

# A ‘congealed’ Swedish planning community? Key constraints to planning zero-carbon cities and regions

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Climate change requires us to fundamentally change the way we plan and develop our cities and regions. This raises questions about the role and capacity of spatial planning in general and the agency and expertise of planners in particular. Based on 27 qualitative interviews with Swedish planning professionals, we identify four key constraints: the increasing politicisation and complexity of planning practice, a cultivated practice of bypassing planners’ expertise and a loss of control over their own professional sphere. Our findings suggest that the Swedish planning community is ‘congealed’ rather than agile when it comes to promoting zero-carbon cities and regions.

**Keywords:** spatial planning, climate change, zero-carbon cities, planners’ agency, planners’ expertise, planning community

**JEL Classifications:** O21, R52, R58

## Introduction

Against the backdrop of calls for a green transformation, increasing attention has been paid to the crucial role that cities (Mi et al., 2019), but also other spatial configurations such as regions (Galarraga et al., 2011), are supposed to play in reducing their climate impact. Such an agenda for urban transformation has been explicitly addressed in several policy contexts, such as the United Nations’ adoption of the New Urban Agenda in 2016 (United Nations, 2016), and the IPCC’s (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) Special Report on Climate Change of 1.5 Degrees, which includes a section dedicated to urban transformation (de Coninck et al., 2018). Likewise, Hölscher and Frantzeskaki (2021) underscore the role of ‘cities’ as a reasonable context for sustainable and resilient transformation as they provide the appropriate context for new local governance-networks, experiments, learning, innovations, strategies and new policy tools. Other scholars warn

about overemphasising the urban scale and instead suggest ‘multi-spatial strategies’ that take into account the multiple, but also conflicting scales of place-based environmental concerns and uneven spatial development (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020; Holgersen, 2025). Additionally, many urban transformation projects have not resulted in significant action and have been criticised for being nothing more than empty signifiers (Westman and Castán Broto, 2022). Much of the transformation required to reduce the impact of climate change on a broader scale must be implemented at a local level in order to enable an immediate and effective response, which requires multi-level governance capacities. However, a key question is how place-based actions, which are so urgently required, can be implemented while taking into account the specific characteristics of different territories and the prevailing institutional contexts in cities and regions.

This brings us to the role and capacity of spatial planning in general, and the expertise and agency of public

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planners in particular. Here, we understand spatial planning in the European tradition to be an inclusive and generic term that encompasses various planning styles and types of places and territories (e.g. urban, metropolitan and rural), as well as different scales (e.g. local, regional and national). Following this notion, spatial planning goes beyond traditional land-use planning by coordinating other sectoral policies, goals and purposes, and by promoting, guiding, enhancing and controlling different forms of development and land-use activities, in order to facilitate the sustainable use of resources (Nadin et al., 2024). This requires spatial planners to take on several roles as leaders of change, analysts, designers, visionaries, political advisors, mediators and managers, engaging with multi- and transdisciplinary communities of practice (ECTP-CEU, 2013; Varş Husar et al., 2023). As Suitner and Levin-Keitel (2025) recently argued, spatial planning and planners provide a wealth of spatial, instrumental and future literacies. These literacies are key to finally achieving sustainable transitions (ibid., 2025, 10). In other words, spatial planning is essential for translating the systemic knowledge of transition studies into local contexts where transformative change ultimately occurs.

In the context of this paper, we conceptualise the expertise of public spatial planners in line with the latest AESOP (Association of European Schools of Planning) core curriculum, which depicts a number of knowledge fields, or substantial planning expertise (such as processes of spatial change, understanding of the natural and built environment or the political, legal, institutional and cultural context of planning) and practical competences, or generic expertise (such as integration of different types of knowledges or managing complexity and change) that are 'deemed vital for spatial planners at the start of the 21st century' (AESOP, 2024, 1) and thus 'serve as a benchmark' (ibid) for planning education. The core curriculum also defines several attitudes and responsibilities that planners should strive for such as social and transdisciplinary learning, respecting planetary limits, but also for '[e]xpert independence [by] [m]aking ethical decisions based on knowledge and research, not on temporary politics' (AESOP, 2024, 4). The latter also touches upon the issue of planners' agency. This is shedding light on the planners' scope of action, which is influenced by the extent to which they can be 'self-driven and creative in the use of the resources' but also 'shaped by the constraints of institutions and the political economy' (Filion, 2021, 258).

The question we want to explore here is to what extent public planners, and their expertise as described in the aforementioned AESOP core curriculum are actually able to act as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983; Willson, 2020) and creative thinkers (Albrechts, 2005; Filion, 2021) as these are qualities that are often asked for to promote the required transformative change within their professional sphere (Othengrafen and Levin-Keitel, 2019). However, a re-

cent study of interviews with key representatives from European planning schools suggests that a clear understanding of what planning for carbon-free cities means for planning education, as well as for the expertise and agency of the next generation of planners, has yet to be developed (Schmitt and Magnusson, 2024). Nonetheless, in this paper, we aim to explore whether today's public planners are adequately prepared for the challenges ahead (Albrechts, 2010). Alternatively, is the issue of climate change still too significant for spatial planning, as Campbell (2006) suggested many years ago, due to the political, institutional and organisational context that may limit planners' autonomy?

It is argued widely in the literature that sustainable urban or regional transformations necessitate innovative or even experimental forms of local governance (Hölscher et al., 2019). In this debate the question arises how progressive policies can be implemented or how a favourable context for social and technological innovations can be created, for instance with the help of urban living labs to showcase opportunities on the ground (Fuenfschilling et al., 2019; Kronsell and Mukhtar-Landgren, 2018). This prompts the immediate question how the expertise of public planners in their ascribed roles as 'change agents, future-makers and -shapers, community heroes, justice distributors, deliberative or reflective practitioners' (Tasan-Kok and Oranje, 2018, 4) actually matter and about their agency 'to look at the prospects of new ideas and breaking-out-of-the-box' (Albrechts, 2018, 289).

These issues are in the focus of this paper by taking the Swedish spatial planning community as an example, which encapsulates individual planning professionals working for different public institutions (e.g., municipalities, regions and national public agencies), but also representatives from consulting firms and some other types of organisations and associations. Drawing upon 27 qualitative interviews, we discuss how planners perceive the political, institutional and organisational context in which they are embedded, how this context affects the role and impact of their expertise as well as their agency to promote the transformation towards zero-carbon cities and regions. More specifically we identified four key constraints in planning zero-carbon cities and regions: (1) the intricate relationship between public planners and politicians, (2) the increasing complexity of planning processes with regard to integrating different interests and regulations, (3) the organisational aspects of planning institutions (e.g. the downsizing of municipal organisations), which supports a cultivated practice of bypassing the public planners' expertise rather than mobilising it in decision-making processes, and, finally, (4) the self-perception of planners with regard to their own professional sphere. Through these constraints, we problematise the increasing routinisation of planners' every day-work that leads to difficulties in prioritising more long-term, substantial and concrete

actions and interventions necessary for combatting climate change. Overall, the four constraints influence the way planners' think about their agency regarding utilising their expertise more effectively. In the end, we argue that the Swedish planning community can be rather described as congealed than agile, flexible or adaptive, despite the urgent need for transformative, creative and more radical actions. Our study thus offers a complementary perspective on climate action in cities and regions by contributing to the debate on the specific roles of public planners as potential change agents due to their location-specific knowledge, their various practical competences, and social and ethical responsibilities as well as multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral perspectives (AESOP, 2024).

In the remainder of the paper, we first discuss the literature on how the planners' expertise and agency is connected to planning practices with a focus on the extent to which they own control of their own professional sphere. After that we describe the design and implementation of our empirical analysis. In the following section we contextualise Swedish planning practice and the Swedish planning community. This is then followed by an analysis of a number of voices from the Swedish planning community along our four identified key constraints in relation to planning for zero-carbon cities and regions. We finalise the paper with a concluding discussion.

## Theoretical foundations

It is often claimed that a key characteristic of planning is to connect forms of knowledge with forms of action in the public domain (Friedmann, 1987). This view has triggered a wide debate within planning studies, for instance regarding how the connection of knowledge and action can be construed from a theoretical perspective (Rydin, 2007; Davoudi, 2015) and how this connection can be analysed in view of real planning situations (Campbell, 2012). Davoudi (2015), for instance, conceptualises planning as practice of knowing. She claims that planning is related to multiple forms of knowing (knowing what, knowing how, knowing to what end), which provide the foundation for the act of practical judgement challenging the mechanical and thus unrealistic assumptions of the rational planning model concerning the relation between knowledge and decision-making. Instead Davoudi (2015, 317) suggests 'knowing is not a simple matter of taking in knowledge'. It is rather an iterative social, collective, but also contested process, which is characterised by pragmatism, norms, values and specific purposes and situations. Therefore, it is important to understand how public planners' knowledge and expertise connect to actions within a given socio-political context, in order to explain why ambitious zero-carbon goals are failing to materialise in planning practice (Kenis and Lievens, 2017).

It seems that we find ourselves in a dialectical situation in which we must emphasise the extensive expertise of planners and provide them with an opportunity to express their views. This is particularly important given the ongoing knowledge-intensive socio-ecological and technical transformation process (Elsmore and Congreve, 2022; Suitner and Levin-Keitel, 2025). At the same time, however, there are several tendencies that undermine the call to acknowledge the expertise of planners. Firstly, there is the risk that the planners' substantial planning expertise is pushed back due to the often-contradicting aspirations from a variety of actors within which planners need to navigate. The assessment and weighing up of different knowledge claims may result in rather generic articulations of what should be done by planners. Hence, they may find themselves acting as generalists rather than experts or specialists (Campbell, 2014; Othengrafen and Levin-Keitel, 2019).

Secondly, we are witnessing a widespread wariness regarding the trustworthiness of knowledge and expertise throughout society in general, since 'our contemporary society is confronting a crisis of truth, as facts and fakes are conflated and disseminated across both digital and spatial communities' (Gudowsky and Rosa, 2019, 24). This wariness could potentially further constrain the relationship between politicians who make decisions and planners who deliver decision support. Thirdly, responses to transformation towards climate neutrality are increasingly experimental, with a project logic being taken for granted (Fuenfschilling et al., 2019). This projectification of transformation processes not only induces short-termism and unambitious incrementalism but can also lead to the inclusion of expertise stemming from actors outside responsible public planning institutions, such as consultancies, architectural firms, community agencies and IT companies (Robin and Acuto, 2023; Torrens and von Wirth, 2021). In many cases, transformative projects are managed by local industry offices rather than municipal planning offices, despite their direct relevance to central spatial planning issues (Grundel and Trygg, 2024). We argue that this trend has serious consequences, as it shifts planners' focus from providing substantial planning expertise to managing (e.g. AESOP, 2024).

The results of these tendencies can be observed in empirical studies contributing to the debate of the factual agency of planning (Filion, 2021; Rokem and Allegra, 2016), or more specifically, of individual planners as prospective change agents who are supposed to promote the transformation towards carbon-free cities and regions. In a recent study based on interviews with programme directors and other teachers involved in different European schools of planning, the opportunities offered by technological advances were valued, as well as the need to consider the implications for processes. This includes dealing with different, often highly politicised and contested knowledge

claims that could challenge the prevailing notion of public planners acting as seemingly neutral process managers (Schmitt and Magnusson, 2024). Based on interviews with Swedish municipal planners, Grange (2017) criticises that this self-image is problematic as it advocates an unwillingness to give voice to professional judgement. She argues that planners are silenced by the ongoing politicisation of planning that follows a neo-liberal logic favouring efficiency instead of encouraging them to act as guardians of democracy and to question, for instance, taken-for-granted beliefs with the help of their expertise. In other words, Grange (2017) points at the limited agency of planners who are supposed to be loyal to the politically governed institutions with which they are affiliated with and proposes instead to promote a critical ethos within the planning profession. In other words, public planners seem reluctant to exercise leadership and apply their expertise (Johnson 2018) due to the clear division of responsibilities between themselves and politicians.

Similarly, Filon (2021) demonstrates that, despite being portrayed as autonomous social actors who recognise discretion and reflection, planners' factual agency is limited and shaped by factors such as available resources and prevailing constraints defined by the state apparatus and shifting political economic circumstances. For our analysis, this means shedding light on the expertise of public planners, which is shaped, challenged and developed by the political, institutional and organisational environments in which they work (Mäntyselä et al., 2023). Therefore, we explore how public planners' expertise is shaped by the political and institutional context, in order to assess the scope of their agency and their understanding of their role.

## Design and implementation of empirical analysis

Our paper builds on semi-structured interviews conducted with planners employed by Swedish municipalities, regions, national public agencies, consulting firms and other types of organisations and associations that are important in the Swedish planning context, specifically in view of planning of zero-carbon cities and regions. A total of 27 interviews were conducted between fall 2023 and spring 2025. Our intention was to have a balanced mix of municipalities and regions in terms of size and geographical distribution. Consulting firms were included as they often work on specific parts of planning projects, such as investigations, or provide certain competencies or skills (e.g. scenario techniques or impact assessments of planning interventions) that municipalities, regions and other public institutions require and order from them. In total we have interviewed planners from ten municipalities, six regions, three national public agencies, five consultancy firms and three other types of organisations. Crucially, our

informants include planners working either more operationally or strategically with planning of zero-carbon cities and regions.

Three of the 27 interviews were conducted in person; the remainder were conducted via the digital communication platforms Microsoft Teams or Zoom. All interviews lasted between 50 and 120 minutes. In the interviews we enquired about what expertise planners need now, and in the future, and where this expertise comes from to manage the changes that the climate targets require, and the public planners' agency in view of transformative actions.

Noteworthy is that the interviews were carried out by five researchers, meaning that cross-analysis and joint discussions of the results have been a vital part of the analysis. The analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge directly from the empirical material rather than being predefined. All seven authors of this paper shared the transcriptions of the interviews, most important quotes and other thoughts around the interviews. The thematic analysis was then done through reading, discussing and comparing similarities and differences between the transcriptions several times between the authors. Through iterative readings of the interview transcripts, patterns in the respondents' accounts were identified, compared and clustered into analytical themes. Based on this process, the following analytical themes could be distinguished: politics in planning, increasing complexity of the planning process, organisational aspects of planning institutions, self-perception of planners, multi-scalar challenges, geographical context and internal feedback loops/room for reflection, which may narrow learning opportunities, particularly in smaller institutions. For the purposes of this article, we have chosen to focus on the four most prominent themes mentioned first, as the remaining categories were raised by a considerably smaller number of respondents.

## Contextualising the Swedish planning community and the planning of zero-carbon cities and regions

Sweden is an interesting example because its planning and administrative system is characterised by strong local autonomy, offering its 290 municipalities a comparatively large scope of action at the lowest political level. Additionally, the prevailing taxation scheme provides Swedish municipalities with considerable financial power. In principle, municipalities have a monopoly on land-use planning, meaning they have the right to decide where, when and what type of urban and rural development takes place, provided their aspirations do not counteract national interests (Persson, 2020). However, municipal planning is also described as intricate, as it involves numerous professionals and perspectives due to the often-reported silo mentality of different departments following sectoral interests

within municipal administrations (Gustafsson et al., 2019). Their different prioritisations often lead to conflicts and tensions in the planning process (Isaksson and Storbjörk, 2012) and in the alignment of spatial plans in view of cross-sectoral issues addressing sustainability and climate change (Högström et al., 2018). The national state's role is limited to providing legal frameworks, policy programmes and safeguarding national interests. Regional planning has a rather weak position in Sweden compared with many other European countries (Smas and Schmitt, 2021). Statutory regional planning is legally validated only in three out of 21 regions across the country, namely in Stockholm, Skåne and Halland. The remaining 18 regions follow different logics in practicing voluntarily non-statutory regional planning in relation to their understanding of tasks, mandates and challenges (Bergkvist Andersson and Schmitt, 2024).

Overall, Swedish planners at different policy levels are supposed to collaborate with various public and private organisations (Trygg and Wenander, 2022). In addition, as in many other countries, an increasing number of consultancy firms are responsible for producing analytical reports in support of policy development and other types of assessment. This is intended to compensate for any shortcomings in terms of capacity and/or expertise at a time when the planning process is described as becoming increasingly complex and in need of balancing and integrating different interests and regulations with a tendency to package planning interventions in distorted projects rather than into coherent plans (Loh and Norton, 2015).

Together with many other countries, Sweden has signed the Paris Agreement to become climate neutral in 2045 at the latest. Overall, Swedish spatial planning is often seen as pioneering and ambitious with regard to sustainable development in general, and climate change mitigation in particular (Vanhuysse et al., 2023). However, in recent years, Swedish environmental policy at a national level has been significantly affected by the global backlash against climate action, as evidenced by the increasing number of primarily right-wing governments pursuing pro-fossil fuel agendas (Vowles et al., 2024; Malm et al., 2025). For example, Sweden's conservative government, which has been in power since 2022, has rolled back several carbon mitigation policies. These measures resulted in an increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in 2024, reversing the trend of decreasing emissions almost every year since 2010 (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2025). However, as mentioned previously, despite this shift in national climate policy, municipalities have considerable influence over local climate action, as demonstrated by the numerous ongoing projects explicitly aimed at carbon mitigation through spatial planning. A key example of this is the significant interest shown by almost 20% of Swedish municipalities in joining the Viable Cities Strategic Innovation Programme, which was set up in 2017. The programme aims to achieve

climate neutrality by 2030 through collaboration between municipalities, businesses, academic institutions, civil society organisations and government agencies.

## Voices from the Swedish planning community: four key constraints

As noted above, the assessment of our interviews resulted into four key constraints, which also structure the following section. The analysis focuses on how planners mainly in municipalities and regions relate to these analytical categories and how they reflect on their agency and future planning expertise to promote climate neutrality.

### Politics in planning — on the difficult relationship between planners and politicians

Since planning is intrinsically political, it is key to consider how planners' actions are shaped by their political context and thus the planners' agency, scope of action and understanding of their roles as planners. Planners do not only participate in and contribute to policy processes; their ability to navigate and act also shapes the outcomes of the planning process. In this respect, planning expertise is no longer neutral, rational and objective, rather, and in line with the communicative turn, the planners' expertise can be defined with respect to their ability to mediate between different public interests. This also means that planners' contributions to policy processes reflect not only their professional expertise and the application of tools, but also their ability to act strategically within their operating context (Rokem and Allegra, 2016). However, the extent to which they can act strategically and navigate the planning process is dependent on the concrete political context and the overall trust and understanding of the relation between politicians and the public planner as civil servant, as the following quote shows:

It entirely depends on the political majority in the municipality. It has always been this way. Different issues have been the focus for different political orientations. And then it also depends on the discussion climate between politicians and civil servants. How much the politicians rely on the civil servants' expertise and how much they let it influence their direction. (Policy officer national authority A)

The complex relationship between politicians and public planners is particularly at stake in the planners' work towards climate neutrality. In most of the interviews there was a call for a strong political leadership, supporting public planners in their work towards transformative change:

As you and I discuss this issue of strong political leadership. Without it, civil servants are quite alone in their work. Therefore, it is crucial that they can explain

why it is important to get decision-makers on board. (Municipal planner A)

The interviewees also highlighted that political courage is often lacking among public planners, despite it being essential for making radical decisions that will drive societal and ecological transformation processes. Hence, if public planners just follow their dedicated roles as implementers of politically taken decisions, they have limited agency to critically engage with and change the outcomes of their work (Grange, 2017).

The relationship between public planners and politicians highlights also an important aspect of the democratic system, that limits the scope for action of the former and thus, at least in principle, defines a clear division between the two.

We must cherish, our representative democracy, where we have municipalities with elected politicians who decide on plans, make planning decisions, order plans, the number of plans and so on. [...] A planner cannot do more than what politics allows. It is politics that sets the level of ambition. (Regional planner A)

However, in practice, there is a grey area suggesting that the division of tasks and responsibilities is not that crystal clear as it appears on first sight. The ability of public planners to mediate between the greater good and the will of politicians is one of the key matters of the planners' agency and expertise (Mäntysalo et al., 2023), particularly, as our interviews show, in relation to their ability to inform and sometimes also 'educate' politicians on certain issues. Hence, it is an open and context-related question whether public planners are limited in their work by politicians or whether they indeed can influence the outcomes of policy and planning processes. As many interviewees state, political goals such as achieving climate neutrality by 2030 are often vaguely described in policy documents. This gives public planners quite a lot of flexibility to interpret the goal and decide the best way forward.

Another issue that emerged from the interviews was the increasing complexity and politicisation of climate policy in recent years, and the growing need for public planners to address political mistrust.

As an urban planner, you may find that politicians question you more frequently, and perhaps in a different way, than before.. [...] Unfortunately, even the seemingly neutral bureaucrat who just wants to present some facts when talking about climate transformation, for instance, inevitably leaves this neutral position, because climate facts are politicized. So as soon as you start touching on those issues, you are in the middle of big politics. So, the big challenge is how can I handle this? How can you balance between trying to follow a somewhat neutral, fact-based position and being questioned and thus right in the middle of the political

game? [...] So, you need to have some, well, specific expertise or what you might call emotional skills to deal with this. (Regional planner B)

However, this shows that the relationship between politics and expertise is changing. This may have consequences for the relationship between politicians and public planners, as well as for public trust in planners as neutral providers of expertise. In the context of the increasingly politicised planning of zero-carbon cities, this points towards growing scepticism about the reliability of knowledge and expertise, in line with Gudowsky and Rosa's (2019) research.

### Increasing complexity within planning processes

In 2011, the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning summarised over 100 objectives linked to spatial planning in various ways (Boverket, 2011). Additionally, the Swedish environmental goals, different EU-directives and the UN 2030 Agenda have permeated spatial planning. Hence, the number of objectives has greatly increased over the past decade, which is also in line with our interviewee's acknowledgement of the increasing complexity in planning and the need to navigate a plethora of public interests. This has also consequences regarding the planners' expertise, as it suggests that the growing complexity of planning requires public planners to be generalists knowing a little bit about everything but relying on others for specialised (often technical) expertise:

[T]he planner has so many different public interests to deal with. What a planner needs to know is where to look for the expertise that they need to bring into the planning process. You may not possess it yourself, but you have enough expertise to understand what the important issues are. (Policy officer national authority A)

This is consistent with Davoudi's (2015, 328) suggestion that planning can be conceptualised as practice of knowing, which is situated and provisional, distributed among different actors, but also purposive and pragmatic. Regardless of their affiliation to different planning organisations, all of the public planners interviewed emphasised that their planning expertise consists of both their broad generalist expertise and their substantial expertise in the legal planning framework. However, such legal planning expertise might also contribute to the understanding of public planners as generalists and process coordinators rather than experts in their specific field:

When I work with municipalities, I appreciate if the planners I work with have expertise in the Planning and Building Act. That's the legislation we must comply with. I feel that as a planner you need to be more and more of a coordinator rather than needing in-depth

expertise in a particular area, and that is because I feel that more and more investigations are required when drawing up a plan. (Consultant A)

Hence, Swedish public planners need to navigate a large variety of interests and regulations in their role as process coordinators. To some extent, this ties in with the earlier discussed complex relation between politics and planning: if there is no strong political will for climate neutrality, other interests are valued higher precisely because these interests are translated into concrete recommendations. In other words, when it comes to implementation, concrete recommendations are favoured over more abstract sustainability goals:

If everyone agreed that climate neutrality was the most important goal, it might be easier to achieve. But that's not the case. We must try to navigate between many different interests, and it's usually a matter of trying to identify the low-hanging fruit. (Municipal planner C)

### Organisational dilemmas inside planning institutions

In times of increasing budget cuts, public institutions are faced with the challenging task of becoming more efficient while reducing their size. Despite the added complexity discussed above, the interviewees pointed towards smaller organisations, even in larger municipalities. This creates tensions due to additional tasks, demands and responsibilities, as well as an increasing need for consultancies. This is because some of the required expertise might not be available within the public planning institution in question, as illustrated by the following quote:

Well, the number of in-house experts specifically with technical and specialized expertise have decreased in recent years. If you have fewer people working with spatial planning in a municipality (...) it means that you need to know a lot. And yes, there are many more questions that pop-up too, which may not have been talked about so much if you go back 15 years in-time. This means that either public planners need to know more, or you have to procure services, thus include consultants from outside the public sphere, to look at our plans from an ecosystem perspective or climate adaptation perspective or whatsoever. (Municipal planner D)

Our respondents verified that private actors, including consultancies, architectural firms, local economic development specialists, community advisory agencies and IT companies, are becoming increasingly involved in municipal planning. These entities operate beyond the traditional public sector roles of public planners (Robin and Acuto, 2023), which is also highlighted in the following quote:

We use a lot of consultants. And I think there is a need for that. It's a matter of specialist expertise. Therefore,

we need consultants with specific models and model calculations and analysis. (Regional planner C)

Overall, the increased use of consultancies is often associated with the growing importance of cross-sector collaboration in climate change mitigation and adaptation processes. It is also notable that some of our respondents reported that consultants have been used for a long time. However, their increasingly prominent role in the planning process is an important issue to reflect upon critically. On the one hand, the growing use of consultants can incorporate broader perspectives of the different impacts of a planning intervention and provide access to different forms knowing (Davoudi, 2015) individual planning organisations may otherwise not be able to mobilise. On the other hand, the use of these services is expensive, and it might also perpetuate a knowledge deficit in planning institutions. The key question, then, is how the increasing involvement of consultancies changes the demand for expertise among public planners. A common response from our interviewees is to emphasise that there are public planners with a general knowledge of topics such as the pillars of sustainability, urban design and the economy. They may also have more in-depth knowledge of a few specific topics due to their education or personal convictions. Our respondents working mainly in the public sector consider although consultants do provide specific expertise in areas such as calculations, model application and technical aspects, they often lack more specific knowledge about the local context (AESOP, 2024).

Another important aspect concerns the organisational structure of municipalities. With an increased demand for substantial planning expertise, there is apparently an accelerated need for exchange between sectorally divided departments, also partly because of their shrinking sizes (see above). However, we can observe an important difference between large and small municipalities (in terms of population) in the Swedish context, as the latter ones often do not have the requisite expertise as such and thus need to rely on consultancies. In larger municipalities, there is rather a matter of creating different channels for cross-departmental coordination and knowledge exchange. In the larger municipalities it is therefore a need to either promote more dialogue between departments or to restructure the organisation of such departments to bring various types of planning expertise closer together.

Regarding larger municipalities, I have seen a different problem. There is expertise, but they are not at the city planning office, they are elsewhere located in the municipal administration. [...] For those municipalities, it's a matter of getting these silos to talk to each other, and that's starting to happen now in [name of Swedish city] at least, which is positive. (Consultant B)

Another issue raised by our interviewees was the increasing use of ‘task forces’ or ‘special project groups’, particularly in larger municipalities when working on high-profile sustainable urban development projects. This can be related to responding to transformation challenges and the ‘projectification’ of urban and regional planning, where project logic is taken for granted (Fünfschilling et al., 2019), as well as to the increasing experimentation in planning, which is often criticised as part of a more general trend (Torrens and von Wirth, 2021). For such task forces, it has become increasingly important to work closely with other departments and their sector-based expertise and consultancies through networked governance, as well as to draw on external competencies. This could arguably be a potential way to organise planners and their expertise around climate missions. However, these projects are often short-term and isolated from the rest of the administration and its departments. Another issue is the loss of expertise gained through the learning process once the project has ended (Grundel and Trygg, 2024).

### Self-perception of planners — losing control of their own professional sphere

Literature on planning agencies often portrays planners as reflective individuals and creative thinkers who can initiate changes within their area of expertise. This implies that they have, at least in theory, control over their professional sphere (Filion, 2021). Here, agency is closely linked to perception. This implies that planners’ self-perception might play an important role in how they understand their professional role in sustainable transformations. These transformations require profound changes and radical new ideas, which are often not evaluated due to their novelty. Hence, planners as creative thinkers might be a perfect match for this call for novelty (Albrechts, 2005; Filion, 2021). However, our respondents challenge this self-perception of planners as creative thinkers and change agents, questioning the extent to which planners can initiate change. They feel that they need to stick to established routines, regulations and demands from politicians in order to avoid mistakes. If public planners are increasingly questioned by politicians, as shown above, this may lead to a fear of failure, making public planners more cautious. Many spatial planners think that:

Well, my job is not to make mistakes. [...] And I think that highlights a lot what the basic self-perception is. Then you do not get the necessary progress regardless of expertise, since you do not dare to leave your snail shell. (Consultant B)

This fear of failure may indicate a desire to adhere to established routines and rules, or it may be linked to how planners perceive their role within a planning institution. Public planners are embedded within local institutional

structures, and the managerial hierarchy influences their flexibility and actions.

I think that for public planners as civil servants, it depends on what room for manoeuvre their managers have, which affects what they can do. So, it depends on who is one’s immediate manager and the other managers above them. [...] Now I only have one manager between me and the head of the administration of the entire municipality. For a while I had three managers and then it is obvious that there are many people who have opinions and views on this or that. (Municipal planner D)

The quote highlights that public planners see their ability to manoeuvre and make decisions as being significantly affected by their degree of autonomy and the managerial layers above them, rather than by their own ability to influence their own capacity for influence. The quote also shows that the situation may change over time and differ between planning institutions, affecting the number of opinions and views that need to be considered in decision-making.

Some of our interviewees also highlighted the challenge of substantially working with zero-carbon cities and regions. While sustainability and climate neutrality are now part of many municipal strategies, there is a clear difference between ambition and implementation. Much of this can be traced back to the increased complexity of planning, with public planners spending an increasing amount of time on legally required investigations rather than finding new ways to plan for zero-carbon cities and regions. Another argument is that, although there are many opportunities for public planners to discuss sustainability goals, more tangible tasks still dominate their daily work, as the following quote shows:

In [name of Swedish city] where I was six years before I started at [consultancy company], the idea was good, they appointed a person responsible for working with Agenda 2030 and all the managers were involved [...]. They did this precisely so that things could happen. They wanted to avoid that planners are left with little room for manoeuvre. But in practice it is difficult, because everyone has so much work, and then you go to some joint seminars and then you go home and everything you have on the desk just continues. (Consultant C)

Clearly, there is a difference between ambition and implementation, which can also be applied to the distinction between testing new solutions and implementing them on a large scale. This requires a commitment to changing or replacing existing processes based on the results of experimentation. While public planners perceive that they have a lot of freedom when it comes to testing, there has not yet been clear acceptance of commitment to real change from

politicians. Consequently, while testing and experimentation within projects are perceived as relatively straightforward and flexible, the real challenge lies in deciding to transition from testing to implementation (Torrens and von Wirth, 2021).

I think there is a lot of room for manoeuvre for testing things. It's unproblematic, I'd say, and you can do a lot of that in project form. But the big thing is when it should be implemented. When you want to do something that is not just a test, something that is real, permanent and may replace something that has been there for long. (Municipal planner B)

Our respondents were also rather cautious about their ability to contribute to sustainable transformation. Decisions that are important for setting standards for sustainable transformation are often made in arenas outside their sphere of influence. This means that their expertise is not fully utilised in their role as agents of change. According to our analysis, public planners aim to compensate for this by focusing on more generic expertise, in order to work and navigate within the perceived action space.

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the extent to which public planners are able to act as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983; Willson, 2020) and creative thinkers (Albrechts, 2005; Filion, 2021), as well as the extent to which their location-specific, instrumental and prospective expertise, and their multi- and transdisciplinary and cross-sectoral perspectives, enable them to do so. These qualities have been identified as important for promoting the required transformative change within their professional sphere (Filion et al., 2015; Othengrafen and Levin-Keitel, 2019), particularly when it comes to promoting the transition towards zero-carbon cities and regions. We could identify four main constraints, namely politics in planning, increasing complexity within planning processes, organisational dilemmas inside planning institutions and the loss of control of planners' own professional sphere. While the latest AESOP core curriculum (AESOP, 2024) highlights that public planners should have substantial and generic expertise, the four identified constraints imply a clear shift towards generic expertise, such as project management, and away from substantial and technical expertise. This is problematic as our results show that the Swedish planning community can be rather characterised as congealed than agile. This is a significant issue, given that agility, adaptability and creativity are essential for promoting and enabling sustainable transformation (Frantzeskaki, 2022; Wolfram et al., 2019). Our study showed that a shift from substantial planning expertise to more generic expertise is not necessarily due to a lack of expertise among individual

planners. Rather, it is the delegitimisation of their expertise due to organisational issues within planning institutions, as well as often problematic relationships with politicians, that hinders them from utilising related skills and knowledge. Another factor is that public planners are increasingly being used as process managers rather than for their expertise. Furthermore, other actors are increasingly involved in agenda setting when working towards zero-carbon cities and regions. The increasing routinisation of public planners' daily work results in that planners have neither the time nor the mandate to break free from established ways of thinking and to act as reflective practitioners or change agents. The large number of regulations and required investigations related to planning projects means that public planners must invest considerable time in investigations rather than being creative and proactive. Such investigations have made spatial planning in Sweden a field in which many different professions converge more than ever before. This highlights the growing importance of planners in managing communication between different professions, as well as between specialists and politicians. Furthermore, this routinisation fosters a fear of failure among public planners, forcing them to do things by the book rather than testing new, creative, transformative approaches.

The increasing delegitimisation of planners' expertise also risks that the place-specific expertise of public planners being bypassed. This further restricts their ability to act as reflective practitioners or change agents. The general wariness of expertise as potentially fake, coupled with the politicisation of climate change, appears to be undermining planners' ability to act as neutral providers of expertise. Meanwhile, the use of consultants to provide specialised expertise is increasing, pushing public planners further towards generic expertise and leaving them responsible for compiling knowledge from different sources.

Although our study is based on interviews with members of the Swedish planning community, the four constraints identified, as well as the trends and observations discussed in this paper, are arguably not unique to Sweden. We therefore wish to express our concern that the substantial expertise of public planners, along with their other literacies and forms of knowing, is often overlooked or not utilised sufficiently as illustrated in our study. This ultimately restricts their ability to fulfil their assigned role as creative agents of change, which is essential for planning to play a key role in achieving carbon-free cities and regions.

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