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The role of strategic planning in ensuring sustainable housing markets in a neo-liberal planning context

Gro Sandkjær Hanssen ^a, Torill Nyseth ^b, Toril M. Ringholm ^b and Mina Benjegård ^b

^aNorwegian Institute of Urban and Regional Research, Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), Oslo, Norway;

^bDepartment of Social Sciences, The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway

ABSTRACT

The article illuminates how local government uses strategic planning in a context characterized as neo-liberalist-oriented housing market, to frame the broad varieties of planning and policy-instruments they possess to reach the goal of more inclusive housing markets. In line with other studies showing how European cities take passive, active, reactive and protective roles in their housing policies, our study of four Norwegian front-runner cities shows that their roles vary. Two of the cities, Tromsø and Oslo, have taken the most explicitly stated proactive role – by having a clear redistributive goal of ‘affordable housing’ and have established operational units in their organization (or by public-private companies) to implement it. All the cities have worked systematically with a more comprehensive housing policy, which have increased their ability to integrate their policy areas and use their different policy tools in a coordinated effort for more inclusive housing markets.

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1. Introduction

Urban densification and compact city development are considered to be important solutions to curb Co2-emissions and loss of nature, in a time of climate- and nature-crises. However, the compact city growth model embeds inherent challenges related to rising housing-prices, lack of ‘workforce housing’, increasing inequality, segregation, low supply elasticity and spatial segregation (Burgess 2000; Burton 2000; Johnson 2007; Ettema and Schekkerman 2016; Shahab, Hartmann, and Jonkman 2021). Globally, the challenges are addressed in the UN Sustainable Development Goal; in SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. To accommodate households at all income levels in all areas in the city, avoiding spatial segregation and clustering of low-income households, is at the heart of this. Also in Nordic countries rising housing prices have excluded more groups from the housing market, causing

CONTACT Gro Sandkjær Hanssen  groha@oslomet.no  Norwegian Institute of Urban and Regional Research, Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), P. Box 4, St. Olavs plass, 0130 Oslo, Norway

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spatial segregation (Mamre 2021; Hernæs, Markussen, and Røed 2020; Christiansen and Kjærås 2021), resulting in intense discussions about how to ensure inclusive housing markets (Granath Hansson 2019; Sager 2024).

Studies show that countries have different strategies to fulfill this goal, as there are local variations in housing markets, being extremely dependent upon contextual factors, as demographic changes, centralization and economic cycles (De Kam, Needham, and Buitelaar 2014; Mäntysalo et al. 2015; Granath Hansson 2019; Granath Hansson et al. 2024). They are embedded in institutional settings framing the interplay between market actors and the layers of public authorities, but also influenced by the strategies (and tools) local decision-makers adopt. Many studies show internal country-variations in how proactive different cities are. Shahab, Hartmann, and Jonkman 2021) illuminates varieties in municipal land policies among cities in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, and in a Nordic context, Granath Hansson (2019) show how Swedish, Danish and German municipalities play out their role in different ways. Our article contributes to these international discussions by showing that also cities placed in a deregulated, neoliberalized context of housing policy, play out their role differently. Norwegian local government are given a hands-off steering role in housing production, as land-use authorities, while the roles of initiating, developing and owning housing have been delegated to real-estate developers and private actors (home-owners) (Sager 2011; Aarland and Sørvoll 2021). In contrast to local governments in Denmark, Germany and UK, Norwegian local government lacks regulatory mechanisms to enforce private actors to provide affordable housing, and- there are no 'affordable housing'-like Allmenboliger in Denmark (Granath Hansson et al. 2024). Hence, hands-off steering by strategic planning instrument becomes of utter importance to respond to the challenges of more excluding local housing markets (Ringholm and Hofstad 2018).

Macintosh, Foerster, and McDonald 2015) and Stead (2021) have made an integrated framework, bridging strategic planning literature (Albrechts 2004, 2006; Healey 2004) and steering tool literature (Hood and Margetts 2007), and we will use this to illuminate local government, in a neoliberal context, acts to make housing markets more including. More specifically, we ask:

How do local government use strategic planning in framing and coordinating their own policy-tool mix (cross-sectoral mechanisms) and for framing the action of market actors (private developers, real-estate actors)?

The question is discussed by analyzing an empirical case-study of four Norwegian cities with population pressure, but varying in size and centrality. The article contributes to the theoretical debate about strategic spatial planning in a neo-liberal planning context, that is relevant in many European planning contexts (Albrechts 2004, 2006; Olesen 2014, 2023; Stead 2021; Kalliomäki, Oinas, and Salo 2024). Even if many countries have stronger regulatory regimes, private actors are often important actors producing new housing projects. Hence, the use of strategic planning for developing more social sustainable local housing markets is relevant for countries beyond the Nordic context. Using the integrated framework of Macintosh, Foerster, and McDonald 2015) and Stead (2021), we also contribute to strengthening the bridge between the strategic planning literature and political science steering tool literature.

2. Theoretical perspectives – integrating the perspectives of strategic planning and steering tools

In most European countries, social housing policies and provision have generally been subject for deregulation and neoliberalized trends since the 1980ties. This is also the case in the Nordic welfare-states. However, when it comes to planning, the neoliberal turn has been stronger in Norway than its neighboring countries. In contrast to Sweden and Denmark, Norway liquidated the planning monopoly, and private actors are allowed to submit detailed plans (Barlindhaug and Nordahl 2018; Sager 2011). In addition, Norwegian municipalities lack regulatory mechanisms that require developers to set aside a small portion of their units for households unable to afford housing in the open market, which are common elsewhere (Calavita and Mallach 2009, 15). UK introduced Section 106 in the Town and Planning Act in 1990, allowing local government to ask developers provide 30% of the housing as affordable housing, and this has become a key mechanism for providing affordable housing (Stephens 2019). In Germany the practice spread from 2009 and onwards (Friecke 2015; Granath Hansson 2019). Other Nordic countries have introduced similar regulatory mechanisms. The Danish Planning Act introduced a similar section in 2015, where local government was delegated authority to ask for 25% allmennboliger (affordable housing) (Nordahl 2018). Norway also lacks third sector housing-actors like Allmennboliger in Denmark (Granath Hansson et al. 2024). In Sweden, municipalities provide the production (and ownership) of a much larger share of housing themselves. Norwegian municipalities do not own houses in a large scale, as private real-estate actors plan and produce housing, and 76% of the inhabitants own their own home (SSB 2024). Social housing is not common, and local government are only responsible for supporting a small segment of the most vulnerable groups, with measures like subsidies for rental and subsidized start-up loans (Aarland and Sørvoll 2021; Granath Hansson et al. 2024). As a result, housing production is market-based and the main role of local government is to act as strategic planning- and regulation authority and facilitate for private real-estate actors' housing-production.

The system has enjoyed high legitimacy, but due to rising housing prices, a larger share of the population are defined as 'the squeezed middle' (Christiansen and Kjærås 2021; Christiansen and Nordahl 2024; Galster and Wessel 2019; Hernæs, Markussen, and Røed 2020; Mamre 2021), being excluded from the market but also from the subsidized start-up loans. This leads to intertwined challenges of lack of individual access and urban segregation, which requires strong strategic steering to address in a comprehensive way. A complicating factor is a *fragmented* municipal organization, with many departments having interrelated roles which are not coordinated. Hence, as our aim is to analyze how local government uses strategic planning for a comprehensive housing policy, and our analytical model is illustrated below (Figure 1).

Figure 1 illustrates the policy-fields of local government that are relevant for a comprehensive housing policy (large boxes). Firstly, municipal *land-use authority* is managed by one department (Hanssen and Aarsæther 2018), and secondly, *land-ownership* is often managed by another department. Land ownership allows municipalities to ask for affordable housing when selling land, also practiced in other countries (Christiansen and Nordahl 2024; Granath Hansson et al. 2024; Hartmann and Spit 2015; Shahab, Hartmann, and Jonkman 2021). Thirdly, municipalities can be a *housing market actor*.



Figure 1. Local governments responsibility being relevant for a comprehensive housing policy and tools (Inspired by Hood and Margetts 2007; Stead 2021).

Fourthly, *social housing* tools as start-up loans for the most vulnerable groups are often managed by a separate department. Lastly, a major welfare task is to provide *health and care-services for elderly and disabled*, which also include investing in age-friendly housing (institutions or in customized homes). Earlier studies find that *a comprehensive local housing policy*, integrating these policy areas, is needed to offer affordable housing to low-income groups and the ‘squeezed middle’ (De Kam, Needham, and Buitelaar 2014; Granath Hansson 2019). De Kam, Needham, and Buitelaar (2014) especially emphasizes the need for coordinating municipal property policy, land-use policy and affordable housing policy. Earlier studies show that this seldom happen in Norway (Aarland and Sørvoll 2021). The fragmented character of local housing policy is often a challenge for the ability of cities to act as strategic actors towards market actors.

In order to analyse how cities act as strategic actors, we need a comprehensive analytical framework. The planning literature and political science literature are often studying the same phenomena, without referring to each other. The classical categorization of steering tools are found in the NATO-scheme of Hood and Margetts (2007), the carrots, sticks and sermons-concepts of Bemelsman-Videc, Rist, and Vedung (2011) and in the governance modes of Howlett (2009), all treating planning as one of the tools available. The planning literature, on the other hand, describes a paradigm shift in the 1990ties, from traditional land-use planning to a more strategic approach (Albrechts 2004, 2006; Healey 2004; Stead 2021), being rooted in a different governance model than statutory land use planning (Mäntysalo et al. 2015). Strategic planning can be seen as a systematic process for plotting the future direction of an organization in relation to the demands of both the internal and external landscape of stakeholders (Berry and Wechsler 1995; Bryson, Edwards, and Van Slyke 2018; Olesen 2023). Even if these strands of literature obviously have much in common, they have not been systematically integrated before (Macintosh, Foerster, and McDonald 2015) and Stead (2021) developed integrated models based on the literature of strategic planning and the NATO-categories of steering tools (Hood and Margetts (2007)).

We will use their work as a framework for our analysis, where we are specifically interested in what make up the ‘strategicness’ in the municipal plans. According to Albrechts and Balducci (2013) and Bryson et al., (2016) the dimensions that make up the ‘strategicness’ in strategic planning are the following dimensions. Firstly, *the selection of long-term visions and goals that are flexible enough*. This implies thinking about the future in the light of key development trends, improving the effectiveness of planning by selecting long-term, transformative goals, being flexible enough vis-à-vis uncertain futures (Albrechts and Balducci 2013). Recent research emphasizes that goals must be *ambitious* (Bryson, George, and Seo 2022; Hansen et al. 2023; Vedeld, Hofstad, and Hanssen 2021; Mäntysalo, Olesen, and Granqvist 2019). Secondly, strategic planning aims at *integrating decisions* (Ringholm and Hofstad 2018; Nadin et al. 2024), as public authorities often are fragmented. Hence, a comprehensive approach, ensuring goal alignment and continuity of efforts, is important to avoid narrow sector-approaches (Bryson, Edwards, and Van Slyke 2018; Kalliomäki, Oinas, and Salo 2024). This should not lead to wide, opaque policy-choices – rather be used for sharper strategic choices, requiring strong political anchorage (Albrechts and Balducci 2013). Thirdly, such comprehensive approaches require *deeper coordination* between actors representing a range of governmental sectors and layers, and spatial scales (Kalliomäki, Oinas, and Salo 2024; Albrechts 2006). Thus, *developing context-sensitive operative programmes* to reach the aims must be part of strategic planning (Granqvist et al. 2021, 173). There is a strong system-thinking (Bryson, Edwards, and Van Slyke 2018), emphasizing the need to understand the dynamics of the overall system being planned for as it functions, including the interrelationships among constituent subsystems. Fourthly, more open processes is needed, with *broad engagement of stakeholders* in the goal formulation and collective visioning of the future (Granqvist et al. 2021), as well as in co-producing and reframing what a place is and can become (Albrechts and Balducci 2013, 18).

Recent studies have illuminated how municipalities work strategically in their land-use planning, in line with these main dimensions (Shahab, Hartmann, and Jonkman 2021; Granath Hansson et al. 2024). This is in line with a more general strategic turn in local government over the past three decades, as strategic planning have become a standard practice (Johnsen 2021; Guyadeen et al. 2023). As Berry et al. (2018) emphasize, strategic planning promotes strategic thinking and learning within local government organization while enhancing organizational legitimacy.

However, more analytical tools from the steering-literature are needed to analyze how strategic planning works – how it ‘frames’ the action of local government and coordinates their efforts and measures. Here Stead (2021) and Macintosh et al., (2015) have bridged the literatures of strategic planning and steering tools (Hood and Margetts 2007; Bemelman-Vidéc, Rist, and Vedung 2011; Howlett 2009). Stead (2021, 300) proposes that policy tools for spatial planning can be defined as all policy actions or initiatives intended to affect the decision environment and behaviour of market actors and to achieve desirable societal objectives, thereby showing that strategic spatial planning involves a much wider range of policy tools than regulation alone.

Thereby, Stead (2021, 300) argues that the NATO-scheme of Hood and Margetts (2007), that has for long been the main categorization of steering tools; is a good way of illuminating the steering potential in planning instruments. The categories are (i) Nodality (i.e. information-based), (ii) Authority (i.e. regulatory), (iii) Treasure (i.e. fiscal), and (iv) Organization, and they can be distinguished between substantive tools

(effectors) denoting policy tools that directly affect the delivery of policy goals, and procedural policy tools (detectors) affecting the process and procedures of developing policy (Howlett 2009). Stead (2021, 302) make a distinction between three parts of planning processes: (i) plan-making (and review), (ii) development control, and (iii) plan enforcement, in order to encompass all tools, and also shows that Hood & Margetts originally emphasized the stock of human capital and physical capital as important organizational tools (Stead 2021, 299). The neo-liberal new public management approach has drastically reduced the stock of public-owned-land and professional stock in many local governments, as parts of the outsourcing and contractualization (Raco 2008).

Another useful distinction is between visionary plans, strategic (spatial plans), framework plans and regulatory plans (Stead 2021, 300), as it nuances the planning tool that planning authority encompass (A, in NATO, Hood and Margetts 2007). Nadin et al. 2021; Stead 2021, 300) defines visionary spatial planning tools as tools setting out a normative, agenda, principles or goals for a desirable future, while strategic tools provide integrated and long-term frames for decision-making. Framework-tools implies policies, proposals, criteria that are (non-binding) references for other plans, and regulatory instruments are the ones making legally binding commitments and rights for land-use (Nadin et al. 2021).

We build upon this literature, aiming at deeper insights in how local government being placed in a neoliberal planning system, use strategic planning in framing their own effort – coordinating their policy tools and measures. By this, we contribute to international research, like the studies of Lee, McGuire, and Ho Kim (2018) and Bryson, Edwards, and Van Slyke (2018, 324), illuminating the linkages between strategic plans and other measures, as well as the study of Shahab, Hartmann, and Jonkman (2021) showing that German, Belgium and Dutch municipalities vary in how active they are in their roles.

3. Methods and data

The article is based on studies in the research project xx (funded by the XX), which have conducted case-studies in four Norwegian cities: The capital of Oslo (709 037 inhabitants,) 2023, as well as the neighboring municipalities of Bærum (129 874 inhabitants) and Lørenskog (46 933 inhabitants). In addition, the city of Tromsø, in the north of Norway, with 77 992 inhabitants. The cities are chosen to represent variations in size and centrality, but they are all experiencing population pressure. Considering the deregulated housing market and neoliberal planning system of Norway it is therefore interesting to analyze how cities use strategic planning and policy-tool mix to meet the challenges of a housing market under pressure.

In the four case-cities we conducted content-analyses of overall masterplans and themed plans relevant for housing, and also strategic steering documents – all being considered persuasive storytelling in the literature (Mäntysalo, Olesen, and Granqvist 2019). All cities have been in the process of revising the overall masterplan (land-use part), and we have had a special focus on how they perceive this as a strategic tool. Topics we have been looking for are how comprehensive their housing policy are, what strategies are presented, what sort of tools are highlighted, how much new solutions are highlighted, to what degree collaboration with private developers is addressed and what target groups are addressed.

In addition, we have conducted in-depth interviews with 23 key actors: political actors (councillors and mayors), planners and civil servants/ administrative staff, developers and external professionals.

Table 1. In-depth interviews.

| City | Position |
|---|---|
| Tromsø Lørenskog | Councillor |
| | Earlier executive for building permits |
| | Civil servant, municipal property |
| | Civil servant for elderly care |
| | Focusgroup-interview |
| | Workshop (internal cross-sectoral) on knowledge and input for overall plans |
| | Mayor |
| | Planning Executive |
| | Executive for Elderly care |
| | Civil servant working with activating inhabitants and local community |
| | Workshop (internal cross-sectoral, and private developers/ real-estate actors) on knowledge and input for overall plans |
| | Developer |
| | Developer, Neighborhood coordinator |
| | Councillor (Leader of the planning committee) |
| Bærum | Planning executive |
| | Civil servant, municipal property |
| | Planner |
| | Planner |
| | National Housing Bank, Eastern Norway District (responsible for Bærum) |
| Oslo | City government, political secretary for the City Governor for urban development |
| | Executive for a public-private Housing company (where Oslo participate) |
| | Civil servant, City District |
| | Civil servant, City District |
| | Developer |
| | Developer |
| | Workshop (internal in the Planning and building Agency) on knowledge and input for overall plans (4 participants from the city) |
| Total interviewees 23 Total workshops 3 | |

The interviews were conducted from January 2022 – June 2023, both digitally and face-to-face. Most were individual interviews, some were focus-group-interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and used as data. In addition, we have conducted workshops with larger groups in each city – discussing knowledge and input for overall plans. Here, about 5–6 civil servants participated in each city. The discussions were not transcribed, but taken notes from, and also inform our understandings. Even if the mix of positions interviewed vary, we have been able to cover a broad range of relevant actors. The study is following the rules of The Norwegian Data Protection Authority, which ensure that GDPR is followed, and we have conducted a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA), and sent a declaration to the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT) (Table 1).

4. Analysis: how to local government use strategic planning for framing and coordinating their own mix of policy-tools, and for framing the action of market-actors?

4.1. Do we find an integrated, comprehensive strategic approach to housing policy?

The literature stresses the need of *integrated, comprehensive, strategic planning decisions (alignment of goals)* – and that this requires comprehensive approaches (Kalliomäki, Oinas, and Salo 2024; Albrechts 2006; Ringholm and Hofstad 2018). As Norwegian

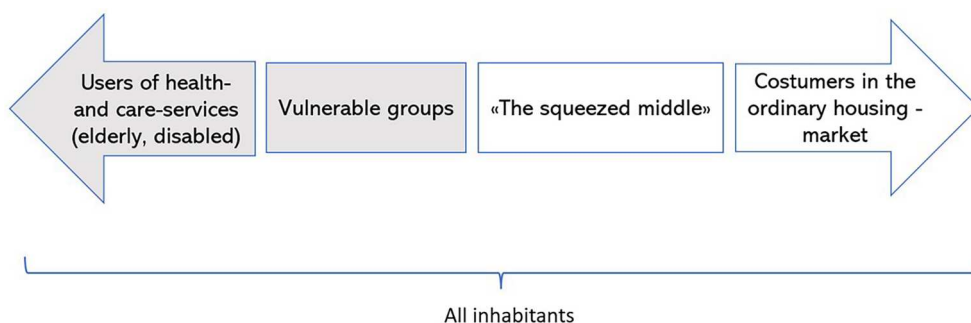


Figure 2. The target groups for a comprehensive municipal housing policy.

local housing policy is characterized as fragmented (see [Figure 1](#)), mirroring the general characteristics of public sector (Christensen and Læg Reid 2011), we were interested in analyzing *how* comprehensive the scope of local housing policies was in four cases. One of the indicators we used was how broad landscape of target groups they were addressing (illustrated in [Figure 2](#)).

In Norway, the most common target group of local housing policies is those illustrated in grey: Users of health/elderly care and vulnerable groups (Christiansen and Kjærås 2021; Christiansen and Nordahl 2024), while other groups are seldom addressed. Our case-studies show that our four municipalities are deviating cases, being ‘front-runners’ when it comes to having a more comprehensive view of target groups. They all relate to all groups illustrated in [Figure 2](#), including the new group of ‘squeezed middle’, which is the group that are not able to buy their own home in the ordinary market, but neither qualify for public social housing measures (subsidized rents or start-up-loans). These are low-income or moderate-income groups, often being the target group for affordable housing policies in other countries (Calavita and Mallach 2009; Granath Hansson 2019).

The cities in our study vary in their strategic planning approach towards this comprehensive target-group landscape. In Oslo, the red-green city government was one of the first cities addressing the challenges of the ‘squeezed middle’, more precisely in the strategy ‘New trajectories to owning your own home’ (2019). Here, they launched several pilots for new ways of providing affordable housing – both ownership and rental. The ideas in the strategy were only partly integrated in the societal part of the statutory municipal masterplan in 2019. Here, the city recognized the tendencies of segregation and exclusion from the housing market (page 34), and repeated that it will experiment with collective housing models which allow for meeting-places, and that it would build more (municipal) housing for youth and elderly (page 24). However, many of the formulations are general, and it is strikingly few mentions of models helping people entering the housing market as owners (‘part-ownership’, ‘rental-to-buyer’) Neither to the statutory plan specify the role of the city – if they are to offer affordable housing models themselves, or if private actors are expected to offer them (as they do today). Hence, the pro-active role taken in the strategy ‘New trajectories to owning your own home’ is only *weakly* reflected in the societal part of the statutory municipal

plan. Nor is the strategy visible in the proposal for the land-use part of the statutory plan from 2023 (to be decided in 2024/5).

Nevertheless, the strategy 'New trajectories to owning your own home' had strong effect on market actors, and spurred housing innovation among private developers, producing innovative models for rental-to-ownership and part-ownership. These models had the intention of offering market-based new trajectories for people to buy their own homes. Another result of the strategy was the establishment of a new private-public partnership company, consisting of the city of Oslo, the national railroad agency (BaneNor) and two private cooperatives/companies (OBOS and NREP). The company (OsloBolig) buys flats in new projects and offer them as part-ownership homes, being an operating tool for relieving private developers for the organizational burden of the part-ownership models.

Tromsø has suddenly taken a 'front-runner'-position in local housing policies in Norway. In the strategic housing plan 'Straight home' from 2023, they stated explicit goals for the 'squeezed middle' in addition to the traditional vulnerable groups, thereby widening the scope of local housing policy. Here, they also enshrined explicit goals of collaboration between the city and private developer. The need for new forms of housing is mentioned, emphasizing the municipal responsibility for initiating innovative models and be an instigator in testing out new forms of housing (p. 12). These ideas are clearly innovative, in a Tromsø-context, and cannot be found in any other plans of the city, since the masterplan is old. Neither do we find these ideas in the two thematic plans concerning housing: Housing-demand plan 2020–2030 and Proposition for building program for Tromsø 2020–2032. In both documents, the municipality's role regarding housing is concentrated on vulnerable groups. However, we find a glimpse of the ideas. Hence, the strategic housing plan 'Straight home' represents a new direction, but has not been mainstreamed in the overall plans yet. Nevertheless, it has reframed the role of the city to take a more proactive role. This is now reflected in the initiation and establishment of the municipal enterprise 'Tromsøbolig KF', and municipal company 'Arnestedet AS', which is an operative actors cooperating with CoOwning, a private company offering 'part-ownership'-models for 'the squeezed middle'.

Lørenskog, a neighbor city of Oslo, have the largest growth-pressure in Norway at the time. The need for a more comprehensive housing policy were firstly addressed in the *Municipal Housing plan 2019-2026*, where the scope was widened from disadvantaged groups to addressing all groups that face challenges of entering the housing market (including the squeezed middle). The plan presents six main strategies; where one is to contribute to a housing market that embraces groups who have difficulties entering the current housing market, such as low-income groups, first-time buyers, people in need of care, ensuring that all new residential areas have both variation and quality. The plan states that the city will engage in co-creation and interdisciplinary cooperation and alternative forms of living. The goal of cooperation with market-actors and developing new housing models has later been integrating in the new *societal part of the statutory, overall plan (2020)*, where 'Housing quality and inclusive housing' is one of four main goals. However, it does not target the 'squeezed middle' as explicit as the housing plan does. This is neither done in the new *land-use part of the statutory, overall plan (2023)*, the main juridical steering instrument for land-use.

However, we see it more implicit, baked into the collaborative approach for more innovative practices. In addition, the land-use part includes juridical guidelines emphasizing that the municipality should work actively with giving everyone the opportunity to acquire adequate housing, and points to housing cooperations as the preferred collaborator for the municipality. According to informants, these overall plans give them a clear mandate to be more cooperative with private sector actors, developing new mixed housing models, and frame housing innovation. The interviews reveal that the city also aims to use municipal property more strategically, selling land with conditions, to make their local housing market more inclusive. Hence, we see that the city has been able to widen the scope of housing policy to a broader range of target groups, and to include a broader range of instruments – also collaboration with market-actors.

In the city of *Bærum*, an increased political attention to inclusive housing markets and affordable housing for low-income groups has led to a broader scope for their housing policy in the latest plans. In the societal part of the statutory, overall plan, adopted in 2021, the goals are rather vague; ‘Bærum has inclusive and accessible housing, local communities and meeting-places’, not giving municipal actors a straight mandate to form a policy for the ‘squeezed middle’. Here an innovative housing pilot has triggered a clearer mandate being enshrined in the new land-use part of the statutory, overall plan from 2023. The pilot was initiated based upon two existing strategic documents, one mapping of future housing needs for the care-sector, urging more internal cooperation, and the other was an Innovation Strategy. As a result, the Municipal property department and the Department for Health- and care developed the pilot together (Vallerveien 146), where property was sold with conditions of different affordable housing models (for disabled, but also for the squeezed middle). In the new land-use part this model has been enshrined as a new way of operating. Hence, it is used strategically to signal to all municipal departments to cooperate, and have a broader approach. Since the Planning- and building Act does not allow them to ask for affordable housing-models on private land, the city states that the lack of instruments represents a challenge, thereby sending clear signals to market actors that they should, voluntarily provide affordable housing models. One guideline clearly try to stimulate this; ‘Emphasis must be placed on quality, new thinking and innovation for housing types, living arrangements and a more extensive use of common functions.’

Summing up, in these cities, we observe a major shift the last 2–3 years. The *newest* plans and strategies reflect a more comprehensive housing policy, and a more strategic approach. The scope is broader – addressing more than vulnerable groups, and also including the squeezed middle. This requires a much deeper coordination internally in the cities – as well as deeper cooperation with developers. In many of the cities, innovative housing projects and innovative market-initiated models (Ringholm et al., 2024) seem to have worked as catalysators for broadening the perspectives. When the innovative projects emerged, the landscape of strategies and plans they were embedded in were quite diffuse and fragmented – but were used strategically by actors to justify their pilots and initiatives. The lessons learned from the pilots have resulted in much clearer goals and strategies in the newest overall plans. Here, the cities reframe and widens their roles, to also being catalysators, nudging private actors to provide innovative affordable housing models etc.

4.2. Do the municipalities use plans as strategic tools for framing their policy mix (cross-sector integration) and for framing the action of market actors?

The mix of policy tools are often not strategically designed, but aggregated results of different sector-policies (Howlett and Rayner 2013; Stead 2021, 306; Hood and Margetts 2007). The mixes are influenced by contextual policy styles and ‘logic of appropriateness’ (Olsen and March 2004), and Stead (2021, 306–7) finds that the design and impact of these packages of tools is a ‘missing link’ in the literature. That is why we want to see if and how strategic planning is used to *frame and integrate* the mix of tools in use. We will look at the strategic elements of the plans, and their ‘framing’-function, when it comes to the coordinative ambitions and the redistributive ambitions.

The landscape of policy-instruments and measures is broad, and is summed up in Table 2. Here we have categorized the policy instrument due to Stead (2021) bridging of the literature of strategic planning (Albrechts 2004, 2006) and steering tools (Hood and Margetts 2007).

The table gives an overview of the tools of local government in Norway – in all policy sectors related to housing, and how the mixes differ in the case-municipalities. Since the choice of policy instruments depends on the strategies decision-makers adopt (Shahab, Hartmann, and Jonkman 2021), we will now analyze the role of strategies and strategic planning in framing and influencing the mix of steering tools being used in our cases.

In a quantitative study of one third of the Norwegian municipalities, Johnsen (2021, 393) find that strategic planning was widespread and perceived as useful by the municipal leaders. This impression is strengthened by our study, as all of the cities use plans as strategic planning tools for framing their mix of tools. However, we observe some interesting divergences from the principles of strategic planning that is emphasized in the literature (Albrechts 2004, 2006; Vedeld, Hofstad, and Hanssen 2021), namely that visions and goals must be ambitious, and at the same time *specific enough* to give the operative actors a clear ‘mandate’. Studies shows that ambitious goals work as ‘frames’ for mixing instruments, and can stimulate more comprehensive policies (Vedeld, Hofstad, and Hanssen 2021). Neither of our cities have formulated very ambitious housing policy goals, and they neither are specific enough to give different sector departments ‘mandates’. The informants consider this to be a challenge for overcoming the fragmented landscape of municipal actors, and achieving comprehensive effort from them.

Another interesting observation is that all cities have a ‘layered’ strategic planning approach. The new goals and ideas come ‘creeping in’ by strategic plans and themed plans, not by the mandatory overall (master)plans. Due to the time-lag of overall plans, in some of the cities the new goals had not been integrated. In *Lørenskog*, the Municipal Housing plan (2019–2026), had clear strategic elements, widening the scope from addressing disadvantaged groups to focusing on all groups that face challenges of entering the housing market (including the ‘squeezed middle’). The housing plan also have explicit goals of developing new housing models and cooperation with market-actors, and these goals have later become more deeply integrated in the overall municipal plan.

In *Oslo*, the strategy of ‘New trajectories to owning your own home’ represented a new, offensive role for the city in housing policy, taking a more innovating role, which deviated from their traditional passive role. In the new role as innovators, they



Table 2 . Analytical categorization of steering tools for housing policy.

| NATO | Description | Bærum | Tromsø | Lørenskog | Oslo |
|--|---|---|---|---|--|
| Nodality | Information, guidance, supervising | Reports on future care-need | Mapping the housing preferences (done by the 'task force') | | Affordable-housing knowledge-report, Three guidelines for innovative housing |
| Authority | Vision- and policy goal setting | Helping the 'squeezed middle' – but not stated as policy goals | Political goal of helping the 'squeezed middle' in the strategy 'Straight home' (15% of new dwellings should be «affordable» housing) | Cooperate with the real-estate developer | Political goal setting for helping the 'squeezed middle' – in the strategy 'New trajectories to owning your own home', presenting pilots |
| Strategic planning | (Narrow vs comprehensive scope). | | | | |
| Regulative tools | Overall strategic plans | Masterplan – Societal part with land-use strategy | Masterplan – Societal part with land-use strategy | Masterplan – Societal part with land-use strategy | Masterplan – Societal part with land-use strategy |
| Policy measures | Non-statutory strategies (for housing production, social housing, elderly etc.) | -not a strong focus on affordable housing | Strategy 'Straight home' | -not a strong focus on affordable housing | Strategy «New trajectories to owning your own home» |
| | Overall statutory planning tools | Masterplan – land-use part, stimulating new typologies and affordable housing for squeezed middle | Masterplan – land-use part (lack explicit goals related to the squeezed middle) | Masterplan – land-use part (lack explicit goals related to the squeezed middle) | Masterplan – land-use part (proposal) (lack goals related to the squeezed middle) |
| | Regulation authority | Detailed regulation plans (variation in housing/ flat size, qualities) | Detailed regulation plans (variation in housing/ flat size, qualities) | Detailed regulation plans (variation in housing/ flat size, qualities) | Detailed regulation plans (variation in housing/ flat size, qualities) |
| | Municipal housing | A small amount of municipal housing for disadvantaged groups | A small amount of municipal housing for disadvantaged groups | A small amount of municipal housing for disadvantaged groups | Active buyers of new municipal housing for disadvantaged groups |
| | Ownership of land, selling with conditions | Vallerveien 146, planning to use it as a model | No | No | Oslo, EBY planning to sell public owned land with conditions |
| Treasure (financial tools: carrots and sticks) | Incentives | | | | |
| | Tax is decided nationally, but property tax is local | | Local property tax | | Local property tax |
| | Sharing of financial burdens by developments | Used for grey, blue and green infrastructure (not affordable housing) | Used for grey, blue and green infrastructure (not affordable housing) | Used for grey, blue and green infrastructure (not affordable housing) | Used for grey, blue and green infrastructure (not affordable housing) |
| | Referral agreements | Use referral agreements | Use referral agreements | Use referral agreements | Use referral agreements |
| | Start loans (subsidised loans) | Nationally funded, distributed locally | Nationally funded, distributed locally | Nationally funded, distributed locally | Nationally funded, distributed locally |
| | | Ad hoc workshops | | | |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|---|
| <p>Organisation Property ownership (land, parks, housing) Internal coordination External cooperation, network and partnerships</p> | <p>Cross-sectoral organization (internally) Cooperation with developers Partnerships/projects with National Housing Bank Operative unit: Municipal company/ private-public company</p> | <p>Internal cross-sectoral group. Establish «Tromsøbolig KF» (municipal enterprise) to coordinate and operate Establishing an 'urban development forum' – a network arena with developers. Tromsø Housing conference Several</p> | <p>Workshops with developers in municipal masterplan Several</p> | <p>Routines for coordinating sector needs in zoning plans. Internal coordination group in overall plans Forums where the public agency (PBE) and developers meet New agreement with one developer of co-producing a major zoning plan Several</p> |
| | | <p>Established a municipal company 'Armedstedet AS', cooperating with CoOwning, a municipal enterprise Tromsøbolig KF'</p> | <p>Establishing 'Lørenskog I utvikling (association) and 'bylivsforum' – a network arena with developers and private sector</p> | <p>Establishing the private-public partnership (company) 'OsloBolig'</p> |

introduced a range of housing-model pilots and initiated an operative public-private company of 'OsloBolig' which buy flats and sell them with affordable housing models (primarily shared-ownership model). It also represented a strong political signal to the market actors, spurring market innovation as new 'housing-purchaser-models' ('part-ownership', 'From rental to byers'). However, the ambitious aims were not reflected in the revised overall plan.

In Tromsø, the most recent strategic plan for housing, 'Straight Home' (2023) gives a strategic direction for a more pro-active municipal role, reflected in the initiation and establishment of a municipal enterprise 'Tromsøbolig KF', and municipal company 'Arnestedet AS', as tools to reach the goals in the strategic plan. This municipal company is cooperating with CoOwning, a private company offering 'part-ownership'-models for 'the squeezed middle'.

In *Bærum*, the new aims came 'creeping in' by an innovative housing pilot – using the sale of public land with requirement of affordable housing models. The pilot had to find anchorage in steering documents, used the Innovation Strategy, and a knowledge report mapping the future need for elderly. Based on the experiences from this pilot, more ambitious aims (however vague) were enshrined in the overall plan – reframing their role.

In all cities, the proactive approach in the strategic plans are not reflected properly in the overall municipal plans, neither in the societal part nor land-use part. In some cities this was explained by lack of updated plans, but even where they were updated, they were less ambitious than the strategies. This finding is in line with the study of Johnsen (2021, 393), finding that the top managers in local government perceived voluntary separate strategic planning document more useful than integrating strategic goals in statutory masterplans. This was explained by many perceiving formal processes as too bureaucratic (hierarchical) for strategic work.

However, when the strategic direction were not enshrined in the statutory plans, not all relevant municipal departments felt they have clear mandates to align their activities to the strategic direction, and this result in a lack of coordinated activities. This is in line with the results of a study of strategic plans in 66 municipalities in Canada, where Guyadeen et al. (2023, 5) found a lack of communication and coordination between departments in planning and allocating responsibilities.

So much for the internal function of the plan. Earlier studies have also highlighted that strategic plans draw connections outside the municipalities to stakeholders that helped achieving local strategic goals (Guyadeen et al. 2023). Did our cities do the same? Our study finds that they all activated the strategies (and statutory plans) for strategic planning instruments for framing market actors and giving direction for the interplay with market actors. However, the informants express that they lack regulatory tools enforcing market actors to include affordable housing mechanisms in their project, which hinder them in realizing the aims of the strategies. The Norwegian Planning and Building Act does not allow them to ask for shares of affordable housing in private building projects, like have been introduced in UK (section 106; see Stephens 2019), Germany and Denmark (Granath Hansson 2019). In April 2024, a law amendment proposal was launched to give them this regulatory mechanism. Meanwhile, the informants consider the municipal steering capacity of market actors to be limited.

To compensate for this, they try to stretch the steering capacity by partnerships and cooperation, and sending strategic signals to market actors, stimulating innovative models. However, informants claimed that this interplay with external actors would have been more effective if they were framed by stronger political steering-signals in the statutory overall plans. Most of our informants stress that if overall plans are to have a strategic function, framing and giving direction for all the activities and mix of tools used, they need deep political anchorage. If not, the councilors will deviate from it in day-to-day decisions – especially when meeting protests from private real-estate actors. When overall plans and strategies have solid anchorage in the political leadership, they not only function as regulatory instruments, but also as strategic guidance for more network-oriented, collaborative activities. This emphasis is in line with other studies of strategic planning (Albrechts 2004, 2006; Mäntysalo, Olesen, and Granqvist 2019; Hansen et al. 2023).

In two of the cities (Lørenskog and Bærum), informants report that the newly revised societal part of the statutory overall plan are now enshrining the aims of the strategic housing plan. Thereby it functions as a strong steering-‘umbrella’, due to a planning-process that ensured solid anchorage in the City Council. By following the principles in the masterplan, civil servants feel they have a clear mandate to cooperate with private developers in a more operative way.

In the strategic planning approach of the four cities, experimenting and innovation was explicitly stated as necessary to reach their aims. The experiences from the innovative housing projects and innovative market-initiated models (Ringholm et al. 2024) seem to have worked as catalysators for broadening the perspectives. The lessons learned from these innovative initiatives has resulted in the formulation of much clearer goals and strategies in the newest statutory, overall plans. In Bærum, the cooperation model from the innovative housing pilot has been enshrined in the new land-use part of the statutory, overall plan, as a new way of operating. In

In Lørenskog they tried to adapt the Bærum-model, but met too many internal hindrances. However, this revealed the need of a more comprehensive housing policy, now being enshrined in the overall, statutory plans. In Tromsø, the strategy ‘Straight home’ has come in the aftermath of other tools for creating a better housing policy was implemented.

When summing up, we find a strong interplay between formulating strategies and (marked-based) experimenting and innovation, which later results in enshrining the strategies into overall municipal plans. Here, it is necessary to remember that Norwegian housing policy is dominated by market-mechanisms. Therefore the ‘layered’ character of strategic planning – is also a result of public sector planning being inspired and influenced by active and strong private sector actors, which initiatives (pilots) are later promoted through public sector planning, creating even better conditions for the marked-based housing solutions. This strong interplay can be explained by the chosen neo-liberal practice, where public sector being reliant on private sector actors to fulfil public goals (Nordahl 2018; Christiansen and Nordahl 2024). Thus, our findings support the view of Olesen (2014, 2023), that strategic (spatial) planning resonates good with the dominant neoliberal political ideas.

5. Conclusion

Olesen (2023) stresses that strategic planning, also strategic spatial planning, must make itself relevant and increase its political legitimacy by addressing the most prominent urban challenges. Unequal access to urban housing markets are one of these challenges, in Europe as in Nordic welfare states. Recent European studies (Shahab, Hartmann, and Jonkman 2021; Granath Hansson et al. 2024) have shown how municipalities work strategically in using the broad varieties of planning and policy-instruments they possess, for more inclusive housing markets. As comparative studies highlight the rootedness of planning in local organizational culture (Nadin, Cotella, and Schmitt 2024; Münter and Reimer 2023), how can a Norwegian study contribute to these European planning discussions? First and foremost, our study contributes by illuminating the use of strategic planning in a neo-liberal-oriented local housing market, where public sector have a marginal role in housing production and ownership of housing. Hence, ‘hands-off’-steering by strategic planning and by regulation is the main approach. In line with Gerber, Hartmann, and Hengstermann (2018, 9) we find that local government have carefully designed a strategic combination of instruments in order to impose themselves in front of other private (or public) interests and reach public planning aims. Our results also show how the strategic turn in planning (Albrechts 2004, 2006; Ringholm and Hofstad 2018) have increased their ability to integrate their policy areas and policy tools. As such, the contribution of a Norwegian study is also to strengthen the arguments of Olesen (2014, 2023), that strategic (spatial) planning resonates good with neoliberal political ideas. But the picture is more nuanced, and in line with Shahab, Hartmann, and Jonkman (2021) our study illuminates *the broad room of maneuver* local government have, and how the cities vary in how passive, active, reactive and protective roles they take in their housing policies. In the Norwegian context, we see that two of the cities, Tromsø and Oslo, take the most visionary, proactive role, by formulating clear redistribution goal of ‘affordable housing’ and establishing operational units in their organization (or by public-private companies) to reach them. However, the other two cities, have anchored their strategies more deeply in the political leadership, and integrated it their overall municipal plans – which increase the potential for them to be implemented.

From an institutional perspective (Albrechts 2004, 2006; Bryson et al. 2016, 2024; Berry et al. 2018), the findings also illuminate the *layered* and *incremental* character of strategic planning. Our study shows that innovative practices and changes in policy often comes *creeping* into the planning hierarchy in a discrete way. It often starts from pilots or practice, and then is *smuggled* into sector-strategies or themed plans, and are later enshrined in overall plans. And then, the overall plans ‘frame’ later practices. Hence, the study of Norwegian Local Government supports more general findings in international studies (Shahab, Hartmann, and Jonkman 2021; Buitelaar and Bregman 2016; Grødem 2014; Ringholm et al. 2024) that *innovative housing projects* have worked as catalysators for broadening the perspectives in the municipalities, leading to changing attitudes and planning cultures, also among the municipal leadership. This seems necessary to address the need for improving internal coordination of policy areas and initiate a deeper interplay with market actors.

As also found in a recent study of eleven European cities (Hansen et al. 2023), our study find that incremental strategies dominate, but more radical shifts can occur

when high-level local politicians induced profound changes, resulting in the development of new planning and governance cultures (Hansen et al. 2023). In our cases, the top political leadership are important triggers of innovative changes, especially in Oslo and Tromsø, where the new housing strategies represented radical changes in the *scope* – for the first time addressing ‘the squeezed middle’. The insights in the ‘layered’ character of strategic planning can help us understand the dynamics of the overall system being planned for as it functions, including the interrelationships among constituent subsystems, as Bryson, George, and Seo (2024) emphasize.

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ORCID

Gro Sandkjær Hanssen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8981-9669>

Toril M. Ringholm  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6488-8449>

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