

The “Fine Art” of “Green” Land Sealing? Competing Discourses on Expansion-Oriented Suburban Planning

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Abstract

The growing populations of many of Europe’s metropolises have intensified pressure on housing provision and renewed political support for large-scale urban expansions. This has sharpened conflicts between housing development and the preservation of green spaces, particularly in suburban landscapes. This article analyses how such conflicts are politically negotiated and rhetorically stabilised in Hamburg and Munich, two major German cities with highly strained housing provision. Drawing on poststructuralist discourse theory, the study examines political discourses on housing construction and green space policies, with particular attention to how tensions between them are reconciled. The analysis is based on policy documents, planning materials, media coverage, and semi-structured interviews. The findings identify three competing discourses that are articulated in largely similar ways in both cities: “preservation of all green spaces,” “deregulation for a housing construction offensive,” and “construction should continue, just not everywhere.” While the first two discourses advance internally consistent but polarised positions and remain marginal, the third discourse has become hegemonic. It claims to integrate housing construction and green space preservation, yet does so by obscuring inherent contradictions through a set of recurring discursive strategies. The article argues that this hegemonic discourse enables a substantial political shift from prioritising inner-city development towards legitimising large suburban greenfield projects, while formally maintaining established sustainability goals. By exposing how growth-oriented rationalities are discursively stabilised, the study exposes the fragility of contemporary suburban greenfield development policies.

Keywords

discursive strategies; Germany; green space preservation; planning conflicts; suburban development; urban expansion

1. Introduction

The tension between the growing demand for housing in many European cities and the limited space at central locations is once again drawing the attention of policymakers and planners alike to suburban areas, where swathes of farmland often lie directly beside motorways, commercial developments, nature reserves, and infrastructure facilities of all kinds. Their highly dynamic development prevents any easy categorisation as either “urban” or “rural,” which has encouraged some authors to propose novel categories such as “landscape three” (Jackson, 1984), “Zwischenstadt” (literally “in between-city”; Sieverts, 2003), or “suburban cultural landscapes” (Schenk & Tillmann, 2018). This makes suburban landscapes not only of great interest to planners and developers but also a fascinating research topic.

Since 2017, there has been a significant increase in the size and number of urban expansion projects at the fringes of economically thriving cities in Germany. These projects are usually constructed on land previously used for agriculture (Bensch, 2020; Freudenau et al., 2021). Siedentop (2024) describes this as a “new wave of suburbanisation.” Similar trends are evident in many other European countries such as the Netherlands, Poland, or the United Kingdom (Hesse & Siedentop, 2018; Schiavina et al., 2022), exacerbated in part by the Covid-19 pandemic, which boosted remote working (Gallent & Madeddu, 2021; Maginn & Anacker, 2022). Altrock (2022) speaks of a “new suburbanity,” whereby the implication is intentionally *qualitative*: Advocates of current large-scale urban expansion projects explicitly wish to avoid the shortcomings of the satellite towns and *banlieues* of the past; instead, they promise innovative and allegedly more sustainable concepts (Biemann & Schulze Mönking, 2021; de Buhr, 2021).

While some authors have provided a descriptive overview of urban expansion plans in green spaces (e.g., Altrock, 2022; Hesse & Siedentop, 2018) and others have evaluated these developments in a generally positivist or even outright normative manner (e.g., Sieverts, 2003), our study reveals the semiotic processes through which suburban green spaces are socially constructed in the context of urban expansion planning. Hamburg and Munich are interesting cities in this regard due to the decades-long growth in their populations and their severely strained housing provision. As a state capital (Munich) or city-state (Hamburg), they aim for high standards in urban planning to ensure climate-friendly mobility, environmental quality, and social infrastructure. The suburban expansions currently being planned in both cities are among the largest in Germany, with over 5,000 new housing units each (City of Munich, 2023; de Buhr, 2021). Unsurprisingly, these projects have proved hugely controversial, exemplified by the many citizens’ initiatives set up with the aim of stymying the developments in order to preserve green space.

This study will identify political discourses on green space and housing construction policies—especially in relation to large urban expansion projects—in Hamburg and Munich. As the goals of cutting housing shortages and preserving green spaces are both high on the political agenda, the particular focus is on how tensions between these political ambitions are “glossed over” (Molek-Kozakowska, 2024, p. 187). Referring to poststructuralist discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Nonhoff, 2019), we understand discourses as contingent, relational, and thus potentially dynamic systems of meaning, in which social reality is constructed in specific ways. The findings rely on textual discourse analyses of published documents and semi-structured interviews, whereby we supplement discourse theory with rhetorical categories to elucidate how the respective discourses address contradictions.

In the following, we first give a brief overview of our analytical approach as well as previous studies which have explored urban development discourses in a similar way. After specifying our research questions, we proceed by introducing the cases as well as our empirical material and analytical methods, before presenting the results. We then discuss our findings and conclude with reflections on planning practice and potential avenues for further research.

2. Analysing Planning Conflicts From the Perspective of Discourse Theory

Poststructuralist discourse theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Nonhoff (2019) conceive discourses as contingent, supra-individual systems of meanings that relate linguistic as well as non-linguistic elements and via this “create” social realities. Poststructuralist thinking is post-foundational: It rejects the idea that meaning can be grounded in fixed relationships between signifier and signified. Instead, meaning is understood as resulting from an endless “flow of differences” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 112), which is why meaning is always instable to a greater or lesser degree. Despite this fluidity, discourses do include privileged elements, called “nodal points,” which temporarily anchor meaning by being articulated with many other elements.

For instance, the more conventional discourse on the “compact, green city” constructs “density” and “functional diversity” as the ideal of the “European city,” while “suburban area” functions as a contrasting nodal point whose meaning is constructed through being articulated with “low density,” “large infrastructure facilities,” and “consumption of green space” (Hautamäki et al., 2024). In another discourse, the very same term of “suburban area” may be linked to “greenbelt,” “scenic landscape,” and “quality of life.” This shows how fragile, context-dependent, and contested the meaning of any signifier in general and the relations between housing construction and green spaces in particular can be articulated. Those who produce and reproduce a specific discourse are referred to as a “discourse coalition” (Nonhoff, 2019, p. 77). Such a coalition may include policymakers, journalists, NGO representatives, researchers, and others—though its members do not necessarily know each other.

Discourses are constituted not only through positive relations between elements—what is called a “chain of equivalence”—but also through what is explicitly excluded or rejected by relations of contrariety. This excluded dimension is referred to as the “constitutive outside” (Staten, 1985, p. 16): It defines the discourse’s identity by marking what it stands against. The discourse on the *Zwischenstadt* as a “new notion of cultural landscape” (Sieverts, 2003, p. 41) illustrates this dynamic. As a key proponent of this discourse, Sieverts (2003) articulates suburban spaces positively as, for example, “green spaces as man-made structures,” a “new symbiosis of city and landscape,” as well as a “conceptual unity of landscape planning, town planning and urban design” (pp. 40, 43, 115). The meaning of this rearticulation becomes clearer if we consider some relations of contrariety such as “consumption of landscape,” “beloved traditional cultural landscapes,” or “biodiversity offsetting” (Sieverts, 2003, pp. 9, 40, 41). Through this opposition, the plea is for suburban areas to be “new[ly] interpreted” (Sieverts, 2003, p. 69) as an independent spatial category, one that integrates economic, social, and landscape developments, rather than as a deficient transitional form. This highlights the fluidity in the meaning of suburban areas.

Analysing discourses has a practical application if we remember that discourses are inevitably linked to power. When a specific discourse is established and is taken up and reproduced by a broad range of actors, it has the

effect of normalising a certain worldview, including specific problematisations, normative criteria, and ways of doing things. This phenomenon is referred to as “hegemony” and often results in a discourse becoming “sedimented” (Howarth, 2010, p. 329) in the form of policies, practices, and institutions (Griggs & Howarth, 2013; Nonhoff, 2019). As this happens, the contingent origins of the discourse tend to be forgotten, which is why Laclau (1990, p. 60) describes hegemony as “a power whose traces have been erased.” Thus viewed, any municipal planning concept is the manifestation of a discourse that has become more or less hegemonic.

For a discourse to become hegemonic, heterogeneous demands must be integrated around what are called “master signifiers,” particularly important nodal points of a discourse. As a master signifier is linked to an ever-growing range of elements, it gradually becomes an empty signifier (Laclau, 1990; Nonhoff, 2019): a term so broad that it carries many different, even contradictory meanings. Leffers’ (2015) analysis of urban intensification in Ottawa offers a concrete example: The term “sustainability” simultaneously serves ecological arguments, economic interests, and social demands—despite their partial contradictions. It is precisely this ambiguity that contributes to hegemonic success: Actors from different political positions are able to identify with and reproduce the same discourse: “No discourse and no hegemonic practice can exist without ruptures and internal contradictions, particularly because some contradictoriness can lead to greater success” (Nonhoff, 2019, p. 83). As more heterogeneous demands are integrated, “intradiscursive tensions” (Molek-Kozakowska, 2024, p. 183) increase. Yet so does consent, as former counter-discourses are absorbed into expanding equivalence chains. Griggs and Howarth’s (2020) study of Nantes illustrates this dynamic: Even the construction of a new airport on suburban green space can be framed as “sustainable” when articulated in terms of inner-city redevelopment for residential areas and the ideal of the compact city.

To resolve such “intradiscursive tensions,” there exist many “discursive strategies” (Nonhoff, 2019). For example, existing spatial concepts may be rearticulated with completely new demands, thereby silencing others (Griggs & Howarth, 2013). A telling example is the Swiss discourse on “compact cities,” in which inner-city allotments are rearticulated as “land reserves” rather than in terms of social and ecological advantages as before. This redescription brings the concept in line with economic interests and makes relocation to the urban periphery appear logical—yet comes with an exclusionary effect as it ends previous place-based social practices (Tappert et al., 2018). Authors such as Finlayson (2025) call for discourse-theoretical analyses to be complemented with rhetorical approaches in order to capture diverse discursive strategies with greater precision. These discursive strategies ought to be viewed in relation to each other within a larger structure of meaning (discourse) to understand not only how they withstand inherent contradictions but also actively address them.

Building on these theoretical considerations, the present article addresses three research questions, all focused on discourses on green space and housing construction policies related to large urban expansion projects in Hamburg and Munich. Firstly: How are green spaces, housing construction policy, and suburban areas discursively constructed? Secondly: Who is (re-)producing these discourses, i.e., which discourse coalitions can be discerned? And thirdly: Which discursive contradictions can be found and how are these glossed over?

3. The Cases of Hamburg and Munich: Overview of Context and Analytical Methods

The populations, economies, and housing sectors of Germany's second and third largest cities, Hamburg and Munich, have seen several decades of growth. Both cities are enjoying economic growth above the national average, albeit in different sectors: Hamburg's boom is due to its role as Europe's third largest port along with thriving industries such as aerospace engineering and bioscience, while Munich's economy is rooted in the automobile sector as well as finance and high-tech. Since the 1990s, Hamburg has pursued growth-oriented urban development (Vogelpohl, 2017). This is reflected in the city's rising population, which is expected to increase by a further 80,000 (+4%) between 2022 and 2040, following an increase of 80,000 (+4%) between 2021 and 2025 (Statistisches Amt für Hamburg und Schleswig-Holstein, 2024). Of the housing stock in Hamburg, 28% is available as "affordable" subsidised housing for low-income households, who account for 36% of the population (City State of Hamburg, 2025). Based on this, the City State of Hamburg concluded in 2011 that there was a need for 10,000 additional homes per year (de Buhr, 2021). Munich's population has grown since the turn of the millennium, increasing by around 55,000 inhabitants (+3.8%) between 2015 and 2025. However, Munich already has the tightest housing provision in Germany (Bertram & Altröck, 2021). Based on this, in 2012 the City of Munich (2012) concluded that there would be a need for an additional 4,500 homes per year. Since then, the ratio of applications and allocations for subsidised housing has worsened, though. The municipal authorities estimate a major jump in the population of up to 220,000 (+14%) in the period 2023–2040 (City of Munich, 2025). Traditionally, both cities have stressed the importance of preserving green spaces in their urban planning: Munich's Englischer Garten is one of the world's largest inner-city parks, while Hamburg cultivates a self-image as "green metropolis" (Demaziere, 2020) and points to a long tradition of green space policies.

In recent years, however, there have been signs of shifting priorities in both cities. In 2020, the City of Hamburg revised its urban development concept to concentrate not only on "More city in the city" (urban densification) but also to consider "More city in new locations," i.e., large-scale residential development on suburban greenfield areas (City State of Hamburg, 2020). In total, five urban expansion projects are planned, creating homes for over 25,000 residents. At the same time, a new green space development strategy has been adopted, one that moves away from clearly delineated axes and belts towards a more flexible network of green spaces (City State of Hamburg, 2018). Similarly, the City of Munich has adopted new planning concepts for green areas and urban development that pursue inner-city development and urban expansion in equal measure (City of Munich, 2015, 2022). Seven urban expansion projects are planned on land currently used for agriculture, with the potential to provide homes for more than 32,000 citizens (City of Munich, 2021a). These political developments have led to public protests in both cities. Referendums have further politicised the protection of designated public green spaces, successfully pressuring both municipal administrations to make voluntary commitments in this regard.

The discourse analysis is based on textual material such as plans, policy documents, and newspaper articles, as well as press releases, videos, and position papers written by NGOs. Given the increased intensity of discourse production since 2017, the virtual corpus includes all published documents dealing with green space and housing construction policies—especially in relation to large urban expansion projects—from 2017 to 2024 (Hamburg: $N = 84$; Munich: $N = 83$). In a first step, 37 documents from the Hamburg corpus and 40 documents from the Munich corpus, all selected because of their political character, richness of content, cross-document references, and variance, were analysed in detail (Keller, 2016). A second step was to conduct six problem-oriented interviews (Döringer, 2021) per case with key actors from the municipal

administrations as well as local politicians and NGOs, aimed at exploring dense moments of discourse production and controversial interpretations (conducted between July 2024 and March 2025). The interviews also helped contextualise and condense the document analysis (Hughes et al., 2020). The material was coded using the MAXQDA analysis software in the following steps: Firstly, the material was empirically coded, using in-vivo codes, classifying the codes as belonging to the discursive inside or outside with regard to the topics of interest—planning of housing, green spaces, and suburban spaces (see Table 1). In a second step, relationships between the individual signifiers were examined for equivalence and contrariety in code-sets (Nonhoff, 2019). By means of typification, we identified different discourses. Subsequently, signifiers articulated with many others were identified as nodal points. Finally, the results for both cases were compared and synthesised.

4. Competing Discourses on Housing and Green Spaces in Hamburg and Munich

We identified three discourses in both Hamburg and Munich concerning the conflictual relationship between housing development and the preservation of green spaces, especially in relation to suburban areas, with significant similarities between the two cities. We named these three discourses “preservation of all green spaces,” “deregulation for housing construction offensive,” and “construction should continue, just not everywhere” (see Table 1 for an overview). The first two are rather radical in their orientation: In the discourse “preservation of all green spaces”—particularly suburban green spaces classified as valuable—housing is to be created solely through infill development, whereas the discourse “deregulation for housing construction offensive” calls for deregulating not only housing policy but also green space policy. In the latter discourse, suburban areas are downgraded to “mere farmland.” The third discourse is more integrative, reflecting an attempt to reconcile conflicting demands. In describing the three discourses, we focus on the three themes of green space, housing, and suburban areas, on variations between the two cities, and finally on the coalitions that reproduce the respective discourse. All German quotes from the material in the following are translated by the authors. As the production and reproduction of a discourse are supra-individual phenomena without personal authorship, no references are provided for the discourse fragments quoted in this article.

4.1. “Preservation of All Green Spaces”

The central nodal point in this discourse is the safeguarding of green spaces in the city. They are depicted as living spaces for humans as well as for wildlife and plant populations. They are associated with a broad range of functions: supporting the microclimate, biodiversity, quality of life in the city, as well as climate-effective soils and CO₂ reservoirs. Crucially, however, it is claimed that these positive effects are not sufficiently taken into account by the municipal authorities. This perceived neglect forms a nodal point in the discourse’s outside. The discourse also includes the idea of regulating the amount of green space to reflect the population size, i.e., increasing the extent of green space as the urban population grows. Green spaces are associated with a natural balance that is said to be maintained by reconnecting biotopes and reducing the intensity of use. Nature conservation law and cities’ self-commitments to preservation of all green spaces are referred to as another rationale for safeguarding green spaces. Further, green spaces are set in a stark contrast to soil sealing, which forms a nodal point in the discourse’s outside and is related to other, similarly negative elements such as concrete, asphalt, and climate change. The idea of design enhancement towards a greater multifunctionality of green spaces is also rejected as counterproductive and associated with overuse.

Table 1. Competing discourses on green space and housing construction policies—especially in relation to large urban expansion projects—in Hamburg and Munich.

	“Preservation of all green spaces”		“Deregulation for housing construction offensive”		“Construction should continue, just not everywhere”	
	Discursive inside	Discursive outside	Discursive inside	Discursive outside	Discursive inside	Discursive outside
Green spaces	“protecting biodiversity” “quality of life in the city” “CO ₂ reservoirs” “reconnecting biotopes”	“soil sealing” “climate change” “multifunctional green space” “overuse”		“preservation of all green spaces” “climate protection requirements”	“green infrastructure” “multifunctional green spaces for recreation and urban climate”	“preservation of all green spaces as restrictive and not holistic”
Housing	“affordable housing” “building for housing needs” “infill development” “sufficiency,” “net zero of new soil sealing”	“greenfield development” “lost grey energy due to demolition” “profit-oriented real estate investors” “poor distribution of housing” “growth dogma”	“build, build, build” “important for economic development” “housing construction offensive” “deregulation of planning”	“high rents” “existing housing shortage” “exodus of the middle class” “enormously increased construction costs” “extreme bureaucracy”	“provision of housing” “creating building permits” “exhausting all legal remedies”	“capital accumulation in the real estate sector” “high land prices”
Suburban space	“valuable green spaces” “reconnect biotopes” “prospects for remaining agriculture”	housing in suburban areas: “outdated form of settlement development”	“settlement pressure” “growing metropolises” housing in suburban areas: “big leap”	“only cropland”	“the last large reserves of land” “improvement of desolate fringes” housing in suburban areas: “affordable,” “sustainable,” “in harmony with nature”	“current agricultural practices” “desolate fringes” housing in suburban areas: “potential for densification and infill development is exhausted”
Discourse coalitions	environmental and climate protection organisations smaller opposition parties in local parliaments actors of municipal environmental/climate agencies		actors from the real estate and construction sectors welfare associations		municipal administrations, including planning authorities members of majority parties in local parliaments state-owned or non-profit housing providers	

When it comes to development, the provision of affordable housing is generally advocated in this discourse as long as it is compatible with the preservation of green space. However, affordable housing is contrasted with greenfield development, which in turn is linked to soil sealing as well as to grey energy and climate change: “New construction is...never climate-friendly” and must “become the absolute exception” (Ulrich & Meyer-Wellmann, 2022, p. 7). The idea that housing is scarce is rejected. Instead, problems of affordability are attributed to the “poor distribution of existing housing”. In Munich, small-scale housing projects are promoted and equated with densification—as long as designated green spaces are unaffected. Furthermore, a general rejection of new construction is articulated negatively. Instead, excessive zoning to create commercial areas is criticised. In Hamburg, the notion of sufficiency is a nodal point within this discourse’s inside, equated not only with net zero of new soil sealing but also with social innovation and social change regarding structures and habits. The municipal administration’s dogma of growth, which is allegedly not related to housing needs but to the wishes of profit-oriented real estate investors, is rejected as “based on forecasts that have not come true” (Klimabeirat Hamburg, 2021, p. 8).

In this discourse, suburban areas are described as valuable green spaces. Conversely, urban expansion is dismissed as an outdated form of settlement development. In Hamburg, the aim is to reconnect and maintain suburban biotopes, thereby equating suburban spaces with a net zero strategy. In Munich, the discourse is structured differently. The idea to preserve all green spaces is articulated positively alongside the current use of suburban areas. Existing garden cities and agricultural land used by agricultural businesses should be preserved. Rather than allowing these spaces to be built up with new constructions, farmers should be given the chance to maintain their livelihoods.

Overall, the discourse “preservation of all green spaces” is marginal in both cities; it is only (re)produced by environmental and climate protection organisations, smaller opposition parties in local parliaments, and actors of municipal environmental or climate departments. It was primarily (re)produced in press statements published by these organisations and parties, as well as in the local press and on local television. Hence, this discourse strongly opposes prevailing planning policies in Hamburg and Munich, which favour suburban expansion.

4.2. “Deregulation for Housing Construction Offensive”

As this discourse mainly centres on the slogan “build, build, build,” there is hardly any discussion of green spaces. The element “preservation of all green spaces,” which is articulated negatively, functions as a nodal point on the outside. The only action viewed as necessary for climate protection is the design and preservation of inner-urban green spaces.

When it comes to housing, a long list of elements are articulated as being equally problematic, including the ticking time bomb of high rents and existing housing shortages, potentially leading to an exodus of both companies and middle-class residents. Criticism is levelled at the enormously increased construction costs and higher interest rates, which are believed to discourage investors, companies, and housing cooperatives from investing in new housing. The main thrust of this discourse is on the construction of housing, which is articulated positively in regard to owner-occupied homes as well as to social housing. There is a relation of contrariety between social housing, on the one hand, and housing construction coming to a standstill along with hugely increased housing prices making it a “luxury good,” on the other. Furthermore, new housing

construction is generally depicted as vital for the economic development of cities, yet also equated with the metaphor of a “tanker,” which “takes a very long time to pick up speed” (Iken, 2023). This is part of an equivalential chain of elements including “housing construction offensive,” “housing targets,” “more realistic guidelines,” and “subsidies for the construction sector provided by cities.” Taking up the metaphor of the tanker, housing provision is contrasted with regulations imposed by local authorities, which can be regarded as another nodal point in this discourse’s outside. In particular, climate protection requirements are criticised as extreme forms of bureaucracy; indeed, their usefulness is called into question on the basis that excessive summer heat is not yet a real problem and that climate protection requirements need to be streamlined.

Concerning complete urban agglomerations (i.e., including suburban areas), settlement pressure and growing metropolises are viewed positively as indicators of economic attractiveness. Support should be given to help metropolises grow. To this end, all available space should be utilised with no holds barred. Urban expansion is welcomed as a “big leap” and contrasted with restrictions and the current state of suburban areas, which are pejoratively described as mere “cropland.” Any protest is dismissed as agitation by residents who have already settled comfortably in their affluent paradise, while the middle classes are facing the problem of high rents and may be forced to leave. Furthermore, municipal administrations are criticised for not daring to take the “big leap” of urban expansion due to their fear of protesting residents.

This discourse is articulated—homogeneously in both Hamburg and Munich—by actors from the real estate and construction sectors as well as from welfare associations. The latter advocate the concerns of those seeking housing more strongly than the former, who primarily address housing construction as an economic activity. It was primarily (re)produced in press statements by these organisations, as well as in local and national press. By focusing its criticism on the prevailing planning policies of the respective local governments, this discourse—like the previous one—remains marginal.

4.3. “Construction Should Continue, Just not Everywhere”

While the first two discourses are coherent and strongly biased towards either green space preservation or land consumption for new housing, this discourse is more conciliatory in tone, attempting to strike a balance between conflicting demands. Green space is equated with green infrastructure—a term which is said to make clear that green spaces are not a “dispensable luxury” (City of Munich, 2021a, p. 5). Green infrastructure clearly functions as a master signifier: It is articulated with many other elements such as recreation, urban climate, cold air supply, and water retention. For climate adaptation, which is seen as an essential task of urban development, green infrastructure should be mapped, measured, and qualified using various indicators. The claim that urban expansion leads to a major loss of green space is articulated as being untrue: Only carefully selected areas are said to be designated for construction. As a result, the demand to preserve *all* green spaces is positioned as a nodal point in this discourse’s outside. It is articulated with attributes such as “restrictive” and “not holistic,” thereby blurring the meaning of “green infrastructure.” The central claim, therefore, is that “construction should continue, just not everywhere” (Heintze, 2021, p. 20).

The element “provision of housing for city dwellers” appears as another nodal point in this discourse. Estimates of population growth by the city authorities are frequently cited. Depoliticised as fact, these projections are linked to the demand for continued building and more building permits for “affordable housing,” the latter being a nodal point in the discursive inside. The proponents of this discourse (mainly non-commercial actors)

articulate themselves as active in this regard, taking sufficient measures and providing a good example of housing promotion. Interestingly, private construction companies and investors are articulated in a relation of contrariety with public, welfare-oriented housing construction policy. Beyond these commonalities, some features are unique to each city. In Hamburg, for instance, the goal of building 10,000 new homes every year is frequently mentioned, which will require creating an alliance for housing between the city and the real estate industry. In contrast, the notion of lowering housing construction targets is rejected as being an irresponsible and negligent planning policy. In Munich, affordability through new construction is frequently articulated in a relation of equivalence with housing cooperatives, which are said to be in favour of new buildings yet opposed to exhausting legal remedies, high land prices, and close links to the market and capital accumulation; thus, they reject the discourse “deregulation for housing construction offensive” more directly.

As regards the relations between urban centres, suburban peripheries, and metropolitan development more broadly, the elements “infill development” and “re-densification” are articulated as elements of the discursive outside in both Munich and Hamburg. The respective chain of equivalence also includes “(inner-city) land potential as exhausted.” By contrast, the discursive inside includes “growing city” as a nodal point, positively related to urban expansion in the form of housing construction on a larger scale, viewed as a necessity of urban planning, as well as the need to build housing in suburban areas, regarded as the last large reserves of land. These elements are also articulated as equivalents of “simultaneity,” understood to mean the simultaneous realisation of housing that is affordable, high-quality, sustainable, and climate-neutral. In this case, planned large new residential quarters in suburban areas are said to be space-saving and in harmony with nature. However, suburban areas are also articulated as spaces for leisure and nature experiences, for example when designed as green corridors, and thus are compatible with green infrastructure. Yet the negative association with current agricultural uses and associated actors means that farmers would in any case be forced to rethink their agricultural practices. In Hamburg, urban expansion is additionally equated with the “improvement” of desolate urban fringes.

This discourse is widely (re)produced in both cities by powerful local actors, namely municipal authorities (including planning authorities), members of majority parties in local parliaments, as well as state-owned or non-profit housing providers. It dominates the city-wide understanding of the relationship between green space and housing construction planning (and the significance of suburban space for this) as it is (re)produced in both local and national media as well as in publications and policy documents by the city administration and governing parties, and has also precipitated current municipal policies, for which reasons it can be regarded as the hegemonic discourse.

Within this discourse, suburban areas are simultaneously articulated as the “last large reserves of land” for new housing and as green spaces for “recreation” and “urban climate.” This creates an inherent contradiction: Green spaces are to be preserved while housing is at the same time to be expanded.

4.4. Discursive Strategies Glossing Over Contradictions of “Construction Should Continue, Just not Everywhere”

In order to maintain the hegemony of the discourse “construction should continue, just not everywhere,” various discourse strategies have been devised that relativise, obscure, or seemingly resolve the contradiction between housing construction and green space policy. These can be categorised into three

groups: (a) relativisation of contradiction; (b) rearticulation of green spaces; and (c) commensurability (see Table 2 for an overview).

Table 2. Groups of discursive strategies in the discourse “construction should continue, just not everywhere” addressing the inherent contradiction of green space and housing construction policies.

Relativisation of Contradiction	Rearticulation of Green Spaces	Commensurability
Exceptionalism	Narrowing	Multifunctionality
Isolation and prioritisation of single problematisations	Place-agnostic articulation of green spaces	Sustainability fix Catachresis
Naturalisation of loss	Spatial rearticulation	

The first group of discursive strategies relativises the contradiction between green spaces and housing construction policies, for example by highlighting individual aspects of housing construction or green space policies as being exceptional, thereby placing the sealing of green spaces in perspective. In Munich, the crisis in housing supply is depicted as extraordinary, thereby prioritising it over other urban development objectives and legitimising further urban expansion. Another strategy in this cluster is to isolate and prioritise one single issue above all others. For instance, rights to housing and schooling are discursively contrasted with demands for green space preservation, whereby the latter is said to restrict the former. A third discursive strategy is to naturalise the loss of green space through urban expansion. In Hamburg, for instance, the initial supply of green space and woodland is described as being above average compared to other cities, a fact which then serves to justify the sporadic deforestation and soil sealing.

A second group of discursive strategies rearticulates green spaces by, for example, narrowing their functions to only one, such as temperature regulation or air exchange. Only this function is then considered worthy of protection, while other current uses such as agriculture or non-measured qualities such as carbon sinks are disregarded. Consequently, the nodal point of the discourse “preservation of all green spaces” is rejected: “If you compare the areas that are actually relevant [areas valuable for climate adaptation]...Munich is by no means the most sealed city in Germany” (Effern, 2023, p. 2). Another related strategy is the place-agnostic articulation of green spaces. This refers to the simple balancing of green space functions irrespective of local specificities. To this end, any understanding of open *areas* as specific places must be replaced with a focus on green space *functions*, which must be qualitatively safeguarded and adapted to changing conditions. Finally, there is the strategy of spatial re-articulation. This can mean the advocating of functionally-defined green networks (which are rather incoherent in spatial terms) rather than coherent green belts or corridors. However, spatial re-articulation can also simply be a form of rescaling: Regarding ecological contexts and the leisure behaviour of local residents, municipal boundaries are here articulated as part of the discourse’s outside, implying, for example, that residents also fulfil their recreational needs in neighbouring communities. This discursive strategy is employed to justify flexibilised inter-municipal land swaps and the development (up to regional level) of green and landscape spaces beyond the city limits. However, the strategy neglects existing ecosystems and issues of accessibility. In combination, this group of discursive strategies tendentially empties the discourse’s master signifier “green infrastructure” and consequently legitimises ongoing land sealing in suburban areas.

The focus of the above-mentioned discursive strategies is either on housing or green spaces. Conversely, strategies of commensurability articulate green space and housing construction policy within the same chain

of equivalence. Instead of justifying the contradiction between green space and housing construction policy (relativisation) or attempting to cover it up (re-articulation of green spaces), they try to eliminate it altogether. This can be done by referring to multifunctionality, by constructing a sustainability fix, or by using catachresis.

Multifunctionality is a term frequently used in association with green spaces or greenery on buildings to argue that densified green spaces still provide important ecological functions despite increased soil sealing: “Actually, it’s important to create synergies, and that works, too: green roofs and photovoltaics or green facades, and so on” (interview M6).

The term “sustainability fix” is a catch-all for discursive strategies which assume that, with the right planning and architectural engineering, sustained economic growth can be stabilised through a process of ecological modernisation (Scanu et al., 2021). One such strategy equates new housing with positive effects on the urban climate—for example, through a good building culture that is more feasible in new constructions than in existing stock—and rejects binaries such as “grey vs. green” and “built space vs. green space.” In these articulations, planning is presented as a “fine art” of sustainable development, although the terms used are vague and lack clear operational content.

Finally, some discursive strategies articulate housing and green spaces as inherently compatible, even without robust evidence or further explanations. Two examples portray Hamburg as a “national park of the future” or describe Munich’s housing situation as a catalyst for “transformation processes in housing and land policy.” Here, emblematic terms such as “national park” and “transformation” are rearticulated in new contexts without altering the underlying premises of planning. This strategy of commensurability corresponds neatly to what Howarth and Griggs (2006, p. 32) describe as catachresis, i.e., the deliberate misuse of a word.

These discursive strategies are employed cumulatively to support the central plea of the discourse “construction should continue, just not everywhere” for large new residential developments on suburban greenfield areas. The monofunctional characterisation of green spaces solely as water retention areas or reservoirs of cold air normalises place-agnostic land use accounting practices. Furthermore, the assumption that a sustainability fix can be achieved through planning is believed to lend more credibility to a catachresis such as “we must ensure that cities become the national parks of the future” (Knödler, 2021). These strategies go beyond articulation of equivalence or contrariety to secure the discourse’s hegemonic status. They allow conflicting goals to be integrated while maintaining the appearance of making sustainability commitments, thereby ultimately legitimising urban expansion projects.

5. Discussion

Despite the specific, different spatial and institutional contexts of Hamburg and Munich, our analysis reveals three largely similar discourses on housing construction and green space policy in these two cities. The discourse “deregulation for housing construction offensive” primarily articulates housing construction with economic competitiveness and growth, alongside demands for reducing planning bureaucracy. It thus can be interpreted as a neoliberal discourse that legitimises—or better: makes invisible—the sealing of green spaces. At the same time, it adopts socio-political arguments such as the needs of the middle classes, thereby referencing a popular housing construction policy discourse (Schad & Sommer, 2025) that portrays the preservation of green spaces in cities as an unavoidable conflict of objectives.

Conversely, the discourse “preservation of all green spaces” attempts to harmonise housing construction policy with environmental and climate protection by proposing alternatives to growth-based thinking such as brownfield development, recycling land, and reducing living space per person. Interestingly, this radical environmentalist discourse articulates green space preservation with sufficiency instead of linking to regressive or indeed right-wing authoritarian discourses. In this regard, our findings differ from those of other analyses of discourses on preserving green spaces against large-scale, densified residential development in suburban areas (Dunn, 2024; Janssen et al., 2022). Especially in Hamburg, the respective discourse calls for progressive social change rather than a populist positioning of “us against them.” In doing so, this discourse shows similarities to planning-related approaches to postgrowth (Savini et al., 2022).

While these two discourses are inherently consistent in terms of the radical nature of their demands, they have both remained marginal. The third (hegemonic) discourse “construction should continue, just not everywhere” differs from the others in that it attempts to integrate environmental concerns and growth-oriented politics, thereby epitomising the notion of ecological modernisation. In this discourse, “green infrastructure” appears as a nodal point that relates green spaces primarily to climatic and health functions, while cultural and subsistence practices remain invisible (Neidig et al., 2022; Warner & Meissner, 2025). It can be asked if this discourse is merely a form of “persuasive storytelling” (Mäntysalo et al., 2020) and whether planners are actually able to fulfil the demands they formulate. On the one hand, the discourse reproducers in the municipal planning administrations in Hamburg and Munich clearly verbalise their efforts to preserve the functions of green spaces in urban expansion planning via measures such as air cooling through greening, rainwater retention, and maintaining fresh air corridors. These efforts are neither rhetorical nor politically insignificant. However, fundamental conflicts between demands for affordable housing through new construction and the preservation of green spaces can only be partially resolved by planning. The loss of CO₂ storage capacity due to an area being sealed over cannot, in most instances, be compensated by well-maintained green roofs (Richter, 2022); and an area intended to fulfil recreational, construction, and compensation functions cannot simultaneously be regarded as a high-quality biotope, let alone a large protected area that would contribute to “national parks of the future.”

The idea that technical solutions—such as green infrastructure, climate models, and compensatory measures—and planning as a “fine art” can together reconcile the conflicting objectives of housing construction and green space protection creates a powerful narrative. This discourse can be understood as an expression of entrenched planning ideologies that treat growth as a prerequisite for urban modernity and planning capacity (Harvey, 2001). The self-descriptions of both Hamburg and Munich as “growing cities” illustrate this nodal point.

This leads to contradictions in the relationship between housing and green space policy, which are particularly evident in the articulation of suburban spaces and their planning. Measures such as green roofs, multifunctional green spaces, or ecological compensation can only partially offset the ecological losses caused by large-scale sealing. It is precisely here that the ideological functioning of the hegemonic discourse becomes apparent, as inherent contradictions are only symbolically addressed through strategies of relativisation, rearticulation, and commensurability. Hence, the discourse is successful in presenting urban expansion as inevitable, and the provision of affordable housing through new construction as compatible with the preservation of green spaces, “incanting” (Glasson, 2022, p. 221) this in a mythical manner, whereby planning is described as “fine art” and a “catalyst” for transformation and “the political” is closed down (Shepherd et al., 2020, p. 10).

Most importantly, the discourse “construction should continue, just not everywhere” enables a substantial political shift from the prioritisation of inner-city development to the legitimisation of suburban megaprojects while formally still adhering to well-established sustainability targets. Therefore, it is less a balanced middle ground between growth orientation and green space protection and more an expression of a deeper, hegemonic planning ideology of ecological modernisation as “sustainable non-sustainability” (Blühdorn et al., 2020) that orders contradictory social tendencies and stabilises political arrangements in the face of challenges. By “organising the complex and frequently contradictory terrain of popular common sense” (Inch & Shepherd, 2020, p. 62), the prevailing problematic development models can continue.

6. Conclusion

Our study aimed to identify political discourses on green space and housing construction policy regarding the planning of suburban areas in the context of large-scale urban expansion projects in Hamburg and Munich as well as to analyse their internal contradictions. This complements existing planning research by offering a perspective based on second-order observations to reveal the semiotic processes through which suburban spaces are socially constructed in concrete cases. The concept of “suburban” thus appears less as a topographical category and more as a projection surface for societal negotiations on growth, sustainability, and quality of life. Although our study is limited to two cities, the similarity of the deconstructed discourses provides novel insights into the mechanisms of hegemonic stabilisation beyond the basic relations of equivalence and contrariety. The discursive addressing of inherent breaks and inconsistencies greatly aids our understanding of hegemonic structures of meaning and significance. The fact that discursive strategies refer to these makes such structures insightful objects of study. The large number of discursive strategies found in combination indicates the challenge of fundamentally reassessing former “abolished” greenfield developments as “necessary” for the discourse “construction should continue, just not everywhere.”

Our results show that the idea of growth is rarely questioned even in cities with ambitious climate policies such as Munich’s declaration of a climate emergency (City of Munich, 2021b). The juxtaposition of a marginal “postgrowth” discourse and a dominant “ecological modernisation” discourse, which can also be observed in broader social debates, creates an ambivalent situation for planning practice. Planners are embedded in the hegemonic order of meaning, shaped by professional routines, institutional expectations, and dominant ideologies that determine which problems are considered relevant and which solutions appear realistic (Shepherd et al., 2020). Nevertheless, they have some discursive agency (Leipold & Winkel, 2017), which can be applied, in particular, to contradictions inherent in a discourse. They can shift meanings and disrupt existing discourses, thereby opening up spaces for new articulations. Reflexive planning practice, for instance in the sense of deliberate “non-solutions” (Heindl & Robnik, 2021), renders contradictions visible and insists on alternative forms of development, in the sense of destabilising “sedimented” discourses (Marttila, 2015, § 44). The politicisation of forecasts on housing demand from a sufficiency perspective or commercial space planning, as criticised in the “preservation of all green spaces” discourse, provides initial points of reference for strengthening postgrowth approaches in planning.

Two topics arise for further research. Firstly, the comparison of city-wide discourses with local articulations surrounding specific urban expansion projects would shed light on whether progressive discourses such as “preserve all green spaces” are also produced locally in addition to regressive anti-growth protests (Bertram, 2024; Dunn, 2024). If so, the question arises: Which place-specific constructs of suburban space do they

include? Secondly, it would be promising to examine how deeply sedimented discourses and demands, which are less verbalised and more evident in routines and norms, translate into concrete planning acts. By combining discourse-theoretical approaches with practice theories (Leibenath, 2025), it would be possible to analyse how actors deal with the inherent contradictions between housing and green space planning as well as to determine how to design “non-solutions” (Heindl & Robnik, 2021) for suburban spaces in growing urban regions.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to considerations pertaining to the protection of personal data and the intellectual property rights of the documents examined, the research data are not available for dissemination.

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