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Perform or conform? Looking for the strategic in municipal spatial planning in Sweden

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ABSTRACT
In recent decades, various strategic approaches to spatial planning have been introduced and implemented in Sweden, although the planning system itself has not fundamentally changed. However, strategic spatial planning is not a fixed and regulated institutional practice in either planning in general or in the Swedish planning system. To investigate strategic planning practice in Sweden, 16 recently approved comprehensive plans were studied to elucidate how strategic planning is understood and conceptualized by planners and then expressed in a statutory planning instrument. Although there is no ‘right theory’ of strategic planning, to avoid an ‘anything-goes’ attitude towards strategic planning, the contents of the studied plans were set against an ideal, normative model compiled from the academic debate, thus researching practice in dialogue with theory. The results indicate that comprehensive plans, rather than being contextually embedded, follow generic models of environmental scanning and strategy making, and most visions reiterate common political goals and slogans found everywhere. The plans often become catalogues of detailed instructions that, although not legally binding, tend to steer practice into predefined paths framed by generic doctrines within the planning community, rather than being the flexible and open-minded planning instruments that academic ideals prescribe.

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Introduction
Strategic spatial planning (SSP) as a public-sector–led process have been advocated as a means to overcome the inertia and inflexibility of traditional land-use planning and to accommodate the dynamism and uncertainty of a rapidly globalizing economy and society (see, e.g. Albrechts, 2004, 2010). However, SSP is not a well-defined end product or process, but rather a loose framework of approaches to planning. SSP can be understood and carried out differently depending on the circumstances, and it is not always clear what SSP means as a planning concept, or in actual planning cases. Nevertheless, the idea of SSP has not only entered academic debate, but has also changed planning practice and in some countries even led to fundamental institutional changes in legislation and

Although such fundamental changes have not occurred in Sweden, different strategic approaches to planning have been introduced and implemented in recent decades, not least in municipal spatial planning, in which the municipal comprehensive plan (MCP) is to ‘provide strategic guidance for decision making’ (Thune-Hedström & Lundström, 2013, p. 72). Instead of making institutional changes, the Swedish authorities have gradually implemented strategic measures in a statutory plan, anchored in an existing institutional setting. This begs the questions of what effect such an incremental adjustment will have on the planning system, and of what kind of strategic planning will emerge.

Aim and scope

The purpose of this paper is to examine SSP in Sweden through the lens of a statutory structural plan (MCP) and to investigate the potential strategic performance of this plan. Although the MCP is not the only planning document used in strategic planning in Sweden, the plan itself (including the preceding planning process) is clearly intended to apply a strategic perspective to spatial planning and future land use and, furthermore, is the only statutory plan in the Swedish planning system to do so.

The scope is limited to the MCP as a document, excluding the preceding planning process. Furthermore, the purpose is not to reach a general verdict on SSP in Sweden, but to probe a certain dimension of the planning practice. The results are thus provisional, but, set against some key assumptions distilled from academic debate, they answer the overarching research question of how strategic planning is understood and conceptualized by planners and then expressed in this statutory planning instrument, and to what extent this understanding reflects a new take on spatial planning, given that that the legal framework, planning competencies, and institutional settings are more or less unaltered.

The research questions are as follows:

- Does current municipal strategic planning challenge predominant ideas of development and reframe the scope for planning action?
- Do current MCPs focus on their performative rather than regulatory role?
- To what extent can incremental adjustments to planning instruments transform planning practice and bring about a strategic perspective on planning?

Strategic spatial planning

Burgess and Carmona (2009) explicitly traced the transition from master planning to strategic planning to a neoliberal shift in global capitalism. This transition epitomizes certain important changes in the direction of the public management of cities and municipalities, such as enabling rather than providing, working with rather than countering the market, and being competitive and attracting people and investment. To say that strategic planning is neoliberal per se may be farfetched, but as Olesen (2014) has argued, SSP has undergone a process of neoliberalization in many countries, albeit under many different guises and sometimes blended
with traditional forms of welfare state planning. This indicates that neoliberal norms and practices are not inherent in SSP itself, which, like any form of planning, is susceptible to shifts in ideology, since it has ‘an ideological component’ (Gunder, 2010, p. 309).

The advent of SSP, with its focus on flexibility and the ability to transgress formal boundaries (e.g. territorial and public/private), can also be seen in conjunction with the rescaling of the state (Cremer-Schulte, 2014), which many critics consider necessary to the neoliberal political project, undertaken to accommodate the growth of global capitalism (Brenner, 2004, 2009; Jessop, 2000, 2002; Swyngedouw, 2004). Contrary to the claim that the nation state has lost its function due to current trends in globalization, the transition from government to governance arguably implies that the state indeed takes part in redefining politico–institutional arenas (Gualini, 2006, p. 884; Jessop, 2002, p. 454), a process that also has had more or less radical consequences for spatial planning (Brenner, 2004; Haughton et al., 2010). One scalar level that has attracted particular attention is the city region, in its ascendancy as a pole of economic growth (Brenner, 2004, pp. 227–228; Herrschel & Newman, 2002; Neuman & Hull, 2011; Salet & Thornley, 2007).

Planning in this new reality, must take account of a perceived need for, as well as real changes in, the public management of regions, cities, and municipalities. This is not to say that all such management is undertaken according to a neoliberal worldview, but that neoliberal values may have seeped in without reflection as pure planning and management techniques. Among neoliberal values of direct relevance to spatial planning are the fundamental principles that markets are better providers of goods and services than the state, and that public authorities should rely on the market or at least use market proxies in managing the public sector (Jessop, 2002, p. 454; see also Sager, 2011). The latter is evident in strategic planning, which borrows many concepts and methods developed in business management (see Mintzberg, 1994). Another key point is the focus on local and regional economic growth. Due to the devolution of state powers, regional and local authorities must look out for themselves and create and/or defend their place in a competitive global economy. The priority then is to facilitate economic growth, and pool public and private resources in projects to make the city or municipality attractive for inward investment.

SSP is not a neutral planning instrument, but whether it openly or tacitly serves certain political agendas is an empirical question, as there are several ways of understanding and working with SSP. SSP is not a well-defined end product or process, but rather a loose framework of approaches to planning. Although any search for a process of SSP will identify several key principles, practice shows that actual outcomes are partial, contingent, and discretionary (see, e.g. Newman, 2008) and that strategic planning is ‘a situated practice with its effects deeply structured by the specificities of time and place’ (Healey, 2007, p. 175). Kunzmann (2013, p. 31) claimed that ‘any effort to standardize … strategic planning would be extremely counterproductive’. It is thus to be expected that SSP can be both understood and carried out differently depending on the circumstances. Furthermore, many calls for strategic planning have a strong normative component. In the words of Albrechts (2010), SSP should help us to get ‘out of … [our] comfort zones and compel … [us] to confront … [our] key beliefs, to challenge conventional wisdom, and to examine the prospects of breaking out of the box’ (p. 1115). The normative character of strategic planning was also emphasized in a recent collection of papers elaborating on both the practical virtues and theoretical conundrums that still surround SSP (Albrechts et al., 2017; see also Albrechts, 2004, p. 747).
In recent decades, Louis Albrechts and Patsy Healey have been among the most ardent proponents of strategic planning, debating the content and purpose of this ‘new style of strategic spatial planning’ (Newman, 2008, p. 1371) in numerous publications. In a seminal paper, Albrechts (2004, p. 747) listed many characteristics of strategic planning, a list apparently including almost everything in the planning field. Instead of narrowing this list down, Albrechts (2004) concluded that strategic planning must be viewed broadly, since ‘strategic (spatial) planning is not a single concept’ (p. 747), but a set of ‘concepts, procedures, and tools that must be tailored carefully to whatever situation is at hand’ (p. 748). SSP is then understood as a contextually embedded planning process, contingent not only on formal institutions, but also on current circumstances and involved actors (see also Healey, 2009, pp. 452–453).

The versatility of strategic planning is also mirrored in strategy formation research, which speaks of ten schools with different characteristics (Cherp et al., 2007; see also Mintzberg, 1994, p. 3), indicating that there is no “right theory” of strategy formation’ (Cherp et al., 2007, p. 641). A major divide between these schools concerns whether strategies are to be seen as deliberate or emergent, that is, whether they are explicitly formulated ex ante in a formal plan, or whether they emerge informally during the planning process (Cherp et al., 2007, p. 627; Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2005, pp. 455–456). The former view, building on the assumption of a rational planning process, had its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s. Its decline reflects not so much a total rejection of the idea of rational planning as a shift towards strategy formation as a learning process in which strategies emerge over time (Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2005, p. 468). Steurer and Martinuzzi (2005, pp. 467–468) also noted that features of different schools are often combined in many cases, and accordingly speak of hybrid forms of strategic management.

How then does one identify ‘the strategic’ in SSP and its ‘critical features’ – to quote Albrechts and Balducci (2013)? According to Healey (2009), the importance of strategic planning lies in ‘shaping future development trajectories’ (p. 439). This includes the necessity of situating and understanding current societal trends in all their complexities and variations, and being able to fuse these into a coherent framework for future action. This goes beyond merely collecting ‘facts’ and entails understanding what is desirable, possible, and at stake (Healey, 2009, p. 446). This recalls the position of Henry Mintzberg (1994), whose research into business and organizational management led him to conclude that strategic thinking (rather than strategic planning) entails the ability to synthesize and intuitively grasp complex and seemingly unconnected information, have intimate knowledge of day-to-day issues, and create a ‘big picture’ from myriad minor details, making that into a strategy. Mintzberg (1994, p. 321) even argued that planning, which is an analytical and formally structured process, is inherently non-strategic and that strategic planning is an oxymoron. The real challenge is accordingly to combine strategic (novel) thinking with formal planning procedures (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 325; see also Albrechts, 2010, p. 1122).

A strategic plan should be able to change how participants think and act, and provide a common frame of reference, mobilizing relevant actors to pursue significant projects (Albrechts & Balducci, 2013, pp. 19–22; Healey, 2009). It should reframe institutionalized thinking and challenge current practices (Healey, 2007, p. 25, 30), leading to a future that is not simply ‘an extension of the present’ (Davoudi, 2009, p. 223). The purpose is to manage an uncertain future, and to prepare for what might happen
A strategic plan performs its role if it gives guidance rather than detailed instructions on what to do and, as such, forms part of a continuous learning process (Faludi, 2000), not least since ‘long-term planning decisions … are affected by high degrees of uncertainty’ (Laurian et al., 2004, p. 472). However, to guide future decisions, an important part of strategy making is to come up with a long-term vision and to provide a framework for specific actions (Albrechts & Balducci, 2013, pp. 20–21; Healey, 2007, p. 180), selecting what is really important and should be prioritized (Albrechts, 2004, pp. 751–752; Healey, 2009, p. 449). The framing is supposed to help reduce uncertainties, and to settle the issues at hand (Healey, 2009, p. 449). The actual strategies chosen will then be part of that framework, and as such will display consistent behaviour over time (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 23), constitute ‘a pattern in a stream of decisions’ (Mintzberg, 1978, p. 935), or represent a recurrent idea of how to manage certain developments, i.e. to influence the ‘routines of practices’ (Healey, 2007, p. 184).

The above fundamentals of strategic planning give an idealistic and normative picture of what strategic planning is supposed to be, although they do not take full account of the extended deliberations of Louis Albrechts or Patsy Healey. Nor do they consider the range of interpretations found in contemporary practice. Case studies from various countries, regions, and cities show that strategic planning can be understood in different ways, that planners may emphasize different aspects of this broad planning field, depending on the issues addressed, and that the outcome may depend more or less strongly on institutional inertia and stakeholder interests (Albrechts et al., 2017; Cavenago & Trivellato, 2010; Davoudi & Strange, 2009; Healey, Khakee, Motte, & Needham, 1997; Newman, 2008; Walsh & Allin, 2012).

This is also what is to be expected given the potentials and restrictions when it comes to incorporating new and/or changing existing practices. As Newman (2008) argued, the fixity of planning institutions governed by formal rules and competencies as well as the chores of day-to-day work tend to limit the infusion of new ideas and ways of doing planning. Since there are different ways of understanding strategic planning and different models are often mixed (Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2005), coupled with the fact that planning must accommodate both strategic issues and the certainty of property rights guaranteed in traditional land-use planning (Haughton et al., 2010; Mäntysalo, 2013; Van den Broeck, 2013), the expectation would be to find hybrid forms of planning in contemporary practice rather than a completely new set of tools.

**An analytical framework**

When investigating the practice of SSP and considering earlier research, one would expect to find a wide variety of interpretations and practices, ranging from the piecemeal incorporation of certain strategic elements to more radical changes. However, to avoid merely describing current practices, this study starts from the normative assumptions elaborated on above. If SSP in Sweden has become something more than just tinkering with the existing planning system, it is reasonable to focus on the critical aspects that distinguish it from traditional land-use planning. However, the purpose is not to pronounce a verdict as to whether or not planning has become strategic, but to highlight how strategic planning is expressed in the planning documents studied.
Furthermore, the purpose is not to set Swedish planning practice against a ‘theory of strategic spatial planning’, since there is no ‘right theory’ (Cherp et al., 2007, p. 641). Nor is it to evaluate whether or not planners have done their homework, reading up on current planning theory that might be far from their daily routines. It is also not expected that the present analytical framework should have been the starting point or ideal for either practitioners or officials making amendments to legislation and writing instructions for implementation. However, to avoid an ‘anything-goes’ attitude towards SSP, one must use a more stringent model as a sounding-board for investigating how SSP in Sweden is understood and conceptualized. By using a normative ideal that has been debated for some time by influential academics-cum-practitioners, the idea is to set current practice against expectations raised in academic debate. The purpose is to research practice ‘in dialogue with theory’ – as Mäntysalo, Kangasoja, and Kanninen (2015, p. 181) put it – and to combine theory with practical experience (Albrechts, 2004, p. 743).

In terms of evaluation, a strategic spatial plan performs its role if it helps decision makers and planners understand and make sense of their situation, and gives guidance on future decisions, rather than specifying them in detail. This is in contrast to local or project plans, whose material outcomes are supposed to conform to what is laid out in the plan (Faludi, 2000). The analytical framework must help illuminate the potential performative role of the MCP. The analytical framework is based on certain core principles found in the literature, principles thought to distinguish SSP from traditional regulatory land-use planning and to enable strategic planning to be performative. The analysis considers how the strategic framework of the spatial plan is constructed in terms of these core principles, namely, how the plans situate the place in question (how they construct a worldview and long-term vision), and whether this is unique in terms of context (rather than just reiterating generic ideas), how the framework is supposed to reduce uncertainty and guides further action (i.e. what priorities are established), and, finally, how these translate into strategies, not least spatial strategies for future land use.

Sources and research design

The present study has a limited scope in that it only investigates SSP documents (i.e. MCPs), meaning that the process of strategic planning is not addressed. However, the MCP can be investigated on its own merits as the strategic document, or ‘valuable strategic device’ (Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2005, p. 467), it is intended to be. Although the plan is only a temporary agreement (Abis & Garau, 2016, p. 141; Faludi, 2000, p. 303) in an ongoing process, it has a value of its own pertaining to the planning process. The plan tells a story to provide meaning and coherence to all the individual facts, suggestions, and pieces of information assembled in the plan, for the purpose of outlining the relationships between them (Healey, 2007; Walter, 2013). The plan can be regarded as a narrative intended to position the municipality in the world, point out a desirable future, and persuade the reader to accept the message, thus being a rhetorical device signalling intent and commitment in order to influence stakeholders to take particular courses of action (Kaza & Hopkins, 2009, pp. 495–496).

A Swedish MCP is usually an extensive document containing 100–200 pages of text, illustrations, maps, and graphs. Often, if not always, the plan has several supplements adding to the information presented. As a complete investigation of MCPs in all 290
Swedish municipalities is infeasible for a short paper, the purpose here is to study current strategic planning; recently approved plans will suffice for this, as comprehensive planning is a continuous process and not all municipalities have up-to-date plans. To select a reasonable number of MCPs for study, the present state of comprehensive planning in Sweden was inventoried. Since this was done before the end of 2017, it was decided to select all plans approved in 2016.\(^1\) This reduced the number of plans to 16, which were downloaded from the municipal websites.\(^2\) These plans cover a wide range of municipalities, from small rural municipalities to large commuter suburbs in metropolitan regions, as well as a few major cities.

The research design employed is a cross-sectional survey of documents, using qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2012, p. 76). To systematically investigate the use of strategic planning in the MCPs, a simple coding frame (Flick, 2014, p. 429) was constructed from the core principles discussed above, for the purpose of structuring the memos and facilitating comparisons between plans. It is important to note that while the principles listed here describe an ‘ideal model’ (Newman, 2008) of strategic planning compiled from the literature, not all principles can be expected to figure in every MCP. The coding was done for analytical reasons, but its purpose was of course to see how the different criteria work together to build a strategic framework.

While reading the plans, all relevant information pertaining to the coding frame was gathered and entered into a form. This reading yielded several summaries, one for each MCP. The summaries resemble ‘memos’ (Bryman, 2012, p. 573; Flick, 2014, p. 387) in that they not only record what is explicitly said in the documents, but also include interpretations, comments, and assessments raised by the researcher during the reading process. The summaries were then used to compare the plans and seek differences and similarities.

**Spatial planning in Sweden: a brief overview**

Unlike in many other European countries, the formal framework for spatial planning in Sweden has remained basically the same for the last 30 years, although there have been continuous adjustments, including a major revision in 2011 (Thune-Hedström & Lundström, 2013, p. 70). The advent of SSP in Sweden must be seen in conjunction with how the concept of strategic planning has permeated public governance throughout the country. Today, the public sector resounds with strategic measures, work, goals, cooperation, ideas, etc., and strategies can be found in almost every policy field, whether concerning strategies for integrating immigrants, providing housing, and promoting economic growth or for fulfilling environmental goals.\(^3\) This means that ideas concerning SSP are not limited to this particular field of governance and that there is no uniform way of tracing the genesis of SSP and expecting it to be confined to this sector only. On the contrary, planners are expected to have been influenced by developments in other public policy fields and by ideas developed in corporate management. This suggests that there are some generic elements pertaining to strategic planning as such, although the elements chosen and how they are operationalized can be expected to be tailored to the various circumstances and demands of specific policy sectors and situations. One example of this is the employment of visions as a model for steering Swedish public management (Waaranperä, 2013, pp. 5–7). SSP in Sweden has evolved, not so much from
formal rules set out in legislation and governmental instructions, as from taking part in
general deliberation by policymakers, civil servants, consultants, and academics engaged
in public management in general.

There are three administrative levels in Sweden, the state, regions (counties), and munici-
palities. There is currently no territorial spatial planning at the national level, and the
task of the state in planning is only to govern the planning framework via legislation,
directives, instructions, and policy making (Larsson, 2006, p. 245). Although the state
issues sectoral plans for infrastructure such as roads, railroads, harbours, and airports
of national interest, territorial planning is mainly left to the regions and municipalities.

When it comes to regional spatial planning, the situation is more diverse. Formally, a
regional plan may be adopted that jointly plans land-use and infrastructural development
for two or more municipalities. In recent decades, many Swedish municipalities have
begun to cooperate to manage public facilities such as fire departments, waterworks,
and secondary schools, and there has also been interest in jointly formulating spatial strat-
egies governing, for example, green infrastructure, water management, and public trans-
port. Counties also issue strategic documents concerning spatial development, as do
constellations of municipalities trying to create common development agendas
(Johnson, 2013). However, there is no statutory planning institution at the level of regional
government. In effect, this means that though these voluntary agreements and regional
planning documents may have policy implications, they are not legally binding.

Spatial planning in Sweden is mainly undertaken at the municipal level where the
municipalities exercise a ‘planning monopoly’, in that municipal plans do not have to
conform to plans or programmes at higher levels, although they must take national and
regional policies and guidelines into consideration (Thune-Hedström & Lundström,
2013, p. 73) and, of course, follow rules set in national legislation. Municipalities both
initiate planning and adopt their own plans. A county board may remit a plan on the
grounds that it does not conform to the law, but it cannot prescribe what a municipality
should do. This is part of the far-reaching devolution of political power in certain
policy fields in Swedish governance. While planners do the preparatory work, provide sug-
gestions and sketches, and draft the final plan, local politicians make the final decisions on
whether or not to adopt the plan. Municipal spatial planning is not merely a technical
exercise, but a political steering instrument as well.

Since the introduction of the Planning and Building Act (PBA) in 1987, there have been
two kinds of statutory plans at the municipal level: the översiktsplan (MCP), and the detalj-
plan, a local development plan. The detaljplan is the proper legal instrument regulating
development rights, and all building permits within its jurisdiction must conform to
what it specifies, although certain deviations can be granted by municipal discretion.

The MCP covers the entire administrative territory of a municipality, although the
possibility also exists of conducting an in-depth analysis for a particular area of the muni-
cipality or a certain planning theme. The MCP is a hybrid. On one hand, it is a traditional
land-use plan, mapping the locations of various objects, land uses, existing land regu-
lations (i.e. areas regulated by other laws), and areas of national interest. On the other
hand, it is also supposed to provide ‘strategic guidance’ (Thune-Hedström & Lundström,
2013, p. 72), mapping out the long-term intentions of the municipality and guiding
upcoming decisions rather than regulating them in detail. The strategic intentions under-
lying the MCP have been explicitly noted by legislators since the introduction of the PBA,
and repeatedly emphasized in government bills and communications, as well as in amendments to the PBA. However, the actual content and making of the plan are not regulated in detail, leaving considerable scope for local discretion, providing that the few compulsory items are dealt with accordingly and that the planning process follows the rules. Also, the MCP is not legally binding for the municipality or its citizens, although it is statutory, meaning that all municipalities must have one. The PBA also states that the plan must be kept up to date, although it is up to the municipality to decide whether or not an existing plan is valid.

Looking for the strategic in Swedish municipal spatial planning

The story of the municipality in the present and future

An important part of constructing a strategic framework is situating the municipality in the world, i.e. presenting how the planners understand and make sense of their situation (Faludi, 2000, p. 300). Most plans dwell extensively on the municipalities’ position and role within the county, not least how they relate to strategies formulated at the regional level of government. In fact, many municipal plans not only reiterate the goals and strategies of the regional plans, but also discuss how they can be adopted and implemented in the municipalities in question. National and international goals and challenges are treated less meticulously, usually merely invoked as something to be striven for, but with no explanation given as to how.

The strong alignment with regional goals, policies, and strategies shows that the outlook and environmental scanning are largely dependent on existing narratives produced at the regional level, rather than on the independent discussion of current trends of significance for development in the municipality. Not all MCPs stop at county borders however, extending their regional outlook towards neighbouring counties and major cities of importance, which illustrate how some municipalities build their worldviews on a geographical basis, and not only by referring to formal documents at the county level.

‘The region’ is thus a strong narrative, but other major narratives occur as well. What sets the latter apart is that their main theme has another focus, though they do not stray far from the regional theme as such. According to the normative model used here, strategic planning should be carefully tailored to local conditions and challenges (Albrechts, 2004; Healey, 2009), apparently contradicting the regional perspective found in the plans. However, considering the importance of the regional cooperation, coordination, and (non-mandatory) planning currently emerging in Sweden (Johnson, 2013, p. 109), it might make perfect sense to focus on the regional level. One way of taking stock of local conditions and challenges could be to position the municipality in a regional setting, so a regional outlook could be considered a matter of local concern.

One way of looking at this is to consider how the municipalities communicate their futures, since an important part of strategy making is coming up with a long-term vision (Albrechts & Balducci, 2013, pp. 20–21; Healey, 2007, p. 180). The visions are generally characterized by references to generic national political and welfare goals, such as providing first-class schools, safety, good communications, a diverse and open society, and environmental sustainability. Common buzzwords are even more prevalent, with words and expressions such as ‘energetic’, ‘happy’, ‘quality of life’, ‘sustainable’, ‘positive’,
‘beautiful environs’ (unspecified), ‘full of life’, ‘trust in the power from within’, ‘responsibility’, ‘cooperation’, and ‘being proud ambassadors of the municipality’. Many visions resemble slogans, and indeed in some cases, the vision is little more than a slogan (cf. Waaranperä, 2013, p. 7). In other cases, the vision starts with a slogan, which is then elaborated on and illustrated. Overall, the visions refer to more abstract values, references, and metaphors and are not place specific, since local or regional virtues and features are generally lacking, although they do appear in some MCPs. There are even visions that embrace current planning doctrines such as the compact city, mixed development, and vibrant public spaces, adding further abstract values, but from within the planning community.

One obvious feature is that many MCPs start from visions formulated and adopted beforehand by the municipal council. This may be a formal way of implementing different steps of a lengthy planning process, but these visions have little, if anything, in common with the worldviews presented above. There is little to suggest that these predefined visions were constructed with a regional or local worldview in mind or that these visions were developed in conjunction with the strategic planning process. Rather, some of these predefined visions have come about as overarching goals for the governance of the municipalities as a whole, and are meant to guide all municipal actions, not only the comprehensive planning. This is made clear in some plans, which state that the MCP is yet another tool to fulfil the vision. These visions, then, are not tailored for spatial development per se, but govern all activities in the municipality. It is then up to the planners to translate these common welfare goals into spatial strategies that will fulfil them.

This emphasizes the fact that planning is political. Planners are ‘never detached from their political relationships’ (Newman, 2008, p. 1378), and strategic planning is both a technical and political endeavour. Unlike a business vision, a municipal vision must be reached through consensus, whether achieved through negotiations between politicians or by involving a wide range of community stakeholders. Visions of public authorities may therefore be expected to be less strong and to the point, and the MCPs studied here do not diverge from earlier findings regarding Swedish authorities (Waaranperä, 2013). In such cases, the visions will not likely be as simple, clear-cut, and bold as visions determined by business CEOs. Mintzberg (1994, p. 293) argued that a clear vision may be easier to come by if it emerges from a single person than from a group (see also Cherp et al., 2007, pp. 637–638). To achieve some form of democratic legitimacy, however, planners and politicians must formulate a vision that considers many different and conflicting interests, and the final results may therefore be diluted and rather empty. It is not very likely that a weak vision will result in bold and clear-cut strategies. The results indicate that when business models such as strategic planning are translated into municipal governance, the necessity of anchoring important decisions among stakeholders and the general public may disable some of the fundamental components of the model.

To conclude, the visions found in the plans vary considerably. While some are merely simple slogans, others are more detailed, even extensively elaborated. Regardless of how the visions are presented, they mostly centre on generic national political and welfare goals or buzzwords found anywhere. They may not represent the carefully tailored responses to current circumstances expected of strategic place making with a sensitive ear towards local conditions (Albrechts, 2004; Healey, 2007, 2009).
The next step in the analysis is to take a closer look at the effect of the vision in constructing the overall strategic framework of the plan. The MCP of Haninge can be seen as an exemplar here. The narrative begins with a worldview taking into consideration current global trends in trade and travel, footloose transnational business, and climate change, goes on to discuss national trends in urbanization and population ageing, and then focuses on the regional housing and labour markets, identifying important factors that will influence the municipality in the future. The vision is fashioned out of local circumstances as well as current global, national, and regional trends, and is made tangible in five major planning themes that shape the plan. Although the plan does not explicitly use the term ‘strategic’, it illustrates a reasonable way of understanding the concept.

The strategies in the MCP of Hallsberg are also based on the content of the vision, but with a twist. The vision itself does not originate from the planning process, but from four strategic areas identified beforehand by the local council. These four areas are to guide the strategic work in the municipality in general, including in spatial planning. It should be noted, however, that the identified strategic areas could themselves be considered part of the vision, as they convey only generic welfare goals and buzzwords, such as a ‘sustainable municipality’, ‘lifelong learning’, ‘inclusion’, and ‘good service’. It seems as though the four major strategic areas in Hallsberg have been confused with visions.

In most cases, however, the visions have little to do with the strategic framework, regardless of whether the vision was adopted while making the plan or before the planning process. One important reason for this is the abstract nature of most visions, especially when they are merely slogans. The municipality of Hedemora has even inverted the idea of letting a vision lead the spatial planning process, by claiming that the MCP is the vision, and a similar approach has been taken by the municipality of Landskrona.

Making priorities and identifying strategies

One important feature of strategic planning is that it is about reducing uncertainty and prioritizing, so a strategic plan needs to identify priorities in order to come up with strategies for accomplishing them (Albrechts, 2004, pp. 751–752; Healey, 2009, p. 449). In general, all MCPs studied here are narrated so as to seemingly invite strategic application. They start with an introduction describing the goals and visions of the municipality, as well as major challenges and necessary conditions, which more often than not are followed by what can be seen as overarching strategies, whether or not they are explicitly called this. Some plans explicitly refer to strategies, while others call them working areas, priorities, themes, strategic areas, planning directions, and focus or development areas. Most MCPs list between five and ten themes, sometimes traditionally labelled, for example, as ‘housing’, ‘communications’, and ‘living in the countryside’, and often associated with positive attributes such as attractiveness, sustainability, and inclusiveness.

If the plan lists a limited number of themes, it is doing the job it is supposed to do, namely, prioritizing. However, after the introduction of the MCP follows the actual planning document, which is more conventional, often totalling 100–150 pages divided into several generic themes and geographic subdivisions. The plan usually contains extensive factual information describing the municipality, but also general policy statements as well as more detailed information concerning future land uses or actions to be taken. In this part of the MCP, the overarching strategies are complemented with several additional
strategies, standpoints, recommendations, or guiding principles, which can number up to 50–100, and in one case over 300. The sheer number of items in many plans is apparently intended to control uncertainty, rather than keeping the door open for alternative options, calling into question the strategic nature or performative capability of the plans (Laurian et al., 2004, p. 472). The narrative is thus one of being in charge, and of the municipalities having considered every conceivable aspect and ‘demanding certainty’ (Berglund Snodgrass, 2016) concerning those circumstances over which they have control. The MCP tells a story of efficiency, of a local government able to act, adapt to, and mitigate climate change, to reduce vulnerability, accept challenges, enhance liveability, strengthen existing infrastructure, and so on. By creating a strategic frame, the intention of the plan is to ‘reduce the incapacity which often accompanies doubts and uncertainties’ (Healey, 2009, p. 451), and to take control of the future.

When overarching strategies are translated into routines of practice, the plan becomes more of a catalogue, and every strategy, theme, or geographic area of the municipality generates a long list of detailed instructions. Here, the messages sent by the overarching strategies tend to dissolve into a plethora of petty decisions, making the MCP more of a manual for conducting daily chores than a future-oriented document with a focus on ‘what is most important’ (Albrechts, 2004, p. 752).

The impression is that the MCPs studied here may well be strategic in that they identify priority areas, but their tendency to provide detailed instructions and recommendations for almost everything conceivable blurs the overall strategic picture, while most actual strategies (whether called that or not) tend to be too limited, strict, and inflexible to constitute anything but blunt tools. The latter may of course become routines of practice, but more closely recall a tendency towards ‘strategic control’ (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 357) than ‘strategic thinking’, with the former being called inherently non-strategic by Mintzberg.

**Spatial strategies**

Although strategies or their equivalents abound in the studied MCPs, the same cannot be said of the spatial strategies. Only three of the investigated plans incorporate clear spatial strategies, visually and verbally explained and argued for, and recurrently used throughout the plan when appropriate.

Most studied plans present structuring principles of some kind, usually introducing them piecemeal rather than systematically. These principles generally concern development along certain corridors, in particular areas, or at junctions. Such principles may well be thought of as individual guiding spatial strategies, but they are seldom determined together in a systematic way. Examples of such principles range from ‘polycentric development’, ‘the compact city’, and ‘corridor developments’, to combating urban sprawl, all of which are more or less generic in Swedish spatial planning (cf. Persson, 2013) and not necessarily originally based on local circumstances or detailed spatial structures. It should also be noted that many of the generic structuring principles are often found among the myriad other strategies listed in the MCPs, and thus do not belong to a higher level of strategies in the plans, which could have highlighted their importance.

One should be careful not to dismiss the strategic potential of spatial planning in Sweden based on the few (i.e. 16) examples investigated here. Although this study has only found a few elaborated examples of spatial structures that can be said to have a strategic function, the
lack of such structures does not necessarily indicate that routines for practice are missing. On the contrary, the presence of generic planning guidelines, although presented piecemeal and sometimes without hierarchical distinction, suggests that they may be crucial in the mindset of planners, and carried out in everyday decisions (see Persson, 2013). Generic planning doctrines may thus work as a tacit strategic spatial structure. The problem with this, of course, is that they are generic, and more part of ‘strategic land-use control’ than of ‘strategic land-use thinking’, which concerns finding novel approaches embedded in local circumstances. This also suggests that most strategies are deliberate rather than emergent, not really being part of local learning processes (Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2005), and that strategic thinking (Mintzberg, 1994) as a way of identifying and emphasizing unique conditions and opportunities is poorly developed, if at all.

This could indicate a lock-in, a hegemonic view of spatial planning with shared doctrines occurring throughout the planning community. There are signs that this is indeed the case. The National Board of Housing, Building and Planning are currently promoting a model that might cement certain practices in what is supposed to be strategic planning. This represents an effort of the governing authorities to promote what they consider SSP in Swedish municipalities. Compared with the normative model used here, it is questionable whether such intentions will lead to a situated practice structured by the local specificities of time and place (Healey, 2007, p. 175). Following Kunzmann (2013, p. 31), one wonders whether the ‘effort to standardize … strategic planning in Sweden is becoming … extremely counterproductive’?

Conclusions

Finally, we return to the three research questions.

- Does current municipal strategic planning challenge predominant ideas of development and reframe the scope for planning action?

The studied plans do not challenge predominant ideas of development or reframe the scope for planning action. Rather than ‘breaking out of the box’ (Albrechts, 2010, p. 1115), the plans follow current trends, cling to ordinary welfare goals without tangible content, subscribe to a hegemonic view of regional extension, and deploy established planning doctrines. For example, the plans do not challenge, but rather support the prevailing growth paradigm (cf. Haughton et al., 2010, p. 230), corroborating the view that strategic planning is a tool for a growth-oriented agenda. The future is not imagined to differ radically and structurally from the present (Albrechts, 2010, p. 117), nor do the plans ‘move away from previous positions’ (Healey, 2009, p. 440), or invite radical and progressive ways of planning (Olesen, 2014, p. 289). The overall impression is that ‘the future is an extension of the present’ (Davoudi, 2009, p. 223).

- Do current comprehensive plans focus on their performative rather than regulatory role?

Though this question cannot be answered ex ante, a few remarks considering potential performativity are warranted. Any actual evaluation would have to wait until sufficient time has elapsed. It should also be mentioned that a plan might perform well in
implementing the policies intended, regardless of whether or not the strategies have been followed (Laurian et al., 2004, p. 472). This is inherent in any strategic plan flexible enough to adapt to new circumstances.

There are some doubts as to whether the studied MCPs can perform in the manner presupposed here. According to Faludi (2000), a plan performs its role if it gives guidance rather than detailed instructions, changes the mindset of the planning actors (Albrechts & Balducci, 2013, pp. 19–22), reframes institutional thinking, and challenges current practices (Healey, 2007, p. 25, 30). The generic character of the studied plans begs the question of whether they in fact will do this. As shown so far, an abundance of additional instructions may both blur the overall message and turn the MCP into a rulebook, and if these instructions are firmly rooted in daily practice, it is doubtful whether the plan will change the minds of planning actors or in the long run reframe institutional thinking and challenge current practice. For a plan to perform, it should be open and flexible (Laurian et al., 2004, p. 472), but the plans studied here are mostly ‘closed’ and replete with rules. The MCPs, regardless of their strategic intentions, might well have become stuck in the kind of analytic tradition that Mintzberg (1994) considered the direct opposite of strategic thinking. If this is the case, perhaps the MCP has become a plan to which planners conform rather than a plan having a performative role. Here, ‘conform’ does not mean conforming to rules as to what is or is not permitted, since the MCP is not legally binding, but conforming to tacit rules as to what ‘good’ planning entails, as shared within the planning community. The MCP then becomes a transmitter of planning doctrines, a strategic device with more persuasive power than the doctrines themselves. The doctrines in turn gain status through the MCP and will be accepted as important planning tools. If this is the case, or is to become the case, one might ask whether municipal SSP in Sweden performs or conforms?

To what extent can incremental adjustments to planning instruments transform planning practice and bring about a strategic perspective on planning?

A study limited to the actual planning instrument, in this case the MCP, can of course not give an extensive answer to this question. However, the point of departure here has been to focus on the instrument itself and its potential to change practice, as far as can be ascertained from the content and narrative of the plan. As the results have shown, the narratives in these plans are a matter of control and decision-making capacity, reducing uncertainty about the future, and showing the ability to manage future risks and uncertainties. The intention of the Swedish government to bring a strategic perspective into planning through mandatory planning may thus have been obstructed, since the results suggest that rather than implementing new routines of practice, planners have fallen back on established practices and the chores of day-to-day work (Newman, 2008), albeit complemented with an array of policy recommendations. Consequently, one may doubt the potential of the MCP to bring about a strategic perspective on planning.

The municipalities studied here range from small rural communities to populous suburbs and major towns, and it may well be that the intentions underlying the MCP might differ according to varying circumstances. Some municipalities may use the MCP to handle an expected major influx of inhabitants and businesses, and accordingly apply an overarching strategic perspective to developments, combined with local detailed
information. Others may see the MCP as a traditional land-use plan, but still provide ‘a vague rhetorical invocation of a strategy’ (Healey, 2007, p. 198), since the MCP is supposed to be a strategic plan.

At the same time, the MCPs tell a common story, albeit with variations and not always with a similar structure, suggesting that there is a shared though fuzzy idea concerning what a strategic plan should be like. It may well be that the strategic MCP has been moulded from a traditional land-use plan, with the new take on spatial planning having been embedded in existing practices, supplementing the latter with a blend of policy issues and vague guidance recommendations.

The important lesson here is that it takes more than just some minor tinkering with the planning system if one wants to make a fundamental shift in how planners think and act, and that gradual changes might become embedded in prevalent structures. A paradigmatic shift in planning may well require that the formal planning system is shaken up and restructured, and this Swedish case thus show that a too modest and conservative adjustment to an existing system might not lead to expected results.

Notes

1. This was simply a heuristic for making a selection. The information gathered from the websites was not always complete, and it was later determined that some plans had been finalized a few years earlier, but not approved until 2016. These plans were nevertheless kept in the study.
2. Comprehensive plans were selected for the following municipalities: Degerfors, Filipstad, Gislaved, Grästorp, Hallsberg, Haninge, Hedemora, Hörby, Jönköping, Katrineholm, Landskrona, Ljusnarsberg, Piteå, Solna, Almhult, and Östhammar.
3. A quick search for ‘strategic’ on the website of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges kommuner och landsting) confirms this.
4. As an effect of EU Directive 2008/56/E, Sweden is currently establishing a national level of planning for maritime spatial planning. However, it is not expected to be formally implemented until the relevant plans have been approved by the government.
5. What should be considered a direct reference to national politics or a mere buzzword is of minor importance; the point is that this kind of wording dominates the visions.

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