU (Nadin et al., 2021; Pastor-Seller et al., 2023), and identified specific factors of democratic backsliding with such an impact. These include the centralisation and ongoing reorganisation of public administration, which deprives actors responsible for local planning of mandates in policy areas relevant to local development; poor funding and lack of financial autonomy of local governments, which increases the resource dependency of planning; a comprehensive deterioration of local self-governance, which is expressed, among others, through the emergence of individual bargaining as a practice in local development and the limitation of local planning autonomy through non-negotiated top-down project allocation decisions; as well as non-transparent legislative procedures, and the insecurity and, sometimes, non-transparency of the legal context. The results also suggest that limitations concerning the implementation of the procedural principles of IUP negatively impact the articulation of its normative components, such as sustainability, social inclusion, and economic competitiveness; however, such results only allow the formulation of a hypothesis for further research.

Due to the highly context- and path-dependent nature of planning (Albrechts, 2006), factors limiting the implementation of integrated urban planning principles may vary, and may be significantly different in countries with a fundamentally different planning approach and traditions, such as in neo-performative planning systems (Berisha et al., 2021), planning systems with stronger public participation traditions, or stronger traditions concerning cooperation for joint interest articulation (Maier, 2012). However, experiences from Hungary may provide input for identifying risk factors concerning the implementation of IUP principles in other contexts as well.

Conducting empirical research on the implementation of abstract concepts in urban planning practice poses a challenging methodological issue. In this analysis, a combination of a survey and semi-structured interviews was used to enhance the validity and reliability of the results, but it remained difficult to grasp the highly complex issues we intended to explore. Therefore, further research, incorporating diverse methodologies such as case studies and discourse analysis, could substantially enhance, elaborate, or refine the results presented in this article.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Primary quantitative and qualitative data used in this article are stored in the secure cloud storage of the HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences and can be obtained from the authors upon request.

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this article, DeepL and ChatGPT were used for grammar and style improvement. The accuracy of the text was carefully checked by the authors. No other use of LLM models was involved.

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ARTICLE

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Precarious Settlement Upgrading and Racial Capitalism: Planning Authoritarianism and Its Crossroads for Democracy

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Abstract

A key critique of urban planning in postcolonial contexts is the persistence of Western/Eurocentric approaches that disregard the spatial production of Black and Indigenous populations as legitimate. In Brazil, despite shifts from authoritarian to democratic governments, racialised territories have consistently been subjected to state intervention. While policies have evolved—from deregulation and disinvestment to infrastructural investment—the underlying patterns of violence, dispossession, and undemocratic practices endure. This article explores the connection between Brazil's authoritarian urban planning history and the tenets of racial capitalism. Through a qualitative research synthesis, we examine scholarly literature focusing on the Growth Acceleration Programme on Urbanisation of Precarious Settlements (PAC-UAP) during the Workers' Party (PT) administration (2003–2016). Our aim is to (a) identify the conceptual and analytical approaches used by researchers, and (b) put these studies into dialogue with racial capitalism. By doing so, we unveil the inherent non-democratic tradition of planning in Brazil despite the implementation of a progressive policy. Furthermore, we point to the relevance of using racial capitalism as a lens to understand the causes of structural violence that remain in urban planning.

Keywords

authoritarianism; PAC-UAP; precarious settlement upgrading; racial capitalism

1. Introduction: Democratic Regimes, Authoritarian Planning?

Growing literature in Latin America (Gardella & Pinzón, 2023; Sadighian, 2023), Brazil (Brito et al., 2023; McDonald, 2021; Melgaço & Coelho, 2022; Paterniani, 2022; Tavolari, 2023), and beyond (Bates et al., 2018; Dantzler, 2021; Dorries & Harjo, 2020; Goetz et al., 2020) focuses on the intertwinement of urbanisation

and racial capitalism. Critical to the traditional class-centred perspective on urban development and inequality, studies have demonstrated the role of race and racism in urban processes. These studies not only recognise the historical legacy of colonial exploitation and economic dependency, but also the system that benefits from racial hierarchies as mechanisms of power and accumulation. For instance, in Latin America, precarious settlements and peripheral urban areas are predominantly inhabited by Black and Indigenous communities, yet the racialised nature of their exclusion is often overlooked in favour of broader socioeconomic analyses (Torino, 2024). Similarly, processes that often displace these communities, such as urban renewal, gentrification, and infrastructure development, are primarily explained through class-related theory. These explanations obscure the intersection of race and economic exploitation (Brito et al., 2023).

In this article, we join this critical arena by discussing how urban planning sustains authoritarian practices in seemingly democratic and progressive contexts, as well as how race plays a central role in sustaining this process. While engaging with critical race scholarship, we also bridge debates of critical urban planning, critical race studies, and racial capitalism. We employed qualitative research synthesis to analyse empirical studies published between 2016–2024 that addressed an investment policy within the Growth Acceleration Programme (PAC) called "Urbanização de Assentamentos Precários" (Urbanisation of Precarious Settlements) and here forth referred to as PAC-UAP. PAC was implemented during the progressive Workers' Party (PT, Partido dos Trabalhadores) government in Brazil that ranged from 2003 to 2016. PAC-UAP (2007–2016) specifically involved different levels of government and the private sector to provide large-scale infrastructure (including sanitation, housing, transport, energy, and water resources) to favelas or precarious urban settlements. As statistics show, those territories are mostly home to Black communities.

Qualitative research synthesis offers an interpretivist approach to reflect on the social and theoretical context of research, thus opening up data for further findings (Noblit & Hare, 1988, as cited in Major & Savin-Baden, 2012). In this case, this methodology is essential since, as expected, race did not feature as an analytical category in most of the papers, and the available racial data was also unexplored. By synthesising this body of work, we systematise the different mechanisms that further authoritarian patterns of intervention in these geographies, as observed in the original papers' empirical work. We also produce conceptual interpretations that, under a racial capitalism lens, help unveil the mechanisms through which racialisation serves capital accumulation. By doing so, we discuss the relevance of race and racism as analytical categories to critique interventions such as PAC-UAP, arguing that colourblindness hinders the progressive agenda of urban planning in Brazil and beyond.

The PT government foregrounded a series of advances in urbanisation management with, for example, the creation of the Ministry of Cities (in 2003). This ministry was responsible for implementing progressive urban policies, ranging from housing to mobility, sanitation, and participatory planning. PAC-UAP was enthusiastically received by housing activists, academics, and social movements because it was the first national policy to allocate substantial amounts of investment to historically disinvested areas (Denaldi & Cardoso, 2021). However, several problems in the PAC-UAP implementation have been criticised by urban scholars, including flawed participatory processes and non-democratic practices (Ferreira & Pereira, 2020; Moreira et al., 2020; Ximenes et al., 2023).

Our previous work (Melgaço & Coelho, 2022) has scrutinised PT's urban agenda, identifying colourblindness as a weak feature of urban planning initiatives that address spatial inequalities under progressive

governments. We delved into the history of the country and the myth of a racial democracy—the denial of racism—in the landscape of policy implementation. The multiple institutional levels and actors involved in enforcing federal policy programmes complicate the achievement of social justice goals. Local and regional institutions, responsible for implementing them, remain blind to race and racial inequalities. By synthesising and re-interpreting existing studies on PAC-UAP, we underscore "the relationship between ideology and planning policy and practice" (Shepherd, 2018, p. 494).

If investment in urban policy during PT's mandate highlighted the co-constitutive nature of planning and democracy to "counter entrenched social inequalities" (Caldeira & Holston, 2015, p. 2001), one must consider the sharp contrasts between this period and the one that followed President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment and Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 election. Bolsonaro's far-right government largely impacted urban policies and politics in the country. His government brought to light the traditionalist, racist, and elitist character of city-making, lurking in the small social gains provided in the first decades of the 2000s. Among many of the measures curbing social investment, the government extinguished the Ministry of Cities and reduced investment in programmes such as PAC. In other words, under Bolsonaro, we witnessed the use of morality to pursue policy deregulation and dismantling to satisfy international and national capitalist interests. Claiming to defend the interest of "the people," social policy beneficiaries, depicted as draining public resources, had their benefits slashed; historical rights of minority groups and Indigenous populations were reviewed; military and police spending increased with no matching investments in preventive measures (e.g., Milhorance, 2022). Urban policy shifted towards strengthening security forces, particularly in the territories where urban planning had previously been employed in response to social inequality. As Alves and Vargas (2020) discuss, Brazil's turn to the far-right is connected to its inherent anti-Blackness.

This turn is to be understood as a multiscalar process, pushing researchers to engage more deeply with "ideologically motivated planning reforms," given the close relationship between institutional changes in urban planning and national political ideologies (Davoudi et al., 2020, p. 31; see also Coşkun et al., 2024; Fearn & Davoudi, 2022; Shepherd, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2024). Several studies analyse how planning is used by autocratic regimes as an arm of the state to streamline swift development plans (Crot, 2013), implement master-planned urban megaprojects (Almqvist, 2024), or enforce labour control through spatial ordering (Nathan, 2023). However, within the putative democratic states, planning decisions have seldom been discussed under such a framework. In fact, planning has been regarded as a professional activity that "produces a public good of one kind or another" by safeguarding unequivocal social values (Yiftachel, 1998, p. 395). Therefore, urban planning has been at the centre stage in protecting democracy itself (Davoudi et al., 2020). Most cases of identified authoritarian practices have been seen as "states of exception" to otherwise democratic practices, rather than constitutive of them (Fearn & Davoudi, 2022).

If we concede that authoritarianism should not be confined to geographical and political representations of the state, then we must also closely consider how democratic governments and individuals may employ authoritarian practices and for what purposes (Koch, 2022; Luger, 2020). This feat requires us to overcome "an overly narrow definition of authoritarian practices (executive power grabs, direct police collusion, and limited political competition)" (Weaver & Prowse, 2020, p. 1177). Thus, we must also include "mundane state–society relations, operations and encounters" which produce spatialities and practices riddled with power (Luger, 2020, p. 3). This definition renders planning, as a "politics of place" (Fearn & Davoudi, 2022), with a central role in shaping such spatialities and enabling such practices, despite its recurrent attempts to

distance itself from the "messiness of the political" (Fearn & Davoudi, 2022, p. 351). Moreover, urban planning furthers the interests of elites throughout the whole autocratic-democratic spectrum. And regarding the production of space and the power relations it entails, race is central in defining "political subjects," "rights subjects," and what/who moves the political set to fulfil legitimated interests.

This article is organised as follows. In the next section, we discuss how racial capitalism has shaped postcolonial spaces and the consequences for furthering undemocratic processes, despite the implementation of democratic governments in the 2000s, with a closer look at the Brazilian case. We then present our use of qualitative research synthesis to identify four central mechanisms for understanding how racial capitalism underpins urban planning's authoritarian character, which is further discussed. Lastly, we conclude by discussing the importance of an urban research agenda that centres race as an essential analytical and policy category to address the racial reality of postcolonial cities.

2. Authoritarianism in the Production of Postcolonies: The Inherently Undemocratic Urban Formation Under Racial Capitalism

Race is often absent in the formulation of what is considered urban problems. When contemplated, it tends to be done from "one side of the color line," suggesting Black poverty, unemployment, or crime; thus leading, for example, to "public policy for *blacks*" (Brown et al., 2003, as cited in Goetz et al., 2020, p. 146, emphasis in original). Even more detached, urban inequality is portrayed as the "underclass problem," erasing race altogether, or at best, treating race as "experiences rather than central components shaping it [urban inequality]" (Dantzler, 2021, p. 113). In Latin America, the denial of racial segregation or the racialisation of urban processes is perpetuated by mestizo ideologies, which assume that racial mixing has erased societal divisions based on race (R. J. D. Oliveira, 2020; Torino, 2024). Nonetheless, the varying life experiences under democratic (racial) regimes have gained different spatial analogies, such as the colour-line by Du Bois (1994), zones of non-being by Fanon (2002), and necropolis or territories of death by Alves (2020). They all indicate that in racial regimes, democracy is a fallacious idea, given that these liberal regimes are sustained by racial oppression.

Such a critique gains special contours when discussing the Americas. Black and Indigenous scholars have long argued that liberal hegemony in these geographies meant equality among Whites (cf. Bertúlio, 2019; Dorries et al., 2022). Most of the countries on the continent *were made* independent by liberal revolutions that maintained racial slavery regimes and Indigenous peoples' servitude, while declaring equality for White male property owners (Wynter, 2003). In Latin America, even when the legacies of colonialism are recognised in producing space, such recognition fails to consider the undergirding racial logic in urbanisation (e.g., Mitchell-Walthour et al., 2022; Pereira, 2016). Furthermore, engaging with racism remains off-limits, often seen as unpatriotic, out of place (Torino, 2024), or secondary to socioeconomic aspects (Ruiz-Tagle & Aguilera, 2021). Lacking critical engagement with the entwinement of coloniality, democracy, and the legacies of colonialism, hegemonic models cannot address inequality and the colonial difference in these geographies to support a "democratic post-colonial perspective" (Ballestrin, 2015, p. 210; see also Banerjee, 2022). In these contexts, space retains an essential element to understand authoritarianism, for the uneven access to space is directly connected to the colonial past (Paolinelli et al., 2022) and racial regimes (Coelho, 2021). Indeed, emerging literature points to the racialised logics governing urban planning and its entanglement with the advancement of capitalism in the subcontinent (Gardella & Pinzón, 2023; McDonald, 2021).

Focusing on Brazil, authoritarian practices have been updated and are "naturalized in the country's social and political landscape" throughout different historical moments (Paolinelli et al., 2022, p. 282). The authoritarian continuity from the dictatorship to civil government was facilitated by the persistence of what Pinheiro calls "social(ly implemented) authoritarianism" (Alvarez et al., 2021, p. 312). In such case, the author argues, forms of violence, coercion, and exceptionalism are entrenched and continue beyond authoritarian periods, revealing an unresolved military past. The persistence of social(ly implemented) authoritarianism is affected by the intrinsic contradiction of the state, even when reproduced in the everyday and made visible through social relations. Three mechanisms sustain social(ly implemented) authoritarianism: racism, inequality, and state violence. Such authoritarianism is visible through, for example, unequal access to urbanisation in contiguous territories of large cities through both the action and inaction of the state (Alvarez et al. 2021).

In fact, looking at Brazil's urban planning history, what remains a constant is the reproduction of racially-segregated spaces (Melgaço & Coelho, 2022); protection and investment in White property (Paterniani, 2022); formation of White-segregated spaces that Jaime Amparo Alves calls "brancopia" (Alves, 2020); envisionment of a city that is "pure" and "clean" from unwanted inhabitants (Costa & Ribeiro, 2004; McDonald, 2021); and valorisation of exclusively White territories in the determination of the city quality (Brito et al., 2023). Both state and private actors actively benefit from the production of White space to increase land value:

> As an essential action for property development, spaces of Black sociability, which are in the path of the expansion of territories of white exclusivity, are destroyed and emptied, preparing the ground for territories and property products aligned with the urban norm, i.e., the ideal of the white city. (Brito et al., 2023, p. 36, our translation)

White segregation in Brazil guarantees "location vantages" for whiteness, i.e., the best location of work and housing (Brito et al., 2023). The devaluation of land and racialised processes producing land value are central to understanding racial capitalism's functioning (Dantzler, 2021).

Calling attention to the functioning of the racial regime and logics of racial capitalism in territorial control presupposes exposing what Harris (1993) defines as "whiteness as property." The author's theorisation underscores the shortcomings of the rule of law and equality, predicated by liberal regimes, in anti-Black and anti-Indigenous societies. In liberal hegemony, as she discusses, property is defined for the functioning of the racial regime and logics of racial capitalism, identifiable in territorial control (e.g., planning practices). Harris explains how "possession," the basis for rights to property, was defined to only consider cultural practices of Whites: "This definition [of possession] laid the foundation for the idea that whiteness—*that which whites alone possess*—is valuable and is property" (Harris, 1993, p. 1721, emphasis in the original).

Possession in this racialised definition becomes quite evident in the different value given to peoples and places through urban planning choices and practices in Brazil. The racialised regime is masked by modernity as an ideology at work in urban planning. This ideology blurs the political nature of how social problems are construed, often in tandem with broader civilisational projects that support progress (Escobar, 1997). Modernity is here understood within the decolonial tradition as a universal paradigm produced by "Eurocentered capitalist colonial power" restructuring power in capitalist and urban social relations (Quijano, 2007, p. 171), by allowing specific discursive and rule strategies to legitimise the colonial project (Boatcă,

2016). For decolonial scholars, modernity can only be understood as co-constitutive to coloniality, which simply put, relates to how power dynamics and social hierarchies (established during colonial times) continue to shape modern societies (Grosfoguel, 2008; Quijano, 2000). The historical invisibility of modernity's role in producing (post)colonial cities also exempts planning from its pivotal place in reproducing colonial relationships by means of "appropriation—of land, resources, culture, and ideas" (Cordova, 1994, p. 242). Thus, modernity as an ideological apparatus continues to legitimise the operation of planning, for it is based on "notions of private property and representative democracy" (Escobar, 2010, p. 5; see also Ballestrin, 2015; Koch, 2022; Paolinelli et al., 2022). By equating modernity to progress and development, throughout different historical periods and with various mechanisms, "planning innocence" remains seen as racially neutral and thus scrutinised from a class perspective (Melgaço & Coelho, 2022).

In the case of Brazil, as Villaça (1999) argued, progressive urbanists successfully politicised urban planning during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly by using master plans to highlight the competing interests and disputes among various societal sectors. However, this return to the master plan led to naturalising urban problems as a lack of planning, excusing political and economic sectors from their responsibility (Villaça, 1999). The City Statute (2001), a progressive law mandating participation in urban planning and recognising tenure rights for low-income informal land occupants, intensified urban tensions around the master plan. While designed to foster inclusion, its focus on participation failed to address the deeply rooted racial inequalities in access to urban resources. This failure inadvertently reinforced historically entrenched racialised regimes of democracy. The limit of progressive urbanism was its colourblindness. The implementation of the PAC-UAP in racialised territories illustrates the limit of intervention choices and the dangers of colourblind approaches to urban inequality in Brazil.

3. Research Design and Methodology

The research derives from two main enquiries. First, to understand what the analysis of a progressive policy implementation reveals regarding the inherent non-democratic tradition of planning in Brazil. Second, to investigate the relevance of using racial capitalism as a lens to understand the causes of the structural violence that remains in urban interventions implemented in precarious settlements. We resorted to qualitative research synthesis, a growing methodology in social sciences that enables conceptualisations and theories to be further developed through an interpretivist approach to prior studies (Drisko, 2020). This methodology allows for such "cross-studies interpretations" from the sampled material (Ulloa & Schwerer, 2024) to be produced from a different conceptual space. Analysing the large empirical work on the PAC-UAP implementation through racial capitalism as a theoretical lens revealed the racial silence in scholarly work. This discovery indicates the need for further studies to adopt race as an analytical category.

As our object of study, PAC-UAP offers a window to understand the premises of this research, since the programme provided the institutional and financial framework for rolling out the progressive agenda kickstarted by the City Statute. Importantly, it represented a change in the longstanding legacy of disinvestment in precarious settlements that contrasted with massive public investment in already consolidated residential areas. For the programme, precarious settlements were defined according to irregular land usage, poor infrastructure, occupation of environmentally risky areas, insufficient public services in general, and unsafe or unhealthy environments (Secretaria Nacional de Habitação, 2010). Within a broad framework, projects could seek national funding for a single or multiple aspects simultaneously.

When approved, the projects were implemented in coordination with various institutions but led by the local and state governments (Cardoso & Denaldi, 2018, p. 11). Furthermore, the programme guidelines required residents' participation from design to implementation to minimise evictions, as well as a focus on environmental and health improvements (including water, sanitation, and garbage collection; Secretaria Nacional de Habitação, 2010). The scale of interventions required a coordinated effort and solid municipal institutionality to guarantee completion. Up to 2017, PAC-UAP invested 29.6 billion BRL (5.3 billion USD) in 1,072 different cities across all federal states (Cardoso & Denaldi, 2018, p. 25). However, broad studies on implementation throughout the country reveal patterns of violence in connection with urban planning (Moreira et al., 2020).

The case selection encompassed papers published between 2016–2024. The timeframe delimited the sample size considering (a) the growing general interest in critical scholarship using race as an analytical tool over the last decade; (b) the increasing adoption of scholarly debates on Southern urbanism, decolonial planning, and settler colonialism in planning; and (c) a temporal distance from the initial launch of the programme to investigate concluded projects, offering a more consolidated analysis of the process. A systematic search was conducted with a combination of words in both Portuguese and English (including "PAC," "PAC-UAP," "favela upgrading," "urbanisation") in Brazilian databases (CAPES Periódicos and SciELO, with 13 results) and international databases (Scopus, Proquest, and Web of Science, with 8 results). To expand the results, a manual search was conducted on the highest-ranked Brazilian urban studies journals, leading to 13 new papers. To make sure we had achieved saturation—or a desired diversity and range of body of data (Strübing et al., 2018, as cited in Ulloa & Schwerer, 2024)—a final search was conducted in Google Scholar for both Portuguese and English. Of the 900 and 76 results (for Portuguese and English respectively), only the first 200 were considered. Initial results ranged from subjects such as education to health, social services, and urban violence. Furthermore, in most papers, PAC was mentioned only as a descriptive context and, therefore, excluded. The selection criteria in the first round included: case studies that specifically focused on PAC-UAP, the production of empirical data, and a focus on planning. This process yielded an initial selection of 47 papers.

In the second stage, we produced fact sheets of the papers, containing objectives, case city and macro-region, theoretical framework, whether race was a considered category, and the main aspects of PAC-UAP analysed (cf. Ulloa & Schwerer, 2024). Only one paper per author was considered to avoid inflating one's approach or positionality. Papers producing macro analysis of the programme's implementation in a region were excluded to privilege specific projects as case studies, with one exception: papers discussing cities in under-researched macro-regions of the country. Our initial goal to analyse papers representing all the five macro-regions in the country (North, North-East, South-East, South, and Centre-West) was not fulfilled, as no paper discussing the Centre-West region fit the exclusion criteria. Thirteen papers were selected at the final selection round. The final selection also showed an overrepresentation of cases in Rio de Janeiro (RJ; five in total) reflecting the large body of research and the scope of investment in the city.

The research followed a three-step process (as suggested in Major & Savin-Baden, 2012; Table 1 in the current article). Initially, eight overarching themes were identified as relevant to most of the papers (column 1). In the second stage, themes were synthesised into second-order themes through the analysis and comparison of the papers (column 2). These themes, individually, largely confirm an overall critique of precarious settlement upgrading projects. Finally, four third-order themes were defined after an

interpretative comparison and inductive analysis, using a racial capitalism analytical lens (column 3), which we further develop in the next section. Among the concerns of deploying this methodology are the flattening, decontextualisation, and oversimplification of data to achieve generalisations (Drisko, 2020; Major & Savin-Baden, 2012). In addition to creating factsheets that allowed researchers to access similar information, we also weighed the benefits of producing a systematic, in-depth analysis through the cases to avoid sweeping generalisations (as suggested by Ulloa & Schwerer, 2024).

The absence of racial data in the research, when contrasted with the large set of racial composition offered by the census, provides a strong base for discussion. The Black population living in favelas in 2022 within the analysed cities are (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2022): RJ (70.7%; papers 1, 2, 6, 8, and 10); Belém (78.49%; papers 3 and 12); Fortaleza (76.22%; paper 4); Belo Horizonte (78.53%; paper 5; Salvador (91.54%; paper 11); Curitiba (41.81%; paper 9); Florianópolis (53.52%; paper 13); Porto Alegre

Table 1. Cross-study analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of themes.

Overarching themes	Analytical and comparative themes	Conceptual interpretations
Participation (papers 2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11)	Elusive, flawed, or absent; Silencing of population; Selective participation	Racialised regimes of citizenship undermining democracy
Stakeholder interests (papers 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13)	Tourism; Increase in land value; Entrepreneurial governance	Racialised urban politics
Role of the state (papers 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13)	State as a facilitator of private interests; Faulty implementation and post-implementation maintenance; Violent state presence through police and the judiciary apparatus	
Modes of living and identity (papers 1, 2, 3, 5, 10)	Loss of community ties; Homogenisation of livelihoods; Disregard of cultural and economic specificities; Precarious settlements as "places of absence"	Modernity as a planning ideology at the service of racial capitalism
Project decisions vs. population needs (papers 2, 3, 4, 5, 8)	Inadequate typologies; Neglect of community's desires and needs; Intervention vs. material reality; Privilege of mobility infrastructure	
Technical discourse (papers 2, 3, 6, 9, 12)	Lack of collaboration as argument for delays; Technical jargon as argument for interventions; No democratisation of technical knowledge	
Evictions (papers 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12)	Evictions justified by technical arguments; Questionable eviction decisions; Violent approach to evictions	Dispossession as racial capitalism's modus operandi
Formalisation (papers 1, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11)	Violent relocation processes; Maintenance of precarious conditions; Abandonment of projects during or after completion; Economic repercussions	

Note: Papers analysed are (1) Vasconcelos and Duarte (2017); (2) Blasi Cunha (2018); (3) Castro and Lobato (2023); (4) Freitas (2016); (5) Libânio (2016); (6) Martins and Saavedra Farias (2019); (7) Menezes et al. (2017); (8) Sørbøe (2021); (9) Prestes and Zuquim (2023); (10) Rekow (2016); (11) A. A. A. Oliveira and Teixeira (2023); (12) Tavares and Cardoso (2023); and (13) Soares and Moraes (2019).

(47.07%; paper 7). These last three cities are in the South macro-region, where the population is predominantly White, thus, the over-representation of Blacks remains significant relative to their share of the total Black population (which is 23% on average). In Brazil, racial data are collected in five categories: White, Black, "Pardo," Yellow, and Indigenous. The "Pardo" category has historically been associated with Blackness, often referring to light-skinned Black individuals during the racial enslavement regime (Bertúlio, 1994). However, people with Indigenous ancestry, who do not meet the criteria for Indigenous identification (e.g., ties to Indigenous lands or languages), have often self-identified as "Pardo" (Silva, 2013). This propels the need for a regionalised, often localised, understanding of racialised spaces or communities. The Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) uses the Statute of Racial Equality definition of Black (*negro*) as the combined total of those who self-identify as either Black (*preto*) or "Pardo." In 2022, "Pardos" represent most of the population (45.3%), followed by Whites (43.5%), Blacks (*pretos*; 10.2%), Indigenous (0.8%), and Yellow (0.4%).

4. Using Racial Capitalism as an Analytical Lens (in the Absence of Racial Data)

The need to bring racial capitalism into the analysis of Brazilian urbanisation in general, and PAC-UAP in particular, is twofold. First, there is a continuum that compels us to look at the historical roots of state violence and authoritarian practices towards Black and Indigenous spatialities. Second, we cannot move forward without truly unpacking the logics behind the uneven ways that infrastructural projects, including PAC-UAP, have unfolded in racialised territorialities. One of our first assumptions about the systematic literature review was that race would be used as data, but not as an analytical category, which has been the tradition of urban studies in Brazil (Melgaço & Coelho, 2022; Paterniani, 2022). What came out of our analysis was much more dire: only three out of 47 papers initially selected mentioned the racial component of the territories under state intervention. Moreover, only one argued that racism was partly responsible for the violence and silencing of residents' voices (A. A. A. Oliveira & Teixeira, 2023), but without exploring the interrelation of race, capital, and urbanisation.

Most of the case studies focused on the concrete aspects of intervention and the impact of PAC-UAP on people's lives. A more comprehensive analysis of the programme must reflect on the underlying causes and structural processes that produce this uneven landscape. Considering the potential of qualitative research synthesis to reflect on how research is framed socially and conceptually for producing new findings (Noblit & Hare, 1988, as cited in Major & Savin-Baden, 2012), we briefly present the theoretical landscape used in the papers. With a few exceptions, most of the articles in the final analysis provided a descriptive approach. This approach privileged the concrete problems identified over an in-depth engagement with the conceptual framework presented.

The papers drew on two main scholarly productions. The first group includes established research projects evaluating PAC from a policy perspective, suggesting policy improvements and exploring best implementation practices at the local level, such as the work of Cardoso and Denaldi (2018; see also Denaldi & Cardoso, 2021). While policy-oriented frameworks provide a detailed understanding of specific interventions, they may limit the broader theoretical scope for a deeper exploration of urban processes. Expanding beyond this focus allows for a critical analysis of these urban processes, offering valuable insights into the larger context of urban planning and the conceptualisation of the city.

The second group includes work by progressive Brazilian urban scholars critical of capitalist and neoliberal urbanisation (e.g., Arantes et al., 2002; Bonduki, 2014; Rolnik, 2015; Vainer, 2003). Ermínia Maricato's work was the most cited reference. Not only is she a progressive and critical urbanist but was also the executive secretary of the Ministry of Cities during President Lula da Silva's first mandate. Recently, the author critiqued PT's shift towards a more market-oriented approach to urban policy (Maricato, 2017; Maricato & Cunha, 2022). The selection of these authors to develop a conceptual framework may partly explain the absence of a racial analysis in these studies. Most of this critical scholarship remains class-oriented, describing the root causes of authoritarian practices towards "the poor" as the inherent logics of capitalism. Even if this argument is correct, it remains incomplete. The colourblindness of the idea of the "poor" hinders analysis of the racial production of space. Paterniani (2022), for example, critiques narratives constructed by the political economy of urbanisation in Brazil that equalise "the worker" while concealing layers of racist formation of peoples and spaces.

Among international scholars, Harvey's work on the logics of urbanisation in relation to capitalism and the investment of surplus capital in the built environment was extensively used. This work includes a focus on spatial fixes, as a mechanism to recreate the need for urban redevelopment, as part of rational spatial organisation (Harvey, 2001). Questioning Harvey's colourblind approach, Dantzler invites urban scholars to reflect on "*who* may enact their individual and collective interests to generate surplus value" and "how such spatial fixes are predicated upon the (de)valuation of people and places" (Dantzler, 2021, p. 117, emphasis in original). These questions help us situate PAC-UAP design and implementation decisions in each city, while reflecting more broadly on the dynamics of racial capitalism in the urban space.

In Section 4, we focus on the conceptual interpretations resulting from the cross-study. Specifically, we discuss the possible implications of the absence of race, as both data and an analytical category, in PAC-UAP impact investigations. Thereby, we expose four of the mechanisms of racial capitalism at work in PAC-UAP: (a) the fallacy of democratic participation under racialised regimes of citizenship and its impact on racialised populations; (b) how urban politics further the interest of a White elite ready to fend for the maintenance of privilege through public investments and private property; (c) the persistence of modernity as an urban planning ideology to advance racial capitalism; and (d) dispossession as a central modus operandi of racial capitalism.

4.1. Participation in Racialised Regimes of Citizenship

Participation was an overarching theme across many of the papers. This was expected, given Brazil's leading position in participatory urban planning (e.g., Sintomer et al., 2008), the institutionalised demand of participation by the City Statute, and participation being a criterion for project approval within the PAC-UAP framework. Participatory planning practices are complex and require, according to Caldeira and Holston (2015), the joint effort and democratic inventiveness of different urban actors, including the justice system, different levels of government, and citizens.

The analysis of flawed (Blasi Cunha, 2018; Libânio, 2016; Vasconcelos & Duarte, 2017), decreasing (Martins & Saavedra Farias, 2019; Sørbøe, 2021), or inexistent (A. A. A. Oliveira & Teixeira, 2023; Rekow, 2016) participatory processes was central to the critique of PAC-UAP's implementation throughout. For example, Rekow's (2016) analysis of the intervention in Rocinha, RJ, focused on the elusive nature of participation as a concept. The author exposed that, while residents participated in the project design, they were not

consulted about decisions regarding eviction and the definition of risk areas. Interviews conducted by Blasi Cunha in Favela do Cantagalo, RJ, show inhabitants' frustration with the top-down approach to the design. As exposed by one of the interviewees: "The project came ready and now it's complicated for us to integrate into these committees and participate in this because the community will be really critical of the project, but it's already ready!" (Blasi Cunha, 2018, p. 132, our translation). The lack of participation was also evidenced in the silencing of the population during the "participatory forum," as they could not ask questions due to "time constraints." Similarly, Martins and Saavedra Farias (2019) detected the declining level of engagement with the population as the project advanced towards the urbanisation of 4th Street in Rocinha, the largest Favela in RJ.

These critiques align with scholarly work on the limits of participation in Brazil under growing neoliberal governance (Dagnino, 2004). Caldeira and Holston (2015) further the argument by pinpointing that participation is central to a new rationality that institutionalises democratic procedures in planning. However, under neoliberalism, participatory urban planning also institutionalises practices that ultimately hinder the implementation of social justice. Democracy plays a key role in "racial capitalist processes of spatial and social differentiation that truncate relationality for capital accumulation" (Melamed, 2015, p. 79), where the racial line determines who can be active political subjects in the participation processes of city planning.

Vargas and Alves (2010) demonstrate how Black people "experience state-sanctioned violence" in "racialised regimes of citizenship." For the authors, Blacks are excluded from substantive citizenship, and thus, unable to fully enjoy civil, political, and cultural rights, leading to "social and spatial confinement" (Vargas & Alves, 2010, p. 613). We understand the denial of being fully recognised as political subjects and rights subjects in participatory processes affecting their own communities as an example of racialised regimes of citizenship in action. Furthermore, the forced planning and implementation decisions, disguised as biased participation processes, reflect the persistence of racialised forms of urban politics at work for racial capitalism.

As Melamed (2015, p. 79) argues, racial capitalism relies on ideologies of democracy, nationalism, and multiculturalism to deactivate a "collectivity that might nurture greater social wholeness," for capital accumulation and state management. However, such lingering politics can only be evidenced when race becomes an analytical concept and racism is understood as foundational, rather than correlational, to urbanisation. Even though participation is demanded by the City Statute and PAC-UAP guidelines, they are mobilised to enable the prevalence of what we discuss below as racialised urban politics. Local and regional institutions are not yet designed to listen to all citizens equally. Forms of classed and racialised participation determine who is recognised as political, with the right to steer project goals and outcomes affecting their lives.

4.2. Racialised Urban Politics

The limited forms of community participation in the different stages of the projects also unveil the complex relations between the multi-layer of public and private actors. Looking at PAC's implementation in Rocinha, RJ, Sørbøe described how different interests and actors impacted the outputs of the intervention, not in the interest of the community. Being executed mostly by the state and private developers, "interventions were tweaked to also accommodate (a) the clientelist-opportunistic interests of powerful politicians, (b) the urban branding interests of the local governments, and (c) the profit-maximizing interests of the construction

companies" (Sørbøe, 2021, p. 140). Urban politics became evident in the papers discussing projects in RJ, given that PAC-UAP's implementation overlapped with the city's preparation for hosting two mega-events. The 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games complexified the city's general landscape of infrastructural work, while also subjecting favelas to larger interests connected to the events. In RJ, great emphasis was given to highly visible mobility infrastructure. For instance, the cable car (currently out of service) in Morro do Alemão was an investment of millions that caused massive evictions while the implementation of Units of Pacification Police (UPPs) served as a postcard for tourists and politicians (Blasi Cunha, 2018; Vasconcelos & Duarte, 2017). The events were used by the real estate industry as a window of opportunity to increase property value around the communities (Rekow, 2016). In other cases, such as in Maranguapinho, Fortaleza, mobility projects were also used to increase real estate value through both the provision of infrastructure for private car owners with a high number of evictions (Freitas, 2016).

The use of PAC-UAP for infrastructural investments that benefited actors outside the community unveils a specific kind of urban politics, which can be scrutinised under a racial capitalism lens. If, on the one hand, we observe broader racialised political economies that selectively remake the city, on the other, we observe a selective disrepair that disproportionately affects racialised communities. In Brazil, the experience of Black communities is marked by state violence through constant processes of intervention (redevelopment, evictions, clearance) and constant surveillance by violent policing with deadly results (Alves, 2020). A class-based perspective alone cannot uncover how policies are mobilised by elite groups, invested in protecting White property owners, and how public investment is used to increase their profit and property value.

This form of racialised urban politics evinces how, despite bringing much-needed investment, PAC-UAP has not dismantled the structures of racial capitalism. Instead, cyclical violence against Black people has manifested through urbanisation processes. Firstly, the legacy of colonialism and racial slavery in urbanisation processes (access to the city and property) has not been challenged or changed by progressive legislation (Melgaço & Coelho, 2022). Here, we must engage with and nuance Shepherd's (2018) remark that ideology is deeply implicated in policy and practice. The City Statute promotes a social justice-driven agenda aligned with PT's political agenda, which represented a great advancement in the country's urban policy. However, a progressive urban policy framework fails to dismantle the historical processes of racialisation that have shaped Brazilian planning practices and urbanisation. Local and regional institutions persist in perpetuating authoritarian planning practices. These practices have been normalised under the ideologies of capitalism, racism, and modernity, thus enabling powerful actors to continue operating as usual.

Caldeira and Holston (2015) discuss the ambiguity engrained in the City Statute that gave institutional legitimacy to different authoritarian forms of space production, mediating the state and ultra-neoliberal market (Franzoni, 2018). Flexible planning regulations in urban redevelopment and the institutionalisation of public–private partnerships allow continued processes of accumulation through dispossession (Rolnik, 2015), which as we discuss below, is racial capitalism's modus operandi. Such politics are made possible because racism still works to produce and naturalise dehumanisation, therefore impacting on the role of different actors in the racialisation of space. In Brazil, the lifestyle of Whites has been secured by containing Blacks in territories of death (Alves, 2020). This model has been sustained by the prevalence of modernity as the urban planning ideology. In order to disrupt the racist patterns of intervention, "a disruption of the racial ontologies of the human" is required (Ranganathan & Bonds, 2022, p. 203).

4.3. Modernity as the Urban Planning Ideology at Work for Racial Capitalism

The research synthesis also revealed an underlying disregard for the modes of living, as well as the kinds of sociability and collectivity of affected communities. Thus, the improvement of (material) living conditions was the main argument for intervention. The implementation of the elevator connecting the "favela and the asphalt" in Cantagalo, RJ, was depicted as a way to "unbreak" the city (Blasi Cunha, 2018), with underlying derogative tones. In Belém, in the Amazon region, research showed how the reallocation of communities, evicted by PAC's implementation, struggled to incorporate existing cultural and economic practices. Imposing apartment buildings with a monotonous typology negatively affected economic livelihoods and social relationships (Castro & Lobato, 2023).

The patterns of subjectification observed in the case studies are multifold, normalising state violence and the denial of autonomy through processes of homogenisation (Blasi Cunha, 2018; Vasconcelos & Duarte, 2017), while disregarding local needs in the name of technical expertise (Castro & Lobato, 2023; Prestes & Zuquim, 2023; Tavares & Cardoso, 2023). In Salvador, Oliveira and Teixeira (2023, p. 469, our translation) evidenced how the state treated those territories as places of absence, concluding that "the absence of both listening and participation is a determining factor in the inefficiency of certain actions developed by the State." Blasi Cunha (2018) identified conflicting perceptions between the state and residents regarding how space should be conceived and treated. For example, the state showed gross ignorance of the marked distinctions among communities constituting the Pavão–Pavãozinho–Cantagalo complex. The dreams of formalisation as a sign of progress are met by the residents with the difficult reality that the houses offered are unfit. As expressed by a resident in Taboquinha, Belém:

> People proudly say they live in an apartment….It is one on top of the other….If you ask me how many times the water tank was filled, I will say two or three times in eight years…how can I work like that? There is no water. (Castro & Lobato, 2023, p. 5957)

However, as already argued, privileging a class analysis shies away from the lingering political, juridical, and institutional structures of modernity on racialised groups. Modernity continues as a hegemonic planning ideology in Brazil (R. J. D. Oliveira, 2020), framing "unplanned" city growth as an urban problem that can be fixed with technical solutions. In a previous study, we discussed how planning in the postcolony furthers Black and Indigenous dispossession for White privilege by rendering political decisions technical, which we termed "planning innocence" (Melgaço & Coelho, 2022). Furthermore, we argued that this logic is perpetuated even in progressive governments' policies, which have inscribed social and spatial justice into their goals. Planning innocence perpetuates racialised spaces as spaces for intervention, using both technical and colourblind planning discourses. Moreover, the country has never faced spatial reparation processes regarding unequal access to the city.

As an ideology, modernity normalises privilege and inequality, underpinning both the perpetuation of White privilege and the broader process of Westernisation. Furthermore, modernity transforms socially constructed hierarchies into seemingly inherent and unchangeable realities. These realities emplace racial difference (Melamed, 2015; Melgaço & Coelho, 2022), thus updating and naturalising geographies of racism (Brito et al., 2023). Naturalisation coalesces in (a) urban planning curricula heavily interwoven with ideas of modernity; (b) the field's infatuation with the idea of civilisational progress; and (c) the implementation of

urban regulation that sustains the unique connection to enslavement as the economic foundation of the country, thus separating the "good" and the "evil" in urban space (da Cruz, 2022). This process enables racially conceived spaces by shaping perceptions and subjectivities, while marginalising Indigenous and colonised populations. These populations are positioned as outside history, thus devoid of cultural practices, thought patterns, and economic organisation (Bhandar, 2018). In planning, this process aligns with Bonnett's (2002) concept of "white urbanism," a phenomenon embedded in the fabric of cities that is enabled by the association of whiteness, modernity, and urbanism.

4.4. Dispossession as Modus Operandi

Discriminatory forms of "dispossession" operationalise (a) flawed processes of participation during evictions; (b) political investments in massive infrastructure that often fail to serve the communities and increase the eviction area; (c) disregard of the community's autonomy and livelihoods in resettlement projects; and (d) flawed recognition of tenure rights. Blasi Cunha (2018) observed how the discourse of development (which is one of the tenets of modernity) normalises dispossession. This is visible in the speech of the Subsecretary of Urbanism of the Construction Work Secretary, in RJ: "You don't make an omelette without breaking eggs. There is a need to open avenues, preserve water basin margins, and combat risk areas. This will lead to the demolition of houses" (Blasi Cunha, 2018, p. 128, our translation). In the metropolitan area of Curitiba, expropriation was even incentivised when not needed, given the availability of land for relocation in the area (Prestes & Zuquim, 2023).

The study of Belo Horizonte (Libânio, 2016) concluded that the city's policy was actually about slum clearance (*desfavelamento*), having chosen a massive mobility infrastructure with high numbers of evictions. The heavy use of the state apparatus to carry out evictions was also deemed as "legally dubious manoeuvres with operational teams that cut electricity, remove residents, and bulldoze neighbourhoods, sometimes with little to no warning," as a "tactic to validate evictions through the elimination of risk areas [and the] resettlement of residents" (Rekow, 2016, p. 11). In Belém, through a decree, the state government managed to extend the eviction zone proposed in the urban plan to include two other blocks for construction site support. Furthermore, the judicialisation of evictions was, as Tavares and Cardoso (2023) show, a way to guarantee the absolute defence of private property, while further stigmatising families occupying this property.

Displacement through the devaluation of racialised peoples and places, one of the key features of racial capitalism, proved to be a readily applied mechanism despite current urban legislation that requires minimum evictions. In theory, low-income people who have been living in informal areas for more than five years can claim ownership by acquisitive prescription (Article 9 of the City Statute). However, as the studies show, land or property titles are hardly ever granted (Libânio, 2016; Soares & Moraes, 2019). Additionally, property rights are not considered in the assessment of the value of people's homes for compensation or resettlement (Blasi Cunha, 2018; Rekow, 2016; Tavares & Cardoso, 2023). Furthermore, the heavy hand of the state in dispossessing, faltered in guaranteeing that service facilities were delivered on time and met communities' needs, as discussed in several of the texts.

Dispossession does not always mean removing people from their homes. It also encompasses actions that "involve the extraction of value (e.g., ghettoisation, movement of jobs and resources, devaluation of housing, neighbourhood disinvestment)" (Dantzler, 2021, p. 122). Several of the analysed papers have shown the

impact of PAC-UAP on (a) people's inability to maintain their sources of income or jobs (Tavares & Cardoso, 2023); (b) devaluing their homes due to the long duration and incomplete projects (Menezes et al., 2017); (c) deliberately abandoning demolition debris as a method of avoiding new occupants (A. A. A. Oliveira & Teixeira, 2023); (d) disinvesting after the completion of projects, including the disrepair of infrastructure, such as parks, libraries, or public service offices (Prestes & Zuquim, 2023; Sørbøe, 2021); and (e) making livelihoods unaffordable through regularisation and increased utility costs (Rekow, 2016).

We link dispossession as a modus operandi to debates on racialised regimes of property (Ranganathan & Bonds, 2022). A central feature raised by PAC-UAP implementation analysis is the disregard for people's sovereignty over their own homes. Specifically, this sovereignty includes the choice of where to live in cases of relocation, proper compensation for damage or relocation, and autonomy over their livelihoods. Vis-à-vis external decisions about local investments, there is little or no input from the community. The prevalence of capital interests, made visible by decisions that would benefit surrounding neighbourhoods or real estate agents (as in the case of the Units of Pacification Police), is an example of how racial capitalism has been at work to extract value from Black dispossession. Furthermore, this process can be historically traced to racial enslavement, with Black people depicted as "conceptually unable to legitimately create space, thereby leaving locations associated with Blackness open to the presumably 'rational' agendas of dominant spatial actors" (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019, p. 5). Black populations, then, serve as the "guarantor of capitalism's need to constantly find new spaces of accumulation" (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019, p. 12). Failing to engage with critical race theory or racial capitalism literature, along with the absence of racial data, has concealed these aspects of state violent intervention in racialised territories, which ultimately is the cause of the persistence of social injustices.

5. Conclusion

Motivated by this thematic issue, this article addresses the persistence of authoritarian planning practices under progressive policy programmes. At the same time, it discusses the challenges faced by critical planning scholarship to address such practices, given the historical privileging of a class perspective. This analysis responds to the growing need to understand the role of urban planning in furthering authoritarian practices (cf. Fearn & Davoudi, 2022). In this article, we propose that such interest must be accompanied with an awareness of racial capitalism's role in current subjugations and dispossessions of racialised populations and, therefore, the different forms of white urbanism.

Using qualitative research synthesis, we provided a snapshot of the research landscape on favela upgrading projects in Brazilian cities. By using racial capitalism as a lens, we underscored the centrality of race in the patterns of both authoritarianism and violence on Black territories. These processes evidence how putative democratic structures enable unending cycles of dispossession and displacement, being an "inherent feature of racial capitalism," which "rest[s] upon a detachment of people from place and resources" (Dantzler, 2021, p. 122). Through the methodology, we further elaborated on the four conceptual interpretations that mark the entwinement of planning and racial capitalism: participation in racialised regimes of citizenship; racialised urban politics; modernity as constitutive of racialised planning; and dispossession as racial capitalism's modus operandi. In conclusion, we highlight how such mechanisms are co-dependent on one another, providing the context, tools, and justification for the persistence of racial lines in urban planning, even in progressive policy landscapes.

In Brazil, local and regional institutions continue to reproduce authoritarian planning practices, normalised under ideologies of capitalism, racism, and modernity. If citizenship is not full in racialised regimes, participation acts as a legitimator of violent dispossession processes. The interventions disregard Black people's spatialities and sparsely recognise the legitimacy of possession. This trend validates Harris' (1993) thesis that possession only becomes property in the presence of "white customs." While we believe that we could clearly position how PAC-UAP reinforces authoritarian practices under a racial capitalism framework, we are not able to extrapolate the extent of the White benefit from the apparatus in place. We must advance research in a direction that allows us to overcome formulating (urban) problems from "one side of the color line" (Brown et al., 2003, as cited in Goetz et al., 2020).

PAC-UAP was just a small part of the investment pack under PAC. From a total of 1,761.4 trillion BRL (Nunes, 2018, p. 386) for different areas of infrastructure provision, PAC-UAP represented only 1.51% of the total investment. Therefore, using racial capitalism as a lens requires a relational analysis of the programs' impact in different areas of the city. Future analysis could encompass (a) Black and White territories; (b) the forms of participation implemented; (c) the association between the different urban actors; (d) the ideologies shaping both discourse and practice in formulating the issues at hand; and (e) how the solutions provided affect local people's livelihoods. Such an encompassing approach can illuminate the differential and unequal processes of how certain groups mobilise public investment to produce surplus value. Spatialised cross-territorial studies may provide a more accurate overview of how investment and disinvestment is being planned. Rather than solely focusing on marginalised communities, these studies could produce a more nuanced understanding of urban processes under racial capitalism.

Such an approach requires novel research questions in fields such as segregation, urban planning, and participatory planning research, while shedding light on racialised forms of property rights regimes. Scholars drawing on racism and race as an analytical category point to the limits of recognition of diversity (Williams & Steil, 2023), procedural reforms (Weaver & Prowse, 2020), and colourblind approaches to urban renewal (Brito et al., 2023). Keenly observed, effective democratic engagement can only be implemented when marginalised communities are at the centre of reparative practices that tackle racial and economic injustices (Stahl, 2023). Unequal access to urban resources (e.g., urban land), resulting from racial property regimes, continues to be a great challenge for urban planning under racial capitalism. The lesson that the Brazilian progressive urbanism experience provides is that colourblindness in such a context is harmful, and state interventions must face racially produced spatial inequalities.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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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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Conflict of Interests

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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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Democracy Otherwise: Learning From the South

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Abstract

More than 40 years of neoliberal globalization have led to a democratic deficit that necessitates urgent redress. *Democracy otherwise*—which is grounded in decoloniality and its accompanying epistemologies of the South—provides urban and regional planners with an opportunity to learn from the diverse democratic practices emerging in the Global South, practices that are deliberately delinked from the state and capitalism. One such example is found on communal landholdings in South Africa, where residents deploy multiple principles of legitimacy to foster an emplaced democracy. But given the entwined relationship between planning and the state, and the state's support of market rationalities, decoloniality urges us to question whether alternative democratic practices are possible beyond local settings. Findings presented in this article suggest that place dependency diminishes transferability and scalability. Nevertheless, herein lies the power of an otherwise democracy to counter coloniality, while keeping alive Derrida's "always to come" narrative, which challenges the liberal tradition of democracy as the only and most profitable outcome. This perspective enables planners to learn from the South—not to replicate its rich diversity, but to appreciate multiple democratic possibilities that acknowledge pluriversality, relationality, popular knowledges, local experiences, and situated worldviews, while nurturing "polities of difference" and "becoming in place," in tandem with "idioms of autonomy and community."

Keywords

coloniality; epistemologies of the South; liberal democracy; Rural Women's Movement

1. Introduction

Public trust in democratic governance structures is at historic lows (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022), while attacks on democratic institutions, coupled with increasing support for ethnonationalism and right-wing political parties, heighten concerns about a looming global anti-democratic

turn (Freedom House, 2021). But dwindling trust and attacks on democracy stem not only from right-wing nationalists; they also stem from a global political economy deliberately crafted to evade scrutiny from democratic institutions. Said differently, since at least the late 1980s, neoliberal globalization has been producing a democratic deficit because power is transferred from citizens to multinational corporations and private-sector entities that are not subject to direct democratic oversight (Purcell, 2009). To make matters worse, such transfers are supported by nation-states that subscribe to a market democracy (disguised as liberal democracy) and operate as if socio-economic and spatial inequalities can, and will, be corrected by the unfettered market (Azyyati Marzukhi, 2023).

Neoliberalism's ideological roots are found in classical liberalism, which "successfully universalized and hegemonized itself across the globe" (Hall, 2000, p. 228). Classical liberalism also seeded liberal notions of democracy that were (and continue to be) inclusive of capitalist ideals. Yet, as Stuart Hall (2000, p. 228) reminds us, "liberalism is not 'the culture that is beyond [other] cultures,' but [rather] the culture that won." Above all, liberalism is the culture that justified at least three centuries of European colonialism. But for decolonial scholars, colonialism is not a thing of the past. It "remains alive and well in the current structure of globalization" (Mignolo, 2000, p. 82; see also Connell, 2007), allowing Aníbal Quijano and Michael Ennis (2000) and Quijano (2007) to equate the contemporary neoliberal world order with the "coloniality of power." The deeply imbricated relationship between colonialism, liberalism, neoliberalism, and liberal democracy therefore necessitates a more nuanced understanding if "a democratic alternative not rooted in the liberal tradition" is sought to "challenge the foundations of the neoliberal project" (Purcell, 2009, p. 141).

By way of this article, I venture down the well-trodden path of neoliberalism's destructive outcomes; but I do so from the perspective of decoloniality—or an *otherwise* thinking—to demonstrate how the coloniality of power continues to jettison ways of practising democracy that do not accord with Euro-American market rationalities, regulations, and institutions. The planning literature on neoliberalism is extensive and my account represents a mere overview with undeniable omissions. Nevertheless, in the numerous criticisms of neoliberalism by planning scholars, the deep-seated logic of coloniality is often overlooked (Connell, 2007, 2014). Similarly, the legacy of colonialism tends to be ignored in theories of democracy; and these theories "do not travel well outside Western sites" (Banerjee, 2022, p. 283; see also Slater, 2002). This can be said even of, for example, John Rawls' and Jürgen Habermas' deliberative turn espoused in the late 1980s, or of Chantal Mouffe's (2005, 2008) more radical approach to democracy.

By contrast, "the decolonial turn is a turn towards different configurations of politics that contribute to worlds and politics *otherwise*" (Escobar, 2008, p. 132). *Democracy otherwise* is nestled in the decolonial turn that rejects the state and capitalism as sites for decolonial thinking. Yet, given the entwined relationship between planning and the state, "the state's structural dependence on capitalism" (Purcell, 2013, p. 20), and the state's role in establishing democratic institutions, decoloniality prompts us to ask whether alternative democratic planning activities are possible beyond activism in local settings. Findings presented in this article suggest that place-dependency diminishes transferability, the potential for scaling up, and universalized outcomes. Nevertheless, herein lies an otherwise democracy's power to counter coloniality while presenting planners with alternative democratic possibilities from the infinitely diverse South. However, "learning from the South," as argued by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2016a, p. 178), necessitates a willingness to "unlearn many self-evident ideas that were useful in the past but are not so anymore, and [a willingness] to learn about new ideas, some of which are altogether unfamiliar," such as "emplaced polities

of difference" and "becoming in place," along with "idioms of autonomy and community." Importantly, "the South" is neither a fixed, ubiquitous geography nor is it a stable power position (Bhan, 2019; Yiftachel & Mammon, 2022). Rather, "the South is a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level" (Santos, 2016b, p. 17). Santos also states that "there is a South because there was and still is a North" (p. 176). The South thus represents noncanonical practices that challenge the foundations of classical liberalism, neoliberalism, and liberal democracy (Ballestrin, 2015).

This article is structured into six sections. The first two sections revisit the overlapping relationships between colonialism, classical liberalism, neoliberalism, and liberal democracy. Section three considers some of the criticisms of liberal historiography and ideology, as argued by postcolonial scholars. It highlights their call for the production of knowledge from Southern locations and explains why this knowledge matters to the study of power and geopolitics. This section also includes important examples of alternative democratic practices that are found in the Global South and that decentre the state. However, where decoloniality diverges from postcolonial theory is in its explicit embrace of forms of knowledge production that exist in-themselves, of-themselves, and for-themselves (and not only for the purpose of "speaking back" to Eurocentrism). Local knowledge that responds to local problems and equips local planners to improve their practice is pivotal to decolonial thinking. Section four thus focuses on an *otherwise* conceptualization of democracy that is underpinned by Southern onto-epistemologies, while section five reveals an example of this found on communal landholdings in South Africa that fall under the custodianship of traditional leaders (namely kings, queens, and chiefs), but where residents deploy multiple principles of legitimacy to foster an emplaced democracy. The final section presents concluding reflections regarding context-specific democratic planning actions.

2. Briefly Revisiting the Philosophical Foundations of Classical Liberalism

Almost a century ago, Karl Polanyi (1944/2001, p. 146) observed that "the free-market [is] kept open by continuous, centrally organized, and controlled interventionism," even if laissez-faire ideologies espouse minimal state interference in the market. "Thus there exists an aidez-faire aspect [to capitalism] in which the state actively assists capital" while simultaneously "getting out of its way" (Purcell, 2009, p. 142). To counter capitalism's self-interests and attempts to separate itself from society, some form of state intervention (via regulations and social protectionism) is needed, which in turn embeds the market within societal control (Polanyi, 1944/2001). Herein lies Polanyi's (1944/2001, p. 146) famous "double movement" thesis between "a market society" and "a society with markets;" or between "the propensity of capitalist society to define and quantify social life in market terms," and the propensity of society to control forms of socio-economic exchange via direct democratic oversight. Polanyi (1944/2001, p. 147) concluded his double movement thesis by arguing that "planning" (in the broadest sense) enables "a society with markets," since planning encompasses "a collectivist reaction to the self-regulating market" and "a moral logic" to protect the public good. Indeed, "the rhetoric of serving the public good is central to the folklore of planning" (Campbell & Marshall, 2000, p. 306).

Polanyi's thesis spotlights the inherent tension between freedom and control found in liberalism, a tension identified by European economists and philosophers almost two centuries prior to Polanyi's writings (Winkler, 2011, 2012). This tension compelled Adam Smith (1776/1991), for example, to champion not only the idea of free markets in *The Wealth of Nations* but also the idea of "moral sentiments," which was penned

in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and which stipulated that "the private interests of men are desirable only when these interests [enhance] the interests of the whole society" (Smith, 1759/2000, p. 273). Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and David Ricardo espoused similar sentiments in their utilitarian forms of liberalism that sought to maximize the greatest happiness of the greatest numbers through freedom and self-restraint (Bentham, 1789/1948). And it is this line of thinking that allowed John Stuart Mill (1859/1982, p. 59) to make a case for "social interests," which are "different from self-interests." Distinctively, social interests encompass the moral obligations citizens demonstrate towards others for a collective good, which deliberately necessitates combining "liberty with discipline, and individuality with sociality" (Hamburger, 1999, p. 232).

Liberalism, with its roots in Western rationality, gained popularity during the (European) Enlightenment and remained a persistent political force for the better part of three centuries. It served to plant the seeds of Western democracy while justifying three centuries of European colonialism. Yet, from its earliest inception, it encompassed a tension between freedom (including minimal state control; the idea of a self-regulating market; and freedom for some, but slavery for others) and necessary correctives (including some form of state planning and regulatory oversight) to temper capitalism's self-interests. Navigating this tension has, however, proven to be classical liberalism's undoing. In the contemporary era of neoliberalism, concerns for social protectionism, social interests, self-restraint, and the idea of embedding the market within societal control are simply discarded, thereby confirming Polanyi's (1944/2001, p. 268) warning that capitalism's "double movement can destroy society."

3. Neoliberalism's Erosion of Democracy

Under the neoliberal rubric, the market is not controlled by the state. Instead, it has become the state's regulating and organizing directive, with the market (not the state) defining social life (Epstein, 2005). The state needs merely to ensure that monetary, fiscal, immigration, public infrastructure, etc. policies accord with market rationalities, thereby rendering state planning, from a Polanyian standpoint, irrelevant (Epstein, 2005) because "profit and expediency are the only criteria for policymaking" (Brown, 2003, p. 47).

The market-oriented ideals advocated by Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and others in the 1950s began to flourish from the late 1970s onwards, and with the demise of the Soviet Union a decade later, neoliberalism became the dominant global order (Mignolo, 2021). Concerns about developmentalism in the South—itself a problematic concept imposed by the North—quickly transformed into economic globalization and market democracy (disguised as liberal democracy; Mignolo, 2021). Neoliberal globalization has thus come to resemble a contemporary reincarnation of the violent processes of European colonialism (Chakrabarty, 2000; Connell, 2014; Quijano, 2007; Tully, 2008). It jettisons local economies of reciprocity, communal practices of living, and alternative ways of exercising democracy by exporting a Western version of democracy to the South—this version meaning little more than "a code word for [a country's] availability to market rationality" (Brown, 2003, p. 48)—while the South is held hostage by global powers unless it is willing to forgo trade agreements, international aid, and the like (Banerjee, 2022; Chakrabarty, 2000; Slater, 2002). The South is thus compelled to accept "an externally imposed logic that is conditioned by ethnocentric privilege" (or what might otherwise be referred to as white privilege; Slater, 2002, p. 257). Such was the case in South Africa during the early 1990s when the long-fought-for democracy came at an unanticipated price: a reduced focus on redistributive policies in favour of global economic competitiveness.

But what keeps a redistributive agenda alive in this context is the resolute pressure from social movements who use the courts and mobilized actions not only to fight for restorative justice but also to spearhead decolonial values of the *democratic commons* (which is an altogether different understanding of "the commons" than the one posited by Garrett Hardin in the 1960s). The case of the Rural Women's Movement (RWM), which is discussed later in the article, is an example of this resolute pressure.

Furthermore, neoliberalism requires individuals not only to behave like entrepreneurs in every sphere of life but also to become self-sufficient agents who are responsible for their welfare. Individuals thus shoulder all the responsibilities for and consequences of their actions, regardless of systemic inequalities and constraints, while the state reneges on its responsibilities towards them (Grange & Gunder, 2019). One outcome of this logic is the inescapable rise in global inequality alongside "the extraordinary concentration of wealth in the hands of an ever-shrinking global elite" (Klein & Morreo, 2019, p. 2), and "the greater the separation between rich and poor, the more implausible is the liberal democratic claim that all citizens are equally valued and carry an equal voice" (Purcell, 2009, p. 144). Another outcome is a citizenry that strategizes only for itself and not with others to challenge the status quo, since "a fully realized neoliberal citizen [is] the opposite of a public-minded [citizen]" (Brown, 2003, p. 43). The success of neoliberalism thus lies in its nefarious ability to obscure, distort, and depoliticize the idea of democracy, whilst eviscerating concerns for equality, fairness, environmental justice, and ethics of care (Grange & Gunder, 2019).

However, the neoliberal calculus does not culminate in a reduced state. Rather, the state needs to protect financial institutions at all costs (Harvey, 2009), as only the *aidez-faire* aspect of Polanyi's (1944/2001, p. 147) "double movement" remains relevant in the current world order. This *aidez-faire* role was first deployed in 1982 when Mexico was on the brink of bankruptcy, and when investment banks based in New York would have been ruined by Mexico's economic demise (Harvey, 2009). In response, the US Treasury and the IMF colluded to bail Mexico out with the proviso that austerity and "good governance" measures be implemented (Harvey, 2009). The financialization measures taken by governments to address the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007–2010 represent another example of state intervention (Klein & Morreo, 2019), thereby rendering democratic institutions "largely irrelevant, and at times even impediments, to neoliberal governmentality" (Brown, 2003, p. 49).

Notwithstanding liberalism's myth of equality, which is selectively allotted to some through undeniable processes of racism, and the fact that democracies in the North are sustained by exploiting the South, Wendy Brown (2003, p. 51) laments the "extent to which basic principles of liberal democracy are abandoned" under the neoliberal apparatus. And by abandoning classical liberalism's necessary correctives, we find ourselves:

> Not simply in the throes of a right-wing or conservative positioning within liberal democracy, but rather at the threshold of a different political formation, one that legitimates itself on different grounds from liberal democracy even [if] it does not divest itself of the name. (Brown, 2003, p. 56)

For Brown (2003), this threshold is worrying, as it signals the eventual demise of liberal democracy, while Walter Mignolo (2021, p. 732) goes one step further by forecasting the "collapse of Westernization" in light of the ever-growing global role of the intergovernmental BRICS coalition. This emerging role might, however, prove to be catastrophic for democratic goals and practices, since various nation-states within BRICS's

geopolitical orbit display regressive democratic track records. The search for credible alternatives then becomes more urgent than ever. Yet, many political theorists might be ill-equipped for this task, given their tendency to ignore the entangled connection between coloniality and liberal democracy (Escobar, 2007). Even Chantal Mouffe (2005, p. 32)—whose theory of democracy is mindful of pluralism and alternative modernities—maintains that "liberal democracy is not the enemy to be destroyed." Rather, principles of "liberty and equality for all [necessitate more] effective implementation" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 32). Earlier discussions suggest why a more "effective implementation" of liberal principles might be fruitless in stemming neoliberalism's dismantling of democracy. Mouffe's claim also retains "the primacy of the West as the ultimate standard against which to evaluate [all] other [imaginaries]" (Singh, 2019, p. 341).

4. The Search for Alternative Imaginaries Found in Postcolonial Scholarships

Alternative imaginaries have long been sought by postcolonial scholars who call for theories "from the margins" by centring the "politics of location" (Roy, 2015, p. 201). Still, the struggle to disrupt "liberal historiography"—that claims to "speak for all of society"—continues, while other histories are silenced (Chatterjee, 2013, p. 69). By way of an example of this silencing, Partha Chatterjee (2013) and David Slater (2002) demonstrate how the American and French Revolutions serve as foundational texts for democracy, while the Haitian Revolution (that also began in the late 18th century, and ignited the ending of the trans-Atlantic slave trade) is either relegated to a footnote on democracy or erased from history altogether due to the power of the Euro-American archive (see Trouillot, 1995, for an illuminating account of the Haitian Revolution). Subaltern and postcolonial studies challenge liberal historiography. They unmask the location of knowledge production (Robinson, 2005; Vegilò, 2021). And they aim to rectify the epistemological problem of Eurocentrism by paying attention to how histories of colonialism and imperialism continue to shape polities in different world regions (Roy, 2015). In doing so, they unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions about "the economy" and "the political" (Chakrabarty, 2000), while rejecting "universal grammars" (Mbembe, 2001) that "exclude, displace, and occlude other analytical directions which are vital to the study of power and geopolitics in a genuinely global, rather than Occidental, context" (Slater, 2002, p. 259).

This line of thinking prompts David Slater to explore Andean geographies of democratization for the purpose of expanding our perspectives on power and geopolitics because "much writing on democracy [remains] limited by universalist assumptions" (Slater, 2002, p. 256). What he discovers, which is unsurprising, is that "Western-style arrangements for democratic rule" and imposed "policies for 'good governance' " are failing to address increasing economic inequalities and socio-spatial injustices in Southern contexts (Slater, 2002, p. 257). In fact, these arrangements and policies are merely creating "a growing disillusionment with formal institutions" (Slater, 2002, p. 257). In response, residents are establishing "new networks of resistance" to counter "the neoliberal framing of order" through mobilized forms of "popular democracy" (Slater, 2002, pp. 258–260). Slater's "popular democracy," based on empirical research undertaken in Peru and Bolivia, corroborates James Holston's (1998, p. 53) findings from Brazil, where sectors of civil society are facilitating "spaces of insurgent citizenship" to dislodge modernity's "absorption of citizenship in a project of state-building." By resisting the state's interpretation of citizenship, and by claiming new political rights, such forms of insurgency are spearheading "alternative possible sources for participating in society" (Holston, 1998, p. 53). Gavin Shatkin (2011, p. 80) equally speaks of "other urbanisms at work" in cities of the Global South that "constitute alternative [political] regimes," which he terms "actually existing urbanisms."

Interestingly, Shatkin's research points not only to progressive or emancipatory urbanisms but also includes "drug gangs and other political manifestations of violence" founded on ethical values that are "sometimes morally ambiguous, or outright reprehensible" (Shatkin, 2011, p. 80). However, such urbanisms are indifferent to democratic principles and are therefore excluded from the discussion presented in this article.

What these studies have in common is that they do not accord with conventional political theory. They demonstrate the "existence of power centres outside the state," which "resist [neoliberal] worlding practices" (Shatkin, 2011, pp. 79–80). And they are shaped by "historical difference" in specific locations (Roy, 2015, pp. 201–202). Decentring the state, centring place, and acknowledging historical difference also serve as cornerstones for decolonial praxis, especially since context-specific dimensions are often excluded in modernity's dominant concerns for universality, progress, reason, and technological advancement (Escobar, 2007). To counter modernity's unidimensional and context-indifferent logic, decolonial scholars, like Arturo Escobar, draw on Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson's "politics of becoming in place" (Gibson-Graham, 2003), which emphasizes "emplacement" and "relational ontologies" as key to "becoming something other" than what the contemporary world order demands (Escobar, 2007, p. 200).

But where decolonial theory gradually departs from postcolonial theory is in its explicit embrace of knowledge in-itself, of-itself, and for-itself; and this knowledge is based on Indigenous onto-epistemologies. This departure is respectful because, from a decolonial standpoint, all modes of knowledge production are valid (Eze, 1997; Winkler, 2018, 2024). Decoloniality is therefore less focused on "seeing difference in repetition" or establishing "a method for interpreting the West" so that the Global South is empowered to "speak back to the West" (Roy, 2015, pp. 205–207). Nevertheless, an argument for knowledge in-, of-, and for-itself will inevitably fuel Allen Scott and Michael Storper's (2015, p. 10) criticism of postcolonial (and presumably decolonial) theory, which, in their opinion, denudes the possibility of establishing "a coherent concept of the city as the object of theoretical inquiry." For them, postcolonial theory simply creates "a new particularism," even if they go on to state that "particularism can often be a positive attribute of academic work" (Scott & Storper, 2015, p. 12). Yet, as they emphatically maintain, "there are systematic regularities in urban life that are susceptible to high-level theoretical generalization," and these systematic regularities (that ought to be applicable regardless of context or history) are absent in postcolonial (and decolonial) theory (Scott & Storper, 2015, p. 11). However, at this intellectual impasse I am reminded of John Friedmann's (2011, p. 133) assertion that "the purpose of theorizing is to improve the practice of planning," and to do this, "planners need to have a good understanding of the inner workings of city-forming processes before we impose on them a normative structure or talk of strategic intervention" (Friedmann, 2011, p. 139). This suggests the importance of establishing, in the first instance, explanatory and analytical frameworks, even if findings point to context-specific particularities. Situated particularities focus our attention on what is going on and why, and if local planning praxis needs to be improved without attempting to establish "high-level theoretical generalizations." Local solutions to local problems are desperately needed, especially in Southern contexts. *Democracy otherwise* is conceptualized as a means to explore alternative democratic practices, so that planners might, in the first instance, begin to understand, explain, and analyse some of the "inner workings" of alternative democratic practices before hoping to launch strategic interventions. Furthermore, and from a decolonial standpoint, any venture into the normative terrain of planning necessitates resident-driven processes and outcomes that, in turn, shape what *democracy otherwise* might mean in a situated context.

5. Principles That Inform an Otherwise Conceptualization

While *democracy otherwise* seeks to challenge Western framings of democracy as universally applicable, its overarching objective is to acknowledge, understand, and learn from alternative democratic practices that are delegitimized by coloniality. That said, it is not a framework geared towards the "outright rejection of Western notions of democracy" (Banerjee, 2022, p. 289). Rather, it allows disparate points of view to coexist by respecting and working with pluriversal (as opposed to universal) worldviews (Escobar, 2010, 2019a, 2019b). It also recognizes the fruitlessness of privileging the state as a site for otherwise thinking, since coloniality retains its stronghold on governments beholden to centres of global power (Escobar, 2010; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Decolonial (and postcolonial) scholars arrive at this conclusion by observing how nation-states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were, and remain, "governed by the same rationality that inscribed the colonial project" after gaining independence (Banerjee, 2022, p. 290). Here, power simply shifted to and remains within the clutches of local elites. Sites for alternative democratic practices are, instead, found in "multiple local forms of governance that avoid the pitfalls of contemporary liberal democracies" (Banerjee, 2022, p. 290). The task then for *democracy otherwise* is:

> A decentring of capitalism in the definition of the economy; [a decentring] of liberalism in the definition of society and the polity; and [a decentring] of the state as the defining matrix of social organization. This does not mean that capitalism, liberalism, and state forms cease to exist. *It means that their discursive and social centrality have been displaced somewhat*, so that the range of existing social experiences that are considered valid and credible alternatives to what exist is significantly enlarged. (Escobar, 2010, p. 12)

This range of existing, valid, and credible alternatives informs Boaventura de Sousa Santos' *epistemologies of the South* (Santos, 2003, 2016b). As an explanatory and analytical framework that operates not only at the intersection of theory and practice but also at the intersection of the Global North and the Global South, *epistemologies of the South* derive their validity from local struggles, local experiences, popular knowledges, and a "politics of difference" that is deliberately delinked from modernity's approach to politics and planning (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Such epistemologies also derive their validity from a form of epistemic disobedience that disrupts foregone conclusions about democracy and foregrounds autonomy from the state. For Escobar (2019b, p. 138), autonomy enables residents to exercise both self-determination and collective action, which he conceptualizes as "idioms of autonomy and community." These interwoven idioms, as Escobar (2019b, pp. 133–138) goes on to explain, "contribute to an explicit sense of politics" in contexts where "modes of living [are] based on relational interdependences with land and place," and where "Indigenous cosmovisions" inform praxis. Popular democracy, insurgent citizenship, and actually existing urbanisms—as envisaged by Slater, Holston, and Shatkin, respectively—equally encompass forms of autonomy from the state. However, these studies, while significant and relevant, stop short of delving deeper into the fluidity, volatility, and unpredictability of self-actualization and collective action. They also stop short of exploring the interwoven and relational nature between Indigenous knowledges and land/place. Moreover, Slater and Shatkin seem doubtful of the idea of generating knowledge that might be deemed "particular" (i.e., in-, of-, and for-itself). As an anthropologist, Holston is less hesitant about the validity of producing context-specific knowledge. It is also important to recognize that Escobar's idioms differ from John Stuart Mill's (1859/1982) liberal assertions for "individuality and sociality," as emplaced polities, and not capitalism's prosperity, is centred in decolonial thinking. By centring emplaced polities, an

otherwise framework makes use of Gibson and Graham's "politics of becoming in place" (Gibson-Graham, 2003), which is shaped by relational ontologies that emphasize attachments to land, the ancestors, and all animal and plant nations that are sustained by the land.

6. An Example of *Democracy Otherwise* in a Situated Context

In 2021, South Africans witnessed a landmark High Court case initiated by the Rural Women's Movement (RWM, the plaintiff) with support from the pro bono Legal Resources Centre. The defendants were the Ingonyama Trust and the South African state. What makes this case unique is that, for the first time in South Africa's history, a legal ruling was based on decolonial values that acknowledge residents' ontological relationality to the land that constitutes the *democratic commons*. To clarify, since 2012, representatives of the Ingonyama Trust (of which the Zulu king is the sole trustee) have been converting communal landholdings in KwaZulu-Natal (a province of South Africa) into leaseholds with the aim of extracting rents from residents. In response, the RWM based their affidavit on the fact that customary land rights (derived from decolonial values) preclude Western notions of absolute land ownership and that South Africa's traditional leaders (kings, queens, and chiefs) are mere custodians of the democratic commons (*The Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution and the KwaZulu-Natal Rural Women's Movement v. the Ingonyama Trust and the Ingonyama Trust Board*, 2021). The High Court judges thus ruled against the Ingonyama Trust, whose conduct was found to be unconstitutional because it undermined residents' customary land rights to live on and use communal landholdings without being charged a monetary value to do so (Manona & Kepe, 2023). They also ruled against the South African state, which was found to be negligent in protecting residents from the Ingonyama Trust's exploitative practices (Manona & Kepe, 2023).

Before exploring an example of co-sustaining polities of difference and becoming in place, alongside idioms of autonomy and community, it is important to note that the Ingonyama Trust Act was formulated by the Zulu king in collaboration with the Inkatha Freedom Party and the apartheid state. This Act was promulgated on the eve of the first democratic elections in 1994 (Manona & Kepe, 2023). The Inkatha Freedom Party—which, at the time, held majority support in KwaZulu-Natal—threatened to withdraw from the national elections, thereby placing the incoming African National Congress (ANC) in a precarious position that ultimately resulted in it "turning a blind eye" to the nefarious collusions between the Inkatha Freedom Party and the National Party (which was the political party in power during the apartheid era). The Ingonyama Trust Act thus constitutes one of the several land reforms implemented between 1991 and 1994 by the outgoing apartheid state which explicitly targeted communal landholdings and state-owned land for the purpose of privatizing these lands (Steyn, 1994). As part of these privatization measures, tenure rights were reconfigured to exclude residents from controlling communal landholdings (Steyn, 1994). These reforms (which remain for the most part unamended and unrepealed) sparked communal landholders' disquiet. Nevertheless, "the Ingonyama Trust Act was fuzzy with respect to the powers, functions, and future of chieftaincy structures" (Manona & Kepe, 2023, p. 5). This fuzziness seemed to be of minimal concern to the incoming ANC state since it assumed that traditional governance structures would become obsolete once democracy was established (Ntsebeza, 2005). But this did not happen. Instead, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act of 2003, and the Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act of 2019 all recognize the authority of traditional leaders, despite the fact that these Acts refrain from stipulating who, precisely, is responsible for governance and land administration on communal landholdings (Winkler, 2021). These Acts also assume that traditional leaders

will participate in, and work through, democratic state structures, including ward council structures (Winkler, 2021). Again, this assumption has not come to fruition. As a result, land-rights activists campaigned (and continue to campaign) for all governance and land administration functions on communal landholdings to be transferred to democratic state structures, and for traditional leadership structures to be revoked (Kepe & Hall, 2018; Ntsebeza, 2005). For these activists, kingdoms and chieftaincies are inherently undemocratic, thereby depriving rural residents of choosing their leaders (Ntsebeza, 2005).

Notwithstanding this reality, the 2021 High Court example represents much more than rural women's fight to protect their lands and values through a legal system that upholds this democratic right. It also represents an *otherwise* approach to democracy that enables residents of communal landholdings to mobilize against the official political regime (whether the state or traditional leaders) during one moment in time, and, during another moment, to mobilize in support of traditional leaders when communal landholders lose confidence in the state's official democratic structures (Winkler, 2021, 2024). Official democratic state structures include electing the political party that governs communal landholdings via party-appointed ward councillors. Ward councillors are supposed to govern communal landholdings in collaboration with traditional leaders, which creates its own set of governance dysfunctionalities (Winkler, 2021). Yet, it is precisely these dysfunctional dynamics and oscillating alignments that create opportunities for an *otherwise democracy* to arise. To be sure, members of the RWM strategically chose to counter the state and traditional leaders via the 2021 legal action. But when such measures no longer serve an emplaced politics, members of the very same Movement realign themselves with the state by, for example, partnering with the KwaZulu-Natal provincial government to establish the Women's Advancement Fund, which supports women entrepreneurs in overcoming unique challenges in the commercial sector (KZNOnline, 2024). The Movement is also actively involved in state-led campaigns to combat gender-based violence and regularly engages with policymakers to ensure that any legislative amendments reflect the needs and rights of rural women ("Africa: South Africa's land," 2020).

On the other hand, (re)alignments with traditional leaders have resulted in a noticeable resurgence of their roles over the past two decades, even though traditional leaders do not draw power from the ballot box (Ainslie & Kepe, 2016; Winkler, 2021). To be clear, traditional leaders are not elected; they are born into their political positions. This explains the state's decision to promulgate the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act of 2003 and the more recent Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act of 2019 (despite the fact that both Acts of Parliament are currently in abeyance). So, while (re)alignments with traditional leaders might seem puzzling to Occidental thinkers (as such leadership structures undermine Western understandings of democracy), something altogether different and powerful is taking place on communal landholdings in South Africa (Winkler, 2024). Yet, the resurgence of traditional leaders' roles—along with the state's power—is always volatile, transient, and subject to emplaced democratic practices that are sometimes oppositional and sometimes allied with the official political regime, thereby disrupting foregone conclusions about democracy that presume that "no political regime can tolerate multiple principles of legitimacy without jeopardizing its very survival" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 122). South Africa's democratic commons encompass multiple principles of legitimacy which, at times, call into question the existence of the official regime and, at other times, support it. These multiple legitimacies are enabled through a "politics of difference" characterized by a fluid relationship with established powers. Multiple legitimacies are also enabled via a "politics of becoming in place" that comprises an intimate relationship to the land itself and a resolute defence of this ontological relationality (as demonstrated by the RWM's

affidavit). Collectively, these polities assert a form of autonomy from both the state and traditional leaders through emplaced democratic processes involving self-determination and collective mobilisation. Here, "idioms of autonomy and community" contribute to a collective sense of power, whilst enabling residents to simultaneously assert themselves as autonomous political actors (Winkler, 2024). And by challenging the foundations of liberal democracy through multiple legitimacies that are in perpetual states of oscillation, communal landholders are taking control over the production and planning of their democratic commons. The idea that "self-determination [is a] concept that sits uneasily with liberal democracy" (Banerjee, 2022, p. 291) is thus immaterial to South Africa's communal landholders.

From a planning perspective that aims to understand *democracy otherwise* in situated contexts, it is essential to recognize the many different emplaced democratic practices exercised across diverse world regions, even if these practices tend to be fluid, transient, small-in-scale, deliberately place-dependent, and resistant to being scaled-up (and universalized). Yet, for Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015, p. 13), these types of anti-hegemonic endeavours simulate a mere "folk politics [that] cannot mount an effective opposition to neoliberal capitalism." While Srnicek and Williams (2015, p. 17) might be correct in their assertion, their alternative ("a full-throated embrace of the project of modernity") is disturbing even if their end goal is to build "a world more modern than capitalism will allow." But rather than resort to an outright disqualification of *democracy otherwise*—and given decoloniality's respect for all knowledges in a pluriversal world—perhaps a response to Srnicek and Williams lies in Jacques Derrida's (2005, p. 152) claim: "If democracy that is 'already here' cannot represent all its citizens equally and absolutely, then its lack of closure implies there is a democracy *always to come*." In other words, democracy, from the perspective of modernity and conventional political theory, relies on the idea of "sovereignty to legitimize its existence" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 122), which, in turn, necessitates an assimilation and homogenization of difference. However, as Derrida (2005) argues, difference is a precondition for the formation of democracy, thereby rendering the sovereignty of a political regime vulnerable to differences that cannot be assimilated or homogenized. It is this tension between necessitating sovereignty and difference that opens radically different horizons for democracy (Derrida, 2005), including *democracy otherwise*.

7. Concluding Reflections

Under neoliberalism, "the interior essence of the state is captured" (Purcell, 2013, p. 30). And given the entangled relationship between planning and the state, we might conclude that there is little that planning can do to address the democratic deficit left in the wake of neoliberalism. But for Mark Purcell this conclusion is not good enough (Purcell, 2013). Instead, he urges us to conceive of an altogether different approach to planning: an approach that "refuses the state and capitalism [and that] works tirelessly to ward off new forms of hierarchy [and hegemony]," whilst emplacing itself within "the whole body of society" without attempting to direct and control society (Purcell, 2013, p. 35). In this conceptualization of planning, "actions [are] taken;" but not by "a specialized group, institution, or planning department," but by "everyone acting together to coordinate activity" (Purcell, 2013, p. 35). Such a radical re-making of planning can be enhanced by first engaging with explanatory and analytical frameworks—including situated frameworks that hope to understand some of the inner workings of otherwise approaches to democracy—before launching into normative proposals that are shaped by resident-driven processes and outcomes. As an aside, it is important to stipulate that Purcell's political vision for planning is based on a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective and not on a decolonial perspective. Nevertheless, aspects of his argument resonate with decoloniality.

Democracy otherwise equally rejects market democracy (masquerading as liberal democracy). It values "the whole body of society" in fulfilling democratic planning practices, and it resists "new forms of hierarchy and hegemony." However, and importantly, *democracy otherwise* is not contingent on establishing more radical planning approaches, since alternative democratic practices already exist across diverse world regions despite (or because of) neoliberal globalization. For this reason, Santos (2020, pp. 31, 46) maintains that:

> The rich diversity of democratic experiences arising in different parts of the world may well prove to be a key step towards the necessary reinvention of democracy in contexts of increasing cultural, ethnic, [political], and religious diversity, as is the case in Europe, [the US, and elsewhere]….[Hence his call to] learn from the Global South.

Yet, while the state is decentred in decolonial thinking, citizens' democratic right to, for example, lodge legal actions against the state (with the security of knowing that the judiciary is independent of the state) cannot be underestimated. These democratic rights are demonstrated by the example of the RWM. Still, the fact that a class action lawsuit took place—and that the RWM was victorious in its defence of the democratic commons—is not the catalyst for an *otherwise democracy*. Rather, in the context of South Africa's communal landholdings, dysfunctional governance structures and emplaced polities serve as catalysts to challenge the foundations of coloniality, liberalism, neoliberalism, and liberal democracy through the use of multiple principles of legitimacy that are in perpetual states of oscillation. Here, political fluidity empowers residents to experiment with the opportunities that alignments with the official regime (whether the state or traditional leaders) have to offer. And when these opportunities cease to exist, residents oppose the regime. Each alignment/opposition serves to unsettle the official regime's control over communal landholders, regardless of ballot box outcomes or traditional leaders' birthrights.

Most catalysts for alternative democratic practices are place-dependent (see Holston, 1998, 2008; Shatkin, 2011; Slater, 2002). It is precisely this place-dependency that negates transferability to other settings, and if attempts are made to scale up or transplant an emplaced politics, neoliberals will, in all likelihood, "capture its banner" (as they did with multiculturalism; Purcell, 2009, p. 147). But an awareness of this potential vulnerability is also an *otherwise democracy's* power since it keeps alive Derrida's "always to come" narrative that challenges the liberal tradition of democracy as the only, and most lucrative, outcome. This power allows planners to learn from the South's "rich diversity of democratic experiences" (Santos, 2020, p. 31). It also offers a role for emplaced planning praxis that is mindful of pluriversality, relationality, local experiences, and situated worldviews, whilst supporting polities of difference and becoming in place, in tandem with idioms of autonomy and community.

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COMMENTARY

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Eurovision and the City: "United by Music" Meets "Malmö against Genocide"

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Abstract

"United by Music" was the slogan of the 2024 edition of the Eurovision Song Contest, held in Malmö. However, the festive spirit of the event oddly contrasted with what was described as "the largest police operation in Sweden's history" (Ivarsson, 2024). This operation was mobilized in response to the expected civil protests regarding Eurovision's decision to welcome Israel's participation, despite its ongoing genocidal war on Gaza. We examine the temporary disruptions in Malmö's urban space during Eurovision to understand the dissonance between a peaceful pro-Palestine movement, a supposedly festive event, and the heightened securitization of the city with its alarmist tones. We aim to understand these contrasts within a broader temporal context and across different geographical scales. We argue that the distinct racialized characterizations of neoliberal authoritarian practices in Malmö during Eurovision are deeply enmeshed with the implications of the Western narratives about Israel and Palestine, the growing influence of the far-right in Swedish politics, and, ultimately, the identity Malmö aspires to and is perceived to have. Rather than being a local manifestation of isolated authoritarian practices, Eurovision in Malmö opens a conceptual space to explore authoritarianism as a multiscalar discourse and practice. This perspective allows us to move beyond the dichotomy of the "democratic West" versus the "authoritarian others" by revealing the persistence of authoritarian practices in democracies.

Keywords

authoritarianism; Eurovision; mega event; neoliberal planning; pro-Palestine; securitization; Sweden

1. Introduction

"United by Music" was the slogan of the 2024 Eurovision Song Contest, held in Malmö from May 4–11. The vibrant display of rainbow flags, pink pom-poms, glittery garlands, and the 51,000 excited Eurovision fans (Upplevelseinstitutet, 2024) starkly contrasted with what was described as "the largest police operation in Sweden's history" (Ivarsson, 2024). During those days, 1,500 police officers were deployed, recruited nationally, and supplemented by officers from neighboring Norway and Denmark. The city spent over 13 million SEK (approximately 1.2 million Euros) on surveillance technologies and anti-terror equipment (Gillberg, 2024b). While increased policing measures have been a common approach to securing mega-events since 9/11, Malmö experienced an exceptional level of public space securitization. This mobilization aimed to protect urban spaces from expected civil protests against Eurovision's decision to welcome Israel's participation, despite its ongoing genocidal war on Gaza, recognized by the International Court of Justice (ICJ, 2024), UN experts (Human Rights Council, 2024), and international human rights organizations (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). In the Police and Swedish Armed Forces report on security threats during Eurovision, terrorist, cyber-attacks, and civil disobedience were identified as top concerns (Jönsson, 2024). Pro-Palestine solidarity movements, under the slogan "Malmö against Genocide," were perceived as a significant public security threat requiring maximum attention.

Malmö is Sweden's third-largest and one of its most ethnically diverse cities, with one-third of residents born outside the country (Malmö Stad, n.d.-a). Its high rate of migrants, especially from the Middle East, and high levels of segregation and socio-economic inequalities make it a focal point for political mobilizations. The city has a vibrant history of anti-racist and pro-Palestine solidarity, which intensified in response to Israel's genocidal war on Gaza since October 2023. Malmö has also been portrayed in far-right discourse as a socially problematic city (Schclarek Mulinari, 2017). Notably, far-right activists have used public Qur'an burnings to instigate protests and riots, perceived as direct attacks on Muslim communities. This has also damaged Sweden's reputation internationally, especially in Muslim countries, leading the Swedish Security Service to upgrade the threat level of terrorism (Glaad, 2023). The latest Qur'an burning event occurred during Eurovision week. Concurrently, Malmö has been labeled for several years as a hotspot for antisemitism, prompting the city of Malmö to implement preventive measures (Katzin, 2022). In this context, Malmö and the police forces took extensive measures to prevent social unrest during Eurovision.

As urban scholars based in Malmö, in this commentary we try to collectively make sense of the dissonant discourses that emerged during Eurovision week. On the one hand, the solidarity with Palestine and the discontent over Israel's participation materialized in the mobilization of the "Malmö against Genocide" campaign. On the other hand, the municipality's effort to provide a safe and welcoming environment for visitors in a city "United by Music" included increased security measures in urban spaces. We suggest that Eurovision in Malmö represents more than just a local manifestation of isolated authoritarian practices; in our reflection, it opens a conceptual space to explore authoritarianism as a multiscalar discourse and practice. This perspective allows us to move beyond the dichotomy of the "democratic West" versus the "authoritarian others" and to reveal the persistence of authoritarian practices within democracies (Koch, 2019).

We understand authoritarianism as a set of spatialized practices centered on control, discipline, and univocal authority that are diffuse and ephemeral, unfolding in particular spaces and places, and impacting different

people in various ways (Koch, 2022). In this sense, authoritarianism is sustained and legitimized by the long-lasting legacies of the "coloniality of power," which produce racialized forms of world-making through ideological, epistemic, and material forms of subjugation (Quijano, 2000). Nationalism and far-right populism have increasingly intertwined with neoliberalism worldwide (Gallo, 2022), a phenomenon Bruff (2014) defines as "authoritarian neoliberalism." Indeed, authoritarian practices are often accentuated during exceptional events, such as international mega-events, where democratic governance and urban planning routines are suspended to meet the demands of organizing committees, sponsors, and international organizations (Gruneau & Horne, 2015). The combined economic imperatives and racialized authoritarian practices enforced before, during, and after mega-events disrupt the social fabric of localities, leaving long-lasting effects (de Oliveira, 2020). Here, we examine the temporary disruptions in urban space during Malmö's hosting of Eurovision, thus highlighting the twofold amplification of social tensions and security measures. We propose an interpretation that connects these urban scale disruptions to neoliberal authoritarian practices at both national and global scales.

2. Two Tales of a City: "United by Music" Meets "Malmö against Genocide"

The European Broadcasting Union's (EBU) decision to include Israel in the 2024 Eurovision Contest while maintaining the ban on Russia enraged pro-Palestine citizens in Malmö and beyond. Russia was punished in 2022 for its invasion of Ukraine, while Israel was invited to participate despite allegations of committing genocide against the Palestinian population in Gaza (ICJ, 2024). This decision amplified the discontent towards the Swedish government's silence on the situation in Gaza, thus giving new momentum to the existing pro-Palestine movement to boycott the song contest. The movement was international, with Malmö as its core, and produced creative ideas and materials for resistance and solidarity months before Eurovision, encapsulated in the slogan "Malmö against Genocide." These efforts were highly visible in Malmö's urban life and public spaces, shaping several counter-events through a boycotting campaign. The week of the contest became the highlight of pro-Palestine demonstrations and featured an alternative "genocide-free" series of events called "FalastinVision" (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Posters by the pro-Palestine campaign demanding Israel to be excluded from Eurovision and that Eurovision be removed from Malmö. Photographs by Laleh Foroughanfar.

Under the slogan "United by Music," Malmö underwent a profound transformation that affected not only the event site but also the heart of the city. These interventions disrupted the daily lives of Malmö residents, regardless of their interest in participating in the event. The city of Malmö and the police forces used the safety of Eurovision visitors, especially in response to the increased national terror risk level, to justify the presence of barricades, checkpoints, surveillance cameras, and observation posts, reminiscent of what Graham (2011) calls "passage point-urbanism" (Figure 2). This security apparatus took center stage, becoming an integral part of this Eurovision edition and everyday urban life (Figure 3). State security agencies, which hold a monopoly over the surveillance and safety of public space in Sweden, devised an expensive plan described as the largest police operation in Sweden's history (Ivarsson, 2024). The operation was highly publicized, with surveillance

Figure 2. Barricades and security checkpoints set up around the streets leading to the People's Park (*Folkets Park*) during the Eurovision Song Contest. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.

Figure 3. Police passing by pro-Palestine artwork on the legal graffiti wall outside the People's Park/Eurovision Village. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.

technologies on full display and heavily armed police officers. Malmö's display of force was not only a tool for maintaining order but also a symbol of power and control (Boyle & Haggerty, 2009).

Key public spaces were repurposed and fenced for the event. The People's Park (*Folkets Park*), a site with historical roots in the labor movements (Mitchell et al., 2021), was transformed into the "Eurovision Village," while the pedestrian street Friisgatan leading to the park was marked as "Eurovision Street" (Figures 4 and 5). Access to the People's Park was extremely restricted, with zero tolerance for bags or "anything bigger than you could fit in your pocket," according to Malmö Municipality (Malmö Stad, 2024a). Amid these restrictions, a mother wearing a Palestinian shawl (*Kufiyah*) was violently apprehended by the security forces in front of her children while entering the park (Esmailian, 2024). However, pro-Palestinian citizens responded with non-violent and creative actions, reclaiming the park by jogging with flags, putting up murals with political signification for Palestine, and covering many meters of the park's wall with posters declaring "Malmö against Genocide" (Figures 1, 6, and 7).

One of the central points of resistance was the *Gazarondellen* (Gaza-roundabout), located at one corner of the People's Park in the Möllevången neighborhood. This ethnically and socially diverse neighborhood serves as a hub for numerous political demonstrations (Hansen, 2021). The roundabout was not always called *Gazarondellen*. During the Eurovision week, pro-Palestinian citizens renamed it due to its location at the heart of solidarity demonstrations close to the People's Park. *Gazarondellen* evolved into an alternative scene, where activists, artists, students, and other citizens gathered to perform, chant, read poems, and

Figure 4. Eurovision Street, at the pedestrian street Friisgatan in Möllevången, leading towards the People's Park/Eurovision Village. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.

Figure 5. Eurovision Street, leading towards the People's Park/Eurovision Village. The signs remind visitors about filming and photographing in the area, as well as the rules regarding prohibited items inside the Eurovision Village (left); Eurovision Street, leading towards the People's Park/Eurovision Village, is decorated with Eurovision slogans and pampas (right). Photographs by Laleh Foroughanfar.

Figure 6. The main entrance to People's Park, where private security guards and a team of the Eurovision organizers are stationed. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.

Figure 7. The back entrance of People's Park has been heavily policed. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.

organize memorial events in remembrance of the mass killing of Palestinians. Outside of the People's Park, there is a legal graffiti wall that has long been a site of social and political expression. After October 7, the murals often depicted the ongoing genocide. However, during Eurovision week, all these murals were erased by a cleaning company sent by the municipality, thereby raising tensions. Malmö City, which does not usually remove graffiti, claimed that this action was due to a miscommunication (Malmö Stad, n.d.-b).

During the week leading up to the Eurovision final, tension continued to rise, and the voices opposing Israel's participation grew louder. Over 1,000 Swedish artists called for a ban on Israel ahead of the contest, but their demands were rejected (Adler, 2024). Additionally, the EBU banned Palestinian flags and any pro-Palestinian symbols from the contest ("Palestinaflaggan förbjuds," 2024a). Several restaurants withdrew from the official Eurovision celebrations, including Moriskan nightclub, located inside the European village. Moriskan resigned from its role as the host of this year's Euro Fan Café, preferring not to participate in the mega-event economy. The CEO of Moriskan explained the decisions as follows:

> We saw how polarization increased, and the atmosphere changed in the city. You can't pretend it's a joyous folk festival when surrounded by concrete walls, machine guns, and drones on the roof. It is a lie….We feared that people would not feel the security that the police wanted to signal. (Gillberg, 2024a, authors' translation)

Similarly, Friisgatan, dubbed "Eurovision Street," leading from the train station to the Eurovision Village, became a battleground of representation. The city of Malmö's project manager for the Eurovision Song Contest, Karin Karlsson, envisioned a giant party for all residents to celebrate music, diversity, and community in connection with Eurovision week (Malmö Stad, 2024b). Friisgatan—which the city aims to renew as a pedestrian car-free, green, and attractive area (Malmö Stad, 2024c)—was adorned with heart-shaped street furniture, balloons, and colorful pom-poms. In contrast, residents hung Palestinian flags and watermelon signs from windows and balconies as symbols of transversal solidarity (Yuval-Davis, 1999).

Furthermore, people organized several informal sit-in actions in smaller groups along the outdoor dining areas on "Eurovision Street."

The public space outside Malmö Arena, the venue for the Eurovision Song Contest, was also heavily securitized. The chief of security at Malmö Arena highlighted the concerns related to a "threat picture connected to the outside world" (Stolpe, 2024). To enhance surveillance capabilities, Malmö Arena partnered with Axis, a Swedish company specializing in video surveillance. To extend the area eligible for surveillance, the organizers circumvented Swedish law by fencing off the surrounding public space, even though Swedish legislation prevents private surveillance in public spaces. This temporary expansion of private land allowed Axis to install outdoor thermal cameras, license plate recognition, and security software capable of detecting and classifying humans and vehicles beyond the limits of the arena. According to Axis Communications (2024), "the bottom line with AI is, the algorithm is only as good as the data it trains on." The company described the event on its website as a "testbed for innovation," where real-time data and feedback opened new possibilities for product development and the training of new AI models (Axis Communications, 2024).

Lastly, pro-Palestinian solidarity events were not limited to areas adjacent to the formal Eurovision venues. Among various initiatives, two large demonstrations took place on May 9 and May 11 (one during the Eurovision second semi-final and the other on the final day). People from all over Sweden, Denmark, and Germany came to Malmö to protest against Israel's genocidal war and its participation in the song contest (Figure 8). The police-approved routes for the demonstration did not include the Eurovision Village or the contest venue. These demonstrations concluded in one of the city's largest parks, "keeping" the protestors out of sight from the city center, where Eurovision tourists gathered. At the end of the second demonstration on the final day, some protestors defied police orders and went to Malmö Arena. There, some were violently removed, arrested, and temporarily detained.

Figure 8. Pro-Palestinian demonstration on May 11, with the event being heavily policed with security assistance from neighboring countries. Photograph by Laleh Foroughanfar.

3. Discussion: Geographies of Authoritarianism and Pro-Palestinian Solidarity

Even though Eurovision in Malmö did not involve any large urban redevelopment plans typically associated with mega-events, the temporary spatial re-organization could have a long-lasting effect on the social fabric and memory of the city, with material, representational, and discursive repercussions. Previous research on mega-events highlights how "states of exception" allow for the suspension of democratic governance to cater to private interests connected to events (de Oliveira, 2020). This has historically enabled the expansion of capitalist exchange across global scales, accelerations in the neoliberalisation of planning, and also the rise of authoritarian governance models. Scrutinized under the notion of "authoritarian neoliberalism" (Jenss, 2019), the attempt to provide a sense of security and enjoyment for the Eurovision fans in Malmö reveals a series of not-so-exceptional exceptionalist measures for mega-events worldwide. However, we want to pinpoint the racialized connotations that authoritarian neoliberalism assumed here, and that, we argue, are connected to geopolitical discursive and material processes at different scales in which the "civilized democratic vs. the barbarian autocratic" is constructed and made visible. In this case, racialization takes the form of anti-Palestinian racism, especially suffered by Arabs and Muslims (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2024).

As urban researchers, we examine the events during Eurovision to understand the dissonance between a peaceful pro-Palestine movement, a supposedly festive event, and the heightened securitization of the city with its alarmist tones. We aim to contextualize these events within a broader framework, connecting them to different geographical scales and urban planning. We argue that the distinct racialized characterizations of neoliberal authoritarian practices in Malmö during Eurovision are deeply enmeshed with, firstly, Western narratives about Israel and Palestine, secondly, the growing influence of the far-right on Swedish politics, and thirdly, the type of city Malmö aspires to be and is perceived as.

First, the securitization of the city has been colored by the international legitimacy enjoyed by the Israeli state, both internally and externally. This legitimization of Israel and its actions denies the "history, geography, demography, and political system created under Jewish colonization of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea" (Yiftachel, 2023, p. 2) and normalizes the violence against the Palestinian people. Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023, intensified Israel's warfare and aggravated its colonial claims. Within this framework, the pro-Palestinian movement is de-legitimized and labeled as being antisemitic (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2024), violent, and a threat to "Western democratic values." These geopolitical tensions were directly reproduced in the Eurovision, which included Israel in the song contest while banning Palestinian flags and other solidarity symbols. This dynamic was broadly translated into Malmö's city spaces: as we observed, this overarching international discourse served as a legitimizing force for the securitization of the city. Moreover, the transnational support of Israel and the concomitant de-legitimation of pro-Palestinian protests created an environment where it became acceptable to erase graffiti artwork on the Graffiti Wall of People's Park, which expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Second, the materialization of security measures, as a form of authoritarian practice, occurred within the context of Sweden's recent shift towards the far-right and the growing influence of the Sweden Democrats Party (*Sverigedemokraterna*) in the government. With roots in the neo-Nazis movement of the 1980s and 1990s, the party, with its anti-Muslim and anti-migration ideology, became Sweden's second-largest political party in the 2022 election. This shift has contributed to a paradigm shift in both rhetoric and reforms regarding immigration (Rothstein, 2023). Although Sweden had already experienced increasing bordering

practices within the state through internal border controls, heightened police intervention, and racial profiling (Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2022), after 2022, we have seen a punitive and authoritarian spatial turn. This includes the creation of temporarily designated zones where police can frisk individuals without any criminal suspicion, especially targeting people living in "racialised working-class neighborhoods" (Schclarek Mulinari, 2024, p. 5).

Third, we argue that the national and international political atmosphere have acute impacts in Malmö, because of its demographics, as well as its racialized representations. Depicted as "Sweden's Chicago" (Schclarek Mulinari, 2017), Malmö has adopted a security rationale that has "legitimised the mass surveillance of citizens, and the increased concern relating to pre-crime risk management through technological innovations aimed to be pre-emptive" (p. 6). This approach has had a specific impact on racialized groups. This atmosphere, influenced by the national turn towards far-right politics and rhetoric, as well as the external perception of Malmö as a crime city, became a justifying force for the city and the police to roll out Sweden's largest police intervention in its history. As authoritarianism is a political discourse that "draws upon and produces particular moral geographies and identities" (Koch, 2022, p. 3), the shift towards more racist, anti-Muslim discourses and politics provides important context for the above-mentioned Qur'an burning events and the resulting social unrest, which motivated the implementation of public and private security measures. Crucially, the normalization of more authoritarian ideas at the national political level has a significant effect on the racialized population in Malmö. This was evident, for instance, in the incident where a mother was prevented from entering the Eurovision village because she was wearing a *Kufiyah*. Among demonstrators, racialized protestors were specifically targeted, as seen when a special task force with assault rifles removed young men from a peaceful demonstration outside of the Eurovision Village (Pressfeldt, 2024).

In conclusion, scrutinizing how Eurovision in Malmö materialized in the city, both discursively and practically, helps us to understand the urban *spatialization of authoritarianism*, its contradictions, and its consequences for urban planning. Authoritarian practices that are salient nationally or internationally become embedded locally. Authoritarianism manifests in locally situated spatial practices as transnational cycles of power, pointing to global conflicts, are embedded in the "flows of power attached to place" (Luger, 2020, p. 1). In our case, this is linked to how mega-events disrupt the urban social fabric and impact planning practices (de Oliveira, 2020). Here, we can see that the city was eager to welcome the 184.4 million SEK in tourist spending reported during Eurovision (Upplevelseinstitutet, 2024). But arguably, Eurovision meant more than that for the city planning. From a longer perspective, Eurovision represented a testbed for the local government in Malmö to advance its vision for the city. For instance, the city designated Friisgatan as Eurovision Street, connecting the People's Park with the train station that links Malmö to Copenhagen Airport. Friisgatan had previously been a site for urban experiments, including cultural district development and, more recently, efforts to create a car-free, green city (Gillberg, 2016; Malmö Stad, 2024d). However, as explained in the previous section, the city also became a battleground for representation during Eurovision, bringing to light existing contradictions, contrasting imaginaries and resistance to neoliberal planning. While Malmö aspires to be an open and vibrant city, welcoming everyone to celebrate Eurovision and express their opinions (Ftouni, 2024), it also experienced the largest security event in its history, including armed interventions against peaceful protesters and racial profiling of Eurovision visitors. The combination of the security apparatus dominating public space, surveillance measures, and the use of mega-events as a testbed for planning interventions should be seen as moments where authoritarianism is translated into local

temporary practices which might consolidate some exceptional neoliberal planning practices. Our multiscalar perspective on authoritarianism speaks about urban planning as embedded in and shaped by trans-local scales and discourses. While urban planning literature has acknowledged the multiscalar governance framework, it has mostly highlighted its economic imperatives and financial constraints. While critical literature has highlighted the social effects of this, the multiscalar racialized and colonial dimensions of urban planning are less discussed and require urgent attention.

Most importantly, we would like to emphasize that the legacy of Eurovision 2024 in Malmö should not be reduced to authoritarian trends alone. Since October 2023, Malmö has seen a flurry of activism in solidarity with the Palestinian people in Gaza. People had been demonstrating every weekend, demanding an immediate ceasefire and urging the Swedish government to take a stance against the ongoing genocidal war in Palestine. Several new solidarity groups have formed, and a new generation of activists has mobilized, injecting new energy and plurality into Malmö's already political landscape (Hansen, 2024). Solidarity and resistance movements challenge the boundaries of what a city is represented to be, and who it is for. The Eurovision event served as a local catalyst for the widespread dissent across the country against Israel's settler colonialism. It also amplified this dissent's visibility on a local-to-global trajectory, thus reinforcing the transnational and transversal solidarity movement of those who stand with Palestine against its ongoing, livestreamed annihilation.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Please contact the corresponding author Chiara Valli (chiara.valli@mau.se).

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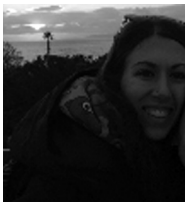

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