



Planning with power. Implementing urban densification policies in Zurich, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the debate on power in planning. It builds on recent developments linked with the so-called new institutional turn in planning. By bridging planning, new institutionalism, and power, the article ambitions to (1) develop a conceptual framework that captures the role of power in concrete spatial development projects, and (2) illustrate the potential of this framework with a real-life example of contested urban redevelopment in Zurich, Switzerland. The proposed framework provides a different picture of urban densification processes which are typically presented as eco-friendly and sustainable initiatives. Through its impact on the built environment and on existing rights and interests, redevelopment for urban densification creates not only winners, but also losers, especially among those inhabitants who cannot afford the higher rent following redevelopment in favor of density. Due to its conflictual nature, densification is therefore an ideal subject to study power in planning.

1. Introduction

Since the widespread introduction of political economy perspectives into planning studies in the 1970 s (e.g. Harvey, 1978; Fainstein and Fainstein, 1979), the understanding and conceptualization of what power is and how it is exercised has been a major topic of interest, research, and controversy in the field. These debates were revived with the arrival of communicative planning theory in the 1990 s (e.g. Healey, 1996; Forester, 1989), and received renewed attention due to the influences of planning scholars inspired by Foucault in the 2000 s (e.g. Flyvbjerg, 2002; Hillier, 2002). Although planning studies have a long tradition of questioning the role of power, there is simultaneously a strong appeal by many planning scholars to better take power issues into account (e.g., Jacobs, 1961; Fainstein, 2010; Metzger et al., 2017). Creating transparency over existing power structures – e.g. through improved conceptual clarity – is essential because power is a central determining factor of spatial development, including with regards to urban sprawl or densification. Densification is the process leading to compact cities (Bokyo & Cooper, 2011). The positive effects of densification on resource use efficiency (for discussion see Ewing, 1997; Kahn, 2000; Squires, 2002) tend to cover up potential drawbacks of the compact city for different stakeholders, particularly those with lower income. The policy shift towards densification in many cities worldwide

has made conflicting use interests more pronounced because of increased urban land scarcity (Williams, 2010).

In such a situation, transparency in densification processes leads to publicity and knowledge, encourages public resistance to power abuse, and improves accountability on the part of those exercising power (Albrechts, 2003). Only with a clear picture of power structures can a structured discussion—and possibly a renegotiation—take place about the unsustainable consequences of asymmetric power distribution. However, this requires analytical concepts that grasp power structures before they materialize in irremovable bricks and mortar (Flyvbjerg, 2002).

This article aims to contribute to the debate on power in planning. It builds on recent developments linked with the so-called “neo-institutional turn” in planning. Public interventions, such as planning, are appraised as processes impacting the distribution of use and access rights to resources (such as land, housing, or greenspace), thus potentially generate contestation (Gerber et al., 2000; Scharpf, 2000; Ensminger, 1992). By bridging planning, new institutionalism, and power, the article aims to (1) develop a conceptual framework that captures the role of power in concrete spatial development projects and (2) illustrate the potential of this framework with a real-life example of contested urban redevelopment taking place under densification. Even if the main objective is theoretical, which reflects in the fact that the

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theoretical part (Section 2) is more detailed than the illustrative empirical part (Section 3), this article intends to “move away from abstract theories of power toward methodological strategies for the study of power in particular situations” (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Due to its conflictual nature, densification appears to be an ideal subject to study power in planning. Densification objectives never get implemented on a one-to-one basis. Rather power games influence the way densification objectives can be implemented (Bramley et al., 2009). Powerful actors are those who know how to promote or protect their own values or interests. For instance, veto rights controlled by powerful stakeholders influence the way densification is being performed (Debrunner et al., 2022). Therefore, to understand urban social challenges under densification pressure, a close analysis of these power games is needed.

This article is organized according to its two main objectives. First, we demonstrate how including power awareness in institutional approaches in planning can provide a useful framework for the analysis of present-day challenges in planning such as fighting urban sprawl. Second, we illustrate how this framework can be put to work in the analysis of a densification project in the municipality of Zurich, Switzerland, in which tenants are threatened by acute housing shortages and the imminent demolition of their apartments.

2. Bringing power into planning – a conceptualization attempt

In this section, we aim to develop an analytical strategy that can grasp what power is in real-life planning situations. We provide the analytical tools to identify the places where it is exercised. Our analytical strategy focuses on a particular understanding of land-use planning as a public policy, which delimits our research field and specifies our approach to power, recognizing that “the concept of power is one of the most elusive in the social sciences” (Friedmann, 1973).

We proceed in three steps. First, we introduce a new institutionalist approach to planning that resonates with our definition of land-use planning as a public policy. Second, considering the difficulty of new institutionalist approaches to capture power, we define four “situations of the exercise of power” within our new institutionalist framework where power needs to be analyzed more closely. Third, we flesh out these four situations of power by confronting them with existing literature on power in planning and beyond.

2.1. The institutional turn in planning and the challenging connection with power

Institutionalism deals with formal and informal rules, as well as other social structures (traditions, patterns of behaviors, cognitive frameworks mediated by ideologies, worldviews) that are determinant of—and emergent from—the actions of the individuals (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Hall and Taylor, 1996). Institutions are the “conventions, norms and formally sanctioned rules of a society” (Vatn, 2005). As conventions, they provide expectations and regularize life. As norms, they guarantee stability and meaning essential to human existence and support values. They form the “foundation of our belief in the rightness of a particular way of doing things” (Abram, 2000: 353). And as formal rules inscribed in the law and property rights, they protect—and produce—interests (Vatn, 2005).

Contrary to classic institutionalism which often led to unraveling the functioning of institutions in a descriptive legalistic language (Thelen, 2003), the new institutionalist perspective postulates a mutual interaction between actors and institutions; the actors are influenced by rules, norms, and conventions embedded in collective action, while at the same time the institutions evolve because of the actions and decisions of the actors (Lowndes, 1996; Koelble, 1995).

Formal and informal institutions inform about the institutional opportunity structure within which actors develop their strategies (Vatn, 2005). The new institutionalist perspective is therefore well suited for research on the institutional system of spatial planning, which is

characterized by a variety of formal rules, plans and procedures, as well as informal rules, routines, traditions, and ideologies (Alexander, 2005).

In an effort to narrow our overall approach to the political dimension of planning, but without reducing involved actors to purely maximizing entities, we follow a middle way between rational choice (Webster, 2005) and sociological institutionalism (Hillier, 2002). We focus on planning as a public policy that aims to regulate land use and prevent the uncoordinated use of the land and land-related resources. We are interested in political action, which is interpreted as the result of interactions between intentionally acting actors, keeping in mind that intentions emerge out of the mental structures which orientate actors’ understanding of the social world and “which are acquired through the lasting experience of a social position” (Bourdieu, 1989: 19). Our approach can be linked to actor-centered institutionalism such as developed by Mayntz and Scharpf (1995), Scharpf (2000) or Knoepfel et al., (2001, 2003). A careful analysis of the architecture, operation, coherence, or regulation capacities of the rules in force needs to be carried out in order to understand the implications of each planning intervention. Political institutions, such as public policies, property rights, the division of competences among political levels, or procedural rules, are analyzed from the perspective of the constraints and opportunities they offer to the actors involved in planning.

Land-use planning as a public policy can be defined as a series of intentionally coherent decisions or activities taken or carried out by local, regional, or national planning administrations with a view to resolve in a targeted manner the public problem of uncoordinated land development.¹ Many definitions formulated by planners insist on the positive role of land-use planning, which is “basically concerned—in an integrated and qualitative way—with the location, intensity, form, amount, and harmonization of land development required for the various space-using functions” (Albrechts, 2004: 744). From a public policy perspective the need to harmonize land development is precisely a sign that governments are facing a problem of insufficiently coordinated development. Solving a public problem, the precise formulation of which evolves through successive legal revisions and political majorities, is the *raison d’être* of a public policy. To this aim, a specific law has to be passed (as well as implementation ordinances), a dedicated administration created, specific policy resources (money, personnel, buildings, etc.) allocated, and so on.

Policy implementation presupposes power in the sense that public actors need to mobilize policy resources to be able to act and intervene. Yet one cannot equate policy resources available to planning administrations (money, legitimacy, personnel, etc.) with outcomes (Keohane and Nye, 1989). “To have (access to) resources is one thing, to use them and become effective another” (Arts and Van Tatenhove, 2004: 347). Indeed, land-use planning appears to be struggling to provide a solution to the uncoordinated use of land as densification efforts to curb urban sprawl prove very tricky to implement (OECD, 2018). During implementation, costs and benefits are not equally distributed. Ensuring profitability for the developers—and therefore implementation—can create poor development quality; externalities (such as pollution) created by a scheme can remain unaddressed by it; and new developments can create additional impact upon existing properties (for example loss of light or loss of privacy).

This article examines this puzzle by bringing the question of power into the center of the institutional analysis, i.e. the forms of power that shape the formulation and implementation of planning objectives. At first glance, the link between new institutionalism and power may seem artificial or even superfluous: new institutionalist approaches are historically strongly influenced by neoclassic economics (North 1991; Williamson, 1981; Ostrom, 1990) and based on ontological premises (rational-choice, actors with fixed preference functions, game theory)

¹ This definition bases on the general definition of a public policy proposed by Knoepfel et al. (2007):24.

that conceptualize power as an external factor, i.e. not as a deciding ingredient explaining the outcomes of the socio-political processes shaping urban development. In new institutionalism, power is seen as “embedded” in the rules in force as rules reflect the power of those who formulated them. Therefore, power is not an object of study in itself and new institutionalist conceptualizations of actors oriented toward modeling do not directly resonate well with socio-political approaches to power.

2.2. Situations of the exercise of power in new institutionalist analysis

To analyze power structures in urban development processes, we use the Institutional Resource Regime (IRR) approach (Gerber et al., 2020; Knoepfel et al., 2007). This neo-institutionalist framework shares some similarities with the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework (Ostrom, 2005, 2010) but better renders the role of legal institutions, as it was specifically developed to analyze the impact of public policies on resource use (Knoepfel et al., 2001, 2003). The IRR framework identifies three main variables: institutions, actors (resource users), and the condition of the resource and postulates a causal relationship between them (Fig. 1). By resources, the IRR framework does not only mean natural resources, such as water or forest, but also human-made resources, such as housing or infrastructure. The uses of the resource need to be regulated to prevent conflict, overuse, and potential resource destruction (Ostrom, 1990).

2.2.1. Institutions

The institutional regime (left inlaid box in Fig. 1) refers to all formal institutions, including land-use planning policies and property titles, shaping the scope of action of resource users. The IRR framework insists on the fact that public policies and property titles work according to an opposite, sometimes but not always complementary logic: while property titles protect private interests against the state, public policy aims to defend the general interest(s). Formal institutions are “the product of a socio-political compromise—crystalizing in space and time the complex power relationships shaping our representations of the role of specific resources in our societies and of the need to regulate their uses” (Gerber et al., 2020: 157). This compromise is never stable, as laws and regulations are revised, remain unimplemented, and can be diverted or even hijacked. This compromise results from the recurrent confrontation of political-administrative actors (legislative and executive actors) with the perceived condition of a given resource in a given space and time. In the IRR framework, this confrontation is mediated by the resource users who convey their experience through different channels to the political-administrative actors. *Nota bene* planning administrations in charge of plan-making and plan implementation, as integral parts of the planning policy, are located in the left box of the diagram.

2.2.2. Resource users

The IRR framework aims to capture how actors use the resource and how their uses are shaped by formal institutions. The private or public users of the resource are interested in defending their use interests (e.g. housing stock as a reasonably priced living space or as a sink for surplus funds). Actors are understood as knowledgeable and caring about the consequences of their own decisions and actions (Simon, 1957; Norgaard, 1996). Relying on actor-centered institutionalism, the IRR framework highlights the agency of resource users and makes the point that issues of sustainability need to be analyzed as institutional issues.²

² Against non-political explanations of resource degradation (such as demographic increase, human greed or laziness, or predatory human “nature”), the IRR framework postulates that resource overuse is linked with the institutions governing actors’ uses. Ignorance is not the motor of resource overuse and degradation, but rather the inability to decide on the institutions that govern resource uses (Haller, 2019).

The IRR approach acknowledges that rivalries or conflicts among competing users lies at the heart of resource scarcity—whether objective or perceived—and raises the awareness that environmental degradation and resource overuse are ultimately social-political problems. Institutions not only define the room of users and shape incentives, they also organize the distribution of use rights and generate power asymmetries among groups of resource users (e.g. between titleholders and others). Neo-Marxist insights point out the role of the market (capitalistic) relationships in the stratification of society with differential distribution of power among social groups and corresponding impact on resource use and overuse (Robbins, 2004). This analysis of power relations is connected to the question of who controls the access to and uses of the land and other resources, whether through exclusive property rights, public ownership, or collective tenure arrangements, as well as the mechanisms through which some actors are included or excluded from decision-making and resource uses (Ribot and Peluso, 2003).

We build on the three main variables identified by the IRR analytical framework—institutions, actors, resources—and identify “situations of the exercise of power” where urban development processes and corresponding resource consumption are shaped (Fig. 1). We refer to them as the (1) power of planning, the (2) power in planning, the (3) strategic power on planning and the (4) discursive power on planning.³ These “situations of the exercise of power” describe power games as additional intermediary variables, which ultimately co-determine the uses of land and land-related resources. Power *in* and *of* planning are direct co-determinants of resource use, while the two forms of power *on* planning have more long-term impacts through a change in the rules of the game. In real life situations, all arrows of Fig. 1 work simultaneously. We separate them for analytical reasons, keeping in mind that they may interact in reality as actors can exercise their power simultaneously in different situations. The empirical reality is never as clean as theory, as Section 3 will demonstrate, although abstraction is only to be considered a quality if it helps the “study of power in particular situations” (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

2.3. Characterization of the situations of power exercise

2.3.1. Power of planning

The power of planning refers to the capacity of planning administrations to steer the behavior of resource users and is measured according to the corresponding ability to govern resource uses. It plays a central role in plan implementation. Concretely, this form of power can be appraised “as the potential to get things done” (Van Assche et al., 2014: 2395). Enforcing planning regulations corresponds to the classical definition of power in planning and has prompted research on plan implementation and procedures (Faludi, 1973). The actors who have the legal capacity to execute and enforce law through decisions of an authoritarian nature form the executive system of a country. Their decisions are the result of political-administrative processes governed by precise rules of procedure (Easton, 1965). Executive actors are characterized by their sovereignty: the state has the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force (Weber, 1922). Building permits, tax assessments, or the granting of a concession are all examples of administrative measures. These administrative measures are founded on law and must comply with it. As such, they may be subject to legal review, usually carried out by an administrative court.

Public actors can choose to escape control by administrative courts in a completely legal manner: if it acts in the realm of private law, it can evade the restrictions associated with the principles of administrative action, such as the need for a legal basis, the principle of equal treatment, proportionality, or other mandatory provisions of public law (Knoepfel et al., 2007). This “flight outside the realm of public law”

³ Our definitions of power of, on, and in planning are slightly different from those proposed by van Assche et al. (2014).

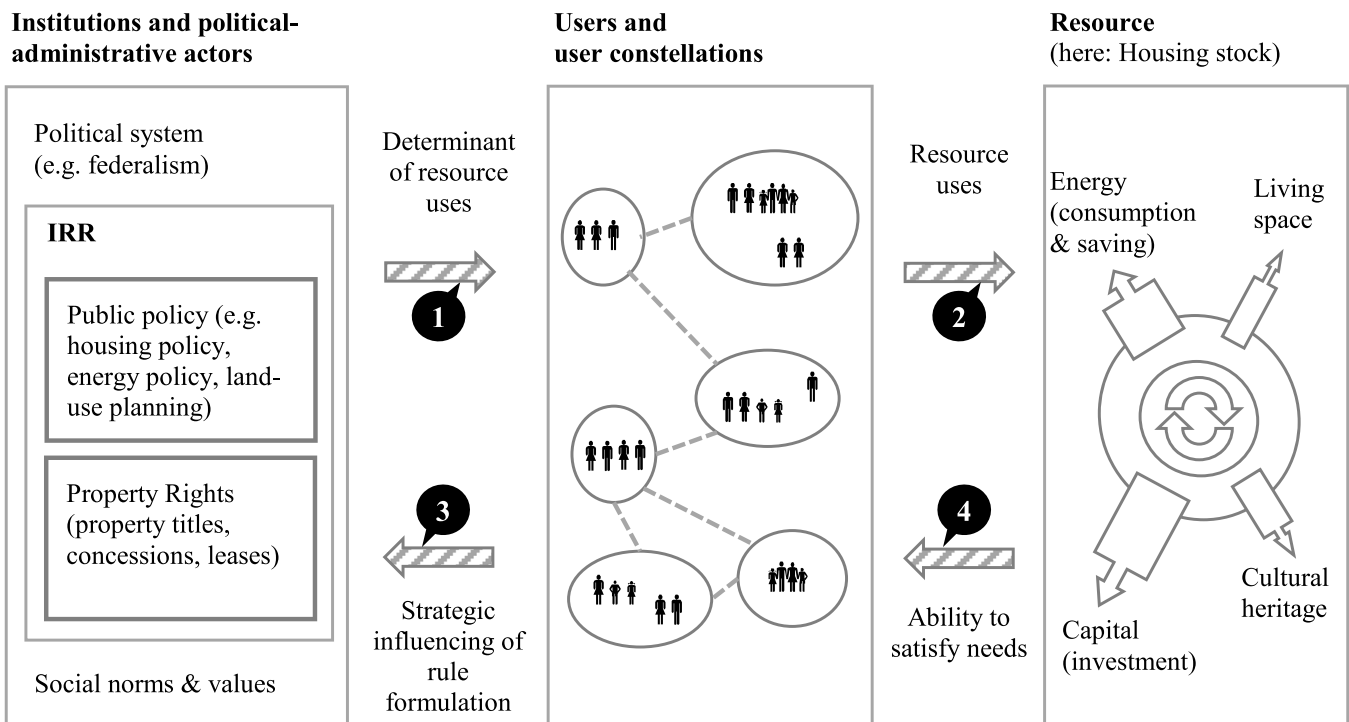


Fig. 1. Institutional Resource Regime (IRR) framework (Gerber et al., 2020). The IRR framework postulates the existence of causal relationships (four hatched arrows) connecting the three main variables: the condition of resource (here the housing-stock resource), actors (resource users), and institutions. This article relies on this framing to situate power in planning. Four situations of the exercise of power are identified, which co-determine the impacts of the four causal relationships: the power of planning (1) is shaped by the capacity of planning administrations to impact the practices of resource users, measured according to the corresponding ability to govern resource uses; the power in planning (2) refers to the ability of resource users to make the most out of the existing room (e.g. to exclude other users through selective rule activation), to their ability to self-organize (cooperating with other users), to playing within market mechanisms (competing with other users), sometimes at the margin of legality; the strategic power on planning (3) addresses the capacity to define formal institutions and therefore to influence the functioning of the planning system; and the discursive power on planning (4) includes all processes which shape resource users' expectations and legitimate goals concerning the resource and what it is supposed to provide to them and to society (e.g. in terms of livelihood or lifestyle).

(Knoepfel et al., 2007, p. 48) can be seen, for example, where public authorities acquire shares in limited companies, enter into private-public partnerships or buy real estate as part of their financial assets. With the expansion of New Public Management, more and more public tasks are implemented through private law and, therefore, more and more private law organizations perform public functions (see §2.3.2 below).

Even if planning administrations have the ability to mobilize and allocate resources (personnel, capital, information, political support, etc.) in a given geographical space to intentionally structure the decision-field of others, and therefore to influence the response of landowners, the location of firms and households, the quantity of available resources, or the flow of innovations (Friedmann, 1973), their administrative power has typically been overestimated in the planning field (Albrechts, 2003). Planning measures, like any public policy measures, always have a redistributive effect: constraining actors who perceive themselves as losers is an arduous task for planning administrations. Recent literature on land policy starts from this observation and analyzes the actual strategies—often relying on private law (public property, contracts, long-term leases, etc.)—implemented by those municipal administrations who manage to get things done (Gerber et al., 2018). Capturing the reasons for the failure to implement plans implies going beyond legalist approaches to planning and focusing on actors, their strategies, and power relationships.

The prolific literature on communicative or collaborative planning theory in the late 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Healey, 1996; Forester, 1992) emerged as a response to the difficult implementation of planning objectives due to paralyzing power games.⁴ Communicative planning is an approach to spatial planning which postulates that stakeholders need to be brought together around the same table and make decisions in a process that respects the positions of all involved (Healey, 1996). Different degrees of citizen involvement have been described, ranging from participation as empty ritual to the real control to affect the outcome of planning processes (Arnstein, 1969). Many authors underline the real challenge of increased citizen participation as it implies a redistribution of power. Harvey : 231 (1978) detects in communicative planning a “commitment to the ideology of harmony within the capitalist social order”, which remains the “still point upon which the gyrations of planning ideology turn”. Nothing prevents interests from being captured even if planning is performed communicatively by planning authorities (Gunder, 2010; Purcell, 2009). Communicative planning theory might even contribute in lubricating the neo-liberal economy—and in particular the workings of the real estate market (Bengs, 2005)—by claiming decisions to be democratic even if existing power relationships remain fundamentally unchallenged (Sager, 2005: 1).

Administrative power is a form of power over people. Planning is not a neutral, purely technical, or independent activity. “As decisions are

⁴ Depending on whether it is seen as a top-down strategy to improve the implementation of plans or as a bottom-up strategy for citizens to improve their involvement in local affairs, collaborative planning could also be mentioned in the discussion on the power in planning below.

made, relations of power are reproduced too" (Forester, 1992: 46). Rather, planning is to be appraised as a part of a political economy defined by capitalist social relationships. Power relations are generated and maintained through different mechanisms; planning is one of them. It must be understood "as *one* particular and material way of producing and reproducing power" (Holgersen, 2020: 804).

2.3.2. Power in planning

In a context where planning administrations attempt to govern the uses of the land resource and land-related resources, power in planning refers to the ability of resource users to make the most out of the existing leeway provided by formal and informal institutions. Rationalism, voluntarism, and determinism, such as are often implied or expected when referring to the power of planning, offer an oversimplified understanding of policy subjects, who tend to be reduced to targets of policy interventions. In contrast, power in planning is best understood at the level of formal and informal institutional arrangements involving resource users, who may try to influence plan implementation.

Specific forms of social, economic, and political power are needed to use the leeway given by legal norms in force. It includes not only (1) the ability to determine and take advantage of unregulated spaces or loopholes (Alterman and Calor, 2020), but also (2) the power to resist public implementation efforts (e.g. of land-use plans) through selective rule activation (e.g. of property rights). In addition, resource users can (3) self-organize to reinforce their positions through tighter cooperation with other users in a commonly agreed-upon set of rules. Or they can make use of (4) market mechanisms to impose themselves as key players and exclude other users through competition.

Land-use planning is typically ill-equipped to deal with the strong property rights of actors who follow their own agenda. Speculation and hoarding of land often slow down plan implementation. Hierarchically organized plans are the classical instruments of land use planning (Bassett and McNamara, 1940; Booth, 1995). Plans are the responses by public authorities to the problem of uncoordinated spatial development that might result from the potentially disruptive power of unrestrained property-title holders (Adams et al., 2002; Jacobs and Paulsen, 2009). Planning scholars, who have long focused on the policy dimension of planning, have often underestimated the role played by property rights (Jacobs and Paulsen, 2009; Hartmann and Needham, 2012).

While land-use planning traditionally focuses on the definition of planning/development objectives, a broader understanding of power in planning considers all rules and regulations, including those based on property rights (Gerber et al., 2018). Finding a socially and politically acceptable balance between the defense of private and public interests is a never-ending challenge (Booth, 2002). Strong property rights encourage and protect long-term investments in real estate (Davy, 2012). However, contemporary planning theory often criticizes property rights as being too inflexible to effectively cope with uncertainties, deadlock situations that hamper changes (Hartmann and Needham, 2012; Gerber et al., 2017), changes in economic conditions (e.g., brownfield redevelopment), and evolution of political objectives (e.g., densification goals).

While formal rules play a central role in the management of resources, informal rules developed by resource users—what Ostrom describes as "rules-in-use" (2005: 59)—also play an important role in understanding policy outcomes. A *localized regulatory arrangement* is defined by the IRR analytical framework as "a set of more or less formal agreements that regulates resource uses at stake with regards to specific situations" (Gerber et al., 2020: 160). In such self-organized arrangements, the actors concretize the law according to local conditions and specificities. This inevitably involves a partial reinterpretation of the law according to shared societal norms and values (Schweizer et al., 2016). Localized regulatory arrangements can appear if resource users have either the power to (1) complement existing rules (when the actors innovate to locally enrich the legal framework), (2) circumvent formal institutions (when users voluntarily decide not to apply the formal

rules), or (3) to divert the rules – when the actors use legal provisions to achieve a different objective than originally intended by the law (Bréthaut, 2013; Gerber et al., 2020).

When adequately titled, registered, protected, and enforced (Stepacher, 2008), property titles play a central role in the negotiations leading to a localized regulatory arrangement. The institution of property has a double meaning in this context (van Griethuysen, 2012): (1) it not only crystallizes power in the hands of an elite, the landowners, who has material control over resources, but (2) it also opens the door to the power accumulation and concentration through capitalization. Planning does not "transcend the social and property relations of capitalist society but is contained within and is a reflection of those same relations" (Scott and Rowes, 1977: 1118). Therefore, within a localized regulatory arrangement, a negotiated agreement needs to be found that prevents the potential disruptive effects of asymmetric distribution of power among resource users (Knoepfel et al., 2012).

Then as now, debates on land policy have called for mainstream planning to reopen the controversial *land question*. The land question addresses the problem of making land available for various uses and users (Weiß, 1998). At the core of the land question is the question of landownership and its political-economic implications (Marx, 1859; Polanyi, 1957). Historical debates on land policy illustrate the acute tension between the use value of the land (e.g. affordable housing) and its exchange value (e.g. for-profit investment) (George, 1879; Bernoulli, 1946). Starting in the 1980 s, neoliberalism led to a roll back of the state and modified the delicate balance between public policy and property rights, shifting power of decision toward landowners and developers (see the planning literature on public private partnerships; Moulart et al., 2001; Fainstein, 2008), in turn prompting counter-reactions (Harvey, 1989; Brenner, 2009). Recent efforts of public administrations in different countries to develop proactive land policies can be analyzed as a tentative attempt of planning administrations to regain control over spatial development (Gerber et al., 2018).

2.3.3. The strategic power on planning

The strategic power on planning addresses the capacity to define the formal institutions of the planning system through policy-making. Resource users who are dissatisfied with the way formal institutions take their interests into account can try to change the rules of the game, for example through the making of new plans. This undertaking makes them enter the field of politics through involvement in political processes such as elections, referendums, lobbying, or opinion building. Power is the "ability to get what one wants from others" (Ensminger, 1992:7). Policy-making—and politics—is typically described as being located between "rationality" and "power", i.e. between providing substantive argumentation and imposing one's own (selfish) interests.

In his much-cited work, Lukes classifies power into three dimensions, which emerged out of the intense debates during the 1960 s and 1970 s focusing on whether power is always the result of the express decision of the powerful or not (Dahl, 1961; Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 1974, 2005). According to the first dimension, power is distributed pluralistically in democratic political systems and can be identified every time actor A gets actor B to do something B would not do otherwise (Dahl, 1957). Going beyond the pluralist definition of power as "influence" or "control", which can be observed and even measured, the second dimension of power claims that there is more to power relations than visible conflicts between the opposing positions of different people (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). Power can also be exercised through agenda-setting where the powerful—consciously or unconsciously—limit decision-making to relatively noncontroversial matters to avoid open conflict and preserve his/her interests.

Lukes (2005) adds a third dimension of power referring to the ability of A to affect B in a manner that disproportionately serves A's interests at the expense of B. Power relations may therefore exist where neither party is fully aware of the benefits or losses to their interests caused by their relationship. Lukes' view avoids any necessary connection between

power and conflict, nor between power and conscious intention. This opens up the possibility of viewing power as a system in which actors play roles, the implications of which they may not fully understand (s. §2.3.4 below). It is clear that such an understanding of power appeals to many Marxist, elitist, feminist, or postcolonial accounts of power relations that face the problem of the compliance of the oppressed with domination (Piper, 2005: 118).

In urban studies, the strategies implemented by political-economic elites to expand their power are the focus points of the literature on growth coalitions (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Domhoff, 2005) and urban regimes (Stone, 1989, 1993). These two approaches start from different assumptions in terms of power definition (elitist vs. pluralist schools) but share a common interest in how local communities are governed. A growth coalition (or a development regime) emerges when a convergence of interests exists among political elites, landowners, speculators, developers, building contractors, manufacturers and all business owners who take advantage of urban growth. A growth coalition is characterized by a collective belief system, shared by the political-economic elite of a city, that the spatial location of socio-economic activities and infrastructure are the central issues at stake in urban development because they support land rents, tax revenue, and the economy of the city as a whole (Logan and Molotch, 1987).

Even in cities where growth coalitions or growth regimes cannot be detected as such, interactions between economic and political actors are commonplace and perpetuate power asymmetries. In planning, the interests of the main target group, the landowners, are protected by constitutional provisions on the guarantee of property. Tight negotiations between planning administrations and landowners are inevitable. Powerful lobbies represent landowners' interests, as well as those of institutional investors (including pension funds, banks, credit unions, and insurance companies), and develop strategies to secure their specific (sectoral) interests in policy-making. This may lead to counter-reactions from other interest groups, in particular tenant associations, NGOs, neighborhood associations, etc. looking for windows of opportunity to induce change or fight back. While policy making leads to frequent amendment of planning and housing legislations, it is worth noting that the definition of the institution of property, enshrined in the civil code,⁵ remains very stable over time, because the delicate balance between use value and financial value of the land is the result of a subtle politico-legal compromise (Harvey 2008).

2.3.4. *The discursive power on planning*

The *discursive power on planning* includes all processes which shape resource users' expectations and legitimate goals concerning the resource and what it is supposed to provide to them and to society (e.g. in terms of livelihood or lifestyle). The definition of the resource itself is socially and politically constructed (Zimmermann, 1951). According to this constructivist and relational perspective, "resources are not automatically viewed as factors with an inherent use-value and pre-determined application. [...] The use-value of a resource depends upon the social context within which goals and capabilities are shaped" (Bathelt and Glückler, 2005: 1547).

For Foucault, power is a diffuse and fluid characteristic of social and political practices. It operates through discourses (rather than through legal institutions or governmental bodies), which have a disciplining (rather than prohibiting or subordinating) effect on people (Arts and Van Tatenhove, 2004). Discourses are flows of commonly accepted knowledge. Mainstream scientific knowledge plays an essential role in their construction. For example, the engineering sciences define suitable planning intervention measures, the medical sciences define a healthy urban environment, and the social sciences distinguish appropriate social behavior from deviant conduct. According to Foucault, power can be seen as pervasive in the construction of possible and desirable futures

in planning, in particular in the framing of what is real, possible and desirable (Gunder and Hillier, 2009). In this article, despite recognizing the ubiquitous nature of power, in line with our actor-centered approach, we maintain that the knowledgeability and capability of human agency to interfere with the socio-economic and politico-legal order must not be underestimated.

Power such as conceptualized by poststructuralist social theory has the most pervasive effects on resource use, not only because it defines what social groups need to expect from a given resource (e.g. in terms of lifestyle or livelihood), but also because it shapes all three other forms of power (§2.3.1 to 2.3.3 above). The actors who are able to intervene in people's representations and contribute to develop new discourses have a direct impact on the way resources are used, appraised, and managed. Those who participate in defining the criteria for a "successful life", the attributes of a middle-class apartment, or the importance of exchange value vs. use value in housing, contribute to legitimate the construction of specific infrastructures supposed to meet the expectations raised by these representations. Planning is embedded in these representations, discourses, or narratives. The implementation strategies, including the policy instruments put forward by planning administrations (e.g. transferable development rights or command-and-control forms of zoning), are never value neutral; they are always embedded in a particular representation of the role of the state, landowners, or tenants (Salamon, 2002; Landry and Varone, 2005).

3. Case study: housing under densification pressure in Zurich Brunaupark, Switzerland

3.1. *Housing stock under densification*

The compact city model targeted by densification policies (in the US also termed "new urbanism" or "smart growth") is a concept that evolved in the UK during the 1960s as part of wider efforts to prevent resource depletion (Elkin et al., 1991; Breheny, 1992; Newman and Kenworthy, 1999). The compact city has become a response to many urban challenges such as urban sprawl, land consumption, energy and resource waste, accessibility, air pollution or social segregation. It has practically evolved into a synonym for "the sustainable city" (Neuman, 2005:17). By the mid-1990s, however, the "compact city" model had also become challenged due to potential negative effects on urban quality of life (Daneshpour and Shakibamanesh, 2011).

The implementation of densification objectives in the built environment presents many socio-political challenges (OECD, 2012; UN Habitat, 2016). Densification should increase the number of dwellings per unit surface area within the existing settlement boundaries and thus contribute to a higher floor area ratio (Broitman and Koomen, 2015). Through extensions, conversions, or replacement buildings, "hard densification" (Touati-Morel, 2015) deeply impacts the built environment and existing rights and interests. This leads to a reshuffling of the cards, creating not only winners, but also losers (Marcuse, 1998). The replacement of older buildings by new ones often leads to housing price increases. Actors who are negatively affected develop strategies to resist (Scott, 1987; Dear, 1992; Pendall, 1999). Those whose interests are legally protected enjoy not only stronger positions in development projects but also reinforced political power (Knoepfel et al., 2012).

In the context of densification, housing as an affordable living space is put at risk—especially for lower-income segments of the population—as land becomes scarce and rents increase due to upgrade and renovation (Breheny, 1992:143). Housing is considered a safe and lucrative investment, leading to speculation, especially with low or negative interest rates on the capital markets (Harvey, 2005; Aalbers, 2017). Densification has been accused of threatening the very existence of social sustainability, which focuses on dimensions such as social mixing, residential stability, or neighborhood cohesion (Bramley and Power, 2009; Burton, 2000; Cernea, 1993; Gordon and Richardson, 1997; Jenks et al., 1996; Lees, 2008). At the same time, energy efficiency

⁵ Or in a common-law equivalent.

policies target old housing stock due to their higher CO₂ emissions (UN Agenda 21). Through renovation and conversion of existing apartments, the energy requirement per capita is to be reduced. Upgrading of the existing stock therefore not only conflicts with the housing requirements of lower-income segments of the population, but also with the preservation of the urban architectural and cultural heritage (Nicol, 2013).

3.2. Methods and case selection

To understand the role of power in real-time urban densification, we analyze the Swiss example of the Brunaupark in the municipality of Zurich (Fig. 2) as a single case study of urban housing densification (Yin, 2018). We ask: Which power structures are at work in urban development processes and what forms do their involvement in the planning process take?

We proceed in three steps. First, we reconstruct the events that took place in Brunaupark at the interface between planning and housing. Second, we analyze the main variables identified by the IRR framework in the Brunaupark area. (1) We conceptually appraise housing as a resource and focus on four main goods or services provided by the housing resource which are significantly impacted by densification: living space, energy (housing as a place of energy consumption/saving or production), capital (housing as an investment) and architectural heritage (Fig. 1). (2) We identify the different actors using the goods and services provided by the resource, such as tenants, landowners, NGOs,

and involved political-administrative actors. (3) Relevant formal institutions mainly consist of planning and housing regulations, as well as property relationships, including tenancy agreements. Third, we rely on the empirical information collected to reconstruct the power games taking place in the four situations of power identified in Section 2.3.

The data was generated using qualitative methods. We performed a qualitative content analysis of political documents (petitions, motions, votes, and legal texts) as well as the documentation of the construction project. In addition, we held six stakeholder and expert interviews to understand the diverse strategies and the behavior of the actors involved in the Brunaupark densification project. These included discussions with members of the municipal parliament, officers from municipal administration, local homeowners' and tenants' associations, housing co-operatives, neighbors, and residents. All interviews were conducted in person and were recorded with the permission of interviewees. We also conducted a household survey with all 293 households living in the settlement of Zurich Brunaupark to gain a detailed understanding of the residents' perspectives (response rate: 24.9%). The survey enabled us to determine the profile of the tenants, their motivations, and the socio-economic challenges they are currently confronted with.

Brunaupark is a good example for studying power because its highly contested nature makes power issues much more visible than situations where densification objectives are implemented smoothly. Zurich is the largest urban center in Switzerland (~10⁶ inhabitants including the suburbs) (Statistics City of Zurich, 2020). Due to its steady population



Fig. 2. The Brunaupark settlement located in the South-Western part of the City of Zurich, not far from the lake of Zurich. A. Before redevelopment, B. planned development

Source: GIS data system, Canton of Zurich 2022.

and economic growth, as well as its function as an international investment center, Zurich is considered the financial capital of Switzerland (Theurillat and Crevoisier, 2013). Since the beginning of the 2000 s, densification projects in the residential segment, in particular new replacement buildings, have increased dramatically (City of Zurich, 2019). Rapid urbanization, declining inner-city open spaces, increasing individualization and low interest rates on the capital markets have triggered a densification boom (Statistics City of Zurich, 2017). At the same time, demolition and modernization processes have led to increased social exclusion and displacement, especially in the rental housing segment (ibid. 2017). Although the municipality of Zurich has the largest share of non-profit housing in Switzerland (24.9%), rents in newly created housing cooperatives are affordable only for the middle class (Balmer and Gerber, 2017). Low-income groups are therefore dependent on apartments provided by the institutional rental housing market, where densification strategies are most likely to generate gentrification (Rérat, 2012; Debrunner and Hartmann, 2020).

The Brunaupark project, located in the center of Zurich, is a densification project of the private profit-oriented rental housing sector. As of 2022, the pension fund of the bank Credit Suisse (CS) plans to demolish the old buildings of Brunaupark from the 1980 s and 1990 s (Table 1): four of the five residential five-story buildings will be demolished and replaced by seven-story residential buildings (potential for exploitation of +30 000 m²). The number of apartments in the four new buildings will increase from 239 today to 497. In March 2019, the developers applied for a building permit. This was followed by the contract termination with a total of 239 tenants. Within a year, around 450 people were supposed to leave their homes (Schoop et al., 2020). Interestingly, two of the buildings to be demolished had recently been refurbished (in 2012). Following reconstruction, rents are expected to rise by about 60%. In 2022, after a few modifications to the initial project due to appeals from neighbors, the building permit was granted to the developer, opening the way to the realization of the project.

3.3. Power in residential urban densification

3.3.1. Power of planning

The Swiss planning system is characterized by a form of “cooperative federalism” (Linder, 1994). The three institutional levels—the confederation, the cantons, and the municipalities—are jointly responsible for spatial planning but have distinct areas of responsibility. In line with the subsidiarity principle, municipalities hold the greatest decision-making power in the implementation of spatial development (Rudolf et al., 2018:476; Hersperger et al., 2014). Through zoning and other policy instruments, they are the main actors in charge of coordinating densification.

Swiss housing policy is anchored in two Constitutional articles. However, the promotion of affordable housing construction through direct loans granted by the federal government was suspended in 2003 (Swiss Federal Council, 2014). Currently, only the supporting measures in favor of non-profit housing organizations are still being implemented.

Table 1
Timeline of the project.

1960/70	Progressive deindustrialization of the Brunaupark area.
1980/ 1990	Development of Brunaupark settlement, encompassing 4 residential buildings with a total of 239 apartments.
2007	Opening of the Sihlcity mega-project close to Brunaupark. Sihlcity was the first big urban entertainment and shopping center in Switzerland.
2012	Refurbishing of two of the four buildings in Brunaupark. Kitchens and bathrooms were fully renovated.
2019	In March 2019, the approximately 1085 tenants living in Brunaupark were informed of the termination of their rental contract.
2020	Demonstration on street rallies of hundreds of tenants living in Brunaupark; formal petition against the redevelopment
2022/ 2023	Planned demolition and total reconstruction

Following this rolling back of the Federal State, many urban municipalities had to jump in to solve issues of acute housing shortages (Lawson, 2009). Although Zurich is the Swiss city with the greatest share of non-profit housing, a citizens’ initiative was accepted by the population to reinforce the municipal housing legislation even more. This led to the introduction of a programmatic legal article which establishes the target goal of a 33% quota of non-profit housing until 2050 (Balmer and Gerber, 2017). One major side-effect of this path-breaking legislation is that many pro-business actors consider that the rest of the building stocks should be left undisturbed from municipal intervention.

Zurich’s City Council (executive) tends to consider densification processes as an opportunity to reorganize and modernize urban landscapes through unfettered market forces (Zurich City Council, 2019a, 2019b; Debrunner, 2021). The municipality of Zurich introduced “densification” as a legally-binding planning objective in order to promote sustainable settlement transformation in 2016. To steer (re) development, the City Council has developed new planning instruments, such as “densification zones”, where developers are given densification bonuses (Zurich City Council, 2013:5). According to this entrepreneurial line of argument, gentrification is regarded as one of the social costs of economic success that is worth living with.

In order to convince residents, public authorities collaborate with private developers—including CS—to develop strategies to make densification palatable. For instance, in the Brunaupark project, they offered economic compensation measures to tenants such as alternative dwellings outside the city to diminish resistance and corresponding potential delays. Simultaneously, the municipal planning administration developed financial language and management skills that smoothed the dialogue with CS. Participatory forms of planning such as “test planning” or urban design competitions play a central role in this context as they make the densification process more efficient for both sides.

3.3.2. Power in planning

In Switzerland, private ownership is strongly protected by law in international comparison (Property Rights Alliance, 2019). Property rights can only be restricted in cases of overweighing public interest (Article 26, Swiss Federal Constitution). As titleholders, property owners not only have the right to control their real assets and to decide how they are used or transferred, they also benefit from the right to make a profit out of them. In the Swiss rental sector, courts interpret the weight of public interest narrowly so that property restrictions or expropriations are rare in international comparison (Alterman, 2010).

Based on this legal situation, property owners can be said to have quasi veto power: they are in a position to accelerate or slow down public plan implementation such as attempts to increase densification. In Zurich Brunaupark, for example, CS’s strong legal position has led to a situation in which the municipal planning administration prefers to use policy instruments that do not oppose the landowner’s interests to get densification implemented effectively. Otherwise, it would take the risk that densification efforts, as a key element of the city’s sustainable urban development policy, might slow down—or even come to a standstill. Such instruments include, for instance, the promotion of total replacement constructions, eco-efficient modernization, or high-rise buildings at central locations so that CS can benefit from a high return on investment. In other words, as the municipal planning authority is bound by law to get densification implemented, it does not interfere with developers’ interests, taking the risk to restrict those of the tenants. Issues of housing affordability, social mixing, neighborhood cohesion or residential stability are addressed through public support of non-profit housing cooperatives or through public law foundations promoting affordable housing (such as the “Stiftung Einfach Wohnen” created in 2014) because these measures do not directly constrain the freedom of private investors.

“Normally, the property owner has already decided whether they demolish the housing stock or not. The only thing we can do is to

advise them in case the location is sensitive. We cannot do more than this” (Head of Municipal Planning Department, October 2019).

This power constellation leads to densification being performed as a form of “eco-business”, promoting economic profitability and ecological sustainability at the expense of social sustainability (Debrunner, 2021). This understanding cannot be compared to a proper localized regulatory arrangement (in the sense of §2.3.2), but rather is based on a common agreement driven by pragmatism and a common interest in promoting (for-profit) densification.

Residents have started to organize in order to make themselves heard. In March 2019, a group of tenants living in Zurich Brunaupark founded a local self-help initiative to make their protest against what they consider unfair densification and upgrading visible. By 2021 Brunaupark Tenants Association (BTA) counted around 120 members and aimed “to secure stable, affordable and socially-mixed housing for all income segments in the settlement” (BTA, 2019). The association has organized street rallies and initiated a local petition which was signed by over 5700 citizens within only one month (Head of Brunaupark Tenants Association, June 2019). Specifically, the local petition called for stronger legal security for tenants facing (re)development and, more concretely, for better legal protection of rental contracts against unilateral terminations.

In June 2019, the Brunaupark settlement was visited by a UN housing expert, Leilani Farha. She wrote an advisory letter to the Swiss Federal Office for Foreign Affairs on behalf of the UN. Her main concern was the unequal treatment of tenants, particularly in regard to their social eviction at short-notice and the precarious housing situation for old-aged and low-income households (Sturzenegger, 2020). However, municipal authorities did not take a different course of action. Regardless of the strength of their social integration, age, or years of residency in the neighborhood, private landowner’s freedom must be fully guaranteed.

3.3.3. Strategic power on planning

In Swiss planning practice, in addition to voting and lobbying, actors can influence rule formulation through direct democratic instruments such as citizens’ initiative or referendum. But proposing new legislation is of course also a prerogative of members of the parliament. In March 2019, left-wing members of the municipal parliament drafted a motion proposing the introduction of a new obligation to prepare a design plan in the Brunaupark area (Zurich Municipal Parliament, 2019). A design plan makes it possible for municipal planning authorities to encourage specific developments even if they deviate from the zoning plan in force. In concerned areas, city planners become able to intervene more accurately into private development plans. For instance, the municipality could oblige CS to provide at least 40% of affordable apartments and, in turn, the investor would benefit from a density increase of 10% above the limit fixed in the regular zoning plan. However, in June 2019, Zurich’s city council rejected the parliament’s request. Their decision was based on the argument that “the introduction of a design plan would be equal to a restriction of private ownership. Such restriction of property rights would be disproportionate and therefore illegal” (Zurich City Council, 2019a:3). In March 2020, the city council finally granted CS’s building permit for Brunaupark. Consequently, CS will realize the planned densification project without providing any compensation measures (e.g. affordable housing, socially-sensitive redevelopment, or protection of old-aged, low-income or long-term residents). No new rules could be passed by concerned citizens and politicians against purely profit-oriented densification.

3.3.4. Discursive power on planning

The rationality of the actors involved in the Brunaupark case study—their preferences, goals and objectives—is influenced by mental frameworks that can empirically be reconstructed through behaviors as well as an analysis of the arguments put forward. In this article, we refer

to these mental frameworks as an ideology: it encompasses the concepts, categories, discourses, and systems of representations, “which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (Hall, 1986, p. 26). Planning and planning processes are inherently ideological because they are shaped by these dominant, but partially subconscious, systems of values and representations (Gunder, 2010). Our analysis of the complex mental frameworks supporting planning intervention and corresponding responses identifies three main discourses.

First, we observe a powerful discourse of economic growth as a solution for environmental sustainability problems. City authorities and developers claim that building renewal will improve energy efficiency and by extrapolation benefit the overall ecological performance of the municipality. The corresponding line of arguments can be referred to as ecomodernization or green growth paradigm (Jackson and Victor, 2019). Typically, the advantages of technological innovation are put forward, while the social and ecological consequences are downplayed. In Zurich Brunaupark, CS plans to demolish the existing buildings and install a new underground heating system although the buildings were recently renovated and are considered to be in good energetic condition. The reconstruction plans typically ignore the gray energy stored in the existing infrastructure:

“We cannot understand at all why these buildings—which are in a very good physical shape—will be demolished. Especially in the municipality of Zurich which aims to reach the goals of a green and sustainable city” (President of Brunaupark Tenants’ Association, February 2020).

CS and municipal authorities stress the increased sustainability even though urban renewal directly contributes to a process of “green gentrification” (Budd et al., 2008; Debrunner et al., 2020). The compact city argument is used as a covering discourse to push forward growth policies and interventions in favor of increased competitiveness—a consideration far from the original sustainability aims of the compact city model (Charnock and Ribera-Fumaz, 2011).

Second, we highlight a general discourse of free land market and strong property rights supposed to (in)directly benefit all city inhabitants. Considering the high proportion of housing cooperatives in Zurich, free market proponents reject potential additional restrictions on for-profit housing. This view is buttressed by a discourse of strong property rights intended to support overall social benefit and a discourse of improved infrastructure and urban redevelopment as a condition for general performance in competing with other municipalities in Switzerland and with other “world cities” worldwide (Knox and Taylor, 1995). The Zurich City Council argues that a failure to cite new private buildings will create definite and severe impediments on the city’s economic growth and sustainability performance (Zurich City Council, 2019a, 2019b). They legitimize their actions with the argument that the impact of “doing nothing” (Head of Municipal Planning Department, October 2019) on economic sustainability would be overwhelming: it could lead to urban decline following a move outside of the municipality of production, jobs, and residents. According to this view, densification is a train not to be missed. While the potential displacement of lower-income segments of the population is largely ignored, the potential arrival of newcomers belonging to specific target groups is widely discussed and celebrated politically (Zurich City Council, 2015).

Third, we highlight a widespread but less dominant discourse of the right to the city. This discourse takes the opposing view by questioning the understanding of housing as a resource only. While the concept of resource stresses the utilitarian dimension of housing as a provider of different uses and services, this alternative discourse reminds us that housing is a basic human right according to article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Balmer and Bernet, 2015). Therefore (affordable) housing should be considered as an entitlement rather than as a commodity that must be paid or traded for. Despite some attempts to organize (see above), resistance against concrete densification

projects such as in Brunaupark is limited due to lack of legal and financial resources. More generally the development of a diffuse negative attitude against densification—depicted by proponents as a form of NYMBYism—can be observed. The future will tell if it will provide the ground for the emergence of a well-argued counter-hegemonic discourse.

The case study reveals that discourses unfold at the meeting point between structural forces stratifying society and agency. Actors are mostly swept with the flow of powerful discourses, but they can occasionally also swim against the current or even use the energy of the stream to advance alternative lines of arguments that are getting more visibility.

4. Discussion

The case study focusses on the complex links between densification objectives, the social challenges resulting from their implementation, and power. We saw that the four “situations of the exercise of power” defined in our framework could usefully be used to identify power games at play in spatial development processes. By stressing the importance of all four situations of the exercise of power, our framework forces the analyst to consider aspects of planning that otherwise may remain hidden or overlooked. In particular, it sheds a different light on urban densification processes which are typically presented as eco-friendly and sustainable initiatives. In our case, under the flag of sustainable urban development, densification in reality contributes to green gentrification (Budd et al., 2008:266).

Despite the existence of land-use planning and housing policies promoting a balanced urban development—therefore acknowledging the social dimension of planning—we observe in all four situations of the exercise of power the prominent role played by economic interests within political organs and public administration. We see that the promotion of the compact city model goes hand in hand with the promotion of private and public economic interests. Because densification objectives are compatible with different political agendas across party lines, this increases the ability to use them instrumentally. For instance, densification enables Zurich’s city government to promote growth, and attract and accommodate new (potentially higher-income) residents.

Urban densification appears to be essentially market-led in the city of Zurich as the construction of new and denser dwellings relies on mechanisms crafted to make densification palatable (i.e. profitable) to the private construction sector. Their profitability objectives are secured by strong property titles protected by the Swiss Constitution and agreements negotiated with municipal planning authorities and formalized in special design plans. Put under pressure to provide tangible results, public administrations support densification objectives without much regard for their distributional consequences or social equity issues. Needs for increased affordability, place identification, or community cohesion are given lower rank priorities because the municipality already supports non-profit housing cooperatives on its own municipal land. In our case study, residents were not able to organize and gain sufficient power to resist the roll-out business of densification. Other studies have shown successful examples of self-organization in housing, in particular through the creation of housing cooperatives (mostly with the support of the public land). Such a solution was not an issue in the case study. Political reactions to the shortage of affordable housing have led to several citizens’ initiatives at the municipal level in Switzerland (Balmer and Gerber, 2017), but these processes did not impact the Brunaupark case.

5. Conclusion

In this article, our main research objective was to develop a theory-informed framework to conceptualize and empirically capture the power structures that are at work in urban development processes and more specifically in the implementation of densification policies. While

there is a growing body of literature focusing on the social impacts of densification (Bramley et al., 2009; Williams, 2010; Debrunner et al., 2022), and important literature on power in planning (Forester, 1989; Ensminger, 1992; Albrechts, 2003), research on how to combine the two is still thin (Balmer and Gerber, 2017). From a normative perspective, taking into account power issues in planning processes involving densification may help municipalities to develop strategies against power abuse and to counteract trends of social exclusion in a more targeted manner. More and more tenants are forced to leave due to rising rents after urban densification and renewal. If city authorities do not succeed in taking into account asymmetric power relations, the protection of urban social qualities such as social mixing, tenure security, or community cohesion is in danger.

Our results raise the question of the meaning of these power structures for planning as a discipline. This is a much-debated question in planning. Our conceptual approach at the meeting point between neo-institutionalism and power provides methodological strategies for the study of power in empirical situations. Taking into account structural forms of power in our analysis leads us to analyze the underlying forces that structure the planning processes and the development of urban space. Neo-Marxist approaches insist that the development of the built environment, including densification, corresponds to the spatial and geographic materialization of the forces and processes that structure our economic system, the essential engine of which is the creation and accumulation of capital (Hill, 1977).

But planning’s role is not only “to facilitate accumulation and maintain social control” (Fainstein and Fainstein, 1979: 382), it is also an arena where social conflicts play out. Planning administrations are “physical spaces where social relations are enacted and (re)produced” (Holgersen, 2020: 815). Therein also lies the possibilities for alternative futures. Our neo-institutionalist approach to spatial planning as a public policy pushes us to add a prominent actorial dimension to the neo-Marxist understanding of the construction of space.

Politics is made up of a mixture of power and rational argument. In each of the “situations of the exercise of power” described in Fig. 1, we have observed conflicting positions of power. In Western democracies, even the dominant positions are required to provide (rational) arguments for acting the way they do. Power is relational and develops in the interactions between actors or groups. It is neither disembodied, nor absolute. The argumentative space obliges the protagonists to rationalize their action, to legitimize actions by mobilizing institutions or discourses, to force stakeholders to respect procedural rules, etc. It can also generate or highlight argumentative, procedural, or legitimacy breaches, which may open up windows of opportunity that can be seized, opening the door to institutional creativity and social change.

The role of planning science is to highlight the formal and informal institutions that structure the production of space as well as the mechanisms of power. By identifying the role of power—and unmasking its potential abuse—in urban production, it becomes possible to unveil (some of) the reasons explaining why the city is like it is. This can contribute to shifting balances of power but only if stakeholders use their agency to seize this opportunity.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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