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The expansion of 'softer' place-sensitive local planning spaces and practices

The case of transboundary coastal development and planning in Denmark

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Abstract for PLANNORD symposium in Norway 21st-23rd August 2019

Track 3: Integrated Coastal Development and Planning – future challenges for Nordic countries

Title: The expansion of ‘softer’ place-sensitive local planning spaces and practices – the case of transboundary coastal development and planning in Denmark

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Denmark currently experiences an expansion in the use of informal/non-statutory spatial development strategies and plans. Internationally, much attention has been given to such phenomena as processes of reterritorialisation and emergence of ‘soft spaces’ at the scale of city regions (Haughton et al, 2010; Allmendinger et al, 2015), also in Denmark (Olesen & Hansen, 2019 forthcoming). However, it is in particular at local scales that Denmark is facing an increase in various new kinds of spatially oriented strategy-making and planning activities that works outside, or in conjunction with, the formalities of the planning system, as defined in the Planning Act.

This illustrates a widespread interest, and ‘rationale’, for working with local development, urban and rural, in more place-sensitive modes. The aim is mainly to achieve a place-specialisation effect that makes the place meaningful or attractive to citizens, companies, tourists, etc., and also competitive in relations beyond the locality itself. The means are focused on the mobilisation and activation of tangible as well as intangible place qualities and local resources. Local civil society/community actors’ and local businesses and developers are often at the centre of such discussions, as it is assumed that they have knowledge or a capacity to act that can either be discovered or ‘released better’ in development processes. At the same time, external interests and actors often also become part of the process, e.g. in order to clarify external relations, include more general knowledge and experience, and to generate funding. Finally, public authorities and formal planning institutions may play very different roles in such processes; ranging from being initiators and facilitators to being ‘the last to know, e.g. when local community groups show up in the municipal hallways with their new ‘masterplan’.

This paper will discuss how such new and ‘softer’ place-sensitive local planning spaces and practices emerge and develop by looking into specific examples of coastal development and planning activities. Traditionally, coastal areas in Denmark have enjoyed a remarkable protection from various forms of spatial development. However, current trends are, that regulation is loosened in those areas, which makes it an interesting ‘testbed’ for looking into planning innovations that seek to reconfigure the split of roles between formal planning institutions and a range of ‘others doing planning’ without formal planning powers, but surely with planning intentions. The examples show the emergence and building of ‘real’ transboundary planning spaces (inspired by Faludi), and current efforts among authorities to move from a phase of ‘allowing random experimentation’ and into one of standardisation of how to proactively handle ‘softer’ and more place-sensitive local planning spaces and practices. Hence, this illustrate attempts at combining ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ planning spaces.