

Research paper

Translating a wicked problem: A strategic planning approach to rural shrinkage in Denmark



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Rural shrinkage is a wicked problem.
- Rural shrinkage can be addressed by strategic planning at municipal level.
- Actor-Network Theory provides a framework to study strategic planning processes.
- Strategic projects can assemble strategic partners to work for strategic visions.
- Collaborative strategic projects can contribute to sustainable adaptation.

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ABSTRACT

In a time of increasing globalisation and urbanisation, shrinking peripheral rural areas have become a truly wicked planning problem in many European countries. Although a problem can be easily perceived and measured by various indicators, the precise definition of the problem is problematic. Based on the case of a Danish planning process which was carried out in collaboration with a charitable trust, this paper discusses an emerging strategic planning approach at the municipal level. We use the concept of wicked problems, strategic planning theory and Actor-Network-Theory to study a collaborative, place-based and project-oriented process directed at concrete physical outcomes. We frame strategic planning as a translation process where the interaction between human and non-human actors translates a unique, complex and contested situation into an innovated situation. We find that local physical projects played a major role in this process. First, they acted as a vehicle that assembled planners, politicians and stakeholders to work towards strategic visions across multiple scales. Second and consequently, they stimulated considerable second and third order effects in the form of shared problem-understandings, increased social capital, and follow-up projects initiated beyond the actual planning process. We conclude that local physical projects, when conceived in a collaborative and strategic manner, can contribute to sustainable adaptation to rural shrinkage.

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1. Introduction

Although Denmark is a small, urbanised country, rural shrinkage is considered a major policy and planning issue. Since the 1990s, work places and the population have been increasingly concentrated in the bigger cities, while peripheral rural areas lost up to 7% of their population between 2007 and 2012 and 7.8% of their work places between 2009 and 2011 (Ministeriet for By, Bolig og Landdistrikter, 2013).

Over the years, many European and national policies have been implemented to ensure economic development in rural areas.

Recently, a shift in European rural policy has occurred (Bryden and Hart, 2004). The “new rural paradigm” involves a move away from financial redistribution and agricultural subsidies towards strategic investments which exploit local strengths and opportunities (OECD, 2006). This policy shift has also influenced Danish rural policies (Ministeriet for By, Bolig og Landdistrikter, 2013). In addition, a structural reform in 2007 reduced the number of Danish municipalities from 275 to 98 and obliged the new municipalities to formulate a municipal policy for rural development, thus allocating policy and planning measures related to rural shrinkage to the municipal level.

The situation in the shrinking rural periphery of Denmark is a typical case of a “wicked problem” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The general symptoms are well-described: out-migration and ageing, lower educational attainment and lower employment rates

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(Ministeriet for By, Bolig og Landdistrikter, 2013). However, defining the problem, i.e. “knowing what distinguishes an observed condition from a desired condition”, is much more difficult (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 153). Each local situation is unique, socially contested and constantly changing due to many factors at multiple scales. Therefore, formulating a planning problem is interconnected with the process of its solution (Skaburskis, 2008). Furthermore, finding definitive solutions to the planning problem is virtually impossible because any solution will generate “waves of repercussions” over an extended period of time. At best, the problem can, thus, be “re-solved—over and over again” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160).

In partnership with a charitable trust, the peripheral rural municipality of Thisted took this wickedness as a starting point for a new strategic planning approach to address rural shrinkage at the municipal level. From 2007–2012, the planning initiative “Land of Opportunities” was based on a collaborative, place-based and project-oriented approach which resulted in six strategic projects. The primary purpose was not to achieve economic growth, but, with reference to the new rural paradigm, to preserve and strengthen place-based qualities and potential through local physical projects (Sloth Hansen, Møller Christensen, & Skou, 2012).

This paper analyses this planning process with a focus on one project, “The Good Life at the Seaside”. Our purpose is to contribute to substantiating an emerging strategic planning approach to the wicked problem of rural shrinkage both empirically and theoretically, focusing on the following questions:

- What is the planners’ role in a collaborative, place-based and project-oriented strategic planning process?
- How are collaborative decisions made?
- What strategic effects can local physical interventions achieve?

2. Theoretical approach

2.1. From wicked problems to a communicative rationality

Rittel and Webber’s seminal article “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning” from 1973 still effectively dismantles every attempt to develop planning as a scientific discipline. They showed that problems dealt with by planning are essentially different from scientific problems and, therefore, require an essentially different approach. In contrast to “tame” scientific problems, they argued that planning problems are “wicked” by nature. Therefore, linear strategies, which strive for definite solutions, do not apply to planning problems. Instead, Rittel and Webber proposed “a model of planning as an argumentative process in the course of which an image of the problem and of the solution emerges gradually among the participants, as a process of incessant judgement” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p.162). Although they did not altogether leave the technical rationality that dominated the design methods discourse of the 1960s, Rittel and Webber, thus, prepared the ground for a new communicative planning rationality.

Today wicked problem thinking is proving to be productive for planning theory once again. Scholars in environmental planning have framed climate change and sustainability issues as wicked problems and have prescribed multi-actor networks and collaborative partnerships to address them (Artman, 2015; Detoni & Bitzer, 2015; Frame, 2008; Hartmann, 2012; Hocking, Brown, & Harris, 2016; Perry, 2015). Xiang suggests that an *adaptive, participatory, and transdisciplinary* approach involving “collective learning, exploration, and experimentation” is appropriate for tackling wicked planning problems, including both experts’ and laymen’s knowledge (Xiang, 2013, p. 2). Similarly, Innes and Booher argue for the development of a *collaborative rationality* through

non-linear, collaborative and transdisciplinary processes, which can produce socially valuable outcomes, while being adaptive to the opportunities and challenges of their unique and changing context (Innes & Booher, 2010).

2.2. Learning-oriented strategic planning

Whereas Innes and Booher primarily discuss policy issues, other related theorists focus on spatial planning issues with similar reasoning, albeit without making a link to the concept of wicked problems: learning-oriented strategic planning theory advocates an adaptive, collaborative and transdisciplinary approach to complex planning situations (Albrechts, 2004, 2006; Healey, 1997, 2007).

Based on a literature review, Kühn has developed a normative model of strategic planning which outlines the overall characteristics of this approach (Fig. 1) (Kühn, 2010a, p. 2). According to this model, strategic planning can be defined as the recursive interaction between strategic visions and strategic projects.

Strategic visions are long-term development visions for a city or municipality as a whole, which guide action and serve as important tools for building local consensus. To this end, they are based on social negotiation and participation, as well as a comprehensive analysis of present development challenges and opportunities.

Strategic projects are short-term and directed towards selected local areas, generating immediate results for the actors involved. To be strategic, such local projects should steer development in the envisioned direction. At the same time, the limited scale and scope of projects allows one to continuously evaluate and adjust the overall vision.

Strategic planning relies on strategic partnerships to connect visions and projects; both cross-departmental partnerships within the local public administration and co-operation between public and private actors (Kühn, 2010a, 2010b).

Kühn’s model suggests that strategic planning requires a new type of planning professionalism which; (1) facilitates collaborative processes involving many different actors; (2) integrates transdisciplinary knowledge and; (3) works strategically across multiple scales. Planning professionalism, thus, takes on a new meaning, which is to perceive and instigate productive relationships between people, ideas and places in a strategic perspective. Healey speaks of “a relational planning for our times” (Healey, 2007).

2.3. Strategic planning as a translation process

We draw on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to study how such productive relationships are constructed. The ANT-account is a method for describing how complex connections between human and non-human actors are constructed for a certain purpose (Latour, 2005). Originally developed in relation to research and technological innovation processes, ANT is increasingly being used in urban studies (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Farias & Bender, 2010; Latour, Hermant, & Shannon, 1998) and in spatial planning and design theory (Boelens, 2010; Healey, 2007; Rydin, 2010; Tietjen, 2011; Yaneva, 2009, 2012).

ANT proposes “the idea of engagement with socio-technical systems rather than just with the (human) actors as the key to understanding planning outcomes and offering a better planning practice” (Rydin, 2010, p.266). According to ANT, human and non-human actors gather in interdependent, dynamic *actor-networks* through transformative interaction. Therefore, we can define a planning situation as a series of dynamic connections between human and non-human actors that form a “momentary association which is characterized by the way it gathers together in new shapes” (Latour, 2005, p. 65). For ANT, *agency* – the capacity to act in the world – is not limited to intentional human action. Indeed

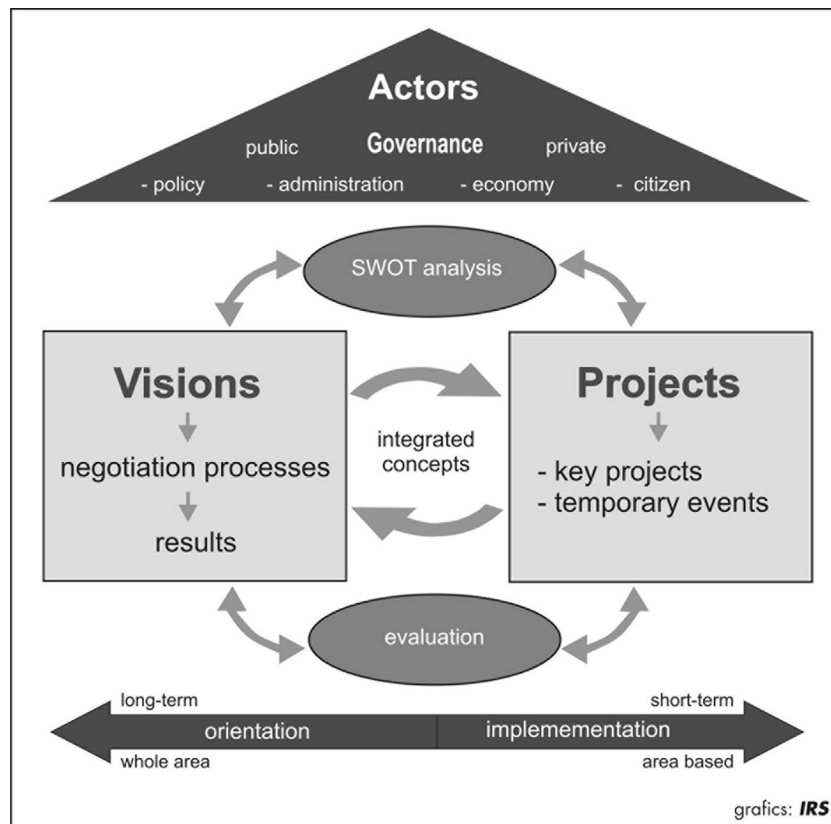


Fig. 1. A normative model of strategic planning[®] Manfred Kühn.

“any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor” (Latour, 2005, p. 71). This means that people, their activities and desires, built structures, landscape features, climatic conditions, etc. may all be actors in a planning process.

2.3.1. Four moments of translation

ANT understands goal-oriented actor-network construction as a translation process (Latour, 2005). ANT scholar, Michel Callon, defined four decisive moments of translation: *problematization*, *interessement*, *enrolment*, and *mobilisation of allies* (Callon, 1986). Building on the work of Tietjen (2011), we suggest that these four moments may be equally applicable to a strategic planning process (Fig. 2).

The first decisive moment in a translation process is the problematisation of the task at hand. Here, the planning problem is formulated as negotiable hypotheses about present challenges and development opportunities. At the same time, this first planning hypothesis defines a set of concerned human and non-human actors, e.g. people who would profit from the projected changes, or built structures that would make part of the projected changes. In this way, the formulated planning hypothesis gathers the actors necessary to achieve the intended goal.

The second moment, interessement, encompasses the activities which an actor carries out in order to, “impose and stabilize the other actors it defines through its problematisation” (Callon, 1986, p. 207–208). In a strategic planning process, this would be, e.g. a focused site evaluation, a goal-oriented stakeholder analysis, and public involvement activities. Interessement activities should confirm the validity of the established planning hypothesis and make the gathered actors commit themselves to the projected task. Therefore, successful interessement finalises problematisation and, at the same time, achieves enrolment.

The third moment, enrolment, “designates the device by which a series of interrelated roles is defined and attributed to actors who accept them” (Callon, 1986, p. 211). In a strategic planning process, this will typically be a concrete project plan with a clearly defined set of actions and actors.

The fourth and final moment of translation, mobilisation of allies, is achieved when all the gathered actors are made to act as one actor-network towards a common goal. In a strategic planning process, this moment occurs when the strategic projects are implemented and begin to have an effect.

This model is, of course, simplified. In practice, the different moments overlap and, in particular, interessement rather takes on the character of an iterative, recursive process through which hypotheses are tested, gradually unfolded and concretised, while the necessary actors are gathered, engaged and committed to the task. Akrich et al. have shown that interessement, i.e. the activities which link problematisation to enrolment, is the key to successful innovation strategies (Akrich, Callon, & Latour, 2002).

2.3.2. Follow the actors!

The contribution of a translation model lies in its potential to establish a clear relationship between formulating a wicked problem, project development, and the construction of human and non-human actor-networks. It reveals how productive relationships between people, things and ideas are constructed—from the first hypothesis to the implemented strategic project. Furthermore, a translation model opens up for new ways of studying planning results in terms of the actor-networks, which have been assembled to work for a strategic goal.

Studying a translation process requires following the actors in the process and mapping their *controversies* with other actors, i.e. the traces, differences and transformations they produce through interaction (Latour, 2005). By tracing how new

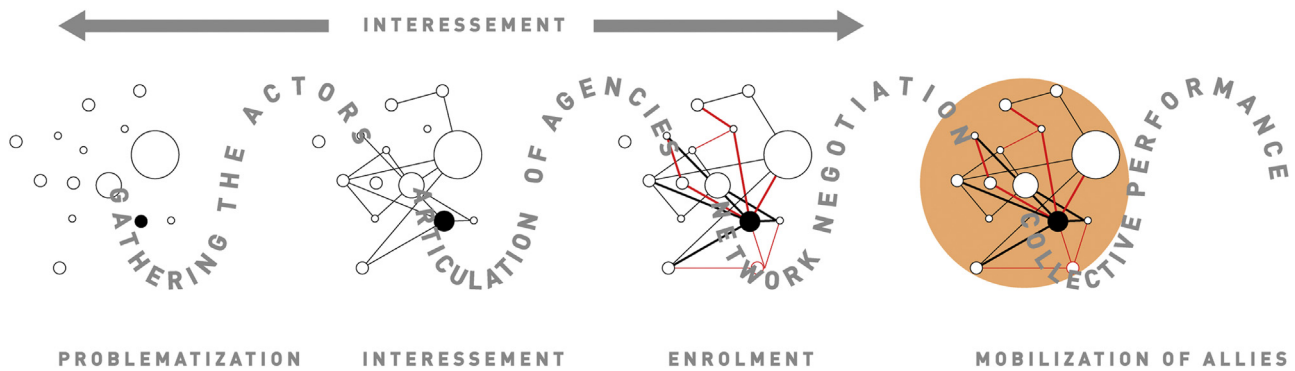


Fig. 2. Four phases of translation: The diagram shows how a project (the black dot) develops from the first planning hypothesis to the implemented project by assembling human and non-human actors (the black circles) until a constraining actor-network has been built. ©Anne Tietjen.

connections between human and non-human actors are constructed, we expect to be able to analyse the role of planners and decision making in a non-linear, collaborative process, and to identify not only immediate local physical and functional changes, but also their network effects across multiple scales.

3. Method

3.1. A qualitative case study approach

This paper is based on a case study of the strategic project “The Good Life at the Seaside”, which was part of the planning initiative “Land of Opportunities” that was carried out by Thisted Municipality and two other Danish municipalities in partnership with the charitable trust, Realdania.

We have applied a qualitative, multi-method approach based on: (1) a comprehensive study of primary documents from the project (planning documents, status reports incl. budgets and accounts, minutes from meetings, external project communication, and an external evaluation carried out by a consultancy firm), as well as related municipal policies and plans and related projects; (2) site visits and; (3) interviews with selected key actors in the planning process (civil servants from the municipality, key actors from the local communities, the project manager from the trust and the project manager from the associated consultancy firm).

We began the case study in early March 2013 with introductory site visits and interviews with municipal planners and actors in all the local communities, who had participated in “Land of Opportunities”. We did not interview all participating actors, but selected those who had a key role in the planning process. In total, we conducted seven interviews with 15 interviewees in Thisted in March 2013 of which four interviews with seven interviewees were related to the project “The Good Life at the Seaside”. In addition, we conducted two interviews with the project managers from the trust (February 2013) and from the associated consultancy firm (May 2013) (see [Table 1](#)). All interviews were open-ended and semi-structured and investigated the process, the different actors’ roles, and the actual and perceived results. The interviews with local actors took place on site. All interviews were recorded on tape.

Following these first interviews, we decided to focus on the project “The Good Life at the Seaside” because it was particularly well-suited to demonstrating the adopted approach. The whole planning process was exceptionally well-documented, in particular through comprehensive, half-yearly status reports. The document studies, thus, provided us with detailed insight into the making of the project, the involved actors’ roles and the results. In practice, we studied the available documents chronologically with a focus on how ideas about problems and solutions were formulated through the planning process, how they gradually evolved

and which actors were actively involved in this process. This analysis was documented in a Table and compared to the results of the first interviews. To further clarify the decision-making process and the ripple effects of the project, we conducted three follow-up interviews by telephone with two of the original interviewees (one in August 2013, two in July–September 2014) and one supplementary interview with the municipal museum curator, who advised the municipality on heritage matters (June 2014). Furthermore, one of the authors revisited the project locations in February 2014. The material used is listed in [Table 1](#).

3.2. Case study background information

Thisted municipality is located on the western periphery of Denmark and is bordered by the Limfjord and the North Sea ([Figs. 3 and 4](#)). The municipality has about 44,000 inhabitants and has a surface area of 1069 km² ([Thisted Kommune, 2016](#)). Since 1990, the population of the rural areas has been in a continuous decline, although the main town of Thisted has a stable population of about 13,000 inhabitants. There are few work places for the highly educated, while employment opportunities in the primary sector have decreased, especially in the previously important coastal fishing industry. On the other hand, the municipality has distinctive place-based resources: exceptional surfing conditions along the North Sea coast and unique nature in Thy National Park ([Sloth Hansen et al., 2012](#)). Also, the municipality has a strong tradition for civic engagement, which is rooted in the Danish cooperative movement, which was founded in Thy in 1866 ([Bjørn, 2016](#)).

In 2006, the trust commissioned preliminary studies for a charity project to address peripheral rural areas and arranged a conference together with Thisted municipality. The resulting report collected data on development tendencies in two peripheral municipalities, Thisted and Lolland, and outlined new development opportunities for Danish peripheral rural areas such as nature, landscape and culture, sport and recreation, experience economy and niche production ([Mogensen & Møller, 2006](#)). Together with Bornholm, these two municipalities later became the municipal partners in the subsequent planning initiative “Land of Opportunities”.

The initiative was organised hierarchically in the form of a partnership board with the director of the trust and the Mayor of the municipality at the top, a steering group with the project manager of the trust and the technical director from the municipality in the middle, and a municipal working group to conduct the planning process. In Thisted Municipality, this working group consisted of three staff members from the planning department and an external planning consultant. Moreover, Thisted established a cross-departmental coordination group, which also included local stakeholders. Although most of the daily project organisation was executed locally, the trust engaged actively in the planning process.

Table 1

List of interviews and printed primary sources.

Date	Interviews (*related to “The Good Life at the Seaside”)
28 Feb 2013	Karen Skou, project manager of “Land of Opportunities”, Realdania
11 March 2013	Peter Skriver Nielsen, chairman of the citizens association of Bedsted and two other representatives of the association, interview and guided visit of the “Land of Opportunities” project in Bedsted
11 March 2013	Bjarne Nielsen, chairman of the citizens' initiative Vestervig Byfornyelse Aps (Vestervig urban renewal Aps) and 1 other representative, interview and guided visit of the “Land of Opportunities” project in Vestervig
11 March 2013	Paul Erik Kjærgaard, vice chairman of the citizens' association Hannik and 2 other representatives of the association, interview and guided visit of the “Land of Opportunities” project in Frøstrup
11 March 2013	*Finn Jorsal, chairman of the North Atlantic Surf Association (NASA), interview and guided visit of “The Good Life at the Seaside” project in Klitmøller
12 March 2013	*Knud Funch, chairman of the citizens association of Vorupør and Søren Odder Jensen, chairman of the business association of Vorupør, interview and guided visit of “The Good Life at the Seaside” project in Vorupør
12 March 2013	*Jette Højberg, chairmen of the Krik citizens association, interview and guided visit of “The Good Life at the Seaside” project in Krik
12 March 2013	*Jens Bach, municipal project manager of “Land of Opportunities” and head of Thisted municipality's planning department from 2007 to 2013; Gerd Dam, municipal project manager of “The Good Life at the Seaside”, and Otto Lægaard, municipal project manager of the “Land of Opportunities” sub-project “Clearing up and new life in vacant buildings”
14 May 2013	Søren Møller Christensen, co-owner of the consultancy firm Hausenberg which coordinated joint activities and external communication of “Land of Opportunities”
23 Aug 2013	*Jens Bach, follow-up telephone interview
22 July 2014	*Gerd Dam, follow-up telephone interview
25 June 2014	*Jytte Nielsen, museum curator and advisor in heritage questions, telephone interview
19 Sep 2014	*Gerd Dam, follow-up telephone interview
Type	Printed primary sources
Planning documents	Partnerskabsaftale mellem Realdania & Thisted Kommune (partnership agreement between Realdania & Thisted Municipality), March 13, 2007 Notat til Realdania møde, den 22. marts 2007 vedr. Bosætningsanalysen “Bosætning i yderområder” SBI 2005:03 (Note for Realdania meeting, March 22, 2007, on the settlement analysis “Settlement in peripheral areas” SBI 2005:03) prepared by Gerd Dam, planning department, Thisted Municipality Notat om fysisk planlægning og turisme i Thisted Kommune (Note on physical planning and tourism in Thisted Municipality), prepared by Ole Olesen, planning department, Thisted Municipality, April 16, 2007 Bykatalog: Gennemgang af alle byer i ny Thisted Kommune (Village catalogue: A review of all villages in the new Thisted Municipality), prepared by the technical departments of Hanstholm, Thisted and Sydthy in October 2006 and revised by the planning department of Thisted Municipality until August 2007 PPT-presentation on Land of Opportunities call for project ideas, prepared by Sven Buch, consultant at Kuben, and presented at eight public meetings in Thisted Municipality from March through April 2007 Landdistrikter og landsbyer (rural areas and villages), ppt-presentation on Land of Opportunities' call for project ideas, prepared by the planning department, Thisted Municipality and presented at the concluding public meeting on Land of Opportunities in Vestervig, April 28, 2007 Krik – en landsby ved fjorden hvor fortid og fremtid mødes. Ansøgning til Realdaniaprojektet 2007 (Krik – a village by the fjord where past and future meet. Application for the Realdania project 2007), prepared by the citizens association of Krik, September 2007 Thisted Kommune. Mulighedernes Land – Nye ideer til udvikling i landdistrikter. Forslag til demonstrationsprojekter i Thisted Kommune (Thisted Municipality. Land of opportunities – New ideas for rural development. Proposal for demonstration projects in Thisted Municipality). Retrieved from http://www.thisted.dk/Erhverv/ProjekterSamarbejder/~media/8778EBE0F8EF4B55814C86581C8D0D02.ashx Thisted Kommune. Mulighedernes Land – Nye ideer til udvikling i landdistrikter. Oversigt over demonstrationsprojekter (Thisted Municipality. Land of opportunities – New ideas for rural development. Overview of demonstration projects), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, February 2009. Det gode liv ved kysten. Indbudt etapekonkurrence. Konkurrenceprogram for første etape (The good life at the seaside. Invited competition in two phases. Competition programme for the first phase), prepared by Thisted Municipality in collaboration with the Danish Architects Association Det gode liv ved kysten. Endeligt konkurrenceforslag 18. februar 2010. Team: Preben Skaarup Landskabsarkitekter (The good life at the seaside. Final competition entry, February 18, 2010. Team: Preben Skaarup Landscape Architects) Det gode liv ved kysten. Arkitektkonkurrence. Dommerbetænkning (The good life at the seaside. Architectural competition, jury report.), prepared by Thisted Kommune in collaboration with the Danish Architects Association, March 2010 Evaluering af Mulighedernes Land Projekt: Det gode liv ved kysten (Evaluation of the Land of opportunities project: The good life at the seaside), prepared by Gerd Dam, Thisted Municipality, planning department, June 18, 2012
Status reports (incl. budgets and accounts)	Thisted Kommune. Mulighedernes Land – Nye ideer til udvikling af landdistrikter. Status Rapport 1, januar til juni 2007 (Thisted Municipality. Land of opportunities – New ideas for rural development. Status report 1, January through June 2007), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, August 2007 Thisted Kommune. Mulighedernes Land – Nye ideer til udvikling af landdistrikter. Status Rapport 2, juli til december 2007 (Thisted Municipality. Land of opportunities – New ideas for rural development. Status report 2, July through December, 2007), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, January 2008 Thisted Kommune. Mulighedernes Land – Nye ideer til udvikling af landdistrikter. Status Rapport 3, dækkende perioden januar til juni 2008 (Thisted Municipality. Land of opportunities – New ideas for rural development. Status report 3, January through June 2008), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, August 2008 Status over kommunens arbejde med Mulighedernes Land – overordnet set, dækkende perioden juli 2008 til juni 2009 (Status over the municipality's work with Land of opportunities – in a general perspective, July 2008 through June 2009), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, August 2009 Statusrapport for demonstrationsprojekt 2: Det gode liv ved kysten, juli 2008 til juni 2009 (Status report for demonstration project 2: The good life at the seaside, July 2008 through June 2009), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, August 2009 Status over kommunens arbejde med Mulighedernes Land – overordnet set, juli til december 2009 (Status over the municipality's work with Land of opportunities – in a general perspective, July through December 2009), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, February 2010

Table 1 (Continued)

Type	Printed primary sources
	<p>Statusrapport for demonstrationsprojekt 2: Det gode liv ved kysten, juli til december 2009 (Status report for demonstration project 2: The good life at the seaside, July through December 2009), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, February 2010</p> <p>Status over kommunens arbejde med Mulighedernes Land – overordnet set, januar til juni 2010 (Status over the municipality's work with Land of opportunities – in a general perspective, January through June 2010), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, June 2010</p> <p>Statusrapport for demonstrationsprojekt 2: Det gode liv ved kysten, januar til juni 2010 (Status report for demonstration project 2: The good life at the seaside, January through June 2010), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, June 2010</p> <p>Status over kommunens arbejde med Mulighedernes Land – overordnet set, juli til december 2010 (Status over the municipality's work with Land of opportunities – in a general perspective, July through December 2010), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, March 2011</p> <p>Statusrapport for demonstrationsprojekt 2: Det gode liv ved kysten, juli til december 2010 (Status report for demonstration project 2: The good life at the seaside, July through December 2010), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, March 2011</p> <p>Status over kommunens arbejde med Mulighedernes Land – overordnet set, januar til august 2011 (Status over the municipality's work with Land of opportunities – in a general perspective, January through August 2011), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, October 2011</p> <p>Statusrapport for demonstrationsprojekt 2: Det gode liv ved kysten, januar til juni 2011 (Status report for demonstration project 2: The good life at the seaside, January through June 2011), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, October 2011</p> <p>Status over kommunens arbejde med Mulighedernes Land – overordnet set, juli til december 2011 (Status over the municipality's work with Land of opportunities – in a general perspective, July through December 2011), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, March 2011</p> <p>Statusrapport for demonstrationsprojekt 2: Det gode liv ved kysten, juli til december 2011 (Status report for demonstration project 2: The good life at the seaside, July through December 2011), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, February 2011</p>
Minutes from meetings	<p>Resumé af studietur til Hälsingland d. 17.–19. september 2007 (summary of the study trip to Hälsingland, September 17–19, 2007—a common study trip of planners from the three partner municipalities), prepared by Hausenberg, September 2007.</p> <p>Mulighedernes Lands Forårseminar 7.–8. april 2008, opsamling (Minutes from Land of Opportunities spring seminar, April 7–8, 2008), prepared by Hausenberg, April 2008</p> <p>Opsamling på Mulighedernes Lands forårseminar, Thisted, april 2010 (Minutes from Land of opportunities spring seminar, Thisted, April 2010), prepared by Hausenberg Aps, May 2010</p>
External project evaluation	<p>Evaluering af forprojektet i Mulighedernes Land (Evaluation of the pre-project in Land of Opportunities), prepared by Oxford Research for Realdania, September 25, 2008</p>
External project communication	<p>Notat til Realdania vedr. midtvejsevaluering af Mulighedernes Land (Report to Realdania on the midway evaluation of Land of opportunities), prepared by Oxford Research, June 2011</p> <p>Slutevaluering af Mulighedernes Land (Final evaluation of Land of Opportunities), prepared by Oxford Research for Realdania, July 2013</p> <p>Med udgangspunkt i stedet, Mulighedernes Land og det nye landdistriktsparadigme (Place-based development, Land of opportunities and the new rural paradigm). Publication prepared by Hausenberg Aps in collaboration with Realdania, April 2008. Retrieved from http://www.realdania.dk/samlet-projektliste/mulighedernes-land</p> <p>Projektresumé Mulighedernes Land (Project summary Land of Opportunities), prepared by Hausenberg Aps, May 2007. Retrieved from http://www.realdania.dk/samlet-projektliste/mulighedernes-land</p> <p>På vej i Mulighedernes Land: Projektudvikling i det nye landdistriktsparadigme (On the way in the land of opportunities: Project development in the new rural paradigm). Publication prepared by Hausenberg Aps in collaboration with Realdania, December 2008. Retrieved from http://www.realdania.dk/samlet-projektliste/mulighedernes-land</p> <p>Mulighedernes land: Nye veje til udvikling i yderområder (Land of opportunities: New approaches to development in peripheral areas). Book publication prepared by Hausenberg Aps in collaboration with Realdania, Thisted Municipality, Lolland Municipality and Bornholm's Regional Municipality, November 2012. Retrieved from http://www.realdania.dk/samlet-projektliste/mulighedernes-land</p>
Municipal policies and plans	<p>Landdistrikter for alle aldre: landdistriktspolitik Thisted Kommune (Rural areas for all age groups: Rural development policy Thisted Municipality), prepared by Thisted Municipality, October 2007. Retrieved from http://www.thisted.dk/Kommunen/PolitikkerOgPlaner/~media/B5690B4159D44893BB2E2F3E03E7AF91.ashx</p> <p>Thisted Kommune Planstrategi 2007 (Thisted Municipality planning strategy 2007), prepared by Thisted Municipality, December 2007. Retrieved from http://soap.plansystem.dk/pdfarchive/70_1071877_PROPOSAL_1202399960112.pdf</p> <p>Kommuneplan 2010–2022 (Municipal spatial development plan 2010–2022), prepared by Thisted Municipality, planning department, 2011. Retrieved from http://kommuneplan.thisted.dk/dkplan/dkplan.aspx</p> <p>Turismepolitik 2011 (Tourism development policy 2011), prepared by Thisted Municipality, August 2011. Retrieved from http://www.thisted.dk/Kommunen/PolitikkerOgPlaner/~media/5B5CC873A9894F38B9009DEAAFD92C79.ashx</p> <p>Erhvervspolitik 2011 (Business development policy 2011), prepared by Thisted Municipality, August 2011. Retrieved from http://thisted.dk/Topmenu/Erhverv/~media/TekniskForvaltning/Planafdelingen/Pdf/Erhvervspolitik2011%20G%C3%A6ldende.ashx</p>
Related projects	<p>Projekt Lokalt Samspil 2006, Rapport (Project local interaction 2006, report), prepared by the rural development group Thy (Landsbygruppen Thy) and presented at the concluding public meeting on Land of Opportunities, April 28, 2007</p> <p>Cold Hawaii Masterplan 2007, prepared by the North Atlantic Surf Association (NASA) Klitmøller. Retrieved from http://issuu.com/rasmus.johnsen/docs/180209_ch_masterplan_rapport</p> <p>Vorupør 2020: Sådan ser vi fremtiden i vores lokalsamfund. Helhedsplan for byens udvikling samt strategi for udvikling af turismen (Vorupør 2020: This is how we see the future in our local community. Spatial development plan and tourism strategy), prepared by the business association of Vorupør in collaboration with Thisted Municipality and LAG Thy Mors. Retrieved from http://www.projektformidlingen.dk/projektavvikling/filer/helhedsplan.pdf</p> <p>Realiseringsprojekt Nørre Vorupør landingsplads (Realisation project Nørre Vorupør landing place), prepared by Nr. Vorupørs Fiskercompagni and Fiskeriforenings Fond in collaboration with Thisted Municipality. Retrieved October 7, 2014, from http://www.stedet-taeller.dk/</p> <p>HF Cold Hawaii (new college in Klitmøller). Retrieved October 16, 2014, from http://vuctm.dk/uddannelser/2-aarigt-hf/hf-cold-hawaii.aspx</p> <p>Cold Hawaii: To byer en bølge (Cold Hawaii: two villages, one wave). Design guidelines prepared by local businesses VisitThy, Thisted Kommune and Visit Nordjylland. Retrieved from http://www.visitthy.dk/sites/default/files/asp/visitthy/cold_hawaii_design_inspiration_single_final_1_4.pdf</p> <p>Matchmaking zone Klitmøller, prepared by Cowork Klitmøller. Retrieved October 7, 2014, from http://www.stedet-taeller.dk/</p>

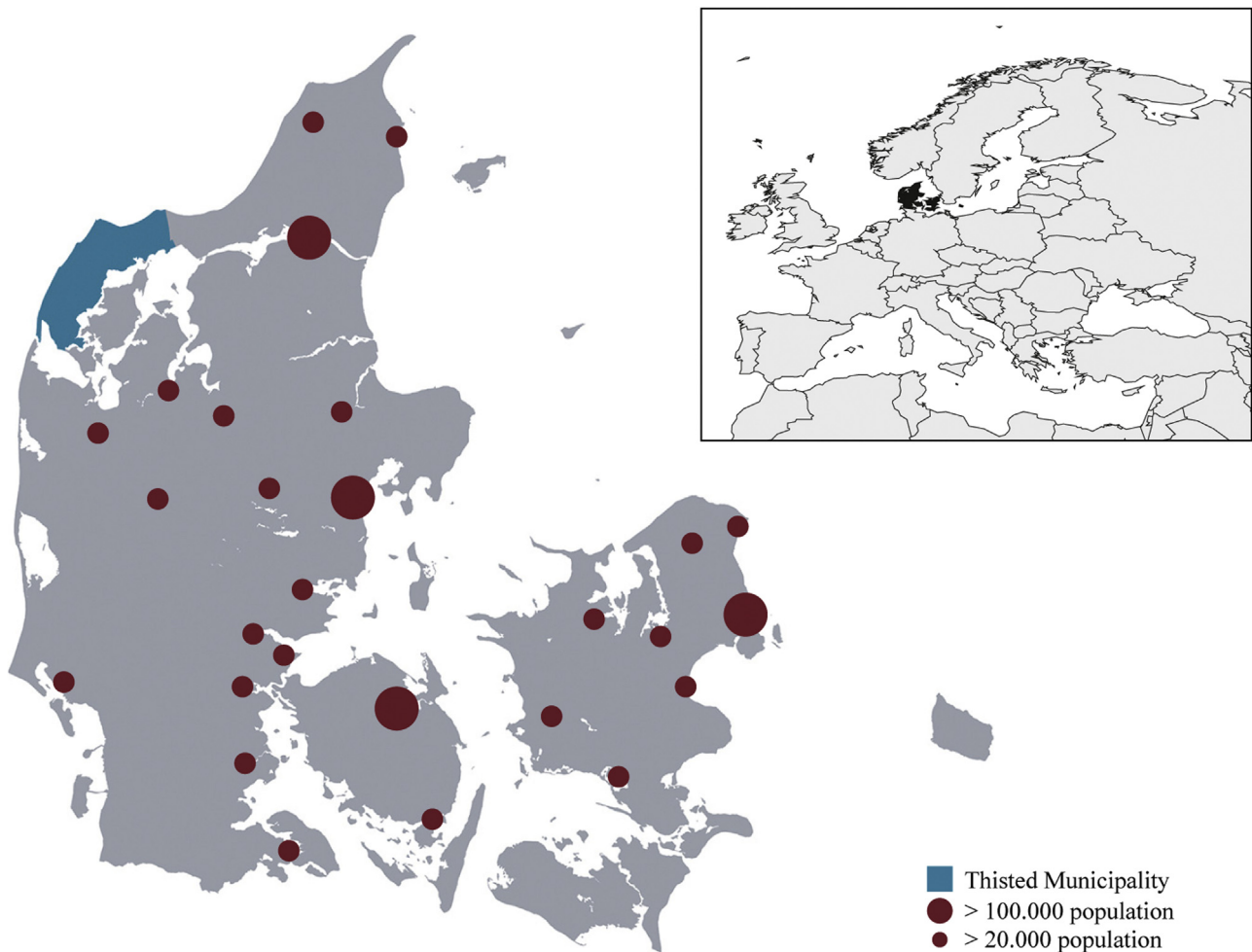


Fig. 3. Thisted Municipality in Denmark and Denmark in Europe.

A consultancy firm coordinated joint activities among the three municipalities such as common seminars, study trips, and external project communication.

Thisted Municipality carried out six strategic projects within this framework, each including several physical interventions for a total sum of 89 million Danish Crowns (€12 million) co-financed by the municipality, the trust, and other external funders. We have concentrated on one project, “The Good Life at the Seaside,” which resulted in physical interventions in three coastal villages for a total of about 33 million Danish Crowns (€4.5 million) (Fig. 5) (Sloth Hansen et al., 2012).

In the following, we discuss the planning process and its results in a translation perspective. To this end, we followed the actors in the planning process from the moment the partnership was officially established in 2007, to the completion of the local projects in 2014 to explore how they addressed rural shrinkage in Thisted.

4. Results

4.1. Two broad questions and a narrow solution focus

“In the beginning, there were only two broad questions: How can we achieve increased settlement? How can we achieve more tourism?” recalls Jens Bach, municipal project manager and the then head of Thisted Municipality’s planning department (Jens Bach, personal communication, August 28, 2013). The broad aim of “Land of Opportunities” to increase tourism and settlement was,

however, combined with a narrow solution focus from the start. Due to the partnership with Realdania, it was clear that the outcome had to be physical projects because the trust’s mission is “to improve quality of life and benefit the common good by improving the built environment” (Realdania, 2016a,b).

The partnership agreement between the trust and Thisted Municipality confirms an explorative project start: The main challenge to be addressed was the “changed framework for living conditions” which was linked to unequal spatial development in Denmark, globalisation, deindustrialisation, altered agricultural production conditions and economic stagnation or decline in peripheral rural areas. The initiative had to preserve and enhance the existing qualities and potential of villages and rural areas such as nature, abundance of space and peace and quiet in order to “create quality of life for those who already live in or visit these areas”.

The initiative had to focus on the development of the physical framework for settlement and tourism; important considerations included the quality of buildings and public open spaces and cultural heritage. Regarding the focus areas for tourism, Thisted Municipality mentioned the forthcoming, Thy National Park, the continued development of the coastal tourism centre, Nr. Vorupør, and active nature tourism. On a strategic level, all projects had to focus on the future role of villages in the municipality, for example, through cooperation networks (Realdania & Thisted Kommune, 2007, March 13).



Fig. 4. Thisted Municipality, overview map ©Geodatastyrelsen.

Based on these first broad ideas, the project partners undertook a wide range of activities to clarify the planning task and engage the actors identified by their initial hypotheses. Specifically, we were able to distinguish four partly overlapping phases of interest activities: (1) *exploration*, (2) *strategic reframing*, (3) *negotiation*, and (4) *concretisation* (Table 2).

4.2. Exploration: *idea development*

To begin with, the municipal planners carried out a settlement and a tourism analysis in order to identify the potential stakeholders and to clarify their concerns. ASWOT analysis of Thisted's 50 villages (Thisted Kommune, 2007a) served to identify local development potential, while it was also used as a tool for public involvement and to obtain local knowledge from the rural communities. In parallel, the municipality invited local communities to propose their project ideas based on their perception of place-specific qualities and resources. An open call for project ideas was initiated at public meetings in eight villages in which more

than 600 citizens participated. These meetings were conducted as idea development workshops in collaboration with the umbrella organisation for rural civic associations, the Thy village group, and the rural development project "Local collaboration 2006". In this way, "Land of Opportunities" became linked to the development of the municipal rural development policy (Planafdelingen Thisted Kommune, 2007, August; Thisted Kommune, 2007b).

The call for ideas identified nine themes of particular significance for settlement and tourism in Thisted which should be considered by proposers: cultural heritage, vacant buildings, visual nature and culture profiling, the role of agriculture, youth culture and education, year-round tourism, nature and open landscape accessibility, development of entrepreneurship, and cooperation networks among villages. Also, the projects had to "fit the place" according to the village SWOT and the results of the project "Local collaboration 2006". Furthermore, project ideas had to be innovative, contribute substantial co-financing and be supported by the local community, while their future management had to be secured.

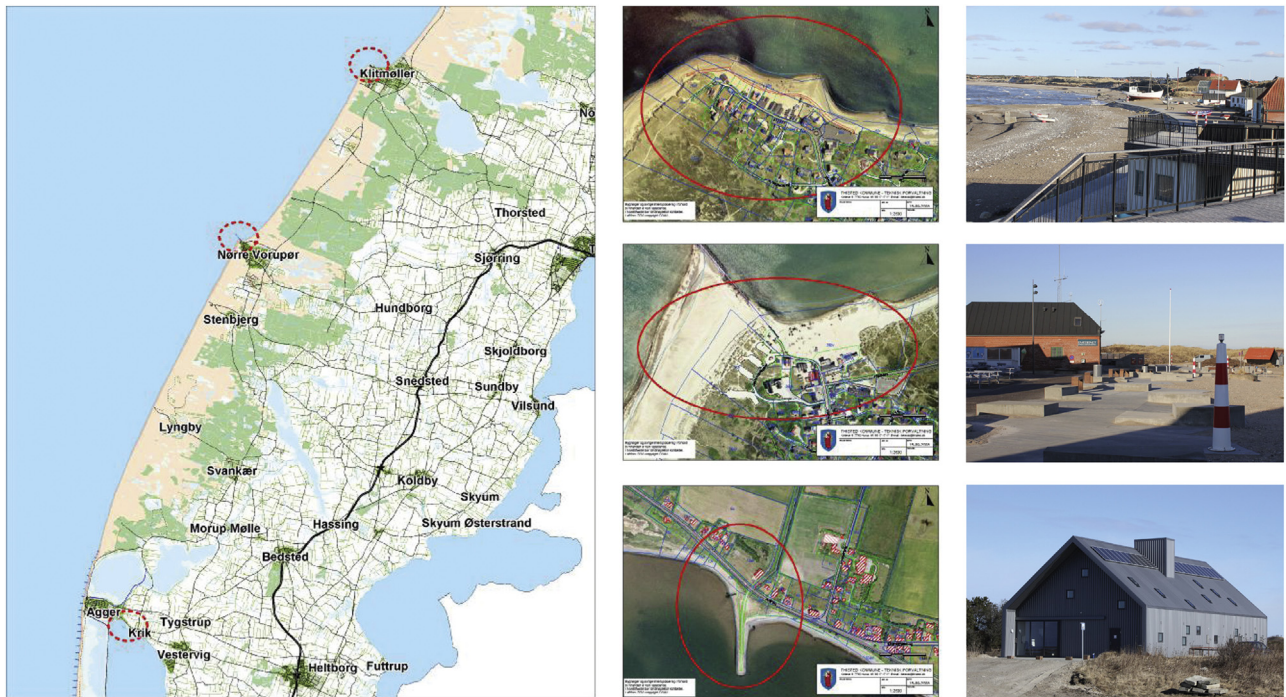


Fig. 5. “The Good Life at the Seaside”: From left to right: location of the three coastal villages in Thisted municipality (marked by circles), aerial photos of the three project sites, and impressions of the realised projects in Klitmøller (top), Nr. Vorupør (middle) and Krik (bottom). ©Map and aerial photos: Thisted Kommune.

Table 2
Four phases of *interessement* leading to “The Good Life at the Seaside”.

Phase	Exploration	Strategic reframing	Negotiation	Concretisation
Activities	Stakeholder analysis Focused site evaluation Open call for project ideas	Evaluation and grouping of project ideas in relation to: – 4 key action areas; – The tourism, settlement and village SWOT analyses; – Other municipal planning strategies and policies; – Opportunities for co-financing, local ownership, and public value Location selection	Selection and development of project ideas based on preliminary project plan	Architecture competition for “The Good Life at the Seaside”
Results	Tourism analysis Settlement analysis Village SWOT-analysis 100 project ideas from 45 civic associations (hereof 19 in the coastal villages of Klitmøller, Nørre Vorupør, and Krik)	Preliminary project plan for 4 key action areas, hereunder “The Good Life at the Seaside” Additional results: Integration with other municipal strategies and policies	Binding project plan for 4 strategic projects, hereunder “The Good Life at the Seaside”	Master plans for the areas around piers and landing places in Klitmøller, Nørre Vorupør, and Krik Design proposals: Klitmøller: Beach promenade, club house for surfers and biological association Nr. Vorupør: Beach promenade, sea bath Krik: community centre, outdoor activity facilities, open space design
Human actors	The charitable trust Planners Politicians Local experts (e.g. heritage experts) Local communities	The charitable trust Planners Politicians Local experts (e.g. heritage experts) Local stakeholders (Representatives of) the local communities	The charitable trust Planners Politicians Local project proposers Local stakeholders	The charitable trust Planners Politicians Local experts (e.g. heritage experts) Local project proposers Local stakeholders Architects External experts (the jury)

Throughout the idea development phase, the planners were in continuous dialogue with citizens and civic associations with regards to the development of ideas, both conceptually and technically.

By October 2007, 45 civic associations had submitted over 100 project ideas of which 19 stemmed from the coastal villages of Klitmøller, Nr. Vorupør and Krik which would become the locations for “The Good Life at the Seaside”. Most of these 19 project ideas were concerned with tourism development, e.g. renovating

and upgrading piers and landing places and improving accessibility to nature and the National Park, while the civic association of Krik also proposed a long-awaited community centre.

Members of the Klitmøller-based surf club, NASA, proposed three project ideas: a “Coastal Experience Centre” and the so-called “Association Path” (Foreningsvejen), a beach promenade in Klitmøller and Nr. Vorupør, which would integrate the landing places and the activities of several associations (Planafdelingen Thisted Kommune, 2007, August). The latter also stimulated new collaborations: “The (work on the) Association Path started cooperation between Klitmøller and Vorupør and between the civic, business and fishermen’s associations in Vorupør” (Knud Funch, personal communication, March 12, 2013). Furthermore, the surfers’ ideas referred to and, thus, directed attention to a regional master plan to develop Thy into “the centre for surfing in Northern Europe” (Johnsen et al., 2007, p. 6). The *Cold Hawaii Master Plan 2007* emphasises the exceptional wave conditions along Thy’s North Sea coast: What was previously an obstacle to fishing, should now be considered an asset not only for increasing tourism, but also for attracting especially young, well-educated and entrepreneurial new citizens, specifically to Klitmøller, which already had a growing surf community (Johnsen et al., 2007).

4.3. Strategic reframing: from ideas to strategic projects

While the many local project ideas were perceived as a public involvement success, they also presented “a challenge to meet both the strategic ambitions and the goal of local ownership and participation” (Planafdelingen Thisted Kommune, 2008, January). To develop strategic projects, the coordination group first defined four key action areas based on the previous nine themes: vacant buildings; coastal villages, sea and fjord; accessibility and connectivity; meeting places and network. The submitted project ideas were then grouped according to these key action areas and evaluated in the light of the tourism, settlement and village SWOT analyses and the forthcoming municipal planning strategy (Thisted Kommune, 2007c). Furthermore, the projects were examined to identify any potential opportunities for co-financing and their potential to create value for people other than the involved actors. According to several interviewed key actors, the decisive event was a 24-h workshop with participants from different municipal departments; a heritage expert from the local museum and representatives of the rural civic associations, the tourism association, the charitable trust and the coordinating consultancy firm. This group visited all the proposed project locations and discussed, grouped and further developed the submitted project ideas. The workshop resulted in the selection of project locations and a preliminary project plan for the four key action areas. Those whose project ideas had been rejected were invited to a fundraising seminar and their ideas were saved in a municipal “bank of project ideas” for possible later use (Planafdelingen Thisted Kommune, 2008, August).

The preliminary project plan presents the first formulation of “The Good Life at the Seaside,” the aim of which was to increase the attractiveness of coastal villages and develop a brand with a focus on cultural heritage, surfing and other water-related activities (Planafdelingen Thisted Kommune, 2008, April). The municipal project manager, Gerd Dam, explains that “the locations around piers and landing places in Klitmøller, Nr. Vorupør and Krik were chosen because of their characteristic historical structures and significant existing tourism and water-related activities, especially surfing” (Gerd Dam, personal communication, July 22, 2014).

4.4. Negotiation: prioritising projects and refining strategic goals

During the subsequent nine months, a working group made up of local project proposers and other stakeholders ranked the project

ideas and negotiated a binding project plan for “The Good Life at the Seaside” under the leadership of the municipal project manager. This plan referred to *The Cold Hawaii Master Plan* and its strategic goal was to “export the surfing and settlement of surfers success story in Klitmøller to other locations” (Planafdelingen Thisted Kommune, 2009, February, p. 2). It was considered that developing the framework for outdoor activities would preserve heritage, while heritage also would support developing the framework for outdoor activities. Also, the project plan emphasises “an emerging cooperation network among three localities with no previous tradition for collaboration” (Planafdelingen Thisted Kommune, 2009, February, p. 2).

4.5. Concretisation: from project to action

The municipality established an architecture competition based on the project plan, the brief for which requested: (1) strategic master plans for the physical development of the areas around the landing places in Klitmøller, Nr. Vorupør, and Krik, and; (2) design proposals for the following prioritised project ideas: the Association Path and a clubhouse for surfers and other users in Klitmøller, the Association Path in Nr. Vorupør and the renovation or replacement of the derelict coal storage house in Krik, which would function both as a community centre and a base for outdoor activities. Finally, the brief required the submission of draft sketches for the following second priority projects with a view to generating funding for them as potential future projects: a sea bath in Klitmøller; a proposal regarding a derelict restaurant in Nr. Vorupør and; the renovation of the pier in Krik. The competition was conducted in two phases to allow negotiations to take place between the architects and local stakeholders (Thisted Kommune & Akademisk Arkitektforening, 2009).

The jury report emphasises that the winning team’s proposal visualises and strengthens the cultural heritage and natural qualities of the sites and rearranges and clarifies spaces for the activities of fishermen and surfers, inhabitants and recreationists (Fig. 6) (Preben Skaarup Landskab, 2010). Also, the jury approved of the draft sketches for future projects, which included sea baths in all three locations and the renovation of historical fishermen’s buildings in Nr. Vorupør (Thisted Kommune & Akademisk Arkitektforening, 2010).

Three years into the planning process, the decision of the jury concluded the formulation of the planning task and defined the necessary actors and how they should interact to achieve “The Good Life at the Seaside”.

Following the competition, the winning proposal was discussed in detail with future users and stakeholders. The architectural projects were subjected to a regulatory review process by the responsible authorities, subjected to competitive tendering and were finally built and opened to the public. During this period, each step was communicated in the local press, while the construction process was celebrated on-site from cutting the first turf to festive local openings. In August 2011, “The Good Life at the Seaside” was officially opened in Klitmøller (Planafdelingen Thisted Kommune, 2011, October).

4.6. Beyond the project

In all three locations, the planning process stimulated new cooperation networks, related projects or follow-up projects (Table 3).

The case of Nr. Vorupør is particularly interesting. Here, the prospect of local investments brought local businesses, civic and fishermen’s associations together to work towards a common goal. In 2010, a local project group headed by the local business association elaborated a master plan for physical development and a strategy for the development of tourism in Vorupør, which drew



Fig. 6. “The Good Life at the Seaside”: Master plan for the landing place in Nr. Vorupør from the winning architecture competition proposal. ©Preben Skaarup Landskab.

Table 3

“The Good Life at the seaside” projects, related projects and financing.

Place	“The Good Life at the Seaside” project	Related project
Klitmøller	<p>Association path (Foreningsvejen) Construction costs: DKK 6 million Club house for the surfers’ association NASA and the Biological Association of North Jutland Construction costs: DKK 6 million Financing: Thisted Municipality DKK 300,000, Realdania DKK 7.7 million, Bevica fonden DKK 2 million, Vanførefonden DKK 1 million, Lokale- og Anlægsfonden DKK 1 million</p>	<p>Matchmaking zone Klitmøller (a networking and business development centre for temporary residents) Organisation: Cowork Klitmøller Financing: Realdania</p>
Nørre Vorupør	<p>Association path (Foreningsvejen) Construction costs: DKK 4.65 million Financing: Thisted Municipality DKK 250,000, Realdania DKK 3.4 million,; Bevica fonden DKK 1 million Sea bath Construction costs: DKK 13.5 million Financing: Thisted Municipality DKK 3 million, Realdania DKK 3.525 million, Det Obelske Familiefond DKK 3.525 million, Lokale- og Anlægsfonden DKK 3 million</p>	<p>Renovation of Vorupør pier Organisation: The Danish Coastal Authority, Thisted Municipality Construction costs: DKK 12 million Financing: The Danish Coastal Authority Vorupør 2020: Local development plan and tourism strategy with several sub-projects Organisation: Vorupør business association, Thisted Municipality, LAG Thy Mors Construction costs: DKK 6.5 million Financing: Thisted Municipality, European development funds, Regional growth funds, Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs Renovation of fishermen’s buildings Organisation: Nr. Vorupør fishing company and fishing association’s foundation Construction costs: DKK 8.152 million Financing: Thisted Municipality DKK 1.1 million; Realdania DKK 2 million; A.P. Møller Fond DKK 3 million; European development funds DKK 1.937 million; Regional growth funds DKK 215,000 Thy National Park visitors’ centre Organisation: Thy National Park</p>
Krik	<p>Community centre and outdoor recreation facilities plus open space design Construction costs: DKK 3.109 million Financing: Thisted Municipality DKK 141,000, Realdania DKK 2.6 million, the Danish Outdoor Council DKK 367,500</p>	<p>Renovation of Krik pier Organisation: Thisted Municipality Construction costs: DKK 2.3 million Financing: Thisted Municipality, European development funds, Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs Three shelters next to the community centre Organisation: Thisted Municipality Construction costs: DKK 90,000 Financing: the Danish Outdoor Council DKK 29 million (€3.89 million)</p>
Total	DKK 33.26 million (€4.47 million)	

heavily on the winning proposal from the competition (Vorupør Erhvervsforening, 2010). To date, this has led to the renovation of the fishermen's buildings at the landing place (Stedet Tæller, 2016). In addition, the municipality obtained external finance and renovated the pier, which enabled the construction of a sea bath in Nr. Vorupør, which was partly financed by the charitable trust, Realdania, and was, therefore, included as a final project in "The Good Life at the Seaside". In the future, Thy National Park will construct the main visitors' centre in Nr. Vorupør in collaboration with local nature and outdoor recreation associations.

The initial investment of about 4.65 million Danish Crowns (€600,000) for the Association Path increased ten-fold to about 45 million Danish Crowns (€6 million). Besides the initial funding from the partner trust, the municipal planners and local enthusiasts were able to obtain additional funding from trusts and regional, national and European development funds, so that the municipality only needed to provide 3.7 million Danish Crowns (€495,000) of the total investment, although they also contributed man-hours to the value of about 1 million Danish Crowns (€130,000).

The cooperation between Klitmøller and Nr. Vorupør continued with the project "Cold Hawaii: Two villages one wave", which resulted in a design manual for visual identity (Visitthy, 2014). Furthermore, a new college, HF-Cold Hawaii, which integrates surfing with its education programme, opened in Klitmøller in 2014 (Thy-Mors HF and VUC, 2016).

With regards to future planning, the overall planning initiative has informed several municipal policies and plans, most notably, "place-based potential as a starting point for development," which is the general theme for the municipal spatial development plan for 2010–2022 and for the 2011 business and tourism policies both with a clear reference to "Land of Opportunities" (Thisted Kommune, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c).

The external project evaluation which was conducted by a consultancy firm shows that the interaction between "The Good Life at the Seaside" and the surfers' initiative "Cold Hawaii" has attracted extensive media attention and has had a clear branding effect on Thisted Municipality (Oxford Research, 2013).

5. Discussion

What can this study tell us about the role of planners in a collaborative, strategic planning process; about decision making and the possible strategic effects of local physical projects? What difference did the application of wicked problem thinking make in this planning project? And how can these insights help to develop an emerging strategic planning approach to address the wicked problem of rural shrinkage?

5.1. The planners' role

Our case study highlights the relational role of planners in a collaborative, strategic planning process: As municipal project manager, Jens Bach, succinctly put it, the planners had to act as facilitators and strategists throughout the planning process (Realdania, 2008). While the planners never explicitly referred to the concept of wicked problems, the project demonstrates how planning problems and solutions can be negotiated interdependently with existing resources, actors and stakeholders. Also it demonstrates how a wicked planning problem can be "re-solved" through solutions which stimulate new opportunities and, thereby, enable new solutions in a continuous adaptation process.

The planners' openness to ideas from other actors and willingness to form strategic partnerships with local stakeholders were deciding factors with regards to the successful results. The planners actively supported the development of local project ideas and

were able to identify and help implement relevant suggestions and emerging initiatives.

Throughout the planning process, one major task for the planners was to integrate the citizens' project ideas, the strategic vision, other municipal policies and strategies and other ongoing projects, which ensured consistency and synergies, thereby optimising the use of resources and strengthening strategic partnerships. Another major task was to raise additional funds for the projects included in "The Good Life at the Seaside" and for follow-up projects, which led to substantial overall investments while reducing the municipality's investment. Finally, the planners facilitated a continuous dialogue among politicians, experts, stakeholders and the local communities, which helped develop strong cooperation networks, which have proven to be enduring and have continued despite a key actor in "Land of Opportunities", the head of the planning department, leaving the municipality in 2013.

5.2. Collaborative decision making

Interessement activities were the key to strategic project development and the construction of new strategic cooperation networks. The fact that an effort was made in the project to identify and engage local communities and other actors to increase their commitment to the formulated tasks was a deciding factor with regards to the successful results. The active participation of the local communities from the development of project ideas to their design and execution ensured that they were committed to supporting the final physical projects, maintaining the completed projects, and continuing to work on follow-up projects.

The projected planning actions and the associated actor-network remained remarkably open even after the planning task for "The Good Life at the Seaside" had been defined. This enabled the integration of new projects, new project partners and new financing opportunities, while maintaining the engagement of enrolled actors for a six-year period and in some cases even beyond the conclusion of the project.

5.3. Strategic effects of local projects

From an actor-network perspective, the results of "The Good Life at the Seaside" encompass considerably more than just three renovated landing places and the construction of a few new buildings.

At the local scale, the new buildings, paths and the landscape design have stimulated new activities and uses and inspired a cohesive aesthetic experience of the areas around the piers and landing places. As a whole, the interventions represent a dynamic transformation from fishing to tourism, surfing and outdoor recreation and, thus, symbolise new directions for "The Good Life at the Seaside," while they have also created new opportunities for interaction between fishermen, surfers, tourists and inhabitants. The parallel interventions in the three coastal villages stage "The Good Life at the Seaside" at the regional scale. At the national scale, the projects had a significant branding effect on Thisted Municipality. Hundreds of citizens and stakeholders from local enthusiasts to national organisations have been actively involved in the development of the project, and are, thus, part of the actor-network of the realised project, which is still evolving across multiple scales. Collaborative project-making assembled a wide network of planners, politicians, local enthusiasts and stakeholders, professional experts and the charitable trust, who worked together to achieve a common strategic goal, and continue to do so. In the course of the planning process, these actors developed a shared understanding of the wicked planning problem centred on place-based development opportunities for strengthening settlement and tourism.

More specifically, "The Good Life at the Seaside" aimed to develop and brand the three coastal villages and make them more

attractive by focusing on heritage, surfing and other outdoor activities. The local projects have clearly contributed to achieving this vision. Furthermore, they developed social capital, shared identity, and local pride, increased local knowledge of place-based potential, and helped develop a collaborative planning culture, strategic planning competencies among municipal planners and project development competencies among local communities. In terms of these second and third order effects, the projects increased Thisted Municipality's capacity to address rural shrinkage in the future. International research confirms that successful collaborative planning processes have led to "system adaptations," which increase the overall adaptiveness and sustainability of the system (Innes & Booher, 2010, p. 38).

5.4. Applicability elsewhere?

While the planning process and results of "The Good Life at the Seaside" have clearly contributed positively to the spatial development of Thisted, the question remains: was the chosen approach to the wicked problem of rural shrinkage appropriate, and are the experiences from Thisted applicable to other similar planning situations?

In the studied case, private funding played a major role. Private funding is increasingly being integrated in urban and regional development projects in Denmark (Realdania, n.d.b), the political and democratic implications of which are being widely discussed (Kristiansen, 2010, August 2; Rebsdorf, 2014, August 8). This development constitutes a new type of "wickedness" where opportunities for funding define the range of possible planning actions and, thus, the way planning problems are formulated. While this involves the risk of customising public policies to the changing agendas of private trusts, we believe that it is the reality which local governments and planners have to come to terms with and take advantage of.

"The Good Life at the Seaside" was part of a larger planning initiative, which was conducted in partnership with and co-financed by a charitable trust. This meant that the overall strategic vision had to fit the trust's mission to improve the quality of life for inhabitants by enhancing the built environment, which is why the outcome had to be in the form of physical structures. Furthermore, the projects had to strengthen place-based qualities such as cultural heritage, which led to a sole focus on enhancing the framework for tourism and settlement, while excluding, e.g. business development or investments in service infrastructure. In fact, the primary school in Klitmøller was closed at the time when the investment was made in the surfers' clubhouse and the recreational redesign of the landing place.

While the cooperation with the trust limited the strategic agenda of the planning initiative, it is important to emphasise that it was by no means forced upon the municipality as Thisted actively participated in the agenda-defining process that preceded the planning initiative. Also, the fact that the municipality and the trust established a common strategic vision and success criteria (local ownership, public value, possibility for co-financing) from the start, enabled Thisted to steer the development of the project in directions desired by planners, politicians and local communities. Furthermore, the municipality was able to use the initial funding from the trust as seed money for additional fundraising thereby generating considerable total investment and a reduction in municipal investment costs. Finally, the partnership organisation implied a mutual commitment from local politicians and the trust over a six-year planning period, which occasionally complicated decision-making, but also ensured political momentum and raised the level of ambition (Oxford Research, 2013). On the whole, the case of Thisted suggests that private funding can form the basis

for a strategic, collaborative municipal planning approach and that a partnership organisation can increase the strategic benefits.

"Land of Opportunities" started out with a vision to attract new inhabitants and increase tourism in Thisted. It is too early to determine whether the success of the existing surf-related settlement and tourism development will spread from Klitmøller to Nr. Vorupør and Krik, just as it is difficult to measure the specific effect of "The Good Life at the Seaside". However, it is safe to say that the local projects and the collaborative planning process helped to strengthen and capitalise on the place-based potential in the form of the exceptional wave conditions and improve the physical and organisational framework for the further development of "Cold Hawaii", which included a new high-school in Klitmøller. While place-based projects cannot be immediately transferred to other locations, we believe the experiences from Thisted can inform other place-based, strategic development approaches.

Collaborative project development was central to the planning approach and instrumental in achieving the positive second and third-order effects. Active participation was a condition for obtaining local investments, although it risked excluding less resourceful local communities, and shifted the responsibility for local development from public actors to private volunteers. Thisted Municipality strived to empower the local communities by facilitating project development through personal dialogue, by establishing a bank for rejected project ideas and by offering fundraising help to their proposers. These innovative public involvement measures stimulated several follow-up projects, some of which were in locations that did not receive investment from "Land of Opportunities". We believe that these strategies for collaborative project development can be transferred to other peripheral rural areas, although voluntary work and private funding cannot and should not replace public investments.

While collaboratively developed and privately funded strategic projects that enhance place-based potential did not solve the problem of rural shrinkage, the experiences from Thisted show that they can be agents of change that stimulate and support positive development, both locally and regionally. This approach cannot stand alone and needs to be combined with other planning measures, yet it can enable socially agreed investments where there is development potential while it also creates a focus on shared opportunities, rather than only addressing the negative symptoms of rural shrinkage.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to substantiate an emerging strategic planning approach to rural shrinkage both empirically and theoretically. We established that rural shrinkage is a wicked problem. Each local situation represents a unique, complex and contested social situation, which changes constantly due to many, multi-scalar factors. Therefore, rural shrinkage requires an adaptive, participative and transdisciplinary approach. Based on a Danish case, we investigated a collaborative, place-based and project-oriented strategic planning approach at the municipal level.

We showed that wicked problem thinking can be aligned with strategic planning theory. Actor-Network Theory, and specifically the model of translation, provided an operational framework for studying a strategic planning process through which problems and solutions were continuously negotiated. By studying the interactions between human and non-human actors through the planning process, we were able to shed light on the role of planners, collaborative decision making and the strategic effects of local physical projects.

In the studied case, the planners' role was to perceive and instigate productive relationships between people, places, ideas

and – particularly important in this case – financing opportunities. Collaborative decision making was a deciding factor in achieving the successful results. Local physical projects played a significant role. First, they enabled strategic decision making by assembling citizens, planners, politicians and experts together to work towards strategic visions across multiple scales. Second, the projects resulted in considerable second and third-order effects in the form of shared problem-understandings, increased social capital and new cooperation networks, which improved the overall adaptiveness and sustainability of the system. In conclusion, collaboratively conceived strategic local projects which enhance place-based potential can contribute to sustainable adaptation to rural shrinkage.

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