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Tourist destinations and place development in Norwegian mountain areas

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Abstract

The paper discusses how planning for tourist destination and place development in Norwegian mountain municipalities takes place and how greater attention to the destinations as *places* could enhance these processes. There are three main understandings of the concept of place: the place as location and physical framework, the place as individual sense of place, and the place as meeting point and context. Our conclusion is that destination and place development should to a greater extent be seen in connection within a broad understanding of place and integrated into municipal-planning processes.

Keywords: destination, place development, mountains, municipal planning, Norway

1 Background and issues

Norway has seen a significant increase in second homes development in the mountain areas over the last decades, a development that has been based mainly on skiing activities, especially alpine skiing. An important part of this process has been the emergence of 'mountain recreation villages', that is, tourist destinations intensively developed in agglomerations, which includes hotels, apartments, second homes, and accompanying service functions, that are more or less integrated in existing rural settlements. In these destinations we may observe planning according to two rather ambitious, and often poorly coordinated, processes. The tourism industry has in recent decades engaged in destination development by means of 'master plans', while the municipalities, under the provisions of the Planning and Building Act (PBA), are obliged to abide by the planning instruments of Municipal Master Plans, which often include more detailed plans for towns or major development areas. Unlike Municipal Master Plans, the tourism industry's master plans are not legally or politically confirmed.

Often these processes encompass the same geographic area, *the place,* but still operate as two parallel processes. At best, the involved parties are mutually informed. One significant characteristic relating to both planning initiatives is the absence of discussion or clarification of their respective understandings of the concept of *place*. 'Place' is regarded as either a tourist destination or a geographically defined area consisting of certain sectors with different functions. Thus, key premises may be overlooked and this may reduce the chances for the development of a successful destination as well as of a place.

This paper raises two research questions concerning planning processes in relation to development of tourist destinations. 1) What are the main characteristics

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of planning processes relating to destination and place development in Norway? 2) How may current planning processes relating to destination and place development be enhanced by greater attention being paid to the concept of *place*? The main area of study is composed by the mountain municipalities in southern Norway, that is, those municipalities characterized by high mountains, small permanent settlements, and a significant number of second homes. The article is primarily a theoretical discussion based on concepts of place, tourist-destination master plans, and municipal planning for place development. This paper also has a special focus on current guidelines and established practices. Although the discussion is primarily theoretical, this paper makes use of an empirical base. This base covers a variety of research projects on mountainous areas, destination development, and place development (e.g. Skjeggedal 2000; Overvåg & Skjeggedal 2008; Overvåg 2009), even though it does not deal directly with evaluations of planning processes and implemented plans. These theoretical discussions, especially those concerning the concept of place and planning processes, are also relevant in other contexts besides the Norwegian one. These ideas are applicable not only to mountain regions in other Nordic countries with similar geographical, political, and demographic conditions, but also to a certain extent to other mountainous countries. Norway can be considered as one of several examples.

We use the 'mountain recreational village' of Geilo in the mountain municipality of Hol as an example of a tourist destination (see Figure 1). Geilo is the largest urban settlement in Hol municipality. About half of a total of 4,500 registered inhabitants in Hol municipality live in Geilo. Geilo has a long tradition as a tourist destination with hotels, ski slopes, and a significant number of second homes. In Hol municipality there are about 5,500 registered second homes.

Figure 1: The mountain municipality of Hol and the 'mountain recreational village' of Geilo in Norway.

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2 The place

The everyday use of the concept of *place* varies, but the context defines the meaning. The situation immediately becomes more complicated when the term is used in academic contexts (Berg & Dale 2004). The term *destination* is used primarily for places that either have significant elements of tourism or seriously promote this development. With regard to municipal planning of place development, the central concepts are *cities* or *towns* and *urban settlements*, the delimitation of which is based on the organization of the local communities, that is, where houses are located. In Norway, an 'urban settlement' is an area where the population exceeds 200 persons, and the distance between their houses does not normally exceed 50 meters (SSB 1999).

In geography, there are three main understandings of the concept of place (Agnew 1987). The first is place as 'locality', a physical framework for social and economic life. In the description of such places, one searches for an 'objective' description of natural and social conditions (Berg & Dale 2004). Delimiting a physical area that attaches 'local people' is essential. Boundaries are perceived as defined and fixed. This interpretation of a place coincides with a 'traditional' concept of place that is found in architecture and planning (Berg & Dale 2004; Healey 2010).

A second understanding of place focuses on an individual's subjective perception, interactions, and relations to a place, namely, one's 'sense of place'. A geographical area is not defined as a place until people have a relation to it. In order to understand the place, it is essential to understand individual's sense of place and therefore their perception of places must be studied to reveal different peoples' interest in places. A specific location can be interpreted as a myriad of different places, all dependent on peoples' perceptions of and connections to this location.

The third major understanding of place is that of locations as meeting points, where peoples' activities intersect in time and space. Place is thus important as a context for maintaining social relations, and it is also shaped by these relations. The two key characteristics of places based on this understanding are *openness,* where the social relationships of people coming to the location exceed those of 'the locals', and *dynamics,* the constant changes due to the continuous occurrence of new relationships and patterns of interaction (Berg & Dale 2004). A place in this sense is a meeting point for a variety of social relationships and events that take place in parallel, and it creates more or less random and unexpected meetings and connections between people and processes (Massey 2005). This does not mean, however, that places are totally blurred and relations are in constant flux; some relationships are relatively constant over years, but others may be more fluid.

The fact that places are open and relational links this understanding of place close both to the concept of *mobility,* in the sense of traditional migration, and to various forms of tourism (Bærenholdt & Johannesson 2009). Tourists are not a homogeneous group, however. For some purposes a distinction should be made between tourists, second home owners, and the local population. Second home owners are often treated as part of tourism, but we argue that they differ significantly from both tourists and the local population, and should be regarded as a separate group in planning issues. Two main factors distinguish second home owners from the other groups.

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They have invested in a house, which distinguishes them from the tourists, and they stay at the place for repeated short periods, mostly for recreational purposes, which distinguishes them from the local population (Arnesen et al. 2010). Thus, owing to their investment and repeated stays, second home owners are connected to a place in a distinctive way. This implies a different connotation from most tourists and local population (cf. discussion on the concept of 'sense of place' above). These three segments may have different but overlapping perceptions and connections to one physical location. Their diverse interests and attitudes must be identified and understood in destination and place-development planning processes.

The great extent of tourism and second homes in many Norwegian municipalities also highlights another key element in an open understanding of place, namely, that places are mutually dependent on each other (Berg 2009). Places attracting tourists do so owing to their on-site activities and other amenities, while tourists seek attractive destinations in order to fulfil their desires for adventure and leisure activities. Owners of second homes connect urban and rural areas by regular 'recreational commuting' between a home in town and a second home located in rural areas (Overvåg 2009; Overvåg & Arnesen 2007). Different locations are thus linked together although the travel distance may be significant.

The three main understandings of the concept of place that we have discussed here are neither mutually exclusive nor contradictory. As Healey (2010) points out, the qualities of place can be seen as a 'coupling' of physical experiences and ideas that are produced through both individual activities and socially shaped perceptions.

3 Tourist-destination development

The major planning type for the development of tourist destinations is the tourism industry's 'master plans'. These master plans are linked to land use at the local level and thus to municipal planning and local development. Although they draw sketches of intentional land use, the master plans are not legally binding. These master plans, initiated by the industry, must be understood as the industry's view of what a desirable development would be, and this is its contribution to the municipal-planning process. The tourism industry acting as a collective would be the optimal situation, since it would lend legitimacy to the proposal in a public planning process. Depending on the proposed actions, such a plan could be a useful guideline for the industry's own implementations and actions. 'The place' in master plans is delimited by tourists' perceptions of a tourist destination.

A White Paper for master plans assumes that the destination development should be sustainable, whereby communities economically, socially, and culturally are enhanced in the long term (Innovasjon Norge 2008). The individual groups' subjective understanding of place and their different needs and interests therewith must be included in planning processes. Nevertheless, in practice the 'market' reigns, and economic development is the overriding objective of these plans. Yet, as Getz (1986) points out, the narrow focus on market perspectives can lead to the exclusion of other important sources of knowledge.

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The master plan for Geilo, our example destination, follows a traditional planning process (Geilo Turistservice 2001). The plan was established in 2000–2001 by consultants engaged by representatives from major stakeholders of the tourism business in Geilo, and it was supplemented by inputs from representatives of the municipality. One main objective in this business initiative was to try to tie political decisions with the main proposals of the plan in order to provide guidelines for future development.

4 Place development

Place development as an ambition is a key element in public planning according to the PBA. Since the early 1990s, place development has also been a task of the Department of Regional Planning in the Ministry of the Environment (MoE). Indications of this emphasis include the guidelines for place analysis (Miljøverndepartementet 1993), the programme called *Environmentally friendly and attractive urban settlements in rural areas*, 2001–2005 (Miljøverndepartementet 2005), and the website www.stedsutvikling.no (place development), established in December 2008. The MoE prescribes different approaches to local development, with an emphasis on urban design. Criticisms directed towards this approach that stresses physical form have emerged, and these have been accompanied with the call for the development of alternative methods, such as socio-cultural analysis. The socio-cultural analysis of place considers the place to be a social and cultural construction and a social product, and it may thus be linked to the understanding of places based on how people perceive and relate to them, as we have discussed previously. Mental pictures and dominant narratives are often perceived as formative elements of a sense of place. In this way, all different types of actors are important in this kind of analysis of place.

The essential part of the PBA is the Municipal Master Plan, and the long-term land-use plans that are used for planning and promoting local development (§ 11-1). The procedural regulations are critical in this context. The PBA has a general requirement for participation, consultation, and public scrutiny (Chapter 5) and more requirements under various plan types in order to ensure that all of the relevant actors have the opportunity to contribute to the planning process.

The Municipal Master Plan must also take into account a social element, for it *"shall consider long-term challenges, goals, and strategies of the local community as a whole and local government as an organization"* (§ 11-2). Although this clause expresses the aim to include a social perspective into traditional land-use planning, it may be criticized for having a foundation based on unrealistic notions of what can be planned (Skjeggedal 2001, 2005). Most social elements of municipal master plans are vague and worded in general terms. In our opinion, there is also a striking lack of discussion on the significant potential and obvious societal impacts that both tourism and second home residents can lead to.

The new and recently included discussion on community development in the municipal master plan in Hol municipality indicates changes in public planning practice

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(Hol kommune 2010a). The plan includes a separate chapter on second home development (Chapter 4.4). Second home development, however, is still only to a limited extent included in a social context, while their provision of significant economic activity is stressed. In our view, a most interesting inclusion in this new planning document is that the village of Geilo is now treated as a tourist destination as well as a rural centre (Chapter 4.5). The vision is that Geilo is to be an attractive place for locals and tourists alike. The main objectives are to ensure the balanced development of Geilo both as a tourist destination and as a local community, to establish an attractive community that features sustainable development, and to make it a leading mountain destination in Norway, as well as a pleasant and functional centre (Hol kommune 2010a: 19).

The Municipal Master Sub-plan for Geilo was treated in parallel with the social element of the Municipal Master Plan, and it was adopted by the municipal council in June 2010 (Hol kommune 2010b). There the link between local development and destination development is not as explicit. The topics are treated separately, and it is primarily concerned with land use. Geilo as a place is not discussed.

The PBA thus provides a framework for place development, but it offers no specific instruments for enhancing place development as coordinated processes related to places. So far, there is little evidence of public encouragement towards coordination developments of place and tourist destination. However, in the 1990s and early 2000s the topic was discussed as a result of the research project, *Place development in tourism,* based at Lillehammer University College and Eastern Norway Research Institute (Rønningen & Sæter 1995; Svalastog 2000, 2001). Their concept of place was primarily based on the place as location, and the focus was on how a place could be developed into a good touristic product. Nevertheless, it was stressed that knowledge of resources outside the tourism operators' control was important for developmental opportunities, and the relationship between development of good places including locals, tourists as well as potential settlers is emphasized. These factors, however, appear to have had little impact on the practical development of destination and place during the last decade. Our example from Hol and Geilo suggests that change could imminent, although the example is not necessarily typical. Nevertheless, it probably indicates a mutual approach of the local authorities and the stakeholders of the tourism industry in which they are gradually recognizing the relevance of place development and the connections to destination development.

5 Conclusions

We have discussed and briefly illustrated how planning for destination development and place development has taken place in mountain municipalities in Norway. We find two dominant trends. First, both types of planning processes have extended the perspective of planning. Tourism-industry stakeholders are no longer solely concerned with marketing, business, and product development, but now they define destination development in a context of development for other groups than tourists. Place development includes more than the physical form and location of functions,

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and it accounts for both how places are perceived by different groups and how places functions as social arenas. These changes have contributed to a second trend of development in which the planning actions increasingly account for the connection between the development of a destination and the development of a place.

A yet unanswered question is, then, how current planning processes may be further improved by an increased awareness of the theoretical concepts of the *place*. By understanding places as open and dynamic, where different people meet and interact, planning processes related to the development of destination and place have widened the focus beyond the interests of either tourists or the local population. Our impression is, however, that municipal planning and place development still only to a limited extent take into account the fact that the municipality or the place could also be a tourist destination and thus a place for tourists and 'part-time residents', or second home owners. A practical implementation of the development of destination indicates that the tourism industry is still insufficiently aware that the places are also communities with diverse populations and interests. As we have discussed above, individuals generally have different and subjective perceptions and connections to a single physical location. It is thus important to include the knowledge of all major groups' interests and perceptions of a place in order to develop good destinations *and* good places.

- The best way of implementing this insight depends on the local context. In places that are both destinations and local communities, which is the most common situation in mountain areas in Norway, we argue that the development of a destination should mainly be embedded in a municipal-planning process under the PBA, primarily with respect to a land-use plan in the Municipal Master Plan for the actual place. The argument may be made in general terms (cf. Müller 2006), which could then be reinforced as a consequence of greater attention to the concept of place in the planning processes: The PBA has provisions to ensure public participation and transparency, and requires the involvement of all relevant groups, interests, and industries related to the place from the start of the planning process. This can bring actors from outside tourism industry into the planning and developmental processes, thus helping to strengthen the local system of innovation through the dissemination and sharing of knowledge.
- Planning the development of place in a municipal-planning process does not only have economic development of tourism as its sole purpose. It is not satisfactory to begin developing plans with comprehensive processes that only have tourism-development purposes in places where there are other important population groups and industries. Considerations other than those related to tourist-destination development must be taken into account in subsequent public planning processes.
- The knowledge base for a plan for the development of place under the PBA needs to be wider than for a plan that only aims for tourist-destination development. Thus, one could achieve substantial discussions on sustainable development, like the current challenges from the emerging climate change, implementing the plans, and the role of tourism at the place.

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- A main point of destination processes is that it is the industry's own plan, implying the importance of marketing strategies, product concepts, destination administration, and more. These issues are often located outside public planning processes, but we believe these issues would benefit from more attention being paid to public planning processes on the development of place. In this way one could achieve a knowledge-based development of destination that has a profit and market perspective that is also balanced with other legitimate interests.
- The implementation of plans for destinations and place development must take place in cooperation between different actors, both public and private. A basis for such a cooperation and the design of partnership agreements can be advantageously linked to planning under the PBA.

In summary, we argue that a wider understanding of the concept of place could contribute to the development of destination and place that is more democratic and more effective, and that better safeguards the interests of sustainable development and addresses the issue of climate change. There are hardly any places which could be developed into pure commercial products on the sole of market demand. Places are social arenas and residences for many different people and industries, and must be developed accordingly. In some cases there may be conflicts between the different function of places, such as a tourism product or as a residence, but generally we hold that good residential areas are also good places to visit. Knowledge and inclusion of various groups' and industries' interests would thus contribute to improving the quality of the place for all actors. Increased awareness of the concept of place in the development of a destination and a place presents new challenges both to the tourism industry and to municipal planning.

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