

Combining Paid Work and Care Work in Suburbia? Planning Perspectives and Everyday Experiences in Munich-Freiham (Germany)

Henriette Bertram , Sarah Mente , and Johanna Niesen 

Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering, Technische Universität Braunschweig, Germany

Correspondence: Johanna Niesen (johanna.niesen@tu-braunschweig.de)

Submitted: 31 January 2026 **Accepted:** 23 June 2026 **Published:** 27 August 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Suburban Development and City Extensions” edited by Henriette Bertram (TU Braunschweig), Angela Million (TU Berlin), and Uwe Altröck (University of Kassel), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i513>

Abstract

The compatibility of caring responsibilities and paid employment (or lack thereof) has been subject to debate in urban planning and related disciplines for decades. In short, criticism from a feminist perspective is that urban planning privileges the spatial needs and demands of paid employment over those of caregiving, thereby discriminating against caregivers. This was especially true for—often mono-functional and insufficiently connected—suburban settlements and was seen as an expression of societal power relations mediated through (sub)urban planning. In our contribution, we analyse planning efforts for compatibility and contrast them with the daily life experiences of employed caregivers in Munich-Freiham, Germany. We ask whether and how planners and other local actors in Freiham reflect on and address the compatibility-related problems of earlier suburban developments and how planning measures and intentions relate to daily life experiences. We draw on document analysis and interviews with planning experts and residents with care responsibility. Our data reveal that care and paid work are still planned for separately, which means that households that deviate from an implicitly imagined “standard” experience significant and unintended friction in daily life.

Keywords

feminist planning; gender equality; infrastructure; paid work; suburbia; unpaid care work

1. Introduction

This article explores the compatibility of paid work and care work in newly planned suburban districts through the lens of feminist scholarship. Space and (sub)urban planning are inscribed with societal values

and reflect (gendered) power relations, so that both the planning of spaces and daily life within them can reveal tensions, forces of change, or forces of inertia (Lorde, 1984; Massey, 2004; McDowell, 2004; Spain, 2014). Space connects “the everyday and the structural” (Appelhans & Schramm, 2023) and demonstrates how decisions and valuations of planners and administrators directly impact everyday choices and chances.

Suburban settlements have been criticised for various reasons. One criticism is that their layout and infrastructural equipment discriminate against caregivers in general, and, in particular, household forms other than a stereotypical, heteronormative two-parent family. Suburbia, it was argued, mirrors and perpetuates unequal societal and gendered power relations more than any other spatial category (Frank, 2009). Even without a decidedly feminist lens, Keil and Young (2011, p. 13) reach the conclusion that suburban infrastructure “fails many people most of the time and some people sometimes.”

On a wider societal level, gender relations have changed recently but are still far from equal. One of the markers for this is the distribution of care tasks and hours spent in paid employment, especially between different-sex couples with children (Fernandes, 2025), even though an increasing number of households aspire to share caregiving and breadwinning tasks equally. We henceforth use the term employed caregivers to refer to people of all genders who combine care tasks and paid work on a regular basis (Bertram et al., 2025).

In this article, we ask how the requirement to combine care tasks and paid employment is discussed and taken into consideration by planners as well as put into daily practice in the newly built suburban district of Munich-Freiham. Freiham is one of five new suburban districts studied within the research group New Suburbanity, of which the present authors are part (Altrock et al., 2024), and, due to its comparatively advanced development stage, presents a unique research context. We make three contributions. First, we strengthen an intersectionally informed feminist perspective in planning science and demonstrate how powerful and normative, yet not fully conscious imaginaries about suburbia and task distribution within suburban households influence contemporary suburban planning. Second, by contrasting planning intentions with experiences of residents, we provide a nuanced account of the complexities of combining paid work and care work and uncover “blind spots” of planning and everyday struggles of suburbanites. Third, our findings suggest that planners are more aware of employed caregivers’ needs than previously, and that layout and infrastructure in suburban districts can support compatibility to a certain extent. Through the contrast with everyday experiences, however, it becomes clear that the implicitly imagined target groups are often still narrowly defined.

In Section 2, we discuss space and planning as mediators of the structural and the everyday and relate this discussion to feminist critique on suburbia. Our methodology is explained in Section 3, followed by the presentation of results in Section 4. We discuss and contrast the two perspectives of planners and residents in Section 5 before drawing a conclusion in Section 6.

2. Care, Paid Employment, and Power Relations Mediated Through (Suburban) Space

In this section, we explain our theoretical and conceptual foundations and summarise the main points of critique on suburbia as a spatial category perpetuating gendered and intersectional inequality. Although we acknowledge that care is multidimensional (de la Bellacasa, 2012; Fisher & Tronto, 1990), this article focuses on care responsibilities for family or community members and the strategies used to combine these with

paid work. In patriarchal and capitalist societies, these indispensable tasks are often undervalued (Binet et al., 2023), although theories of social reproduction have conceptualised them as the foundation of economic activity (Biesecker & Hofmeister, 2022; Haubner, 2024). We consider paid employment and care tasks to be two sides of the same coin (Oberhauser et al., 2017) that have to be aligned by people living together in a household. We draw on Fraser's (1994) universal care giver model, which posits that care tasks and paid work should be compatible for all. Implementing this model would make it necessary to "redesign...institutions so as to eliminate the difficulty and strain," and "integrate activities that are currently separated from one another, eliminate their gender coding, and encourage men to perform them too" (Fraser, 1994, p. 611).

The debate on how society and space co-construct each other is not exclusively led by feminist scholars (Harvey, 2003; Lefebvre, 1974), but they first brought questions related to the household, family, and reproductive tasks to an academic audience (Domosh, 1998; Jarvis et al., 2009). The ways in which gender roles and inequalities are reflected by space and urban design and vice versa have been described with emphasis on a variety of topics that range from public memory and representation (McAtackney, 2018), use and perception of public space (Shirgaokar & Lanyi-Bennett, 2020), housing (Pereira & Rebelo, 2024), or mobility (Hirt, 2008; Parker & Rubin, 2023). How some of these play out in suburban spaces will be elaborated on in the following paragraphs.

Suburban living became a mass phenomenon in Europe after the Second World War and was framed as ideal for families (Bertram et al., 2026). However, it soon became clear that the spatial layout and socio-structural composition presented some residents with severe restrictions (Fainstein & Servon, 2005). In a North American context, one of the early accounts of this was Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she documents the dissatisfaction of women with narrow role assignments, not only but especially so in suburban surroundings. Friedan was later criticised as too focused on the realities of white, middle-class women, but her work remains an important reference (Henderson, 2007). Similarly, in Germany, the strict separation of public (male/city) and private (female/suburb) spheres was identified as both basis and outcome of the gendered division of labour and inequality (Terlinden, 2003). Although suburban locations in Europe were never as mono-functional as their North American counterparts, pursuing a career was usually only feasible for one of the adults in a household with dependents (Terlinden, 1990).

From a feminist viewpoint, the shortcomings of (sub)urban planning and form that failed to address the needs and daily realities of women especially, but also children, youth, older adults, and others not in full-time employment were clear and manifold (England, 1996): Suburban mobility allowed for efficient commuting to inner-city workplaces, but did not accommodate the needs of caregivers and their small-scale mobility patterns. Safe, independent mobility for care-receivers was rarely available due to the car-oriented nature of suburban areas (Baumgart, 2004; Keil & Young, 2011). Adequate employment close to home was difficult to find, and longer commutes were impossible due to the scarcity of day care. Accessibility and variety of workplaces were found to be the most profound inhibiting factors for employment opportunities for main caregivers (Rahn, 2011).

According to Bain and Podmore (2024), academic debates on gender equality, feminism, and suburbia are currently somewhat unconnected. Still, there are a number of publications not explicitly set within a feminist framework that conclude that modern family life and a suburban home are not well suited (Häußermann, 2009; Menzl, 2007; Shirgaokar & Lanyi-Bennett, 2020). With regard to out-of-home household activities,

Schwanen et al. (2007) found that different-sex couples share them more equally if the household location is within a densely populated, multifunctional area. Other research in the European and North American contexts reveals that intra-familial reasoning on the ideal residential location often highlights other aspects such as affordability, child-friendliness, or security that can be seen as arguments for moving out of the city (Karsten, 2020; Kern, 2021).

Feminist spatial scholarship has become more differentiated and more theoretical over the decades and shifted towards intersectionality and other forms of societal power imbalances (Valentine, 2007). One of the sacrifices of this has been its close alignment with planning practice. In the academic debate, it is criticised that planning practice pursued only “tactic” improvements of the built environment, but had no interest in transforming societal power relations (Tummers-Mueller et al., 2019).

Planners, however, are not the only people shaping space. More than 30 years ago, England (1993, p. 25) proposed to view “suburban women...as active and strategizing people able to alter their sociospatial relations and create neighborhood support networks to better meet their needs and those of their families.” The same, one should add, goes for suburban residents of other genders. Mlejnek and Lütke (2023, p. 301) argue that “practices of everyday life are the central elements for understanding the (sub)urban,” and are in turn shaped by “broader forces.” They describe everyday struggles as “points of friction” overcome by “everyday adaptations” (Mlejnek & Lütke, 2023, p. 302). These everyday struggles are therefore an insightful complementary lens to understand power relations and to observe wider societal change as well as forces of inertia in suburban surroundings. If, as explained above, we regard space as socially constructed and planning as a lens revealing hegemonic societal ideals, we must assume that the groups whose needs are met by planners and other local shapers of space experience fewer points of friction and less need for adaptation than others.

3. Case Study and Methodology

3.1. *Munich-Freiham as an Exemplary New Suburban District in Germany*

Munich is one of the fastest-growing metropolitan regions in Germany. Rents and property prices are among the highest in the country. Freiham presents a unique research opportunity: It is still being developed, with about half of the district built or under construction. This means that the complexities of everyday life can already be studied there, but the process is still relatively recent (Landeshauptstadt München, 2019b). Freiham is situated in the west of Munich and consists of a commercial area in the south and a residential area in the north of a newly built railway station (Landeshauptstadt München, 2016). Around 25,000 people will be living there upon completion (Landeshauptstadt München, 2025). It is promoted as inclusive and barrier-free (Landeshauptstadt München, 2018), and its design follows Munich’s general guiding principles “urban, compact, green” (Landeshauptstadt München, 1995).

As with all districts studied in the New Suburbanity research group, Freiham was decidedly planned as different to earlier suburban settlements. Although there is great difference in detail, the districts are connected through general planning principles that borrow from the “city of short distances”: varied social and green infrastructure, relatively high density to avoid unnecessary sprawl, and excellent mobility options to lower car use and carbon emissions. Freiham offers different housing forms, including social housing, cooperatives, housing for refugees or students, and a variety of floorplans (Landeshauptstadt München,

2024). A “green strip” is already built and a 58-hectare landscape park—set to become the largest in Munich—is planned (Landeshauptstadt München, 2019a). The mobility concept envisages Freiham to be car-reduced, focused on sharing concepts, with two rail connections to the city centre; daily amenities will be within walking or cycling distance (Bitter et al., 2019). The district’s educational infrastructure includes a campus with primary and secondary schools, and a special education support centre. The district features two more primary schools and 13 day-care centres (Landeshauptstadt München, n.d.). Most employment opportunities are service-oriented, which caters to local needs such as retail, childcare, and schools.

3.2. Document Analysis and Semi-Structured Expert Interviews

As a first step, 126 planning and media documents relating to Munich-Freiham (masterplans, brochures, political statements, newspaper articles, press releases, website texts) were analysed in a qualitative content analysis. As a preliminary coding system, we used five fields of action of compatibility-oriented planning according to Bertram (2023) with a number of more concrete planning measures as subcategories. These fields comprise (a) housing and housing environment, (b) green and public spaces, (c) facilities and infrastructure, (d) mobility and transport, and (e) employment opportunities and commerce. The underlying aims for all fields are to foster exchange and community, to reduce accompanying mobility and car-dependency through short distances, and to provide infrastructure for everyday needs and a safe and secure environment. Further aims, situated on a structural rather than a material level, are to improve conditions for employed caregivers, to challenge the gendered imbalance, and to elevate the visibility and valuation of care across society (Bertram et al., 2025).

The refined codes were used to prepare the guide for the semi-structured interviews with planners and residents of Freiham. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and are provided in a repository (see Data Availability). All interviews were conducted in German (English translation of quotations in all cases by the authors).

3.2.1. Interviews With Planners and Local Stakeholders

We interviewed 12 people participating in the planning process (see Table 1). The average length of the interviews was 1 hr 36 min. Most interviews were conducted in person in Munich; three online. The interviews allowed us to understand the planning process and envisaged outcomes in more detail and to learn about imagined target groups, self-perception of planning actors, as well as restrictions and obstacles. As the gender of the interviewees was not explicitly sampled, our assessment is based on appearance and other attributes like first name or social role.

3.2.2. Interviews With Residents With Care Responsibilities

In July 2025, semi-structured interviews with 10 residents with care responsibilities were conducted. This enabled us to further differentiate the fields of action and present a more nuanced understanding of the requirements of employed caregivers in suburbia (see Figure 1).

Table 1. Planners and local stakeholders interviewed.

Interviewee (Planner no.)	Interview date	Assigned gender	Role in planning process/employer (anonymised)
P1	24/07/2024	male	Association of urban renewal
P2	30/07/2024	female	City planning office
P3	30/07/2024	female	City architect
P4	30/07/2024	female	City of Munich
P5	31/07/2024	male	Architectural office
P6	14/10/2024	male	City of Munich
P7	16/10/2024	male	City of Munich
P8	18/10/2024	female	Social space developer
P9	22/10/2024	female	District committee, member
P10	30/10/2024	male	City of Munich
P11	30/10/2024	female	City of Munich
P12	09/12/2024	male	City of Munich



Figure 1. Care in Munich-Freiham in summer 2025. Photo by Johanna Niesen.

Interviewees were recruited via leaflets, addressed in public spaces, through website advertisements, and newsletters with a small financial incentive. The average interview length was 37 minutes. Interviews were conducted in playgrounds, courtyards, parks, and homes, some with children present. Most interviewees live in housing cooperatives, both public and private housing sector. Work–life arrangements of interviewees can

be found in Table 2. Although small in number, the sample represents a range of different situations but also allows the identification of common themes and patterns.

From this three-step analysis, we derived a detailed coding system showing examples, quotations, and quantitative relevance for each field of action. The results are presented in Section 4.

Table 2. Interview partners of the everyday life perspective.

Interviewee (Resident no.)	Interview date	Assigned gender	Family form
R1	01/07/2025	female	Lives with husband (pensioner), mother, and two adult children; main caregiver; 30 hr employment
R2	02/07/2025	female	Lives with husband (40 hr employment) and three children aged 1 to 8; main caregiver; parental leave
R3	04/07/2025	female	Lives with husband (40 hr employment) and one child (3 years), mother lives next door; 25 hr employment
R4	07/07/2025	female	Single parent, one child (9 years); 20 hr employment
R5	07/07/2025	male	Lives with wife (main caregiver) and toddler; 30 hr employment
R6	09/07/2025	female	Single parent with disabled child (5 years); not employed
R7	09/07/2025	female	Lives with ex-partner (40 hr employment), two teenagers, and one younger child; 24 hr employment
R8	10/07/2025	female	Single parent, lives with four children aged 4 to 15; not employed
R9	10/07/2025	female	Single parent, one child (9 years); ~35 hr employment
R10	10/07/2025	female	Lives with husband (40 hr employment) and four children in nursery and primary school; 35 hr employment

4. Results

In this section, we carve out aspects of compatibility-oriented planning that have been implemented and draw conclusions regarding the self-perception of planners as well as their imagined target groups. This section reveals which groups are confronted with which everyday struggles. We aim to describe the results and bring the two perspectives into dialogue before we discuss the findings in Section 5. The planning perspective is presented relatively briefly as the authors have previously published on these aspects (Bertram, 2023; Bertram et al., 2025), whereas the residents' perspectives are presented for the first time.

4.1. General Observations

As a general question, we asked planners about their knowledge of brochures on guiding principles for gender- or care-related topics. Some mentioned a user analysis for public spaces in Munich by Danish urban consultancy Gehl (Landeshauptstadt München, 2023) as well as a brochure on inclusion (Landeshauptstadt

München, 2018). Neither focuses on compatibility, and they are not binding (P3, P4). Gender equality, care responsibility, or compatibility were not explicitly discussed during the planning process and were not included as criteria in the design brief for the district or the selection of architects. One interviewee stated that these principles might be regarded as implicit planning goals:

I would rather say that it is written in very small print; the headings were sustainability, accessibility, city of short distances, residence, quality, and inclusivity. And because we've thought about these things...we've covered a great deal in terms of care work. (P10)

When asked about their perspective on the role of planning for compatibility or gender equality, interviewees mentioned their own care responsibilities, which highlights the importance of personal experience in shaping professional perspectives. Still, many did not refer to their scope of action with regard to the topic of gender-sensitive planning.

Although Freiham was considered “family-friendly” by the interviewed residents, all reported compatibility struggles. Care biographies and everyday routines of interviewees are diverse, reflecting unique experiences, needs, and circumstances. Still, some topics were addressed in several interviews.

4.2. Housing and Housing Environment

Housing cooperatives are pioneers for compatibility by providing shared spaces and strengthening community (Bertram et al., 2025), but they remain a niche format in Freiham. Especially in housing cooperatives, close-to-home public space, private, and semi-public interior areas were planned to connect residents:

[We wanted] real laundry rooms in the sense of: This is the meeting room because I go there to do laundry. But there are also laundry rooms that are somewhere in the last corner of the basement...that I can somehow reach via the underground car park, but it's not nice. (P1; see Figure 2)

The indoor common spaces provide play areas, fitness or co-working spaces, workshops, craft areas, guest apartments, or laundry cafés. They are situated on ground floors and are of high spatial quality (daylight, seating). Common outdoor spaces comprise playgrounds, kitchen gardens in the courtyards, and rooftop gardens (R4, R5). The inner courtyards are highlighted as a positive feature, as caregivers can keep an eye on playing children and know that they are safe (R2, R7). The combination of neighbourhood network and the favourable spatial situation represents added value:

The great thing is we have a view of the playground and part of the courtyard from up here. It gives us a full 360° outlook so we can just relax upstairs and watch the older kids play. Plus, you know the other parents—everyone knows you and knows which child is yours. (R10)

The common spaces serve as extensions to the living area and facilitate and shape community networks (R5). The interviewees described different grades of use of the common spaces (R4, R5): Some use the spaces regularly, whereas others hardly find time to use them (R4). Individual interest seems to be as important as time availability and mental load (R3). “In-between” spaces also offer relief and quality for caregivers, for example when strollers and scooters could be stored in building entrances (R5).



Figure 2. Laundry café in a housing cooperative. Photo by Johanna Niesen.

The outside areas were considered generous (R7), while the layout of the apartments was perceived as cramped and restricted. The open-plan kitchens as well as the small bedrooms were criticised repeatedly (R1) and considered inflexible.

Residents noticed significant differences between buildings of housing cooperatives and those of other developers. Housing cooperatives had a more explicit focus on community relations, supported by networks and spaces which are often conducive to compatibility. Residents help each other with meals (R6), oversee homework, or look after an unwell child while parents work in their paid job (R4). Neighbourhood networks also seem to work for older people who move to the district: “My mom has been really welcomed as the oldest person in our little block....She already has a few neighbour ladies who look after her....They just hang out...or meet up here and do things together” (R1). The close community is a great relief for employed caregivers as they can rely on neighbours in case of an emergency or incompatibility.

The perceived invitation to engage is partly reflected in statements by planners. In their view, an appropriation of spaces beyond the private realm would be desirable, but residents so far seem hesitant: “Everything is designed for that. We just realise that people aren’t used to it...they don’t dare to do it or are completely alienated” (P1).

While holding great inclusive potential for the residents, housing cooperatives create exclusions for outsiders: They select members and residents to fit their organisation. To join a housing cooperative, people buy shares and agree to participate in community tasks (R3), which not everyone is able to. One cooperative member claims that there are endeavours to become more inclusive (R10). Still, the average resident of a housing cooperative seems to hold substantial social, cultural, and/or financial capital.

4.3. Green and Public Spaces

The green strip connects the railway stations of Freiham and the neighbouring district within a 15-minute walk. Playgrounds for small children are “distributed throughout the neighbourhood within sight and sound of the residential buildings” (Landeshauptstadt München, n.d.). This was explicitly done with a view to connecting caring residents: “the opportunities it offers and the exchange between parents...there are simply a lot of playgrounds...there are no cars nearby...parents with children can meet up” (P6).

Interviewees acknowledge the number and quality of green spaces but also state that they are still insufficient. On days with good weather conditions, parks are perceived as overcrowded (R3, R5). Playgrounds in different shapes and sizes are placed alongside pedestrian routes and are well-used. One interviewee said that planning afternoon activities was unnecessary as they would just stop at different playgrounds on the walk home and always meet someone (R8). Another interviewee, however, commented on the lack of barrier-free playgrounds tailored to different needs of children with and without disabilities (R6).

Yet another interviewee criticises the lack of public spaces that are not designed with families and young children in mind (see Figure 3). The interviewee felt overlooked in her need for peace and quiet: “You just can’t find a shady spot to sit....It’s either baking in the sun or being surrounded by non-stop screaming” (R1). The lack of shade is a concern shared by caregivers for older adults and for children (R4, R5). Trees have been planted but are not yet fully grown.



Figure 3. Housing environment in Munich-Freiham connecting private and public green spaces. Photo by Johanna Niesen.

The community gardening project in the park, according to interviewees, is a place where people of different age groups and backgrounds gather (R3, R5, R6). Involvement can vary between participating on a regular

basis and only joining for the weekly open gardening hours. Generally, green spaces are perceived as spaces of play and communication but also conflict and constant negotiation.

4.4. Facilities and Infrastructure

A number of facilities for everyday needs are planned or already exist, namely a shopping centre with supermarkets, shops, and cafés in the district centre. A library will also be built soon. Each neighbourhood provides kindergartens, schools, and sports facilities as well as medical care within short distances of the residences. Health advice is available, and also spatially integrated practice rooms for doctors, but practice availability may not always meet the demands of nearby residents: “The very doctors we need here, general practitioners and paediatricians, are not getting any new accredited licences for this region” (P1). Residents confirm that medical care such as nursing homes and medical practices are still lacking (R2, R4) as well as specialist medical trades such as opticians (R2).

Interviews with residents focused mostly on childcare and school, leisure and sports, as well as local food supply. Reliable childcare was described as a basic requirement that enables the compatibility of paid work and caregiving (R9), which mirrors planning priorities. Despite their best efforts, however, families still found themselves without childcare after moving to Freiham (R8). All places in local nurseries were allocated as soon as they opened, and parents had to commute long distances to facilities elsewhere before going to work themselves. One childcare facility was unable to open due to a shortage of educators (R8). One caregiver was unable to take up paid work as she could not find adequate support for her child with special needs (R6).

While social infrastructure seems sufficiently provided for and there is a wide range of offers especially for families with children (activities/playgroups, youth farm, sports programmes), the interviewee without small children laments that participating in cultural activities requires a commute to the centre of Munich (R1). Aside from that, interviewees criticised having too few options for affordable dining, structured afternoon activities, or retail (R1, R2, R6, R7). A lack of places where caregivers could recover from their daily demands was communicated by one interviewee: “I really miss having a nice, cosy, inexpensive café. I think I would actually sit down there....And that would be my me-time” (R4).

4.5. Mobility and Transport

Children in Freiham can be independently mobile: “All children from Freiham...come to school on their own, because there is a large campus with everything, deliberately also with support centres [for disabled children]...[parents] do not have to take their children anywhere” (P10). Care-related mobility with multiple stops, however, seems not to be actively taken into account, as one local actor admits:

It doesn't help me if I 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. (P11)

Carsharing services are planned, but commercial enterprises are responsible for implementation. Public transport is experienced as crowded: “We don't have enough buses and...we don't have enough bus drivers, and you can't spread the school times so far apart that it would work for all pupils” (P11).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, commuting and transporting are the most relevant mobility aspects for caregivers (R2, R8). The mobility concept of Freiham was generally seen as positive, but not without ambivalences. Especially car reduction, which results in safe unguarded mobility for children, was highlighted multiple times (R2, R4, R10; see Figure 4): “At 7.40 am, [my daughter] leaves for school. She goes there on her own. She meets up with neighbouring children and then runs off. I then drive straight...to work” (R4). Car reduction was also beneficial for children’s independence: “The children couldn’t be as independent and free [where we lived before]....In the first few weeks...you could really see how they grew inside because they were...able to do things that they couldn’t do before” (R2).



Figure 4. Bicycle lane and pavement to support the mobility concept. Photo by Johanna Niesen.

Still, the reduced number of parking spaces that are part of the mobility concept are seen as an unnecessary complexity for visitors who arrive from outside of Freiham or Munich (R6) or parents who drop their child off at the nursery before commuting to work by car: “On the one hand, [parking restrictions are] good, but on the other hand, it’s a problem for those who have to go straight to work” (R8). Some have tried out shopping and running errands by bike and then switched back to using the car for convenience (R8). Others claim that sharing offers as well as switching between different transport services do not work reliably (R5, R8).

4.6. Employment Opportunities and Commerce

The two parts of Freiham, commercial and residential, were planned separately and without expectation of any overlap of residents and employees. Interviewees addressed the locally available opportunities of paid work, commuting, and remote work. Enabling remote work was not considered at the time of planning, and its rise in popularity during and after the Covid-19 pandemic was not foreseeable. Remote work is both convenient and challenging for people with care responsibility: It saves commuting time but also means having to do care and paid work simultaneously. Single parents in particular had difficulties fitting commuting and the work itself into the hours of childcare (R4). Not all employers offer choice in that respect: “That makes everyday life much more

difficult and exhausting, because I have to travel an hour by public transport to get to the office. And that's just time that's gone" (R10). Being able to work from home on some days, however, enables both parents to work (close to) full-time and remain somewhat flexible in case of children being unwell (R10). However, one caregiver stated that they prefer to work in the office as a more productive work environment (R9). Another caregiver tolerates a long commute because she feels supported by her current employer with regard to her caring duties (R4). Especially in the interviews with single parents, the difficulties or even impossibility of combining paid work and care were raised. When neither responsibility can be shared, the strains of combining become even more visible. Single parent networks and neighbourhood networks accessible in housing cooperatives are highly important (R4).

Interestingly, caregivers saw minimal links between planning or the built environment and compatibility and also ranked their own influence very low. This is again reflected in the interviews with planners and local actors: Employment opportunities and commerce, as shown in Bertram et al. (2025), is a field of action that planners do not hold themselves responsible for—"I don't think anyone is monitoring and controlling the issue of jobs now, because these are private-sector decisions" (P11); another stated, "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" (P10; Bertram, 2023; Bertram et al., 2025).

5. Discussion: Planning Perspectives and Everyday Lives in Suburbia

Our results reveal how suburban space and life nowadays are imagined by planning actors and how they relate to the everyday struggles of suburban employed caregivers. Planning actors showed some awareness of the decade-long feminist critique but saw very little or no connection to their own professional responsibility or even possibilities. Existing supportive resources were unknown or unused. Some planning measures implemented under the headlines of sustainability or inclusion, however, inadvertently benefit caregivers. Freiham is experienced as "family-friendly" by planners and residents alike; thus, a general devaluation or lack of awareness of caring responsibilities cannot be asserted. Family-friendliness, however, is not the same as compatibility-orientation and the use of the first term rather than the second indicates that caring and employment are still seen as and planned for as separate entities.

Planning principles like the city of short distances, car-reduction, or a varied supply of social and green infrastructure are perceived to make everyday life easier. Planners attend to their "core business," the material dimensions of everyday life such as housing, outdoor spaces, mobility, and (social) infrastructure. They do so with certain target groups—children, youth, elderly people—in mind, but not necessarily thinking about care as a system of caregiver(s), care-receiver(s), and the conditions in which they perform care tasks imposed by a patriarchal and capitalist society. The field of action "work and commerce" is only superficially addressed by planners, which leads to an improvement of fundamental care infrastructure rather than an inclusion of requirements for combining care work and paid work. Another indicator for this is the mobility concept: Car-reduction functions well for caring purposes and other daily needs within Freiham, but less so when leaving the district for work or expecting visitors from outside. The planning outcome therefore falls short of comprehensively accounting for the temporal, organisational, and relational demands associated with combining paid work and caregiving responsibilities in a way that values both caregivers and their dependents, and, at the same time, acknowledges their need to be economically active. Fraser's concept of the universal care giver society (1994) seems far from being implemented.

In all the households we had insight into, women were the main caregivers even in the case where the husband was a pensioner. With few exceptions, they were also employees working between 25 and 40 hours outside the home. Although the sample is not representative, it illustrates that suburban caregiving remains a highly unequal and gendered task. Household form and intersectional aspects play a crucial role (Bain & Podmore, 2024; Crenshaw, 1991), as those families who fit an implicit norm experience fewer struggles and less friction in everyday life than others (Mlejnek & Lütke, 2023). This is exemplified by the carer of an elderly parent who feels that most activity options are geared towards young families. In single-parent families, where the only breadwinners are also the only carers, combining care work and paid work is extremely strenuous. Commuting, work hours, and all other appointments have to fit within childcare hours, which, of course, also have to be adjusted to the children's endurance and capacity. Often, lower financial and temporal resources make it harder for single-parent families to buy property or shares for housing cooperatives and benefit from the qualities they provide.

When a care-receiver has special needs, professional care is hard to organise. Caregivers need special knowledge, and facilities have to be specifically equipped. Our sample only comprises one caregiver for a disabled child, but her experience of having to give up paid work is not a singularity. Whether this would have been easier to manage in an inner-city environment cannot be known. Interestingly, even though Freiham was explicitly planned as an inclusive district, this caregiver does not feel that disability needs were sufficiently considered during the planning process.

Housing cooperatives are seen as "islands" of community-led housing by planners and residents, which raises questions of privilege. The relief that emanates from belonging to such community networks highlights the need for family and neighbourhood support to facilitate compatibility. It also shows that extending childcare hours is not sufficient as a measure and that additional, private networks of individuals have to be organised to complement them.

Generally, work and employment as a field of action receives little attention in both the planners' and residents' perspectives. This is despite the fact that having varied, qualified, and flexible work opportunities nearby has long been identified as one of the most important factors for gender-equal compatibility (Bauhardt, 2003; Rahn, 2011). The complexity and individuality of the best way to structure employment and care became clear in the interviews: Neither remote work nor presence in an office, neither long commutes nor close-to-home workplaces, neither full-time nor part-time work were preferred by all interviewees.

Some unforeseen topics arose in interviews with residents: Problems such as the insufficient transport infrastructure or the nursery without staff can be interpreted as growing pains, but also as an expression of structural neglect for public transport and the caring and educational sectors that goes beyond local administrators' or planners' responsibilities. At the moment, life in Freiham resembles "living on a building site," as several residents phrased it. This poses a challenge especially for people with care responsibilities and their dependents who spend a lot of time close to home. To a certain extent, this is to be expected in a new and evolving neighbourhood (see Figure 5) but still increases difficulties for those who already experience friction. Planners' professional role entails overlooking long timespans, so their evaluation of these situations is different: They see them as momentary problems that have to be weathered through. For residents, it is where the larger issues—gender inequality, housing shortage, lack of skilled labour, and climate change—intersect with their daily lives.



Figure 5. Building site Munich-Freiham in summer 2025. Photo by Johanna Niesen.

All planners interviewed came across as committed and concerned individuals who strive for the best possible outcome of their work. All have or have had care responsibilities in some measure themselves. When asked about the needs of employed caregivers, personal experiences were a valuable resource. Some interviewees, however, only thought about this connection during the interview, not necessarily during the planning process. With regard to their professional responsibility for compatibility or even gender equality, answers remained vague and defensive. It may be concluded that they never acquired a professional approach towards planning for these goals or for reflecting their own power position as shapers of (sub)urban spaces and mediators of structural issues. We see more institutionalised exchange between planning research and practice and an integration of these issues into planning education as well as the active and conscious inclusion of people with (former) care responsibilities and characteristics of intersectionality into powerful (planning) positions as necessary steps to overcome this gap.

Our research has some limitations. Making appointments with planners proved difficult as their daily schedules allow for few activities other than “core business.” This may also be one reason for the low level of reflection and sense of responsibility, especially for the integration of workplaces. Instead, we were able to involve other local actors, and this ultimately widened perspectives on compatibility. With regard to the everyday perspective, an inclusion of more diverse residents was limited by language barriers, time constraints of caregivers, and hesitancy from people not familiar with academic processes. Still, our interviews reflect different life courses and family forms. Regarding planners’ notion of their own non-responsibility for the field of work and commerce, further research is needed to address the entanglement of societal norms, national law-making, local leverage for working opportunities, working conditions and fairer time politics for caregivers.

6. Conclusion

Combining paid work and care work is a structural requirement as well as one of the most strenuous facts of life for many people. We have asked how this requirement is discussed by planners and other local actors in the suburban context of Munich-Freiham, how they see their own role in enabling the reconciliation of the two realms, and how, in contrast, everyday life realities with regard to this challenge are perceived by residents. As suburbia as a spatial category has long been criticised for perpetuating a societal devaluation of care work and gender inequality, this analysis allows for conclusions as to wider societal power relations that are made visible through planning and (sub)urban space.

Our main findings suggest that compatibility, while not as devalued and overlooked as in earlier suburban settlements, is still not a planning priority and not acknowledged as a system comprising various human, material, and institutional actors. Intersectional aspects such as disability, age, or caring alone for a family exacerbate these challenges, compared to the needs of perceived “standard” households for which a general notion of “family friendliness” plays out well enough. Therefore, newly planned suburban districts produce less friction for households that need less support from outside anyway. Looking at the everyday life perspective in detail, it becomes evident that societal values and imaginaries of ideal family life powerfully, and oftentimes unreflectedly, influence planners’ work.

Although our results relate very specifically to Freiham, they also show that compatibility-oriented planning has the potential to contribute to a broader vision of (sub)urban sustainability and inclusiveness. Astonishingly, many material aspects that foster compatibility are achieved without an explicit planning debate or effort towards this goal. It is also noteworthy that more structural goals such as achieving gender equality in caring and paid work or a “universal care giver” society are unlikely to be implemented. Although these goals are an all-encompassing effort and can, of course, not be met by planning alone, necessary first steps would be to include these topics in planning education and give planners more time and space for reflection.

Acknowledgments

We especially thank all interviewees in Freiham who gave us insight into their professional practice and/or personal life circumstances. We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their kind and constructive feedback that has greatly helped to improve this article.

Funding

This research was conducted within the research group New Suburbanity funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, with financial support for publishing from the Technische Universität Braunschweig Publications Fund.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Angela Million (TU Berlin) and Uwe Altröck (University of Kassel).

Data Availability

The data are made available in the LeoPARD repository of the Technische Universität Braunschweig. Interviews of the everyday perspective are available here: <https://doi.org/10.24355/dbbs.084-202602170927-0>. The planning perspective has not been uploaded in a repository yet.

LLMs Disclosure

DeepL was used to assist translation, while Meta Llama 3.1 was utilised to selectively reformulate individual sentences and to find synonyms. No portion of the generated content was adopted directly.

References

- Altrock, U., Bertram, H., & Krüger, A. (2024). Einleitung. In U. Altrock, H. Bertram, & A. Krüger (Eds.), *Neue Suburbanität? Stadterweiterung in Zeiten der Reurbanisierung* (pp. 7–24). transcript. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839463314-001>
- Appelhans, N., & Schramm, S. (2023). Between the “structural” and the “everyday”: Bridging macro and micro perspectives in comparative urban research. *Urban Planning*, 8(4), 275–278. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v8i4.7967>
- Bain, A. L., & Podmore, J. A. (2024). Gender in a world of suburbs. In L. Peake, A. Datta, & G. Adeniyi-Ogunyankin (Eds.), *Handbook on gender and cities* (pp. 85–94). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786436139.00015>
- Bauhardt, C. (2003). Ways to sustainable transport: Gender and mobility. In U. Terlinden (Ed.), *City and gender: International discourse on gender, urbanism, and architecture* (pp. 209–228). Leske + Budrich.
- Baumgart, S. (2004). Gender Planning als Baustein der Profilbildung? Seitenansichten auf Gewerbe- und Dienstleistungsstandorte in der räumlichen Planung. In C. Bauhardt (Ed.), *Räume der Emanzipation* (pp. 77–101). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Bertram, H. (2023). Planning gender-inclusive cities: Tactical and strategic support for the reconciliation of paid work and care work. In N. Čamprag, L. Uğur, & A. Suri (Eds.), *Rethinking urban transformations: A new paradigm for inclusive cities* (pp. 169–185). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-37224-7_10
- Bertram, H., Krüger, A., & Million, A. (2026). New spatial arrangements for family living? Transaction costs of care, education, and mobility in new suburban housing districts. *Historical Social Research*, 51(1), 133–167. <https://doi.org/10.12759/HSR.51.2026.06>
- Bertram, H., Mente, S., & Niesen, J. (2025). Caregiving and paid employment in suburbia: The cases of Hamburg-Oberbillwerder and Munich-Freiham. *Urban Planning*, 10, Article 10036. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.10036>
- Biesecker, A., & Hofmeister, S. (2022). (Re)Produktivität. In D. Gottschlich, S. Hackfort, T. Schmitt, & U. von Winterfeld (Eds.), *Handbuch Politische Ökologie* (pp. 433–440). transcript. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839456279-043>
- Binet, A., Houston-Read, R., Gavin, V., Baty, C., Abreu, D., Genty, J., Tulloch, A., Reid, A., & Arcaya, M. (2023). The urban infrastructure of care: Planning for equitable social reproduction. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 89(3), 282–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2022.2099955>
- Bitter, C., Stupka, C., Böhme, P., & Kipp, T. (2019). *Erstellung eines Stadtteil-Mobilitätskonzeptes zur Förderung der alternativen Mobilität in Freiham-Nord*. Landeshauptstadt München. https://stadt.muenchen.de/dam/jcr:6928b451-3e51-4933-a930-3b580a91c3aa/Stadtteil_Mobilitaetskonzept_Freiham.pdf
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- de la Bellacasa, M. P. (2012). ‘Nothing comes without its world’: Thinking with care. *The Sociological Review*, 60(2), 197–216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02070.x>
- Domosh, M. (1998). Geography and gender: Home, again? *Progress in Human Geography*, 22(2), 276–282. <https://doi.org/10.1191/030913298676121192>
- England, K. (1993). Changing suburbs, changing women: Geographic perspectives on suburban women and suburbanization. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 14(1), 24–43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346556>

- England, K. (1996). Mothers, wives, workers. The everyday life of working mothers. In K. England (Ed.), *Who will mind the baby? Geographies of child care and working mothers* (pp. 109–122). Routledge.
- Fainstein, S. S., & Servon, L. J. (2005). Introduction: The intersection of gender and planning. In S. S. Fainstein & L. J. Servon (Eds.), *Gender and planning: A reader* (pp. 1–12). Rutgers University Press.
- Fernandes, M. (2025). *Addressing the gender care gap: Potential European added value*. European Parliamentary Research Service. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/774666/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)774666_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/774666/EPRS_BRI(2025)774666_EN.pdf)
- Fisher, B., & Tronto, J. C. (1990). Toward a feminist theory of caring. In E. K. Abel & M. K. Nelson (Eds.), *Circles of care: Work and identity in women's lives* (pp. 35–62). State University of New York Press.
- Frank, S. (2009). Architekturen: Mehr als ein „Spiegel der Gesellschaft.“ *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 25, 16–21. <https://www.bpb.de/system/files/pdf/T6NZNZ.pdf>
- Fraser, N. (1994). After the family wage: Gender equity and the welfare state. *Political Theory*, 22(4), 591–618. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591794022004003>
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique*. Norton & Co.
- Harvey, D. (2003). The right to the city. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(4), 939–941. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0309-1317.2003.00492.x>
- Haubner, T. (2024). Soziale Reproduktion jenseits des Produktivitätsfunktionalismus. *PROKLA. Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft*, 54(214), 33–50. <https://doi.org/10.32387/prokla.v54i214.2106>
- Häußermann, H. (2009). Der Suburbanisierung geht das Personal aus: Eine stadtsoziologische Zwischenbilanz. *Bauwelt*, 12, 52–57. https://www.bauwelt.de/dl/748507/10827542_f8908b8fef.pdf
- Henderson, M. (2007). Betty Friedan (1921–2006). *Australian Feminist Studies*, 22(53), 163–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164640701361725>
- Hirt, S. A. (2008). Stuck in the suburbs? Gendered perspectives on living at the edge of the post-communist city. *Cities*, 25(6), 340–354. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2008.09.002>
- Jarvis, H., Kantor, P., & Cloke, J. (2009). *Cities and gender*. Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203878064>
- Karsten, L. (2020). Counterurbanisation: Why settled families move out of the city again. *Journal of Housing and Environmental Research*, 35, 429–442. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-020-09739-3>
- Keil, R., & Young, D. (2011). Introduction: In-between Canada—The emergence of the new urban middle. In D. Young, P. Burke Wood, & R. Keil (Eds.), *In-between infrastructure: Urban connectivity in an age of vulnerability* (pp. 1–18). Praxis (e)Press.
- Kern, L. (2021). *Feminist city: Claiming space in a man-made world*. Verso Books.
- Landeshauptstadt München. (n.d.). *Nachhaltiges Freiham: Ziele, Konzepte und Maßnahmen der Stadtplanung*. Landeshauptstadt München. (1995). *München kompakt, urban, grün: Neue Wege der Siedlungsentwicklung*. https://stadt.muenchen.de/dam/jcr:f3659a62-22a3-4e04-a15a-b2cd44a8decf/Muenchen_kompakt_urban_gruen_kl.pdf
- Landeshauptstadt München. (2016). *Freiham: Development of a new urban district*.
- Landeshauptstadt München. (2018). *Freiham—Ein inklusiver Stadtteil: Ziele und Maßnahmen zur inklusiven Ausgestaltung*.
- Landeshauptstadt München. (2019a). *Freiham: Entwicklung eines neuen Stadtteils*. https://stadt.muenchen.de/dam/jcr:3f6eb0f4-df5c-4052-a5f1-ab5a9c101df8/2019_Freiham_Faltblatt.pdf
- Landeshauptstadt München. (2019b). *Gestaltungsleitfaden Freiham Süd: Beratungsgruppe „Stadtgestaltung und Ökologie.“* https://stadt.muenchen.de/dam/jcr:ff213421-22df-425d-86fc-777612c01d62/2019_Gestaltleitfaden_Freiham%20Sued.pdf

- Landeshauptstadt München. (2023). *People and public spaces: Study for the city of Munich, usage patterns of public spaces in Munich*.
- Landeshauptstadt München. (2024). *Bericht zur Wohnungssituation in München: 2022–2023*.
- Landeshauptstadt München. (2025). *Freiham: Der neue Stadtteil im Münchner Westen*. <https://stadt.muenchen.de/infos/neuer-stadtteil-freiham.html>
- Lefebvre, H. (1974). *The production of space*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Lorde, A. (1984). Age, race, class and sex: Women redefining difference. In *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches* (pp. 114–123). Crossing Press.
- Massey, D. B. (2004). *Space, place and gender*. Polity Press.
- McAtackney, L. (2018). Where are all the women? Public memory, gender and memorialisation in contemporary Belfast. In E. Crooke & T. Maguire (Eds.), *Heritage after conflict* (pp. 154–172). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351164320-10>
- McDowell, L. (2004). Thinking through work: Gender, power, and space. In T. J. Barnes (Ed.), *Reading economic geography* (pp. 315–328). Blackwell.
- Menzl, M. (2007). *Leben in Suburbia: Raumstrukturen und Alltagspraktiken am Rand von Hamburg*. Campus-Verlag.
- Mlejnek, M., & Lütke, P. (2023). The interweaving of everyday and structural perspectives: Exploring suburban struggles of everyday life. *Urban Planning*, 8(4), 301–312. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v8i4.7086>
- Oberhauser, A. M., Fluri, J. L., Whitson, R., & Mollett, S. (Eds.). (2017). *Feminist spaces: Gender and geography in a global context*. Routledge.
- Parker, A., & Rubin, M. (2023). Mobility intersections: Gender, family, culture and location in the Gauteng city-region. *Urban Forum*, 34(4), 463–479. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12132-022-09479-3>
- Pereira, A., & Rebelo, E. M. (2024). Women in public spaces: Perceptions and initiatives to promote gender equality. *Cities*, 154, Article 105346. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2024.105346>
- Rahn, C. (2011). *Restriktionen und optionen in suburbia* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Humboldt-Universität Berlin. <https://doi.org/10.18452/16388>
- Schwanen, T., Ettema, D., & Timmermans, H. (2007). If you pick up the children, I'll do the groceries: Spatial differences in between-partner interactions in out-of-home household activities. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 39(11), 2754–2773. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a38491>
- Shirgaokar, M., & Lanyi-Bennett, K. (2020). I'll have to drive there: How daily time constraints impact women's car use differently than men's. *Transportation*, 47(3), 1365–1392. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11116-018-9969-1>
- Spain, D. (2014). Gender and urban space. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 40, 581–598. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071913-043446>
- Terlinden, U. (1990). Kritik der Stadtsoziologie—Zur Raumrelevanz der Hauswirtschaft. In K. Dörhöfer (Ed.), *Forum Frauenforschung: Stadt–Land–Frau: Soziologische Analysen, feministische Planungsansätze* (pp. 31–66). Kore-Verlag.
- Terlinden, U. (2003). “Public man” and “private woman”: Discourse and practice in Western societies In U. Terlinden (Ed.), *City and gender: International discourse on gender, urbanism, and architecture* (pp. 41–56). Leske + Budrich.
- Tummers-Mueller, L., Denèfle, S., & Wankiewicz, H. (2019). Gender mainstreaming and spatial development: Contradictions and challenges. In B. Zibell, D. Damyanovic, & U. Sturm (Eds.), *Gendered approaches to spatial development in Europe: Perspectives, similarities, differences* (pp. 83–104). Routledge.
- Valentine, G. (2007). Theorizing and researching intersectionality: A challenge for feminist geography. *The Professional Geographer*, 59(1), 10–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9272.2007.00587.x>

About the Authors



Henriette Bertram is professor for gendered perspectives on technology and the built environment at Technische Universität Braunschweig.



Sarah Mente is a research assistant at Technische Universität Braunschweig and investigates the compatibility of paid and care work in suburban areas within the New Suburbanity network.



Johanna Niesen is a research assistant at Technische Universität Braunschweig and investigates the compatibility of paid and care work in suburban areas within the New Suburbanity network.