

# Under Construction

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Making Meaning of Social Sustainability in Strategic Planning Practice

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## Abstract

While social sustainability is attracting attention in both policy and academia, there are still challenges when turning social sustainability policy into practice. Instead of making cities more socially sustainable, the meaning of social sustainability tends to change, become simplified, or disappear when it is actualized in practice. This thesis aims to better understand how goals of social sustainability become actualized in urban planning by investigating how the practitioners in a Swedish, strategic planning project are constructing, interpreting, and practising the meaning of social sustainability by making and navigating boundaries through the planning process. Through an inductive approach, I build a theoretical framework of *situational boundary making and navigation*, a composite of the three analytical lenses: conceptual, contextual, and practice-oriented. This framework enables me to approach the different aspects of the planning situation when constructing the meaning of social sustainability. The research was carried out empirically through an exploratory case study of the ongoing planning project Frihamnen. I have followed how the discourse of social sustainability was constructed in the context of strategic planning and shifted due to strategic planning practice. The thesis concludes that the concept of social sustainability is multi-layered, where, in this case, the first layer of meaning remains while the second layer of meaning shifts through the planning process. I explain the shift by pointing to the mutual effect of the ambiguity of the concept of social sustainability, the hybridity of the strategic planning organisation and the enacted authority of the involved participants. In the end, the planning organisation fall back on business-as-usual to determine the meaning of social sustainability, which moves away from the original vision of the socially sustainable city to a less transformative approach. However, as the shift is only seen in the second layer of meaning, the original formulations in the vision still stand.

## Keywords

Urban planning, urban sustainability, sustainable development, ambiguous concepts, discourse, situational analysis, Gothenburg

## Articles

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