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Planning Consultants' Expertise In Times Of Changing Planning Actor Constellations

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In response to the changing landscape of planning actors, planning literatures are exploring the implications that the extended presence of consultants have for planning processes. From relying on assumptions about “the primacy of public planners” in planning processes (Raco, 2018: 124), recent attention to planning consultants complicates presumptions about their expansion as singlehandedly implying a privatization of urban planning (Inch et al., 2023; Sturzaker and Hickman, 2023).

In this paper, we take cue on these works adding complexity and nuance to the role and impact of planning consultants in planning processes. Through an understanding of expertise as emergent and performed and thus in constant flux (Björkman and Harris, 2018), we ask: how are planning consultants conceiving of their expertise, and how do they situate their work in relation to other planning actors?

A wide range of consultancy types participates in planning processes. In the paper, we focus on planning consultants who work at major technical consultancy firms. They have experience of working for both public and private clients – sometimes simultaneously – and primarily within municipalities’ planning departments and developers. Often, they have worked for municipalities prior to joining consultancy firm, while still being a common feature in everyday planning procedures as public sector budget cuts and reduced in-house staff have had municipalities long-time hire consultants in their planning departments. These consultants thus carry responsibilities in forwarding planning processes, also when acting for private clients in developer led neighborhood plans, and draw on different skills in these engagements.

Across their engagements with different clients, the planning consultants were not merely concerned with advancing the clients’ interest. Rather, they crafted a position where they saw themselves as constituting a neutral partner capable of keeping in view the range of interests involved and navigate for them to be included in the broader planning objectives. This position is crafted to the backdrop of developers advancing private economic interests, and municipalities having maximized economic revenue guide planning choices (Zakhour and Metzger, 2018).

The paper is based on empirical work including ten workshops with consultancy planners, municipal planners and developers operating in the Stockholm region. In the workshops, participants mapped the actors that they encounter across planning processes and discussed the power dynamics between them. This material allows us to inquire how planning consultants perceive of their role in the ascribed importance for carrying forward planning

processes, in the light of how public and private actors negotiate tensions and collaborations with planning consultants.

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