

# Caregiving and Paid Employment in Suburbia: The Cases of Hamburg-Oberbillwerder and Munich-Freiham

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## Abstract

Urban planning has long been criticised for privileging the spatial needs and demands of paid employment, thus discriminating against caregivers. This critique applied especially to monofunctional suburban districts that lacked childcare and employment opportunities, complicating the everyday geographies of caregivers and care-receivers. The spatial structure and layout of suburban settlements had their origin in stereotypical gendered role expectations in which a usually male breadwinner would commute into the city and a usually female caregiver would look after the house, garden, and children. Nowadays, combining care and paid employment has become a matter of course and a necessity for many people of all genders. Our contribution asks how scholarly critique and societal changes affect planning practice and planning rationales. We analyse two newly planned suburban districts in Germany in relation to care and its compatibility with paid employment. We aim to establish whether planners and other local decision-makers reflect on the decade-long critique from a care perspective and see the provision of good conditions for employed caregivers within the scope of their work. Our research draws on a qualitative content analysis of planning and media documents and expert interviews. Our findings suggest that care and supporting compatibility with paid work are important yet are largely implicit guiding principles, which might result in the impact of planning on compatibility and a fairer distribution of care tasks remaining superficial. The study reveals how care and the compatibility of paid work and caregiving are implicitly present, but rarely acknowledged, in planning processes, underscoring the structural role of urban development in shaping conditions for employed caregivers.

## Keywords

care; care work; Germany; infrastructure; suburbia; urban planning

## 1. Introduction

Feminist geographers, planners, and activists have long expressed critique of the built environment and the underlying capitalist-patriarchal values (Spain, 2016). One major issue was the neglect of the needs of (mostly female) caregivers and those cared for, while simultaneously privileging the needs of paid employment. Although gendered role expectations have changed somewhat in the last 50 years, care tasks, and especially their compatibility with paid employment, continue to be framed largely as women's issues. Yet, in reality, balancing care and paid work is now a necessity and a challenge faced by people of all genders. Care and paid work are not opposing spheres, but deeply interdependent (Agenjo-Calderón & Gálvez-Muñoz, 2019; Bauhardt & Çağlar, 2010; Fraser, 1994; Winker, 2015). Both are essential to the reproduction of life and society, and both are typically organised by the same entity, people living together in a household and forming a community (Bauhardt & Harcourt, 2018). What is now a well-established line of thought in academia is, however, not always consciously reflected by those actors—in urban planning, local administrations, investment firms, or housing associations—who actively and profoundly shape our cities and, thus, the ways people live together, work with, and care for each other.

This article explores the interrelations of care and urban planning and the repercussions for the compatibility of care and paid employment from two interlinked perspectives. First, we analyse the material aspects, namely the immediate support for the everyday practices of caregiving by the way space and the institutions involved in the structuring of space (e.g., housing, local supply, or transport) are organised. Many of these measures have been discussed under the label of “gender-sensitive planning.” We argue that although they may facilitate informal caring communities and ease daily life for caregivers, they do not aspire to transform the structural conditions of caregiving. This was already argued in the 1990s by Sandercock and Forsyth (1992) and, similarly, Alisch (1993). Gender-sensitive planning was criticised as merely aiming to ease the “double burden” of paid work and care work for women but not intending to transform its societal valuation or visibility, or the one-sided allocation of care tasks within households and communities. Second, we are therefore interested in the self-conception of local and regional actors and their awareness of these issues. Against the background that planning is often seen as a technocratic profession providing “neutral” spaces (Alam & Houston, 2020; Kern, 2019; Koskela, 2005), we aim to identify the implicit values that play out in the planning process.

Our empirical focus is on two new housing development areas at the periphery of major German cities, Hamburg and Munich. Both are among Germany's largest and most ambitious new suburban developments, initiated by cities with strong planning capacities and social policy frameworks that take environmental and social challenges into consideration and are perceived as model cases in the German context. Suburban residential areas, provided in many Western countries since the end of the 19th century as affordable, quiet, and safe locations for young families, were often monofunctional, car-oriented, and far from places of formal employment (Frank, 2008; Spain, 2016). The spatial separation of care and paid work was seen as actively encouraging stereotypical gender relations. Suburban space became “an inhibitor of emancipation” (Warhaftig, 1985), forcing (usually female) caregivers to withdraw from paid work and their economic independence (McDowell, 1993; Terlinden, 2010). Recently, however, the outskirts of many metropolises are discussed as innovative and experimental, sometimes mirroring diversity and societal changes more accurately than many gentrified inner cities (Frank, 2024; Keil, 2017, 2018). An increasing number of expansion areas are being strategically planned in the suburban peripheries of major cities in Germany

(Altrock et al., 2024). Additional examples of such initiatives include Berlin-Blankenburger Süden, Frankfurt-Stadtteil der Quartiere, and Freiburg-Dietenbach.

In the following section, we will discuss the interplay of care, its compatibility with paid work, and planning, with a special focus on suburban spaces. In Section 3, we explain our methodology—a qualitative content analysis of planning and media documents related to the two new districts, complemented with expert interviews—and present our findings in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the results. We show that although planners recognise the necessity of combining care with paid work and aim to develop the districts accordingly, they at the same time tend to perceive these issues as lying outside their own professional scope, relegating them to the private realm. The article concludes in Section 6.

## 2. Interrelations of Care, Planning, and (Sub)Urban Space

In this section, we discuss how care, paid employment, (sub)urban space, and planning are connected. We use the term “employed caregiver” to describe people of all genders who combine caring responsibilities and paid employment in their daily lives. As a starting point, we take the notion of feminist care ethics that, although the burden of care is unequally carried, the need for it is universal (Power & Williams, 2019, p. 4; see also Lawson, 2007). Almost all people are caregivers and care receivers at some point in their lives, and these roles go well beyond caring for family members or close friends in a private setting (Power & Mee, 2019, p. 489). A much-cited definition of care that comprises its emotional and intellectual aspects was published by Fisher and Tronto (1990, p. 40): Care is “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.” This definition includes human–human interaction as well as care for other animate beings and our material environment (natural and built; Alam & Houston, 2020; Gabauer et al., 2022; Greenhough et al., 2023). Care tasks require empathy, commitment (Bauhardt, 2015), and are based on affection and on satisfying a need (Dowling, 2021). Care is reciprocal, meaning that caregiver and care-receiver together define the caring relationship (Milligan & Wiles, 2010, p. 737).

### 2.1. *Changing Care Relations and Societal Conditions for Combining Care and Paid Work*

In patriarchal and capitalist societies, care is often undervalued as an activity that does not generate financial capital (Binet et al., 2023). It is “associated with lowly people” (Greenhough et al., 2023, p. 12) as those in power can delegate care tasks to others (Saltiel & Strüver, 2022, p. 65). Feminist economists have for a long time upheld the view that it is in fact those often invisible and precarious tasks that maintain “the social, cultural and material subsistence of individuals, families, households and communities” (Loomis & Oberhauser, 2020, p. 119; see also Bauhardt, 2015; Dowling, 2021; Schmitt et al., 2018). Care as practice cannot be separated from society, nor from its institutions, laws, customs, and values (Tronto, 2015; see also Milligan & Wiles, 2010).

Related to this, care has long been seen as women’s work. While gender relations and stereotypical gendered role allocations have been changing in recent decades, a gender care gap remains in all countries of the world. This term refers to the significant difference in the time devoted to unpaid care activities between genders. In 2022, women in Germany performed an average of nine hours more unpaid work per week compared to men, which limits their opportunities for paid employment and reflects broader issues of

gender inequality in society (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2023). Nevertheless, female employment rates keep rising, meaning many households, especially those of heterosexual couples with children or other dependents, struggle with finding a balanced and fair integration of care and paid work. Research on same-sex couples is limited, but suggests that care tasks are allocated more equally and that the details are negotiated individually and according to personal preference (Engström et al., 2019; van der Vleuten et al., 2020). A recent study by the Swiss think tank Prognos titled *The Invisible Value of Care Work* concluded that in Germany alone, 117 billion hours of unpaid care work are performed every year (61% of which by women), compared to only 60 billion hours of paid work (Prognos, 2024).

Additionally, since the late 20th century, care relations are increasingly rationalised and monetarised (Bauhardt, 2015; Lawson, 2007). This has resulted in a severe and ongoing crisis, which entails not only the diminished time and capacity of individuals to care, but also the shortage of workers in the care sector (nurses, educators, social workers, and many others). It culminates in so-called “global care chains,” a term first coined by Hochschild (2000), that manifest the “gendered, racialised and classed division of labour” (Saltiel & Strüver, 2022, p. 164; see also Dowling, 2021) not only within households, but globally. It is evident that combining care and paid work is neither reducible to an individual woman’s problem nor to a problem of gender equality alone, but has intersectional implications (Bhattacharya, 2017; see also Lawson, 2007, p. 5). Saltiel and Strüver (2022, p. 166) posit that a “caring democracy places care centre stage as an essential organising principle of societies.”

Recent years have seen a considerable advancement in the legislative environment concerning employed carers in Germany. Shared parental leave for up to 14 months was introduced in 2007, entitlement to day care for children aged one and older in 2013, and entitlement to leave for care reasons (especially for elderly or disabled family members) in 2015. What may on the one hand seem generous (and likely is when compared to many other countries) has, on the other hand, been criticised as employment politics disguised as care politics, and even as the simulation of a culture of care (Zimmermann, 2019; see also Rubery, 2015). It is argued that if these policies are not accompanied by a fundamental revaluation and redistribution of care tasks, they are, again, devalued as secondary and the needs and demands of employers prioritised over those of households. Combining care and paid employment and distributing both in a just and equal manner remains a privatised day-to-day struggle for employed caregivers (Zimmermann, 2019).

## 2.2. Gendered and Spatialised Role Expectations

Since the 1970s, feminist (geographical and other) scholars, planners, and activists have criticised that the built environment reflects the devaluation of care and the traditional division of labour between men (productive/paid) and women (reproductive/unpaid), which results in a perpetuation of gendered and intersectional inequalities (Massey, 1984). This separation still finds expression in today’s cities, as their materiality changes more slowly than societal values (England & Lawson, 2005, p. 78; Oberhauser, 2017).

Suburban residential areas emerged in Europe in larger numbers after World War II as ideal living environments for the traditional nuclear family (Jarvis et al., 2009, pp. 40–41). Respectable women and their children were not supposed to be near the chaos, pollution, and temptations of the city. The places of paid labour—factories, warehouses, offices—were considered masculine, whereas those of the private household and reproduction were considered feminine (Fainstein & Servon, 2005; Hanson & Pratt, 1994; Loh, 2022;

Terlinden, 2010). In critical feminist scholarship, suburbs were thought of as the passive, domestic counterparts of the inner city, as the spatial expression of the gendered division of labour that kept women in the home and financially dependent (Bertram, 2023; England, 1993; Spain, 2016). Susan Saegert (1980) describes the supposed dichotomies of male city and female suburb as “symbols that our culture has construed as polar opposites” (p. 96) and demonstrates how the “sociophysical environment” affects the feasibility of combining care tasks and “the world beyond” (p. 99). Suburban settlements were planned as mostly monofunctional areas connected to the cities by streets and railway tracks that allowed for efficient commuting (Dörhöfer, 1990, p. 19; Frank, 2008), but led to “complex space-time budgeting problems” for caregivers (England, 1996, p. 5) and their specific mobility patterns. In addition to that, nearby workplaces were scarce, so adequate employment near the home was difficult to find; longer commutes were impossible due to the constraints imposed by care work and the scarcity of full-time day care (Baumgart, 2004, p. 89; Rahn, 2011; Saegert, 1980). Without a car, life as a caregiver could therefore be isolated, especially in relatively spacious houses with large gardens that required plenty of maintenance (England, 1993). In line with the changing role of women in society, employment increasingly moved to the suburbs, even though, as several scholars have pointed out, these were mostly part-time clerical jobs that required little formal qualification. They therefore suited not only the needs of suburban caregivers, but also of employers looking for a well-educated and obedient workforce (England, 1993; Frank, 2003). Saegert (1980) concludes that the decision in favour of a residential location in the suburbs could be seen as a compromise between different and complex needs and demands of the various members of a household. More recent, albeit not entirely new, research findings from German authors suggest that this may still be the case (Danielzyk et al., 2012; Menzl, 2007; Rahn, 2011). Due to other, especially environmental, problems such as urban sprawl and excessive land consumption, suburbanisation became somewhat unpopular after the turn of the century, at least in the professional planning discourse in Germany and other European countries. With regard to severe housing shortage, many cities are now planning and building at the margins again, creating enormous new districts with thousands of housing units.

It is important to note that suburban women and caregivers of all genders are not, and have never been, “innocent and passive victims” of the built environment (England, 1993: pp. 24–25; see also Wright, 2005). At the same time, however, as Binet et al. (2023, p. 290) argue, “the quality and affordances of the urban infrastructure of care influence the burdens and sustainability of caregiving.” Employed caregivers significantly rely on the material environment and infrastructure of their daily surroundings (Biglieri, 2022). “When this infrastructure is inadequate or incomplete in a caregiver’s context, they must work harder to ensure satisfactory background conditions for caregiving” (Binet et al., 2023, p. 282). In recent years, infrastructures are increasingly discussed as “dynamic patterns that are the foundation of social interaction” (Power & Mee, 2019, p. 484), as “sociotechnical systems” which “enable (or constrain) particular forms of sociality and life to flourish” (Alam & Houston, 2020, pp. 1–3). Caregivers, their bodies, and their everyday coping practices thereby become an element of infrastructure themselves (Alam & Houston, 2020). In this line of thinking, the shortcomings of the built environment create additional inequalities and burdens for the already challenged (Binet et al., 2023, p. 290). There is also a clear intersection of the material environment and wider societal conditions, as some caregivers can rely on a system of paid or unpaid helpers, and others cannot.

Planners have translated this critique into “women-friendly” planning (Bundesministerium für Raumordnung, Bauwesen und Städtebau, 1996), which was revised and conceptually updated to “gender-sensitive

planning” in the 1990s (Huning et al., 2019). Its intention is the “reconciliation of ‘work and home’” and to create “enabling time-space patterns” for all (Tummers-Mueller et al., 2019) through improved and more flexible infrastructure that allows for a variety of everyday realities and that supports caregivers of all genders. Gender-sensitive planning, however, was in itself criticised due to its “tactical” character (Alisch, 1993; Sandercock & Forsyth, 1992; Tummers-Mueller et al., 2019). It was argued that changing the material surroundings and the infrastructure of a place had no “strategic” impact in the sense that it could challenge binary gender stereotypes or promote an equitable distribution of care work within households. Neither did it improve the valuation of care tasks and the structural conditions for employed caregivers. In other words, infrastructure and a built environment that are designed using criteria of gender inclusiveness can be levers to ease the “double burden” for employed caregivers immediately and effectively. At the same time, they may continue or even increase the exploitation of their workforce as caregivers feel pressured to complete even more tasks in both realms—a critique that relates back to Zimmermann’s research on care/employment policy cited in Section 2.1. Creating appropriate material surroundings for caregiving can therefore be deemed a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for profound societal change with relation to care and its compatibility with paid employment.

The inclusion of a more comprehensive ethics of care into (suburban) planning, as Lundman and Kymäläinen (2023, p. 3) argue, could entail “an idea of radical transformation of society.” This is necessary, they continue, for the following reason: “If care ethics is not employed in planning, the gap between the goals of regeneration and the realities of everyday life remain distant from each other” (Lundman & Kymäläinen, 2023, p. 8). While their take on caregiving differs from that applied in this article, they conceptualise planning actors as suburban caregivers, the argument is still valuable for this article. In addition to changing the material environment, applying a lens of care would take into account the societal value of care work, the wellbeing of employed caregivers and an equal distribution of tasks on a household and on a societal level, and it could greatly contribute to finding new and less straining ways of combining care and paid employment. Binet et al. (2023, p. 291) express a similar thought:

Though the urban infrastructure of care is a novel framework, planners already work on aspects of the urban infrastructure of care....We encourage planners to explicitly adopt a care-centric lens for understanding the impacts of their work and to consider how their work shapes landscapes of stratified reproduction.

Urban and suburban development should therefore explicitly consider the complex time-space needs of employed caregivers—not as a niche concern, but as a mirror of broader societal values around care and paid work. In this respect, new suburban developments of a certain size and built “from scratch” could become pioneering spaces for reimagining the combination of care and employment.

### 3. Material and Methods

Our empirical research of Oberbillwerder and Freiham is based on a qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018; Mayring, 2015; Schreier, 2012) of planning and media documents (masterplans and related publications such as brochures or political statements, newspaper articles, press releases, and website texts; 25 documents for Oberbillwerder and 126 for Freiham), and expert interviews with actors shaping the planning processes of the new districts (11 people in Hamburg-Oberbillwerder, 2021, and 12 in



Munich-Freiham, 2024; see Supplementary File). Interview partners were architects, urban planners, employees of departments, and of neighbourhood and education management. To guarantee pseudonymisation, interviewees are assigned a combination of letters relating to their professional function (see Supplementary File for full details).

Since the 1990s, many cities, regions, and political bodies in Germany and beyond have developed handbooks and criteria for gender-sensitive planning (Bertram, in press). Gender-sensitive planning differs from the reconciliation of care work and paid employment, but they do overlap significantly, and care is an important topic in almost all the guidelines. In order to ascertain which fields of action are relevant when aiming to improve conditions for care and paid employment, in a previous project, a meta-analysis was conducted of approximately 50 planning publications on gender inclusiveness, evaluation reports, and publications at the interface of research and practice. Five categories resulted from this initial inductive analysis, each with several subcategories (Bertram, 2024). These subcategories were used as deductive templates for the analysis of the two suburban districts. During the analysis of Freiham and Oberbillwerder, subcategories were added and refined according to statements from the interviews and documents. This combined approach allowed us to maintain analytical consistency while remaining flexible and responsive to the specificities of each case.

The first subcategory is housing and housing environment. One overarching aim in this field of action is the promotion of a socio-economic mix in order to offer access to attractive, high-quality housing not only to privileged groups. Flexible floor plans support home-based work and adapt to changing family situations (e.g., birth, separation). Great importance is attached to the safety and accessibility of residential green spaces as they can reduce the need for supervision and accompanying mobility. Communal facilities such as laundry rooms, storage, and bicycle rooms are also essential: The more conveniently located and the more attractive they are, the greater the potential to inspire community and exchange and thereby provide relief for caregivers.

The second subcategory is green and other public spaces. This field of action also focusses on facilitating community and exchange and on reducing the need for supervision and accompaniment. Provision of clean public toilets, baby changing facilities, and resting areas for accompanying or elderly adults are crucial. The interconnectedness of green areas and links with other infrastructure facilities contribute to short and safe routes.

Third is facilities and infrastructure. A variety of easily accessible, barrier-free, and high-quality social infrastructure is the most important element in this field of action. It is achieved through integrated locations and decentralised allocation of neighbourhood centres. “Active” ground floors contribute to vibrancy, safety, and short distances. Residents should be able to use the facilities as soon as they move there.

The fourth subcategory is mobility and transport. Recommendations in this field include general issues such as safety, easy orientation, and accessibility, as well as the avoidance of areas of anxiety. Residential areas should be well-connected to the city centre and to other districts. User-friendly intervals and smooth transfers, including outside the usual working hours, enable shift/night workers to commute safely. A complete, attractive, and safe cycle path network that offers secure bicycle parking facilities is recommended. Similar principles apply to pedestrian traffic, where particular attention should be paid to

safe school routes. Play streets, pedestrian zones, as well as quiet zones, safe crossing facilities, and wide pavements are crucial for pedestrian safety.

The last subcategory focuses on employment opportunities and commerce. The basis for creating a wide range of employment opportunities close to residential areas is the designation of mixed-use areas. Easily accessible, high-quality commercial areas, which are ideally lively at off-peak times and equipped with supply and care facilities, are of fundamental importance. City- or even region-wide labour market and structural policy should be linked to considerations of care and compatibility. The framework conditions for employment also have a major influence on the opportunities for reconciliation: family-friendly working conditions, non-stereotyping, gender-equitable, family-friendly personnel policies, and the promotion of traditionally underrepresented groups in a profession are proposed.

The guidelines predominantly referred to changes to the built environment and took as a given the gendered division of labour as well as the prioritisation of paid employment. The five fields of action were used as a starting point to analyse the two new districts in Hamburg and Munich. Our study adopts a planning perspective; as such, it does not encompass the day-to-day experiences of inhabitants. Oberbillwerder remains unbuilt and the process is under constant revision, so the future design of the district may differ from the plans analysed here.

## 4. Results: Overview of the Two Case Studies

This section presents and analyses the plans for Hamburg-Oberbillwerder and Munich-Freiham regarding the fields of action supportive of combining care and paid employment. With respect to housing and general cost of living, both Hamburg and Munich are among the most expensive cities in Germany (Braun & Paffrath, 2024) and are both experiencing severe pressure regarding land-use and housing strategies due to unbroken population influx (Grund, 2018). Both cities claim to shape the necessary expansion process in an eco-friendly and socially just way. Both districts rank among Germany's largest greenfield developments, combining scale and ambition to potentially reshape urban planning domestically and internationally. Freiham and Oberbillwerder can therefore be seen as role models for similar projects.

The construction of buildings will start in Oberbillwerder in 2026 at the earliest. At the time of writing, preparations for construction are underway. In Freiham, construction of housing started in 2016, so approximately half of the district is now finished. This means that, firstly, changes to the plans may occur in the future, and secondly, our results cannot reflect upon the actual daily life of employed caregivers and care receivers in the districts. As we are especially interested in how the topics of care and paid work are discussed and reflected upon in the planning processes, a knowledge of lived experiences is not necessary at this stage of the project.

### 4.1. Hamburg-Oberbillwerder

The future district Oberbillwerder is situated in the southeast of Hamburg (see Figure 1) and will comprise approximately 7,000 residential units. The site is currently used for agriculture. The master plan's guiding principles are the "Connected City"—connected to the neighbouring districts as well as to Hamburg's city centre—and the "Active City," which is to contribute to exercise and a healthy and active lifestyle. Furthermore,



Oberbillwerder is intended to become less car-dependent, more environmentally friendly, and more socially diverse than past urban expansions. The district will comprise five neighbourhoods with different densities. As the process is still at a master planning level, the final design of neighbourhoods has yet to be determined. Numerous playgrounds, a large activity park, and a swimming pool are planned on a total of 28 hectares of green space. The district will have an education and community centre with two secondary schools, two primary schools, 14 day-care centres, and 14 additional social infrastructure facilities.



**Figure 1.** Map overview: Location of Oberbillwerder in Hamburg. Source: Schwarzplan.eu (2025), adapted by Johanna Niesen.

So-called mobility hubs will be the core element of the district's mobility infrastructure:

Residents and their guests will be able to park their cars in the mobility hubs and switch to sustainable modes of transport such as bicycles, rental and cargo bicycles or, in the future, small autonomous shuttle buses for the journey to their front door. By evenly covering the district with the mobility hubs...equal access conditions for public transport and private transport are created. (IBA Hamburg, 2019, author's translation).

In the medium term, motorised private transport is expected to account for about 20% of traffic. Additionally, cycling and walking are to be encouraged. Cycle lanes to the neighbouring districts and the city centre, as well

as an attractive, safe network of cycle paths and footpaths connecting the five neighbourhoods, contribute to the implementation of the “connected city” and “active city” concepts. Sport and exercise will be important elements of daily life in the district. There will be opportunities for exercise in public spaces in addition to space for institutionally organised sport.

Since 2018, the draft master plan has been further developed in collaboration with political bodies, authorities, and civil society actors. In February 2019, the Senate of Hamburg passed the master plan, and in April 2019, the district assembly decided to initiate the development plan process. Since then, numerous public participation and information events have taken place.

Some basic conditions concerning employment opportunities have been formulated: 500 jobs can be expected in education, health, and social services, with a further 500 in neighbourhood services and retail. Personal services (especially in households) can provide 300 employment opportunities. The aim is to focus on the “nutrition, health and exercise” sectors (IBA Hamburg & Büro Luchterhandt, 2017). The largest employer will be the University of Applied Sciences (Feldhaus, 2018). The importance of short commutes is discussed primarily with regard to reducing traffic for environmental reasons (IBA Hamburg & Büro Luchterhandt, 2017). Craft courtyards and co-working spaces are planned, and it is expected that a high number of people will be able to work remotely (HWK). Remote work is seen as a great support for employed caregivers because of the elimination of daily commutes (KB, IE); potential conflicts and disadvantages are not discussed, however. In the interviews, the opportunities for the compatibility of employment and care brought about by digitalisation and tertiarisation (BKM, BA, SEG) were discussed. The fact that these opportunities can only be used by a certain, rather privileged group is only reflected in two of the interviews (SB, IE). Some interviewees anticipate a change in structural working conditions in the medium term, regardless of any political interventions, due to demographic changes and a resulting shortage of skilled labour (HWK, SB).

#### 4.2. Munich-Freiham

Freiham is situated in the west of Munich (see Figure 2) and consists of a commercial and a residential area (Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, 2016). Around 25,000 people are expected to live there by 2040. Building work started in 2016 so almost half of the district is finished or under construction (Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, 2019a). Due to the lengthy nature of the planning process, the plans are expected to change and be adapted to new realities. As one interviewee said: “The district has the opportunity to move with the times, and there is a certain flexibility and changeability in the overall concept” (VA, author’s translation).

The density and proportion of housing elements, streets, and green areas are shaped following Munich’s long-standing slogan “urban, compact and green.” This triad proclaims the necessity of an interdisciplinary planning process that synthesises perspectives across various domains such as urban development, transportation planning, environmental protection, and social infrastructure. This approach to planning includes adaptable residential designs, accessible and interconnected public spaces, short distances, and mixed-function neighbourhoods, and can count as an implicit foundation for reconciling care and paid work (Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, 1995). Freiham is promoted as an inclusive, barrier-free district, with plenty of options for people with disabilities in terms of education, care, and paid jobs (Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, 2018). The city of





**Figure 2.** Map overview: Location of Freiham in Munich. Source: Schwarzplan.eu (2025), adapted by Johanna Niesen.

Munich offers different housing forms, including social housing, housing cooperatives, housing for refugees or student housing, and works with a variety of different floorplans tailored to different target groups (Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, 2024). In Freiham, 1,250 apartments are provided by housing association Münchner Wohnen, another 400 are to be completed by the end of 2025 (Munich Television, 2025).

Open spaces and green areas are planned to provide opportunities for planned or spontaneous interaction. There are many communal and semi-private areas, namely courtyards, roof gardens, and shared backyards, to stimulate communication and neighbourliness (Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, n.d.). Some housing projects have been developed by cooperatives, supported by the city of Munich, with ambitious concepts regarding social infrastructure and common spaces, like indoor play areas, co-working spaces, or laundry-café. A green strip facilitates secure connections between the two railway stations. (see Figure 3; Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, n.d.). Furthermore, a 58-hectare landscape park is planned, which is set to be the largest in Munich (Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, 2019a).



**Figure 3.** The green strip in Munich-Freiham during the building process in spring 2024. Note: Photo by Johanna Niesen.

The mobility concept envisages that Freiham will be car-reduced, focused on sharing concepts, and have two railroad connections to the city centre (Bitter et al., 2019). Daily amenities will be within walking or cycling distance (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** A front door in Munich-Freiham with bicycle parking poles in spring 2024. Note: Photo by Johanna Niesen.



With regard to social infrastructure, the plan includes options for childcare and education, a care centre for the elderly, as well as solutions for everyday needs, e.g., grocery shopping or medical care. The district's educational infrastructure includes an education campus with a primary school, secondary school, special education support centre, and high school, as well as affiliated sports facilities and a neighbourhood centre. The district features two more primary schools and 13 day-care centres, ensuring sufficient early childhood and primary education opportunities (Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, n.d.). A sports park is included in the campus, and there are several other parks, playgrounds, and public toilets, as well as a site for urban gardening (Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, n.d., 2018). The provision of social infrastructure in Freiham can be attributed in part to Munich's long-standing policy of Sozialgerechte Bodennutzung (Socially Just Land-Use). Introduced in 1994, this framework requires private developers to financially contribute to the development of public infrastructure, including social amenities, thereby ensuring that urban growth is accompanied by the necessary support systems.

Fifteen thousands work places are planned (Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, 2019b). Similar to Oberbillwerder, the majority of employment opportunities will be within the infrastructure of the district—teachers, salespersons, or administrative staff. In the early 2000s, a commercial area called Freiham-Süd was built separately. It comprises manufacturing firms, a DIY store, as well as a furniture shop. Most employment opportunities are service-oriented, focusing on local needs such as retail, supermarkets, childcare, and schools. There are only limited options for highly qualified positions. At the beginning of the planning process, mixed-use development was not a primary consideration, leading to the designation of separate residential and commercial areas. However, certain mixed-use combinations remain legally restricted. Consequently, mixed use is only possible in terms of integrating social infrastructure and local amenities.

## 5. Discussion: Care and Compatibility in the Planning Process

Although neither Freiham nor Oberbillwerder were explicitly conceptualized through a lens of care or gender-sensitive planning, several measures show an implicit alignment with principles of feminist urbanism and care ethics, particularly regarding the provision of social infrastructure and the design of public space. Generally, the two cities seem to be on different pages regarding the awareness of the interrelations of care and compatibility with paid employment, gender/intersectional equality, and urban planning. Although both administrations have published guidelines and considered gender equality on different levels, the impact seems to be greater in Munich. However, there is a tendency to subsume care and gender equality under the potentially less controversial title of (social) sustainability: “The headlines tended to be sustainability, accessibility, the city of short distances, quality of life and inclusivity. And because we thought about inclusivity, we covered a great deal in terms of care work” (VC, author's translation). Sustainability and inclusivity measures are explicitly planned and visible in media discourse and planning documents, whereas care and compatibility remain on an implicit level. In Hamburg, no such guideline was used or even known (BA).

Nevertheless, planning processes in both new districts demonstrate potential for the establishment of caring communities and support of employed caregivers on a material level. For Oberbillwerder, there is a clear community orientation in housing and housing environment as well as green and other public spaces:

There is a square in front of every mobility hub, which is also a meeting place, a place for social exchange....And [this makes] it easier for people to support each other as neighbours if they want to combine family and career. (IE, author's translation)

In particular, the areas for children and young people should become attractive and varied (BA). The emergence of informal networks of solidarity between carers could become a, presumably welcome, but not intentionally induced, side effect. It is envisaged that the Green Loop will connect all important facilities in the district. Spaces will be multi-use and thus very flexible, attracting a variety of people in terms of age, gender, and social status (IBA Hamburg, 2019). The focus on games, sport, and exercise can result in good availability of public and green spaces. Demands on the quality of spatial design are high.

In Freiham, it was not possible to implement some of the initial, rather ambitious aspects of community-oriented housing due to budgetary constraints, political compromises, or practical challenges. Among our interviewees, there was a general feeling of limitation of their own possibilities and scope of action. Tight budgets, short time frames, and cost increases are seen as severely limiting factors. As these limiting factors are not uncommon, integrating community and care-oriented measures into mandatory requirements becomes essential for developing inclusive and sustainable districts and neighbourhoods. Where elements of close-to-home social infrastructure were implemented, it was, for the most part, by housing cooperatives which often occupy a pioneering position in this regard. These elements are considered beneficial for employed caregivers (SA). However, their implementation on a broader scale within the district is unlikely, and they are only available for a small number of people.

There is a detailed document on "inclusion," providing voluntary guidelines to make the district more suitable for disabled people (Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, 2018). These measures are also supposed to support caregivers, even though they are not explicitly mentioned. The guidelines have been published, but not yet implemented.

The discussed social, cultural, and medical infrastructure in Oberbillwerder is diverse and will meet most needs and requirements of caregivers and those cared for. In addition to a differentiated range of educational and childcare facilities, sport and other associations will play an active role in shaping life in the district. Ground floors of many buildings will be dedicated to various uses so that monofunctionality is avoided and liveliness and a sense of security are created (IBA Hamburg & Büro Luchterhandt, 2017). In Freiham, there has also been a focus on incorporating everyday necessities such as childcare or local supply. Schools were constructed first, ensuring that children could attend them as families moved into Freiham. A childcare center was built, but no educators could be employed for several months after construction was completed, which reflects a nationwide shortage of skilled labor in the care professions. As a result, people in Freiham either have to manage without day care or find an institution further away, which then requires more trip-chaining (SA).

In Oberbillwerder, individual motorized traffic will supposedly play a subordinate role (IBA Hamburg, 2019). Mobility hubs are to accommodate the majority of stationary traffic in the neighbourhood. Suburban trains are to run more frequently and additional bus services within the district are planned. Important infrastructure is to be situated within walking distance of the residential areas. Due to the planned high-quality and comprehensive bicycle lanes, it can be assumed that bicycles will feature as an important everyday means of transportation. There are critical voices, but for the time being, there are no public



discussions about altering the plans. In Freiham, mobility was a strong pillar in the conceptual phase of the planning process, emphasising short distances and the use of public transport between home and daily necessities, but some of the goals had to be modified or postponed. As a result, there is a gap between the first inhabitants' expectations of the district and their current reality. As only part of the mobility plan is being implemented at the outset, public transport is currently overloaded and will be relieved when Freiham is connected to another underground line (Baureferat München, 2022). Shortage of staff in public transport adds to the problem (VC) and not only makes commuting to workplaces outside the district difficult but also renders it impossible for young people to travel to school independently. Care-related mobility or the necessity to reconcile care and paid work were not discussed in the mobility concept, which now creates unnecessary challenges in reaching destinations or leads to time inefficiencies for caregivers. One interviewee stated:

It doesn't help me to talk about the city of short distances and then there is no bus or only one express bus or only one underground train from A to B, when I actually have three destinations in between. (VC, author's translation)

For employment opportunities and commerce, a number of basic ideas have been formulated in Oberbillwerder. Short commuting distances are desired due to their positive environmental effects (IBA Hamburg & Büro Luchterhandt, 2017). The most frequently cited measures to improve the reconciliation of care and paid employment are options for home office and co-working spaces in order to reduce commuting. In addition to that, long opening hours of day-care centers are seen as the most effective tool to support employed carers. In Freiham, one interviewee stated: "You either live in Freiham or you work in Freiham. I've never heard of both together" (SC, author's translation). Another interviewee gave a similar account: "I suspect that Freiham will become a district where people live, perhaps go to school, but always go somewhere else to work. That's why this connection to the city and to the surrounding communities is so centrally important" (SB, author's translation). The plans for Freiham were completed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, when remote work gained traction. The Federal Statistical Office has reported that the proportion of employees working from home increased from 3% in 2012 to approximately 23% in 2024 in Germany (Krause et al., 2024). With current discussions on companies ordering their employees back into their office spaces, we cannot say how this topic will develop further. For Freiham, however, it can be said that most floor plans do not consider this option, and a substantial number of apartments do not have space for office use, or the additional room would make an apartment unaffordable (VA, SA). According to an interviewee, there are "few projects that really manage to achieve genuine co-working on this scale" (SA, author's translation). Using the home as a workplace can ameliorate some of the demands of care and employment but can also result in conflicts:

There was a swing or a slide, relatively close to the facade. People with limited mobility...are probably much more likely to be able to work at home now than before, so they stay in their home office. [And] the children are at the facade all day....Now we just have to see how we can find a solution. (VA, author's translation)

Even though Freiham and Oberbillwerder were not explicitly planned with a view to care or the compatibility of care and paid work, many planning measures can be seen as improving the material conditions of caregiving and incidentally supporting the emergence of informal networks between inhabitants. Neither in

Hamburg nor in Munich, however, do planning actors see their role as transformative agents for societal change. Structural conditions for employed carers or a fairer allocation of tasks were mostly seen as private matters, and interviewees reacted with some surprise to the question: “I doubt whether this is specifically supported in the concept in Oberbillwerder. I think it’s more a question of how families organize themselves” (IB, author’s translation). Other interviewees in Hamburg state that the intention to support compatibility is an underlying, albeit never explicit, planning guideline. One interviewee describes reconciliation of paid work and care work as a “condition for success” for the new district (PO, AO). The most important argument to facilitate it, however, is not fairness or the high value of care, but the sheer economic necessity for all adults of a household to earn enough money in order to be able to afford the high cost of living in Hamburg. In Freiamt, it is assumed that the types of jobs available in a district will be determined by market dynamics, leaving little room for intervention by administrations. One interviewee wondered, “whether we can achieve equal distribution [of care work and paid work between the genders] through planning? Not really. I think that’s more of a labour market policy issue” (VC, author’s translation). Another stated: “I don’t see much scope for intervention by the public sector in terms of gender equality policy. What framework conditions could the City of Munich create to strengthen a company’s gender equality policy?” (VD, author’s translation).

It seems that planners and other decision makers do not see the need or a responsibility for explicitly working towards including a lens of care and are not aware of their potential responsibility. It could certainly be argued that these are not classic planning tasks and that some of the issues cannot be solved on a local or regional level. At the same time, planners are more suited than any other professional group to initiating such a process and bringing together those responsible from different sectors. Planning practices cannot be analyzed in isolation. They must be understood within the broader socio-economic and political context. Care, as a fundamental aspect of society, is often undervalued and rendered invisible. Furthermore, it is treated as a private household issue instead of a shared responsibility. Recognising care as a central dimension of life and integrating it into the planning process so that it can systematically be addressed in strategies and designs could be an essential first step. In order to do so, care and paid employment would have to be seen as two sides of the same coin that complement each other. Strengthening care in a way that creates an actual culture of care within a district would entail raising awareness of the topic among local and regional employers, chambers of commerce, actors in economic development, and structural policy. All the above could lead to a more profound revaluation of care as the foundational pillar of society, not something that has to be clocked in and out of on the side. As most of the structural measures are not within the usual scope of planning, addressing the issue of responsibility is crucial, as progress becomes impossible when no one assumes accountability. Turning the potential into tangible outcomes requires not only different self-conceptions among planners but also clear frameworks and mechanisms to ensure accountability and coordinated action.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

This article traces the debate on care in geography and other disciplines as well as the interrelations of care with space and planning, adding the element of compatibility with paid employment. Recognising care and paid employment as interconnected is essential, as both are organised by the same household, and time allocated to one necessarily reduces time available for the other. An analysis of planning and policy measures reveals their significant impact on the feasibility of caregiving tasks and on reconciling these with paid employment. Feminist planning critique from the 1970s onwards has led to a plethora of ideas and changes to the built environment that were mostly discussed under the label of “gender-sensitive planning.”

These were meant to change the layout and design of residential areas in such a way that they would become safer and more accessible, prioritise care-related mobility, and support a feeling of community among residents that may lead to informal support networks. It was later criticised that they may help to ease the “double burden” of caregiving and paid employment but have no aspiration to aim at a more profound societal change. Measures included in this category encompass those that challenge the gendered imbalance in care practices, enhance conditions for employed caregivers, and elevate the visibility and valuation of care across society. Our study draws on insights from feminist geography and economics, care ethics, and planning theory. Feminist geography contributes to a nuanced understanding of spatial inequalities and the power structures that shape urban life, thus offering a deeper critique of the built environment than conventional planning models typically allow. Care ethics and social reproduction theory allow us to analyze the often invisible care tasks and the societal structures surrounding them. The focus on planning practice helps to link theory to material outcomes. An interdisciplinary approach thus provides both critical reflection and practical direction, revealing how planning can become more attuned to the lived realities of employed caregivers.

We have studied two newly built suburban districts in major German cities, Hamburg-Oberbillwerder and Munich-Freiham. Suburban space was seen as the spatial manifestation of patriarchy during the second phase of feminism and was criticised for its perpetuation of unequal gender relations. Nowadays, planners and administrators of suburban districts have high aspirations with regard to high-quality, compact, and modern residential spaces. However, despite the significant number of people affected, care or the challenges of reconciling care and paid employment are still not explicitly discussed in any guidelines or frameworks. Our evaluations show that neither the planning documents nor the accompanying media coverage contain any explicit indications that supporting compatibility of paid work and care work has been an important issue in the processes. This lack of structured policies reflects a broader gap in prioritising the compatibility of care responsibilities and employment within planning, budget allocation, and decision-making processes.

The planning processes were evaluated across five fields of action. Even though the discussion remains on the material (and rather implicit) level, there is great potential for planners to enhance the possibilities of reconciling daily care tasks with paid employment. Varied, inviting elements of social and green infrastructure, short distances to the most important daily amenities, and a general sense of safety and accessibility can reduce accompanying mobility and the need for supervision and inspire community and exchange among caregivers that lead to informal networks of solidarity or caring communities. Interestingly, these elements often find their way into the plans under different, supposedly less controversial labels such as “inclusive” or “compact” planning. Explicit measures for more compatibility include more day care centres with longer opening hours and remote work options. The way these are talked about—namely as a *conditio sine qua non*—shows that the new realities of caregiving and gendered divisions of labour have found their way into urban planning, even though they are not always consciously reflected. However, these well-intentioned infrastructure changes leave the systemic inequities that shape care untouched. The challenge remains to move from tactical to strategic transformations in planning to not only adapt space to care, but also to reframe care as a central concern in the design and functioning of (sub-)urban life.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

## Data Availability

The data are made available in the LeoPARD repository of the Technische Universität Braunschweig.

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In the process of writing the article, the Deep L translation model was used for translation purposes, while the ChatGPT model was utilised to selectively reformulate individual sentences and to find synonyms. No portion of the generated content was adopted directly.

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