Tourism transitions, complex challenges and robust destination development in peri-urban areas: A case study of Zealand, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the peri-urban has been used to explore the dynamics of transition at the urban-rural interface, which has clarified the specific and diverse transitions taking place in these areas. However, research still offers little insight into tourism transitions in peri-urban areas that aim to use tourism as a catalyst for development. This paper addresses this gap with an in-depth study of tourism transitions in such a Danish peri-urban region. The analysis is based on observation, interview and documentary data collected over three years in one macro-case region and two micro-case destinations within that region. Drawing on the concept of robust action, the paper seeks a better understanding of what is termed complex challenges, associated with tourism transitions, and how specific destination development efforts can mitigate these. Four such challenges are identified relating to a lack of respectively investment, star attractions, access and accommodation. The two micro-cases illustrate how destinations can address such complex challenges through what we term robust destination development. The paper also develops a robust destination development framework and confirms its utility in a peri-urban tourism context. This framework enables destinations to cope with complex challenges and researchers to understand how they may do so.

1. Introduction

Tourism transitions are understood as dramatic tourism driven changes to communities, politics, economies, and/or environments, that require comprehensive adaptation (Müller, 2018). Whereas much literature dealing with tourism transitions has focused on transitions to more sustainable tourism (e.g. Niewiadomski & Brouder, 2024; Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008), it can be argued that *the* core tourism transition in many destinations is the change from a destination having little or no tourism, to a much stronger focus on development of tourism as a driver of socio-economic development. Tourism transition may be assumed not only to be a top-down process, driven by political authorities (such as a regional government), but by many different actors. Such a transition process, and how to assess its robustness, is the focus of this paper, which deals specifically with tourism transition in a peri-urban region that has made an active decision to focus on tourism development as a catalyst for broader socio-economic development.

Traditional theorizations of peri-urban challenges in development, planning, and geography research have focused on the diverse dynamics of urban sprawl and development outside, but not far from, the city

(Allen, 2003; Clark et al., 2009; Hoggart, 2005; Rogerson, 2023; Sánchez et al., 2022). However, even though tourism may be a driver of socio-economic development in such areas (Weaver, 2005), little is known about the particular dynamics and challenges of tourism transitions relative to peri-urban areas. This is partly due to the limited scope of tourism research on the topic to date. While development, planning, and geography research have left the rural–urban dichotomy behind, this change has not occurred in tourism studies. According to Gon (2017) "The attempt to link rural and urban tourism has registered limited consensus among [tourism] scholars" (p. 19). Weaver (2005) supports this claim, arguing that tourism research has focused separately on rural and urban areas, thus ignoring the transitional dynamics and challenges in areas lying between these sharply distinct regions.

Tourism is often employed as a catalyst for socio-economic community development (Jørgensen et al., 2021; Scheyvens, 2002). In observing how some peri-urban destinations are attempting to leverage tourism development in such a way, this paper aims to create a better understanding of the challenges of and approaches to tourism transitions in such peri-urban areas. More precisely the research question that the paper addresses is: How can peri-urban destinations that attempt to use

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tourism as a catalyst for development cope with the specific complex challenges that emerge from tourism transitions? In answering this question, the paper has three objectives. (1) It will develop the conceptualization of tourism transitions in such peri-urban areas with a focus on understanding the situational conditions and challenges. To do so, it will (2) conceptualise *complex challenges* in a tourism context, and (3) develop a framework of *robust destination development* to understand how destinations can successfully develop tourism despite such challenges.

Complex challenges are conceptualized as similar to grand challenges (Ferraro et al., 2015; Sørensen & Ansell, 2023), but on a smaller scale and in a specific context. Building on Leifer's (1991) conceptualization of chess, robust action has been defined as "noncommittal actions that keep future lines of action open" (Padgett & Powell, 2012, p. 24; see Ferraro et al., 2015), and "action that accomplishes short-term objectives while preserving long-term flexibility" (Eccles & Nohria, 1992, p. 11; see Ferraro et al., 2015). Robust actions are thus actions that solve problems here and now but are also flexible enough to adapt to other and future situations. Based on this, this paper conceptualises robust actions in a tourism context as collective actions that tackle problems here and now, while also being flexible enough to address future situations. Such actions are particularly relevant for addressing complex challenges in a tourism context, where many diverse actors with different agendas have to come together to develop solutions. The development of both these concepts is explained in the literature review.

The paper is based on extensive qualitative data collected through a three-year case study (2019–2021) focusing on the region of Zealand, Denmark as a macro case, and two micro cases within Zealand. Zealand is characterised 1) by its peri-urban location in relation to the capital Copenhagen and 2) its attempt to promote tourism as a catalyst for socio-economic development through tourism transition. The two micro cases are relevant because they are examples of destinations within Zealand that have gone through relatively successful tourism transition processes, despite challenges brought by their peri-urban location. The data consists of a combination of in-depth qualitative interviews (with experts, tourist enterprises, tourism business organizations, DMOs and policymakers), observation, and documentary materials.

The paper is structured as follows: It begins by defining peri-urban in a tourism context and introducing and developing the concepts of robust action and complex challenges. The methodology for the study is then outlined. In the analysis section, the authors address the research question in two steps. First, the analysis focuses on the macro-case of Zealand to exemplify complex challenges that may emerge from tourism transitions in peri-urban areas. Second, it focuses on the two micro-cases within Zealand to illustrate how they have dealt with these challenges through robust destination development. Based on the analysis and existing theory, a robust destination development framework is developed and presented in the following section to explain and theorise how robust action can help destinations develop tourism under challenging conditions. The paper concludes with a summary of findings as well as discussion of theoretical and practical implications and reflections on limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Perspectives and definition of peri-urban in a tourism context

Various terms have been used to describe what lies between the urban and the rural, based on different delimitations, including: "rural–urban fringe," "fringe,", "metropolitan region," "metropolitan fringe," "exurbs," "exurbia," "urban hinterland," "urban field," "urban shadow," "urban sprawl," "urban-rural continuum," "semi–suburbs," "post–suburbs," "semi–rural," "semi–urban," and "peri-urban" (Monsson, 2014; Weaver, 2005).

However, many of these concepts and related analyses (Bartels, 2019; Sánchez et al., 2022; Weaver, 2005) concern a geographically

delimited suburban belt around a city: for example, "The urban–rural fringe is a transitional zone between space that is more clearly urban and space that is more clearly rural" (Weaver, 2005, p. 23). It can be argued that many of these concepts are too limited in their conceptualization to meaningfully capture peri-urban dynamics in tourism.

Follmann, 2022 summarizes three research perspectives on the peri-urban: territorial, functional and transitional. The territorial perspective uses a structural criterion and frames the peri-urban as a distinct space at the urban–rural fringe. The functional perspective uses a relational criterion emphasizing core-periphery interfaces and interactions. The transitional perspective focuses on imaginaries and plans of the city–yet–to come in the peri-urban area. The often-used territorial–structural criterion is quite limited. For example, some authors use "urban–rural fringe" interchangeably with "suburbia" (Slocum & Curtis, 2017). Yet, peri-urban transitions due to proximity effects can also be observed in areas further away from the city. Others such as (Kline et al., 2017, 2018) argue that the urban–rural fringe extends well beyond the suburbs and includes commuter communities and second-home developments (see also Lamb, 1983). Similarly, Weaver (2005) explains how "McKenzie (1996) defines the "urban–rural fringe" as the space between the edge of a city's contiguous built development (a structural criterion) and the outer edge of the daily commuting zone (a functional criterion)" (p. 25). Earlier, Lamb (1983) defined the "exurban" as "the zone lying beyond the continuously built–up suburbs of a central city, but within a larger functional urban region" (p. 40). Lamb (1983) further argued that the "functional" border of the exurban (in the sense of a commuting zone) should be the farthest limit of an outward recreational excursion. Monsson (2013) argues that the peri-urban can be seen as a mosaic capturing "not only adjacent rural areas with low population density but also established small and medium–sized towns that are under a strong influence from the urban city" (p. 6).

This paper contends that the functional/relational criterion is critical in tourism and destination management research to capture peri-urban dynamics relative to tourism development within a broader zone of a recreational area. The structural perspective alone bears the risk of leaving out important proximity and peri-urbanization effects beyond the urban–rural fringe related to commuting, tourism and business.

Based on this, and following Lamb (1983), McKenzie (1996), Monsson (2014) and Kline et al. (2020), and inspired by Gallent (2006) and Woltjer (2015), peri-urban areas in a tourism and destination management context is defined here as *the area(s) beyond the continuously built–up suburbs of a city, but within a larger functional commuter region, delimited by the maximum distance of a recreational excursion.*

Center–periphery theory has traditionally posited that proximity to the city brings more prospects for development (Amin, 2016; Gritsai & Treivish, 1990). Relatedly, research has tended to conceptualise peri-urban areas in a unified way as offering specific opportunities for development, such as land speculation, location of new entrepreneurial businesses, and cheaper housing for commuters (Monsson, 2013; Piorr et al., 2011; Wandl & Magoni, 2016). However, this understanding has been challenged by observations and theories, revealing that peri-urban areas are diverse in terms of development and management and, in some cases, appear less development-oriented than peripheral areas, with socio-economic heterogeneity and fragmented institutional contexts for planning and development (Ahani & Dadashpoor, 2021; Bartels, 2019; Monsson, 2013; Rogerson, 2023).

Despite the peri-urban dynamics relative to tourism destinations, only a few studies have explored the specifics of such transformative destination development and management in peri-urban areas. As mentioned, some of this research applies a more narrow delimitation of the peri-urban or urban–rural fringe, similar to suburbia, focusing on areas which are characterized by a specific product amalgam of theme parks, tourist shopping villages, modified nature-based tourism, factory outlet malls, golf courses etc. (Slocum & Curtis, 2017; Weaver, 2005). Other research has mainly focused on resident and visitor perceptions of tourism transitions in peri-urban destinations (Kline et al., 2017; Weaver

& Lawton, 2001, 2004; Zhang et al., 2006). Kline et al. (2020) studied perceptions of entrepreneurial ecosystems in peri-urban areas (although they work with the notion of fringe communities). The study finds that these communities are increasingly "having to negotiate the complexities of transitioning natural, built, economic, political, social, and cultural landscapes" (p. 15). Another study points to "conflict over land use and physical changes to the natural resources that have attracted many of the amenity migrants and other new residents in the first place" (Chase, 2015) as a major challenge. However, because these studies focus on perceptions of the community's entrepreneurial ecosystem and resident and visitor perceptions, they do not go further into depth with how destinations may cope with these conditions and challenges.

In the context of this paper, the insights from these studies are valuable in highlighting the challenges of destination development and management in areas between the rural and urban. However, the authors aim to achieve a stronger theoretical conceptualization of the characteristics of a tourism system that has the capabilities to cope with complex tourism transition challenges in the peri-urban.

2.2. Robust action and complex challenges

This paper proposes that the concept of robust action is useful to identify characteristics of a destination management system capable of tackling problems here and now while also being flexible enough to address future situations and create tourism agendas that accommodate conflicts and tensions within a societal context.

The notion of robustness has been applied to understand organizational responses to grand challenges and unsolved problems in society and provides a link between organizational action and changes at the field/societal level (Ferraro et al., 2015). Grand challenges can be defined as complex problems with no definitive solutions, they confront organizations with uncertainty, and involve multiple actors in evaluative practices (Ferraro et al., 2015; Sørensen & Ansell, 2023).

The concept of robustness has rarely been used to understand local tourism systems (but see Haase et al., 2009). Yet, peri-urban tourism areas face challenges with many of the characteristics of grand challenges and collective action problems that require robust action. First, peri-urban areas are relatively well-defined with a common pool of resources such as landscape, cultural heritage, and actor-networks. Second, the challenges that these areas often face, such as employment, education, economic development and protection of nature and environment, are complex with no clear solutions. Third, development and innovation are often characterized by value-based actions involving many conflicting actors engaged in collective action and deliberations, such as whether and how tourism can drive employment, be sustainable and large-scale (or not), and locally supported (or not) (Bærenholdt et al., 2021; Jørgensen et al., 2021). As such, while the challenges associated with tourism transitions are not on the same level as grand challenges such as global poverty alleviation or climate change, the fact that they exhibit the same characteristics suggests that similar approaches to solving them may be relevant. Based on this, this paper conceptualises the challenges associated with tourism transitions as *complex challenges*, which exhibit similar characteristics to grand challenges, but on a smaller scale and in a specific context.

Previous authors in the field of tourism destination development have explored the complexity of destination development using notions of complex adaptive systems, destination governance, leadership and design thinking to capture the complex nature of destination development with multiple actors and no hierarchical management systems (e.g. Volgger et al., 2021; Baggio et al., 2010). These authors tend, however, to take an evolutionary perspective to destination development, as adaptive systems evolving over time, and do not emphasize tourism transitions with no or weak evolutionary patterns in tourism. Moreover, these authors point to the role of governance or leadership in directing adaptive processes in such complex systems. In the case of tourism transitions, starting from weak evolutionary patterns in tourism, we

argue that destination development is instead a contested practice with many actors and interests, and rather than neglecting the conflicted and fragmented aspects of development, we use a model of robust action that can capture these fractured development patterns.

The literature on robustness and robust action focuses on both identifying structural characteristics of robustness and co-operative processual behaviours for the engagement of actors in robust actions. Ostrom's (2005) work on robust institutions emphasizes the structural characteristics of robustness within a delimited area where actors share common resources; it has been applied at least once to tourism research in remote areas (Haase et al., 2009; Ostrom, 2005). Padgett and Ansell's (1993) notion of multi-vocality as a characteristic of robust action pays attention to structural characteristics, for example arguing that actions that are robust and credible must be framed broadly enough to make multiple interpretations possible (involve multivocality) and gain support from multiple heterogeneous actors.

More process-oriented work on robust action and its engaging and collaborative effects include, for example, Sørensen and Ansell's (2023) work on political robustness, which they define as "the ability of political institutions to flexibly adapt and creatively innovate rules, norms and procedures in the face of disruptive tensions in ways that build trust in government and deal constructively with political conflicts and tensions". Thus, they stress the role of ruptured innovation and entrepreneurship processes in addition to adaptation. They further speak of "robust politics as political processes such as negotiations, coalition building, dialogical representation and experimentation that produce political agendas, views and ideas that accommodate and transform political conflict and tension" and robust policy as "policy designs that permit concerted collective action, while allowing, sustaining and mobilizing political agency in a manner that enhances output legitimacy" (pp. 74–75).

Based on these conceptualizations, this paper understands robust action relative to tourism destinations as collective actions that deal with complex challenges by tackling problems here and now while also being flexible enough to address future situations and create tourism agendas, views and practices that may be contested but attempt to accommodate conflicts and tensions within a societal context of tourism development.

Based on a review of the literature, Ferraro et al. (2015) developed a pragmatist processual model of organizational robustness capturing how robust actions within a societal context engage focal actors in purposive actions. These authors argue that three dimensions constitute robust action: an architecture of multiple heterogeneous participants (structural dimension), interpretative multivocality without requiring consensus (interpretative dimension), and iterative experimental actions with evolutionary learning patterns (practice dimension).

Ferraro et al.'s (2015) approach is used as an outset for the development of a framework for what this paper terms *robust destination development* (see section 4.3), where engagement of heterogeneous actors in reflexive and purposeful action is suggested as a way for destinations to cope with complex challenges brought on by tourism transitions in the peri-urban. As such, this paper transitions the concept of robust action from an organizational/institutional/policy level and context to the destination level and tourism context and contributes a new framework to extant research on robust action.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

The paper is based on a research study on tourism development in peri-urban destinations in Zealand, which was carried out over three years from 2019 to 2021. As mentioned, the purpose of this paper is to gain a better understanding of tourism transitions in peri-urban areas that aim to use tourism as a catalyst for development and how such areas tackle complex challenges that emerge from tourism transitions.

According to (Yin, 2014) a case-study approach is appropriate for this kind of study that aims to explore and understand a phenomenon within its real–life context.

Most case study research in tourism are single case studies that focus on a single point in time (Merinero-Rodríguez & Pulido-Fernández, 2016; Xiao & Smith, 2006). This method can be effective for some purposes, but are also at the risk of lacking depth, because only one perspective is taken; having lower validity, because they do not allow for comparison between cases or for inclusion of cases with different characteristics; and retrospective framings of experiences, because data is only collected at one point in time (Crossley, 2020). To bolster the validity and trustworthiness of this study (see also 3.2) and to ensure that the research question could be addressed sufficiently, a longitudinal holistic multiple-case study was undertaken, focusing on three critical cases (Yin, 2014).

The cases were critical in the sense that they were all representative of peri-urban destinations aiming to move from less to more visited. The micro cases were illustrative in the sense that they exemplify destinations that have made use of robust destination development to address complex challenges, and in that sense facilitate the readers' ability to understand the conceptual framework (Fig. 2) (Siggelkow, 2007; Taillard et al., 2016). The study involved multiple continuous restudies at regular intervals, meaning that the researchers revisited the case destinations on site visits multiple times (see Table 1). As such it resembles a qualitative longitudinal research approach (QLR) (Epstein, 2002; Young et al., 1991).

To gain a more holistic view of the intertwined practices that foster tourism transitions and management in their wider context, data were collected and analysed from both macro and micro-perspectives. This combination allows us to focus on both the wider ecosystem via the macro-case of the Zealand region and the particularities of two specific case destinations within that region: Hundested Harbour and Destination Gisselfeld (see section 4.4.2, Table 1 and Fig. 1). The two micro-cases both represent relatively successful peri-urban areas relevant for illustrating and developing the concept of robust destination development in the peri-urban. At the same time, they represent different types of destinations with Destination Gisselfeld being larger, centred around a star attraction but more spread out and with some possibility for overnight stays, whereas Hundested harbour is a much smaller area and more concentrated destination currently with most potential for one-day visits.

Since the focus of the study was to understand complex challenges and robust actions concerning tourism transitions, the analysis has prioritized the perspectives of those directly involved in tourism development efforts. The paper, therefore, examines the cases from the perspective of suppliers, e.g. municipalities, communities, tourism firms, and destination management organizations (DMOs). The authors recognise that including the perspectives of residents and tourists could have provided valuable additional input. However, this is beyond the scope of this paper and the study behind it.

Three types of data were collected to enable opportunities for data triangulation (Denzin, 2017). The macro analysis relied less on observation data, whereas the micro analysis relied less on documentary materials. An overview of data sources is provided in Table 1.

Observations in the micro-cases were planned as regular visits (2 visits in summer each year in the period 2019–21), each lasting half a day, with observations and informal conversations with stakeholders (tourism companies, retailers, and some tourists). This gave an impression of daily life and tourism activities at the destination. The observations and informal discussions were recorded in field notes immediately after the researchers returned from the visits. Observations of meetings, events and physical structures (e.g. construction of physical facilities, concrete tourism activities etc.) were made regularly to follow the local development processes. Observation in the macro-case was less systematic and relied on observations made by the researchers over a long period of time while working on various research projects in the region. As such, this was not used as a direct source of information for the analysis, but as a way to verify or confirm the trustworthiness of other data sources (see section 4.3).

In–depth interviews were conducted with key actors (see Table 2). The interviewees were selected as follows: For the macro-perspective, representatives from municipalities, businesses, DMOs and experts with knowledge about tourism development in the area were selected as key informants, based on purposeful sampling to ensure representativeness and depth of insights. With a similar purpose, in the two micro-cases, the interviewees were selected using a mix of purposeful and snowballing sampling. All interviewees were the authority on the topic in their organisation, for example, for most companies and organizations the CEO or the highest-ranking person responsible for tourism activities was interviewed. Interviews lasted between ½ and 2 h. A semi-structured interview guide was used, where the interview was open for the interviewee to introduce new aspects. Different requests were made by respondents in terms of their anonymity. In the analysis section and in Table 2, references to interviewees are stated in general terms to ensure anonymity in cases where this was requested and in more specific terms for those that did not require it. The number of interviews needed to achieve saturation for each case varied depending on availability of other types of data, as well as the size and characteristics of each case. As an example, Hundested Harbour required less interviews, because the destination is smaller and mainly focuses on daytrips.

In revisiting the cases, some key actors were re-interviewed two or three times to distinguish important from less important actions, practices, and transitions over time, while others were interviewed only once. The latter provided supportive and contextual information to understand the different experiences and actions enacted by individuals in the community when needed, as a complement to the main interviewees.

Documentary data covering 14 years was also used as a basis for the macro-case analysis. Initially, a systematic documentary analysis

Table 1
Data overview.

| Type of data	Macro: Region Zealand	Micro: Hundested Harbour and Destination Gisselfeld
Observation	No specific observational data was collected for the macro case; however, when relevant the authors drew on their deep insights into tourism development in the region having studied several previous projects and having visited and worked with tourism actors in the region for over 15 years.	Site visits in 2019, 2020, and 2021 with informal talks and observations, documented in retrospective field notes.
Interviews	24 interviews in total. Interviewees included regional politicians and civil servants, experts, and representatives of tourist enterprises and tourism business organizations. Collected in the period 2019–2021.	24 interviews in total. 11 in Hundested, 13 in Gisselfeld. Interviewees included representatives of various stakeholders in the destinations, such as attractions, accommodation providers, local tourist businesses (shop owners and artists), and DMOs. Collected in the period 2019–2021.
Documentary materials	50 reports and development plans from regional councils, municipalities, and tourism development organizations. Supplemented by videos, TV broadcasts, and newspaper articles. Materials were published between 2008 and 2021.	Relevant reports, news articles, etc. Supplemented by video interviews from a previous project (source blinded for review). Materials were published between 2008 and 2021.
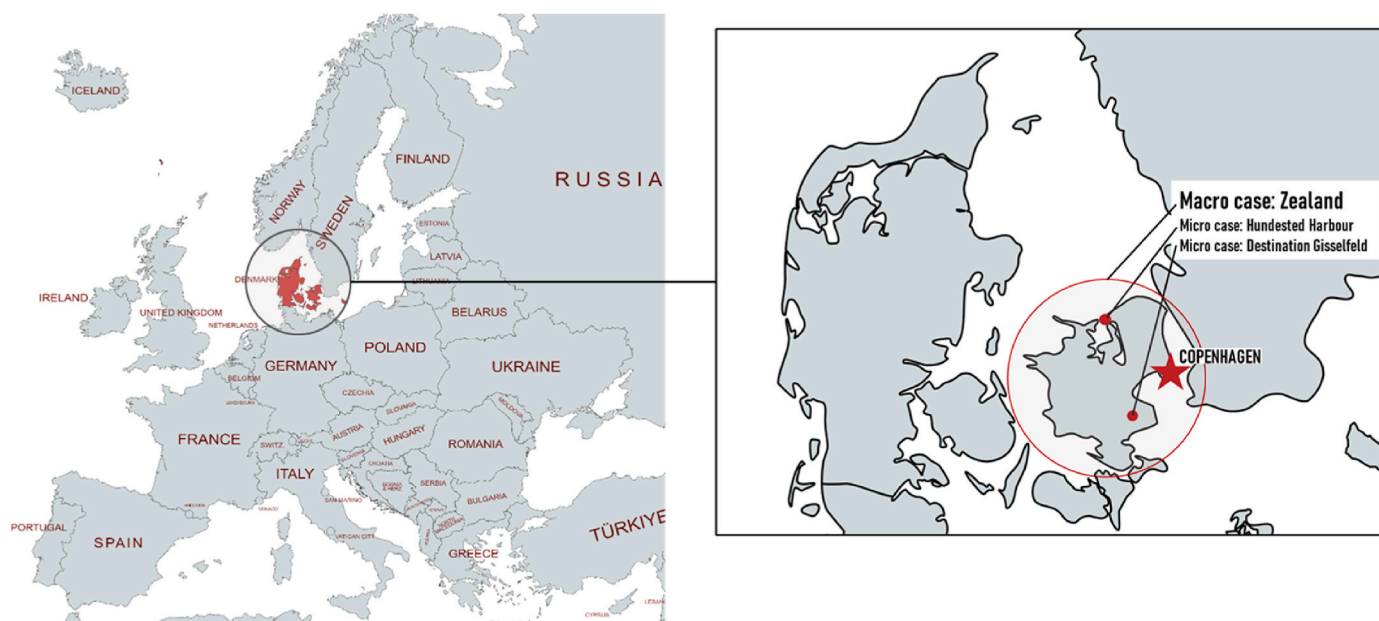
Fig. 1. Location of Denmark in Europe and Case locations in Denmark.

including over 100 reports and documents that included relevant information on the situational conditions and challenges concerning tourism transitions was conducted. Searches were run on the websites of the relevant DMOs, municipalities in the region, and the administrative organization Region Zealand. After initial screening, the most relevant reports, analyses, and plans were retained (n = 50). The material was collected throughout the period to reflect changes in strategies, policies and tourism development. In the micro-cases, documentary materials were collected and used in a less systematic way, to stay informed on relevant events and seek out supplementary information when needed.

The three types of data allowed for triangulation. These sources of data complemented each other, broadening the understanding of each case, while also supporting each other, thus supporting the validity of the findings. Triangulation also acted as a means of assessing when data saturation (no new information being obtained) had been reached. However, as the destinations continued to develop their tourism beyond the research project period, data saturation only relates to the 2019–21 period.

3.2. Trustworthiness

3.2.1. Trustworthiness was secured in three ways

First, two of the authors have in depth knowledge about the case from involvement in various projects and activities over more than 15 years. This adds a layer of credibility to the findings because these authors were able to critically evaluate the trustworthiness of for example interview data and could sometimes point to other relevant data sources that would raise trustworthiness by balancing certain views or perspectives. However, this embeddedness can also be considered a potential weakness because these authors were potentially biased by their conceptions about the destinations in question. This risk was mitigated by having a third author less embedded in the destination context, who could critically examine the data from a more objective point of view. To ensure that the potential of these differing perspectives was taken advantage of, all researchers were actively involved in both data collection and analysis. This involved discussion of how the findings of the analysis should be interpreted and how various concepts should be understood. This added to both trustworthiness and construct validity (construct validity, cf. Yin, 2014).

Second, the cases were followed for three years. This made it possible to follow developments over time, and to re-interview respondents when

relevant, to explore whether they maintained their understanding of the developmental processes or whether the statements expressed momentary, possibly in affect, were still relevant.

Third, triangulation was used to compare the results from the different data sources and thus to improve the trustworthiness and credibility of data (Stake, 1995). This sometimes led to sustaining findings, sometimes to new aspects of a development process being presented.

3.3. Data analysis

3.3.1. The macro perspective: Complex Challenges

For the document analysis, the researchers went through the documents and noted information about different aspects of tourism development. This was supplemented by other types of documentary material that the researchers obtained from the interviewees and other sources (local newspapers, videos and other information from the Internet). These documents were then analysed in depth by the three authors in two stages. First, perceptions, conditions, and challenges deemed related or relevant to the region's tourism development and management, and its peri-urban location, were detected and cross–checked by the three authors, then registered in an extraction sheet. Second, they were grouped into themes through iteration among the authors. These themes were then further explored by combining them with observation notes and insights from semi–structured interviews at the macro-perspective level (see Tables 1 and 2 and Fig. 1). An overview of the initial themes is provided in Table 3. These themes were the basis for the four complex challenges presented in section 4.1.

3.3.2. The micro perspective: Robust destination development

Analysis of the micro-cases started with a direct coding of interview transcripts and observation notes organising the data into a set of themes and subthemes (Bailey, 2017). Understandings generated from this analysis was then applied to explain how the cases were coping with the complex challenges located in the macro analysis. After this, the concept of robust action was used to further the analysis, and then to solidify the framework as it is presented in section 4.3. An overview of themes is provided in Table 3.

The geographical location of respectively the macro-case and two micro-cases are illustrated in Fig. 1.

The island of Zealand is the largest and most populous regional area

Table 2
Interview overview.

Designation	Interviewee type	Number of interviews in the category
	Macro: Region Zealand	
RZ_TE	Tourism experts (consultants, academics)	3
RZ_DMO	Destination Management/Marketing Organizations	4
RZ_M	Mayors	2
RZ_PS	Public servants with a focus on trade/tourism	2
RZ_AO	Advocacy organizations with a focus on tourism	3
RZ_ATT	Large attractions	2
RZ_TRANS	Transport provider	1
RZ_VS	Visitor services	1
RZ_IB	Incoming bureaus	3
RZ_F	Foundation focusing on tourism	1
RZ_ACC	Accommodation providers	2
	Total	**24**
	Micro: Destination Gisselfeld	
DG DM	Destination Management	3
DGATT	Attractions	4
DG ACC	Accommodation providers	4
DG F/R	Food and retail	5
	Total	**16**
	Micro: Hundested Harbour	
HH DM	Destination Management	3
HH ATT	Attractions	3
HH F/R	Accommodation providers	1
HH F/R	Food and retail	1
	Total	**8**
	Total overall	**48**

in Denmark, as it includes the capital, Copenhagen. The peri-urban areas of Zealand, which is the macro-case of this research, are a hinterland of Copenhagen. Region Zealand (excluding the Capital Region) has the lowest number of tourists of the Danish regions and is also at the bottom of socio-economic indicators such as employment, income, education level and health. To mitigate this, the regional government, municipalities and DMOs have launched a strategy to increase tourism in the region, especially by attracting some of the many foreign visitors to Copenhagen (Hansen, 2017; Kvistgaard, 2019).

The first micro-case is Destination Gisselfeld, a private destination collaboration comprising 12 local businesses located 55 km from Copenhagen. Gisselfeld is an old estate with ownership of a large swath of land as well as the various buildings that occupy it. The destination's main draw is The Forest Tower. Opened in 2019, as a part of the attraction Camp Adventure, it has received much press coverage including a place on *TIME Magazine*'s list of the world's greatest places to visit, which has led to it being visited by more than 400,000 visitors each year.

The second micro-case destination is Hundested Harbour, which is located in Hundested town 65 km from Copenhagen. The harbour is privately owned, and the Harbour Company plans and controls its development. Every year a sand sculpture exhibition is held with sand sculptures created by international artists. The municipality plans to create an Arctic centre that will be a combination research centre and tourist attraction. The number of visitors to the harbour is not registered, but the sand sculpture exhibition is visited by about 75,000 people a year, and the harbour is visited by many more.

In this paper, the two micro-cases are presented as illustrative case studies to (1) provide examples of destinations that have made use of what we term *robust destination development* and (2) facilitate the readers' ability to imagine how the conceptual framework can be applied (Siggelkow, 2007; Taillard et al., 2016).

4. Findings

The analysis consists of two parts. The analysis first takes a macro perspective on the case of Zealand to exemplify what has been termed as *complex challenges* to tourism transition in peri-urban destinations. It then focusses on the micro level perspective, centering on two destinations within the Zealand region that have been relatively successful in using tourism as a catalyst for development. These are used to illustrate how robust destination development has helped these destinations to develop tourism somewhat successfully, despite challenging conditions.

4.1. Macro–analysis: Complex challenges in region Zealand

The complex challenges uncovered in the macro–analysis include lack of investment, star attractions and awareness, access, and accommodation.

4.1.1. Lack of investments

Several interviewees stated that they lacked resources for the tourism transitions that they wished to initiate. "We have difficulties in attracting large tourism investments" (RZ_M1). Expert interviewees highlighted that investments are often made in Copenhagen rather than the peri-urban areas. Another mayor stated: "It is difficult to attract tourism investments to Zealand. We need hotels and other overnight capacity, but investors prefer to invest in Copenhagen." (RZ_M2) Municipal reports suggest that policy frameworks, especially for supporting access to investment capital and setting planning conditions, are sub–optimal (e.g. Næstved Municipality, 2018, p. 18). One interviewee said of the establishment of Camp Adventure: "Municipal thinking has been slow, and so has regional thinking. This also explains why investors get tired of trying to invest in Region Zealand." (RZ_AO1). Confirming the current problems in attracting private investment, a mayor voiced some hope of positive change: "We can see that real estate investors in Copenhagen are looking away from Copenhagen to Region Zealand because there is no more land available for building in Copenhagen." (RZ_M1). While this perspective offers some optimism on the prospects for peri-urban destinations in Zealand, it is arguably a complex problem that does not have a simple solution.

Political backing is needed, however, decision–makers hesitate. A respondent argued: "This municipality does not make plans for tourism development. We leave this to the DMO" (RZ_PS1). The municipality is a member of a DMO together with four other municipalities and the manager of this DMO argued: "We need more investment, but it has to be private initiatives" (RZ_DMO1). Thus, the researchers observe a hesitation among policymakers to make plans for destination development in these peri-urban destinations, despite ambitions to use tourism development as a development thrust (e.g. Hansen, 2017). For example, one municipal strategy was premised on huge unfulfilled tourism potential, with opportunities for generating both income and employment, yet also contended that "the time and budget is not for big economic investments paid by public funds"; instead the strategy argues for increased collaboration on different issues (Holbæk Municipality, 2020), meaning that there are no signs of more investments being made any time soon (Economic Council Holbæk Municipality, 2020).

Thus, while tourism transitions and destination development may be a political priority in many rural regions (particularly coastal), its backing by prioritized political actions appears lower in peri-urban regions despite ambitions. One possible explanation is the heterogeneous population of peri-urban areas, with conflicting ambitions in terms of tourism development: parts of the population are living and working in the region, other parts are commuters, and a third group are second-home owners. Commuters and second home owners often work in the city and utilize its amenities, and therefore prefer a community that continues to resemble small-town life in the countryside as also suggested by Kline et al. (2020) and Koster et al. (2010). On the other hand, permanent inhabitants who also work in the peri-urban area may be

Table 3
Summary of main themes and underlying codes.

	Macro Analysis						Micro analysis				
Themes	Advantages of peri-urban location	Zealand is falling behind	Lack of investments	Lack of star attraction(s) and awareness	Lack of access	Lack of accommodation	Challenges from peri-urban location	Participation of heterogeneous actors	Multivocality without consensus	Situational experimentation	Other drivers of tourism development
Codes	- City offers tourist source market - City is a point of attraction - City allows access from international markets - Zealand associates with popular Copenhagen brand - Visitors can combine advantages of rural and city holiday	- Lag of growth in tourism revenue - City tourism grows, this is not mirrored in peri-urban - Does not take advantage of existing tourism resources - Does not take advantage of closeness to big markets - Lacks a good reputation	- General lack of resources - Need for tourism income and employment - No investment in physical development - Missing overnight capacity - Competition with city for investments - Missing access to rural funds - Tourism is touted but not backed politically	- Lacking knowledge about attractions - Star attractions necessary to draw tourists - Attractions with potential do not fulfill it - Disconnected City and peri-urban area - Biggest attraction is nature but not considered a nature destination - Perceived as too close to or too far away from the city	- Considered a day-trip destination - Infrastructure is meant for commuting, not tourism - Lack of "last-mile" solutions - City tourists visiting Zealand expect well-functioning public transport	- Lack of quantity and quality accommodation hinders development - Second home dependence - Big market of second home tourists is not properly utilized - Second home owners could be more attractive than other tourists	- Star attractions - Investment - Access and infrastructure - Accommodation	- Wide and diverse stakeholder involvement - Attraction of new kinds of offers - Open platform with workshops - Common framework established - Common framework is used to gain political clout	- Some are against (specific) developments - Clash between tourism and industrial activities - Challenges to common framework - Touristification requires changes at the expense of residents - Local businesses lack a commercial mindset - Clashes between actors based on differences in size, ambition and values	- Uses common platform to seek funding - Uses common platform to attract entrepreneurs - Room for experimentation	- Entrepreneurial spirit - Strong local networks - Trust - Extending existing resources and attractions - Driving investments into new attractions - Clever use of marketing tactics

interested in creating a livelier community, that fosters the creation of revenue, jobs, and externalities generated from tourism development.

In summary, the lack of investment reflects that the wanted transition towards more tourism is a complex challenge as described in the theory on robust action. Tourism actors face uncertainties about prospects due to a lack of political backing on investments, which can be explained by a heterogeneous population mix with conflicting interests in terms of tourism development.

4.1.2. Lack of star attraction(s) and awareness

Despite its rich cultural landscape and heritage and ambitions in terms of tourism development, Zealand lacks "star attractions"—defined as primary nucleus attractions able to influence a traveller's decision to visit a destination (Leiper, 1990)—as well as efforts to develop them (Jakobsen et al., 2016; Kvistgaard, 2019). A DMO manager from a neighbouring region explained:

> "We have many foreign tourists from Copenhagen visiting the castles in North–Eastern Zealand, which are traditionally very well–known "must-see" attractions. However, we belong administratively to the Copenhagen region. In Region Zealand, there are no similar traditional attractions, maybe except for the cathedral and Viking ship museum in Roskilde—which is also very close to Copenhagen city [30 km]" (RZ_DMO2).

While Zealand contains a relatively high volume of nature attractions, some of which are UNESCO listed, the report data show that even these require investment to become star attractions in terms of visibility and visitor numbers (Kvistgaard, 2019). Observations at meetings confirmed how previous attempts to develop star attractions have caused political conflict due to landowner issues and opposition from those less interested in increased visitation. A DMO manager said: "In this destination, we have abandoned the development of star attractions. We have many second home owners, who contribute to the development of the local community. However, many of them are against large tourist installations." (RZ_DMO3).

Several interviewees highlighted that tourists visiting Copenhagen are relatively unaware of Zealand's destinations, except for those offering a star attraction, such as Roskilde's Viking heritage. For instance, one respondent argued: "The awareness of Copenhagen is very high, but the awareness of Region Zealand is very low." (RZ_AO1). Another explained: "There has to be a star attraction, otherwise you cannot make the guests leave Copenhagen; everything else they can experience in, or very close to, the city." (RZ_VS). Similarly, a hotel manager in Copenhagen explained: "I can easily organize bus tours from the hotel, and I think there might be enough tourists. However, that requires an international star attraction, such as the Forest Tower—it is not enough with a local attraction, such as Hundested Harbour." (RZ_ACC1). This reflects an important difference between rural and peri-urban destinations. Whereas rural tourism destinations can sell themselves on peace and quiet alone, more is required from peri-urban destinations, which to a larger extent need to develop star attractions to draw tourists from the city.

In summary, star attractions are seen as important for tourism transitions in the peri-urban through their ability to raise awareness and compete with attractions in the city. However, star attractions are difficult to establish, may cause political conflicts, and are also affected by the conflicting views of a homogeneous peri-urban population mix. This need for star attractions combined with the difficulties in establishing them makes it a complex destination development challenge.

4.1.3. Lack of access

In Zealand, many transport lines—e.g. roads, and train lines—are built to serve commuters and so rarely connect Copenhagen with tourist attractions in the Zealand region (BARK, 2020). A DMO manager explained: "If the tourists want to go individually, they must either hire a car or use public transport, which will generally be the train. However,

the trains only go to the towns and the tourists have great problems getting to the attractions." (RZ_DMO3). In addition, a recent study showed that tourists could save up to 129% of their time by travelling to Zealand's attractions by car, rather than public transport (Kvistgaard, 2019). A project manager in Copenhagen DMO (Wonderful Copenhagen) explained:

> "We made an experiment where an American journalist should try to order and carry through a trip to Destination Gisselfeld by public transport. It took her a long time to find out how to get there and how to get a ticket. It would take her 2½ hours to get to Faxe [the nearest town], but from Faxe, there is no public transport. The only possibility was an expensive taxi. She gave up." (RZ_DMO4).

As confirmed by a number of interviewees, whereas most visitors to rural areas do not (expect to) rely on public transport, this is the preferred means of travel for many potential visitors to peri-urban areas, whose primary destination is the city.

In summary, tourism destinations in the peri-urban, which to some extent depend on visitors from the city, face a lack of public infrastructure that is useful for tourism purposes. This is a challenge that tourism actors can rarely approach head on because it requires political will and often funds that tourism actors do not have. While they experiment with varied solutions, they are dependent on infrastructure providers, including government, and support from actors in the city.

4.1.4. Lack of accommodation

Several interviewees at the macro and micro levels identified lack of accommodation as another significant challenge for tourism development in Zealand. In the micro-case of Gisselfeld, a representative of Camp Adventure explained that the lack of accommodation options and capacity is the primary reason why they cannot fulfil their potential in attracting business tourism from Copenhagen: "More accommodation offers are necessary for us to take advantage of business tourism, there is a lot of demand for it, so bigger and better accommodation facilities would be great" (DG_ATT1). The same interviewee went on to explain that they are working to attract investments to finance building a hotel in the area. Part of the problem with the lack of accommodation is that the number of available beds for rent in Zealand is the lowest in Denmark (Hansen, 2017). This is reflected in Zealand's administrative region having fewer overnight stays in hotels, holiday homes, and campsites than any of the other regions in Denmark.

Holiday homes are the primary type of tourist accommodation in the country, and Zealand has more holiday homes than any other region (Hansen, 2017; Kvistgaard, 2019). However, unlike more rural areas, second homes in the peri-urban area of Zealand are owned by affluent city dwellers, with little incentive to rent them out (Kvistgaard, 2019; Næstved Municipality, 2018). According to a 2018 report on holiday home use in two areas of Zealand, 93–95% of holiday home owners do not rent out their holiday homes (Dansk Kyst- og Naturturisme, 2018).

Spurred by the ongoing COVID–19 pandemic, some interviewees argued that second home owners are more attractive than tourists from the outside. As one expert explained:

> "They are a more permanent resource for the community, as they are more affluent and therefore spend more money in the destination on a wider variety of services and products, and engage themselves in local development, including sometimes establishing local businesses." (RZ_TE1).

These interviewees argued for new approaches that focused on engaging second home owners rather than attracting tourists from the outside.

In summary, the lack of accommodation presents a complex challenge to these peri-urban destinations because of a lack of supply and perhaps more importantly, because it can be difficult to take advantage of the existing supply. This complex challenge requires innovative thinking and situational experimentation, part of which can be to

consider tourism development more as an activation of second home owners, than the attraction of tourists from outside.

These four examples illustrate that tourism transitions in peri-urban areas are affected by complex challenges with no single or simple solution. As will be explored in the following, this requires engagement of heterogenous actors in reflexive and purposeful action.

4.2. Micro analysis: Robust destination development within Zealand

The conceptualization of the paper is illustrated through two micro-cases. Based on the data described in the methodology, the authors developed the illustrative (Siggelkow, 2007; Taillard et al., 2016) micro-cases as narratives. These narratives show that tourism development efforts in the two cases are examples of what we have termed *robust destination development* (see section 4.3).

Gisselfeld and Hundested are both critical cases that represent peri-urban destinations which are relatively successful in attracting tourism. However, they still face challenges inherent to their peri-urban location. In brief, their situation can be explained in relation to the four regional complex challenges.

- *Star attractions:* Gisselfeld has one (Camp Adventure -The Forest Tower). Hundested is trying to develop one (the Arctic Centre, cf. below);
- *Investments:* Gisselfeld has been successful because a few dedicated entrepreneurs have drawn private investment, while Hundested is engaging local citizens and the municipality to draw investments;
- *Access and infrastructure:* Gisselfeld is challenged by its limited accessibility from Copenhagen. Hundested has direct train access, and is also attempting to take advantage of its cruise ship infrastructure to draw international tourists;
- *Accommodation:* Both destinations lack accommodation of sufficient quantity and quality. Gisselfeld is working to expand capacity but is challenged by zoning legislation. Hundested is working to attract hotel investors, which is challenging because locals are not in favour of hotel development.

(Source: Interviews and observations in both micro-cases)

Although individual entrepreneurship played a role in both cases, it was integrated with other participants' interests and efforts. In *Hundested,* the harbour manager was identified as a key figure, with interviewees stating that entrepreneurial practices have been a longstanding tradition in the locality and are part of its local identity. The harbour manager initiated the transition of the harbour into a tourist destination. Over time the authors observed how the manager achieved relative success in terms of realizing his ideas due to both his entrepreneurial drive and his strong connections with the local population. Interviews and observations indicated that people generally trusted him and thus enabled him to gain support and permission from his board and local businesses.

Hundested has a history as a fishing town with ferries and fishing boats. The idea was to create a unique harbour that included both fishing, local infrastructure with forges and shipbuilding, ferry and adding tourism, shopping, restaurants etc. in the harbour area. The annual sand sculpture festival has been an asset in creating a new, more vibrant harbour atmosphere and raising awareness of Hundested among tourists. Collaboration with the neighbouring sand sculpture festival proved beneficial in raising awareness of Hundested, with their credibility, ability to attract sculptors and visitors, and marketing expertise that could be used and developed.

From the beginning, the *participation of heterogeneous actors* was emphasized according to interviewees representing the harbour organisation in Hundested. New local shops and eateries were created on the novel main street of the harbour. Local plans and strategies were discussed among various stakeholders, including the board of the harbour, the municipality, and residents.

The actors involved were thus quite *diverse*, consisting of entrepreneurs, municipal authorities, businesses, funds, and the local population, each with varying resources, powers, and knowledge. The harbour's development was part of a wider municipal strategy to promote tourism and develop the town. To this end, several planning activities, such as workshops and meetings, were organized to promote and develop the destination in a way that was relevant to a wide range of stakeholders. A common framework and label of "raw and authentic" was developed, which facilitated mobilizing the different actors around a common idea (Economic Council Holbæk Municipality, 2020). However, because the label of "raw and authentic" encompassed the interests of and was backed by several groups such as locals, fishers, municipal authorities, and tourism actors, it implicated *some interpretative flexibility and multivocality without requesting consensus.*

There were several instances where a *lack of consensus* arose between supporters of tourism development and the local way of life. Interviewees mentioned that residents had opposed certain projects in the port, especially those that obstruct access to the port or views of the sea. The authors observed how a well-known handicraft studio relocated production and sales elsewhere after protests from local citizens against an extension to their building, explaining that they could not get the necessary permits to expand their business. Also, the harbour manager explained that to address tourist safety concerns, certain areas of the harbour had to be fenced off due to increased visitation. The authors observed how this measure restricted visitors from accessing the "raw and authentic" parts of the harbour and somewhat disrupted the local way of life because of limited access between the industrial and experience focused parts of the harbour. The harbour manager further explained that the increase in tourist activity also necessitated the introduction of parking fees at the harbour, which caused further disagreements with the local community. The authors observed how the harbour manager had to manage these conflicting situations. An example of this came during an interview, where he had to pause the conversation to address an upset citizen. The harbour manager explained that to ensure congruity in practices, he dedicates a significant amount of time to walk around the harbour area and engage with small businesses. Based on interviews and observations, the authors witnessed how these businesses, such as arts and crafts shops, lacked the tradition of servicing tourists and were challenged when adopting a more commercial mindset.

A strategic-physical development plan for Hundested was sponsored by a Danish private fund. Following the shared idea, this plan was also titled "Raw and Authentic Hundested" (Economic Council Holbæk Municipality, 2020). It highlighted the combination of commercial elements with traditional raw and authentic industrial activities at the harbour to make it an attractive destination. In addition, the plan emphasizes the importance of *inclusion of participants and situational experimentation.* "In Hundested, there is room for experimentation and densification without compromising the local way of life" (Economic Council Holbæk Municipality, 2020, p. 6). During the study period, the harbour of Hundested carried out *experiments* to establish itself as an experience centre. This involved inviting cruise ships to the harbour resulting in *experimentation* with serving a large number of passengers. Employees in the harbour, crafts, and shops were motivated to be more hospitable and tourist-friendly. However, as described, this experimentation also resulted in the paid parking and fencing, which, against the previous intentions, established a separation between tourism and local life. Workshops with residents were organised to experiment with narratives about Hundested to address the emotions and needs of residents and tourists and avoid potential conflict from diverging views.

Gisselfeld shared many features with Hundested in terms of how they dealt with the challenges of tourism transition through robust destination development. Documentary material expressed how an external entrepreneur was the initiator of tourism development in the area, as there was no organised development of tourism previously. A representative of Camp Adventure explained how the entrepreneur

envisioned an adventure park (Camp Adventure) and, later, a forest tower, inspired by similar forest towers in Germany, that offer views of the forest canopy and the wider Gisselfeld area from the top. The land was owned by the Gisselfeld estate, and a collaboration was established which ensured the necessary approvals by Danish nature authorities. Another representative of Camp Adventure explained that despite now having a star attraction, the lack of supporting tourism infrastructure such as accommodation, food outlets and supporting experiences hindered the transformation from attraction to destination. A representative of Gisselfeld estate narrated how this led to the development of a strategy to attract entrepreneurs to the area who could help in the redevelopment of buildings belonging to the Gisselfeld estate and transform them into tourist facilities (small exhibitions, bed and breakfast accommodations, and small eateries, among others).

The authors observed how the *participants*, in this case, were quite *heterogeneous*, comprising entrepreneurs, the estate, and small businesses, each with distinct resources, influence, and local knowledge. Various planning activities, workshops, and meetings were conducted to categorise and plan the development of the destination in ways that could be significant and appropriate to a wide range of stakeholders.

According to interviewees, the label "Destination Gisselfeld" was coined by a collaborative group involving twelve stakeholders including the Gisselfeld estate and Camp Adventure and other supporting businesses all housed on the land of the Gisselfeld estate. It was an independent label and not endorsed by the official tourism authorities in the area. The term was broad enough to potentially accommodate *multiple interpretations and perspectives, even without consensus*, and also provided identity to the place. As stated on the Destination Gisselfeld website:

> "The area around Gisselfeld monastery is a unique area for natural and cultural history, gastronomy, aesthetics and architecture. A unique story of what once was and what still is. Destination Gisselfeld is also the story of several entrepreneurs and self-employed people who at some point fell in love with the unique quality and history of the area and who have each created small oases scattered around Gisselfeld. Together, they now welcome guests to their South Zealand paradise - Destination Gisselfeld." (Destination Gisselfeld website, 2023)

The long-term collaboration between the two main actors (the Gisselfeld estate and Camp Adventure) contributed to further developments of the destination culminating with the forest tower being listed in *TIME Magazine's* compilation of the greatest places to visit in 2019.

The authors observed how the destination conducted several experiments during the study period, mainly concentrating on physical infrastructure developments such as facilities for business seminars, overnight stays, and a playground. However, cooperation issues and a *lack of consensus* also emerged between the twelve local tourism companies. Interviews showed that smaller businesses were unable to provide the necessary resources, mainly due to the feeling that their views were not always considered by the larger actors. They also illuminated how, despite having a common geographical context, the actors did not always share the same values and goals for tourism development. The newcomers focused more on sustainable tourism, while the adventure park and forest tower aimed to attract a large number of tourists.

In summary, both cases of developing destinations in Region Zealand are illustrations of how complex challenges are addressed by engaging heterogenous actors in reflexive and purposeful action, involving multivocality without consensus, and situational experimentation. Thus, different actors with different resources, power and knowledge were involved. These actors held multiple opinions and values which needed to be reconciled and compromised. There was little consensus in both cases, as people advocated different ideas and strategies. Despite this, people were still mobilized around broad labels such as "Raw and Authentic Hundested" and "Destination Gisselfeld". The encouragement of situational experimentation with narratives, organisation, and approaches to experiences was supported by an entrepreneurial climate. Actors were engaged in making visible and harnessing local concerns, ideas and knowledge around a common purposeful framework resembling what we term *robust destination development*.

4.3. Robust destination development framework

Through an interactive and abductive process, the analysis combined with elements of Ferraro et al.'s (2015) processal model was a basis for developing the Robust Destination Development Framework (Fig. 2). The framework was developed to enable understanding and analysis of how destination actors may deal with complex challenges of tourism transitions through robust action.

Robust destination development is achieved through engagement of heterogenous actors in reflexive and purposeful action allowing destinations to cope with complex challenges. Robust Destination Development involves: Firstly, the engagement of heterogeneous actors with varying resources, power, and knowledge. Secondly, multivocality without consensus, i.e. interpretative flexibility, enabling people with different resources, power and knowledge to relate to and experiment with a common idea and what it could mean to them, understanding that
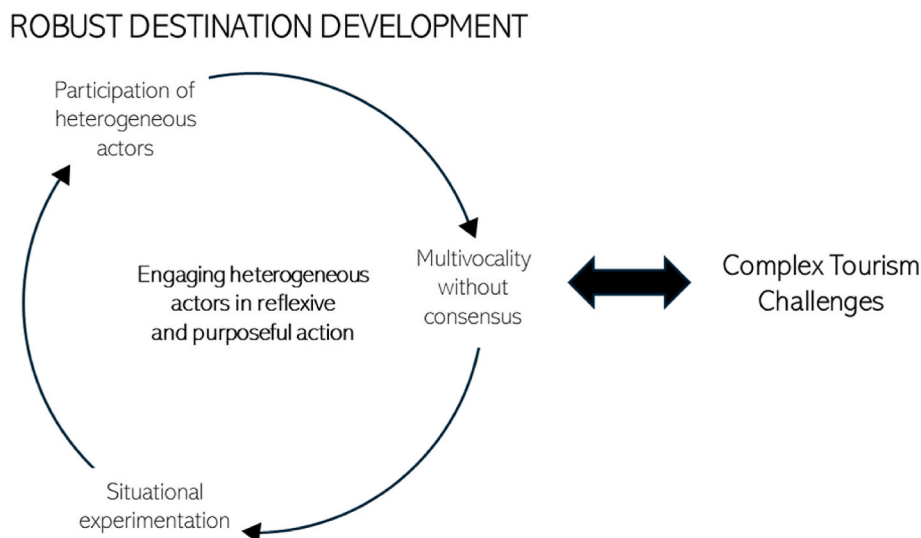

Fig. 2. Robust destination development as a way of coping with complex challenges.

everyone will not always agree on everything. Thirdly, situational experimentation which enables actors to introduce new ideas along the way that suits their interests while also adapting to situational conditions such as social structures. Doing so allows actors to form actions over time – based on a bricolage of various actors and approaches enabling them to address complex tourism transition challenges at the destination level. This framework is validated in the context of peri-urban tourism in the findings section.

5. Discussion and conclusion, implications and future research

5.1. Discussion and Conclusion

Tourism transitions in peri-urban areas, defined as tourism-induced changes in areas beyond the continuously built-up suburbs of a city, but within the distance of a recreational excursion, is a neglected area of research. While these areas are characterized by the absence of strong existing tourism patterns, attempts to transition to tourism may be conflicted and overshadowed by tourism offers in the city. Based on a case study, the paper has conceptualized complex challenges of tourism transition in such areas. Further, the paper has discussed how complex challenges can be met in terms of robust destination development that engages heterogeneous actors in reflexive and purposeful action.

The research question of the paper addresses how peri-urban destinations that attempt to use tourism as a catalyst for development can cope with the specific complex challenges that emerge from tourism transitions. Based on a macro-case study of Zealand, Denmark the analysis has exemplified concrete *complex challenges* that may emerge from tourism transitions in a peri-urban area. Then, based on two micro-cases within that peri-urban area which have been relatively successful in fulfilling their tourism development ambitions, it has been illustrated how destinations may cope with such challenges through *robust destination development.*

In the macro-case of Zealand, these complex challenges included lack of: Investment, which is extrapolated by a lack of political backing due to the heterogeneous population mix in peri-urban areas; star attractions, which are important because peri-urban destinations are in competition with city attractions; infrastructure useful for tourism purposes, because many peri-urban visitors may depend on public transport; and accommodation, because holiday homes are the main source of capacity, but in peri-urban destinations they are often occupied by affluent city dwellers unwilling to rent them out. These examples of complex challenges offer no single or simple solution. The paper suggests that successful attempts to mitigate such challenges and develop tourism successfully despite them may be described as robust destination development through engagement of heterogenous actors in reflexive and purposeful action.

The two micro-cases illustrate this, as they show that successful practices in the peri-urban have properties which are in line with robust action theory as presented in the literature review (Ferraro et al., 2015; Padgett & Ansell, 1993; Sørensen & Ansell, 2023). This includes the participation of multiple heterogeneous actors, multivocality between them with no urge for consensus, and situational experimentation. In other words, the relatively successful practices in peri-urban areas provide evidence for the application and development of a robust action theory to better grasp how destination actors cope with complex tourism challenges in the peri-urban – here conceptualized as robust destination development (see Fig. 2).

In both micro-cases, diverse opinions and values among the actors required reconciliation and compromise. Despite the lack of consensus due to advocating various ideas and strategies, overarching labels like "Raw and Authentic Hundested" and "Destination Gisselfeld" mobilized people. An entrepreneurial climate encouraged experimentation with narratives, organization, and experience approaches. Actors actively engaged in showcasing and utilizing local concerns, ideas, and knowledge within a unified, purpose-driven framework resembling robust

destination development.

Regarding transferability it is likely that some of the tourism transition challenges will also be present in similar peri-urban regions in other contexts. For example, lack of access is arguably a general challenge as the infrastructure in other peri-urban areas may also be built from a commuter perspective. Similarly lack of star attractions and investment can be assumed to be barriers to tourism development in many other peri-urban areas, as these are also marked by attention being drawn to the metropolitan area, rather than its peri-urban surroundings. However, there are examples of destinations actively working to change this, for example as a way to combat overtourism in the city by nudging tourists to visit peri-urban areas (Kuenen et al., 2023). Other challenges such as a lack of accommodation may be more place specific. Additional research in other areas is needed to clarify this further.

With regards to the general appropriateness of the theoretical framework, previous authors in research on destination management have already emphasized that local tourism development at the destination level is complex because it requires the participation of multiple actors in coordinated developments (Baggio et al., 2010; Hartman, 2023; Komppula, 2016; Volgger et al., 2021). These authors have sought to capture the complexity of destination development by theorizing it in terms of complex adaptive systems. Furthermore, the notions of governance, leadership and design thinking have been applied to better understand how destination systems characterized by complexity, multiple actors and no hierarchical management system direct actions.

However, these models of complex collective action have several shortcomings when it comes to tourism transitions in peri-urban areas: First, such models adopt an evolutionary perspective on change assuming pre-existing patterns of tourism, whereas peri-urban regions with no or only weak evolutionary patterns in tourism must take a more disruptive approach to destination development. Second, the above frameworks do not sufficiently consider the heterogeneity of actors, i.e. actors have different powers, resources and interests and different perceptions of the values or counter-values of tourism transitions for socio-economic development.

This paper argues that reflexive and purposeful action in peri-urban areas in transition should be conceptualized through a more pragmatic approach of robust destination development, which implies accepting destination development as a contested and ultimately heterogeneous practice. Thus, in the case of tourism transitions in peri-urban areas, it is argued that destination development is more fragmented and relies not only on evolutionary and adaptive processes, but also on more fractured processes of change through entrepreneurship and innovation.

Thus, the concept of robust destination development seeks to embrace, rather than reject, the experimental and contested nature of destination development in areas under transition. Reflexive and purposeful action is the result of oppositional forces and interests in the social context in which tourism transitions must take place. These actions are robust not only because they promote adaptive patterns and are sustained by governance structures and leadership that direct change, but also because they provoke actions and counter-actions between conflicting actors that attract enough support from relevant actors to enable change. Based on this, it is suggested that people react to each other more than they adapt to each other, and leadership (such as the leadership of one central actor) should be considered a contested practice more than a direct enabler of action.

5.2. Implications for theory

The paper contributes to theory by conceptualizing complex challenges, and the role of robust action as a response to complex tourism transition challenges and introducing a concept and framework for robust destination development. The framework builds on but differs from previous research on complex adaptive systems, destination governance and destination leadership. It does so by applying existing robust action concepts that emphasize the conflicted practice of

destination management; extending these through combination of perspectives from organisational, institutional and policy settings; applying them to the tourism context; developing a concept fit for the destination level; and by emphasizing the engagement of actors in reflexive and purposeful action. The framework is developed for peri-urban destinations, but may well extend beyond the context of the study, however, this needs to be confirmed through reapplication in other contexts in future research.

The paper also challenges the rural–urban dichotomy, which has been dominant in tourism research, illuminating the concept of peri-urban in a tourism context and defining it as the area(s) beyond the continuously built–up suburbs of a city, but within a larger functional commuter region, delimited by the maximum distance of a recreational excursion. In doing so, it contributes an approach to conceptualise and understand tourism destination development in peri-urban areas. Building on and supported by a few already referenced previous studies, this paper has demonstrated that transitionary peri-urban areas indeed differ from urban and rural destinations in their conditions and challenges to destination development and management. Accordingly, increased attention should be paid by tourism researchers to these often ignored, but unique and important areas in terms of destination transition, development and management.

5.3. Implications for practice

The paper provides a practical understanding of and calls attention to the specifics of tourism transitions in peri-urban areas. Specifically, the analysis has outlined four complex challenges for tourism transitions, destination development and management in peri-urban destinations, which may also be present in other peri-urban areas. As our micro-cases show, some peri-urban destinations may indeed be less affected by these challenges. It has been argued that this may be due to their ability to perform robust destination development that incorporates reflexive and purposeful action through heterogeneous participation, multivocal interpretation and situational experimentation. As such, our research suggests that peri-urban destinations should not only seek to face complex challenges directly, for example by securing outside investment, but also to build up their robust action capabilities.

From a practical perspective this entails the capability to both increase managers' understanding of context, and their ability to frame and form collective actions based on what the context offers. In both micro-cases, the development of a destination around the forest tower attraction and the reconstruction of the harbour area as a local strategy, respectively labelled as "Destination Gissefeld" and "Raw and Authentic Hundested" where flexible frameworks partly applied as management tools to engage people in a collective action framework.

The framework proposed here can be used as the basis for an assessment tool that focuses on the process of tourism transitions in peri-urban areas and their reflective purposefulness. As such, the framework would provide a pragmatic tool to assess whether (or not) there is participation of heterogeneous actors, whether the process allows for multivocality and constructive dialogue between oppositional actors, whether situational experimentation is sufficiently allowed, and how purposeful action reflectively engages opposing actors in constructive dialogue.

5.4. Limitations and future research

This study has taken the suppliers' perspective on tourism development in peri-urban regions. Tourists and their decisions are also a determining factor for this development. Future research could investigate tourists' or residents' perspectives to verify and deepen the knowledge generated by this study. Further research could also attempt to develop the framework of robust destination development into an instrumental assessment tool relevant for destination management. The study limits the results to a Danish context and the results should be tested in other peri-urban areas. Finally, as mentioned, the framework of robust destination development should be further tested and developed in other tourism contexts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

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