



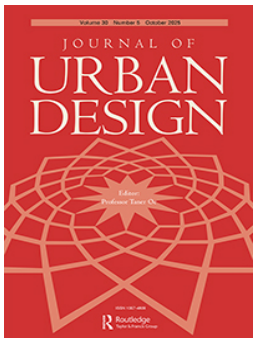
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Why and who? Complaints against infill plans for 30 Gothenburg projects

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ABSTRACT

An infill programme with 30 plans targeting 7,000 new suburban dwellings led to 647 individuals complaining, despite informal early dialogues supported by developers, of whom 24 were interviewed. Contents of complaints were classified according to 27 reasons. Many complaints concerned parking and greenspaces. The elderly more often emphasized parking, while younger complainants mentioned noise and traffic. Gender differences in opinion were smaller. Two plans attracted many complaints: one where owners of neighbouring semi-detached houses complained primarily of the loss of greenspace and another where housing cooperatives faced costly reshaping of parking. The detailed analysis of complaints could guide infill planners.

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Housing infill; urban planning; dialogue; suburbs; Sweden

Introduction

It is common knowledge that local policies to increase housing supply by planning for suburban infill projects can be delayed or thwarted by protests (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2020; Foster et al. 2023). With careful planning, infill projects can be successful; Beattie and Haarhoff (2014) highlighted shared visions of stakeholders, their positive working relationships, and sufficiently flexible urban planning processes. Accelerating urban planning in the context of excess housing demand, however, implies addressing a double pressure for swift and slow planning, where slowness would support more public participation (Calderon et al. 2024). Swift planning might increase the risk of complaints reaching the courts and delaying implementation.

Over the years, there have been reforms to planning laws in many countries to provide for more public participation (Thorpe 2017), such as new required procedures of notification and exhibition, expanding the definition of who may appeal against planning decisions made by a local authority. Adopting participatory elements in urban planning law may lead to delays at the end of the planning process, something that has seldom been noticed (Eriksson, Fredriksson, and Syssner 2022). On the other hand, if developers are engaged early in planning

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initiatives (Mäntysalo and Saglie 2010), they might welcome dialogues with residents and other stakeholders before the legally defined process of planning begins. Early dialogues could reduce the risk of delays arising from protesting residents.

One purpose of the present investigation is to study how developers have perceived early dialogues with residents as a means for mitigating protracted, late conflicts, establishing a balance rather than aiming for consensus. The setting is a Gothenburg municipal infill programme. A second purpose is to analyse resident complaints against 30 detailed development plans forming part of the programme. Here, one objective is to analyse the pattern of complainants and the reasons for their complaints according to age and gender. Thus, the study includes what happens both before the formal planning process and after the city has decided on a development plan. Gothenburg is Sweden's second largest city with about 500,000 inhabitants. The BoStad2021 programme, intended to provide 7,000 new apartments by 2021, was planned for suburbs with apartment buildings from the 1960s and 1970s, being fragmented suburban areas with patches (Schneider and Woodcock 2008) of multifamily blocks.

This study presents new knowledge of developer expectations and experiences concerning the effects of early dialogues with residents. Complaints (objections or appeals) associated with the design of infill projects have been studied primarily in Australia (Cook et al. 2012; Davison et al. 2013). There has been less engagement with the age and gender of those who submit complaints and how these are linked to reasons for complaints. Also, earlier research has mostly concerned infill plans for suburbs dominated by single-family dwellings. The present work intends to fill the gap by relating age and gender to complaints, going into unprecedented detail, in the context of legal protests against the infill of new apartment buildings in low density suburban areas dominated by existing apartment buildings. It is argued that stakeholder complaints can be used by planners and developers as a valuable source of knowledge of views on infill design and as an inspiration for adapting dialogues and plans to the local demographics, making planning and plans more inclusive.

After a literature review, developer experiences of early dialogue are reported based on interviews with their project managers. Identified complaint categories establish the base for a fine-grained textual analysis of all complaints. To begin with, differences between plans that gave rise to complaints and those without any submitted complaints are analysed. Findings are presented, including the significance not only of respecting greenspace but more precisely trees, also consequences for people with mobility difficulties when parking arrangements are reshaped. Ultimately, implications for planners are suggested: relating infill plans to a wider urban context, adapting dialogues and plans to the local demographics.

Literature review

Four strands of literature are relevant: first participation by means of early dialogues, second the legal setting of complaints, third the relation between residents' attitudes and infill in various urban contexts, fourth the specific reasons for complaining, the willingness to complain, and how these can be related to gender and age of

complainants. Almost all publications reviewed here rely on infill as a term; without explicitly mentioning infill, other authors who have contributed to understanding the phenomenon have relied also on terms such as urban consolidation (e.g., Searle 2004), densification (Haaland and van den Bosch 2015), and smart growth (Farris 2001).

Early developer dialogues with residents

That developers engage in public dialogue before the outset of the formal process of planning may reflect a variety of purposes. If early dialogues with residents might reduce the risk of complaints reaching courts after a plan has been decided upon, it would agree with 'generating efficiency' as a motive for dialogue, rather than 'deepening democracy' or 'generating legitimacy' (Tahvilzadeh 2015, 247–248). The principle of 'generating efficiency' is close to 'learning', as contrasted against 'empowerment and legitimization' (Hisschemöller and Cuppen 2015, 36). In a case study of transforming a Copenhagen suburb, Kjeldsen and Joseph (2024, 10) found that private developers saw community involvement as important, 'partially seen as a means to improve usability, partially as a way to demonstrate legitimacy to future business partners', referring to projects with other housing associations. Khoshkar, Balfors, and Wärnbäck (2018), who studied the implementation of greenspace issues in densification projects from the perspective of planners, recognized a need for more knowledge of how developers saw challenges.

Whether developers should initiate early dialogues is partly a question of the legislative framework and municipal resources. Although Norwegian legislation assigns a stronger role than in Sweden for developers to initiate planning (Hanssen 2010), it is mostly a difference in degree when developers are invited early on to consider particular sites for infill projects to conclude development agreements, as in the Gothenburg programme analysed here. According to Hanssen's survey (p. 721), involving the local community could be seen as the responsibility of developers rather than the municipality, and as one of the survey interviewees formulated it: 'we do not have the capacity to do that. Maybe we should have?'

The legal setting

Globally, there is great variety in the legal settings for handling complaints against plans. Mualam (2014) compares three appeal tribunal models in jurisdictions within the Anglo-American legal tradition: Oregon, England and Israel. In the English case, there is a mechanism with a single Inspector (Carmona and Giordano 2022). Tribunal decisions can be subject to judicial review, but courts rarely overturn them, and judicial review is costly and complicated. Irish experiences with a broad view of stakeholders who may appeal imply that third-party objections very seldom lead to a planning decision being overturned (Clinch 2006; Ellis 2002). On the other hand, Dutch legislation has reduced the circle of stakeholders who may appeal (Buitelaar, Galle, and Salet 2013). Before 2008, the appeal against land-use plans was open to anyone, but then it only concerned legally defined stakeholders. In 2010, stakeholders' rights to appeal were restricted to objections that affect their interests directly.

Residents' attitudes to infill in various urban contexts

Earlier studies revealed that residents see infill projects differently according to urban contexts, type of buildings, density, and scale of infill. Much of the prior literature on residents' attitudes to infill projects is concerned with city centres (Farris 2001; Howley, Scott, and Redmond 2009; Sotoudeh and Abdullah 2013; Wallin et al. 2018) or with suburban areas characterized by single-family dwellings, such as in Searle's (2004) discussion of the Sydney context and when Cook et al. (2012, 2013) explored resident opposition to higher density housing in Melbourne. They found that the likelihood and number of objections by residents in relation to planning approvals increased with the size of the development in question. People who live in a neighbourhood where an infill project is planned might react against the infill itself and also because of its impact on a wider surrounding area, the (sub) urban context. It should be noted, however, that their investigation concerned mostly small-scale infill projects. Later, they (Cook, Taylor, and Hurley 2013) showed that residents value lower density homes for a range of reasons: social, financial, and practical; disliking an increase in the concentration of cars, decrease in privacy and sunlight. A comparison of resident attitudes to urban consolidation in two Brisbane suburbs, one on the outer fringe and one close to the inner city, showed concern with high-rise development and traffic congestion, while opinions on social effects differed (McCrea and Walters 2012).

Studies that concern the Nordic region of Europe are rare, except for issues related to infill projects in Finnish suburban areas. Arvola and Pennanen (2014) analysed attitudes towards infill development in 23 neighbourhoods to understand reasons for opposing or favourable attitudes. They showed that residents' concerns about 'any negative changes in the neighbourhood and especially those related to the uniqueness of the area and nature amenities' (Arvola and Pennanen, p. 8) should be addressed; these authors also claimed that improved services and public transportation as well as area reputation may encourage infill acceptance. Later, studies have had their primary focus on the experiences of city planners in the Finnish institutional context where small resident-owned housing companies can be reluctant to engage in infill projects (Kosunen and Hirvonen-Kantola 2020; Kosunen, Atkova, and Hirvonen-Kantola 2020; Leino, Santaoja, and Laine 2018; Leino and Puumala 2021).

There is a research gap here insofar as the views of residents living just outside the boundary of an area planned for infill might differ from what those who live within the area consider important. What is also lacking in previous studies is how residents may hold more comprehensive view of the negative effects due to greenspace loss, traffic, and parking in a larger area than the infill site and its immediate surroundings.

Reasons for complaints

Morphological change may give rise to complaints that concern the environmental effects of an infill plan. In addition to environmental effects, reasons for complaints can also be the expected social and economic effects. Furthermore, complaints might arise from how the procedure of planning is experienced.

Environmental complaints

Much is known about the environmental concerns of residents. Environmental complaints may concern the visual appearance of new buildings and the proposed structure (Davison et al. 2016; Iglesias 2002; Sandman 1985; Woodcock, Dovey, and Davison 2012). Possible effects include decreasing area attractiveness, vitality, walkability, and bikability (Whittemore and BenDor 2019a, 2019b). Heritage buildings could be threatened (Ruming, Houston, and Amati 2012). Infill buildings may reduce sunlight into existing buildings (Nematollahi, Tiwari, and Hedgecock 2016), and loss of sunlight would inhibit the everyday practices of drying clothes and producing food (Cook, Taylor, and Hurley 2013). The view from dwellings can be reduced, decreasing the satisfaction of residents with their urban environment (Shach-Pinsly, Fisher-Gewirtzman, and Burt 2011). Green spaces can be reduced: negative consequences for possibilities for experiencing nature in the neighbourhood (Arvola and Pennanen 2014; Davison et al. 2016; Haaland and van den Bosch 2015), and there can arise concerns of remnant vegetation (Ruming, Houston, and Amati 2012).

There are many examples of problems associated with cars: traffic (Iglesias 2002), competition for car spaces, and other parking issues (Cook, Taylor, and Hurley 2013; Davison et al. 2016). Noise, truck traffic, odour are mentioned by Sandman (1985), increase in concentration of cars by Cook, Taylor, and Hurley (2013), negative consequences for 'peace and quiet in the neighbourhood' as well as the amount of traffic, and traffic jams (Arvola and Pennanen 2014, 5), and in general, traffic (Davison et al. 2016; Trounstone 2023). Increased traffic may impair safety for pedestrians and limit children's social life and play spaces (Cook, Taylor, and Hurley 2013). There may also be concern with endangered plant and animal communities (Ruming, Houston, and Amati 2012). Increased strain on stormwater, sewers, or other public works is mentioned by Whittemore and BenDor (2019a, 2019b).

These examples of environmental objections are similar to arguments used by the UK inspectorate in cases of developer appeals against local authority decisions (Carmona and Giordano 2022): new building intrusive and overbearing, non-contextual, damages vista, little amenity or circulation space, poor daylight to many rooms, position overlooking a major road, over-provision of parking, highway safety, lack of open space, trees, external appearance, and harming the landscape character.

Social complaints

Not much is known about how suburb residents, as opposed to those who live in city cores, interpret and respond to social consequences of new housing infills in their neighbourhoods: an exception is the Christchurch study by Vallance, Perkins, and Moore (2005) who analysed views of residents who lived either contiguous to or in the vicinity of infill housing, finding that the increased diversity of people, lifestyles, and buildings that infill housing brings to neighbourhoods affects the senses of place associated with particular areas and the extent to which particular senses of place can survive in areas undergoing change. These authors concluded that reactions to the changes that occur as a result of consolidation policies cannot be separated from a cultural history that has emphasized the virtues of suburban or low-density urban living. Social objections can have their roots in uncertain social outcomes (Nematollahi, Tiwari, and Hedgecock 2016). Decrease in privacy is raised by Shach-

Pinsly, Fisher-Gewirtzman, and Burt (2011), Cook, Taylor, and Hurley (2013), and Nematollahi, Tiwari, and Hedgecock (2016). Several authors point to crime (Davison et al. 2016; Iglesias 2002; Trounstone 2023) and anti-social behaviour (Nematollahi, Tiwari, and Hedgecock 2016). Loitering is mentioned by Iglesias (2002). Reduced service provision through overburdening of community services and community budgets is emphasized by Sandman (1985), and more precisely through lowering school quality (Trounstone 2023). Effects of infill projects on public transport have seldom been in focus (Newton and Glackin 2014).

Economic complaints

Economic complaints usually have their focus on negative effects on property values (Iglesias 2002; Sandman 1985; Trounstone 2023). This concern is typically voiced by homeowners, but the threat of increased rents has also been recognized (Been 2018). When ownership is involved, costs arising from, e.g., rearranging parking facilities, can be a matter of concern (Puustinen and Viitanen 2015).

Procedural complaints

According to prior research, there are two reasons why citizen appeals against plans could be more frequent for rapid densification projects. The citizen dialogue might suffer from an accelerated process, leaving conflicts open that might have been resolved, and the number of affected people would typically be greater than for greenfield developments and thus likely to generate NIMBY reactions (Schively 2007) including opposition among third-party groups (Buitelaar, Galle, and Salet 2013). The Melbourne study by Cook et al. (2012) looked at the political consequences of fast-tracking densification projects while acknowledging that more than a third of larger densification plans were subject to formal objections. Another issue that can be raised is that of prejudice among planners (Hubbard and Prior 2018).

Who objects?

The probability of residents objecting to urban densification in general has been found to vary with age, education, wealth, political orientation, and type of neighbourhood. A few earlier studies have shown that opponents of densification plans tend to be older, highly educated, and wealthier (Schively 2007). 'Applications in areas of higher socio-economic advantage attract 4–5 more third party objections than in areas of lower advantage' (Cook et al. 2012, 45). Political ideology also matters (Lewis and Baldassare 2010). 'The political power of affluent and professional groups means they can ensure that their opposition is heard' (Matthews, Bramley, and Hastings 2015, 54). Concerns of conservatives 'may result from unfamiliarity or even prejudice' (Whittemore and BenDor 2019b, 424). The classical left/right or liberal/conservative political cleavage that opposes densification accompanied by regulation supporting affordable housing, such as inclusionary zoning and rent control, against market-led densification is important for understanding reactions to plans (Wicki et al., 2022). It has also been found that the types of neighbourhood where people live moderate the impact of project-related factors (Wicki and Kaufmann 2022).

Differences according to age and gender

Prior studies of how attitudes to infill projects differ according to age and gender are very few. A Californian telephone survey in 2002 included an explicit infill question; it was the 45–54-year-old respondents who were most supportive of this type of compact development, while no significant gender difference in attitudes to infill was found (Lewis and Baldassare 2010). Klement et al. (2023) conducted a structured survey experiment where reactions to a proposed infill apartment building, to be two floors higher than the respondents' neighbourhood average, were recorded. They found very little difference between male and female respondents, just as Lewis and Baldassare (2010) did, while the frequency of 'against' increased monotonically with increased age, from 18–24 to 65+.

That higher age is associated with more negative views on densification in general was known already from a long range of studies from the 1970s (Liere and Dunlap 1980). Attitudes to a denser urban fabric were studied by Smith and Billig (2012) in Arkansas, finding that men had a significantly less negative response than women; as to age, they showed that the 45–64-year-old were more negatively inclined than both younger and older people. Here it should be noted that Lewis and Baldassare (2010, 219) warned that individuals' beliefs 'about different facets of compact development are often inconsistent'. Analysing 18 direct-democratic votes in Switzerland in the area of spatial planning, male voters were found to be less likely to accept spatial planning measures (Pleger 2017), but whether this is applicable to suburban infill projects is doubtful.

An Australian survey of attitudes to hypothetical densification scenarios for middle ring suburbs indicated that females were more supportive of greenspace-oriented development (Bolleter et al. 2024). Thus, there is no clear consensus in prior studies, although it is possible that higher age is associated with a negative attitude towards infill projects; the gender effect appears to be small if any. Among researchers, there is a growing awareness of how gender (Horelli 2017; Ortiz Escalante and Gutiérrez Valdivia 2015; Sang et al. 2020) and age disparities (Davet 2022; Soneryd and Lindh 2019) could and should be treated in urban planning, especially in the design of dialogues, but there is little empirical material.

The case: 30 housing infill projects

In 2015, an infill housing programme, soon to be called BoStad2021, was launched by Gothenburg politicians, with a target of 7,000 dwellings finished by the end of 2021 (Bröchner et al. 2021, BoStad2021; 2022). These dwellings were intended to be an addition to the 'ordinary' production volume, which in preceding years had been about 2,000 dwellings annually. Sites were selected almost only in suburbs due to the city's densification policy, while the primary goal of the programme was to increase housing supply. No less than 31 sites were identified at first, corresponding to 26 developers, of which four companies were owned by the city itself through its Framtiden Group. From the outset, the programme had a stated political emphasis on meeting two deadlines: for the approval of the detailed development plans (end of 2017) and the 2021 completion of all projects. One of the projects had to be abandoned at an early stage for financial reasons, leaving a total of 30. Three of the largest projects were for brownfield sites where manufacturing and dairy activities had ceased. Almost all dwellings were to be found in apartment buildings and only a few as semi-detached. About two-thirds of all new

dwellings were to be rented, while another third were to be in housing cooperatives. There was an emphasis on early dialogues before and in the early stages of planning in order to minimize lengthy conflicts.

The Swedish legal framework defines who can complain against plans and also the admissible grounds for complaining. Municipal decisions to adopt a detailed development plan may be appealed to the Land and Environmental Court. Appeal reviews can only scrutinize whether the decision that is appealed conflicts with any rule of law in the way the complainant has stated or is 'indicated by the circumstances'. In general, the Swedish Administrative Procedures Act says that a decision may be appealed by the person who is affected by the decision if it has gone against him or her. This is interpreted to also include tenants, associations of tenants, and members of housing associations. Although there is a generous view of who constitutes a stakeholder, it is difficult to have municipal planning decisions overturned unless there is a clear procedural fault. About half of all Gothenburg's detailed development plans had been subject to legal complaints in the years up to this programme. On average, about half of all Swedish detailed development plans related to housing projects are subject to appeals (Evidens 2023, 14), which means that the fact that 17 out of 30 BoStad2021 plans received complaints is unremarkable.

Methodology

First, semi-structured interviews were held in May–October 2017 with 24 developer project managers (corresponding to developers of all 30 projects but one) to record their experiences of early dialogues with residents, before formal planning was initiated. Municipal documentation of the proposed and modified detailed development plans was analysed in order to identify the effects of early dialogues and changes introduced by the municipal building committee. This was followed by an overarching analysis of why certain plans were subject to complaints and other plans were not. For this analysis, income and education data for primary areas (Gothenburg is divided into almost 100 primary areas with an average of about 5,000 inhabitants) have been obtained from the city statistical office.

In the next stage of the investigation, the full texts of all complaints submitted between 2017 and 2020 by 647 individuals against the 17 of 30 plans (other complainants were 12 organizations including five housing cooperatives, one developer, one owner of a large industrial bakery, and six associations) were analysed. Appeal texts were mostly between 30 and 1000 words and had to be submitted in writing to the city within three weeks of the plan decision having been posted on the official city notice board. The city forwarded all complaints, which sometimes had supporting documents as attachments, to the Land and Environmental Court. There were no anonymous complaints, and if an individual submitted more than one complaint, they were counted as a single complaint.

Texts were analysed using QSR NVivo R1/2020 data management software and reasons coded according to an initial list of four main themes (environmental, social, economic, procedural) and 23 subthemes derived from the literature. A further four subthemes, not immediately obvious from the literature, were recognized inductively in the complaint texts: 'construction period' under Environmental, 'accessibility' and 'child drowning risk' under Social, and 'incomplete or erroneous documentation' under

Procedural. Data on the gender and age of each complainant were retrieved from publicly available sources, the *hitta.se* database and also from the *Ratsit* database. Gender assignment was simplified because of the few unisex first names in Sweden (Gustafsson 2012).

For one plan with many complaints, the location of complainants' dwellings was mapped using geocoding. The addresses of complainants were collected from complaint documents and gathered in an Excel spreadsheet. To manage address data in a visual format, the dataset was imported to Google My Maps. Further, all created point features that represented locations were recorded as an image and displayed on the detailed development plan in its urban context.

Findings

Almost all developers of BoStad2021 projects had engaged in communicative events before the legal and formal process of planning had been initiated. Many developer managers expected early dialogues with residents to mitigate the risk of agonistic elements, in particular, late and time-consuming handling of legal appeals. In general, the 24 interviewed project managers saw the early dialogue as a good thing. Some project managers had prior experience with dialogues, and for some it was the first time. Not least emphasized is the eye-to-eye contact with those affected, and as one interviewee said: 'There is a more individual and human process'. People experience that they are being listened to, 'that it is not just a piece of paper delivered to your home, but that you may meet in person'.

Early dialogues are thought to provide opportunities for dealing with fears and prejudices; residents may have had experiences of prior local dialogues where municipal promises had been felt empty, and in poorer suburbs, there were symptoms of dialogue fatigue. One argument for early dialogue was that it would start a longer process of residents getting used to a plan. For developers, 'getting to know a place' was often mentioned as useful; early dialogue may raise issues that the developer has failed to recognize, and local views can be collected early in the process. When plans were obviously controversial, the dialogue might start by recognizing the agonistic element: at a first dialogue meeting, one developer manager, aware of the high probability of appeals against the plan, immediately declared that the politicians had decided that 250 dwellings should be built.

Then it can be very tiring . . . that is for those who hold a dialogue, it is not always fun, because you sometimes feel that if they had had tomatoes, they would have thrown them now. So it is important that such a meeting is carried out well. And that you express yourself well. But it has worked well on these occasions. That you open a meeting with 'It's not we who decide, we collect information, and we give information'. Etc. [Dev12]

Five developer managers were clearly dissatisfied with what they saw as insufficient engagement by city planners or politicians in early dialogues. It was common that residents brought up other local grievances, such as concerning public transport and schools, at dialogue meetings, but developers were unable to give proper responses unless supported by city representatives. A few developers reported that they had changed their projects because of early dialogues:

But we have levelled the number of floors, you could say, because it has been slightly ... very high, and perhaps a bit lower, so it is more even now. Which rhymes better with their own block. [Dev20]

It was a project where we got views mostly from neighbours, how we intended to handle, e.g., parking within the [project] area, and there we had to reduce the possibility in itself to park, rather seriously. [Dev22]

Findings from the statistical analysis of whether particular plans gave rise to complaints or not show that average primary area income was 11% higher for plans with complaints, while there was almost no difference in complaint frequency due to scale measured as the number of infill dwellings per project plan. The average educational level in the area, measured as the proportion of people 24–65 years of age and having at least three years of tertiary education, was 32% higher for plans with complaints and 29% for plans without complaints, thus a very small difference.

In the following stage of the investigation, concerning the 17 plans with complaints, 647 individuals who complained were identified, of which 54% were female complainants and 46% male; of the female complainants, 62% were less than 65 old, and of the male, 66% less than 65. This corresponds to 36% of all complainants belonging to the 65 and up age group, whereas only 19% of the total Gothenburg population belonging to the 19 and up age group are 65 years old or more. Complaint categories and complainants according to gender and age are displayed in [Table 1](#).

Regardless of age and gender, the most frequent theme for complaints was environmental, in particular, the subthemes of 'parking spaces' and 'reduction of greenspaces'. In general, there are only small age and gender differences in complaint patterns. Applying $p < 0.05$ as the criterion for significant association, a slightly higher percentage of younger complainants complaining of 'noise' (chi-square 8.000, $p = 0.005$) and of 'traffic' (chi-square 5.685, $p = 0.017$) is found. More female than male complainants brought up 'air quality' (chi-square 4.635, $p = 0.031$). The elderly had a stronger tendency to complain about 'parking spaces' (chi-square 22.014, $p = <.001$), but they were less likely to complain about 'endangered plant and animal communities' (chi-square 6.012, $p = 0.014$).

Environmental complaints

'Damage to heritage of place' was slightly more frequent as a complaint theme among females <65 years and also among older male complainants. In some cases, complaints were related to negative effects of reshaped parking arrangements, difficult for elderly people with reduced mobility:

We are among those who have to walk significantly longer to where we park if the multi-storey car park is built according to the detailed development plan, which is deeply unfortunate because my wife has limited walking ability and uses crutches due to chronic rheumatic disease. [D33]

Another complainant mentioned that it was stated in the plan that residents should cycle to the Central Station, where they could shift to public transport; as the distance is almost seven kilometres, partly difficult and unsafe for cyclists, the complaint was that those older than 55 would hardly wish to do so.

Table 1. Complaint categories and complainants according to gender and age (percentages).

Complaint		Female		Male	
		<65 years	65+ years	<65 years	65+ years
<i>N</i>		217	134	195	101
Environmental	Visual appearance of infill	8	8	7	10
	Decreasing area attractiveness	37	40	40	43
	Damage to heritage of place	13	6	9	12
	Loss of light	41	36	33	30
	View	7	2	4	4
	Reduction of greenspaces	69	63	60	64
	Traffic	18	9	17	12
	Parking spaces	68	80	74	84
	Noise	14	6	12	5
	Air quality	39	37	30	30
	Traffic safety	5	5	5	3
	Endangered plant and animal communities	14	6	12	7
	Increased strain on storm water, sewers, or other public works	2	1	2	1
Social	Construction period	5	3	6	3
	Uncertain social outcome	3	2	2	2
	Loss of privacy	41	38	33	32
	Crime	2	1	2	1
	Loitering	3	1	2	1
	Reduced service provision	43	44	43	47
	Lowering school quality	2	1	2	1
	Accessibility	39	44	40	48
Economic	Child drowning risk	4	2	2	1
	Property values	32	37	35	43
	Increased rents	32	38	36	43
Procedural	Costs	58	72	68	70
	Prejudice	1	0	2	0
Incomplete or erroneous documentation		15	10	11	10

Greenspace complaints usually concern losing a row of trees, and more than one complaint widened the perspective to the earlier reduction of greenspace in the surroundings:

I also object to this detailed development plan as it involves a major intervention in the local environment by cutting down a green and beautiful row of trees, exactly as was done in another part of Flatås where you took the entire park away from us! [D105]

Loss of trees is linked to consequences for biotopes:

The linden trees are particularly valuable as they are virtually uncut. There are red-listed lichens on the trees. In the area, there are many red-listed bird species: buzzard, pigeon hawk, [...] This year attention is paid to the importance of pollinators such as bees, bumblebees, butterflies, and other insects. Without them, our gardens and vegetable fields will be empty. [...] In this area, over 65 deciduous trees have already been felled, which is why we cannot shrink this biotope further. [D113]

There were also complaints related to nuisances expected to arise from the construction period itself.

Social complaints

Among the social themes for complaints, very few complainants mentioned 'crime' and 'loitering'; only one used the 'ghetto' term. Instead, it was 'reduced service provision' and 'loss of privacy' that dominated the social complaints. Fears of a lowered provision of social services concerned public transport, as well as effects on schools and opportunities for recreation. One complainant provided a detailed analysis of the current traffic situation, claiming also that:

Public transport in the area as it now is, is overloaded, it cannot take more travellers [...] Bus 17 leaves every 4 minutes during peak hours. Around 7 a.m. the bus is full, there is only standing room [...] More frequent services are impossible; there is a queue if even one car comes in between. [R10]

Similarly, school capacity is mentioned:

The great number of dwellings also leads to a great need for schools. It is not covered by the newly constructed school. There is already a shortage of school places in the area. It will get worse with this detailed development plan. [R47]

A new school may appear intrusive:

The school and the movement that will take place around it come very close to our plot. The school is planned to receive around 550 pupils. The probability is high that a large number of pupils will move onto our plot several times a day as the school's schoolyard is very small. [...] That the children will move onto our plot deteriorates our living environment considerably. [R61]

Preschool conditions are also brought up in complaints:

I raised the question in the Härlanda local district council (6 February 2018) of having so many preschool units in such a small outdoor area. But received an answer that it is good to have several units close together, because it can solve a lack of staff, given that the teachers can then walk between the units both indoors and outdoors. The outdoor play space has been shrunk (to 32.5 sq.m./child from the recommended 35 sq.m.). This then results in a higher noise level, and more children closer together. [R10]

Child safety was brought up by complainants who mentioned the risk of schoolchildren drowning when playing close to the Härlanda Tjärn lake. Furthermore, just as among the environmental complaints, issues of accessibility were raised, usually by elderly residents.

Economic complaints

As will be explained more in detail below for the Distansgatan plan, the 'costs' subtheme under economic complaints, more emphasized by elderly men, can be explained by uncertainties of how a new parking garage would be funded.

Procedural complaints

Rather than complaining about accelerated procedures, some complainants reacted against what they thought was incomplete or erroneous documentation. Moreover, some complainants claimed that planners had exhibited prejudice. Age appears to have

had an influence: there was a slightly higher percentage of younger women who complained about incomplete or erroneous documentation underlying the detailed development plan.

Court verdicts

Ultimately, all complaints related to BoStad2021 detailed development plans were dismissed by the Land and Environment Court. Nevertheless, the court would often repeat in its verdicts the main points raised by complainants. It cannot be excluded that the court sometimes has wished to indicate that the city had approached the limit of what is legitimate.

The two plans with numerous complaints

There are two plans with considerably more complaints. In both cases, ownership is involved and feelings that the areas covered by the plans affect what people see as their established rights, although there has been no legal protection for these assumed rights. The main issues (loss of greenspace, loss of parking space – along with financial consequences for a housing cooperative which would be forced to pay for a new multi-storey garage) have been combined with several other issues mentioned in the complaints.

In the case of the Robertshöjd plan ([Figure 1](#)), numerous complaints were submitted, most of which emanated from an adjacent area with semi-detached row houses ([Figure 2](#)). Just across the road bordering this area, there was a large green area with many forest-size trees ([Figure 3](#)). Due to the protests, the original plan was revised to reduce exploitation.

[Figure 1](#) shows which changes were introduced and also that the frequency of complaints declined with increasing distance from the road that delimited the area covered by the detailed development plan. Along the southern edge of the adjacent area, there were six complainants who all brought up the nuisance possibly to be caused by pupils from the school planned to be built close to their houses.

Distansgatan is a project where a large parking space was planned to be replaced by new housing and a (costly) multistorey car park, to which the city intended to have adjacent existing housing cooperatives to contribute financially. Many complaints were submitted. Unlike the Robertshöjd area, the distance from the original parking space did not affect the frequency of complaints, which were evenly spread over the adjacent housing cooperative. The difference in geographical complaint patterns can be explained by a preponderant effect of expected environmental consequences in the case of Robertshöjd, whereas Distansgatan complainants may have been primarily motivated by economic concerns.

Discussion and conclusions

This study of a suburban infill programme has developed a fine-grained classification of resident complaints and applied it to those filed against detailed development plans. The results include that many complaints concerned parking spaces and the reduction of greenspaces. Comparing reasons for complaints according to age and gender of complainants showed only small differences. The elderly more often emphasized parking, while younger complainants emphasized noise and



Figure 1. Robertshöjd, location of complaining households and changes to the detailed development plan. Source: authors using a base map of the detailed development plan area (project illustration adapted from documents provided by Gothenburg City, urban planning authority) in its context (aerial photo from 2017 from Gothenburg City open data under the CC0 license). Some locations represent more than one complaining household.

traffic. Gender differences in opinion were smaller than age differences. Two plans attracted many complaints: one where owners of neighbouring semi-detached houses, complained primarily of the loss of greenspace, and another where housing cooperatives faced costly reshaping of parking. In spite of interview responses from developers showing that a clear majority of them believed that early dialogue with residents would reduce the risk of objections, there were many formal complaints.



Figure 2. Robertshöjd before: the adjacent area with semi-detached housing (source: photo 2017 by authors).



Figure 3. Robertshöjd before, looking north: semi-detached houses glimpsed (right); forest (left) (source: photo 2017 by authors).

Early dialogues

The early dialogues between developers and residents appear to have served as opportunities for learning by both developers and residents (Hisschemöller and Cuppen 2015). Democracy and legitimacy (Tahvilzadeh 2015) may also have been motives but weaker than generating efficiency in the process or usability (Kjeldsen and Joseph 2024). Whether there would have been many more complaints if dialogues had not preceded formal planning is an open question.

Reasons for complaints

At a first glance, the pattern of infill complaints is similar to what is known from other countries (Davison et al. 2013), although the present textual analysis of complaints, and a more detailed classification of reasons for complaints, reveal specific varieties.

Among the reasons for environmental complaints, parking is frequently brought up (Cook, Taylor, and Hurley 2013; Davison et al. 2016); what stands out in the BoStad2021 study is a recurring concern with access to parking for people with mobility difficulties. The city pursues a policy of reducing dependence on private cars, but in the views of residents, reshaping parking arrangements may not be fully compatible with social and economic sustainability. Also, reduction of greenspace has been the source of many complaints, a common observation in the infill literature (Arvola and Pennanen 2014; Davison et al. 2016; Haaland and van den Bosch 2015). In the present study, a particular sensitivity to trees being cut down emerges. Decreasing area attractiveness is a recurrent theme, well established in prior studies as a source of infill complaints.

Turning to social complaints, the analysis reveals the already mentioned concern with accessibility of parking, and furthermore complaints due to an expected reduction of services, in particular, public transport, an effect rarely discussed in prior studies. On the other hand, there is an almost total absence of complaints related to crime and anti-social behaviour.

Finally, the economic complaints primarily concerned with having to share the cost of new parking arrangements belong to a category which is seldom discussed in prior literature, the exception being the study by Puustinen and Viitanen (2015). Again, and as mentioned, the local mobility policy of reducing dependency on private cars is not fully accepted by all residents.

Effects of income, age and gender of complainants

The findings confirm the well-known phenomenon of a higher frequency of complaints emanating from areas where residents have higher incomes (Cook et al. 2012; Schively 2007), although there was little effect of differences due to educational levels.

Broadly in line with most earlier studies of how the frequency and orientation of complaints are associated with the age and gender of those who complain, it has been found here that elderly residents are more likely to file complaints, which agrees with the findings of Liere and Dunlap (1980) as well as Smith and Billig (2012). However, that there are only small differences according to gender goes against what Smith and Billig (2012) reported, while agreeing with the recent investigation by Bolleter et al. (2024), although the present analysis has failed to discover significant differences associated with age and gender in the case of greenspace reduction.

Concluding remarks

Valuable insights have been gained from the broad range of urban development issues represented in the complaint texts and sometimes raised already in the early dialogues. They reveal citizen awareness of the wider urban context of housing infill projects, as well as several social, economic, and procedural issues that are not regulated by the Swedish Planning and Building Act and therefore appear to be largely disregarded when the city

prepares a detailed development plan. Adverse effects of the ensuing construction process itself, once a plan has acquired legal force, were mentioned by several complainants. These insights should be useful for planners when they consider designs for infill projects and how plans and dialogues should be adapted to the demographics of an area.

The main contributions are twofold: an unusually detailed analysis of complaints according to age and gender has been provided, and the developer dialogues have been related to this context. Although the generous Swedish definition of the group of stakeholders who are legally enabled to submit planning complaints is matched by a low probability of a detailed development plan being rejected by the court, the legal process delays implementation.

As for residents submitting complaints with an uncertain hope of success, this could reflect not just that it is easy to submit a complaint in the Swedish system, no support from the legal profession being required, but probably that complainants feel a need to tell planners and local politicians how infill plans may affect the urban context and a wider range of urban issues. It seems that there is a lack of efficient alternative channels for communicating with planners and politicians. Why there have been few signs of alternative channels for direct influence on planners from citizens, unlike US traditions (Day 1997), should be a theme for further investigation. Early dialogues with residents and other stakeholders should provide a wider range of development aspects and a broader urban perspective rather than a piecemeal approach to planning, and not restricted to the infill site itself, could well be used to allay fears of negative consequences of a plan. There is a need to fill the gap between the comprehensive plan for the whole city area and the small ad hoc detailed development plans.

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