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# Soft Spaces as a Traveling Planning Idea: Uncovering the Origin and Development of an Academic Concept on the Rise

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## Abstract

This article analyses the academic concept of “soft spaces” from the perspective of traveling planning ideas. The concept has its origin in the United Kingdom but has also been used in other contexts. Within European Union policy-making, the term soft planning has emerged to describe the processes of cooperation and learning with an unclear relation to planning. In the Nordic countries, soft spaces are viewed as entangled with the logics of statutory planning, posing challenges for policy delivery and regulatory planning systems. This article highlights the conceptual evolution of soft spaces, specifically acknowledging contextual influences and the changing relation with statutory planning.

## Keywords

strategic planning, soft space, European spatial planning, United Kingdom, Nordic countries, city region, relational space, governance, planning theory, circuits of knowledge

New informal or semiformal territorial governance processes, which operate in parallel to the formal territorial spaces and scales of government, have been increasingly acknowledged over the last three decades (Allmendinger et al. 2015b; Nadin et al. 2018). The emergence of such new forms of governance reflects the broader transition from hierarchical government to network governance (e.g., Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; Rhodes 1996) and processes of neoliberally oriented territorial restructuring of the state (Brenner 2003). These processes have gone hand in hand with a notable increase in spatial planning activities outside the statutory planning system (Allmendinger et al. 2015b). As a result, spatial planning is today partly taking place in nonstatutory or informal planning spaces and processes, which operate alongside the spaces and processes of the statutory system of planning.

In the academic debate, such nonstatutory or informal planning spaces are today often referred to as “soft spaces” (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009; Haughton and Allmendinger 2007). Since Haughton and Allmendinger (2007) initially coined the concept in order to grasp their observations on new approaches to spatial planning in the estuary region Thames Gateway in the United Kingdom (UK), the academic literature making use of the concept has expanded rapidly. Scholars have identified soft spaces at various spatial scales (Faludi 2010; Galland 2012; Hincks, Deas, and Haughton 2017; Illsley et al. 2010; Metzger and Schmitt 2012), in several countries and geographical contexts (Kaczmarek 2018; Olesen 2012; Razin 2015; Searle and Bunker 2010; Watson 2019; Allmendinger et al. 2015b), and in different thematic fields related to planning (Högström, Balfors, and Hammer 2018; Jay 2018;

Thaler 2016). Within this body of literature, most studies build on a definition of soft spaces provided by Haughton and Allmendinger (2007), which describes hard spaces as “formal, visible arenas and processes, often statutory and open to democratic processes and local political influence” (p. 306) and soft spaces as “fluid areas between such formal processes where implementation through bargaining, flexibility, discretion and interpretation dominate” (p. 306). Nevertheless, the studies applying this definition rarely use the concept of soft spaces to describe cases directly comparable with the Thames Gateway. As a consequence, the concept of soft spaces is now used to describe new planning spaces, processes, and practices that on occasion differ considerably from the original observations of Allmendinger and Haughton, rooted in the context of spatial development in the UK under the “New Labour” administrations (1997–2010; Othengrafen et al. 2015; Santamaria and Elissalde 2018).

We can thus observe that the concept of soft spaces has evolved and expanded when being inserted and used in new contexts. However, in our reading, this conceptual evolution has not been sufficiently acknowledged in the academic debate. In this review article, we focus on discussing the evolution of

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the soft spaces concept in planning research, while we do not claim to consider all processes in planning practice that could be labeled “soft spaces.” Indeed, these practices would occur even without researchers describing them as soft spaces (Paasi and Metzger 2017), and some have occurred long before the emergence of the soft space concept. Yet, we argue that a better understanding of the concept can enable more critical discussion and awareness of the contextual factors surrounding soft spaces. This is needed in order to increase conceptual clarity and thereby ensure the concept’s utility for policy makers and researchers, especially at a time when soft spaces are not only used as a descriptive and analytical concept in academia (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009) but increasingly as a prescriptive and normative concept for planning practice (Nadin et al. 2018). We hereby take up an issue highlighted by Paasi and Metzger (2017) who claim that researchers need to acknowledge how academic concepts are enmeshed in wider societal power dynamics and to interrogate the implications of conceptualizing territories as regions or—in the case of this article—as soft spaces.

Consequently, the aim of this article is to clarify the content and use of soft spaces as a concept in the academic literature in the field of planning. To do so, we approach soft spaces as a traveling planning idea (Healey 2012, 2013; Lieto 2015; Tait and Jensen 2007). The traveling of planning ideas refers to the flow of ideas and concepts through different “circuits of knowledge,” such as communities of academics, planning practitioners, and policy makers, from one place-based context to another, for example, from one country to another (Healey 2013), during which the ideas potentially gather new meanings (Tait and Jensen 2007). The unpacking of the content and conceptual evolution of any planning idea thus requires careful consideration of the place-based contexts of its origin and the destinations to which it travels, as well as the circuits through which the idea has traveled and discourses in which it has been captured.

Taking this as a starting point, we first discuss the origin of the concept of soft spaces in the context of spatial planning in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, we outline the traveling and translation of the concept into new contexts. Based on a review of the academic literature on soft spaces, we recognize at least two distinct geographical contexts outside of the UK in which the concept has been extensively used by academic scholars, namely, the European Union<sup>2</sup> (EU) and the Nordic countries.<sup>3</sup> We focus on these two contexts, because the literature review revealed that while the concept of soft spaces was sporadically applied also in other geographical contexts (Harrison and Growe 2014; Levelt and Janssen-Jansen 2013; Walsh 2014), these reflected single studies rather than a broader body of literature in a specific place-based context. This article thus focuses on the EU and the Nordic context, where a larger number of articles using soft spaces made the translation experience visible. We investigate how the concept has been altered from its original meaning in order to reflect the changing planning practices in these new contexts and their framework conditions including planning systems and legal and social systems

(Nadin and Stead 2008; Giannakourou 2012). Furthermore, we examine how the concept of soft spaces has become entangled with other structural narratives and discourses when traveling to new contexts and what role these narratives have played in reshaping the concept itself (Jensen and Richardson 2004).

Walsh et al. (2012) have previously identified a reshaping of the soft spaces concept. They notice a “significant conceptual slippage in relation to the concept of soft spaces as employed in the recent and expanding literature on the topic” (p. 11) and argue in favor of increasing conceptual clarity by arriving at a more precise definition. However, our aim is not to arrive at an all-encompassing definition of soft spaces but to increase the conceptual clarity by expanding the current understanding of the variegated uses and meanings of the concept and the distinct contexts in which it has been adopted (Allmendinger et al. 2015b; Healey 2012). Shedding light on the different meanings that the term soft spaces has gathered may help to avoid Babylonian misunderstandings (Sartori 2009) that decrease the concept’s utility for either policy or scientific analysis (van Meeteren et al. 2016). Therefore, uncovering the assumptions carried by the term soft spaces may support academic scholars in applying the concept in new geographical contexts in a more reflective way, as is currently, for example, happening through research projects in Southern Europe (Universidade de Lisboa 2018). Moreover, an increased awareness of the normative assumptions inherent to the concept of soft spaces is crucial if soft spaces are transformed from a purely academic concept into spatial imaginaries, which create new planning spaces distinct from “hard” territorial spaces and in doing so simultaneously promote new forms of territorial governance (O’Brien 2019; Haughton and Allmendinger 2015; Hincks, Deas, and Haughton 2017).

## Traveling Planning Ideas

With traveling planning ideas, Healey (2013) refers to “a whirlpool of new policy ideas, sometimes swirling about within national political and policy discourse but often circulating vigorously transnationally and in global networks” (p. 190). These circulating ideas take many forms, including spatial imaginaries, models, policies, concepts and theories, and concern, for example, spatial form, governance processes, and planning instruments. However, these ideas do not exist in a vacuum but arise from a particular context and a particular problem or issue at hand (Tait and Jensen 2007). The ideas thus bundle up complex place-based contexts, including their networks, rationalities, values, practices, and mentalities, as one object with a certain level of abstraction. This abstraction is needed for traveling ideas to show their potential to fit into different contexts. However, when ideas are taken to new contexts, it is not just the abstract ideas themselves that travel but also the contexts and histories with which they are bundled up (Healey 2013; Lieto 2015; Tait and Jensen 2007). Healey (2012, 2013) thus suggests that when studying the traveling of planning ideas, careful consideration should be paid to the “origin story” of the idea. The origin story is a thick narrative that can explain where and

how an idea came about, why it succeeded and what the values, practices, and conditions embedded in the idea were.

However, as ideas do not move around “like gifts at a birthday party or like jars on shelves, where mobilisation does not change the character and the content of the mobilised objects” (McCann 2011, 111), they cannot be detached from their context of invention, moved, and simply planted elsewhere (Healey 2012). In order to take root in new contexts, ideas thus need to go through a complex process of translation (Tait and Jensen 2007). In this process, which Healey (2013) calls “translation experience,” the ideas are recontextualized, adjusted to match issues or problems at hand, reinserted into an alternative rationality or political project, and combined into new sets of relations (Healey 2013). As a result of this translation, the ideas evolve and mutate (Peck and Theodore 2010). If the new context is considerably different from the context of the origin story, this evolution might require fundamental reworking of the idea (Tait and Jensen 2007), and consequently, core values of the idea may be abandoned (Healey 2013). While abandoning the core values may lead to an idea losing its original appeal, the idea might in turn fail to take root in a new context if it does not go through such a reworking process (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000).

In addition to the origin story and translation experiences, Healey (2012, 2013) identifies “traveling histories” that refer to the movement of ideas through “circuits of knowledge” which carry them along and “winds that blow” ideas from place to place. These circuits can be understood, for example, as communities of academics, policy makers, and planning practitioners. The “winds” refer to push and pull factors in the form of specific actors or organizations (Roy 2010), institutional legacies (McCann 2011), societal developments, governance tools, funding mechanisms, or discourses about forces of change and transition (Lieto 2015). They can be a crucial factor in deciding which aspects of an idea are taken to a new context and which ones are shed along the way. As this article builds on the analysis of academic literature, the identified circuit of knowledge refers primarily to the “academic community,” and the winds carrying the concept to new context include scientific publications, conferences, and other processes of learning and exchange among scholars.

Therefore, any ideas that circulate in the field of planning are likely to be shaped by their origin (“origin story”), by the channels through which they have traveled and discourses in which they have been captured (“traveling histories”) and their translations into new contexts (“translation experiences”). In the following sections, we outline the path of the concept of soft spaces in the academic literature related to planning with the aim to unpack its conceptual development and probe the assumptions bundled up into the concept. First, we discuss the origin of the concept in the context of spatial planning in the UK. Second, we explore how the concept has been adopted and altered by academic scholars in the context of the EU and European spatial planning. Third, we investigate the development of the concept in the context of the Nordic countries. Finally, we contrast the different conceptualizations of soft

spaces and discuss how planning systems, political objectives, and academic discourses have affected the meaning of the concept as well as relation between soft spaces and statutory planning in different contexts.

## The Origin Story of Soft Spaces: The Thames Gateway as Complex Governance Challenge in the UK

The concept of “soft spaces” has a clear origin in the observations by Haughton and Allmendinger (Haughton and Allmendinger 2007; Allmendinger and Haughton 2009) on the Thames Gateway in the UK. This is not to say, however, that Allmendinger and Haughton were the first to discuss planning processes at new, informal scales, which had already been detected in several countries. Examples for depictions of such informal processes creating new planning spaces include the establishment of cross-border Euroregions starting from the 1950s (Perkmann 2003), the polycentric Randstad region in the Netherlands (Meijers 2005), or the Copenhagen Finger Plan from 1947 (Olesen 2017). Also other processes that are not immediately related to planning can be considered as examples of soft spaces, for instance, the emergence of Silicon Valley (O’Mara 2015) or the spatial imaginaries used to describe spatial development in Europe, such as the Blue Banana (Faludi 2015; Brunet 1989).

While practices of planning across administrative boundaries already existed, Haughton and Allmendinger (Haughton and Allmendinger 2007; Allmendinger and Haughton 2009) introduced a new terminology<sup>4</sup> to describe them and defined the concepts of soft and hard spaces in the context of governance and planning:

Hard spaces are the formal, visible arenas and processes, often statutory and open to democratic processes and local political influence. Driven by a myriad of policy concerns—such as the hierarchy and co-ordination of national policy and development plans, their co-ordination with community strategies and the significance given to community involvement—they are characterised by complexity and delays.

“Soft spaces” are the fluid areas between such formal processes where implementation through bargaining, flexibility, discretion and interpretation dominate. Once alerted to it, signs of this tendency are not hard to find—such as the growing preference for using fuzzy boundaries in establishing new “sub-regions.” (Haughton and Allmendinger 2007, 306)

The observations made by Haughton and Allmendinger are deeply rooted in the context of planning and politics of the UK, describing different political developments and how these are reflected in planning practice. Following Thatcher’s anti-planning approach and the centralized plan-led approach of the Major administrations, New Labour’s focus between 2003 and 2010 on the notion of sustainable communities led to “a more flexible, networked and asymmetrical attitude to governance, planning and regeneration” (Haughton and Allmendinger 2007,

306) visible in the emergence of new spaces of planning that Haughton and Allmendinger came to call soft spaces. The political dimension behind new planning spaces and the immediate influence of nation-level politics on planning policies become apparent when acknowledging that the New Labour government demanded comprehensive, coordinated planning with visible and speedy delivery, without taking up the challenge to reform the structure of government. In other words, as the means were deemed less important than the ends, planners and others involved in spatial development were urged to work in and with new areas such as the Thames Gateway.

Based on its size, the Thames Gateway could be understood as a city region; however, its mix of urban areas and brownfields as well as its location at the intersection of London, its suburbs, and rural areas to the East are a clear contradiction to the idea of a functional city region. Rather, the Thames Gateway can be understood as a regeneration area of national interest (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009). Other examples of planning spaces in the UK emerging during the New Labour administrations, which the academic scholars labeled as soft spaces, include the subregions in the Wales spatial plan (Heley 2013; Haughton et al. 2010), the Northern Way city regions (Haughton and Allmendinger 2007), the City Strategy Pathfinder areas (Adam and Green 2016), and the Science Vale UK (Valler, Phelps, and Radford 2014). These initiatives have in common that they are primarily national government's projects, not least because in the UK the extent of regional autonomy has always been limited (Levelt and Janssen-Jansen 2013).

When identifying soft spaces with fuzzy boundaries in the UK, scholars revealed a desire of policy makers to break away from the rigidities associated with political or administrative boundaries (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009, 619). These new planning spaces were regarded as more suitable to reflect the "real geographies" of problems and potentials, which policy makers might need or want to address (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009, 619). They thus emerged from the need for policy delivery and the understanding of "conventional" spatial plans as static regulatory tools, which are not particularly visionary and can thus not provide adequate responses to pressing challenges. This perspective became especially important in the aftermath of the global financial crisis to facilitate policy delivery and growth (Olesen and Hansen 2020).

Through their flexibility and strategic aims, the planning spaces described as soft spaces are clearly distinct from statutory planning, while it is acknowledged that planners increasingly need the ability to work with both hard and soft spaces and in all kinds of different partnerships and networks. More so, it is argued that planners are "adapting to and even adopting the tactics of soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries where these help deliver the objectives of planning" (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009, 619) or improve service delivery (Heley 2013). According to Haughton and Allmendinger (2008), much of the real work of "strategic planning" was taking place outside the formal and/or statutory mechanisms of planning, which in the UK are primarily rooted in local and (to a lesser extent) regional government. Flexibility, however, is not a new

element in planning, and discretionary planning systems, as in the UK, are often praised for their flexibility, their ability to react to unforeseen situations, and for being devoid of rigid, unadaptable rules (Tewdwr-Jones 1999). Nonetheless, statutory planning is linked to a range of procedures and processes that bind decision makers in ways that more informal approaches do not. Thus, Allmendinger and Haughton (2009) argue that soft spaces emerged as flexible yet delivery-oriented tools for planning which exist alongside the formal scales of statutory planning.

In their conceptualization of soft spaces, Allmendinger and Haughton draw primarily on the academic debates around territorial and relational spaces in geography (Allmendinger et al. 2015a). They also relate the emergence of soft spaces in practice to broader transformations regarding planning and governance, specifically the rescaling of policies, the sectoral integration of different policies, and the importance of major infrastructure investments for spatial development. They thus regard soft spaces as part of a shift toward "spatial planning" in the UK, which integrates a wide variety of policy sectors (Davoudi and Strange 2009; Morphet 2010; Nadin 2007). A similar shift toward spatial planning was also identified in Ireland, and consequently, the concept of soft spaces was used to refer to planning processes in Ireland (Counsell, Haughton, and Allmendinger 2014; Haughton et al. 2010; Walsh 2012, 2014). The term spatial planning, however, was brought to the UK and Ireland through transnational learning from continental Europe (Nadin and Stead 2008) and the EU (Nadin et al. 2018) and is thus a traveling planning idea itself (which will not be discussed further in this article).

### *Further Development of the Soft Spaces Concept in the UK Context*

While initially Allmendinger and Haughton described soft spaces as entailing a strong element of pragmatism, focusing on "getting things done and not worrying too much about tidiness around the edges or administrative clutter" (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009, 619), they also voice highly critical and normative observations related to soft spaces. They argue that soft spaces are prone to turn the notions of consensus building and policy integration into tools supporting neoliberalism and scripting out opposing voices, thus resulting in postpolitical planning (Allmendinger and Haughton 2010, 2012). By drawing attention to the resulting postpolitical condition, they argue in favor of democratizing planning practice. This conceptual development reflects also a move from "spatial planning" toward "new localism" in the UK, that is, the devolution of planning tasks to local authorities (Allmendinger and Haughton 2013), reflecting once again a change in the government and its political priorities. Hincks, Deas, and Haughton (2017) note that while early initiatives described as soft spaces were imposed top-down, the election of a Conservative-led government in 2010 has resulted in a move toward open calls in which local actors are invited to create their own soft governance spaces in a bottom-up manner, such as the Northern

Powerhouse initiative and Greater Manchester. Valler and Phelps (2016) similarly claim that the localism agenda left the previous top-down-initiated planning spaces and their fledgling patterns of governance somewhat exposed.

Providing a more nuanced perspective on soft spaces, Allmendinger and Haughton (2010) thus argue that we may be “witnessing more diverse forms of spatial governance for planning than the ideas around formal and informal spaces or hard and soft spaces might first imply” (p. 811). Instead, they identify five types of new planning spaces and spatial practices (Allmendinger and Haughton 2010, 811–12):

1. Formal or statutory: Devolution creating new statutory spaces;
2. Corporate spatial planning: Adding a spatial dimension to corporate ambitions and infrastructure planning;
3. Informal or soft: Emergence of different types of soft planning spaces;
  - Bottom-up functional: Local actors aim to capture and address functional relations;
  - Delivery-oriented plans: Shadow plans bypassing lengthy and inflexible processes; and
  - Top-down functional: Driven by economic development and competitiveness agenda
4. Fuzzy: Strategic fuzziness to enable flexible policy responses or mask politically sensitive proposals; and
5. National spaces of delivery: New framing of objectives (e.g., housing, infrastructure) at the nation-state level to ensure delivery.

While certain conceptual evolution has taken place in the UK, reflecting the changes in government priorities, the concept and terminology of soft spaces has gained popularity and evolved also outside the UK, as the following sections will demonstrate.

### **Translating the Concept of Soft Spaces into the EU Context: European Territorial Cooperation and Knowledge Exchange as Soft Planning**

Shortly after its initial mention by UK-based scholars, academic scholars from continental Europe started using the concept of soft spaces in research related to European spatial planning (Waterhout et al. 2009; Faludi 2010). The concept of soft spaces was considered suitable to understand the creation of new spatial delineations through EU policies and European integration. Many of such new spaces resulted from European Territorial Cooperation initiatives, such as the formation of cross-border regions or transnational regions (Nienaber and Wille 2020; Pupier 2020; Walsh, Jacuniak-Suda, and Knieling 2015; Metzger and Schmitt 2012; Olesen 2012) or large-scale macroregional strategies, for example, for the Baltic Sea Region and the Danube Region (Allmendinger, Chilla, and Sielker 2014; Sielker 2016; Stead 2014). These new spatial delineations share a common objective to reduce the separating

force of national borders and increase territorial cohesion through the creation of new cooperation spaces. In this vein, also the EU itself was described as a soft space (Faludi 2010). However, EU policies have also been identified to contribute to the creation of soft spaces within the countries in Europe, for instance, through the EU’s discursive and financial support for city regions (Purkarthofer and Humer 2019) or new tools within EU Cohesion Policy, such as Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) or Community-led Local Development (CLLD) (Havlík 2018; Servillo 2019).

Although all these cooperation spaces that were labeled as soft spaces respond to place-specific challenges and rely on different delivery mechanisms and actor constellations, they share a joint rationale derived from the principles of EU policy-making and the EU’s main objectives of economic, social, and territorial cohesion. Consequently, Fricke (2015) argues that “spatial development across national borders is one of the central aims of European political integration” (p. 849). Purkarthofer (2018) summarizes these rationales as a story line on “diminishing borders and conflating spaces” which exists at the EU level and which local and regional actors can reuse. This story line observes that new cooperation spaces, such as functional regions, metropolitan areas, and city regions, as well as transboundary spaces, including cross-border regions, macroregions, and networks of cities and regions are increasingly addressed in EU policy documents and incorporated into the logic of EU Cohesion Policy. Unlike nation-states and the administrative units within them, which can be characterized as a system of containers fitting seamlessly into each other (Faludi 2010), these new cooperation spaces are overlapping and flexible and do not necessarily correspond to existing territories or aggregates thereof (Purkarthofer 2016). The macroregional strategy for the Baltic Sea region, for instance, is thus unlike a binding scheme or plan and “relates, not to a neatly defined space, but to a series of overlapping spaces, each delineated according to the spatial reach of one particular issue” (Faludi 2010, 20).

Several academic scholars draw a connection between what they describe as the emergence of soft spaces in the context of EU policies and debates related to territoriality, subsidiarity, and multilevel governance (Faludi 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Luukkonen and Moilanen 2012; Allmendinger, Chilla, and Sielker 2014). While territoriality is typically associated with administrative structures and democratic representation in hard spaces, the strive for territorial cohesion at the EU level reflects a need for “spatial thinking” rather than bounded planning (Zonneveld and Waterhout 2005). The relationship between spatiality and territoriality is, however, not explicitly addressed in EU policy documents such as the Territorial Agenda (Luukkonen and Moilanen 2012). Yet, with the principle of subsidiarity in place and the EU lacking a competence for spatial planning stipulated in the treaties, planning remains a sovereign activity in the hands of the member states. Thus, in the context of the EU, scholars use the concept of soft spaces to describe “deliberate attempts to insert new opportunities for creative thinking” (Faludi 2013a, 1595), for instance, across

borders, rather than spaces for policy delivery regarding urban development. A noteworthy exception is the field of maritime spatial planning, for which there is a planning competence at EU level. As the logic of fixed territories does not apply to the seas which are characterized by dynamic interactions of substances, organisms, and human activities, it has been suggested that soft spaces might be a suitable concept to frame maritime spatial planning (Walsh 2020; Jay 2018).

The diminishing policy monopoly of the nation-states in the context of EU integration has thus created opportunities for new cooperation spaces to emerge, yet the territorial administrative structure, as well as the clear lack of a legal basis for planning at EU levels, prevented these spaces from being understood as planning processes similar to those within the countries' planning systems. As a response to these framework conditions, the term "soft planning" gained ground in the academic debate. Faludi (2010) states—rather as a matter-of-fact—that "soft spaces require soft planning" (p. 14) and that "[w]e must rid ourselves of the idea that hard planning of hard spaces is the only alternative" (p. 18). However, the term soft planning is not only used to describe planning processes in soft spaces but potentially also implies changes to the style of planning. Thus, soft planning is understood as the joint formulation of strategies and mutual learning, while powers of action remain dispersed (Faludi 2010). Similarly, Stead (2014) claims that "European initiatives to promote or manage spatial development frequently rely on 'soft processes' of coordination, negotiation and learning" (p. 684). These processes do not necessarily follow the rules of democratic decision-making but are justified by output legitimacy, that is, through the positive effects of implementing the decisions made (Scharpf 1999). In the context of EU policies, the academic debate thus understands soft planning as processes of nonbinding policy interventions framing spatial development, for example, the publication of strategic documents such as the European Spatial Development Perspective or the Territorial Agenda. However, also new governance arrangements have been conceptualized as falling under the umbrella of soft planning, for example, the partnerships within the EU Urban Agenda (Purkarthofer 2019). In the EU context, we can thus identify two related concepts used by academic scholars: *soft spaces* referring to cooperation spaces promoting European integration in functional regions and across borders, and *soft planning* referring to strategy development, coordination, cooperation, negotiation, and learning. However, as Zimmerbauer and Paasi (2020) point out, it remains unclear whether there is a causal relationship between soft spaces and soft planning, that is, whether one constitutes the other.

### **Translating the Concept of Soft Spaces into the Nordic Context: City Regions as Soft Spaces of Strategic Planning**

Following its use in the UK and EU contexts, the concept of soft spaces has become widely adopted by scholars in the

Nordic countries. The Nordic countries have often been discussed as a distinct typology of social welfare states (e.g., Esping-Andersen 1990; Sapir 2006), in which spatial policies have traditionally focused on equalizing of living conditions and balanced regional development across the state territory (Moisio and Paasi 2013; Galland 2012; Olesen 2012). However, these traditional welfare state ideals have gradually been replaced by spatial policies oriented toward growth and competitiveness that newly rationalized the major urban regions as competition-oriented and autonomous entrepreneurial subjects as well as the prime scales of strategic spatial planning (Olesen 2014). In the Nordics, scholars adopted the concept of soft spaces to describe these new subnational spaces of strategic planning, especially city regions and regions, that emerged outside the statutory planning system as a result of the state transformation. In the Nordics, this meant that the traditional welfare state gradually evolved into a competition state in which neoliberally informed spatial policies promote spatial restructuring and new state spaces (Moisio and Paasi 2013).

While the neoliberal turn in state spatial politics is clearly a pan-European trend (Brenner 2003), it arrived in the Nordics relatively late (Galland 2012). Therefore, it was only during the 2000s when neoliberal spatial strategies materialized as policy reforms and sparked the conceptualization of urban regions as soft spaces in Denmark (Galland 2012; Olesen 2012), Finland (Luukkonen and Sirviö 2019), and to a limited extent also in Sweden and Norway (Smas and Lidmo 2018; Tolkki and Haveri 2020). Luukkonen and Sirviö (2019) describe the transformation of spatial strategies in Finland as follows:

The Christallerian imagery of a decentralised national territory of the 1990s has been replaced by the post-structuralist imagery of soft spaces in which the state territory consists of a rhizome of significant urban agglomerations and the connecting development corridors between them. (p. 21)

However, the neoliberal turn transformed the state and its spatial policies in the Nordics to a lesser degree than in the UK and other countries in Western Europe (Galland 2012). While it led to emphasizing urban regions as the prime scale of strategic planning, many principles of Nordic planning and administrative systems established in the welfare era remained in place. The Nordic planning systems have been categorized as comprehensive-integrated (CEC 1997; Farinos Dasi 2007). Such systems are characterized by a systematic and formal hierarchy of plans from national to local level and aim to coordinate public sector activities and investments across sectors to ensure spatial coordination. They are often considered mature planning systems with sophisticated planning institutions and instruments and considerable political commitment to the planning process (CEC 1997; Nadin and Stead 2012). They are also considered regulatory due to their intention to create a complete set of abstract rules to regulate decision-making (Nadin and Stead 2012; Newman and Thornley 1996). In these systems, municipalities have a strong position and enjoy planning autonomy over their territory, while regions are traditionally in

a rather weak position (Galland 2012; Högström, Balfors, and Hammer 2018). City regions typically have no legally defined position at all, with the exception of the Copenhagen metropolitan area. Consequently, in the Nordic countries, academic scholars employed the concept of soft spaces to refer to voluntary spatial strategy making and collaboration across municipal borders in order to coordinate spatial development on a city regional or regional scale (Pettersson and Frisk 2016).

At these scales, intermunicipal cooperation has often been incentivized by the national government in order to tackle the issues arising from continuous urbanization such as congestion, pollution, or rising costs for housing. In some cases, intermunicipal cooperation emerged in response to the imminent threat of administrative reforms, that is, municipal mergers (Purkarthofer and Humer 2019). In other cases, increasing intermunicipal coordination in functional city regions and regions was deemed a suitable and flexible response to overcome challenges that the regulatory planning system could not address (Bäcklund et al. 2018). For example, Mäntysalo, Kangasoja, and Kanninen (2015) illustrate how in Finland, Sweden, and Norway, such new types of collaborative planning spaces and informal planning tools were promoted in order to pursue strategic planning, which the statutory planning system did not support due to its lack of strategic selectivity and discretion. Indeed, many scholars have claimed that with incentivizing intermunicipal collaboration, the national governments supplemented the regulatory planning systems with soft spaces in strategic ways (Galland and Elinbaum 2015; Granqvist, Humer, and Mäntysalo 2020; Olesen and Hansen 2020).

However, at the same time when using the concept of soft spaces to capture the emergence of new types of planning spaces, scholars in the Nordic context employed the concept to critically argue that these new planning strategies adopted by the governments did not fulfill their promise to strategically respond to contemporary planning challenges that the regulatory planning systems were portrayed to insufficiently address. For example, when studying the transformations of the Danish planning system, Olesen (2012) and Galland (2012) found that the soft spaces, created to supplement the statutory planning system, started to compete with the established hard spaces. According to Galland (2012), the emerging soft spaces took over many planning functions which were originally ascribed to hard spaces but neglected many of their planning responsibilities, such as social justice and environmental protection, in order to prioritize the objective of economic development. These economic competitiveness and employment agendas aligned with the growth aspirations of the strong, self-governing municipalities co-operating within soft spaces (Olesen 2012). Scholars observed that the co-operating municipalities used these collaboration spaces to serve their common interests, which were typically limited to lobbying jointly for investments in transport infrastructure (Olesen 2012) and gaining visibility for their economic development strategies and objectives (Granqvist, Humer, and Mäntysalo 2020; Olesen and Hansen 2020). Furthermore, Pettersson and Frisk (2016) claim that municipalities favor broad strategic

objectives that reflect their existing planning practices, when negotiating collaborative agendas. Based on these observations, the scholars critically argue that when such objectives are utilized to reach a superficial consensus between municipalities, a debate on intermunicipal spatial development issues, in which municipal interests are in conflict, is circumvented (Granqvist, Sarjamo, and Mäntysalo 2019; Hytönen et al. 2016) and spatial politics are camouflaged (Olesen and Richardson 2011). Therefore, the concept of soft spaces has been used to raise concerns about new government strategies and planning practices undermining the “classic-modernist” steering role of planning (Galland 2012; Olesen 2012) or the democratic control of planning (Bäcklund et al. 2018).

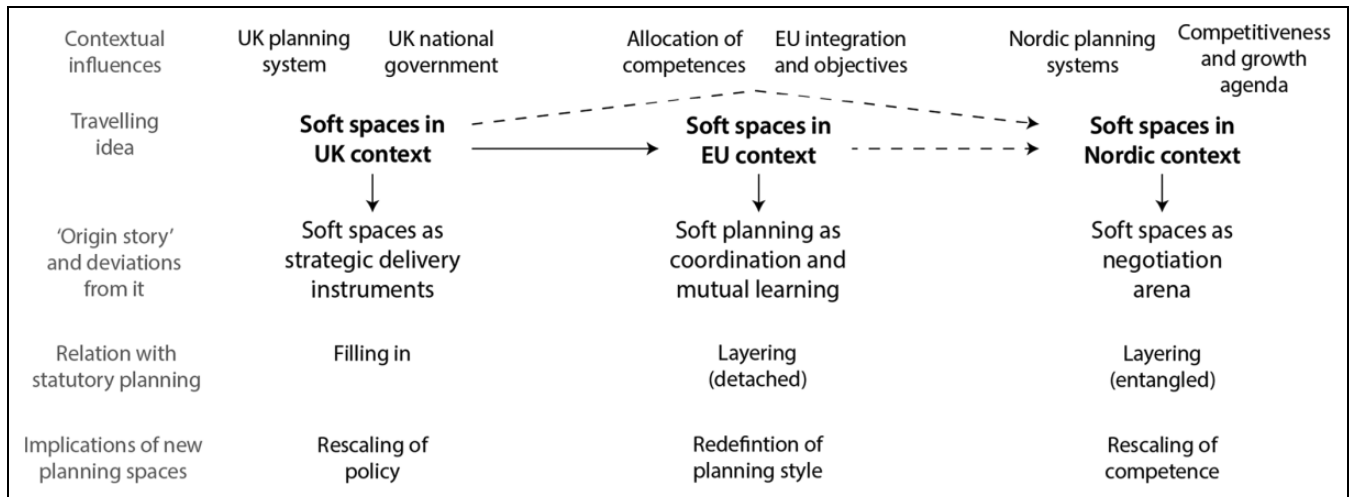
Furthermore, scholars in the Nordic context point toward another central reason for planning in soft spaces failing in practice to overcome the rigidities of existing formal planning practices: these processes are layered onto the scales of the statutory planning systems while their relationship with statutory planning remains ambiguous (Olesen and Richardson 2012; Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2020; Bäcklund et al. 2018). Layering here refers to additions or amendments to existing rules, which may potentially alter the logic of the established system but also create institutional ambiguity (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). For example, in the context of Denmark, Olesen and Richardson (2012) have shown that the operationalization of informal, flexible, and often rather abstract soft space strategies in regulatory planning systems relies on translating them into the language of formal land-use plans and hard spaces. Similarly, Granqvist, Humer, and Mäntysalo (2020) argue that in the context of Finnish planning practice, the logic of strategic planning in soft spaces yields to the logic of formal planning in hard spaces rather than reconstituting it. Thus, it becomes apparent that in the Nordic countries, the regulatory planning system and the associated deeply embedded understanding of planning also shape planning in soft spaces, not vice versa. As a result, in the Nordics, planning spaces have been described as “penumbral,” that is, in-between soft and hard (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2020, 15–16):

old borders may keep on “haunting” and affecting in quite material ways what can and cannot be done in practice. Sometimes soft idea(l)s are transferred to old regions and planning processes are expected to adjust. However, in old institutionalized regions planning practices are tied to established politico-administrative structures, which often generates a certain stickiness that may prevent old regions from turning into soft spaces. The softening of hard spaces can thus be more complex and frictional than the hardening of soft spaces.

### Discussion: Soft Spaces as a Traveling Planning Idea

In this article, we have outlined how the concept of soft spaces has emerged and traveled in the academic literature in urban and regional planning. We identify three contexts in which the





**Figure 1.** Soft spaces as a traveling planning idea.

concept has been used extensively: its origin story in the UK and two translation experiences in the context of the EU and the Nordic countries (Figure 1). When gaining popularity outside the UK, academics have attached different meanings to the concept of soft spaces, and consequently, the concept itself has evolved. The new meanings have been shaped by the observed and analyzed planning practices which are distinct as a result of planning systems and policy objectives of their geographical contexts. In this section, we contrast the distinct practices of planning, especially their relation to statutory planning and implications, in order to grasp the evolution of the concept of soft spaces in the academic literature.

In the UK context, the planning practices that the “soft spaces” concept originally aimed to denote and thus the conceptualization of soft spaces itself are tightly linked to both the UK planning system and the political power structures and priorities at the nation-state level. Soft spaces such as the Thames Gateway were perceived as opportunities for strategic action and cooperation beyond the local level. In this conceptualization, soft spaces can thus be understood as filling in existing gaps in a planning system that often relies on ad hoc decisions through case law and discretionary powers. For the New Labour government, the focus on development spaces of national importance presented itself as an opportunity to create delivery-oriented policies that did not require fundamental reforms of the administrative structure. While planning in the UK is generally lax in regulating private sector-led developments, the national government managed to set the agenda for soft spaces. New governance arrangements bringing together a multitude of public and private actors and agencies have ensured the (partial) delivery of these government priorities. Building on the work of UK-centered scholars, we thus understand the developments in the UK triggered by the emergence of soft spaces as a rescaling of policy, at first from the local to the national scale, and subsequently from the national to newly established soft space scales, typically at the city regional or

regional level. In parallel with the emergence of soft spaces, we can also observe a change in the conceptualization of planning in the UK, transitioning from land-use planning to spatial planning, although the term spatial planning has started to lose its appeal in the UK since the 2010s (once again as a result of national politics). Recently, the understanding of soft spaces in the UK has been evolving, referring increasingly to bottom-up initiatives (Hincks, Deas, and Haughton 2017) and critically addressing the depoliticization and lack of open deliberation in planning (Allmendinger and Haughton 2012, 2013).

In the context of the EU, the concept of soft spaces has been used primarily to describe territorial cooperation across borders. In the academic debate, soft spaces have thus been understood as a contribution to the EU’s objective of social, economic, and especially territorial cohesion as well as a manifestation of the principles of European integration. Strategy documents such as the European Spatial Development Perspective and the Territorial Agenda and funding instruments within EU Cohesion Policy emphasizing new spatial delineations can be considered as pull factors carrying the ideas related to soft spaces via the European level into the member states (Purkarthofer 2018).

However, spatial development in the context of the EU takes place against the background of planning being a sovereign task of the member states. Consequently, EU-related activities, no matter whether in soft spaces or hard spaces, are layered onto existing planning spaces and processes, while often remaining detached from them (Purkarthofer and Schmitt 2021). Planning systems thus seldom steer EU Cohesion Policy investments (Nadin et al. 2018), and in turn, EU funds are rarely used to provide financial resources for the achievement of strategic objectives in planning (Purkarthofer and Schmitt 2021). Consequently, in the EU context, scholars mostly use soft spaces to describe joint strategy formulation, mutual learning and cooperation, and not policy delivery, as in the UK context. This represents a crucial translation experience

of the concept of soft spaces which also brought about the term “soft planning.” To what extent these activities can be considered planning is of course debatable. However, they can be understood as a continuation of the multilevel governance approach within European spatial development, supporting new forms of vertical and horizontal cooperation and new actor coalitions (Purkharthofer 2019).

The concept of soft spaces has also traveled to the Nordic countries. In this context, scholars have used soft spaces to describe emerging practices of strategic spatial planning at city regional and regional scales, which were primarily supported by national strategies considering urban areas as drivers of growth and centers of entrepreneurial activity. These new practices of strategic planning were facilitated by the relatively recent turn of national governments in the Nordics toward neoliberally oriented policies emphasizing economic growth and competitiveness over welfare state ideals. As these neoliberal developments underpinned the emergence of soft spaces in the UK context as well, the conceptualization of soft spaces shares many similarities in both contexts. For example, scholars have identified soft spaces to emerge from a search for new policy spaces that would resonate better with the geographies of contemporary planning challenges. Furthermore, the shift toward strategic planning (termed spatial planning in the UK context) has been described as paving the way for soft spaces in the UK context and as a “pull factor” carrying the idea to the Nordic countries. As a result, in both contexts, academics have described soft spaces as existing alongside hard spaces as a result of the rescaling of policies. Such coexistence has led to challenges regarding legitimacy, depoliticization and spatial politics that are shrouded under the guise of soft spaces. Therefore, it could be argued that the concept has retained much of its original meaning, even when translated to the Nordic context.

However, the planning practices emerging in Nordic context also show peculiarities, and consequently, the concept of soft spaces has gained new meanings. On the one hand, the actors cooperating in and planning for soft spaces in the Nordics are to a large degree governmental actors, that is, municipal, regional, and state representatives. The role of development agencies and partnerships, which was crucial in the UK, for example, in the Thames Gateway, is less pronounced in the Nordic context. On the other hand, the emerging strategic planning practices at city regional and regional scales take place in the context of the Nordic administrative and planning systems, in which municipalities are powerful and largely autonomous actors. Planning processes in soft spaces are thus depicted as collaborative endeavors across municipal borders which are layered onto the statutory planning system (Granqvist, Humer, and Mäntysalo 2020). This conceptualization of soft spaces resembles the EU-related discourse about soft planning, as the role of planning is seen to shift from steering to facilitation and voluntary cooperation. Consequently, in the Nordics, soft spaces are characterized as strategic arenas of negotiation between municipalities as well as between municipalities and the state. As municipal planning remains powerful and

municipal interests often persist, the outcomes of such negotiations are then again translated into the logic of the statutory planning system, in which municipalities represent the key actors. If the direct link with statutory planning is lost, for example, if hard actors extend their area of influence to new soft spaces that go beyond their jurisdiction (Bäcklund et al. 2018), conflicts and ambiguities arise in the law-abiding Nordic systems. Therefore, the strategic and flexible character of soft spaces described in the UK is undermined in the Nordic planning systems with their strong emphasis on regulation. In order to avoid tensions resulting from overlapping jurisdictions and ambiguous relationships between soft and hard spaces, several Nordic countries are in the process of reforming their planning laws, among other things with the intention for emerging new planning spaces to “find their place” in the regulatory systems. While anchoring city regions in the planning law is currently being debated in Finland, Sweden has recently allocated additional responsibilities to county councils, giving, for example, the—formerly soft—Stockholm regional plan a statutory mandate (Smas and Lidmo 2018). Through these reforms of planning regulation, we can observe a (potential) rescaling of competences in the Nordic countries.

Following the traveling path of the concept of soft spaces reveals that when planning practices, planning systems, and political priorities and objectives differ, the concept partly changes its meaning along the way when being “translated” by academic scholars into new contexts (Table 1). In all three contexts, we can observe that the meaning of soft spaces results from the specificities of each statutory planning system context, which is at the same time challenged by the emergence of new planning practices that are described as soft spaces.

In the UK context, soft spaces add a more strategic dimension to a system based on discretion and give more voice to priorities laid out by the national government. In the EU context, the existing systems of territorial governance in Europe are partly overcome through positive reinforcement of cooperation and mutual learning across administrative borders, although these soft planning processes remain detached from statutory planning and their importance should not generally be overstated (Faludi 2018). In the Nordic context, city regions as soft spaces clash with the regulatory system and the formal responsibilities of planning. As a result, they are entangled with the logics of statutory planning and serve as strategic arenas for negotiation rather than flexible delivery spaces (UK context) or arenas of mutual learning (EU context). Indeed, we found that not only have the place-based planning and administrative systems affected the evolution of the content of the soft space concept but also the context-specific academic “circuits of knowledge” with their different discourses (Healey 2013) in which the concept has been used. In the UK context, the concept has been shaped, for example, by its ties to academic discourses about space and politics in spatial planning, in the EU by academic discourses on European integration and cohesion and in the Nordics by academic discourses on neoliberalism and strategic planning.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of soft spaces in the UK, EU, and Nordic context.

Context of Planning Practice	Origin Story: UK	Traveling History: EU	Traveling History: Nordics
Planning system	Discretionary	EU lacking formal competence for spatial planning; planning as sovereign task of the member states	Regulatory, comprehensive-integrated
Administrative structure	Strong national level, devolution of power to local (and regional) levels	(a) Intergovernmental coordination among EU member states; (b) Supranational EU policies regarding certain competences, implementation through existing jurisdictions (national, regional, and local)	Bipolar structure, with relatively strong national government and strong municipalities
Soft spaces challenging existing structures	Opportunity to transcend geographical and professional boundaries of planning	Questioning existing ideas about state territoriality and policy monopoly of nation states; opportunity to enable policy coordination despite lack of competence	Parallelism of statutory and soft planning puts hierarchical planning systems and planning competencies into question
Political and societal objectives	“Getting things done”: Breaking away from bureaucratic working patterns without changing administrative structures; creating action spaces that reflect the “real geographies” of challenges	European integration and cohesion: Enabling balanced development and reducing the separating force of borders; enabling functional geographies (across borders)	Growth-oriented policies: Supporting urban areas as drivers of economic development; urbanization: tackling issues such as congestion, pollution, or rising costs for housing
Actors	National government as main initiator, involving broad and shifting range of actors: Governmental actors, agencies, partnerships	European Commission as main promotor, involving nation states, regional and local authorities, and nongovernmental actors	Primarily governmental actors (states, regions, and cities); often top-down interventions stimulating bottom-up initiatives
Conceptual Evolution and Changes in Meaning	Origin Story: UK	Traveling History: EU	Traveling History: Nordics
Conceptual development	Soft spaces as opportunities for strategic planning and delivery instruments, complementing hard spaces	Soft spaces as cross-border cooperation; soft planning as nonbinding policy intervention, for example, joint strategy formulation, mutual learning, and cooperation; powers of implementation remain dispersed	Soft spaces facilitating negotiation between different actors; soft spaces as strategic supplement to the regulatory system and thus entangled with logics of statutory planning; shifting role of planning from steering to facilitation
Spatial delineation	Subnational functional spaces (regional, city-regional, subregional, and sublocal); often regeneration spaces	Regions of transnational cooperation (including EU, macro-regions, cross-border regions, and transnational spaces) and functional subnational spaces (city-regions, neighborhoods, and coastal regions)	(Functional) city-regional or regional spaces of voluntary cooperation between municipalities

Note. EU = European Union.

## Conclusions

This article builds on the idea of traveling planning ideas, that is, the fact that concepts that circulate in the planning field are shaped by their origins and by the circuits through which they have traveled (Healey 2012). We have demonstrated that the concept of soft spaces is such a traveling planning idea, which has its origins in the UK and traveled to the EU and the Nordic countries, among others. In this process, new meanings have been ascribed to the concept, while other aspects of the origin story have lost relevance. In the UK, academic scholars used the concept of soft spaces first to describe regional and city regional development areas of national importance, promoted by the national government and aimed at speedy policy delivery. In research on EU policy-making, the concept of soft spaces is often used to refer to functional regions and cooperation spaces across borders, while also the related concept of soft planning emerged, referring to strategy development, coordination, cooperation, negotiation, and learning. In the Nordic countries, academics have characterized soft spaces as strategic arenas of negotiation and cooperation between municipal actors at the city regional scale. However, the regulatory system and especially the municipalities remain important for planning, thus conceiving soft spaces as entangled with the logics of statutory planning.

We do not propose that there is one “correct” use of the concept of soft spaces. Translations and contextualizations of abstract ideas are unavoidable and even necessary for concepts to be meaningful tools of analysis and description in different contexts (van Meeteren et al. 2016). However, being aware of origins and travel histories is crucial in order to identify contingencies and inconsistencies related to such traveling concepts. In the context of soft spaces, the repeated and sometimes oversimplified use of a few initial definitions of soft spaces (Haughton and Allmendinger 2007; Allmendinger and Haughton 2009) shows that there is a clear lack of reflectivity in the use of the concept. In our reading, there is a particular need in the academic debates to elaborate what is “soft” in specific processes. Currently, it remains unclear whether new spatial delineations are a necessary condition for soft spaces or whether the processes of soft governance and soft planning can take place in hard spaces (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2020).

There is also an undeniable, yet unspecified, overlap between the use of the concepts of soft spaces/soft planning and strategic spatial planning. This becomes apparent especially in the Nordic countries where strategic spatial planning has been an integral, yet often informal, part of planning practice. While strategic planning has often taken place in soft spaces, it has been proposed that it could be pursued with tools of statutory planning (Mäntysalo, Kangasoja, and Kanninen 2015). Considering such evolving practices of strategic planning, “soft” could refer to the softening of regulatory control of planning and diversification of planning tools and practices (Olesen 2012).

More awareness and reflectivity are needed not only when the concept of soft spaces continues to travel to new contexts in

the “academic circuits of knowledge” but also in the light of the concept potentially transforming from an analytical term into a prescriptive idea. While we have uncovered some of the normative meanings associated with soft spaces in the academic use of the term, the transformation of soft spaces from a purely academic to a normative planning and policy concept, or a spatial imaginary, can currently be observed, for example, in the context of the EU (Purkarthofer 2018) but also more generally in planning systems enhancing planning as cooperative endeavor and in functional areas (Nadin et al. 2018). Given the normative implications of such a transformation, it is necessary to obtain more knowledge about the push and pull factors that promote soft spaces, including the underlying motives and interests.

Finally, it is worthwhile to reflect on the helpfulness of the concept of soft spaces in the planning literature. It is evident that even if the terminology of soft spaces had not been introduced in the academic debate, informal processes in new planning spaces would nonetheless have emerged in planning practice. However, the enthusiastic use of the concept since its introduction by planning scholars points toward a lack of robust academic concepts to describe these emerging practices. In other words, planning researchers were eager to find a concept that would capture what they could observe in their respective research contexts. As we have highlighted in this article, the concept itself has undergone fundamental transformations when being used to describe planning practices in different contexts. Nonetheless, we do not want to claim that the concept as such is fruitless. When contextual influences and entangled discourses are acknowledged, the different analyses using the concept of soft spaces reveal important aspects about the relationship between informal and formal, that is, soft and hard, elements in planning. We see this as a fruitful future research agenda related to soft spaces: a further clarification of what is “soft” in soft spaces is needed, as well as a discussion of the tensions, synergies, and hybrids between “the soft” and “the hard” in planning research, which can ultimately also benefit planning practice.

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## Notes

1. Some of the early literature on soft spaces covered both the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland, motivated by the entwined planning

experiences and planning systems of the two countries (Haughton et al. 2010). Recently, the concept of soft spaces has also been used to address the Irish border with a view to Brexit (Walsh and Rafferty 2019; Walsh 2019). However, as the Irish context is not identical with the UK context, it would require further elaboration which lies beyond the scope of this article (see, e.g., Counsell, Haughton, and Allmendinger 2014; Walsh 2012, 2014).

2. In the context of the European Union (EU), scholars using the concept of soft spaces are placed in several countries across Europe. However, we identify this as a clearly distinct traveling process, as all contributions have in common that they address EU-related policies.
3. The Nordic countries include Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. In this article, we do not refer to Iceland, as we could not identify relevant academic literature discussing soft spaces in Iceland. Furthermore, as the Nordic countries (excluding Norway and Iceland) are also EU member states, Nordic scholars have contributed also to the soft space discourse in the EU context.
4. The terminology of “soft spaces” and “hard spaces” has been used earlier in other disciplines, for instance, mathematics and computing (Shabir and Naz 2011), urban design and architecture (Trancik 1986), or geography (Flusty 2004), however referring to entirely different phenomena.

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