

Preliminary Decision-Making Processes in Suburban Residential Developments

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Abstract

German metropolitan regions experience simultaneous reurbanisation in core cities and intensified suburbanisation in surrounding municipalities. Given limited peripheral administrative resources and complex land availability, a fundamental question arises: Who actually steers urban development in suburban areas? While the Federal Building Code requires formal urban land-use planning, pivotal preliminary decisions on location, scale, density, and actors occur informally beforehand. This study examines how these early decision-making processes in suburban residential area development are shaped by informal negotiations among public and private actors. The theoretical framework integrates Kingdon's multiple streams framework, Sorensen's critical junctures, Sydow's path dependency theory, real estate project logic, Flyvbjerg's concepts of rationality and power, and Heurkens' typology of private-led urban development. This study combines 12 overarching expert interviews with seven in-depth case studies in the Hamburg metropolitan region, capturing perspectives from municipal stakeholders, private urban planning consultancies, district administrations, and project developers. Analyzed alongside official planning documents through qualitative content analysis, the findings reveal a distinct preliminary phase dominated by confidential, small-scale negotiations among mayors, landowners, and developers. These processes predefine core project parameters, creating path dependencies that significantly limit subsequent formal planning flexibility and public input, visualised in a multi-level, phase-based actor model. Ultimately, the findings highlight structural asymmetries that challenge systematic public steering and sustainable development in suburban areas. The study concludes with recommendations for a more proactive municipal land policy, enhanced institutional capacity-building, and supportive regional frameworks to secure long-term environmental and spatial objectives.

Keywords

informal negotiations; land availability; path dependency; preliminary decision-making; suburban development

1. Introduction

Since the Second World War, settlement development in the Global North has been characterised by substantial suburbanisation, which occurred earlier and more intensely in North America than in Western Europe (Hesse & Siedentop, 2018). In Germany and other European countries, this trend was temporarily overshadowed in the 2000s by significant growth in the core cities of metropolitan areas, driven primarily by younger cohorts and high levels of immigration from abroad. However, as early as the 2010s, suburbanisation intensified again through out-migration—particularly of households with children, but also of older demographics—to the immediate and even more distant outskirts of the core cities (Siedentop, 2024; Volgmann et al., 2022). This shift caused residential growth in the 2010s to expand increasingly into suburban municipalities (Ehrhardt et al., 2022, pp. 529–535). As a result, population numbers and dwelling completions in the catchment areas of major cities rose at a similar pace to those in the core cities (Siedentop et al., 2024, pp. 27, 37). This newly utilized land area is significantly larger due to lower peripheral densities, as over 60% of new German urban expansion developments consist of detached houses (Swiacki & Agista, 2025).

The development of residential areas in metropolitan regions is increasingly shifting to suburban areas, a trend now also evident in Eastern Europe (Taubenböck et al., 2019). Unlike core cities, where new developments are restricted to predetermined conversion or peripheral sites, smaller municipalities are often surrounded by open spaces offering multiple spatial planning options. Crucially, while large cities engage in complex planning procedures, smaller peripheral administrations often lack the capacity and resources to evaluate projects in such depth. Land availability also varies: central city projects usually utilize publicly controlled land, whereas suburban authorities develop private land or acquire it late in the process, resulting in fundamentally different framework conditions.

Metropolitan housing market pressures will remain high due to diverse employment and educational opportunities, driving larger households—particularly families—to seek affordable options in surrounding areas. This trend is reinforced by digitalisation and soaring core-city housing costs (Siedentop, 2024).

Given these persistent suburbanisation pressures, how can suburban residential developments be managed to achieve sustainable development? Considering the limited resources of smaller towns, it is critical to understand how these highly consequential developments are initiated and driven forward. To date, there has been insufficient research into the specific actors and informal processes that shape these developments before they are publicly discussed or officially processed. Hence, the impact of these preliminary decision-making processes on subsequent planning and implementation remains unclear. This study addresses this gap by examining how preliminary planning decisions arise and what role actors, power relations, and negotiation processes play. To this end, Section 2 first outlines the theoretical foundations and the current state of research. Section 3 then details the methodological approach, followed by the empirical analysis of actors, processes, and development paths in the early phases (Section 4). Finally, Section 5 presents the conclusions and implications for future suburban residential developments.

2. Theoretical Framework and State of Research

2.1. Problem Definition and Subject of Investigation

In Germany, land-use planning is regulated as the self-governing responsibility of local authorities in the Federal Building Code (Baugesetzbuch [BauGB], 2017). Section 1, Paragraph 3 of the BauGB obliges local authorities to prepare land-use plans “as soon as and to the extent that these are required for urban development and order.” It distinguishes land-use plans into preparatory land-use plans (*Flächennutzungsplan*) and legally binding land-use plans (*Bebauungsplan*).

The formal start of a land-use planning procedure is a local council resolution on the preparation of a land-use plan for a defined area (*Aufstellungsbeschluss*). This is followed by a comprehensive planning and participation process involving public authorities and other public agencies (*TöB*) and civil society actors. Once the feedback has been documented and considered, the legally binding land-use plan is revised where necessary and ultimately adopted by the local council as a by-law (*Satzungsbeschluss*). Given the extensive formal and time-consuming effort required for these procedures, municipalities generally only initiate land-use planning when a project’s realization prospects appear sufficiently secure during an upstream conceptual phase (Langenbrinck et al., 2025).

In reality, however, the development of new residential areas does not begin with this formal land-use planning procedure under the BauGB. As a rule, two key prerequisites are assessed beforehand:

The first prerequisite is to clarify the political viability of the project. In German local government studies, the term pre-decision-makers (*Vorentscheider*) is used in this context. This refers to senior administrative officials (mayors, municipal directors, and heads of planning departments) as well as key political figures (party group leaders, committee chairs, and specialized politicians) who are involved at an early stage and informally in the preparation and coordination of planned projects (Banner, 1972; Bogumil, 2002, pp. 33–37). In some cases, powerful actors outside the administration and local council, such as large companies, are also involved in this early coordination (Naßmacher & Naßmacher, 2007, pp. 245–255; Schneider, 1977). Anglo-American community power research, which examines local political decisions (Stoker, 1998), arrives at a similar assessment.

The second prerequisite is the availability of the necessary land. As landowners in Germany can only be compelled to sell or allow development under strict legal conditions, local authorities are reliant on their cooperative participation. As a rule, therefore, the conditions and key parameters of a new development area are broadly assessed at an early stage. This includes, in particular, the price expected by the landowners, which in turn depends primarily on the potential scale of the planned development.

The preliminary decision-making processes described represent a challenging subject of investigation because they take place informally and are not public. Nonetheless, they are of great significance, as they shape the subsequent manner in which residential areas are developed. Their analytical relevance lies in this combination: even before the formal land-use planning procedure begins, key decisions are made that significantly determine the scope of subsequent action. In this early phase, key parameters such as site selection, development density and ownership structure are pre-determined. At the same time, fundamental

conditions such as purchase price, development volume, and feasibility are often clarified in discussions with landowners and project developers.

From a governance-theoretical perspective, this reveals an asymmetry between formal legitimacy and actual decision-making. While the land-use planning process is characterised by participation, coordination with authorities, and documented deliberation, preliminary decisions are based primarily on informal coordination between a small number of key actors. As a result, part of the substantive and political decision-making shifts to a phase preceding the formal land-use planning procedure.

Against this background, preliminary decision-making processes were examined; the key findings are summarised in this article. Section 2.2 draws on various explanatory approaches from the literature, which should be understood as complementary, as individual approaches can only partially capture the diversity of these processes. The strength of these approaches lies in their combined presentation; accordingly, they are consolidated and presented as pre-decision mechanisms. This is followed in Section 2.3 by a brief description of the actors involved and their motives. This description is closely linked to the processes and is intended to supplement the presentation by illustrating the range of actor constellations. Combining the content from Sections 2.2 and 2.3, a conceptual, analytical model with key questions for the empirical study is derived in Section 2.4. This serves as a basis for, and facilitates a better understanding of, the results presented in Section 4.

2.2. Mechanisms of Preliminary Decision-Making

2.2.1. Agenda or Opportunity-Based Logics to Which Project Ideas Are Subject

While classical policy cycle models (Easton, 1965; Lasswell, 1936/1958) depict political processes as a linear sequence of problem definition, formulation, and decision-making, the complementary agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) explains why certain issues reach the political agenda in the first place. Building on these insights, Kingdon (1995/2014) developed the multiple streams framework (MSF) to conceptualise the various influences on decision-making processes. By viewing these processes as non-linear and accounting for elements of chance, the MSF is highly suited to analysing political decisions on complex, far-reaching urban interventions, such as new residential development areas.

Although Kingdon originally formulated the MSF to analyse the US political system, it has since been widely applied to other contexts, including the German political system (Zohlnhöfer & Herweg, 2024). The framework distinguishes between three independent streams that can converge at an opportune moment (Kingdon, 2014, pp. 86–89):

- Problem stream: the perception and definition of problems, for example via indicators or feedback from existing processes.
- Policy stream: a “primeval soup” of existing solutions developed by experts, administrations, and think tanks. Here, solutions often exist independently of problems, effectively floating around within the political sphere until they attach to a fitting problem or opportune event (Kingdon, 2014, p. 172).
- Politics stream: political power relations, public sentiment, and changes of government, which collectively determine whether an issue reaches the agenda.

A “policy window” arises when a crisis, a shift in public sentiment, or an institutional change causes the problem, policy, and politics streams to align. In such situations, “policy entrepreneurs”—leveraging their resources, contacts, and persistence—can successfully link their solutions to a problem, thereby driving decisions or agenda shifts (Kingdon, 2014, pp. 165–170).

Applied to urban planning, the MSF illuminates the process logic of linking a problem or strategic opportunity to a concrete proposed solution under given political conditions. Central to this framework are policy entrepreneurs, such as leading local politicians, project developers, or administrative actors, who drive these connections. This creates windows of opportunity where prepared conceptual ideas enter the local decision-making process, gaining relevance for the subsequent formal land-use planning process. Consequently, preliminary decision-making processes represent those early phases where such linkages are established—ultimately determining which project ideas are given a realistic chance of realisation.

2.2.2. Development Paths and the Consolidation of Project Ideas

Sorensen’s concept of critical junctures, which draws on historical institutionalism (Mahoney, 2000), highlights decision-making and conflict situations in which spatial development pathways appear comparatively open and several alternatives are possible. In such phases, often within limited timeframes, directional decisions are made that remain effective in the long term because they structure, restrict, or favour subsequent options (Sorensen, 2023, pp. 932–937). With regard to urban and land policy processes, Sorensen describes how critical junctures frequently occur not in major political debates, but in technical meetings between administration and planning bodies. While decisions in these arenas are ostensibly made only on technical issues, such as procedures, instruments, or infrastructure solutions, their outcomes shape the long-term development path of new residential areas (Sorensen, 2023, pp. 941–943).

Against this backdrop, preliminary decision-making processes governing new residential areas can be interpreted as critical junctures. It is within these early phases that the choice of location, the broad outlines of the urban development concept, and key framework conditions are effectively locked in for the first time.

In conjunction with this, path-dependence theory as described by Sydow et al. (2009), drawing on pioneering economic work on lock-ins and increasing returns (Arthur, 1994; David, 1985) as well as institutional approaches (North, 1990), explains the longer-term process that follows such critical junctures. The starting point is an initially open field of possible courses of action, within which certain decisions are made that—via self-reinforcing mechanisms, such as investments, organisational routines, legal provisions, and expectations—increasingly stabilise a specific development path. This multi-phase process model distinguishes between initial openness, the path formation phase, and potential lock-in situations where alternatives can only be realised at high cost or under specific conditions (Sydow et al., 2009, pp. 691–696).

For urban development, this means that decisions made in preliminary decision-making processes significantly influence the scope for further action. These include, for example, choices regarding the type of land use, infrastructure deployment, or land ownership structure—specifically, whether the land is to be sold to many individual owners, transferred to an investor, or retained by the local authority. Such decisions can reinforce themselves through investment and legal commitments, thereby setting subsequent residential development on a specific course.

A complementary approach arises from the project logic of property development. The literature on project management, particularly regarding the development of complex property projects, emphasises that early definitions of objectives and key parameters are central to further planning and implementation. This process carries its own logic, especially in large-scale, investment-intensive projects, where decisions on approach and design are made early on and have a cascading effect on subsequent steps. If significant changes become necessary later, they can lead to considerable delays, additional costs, or even jeopardise the entire project (Kinateder, 2017, pp. 527–529; Paulson, 1976).

This illustrates why preliminary decision-making processes are so crucial in the development of new residential areas: if key parameters are established at an early stage, this significantly restricts the scope for subsequent changes in later planning phases. This applies, for example, to the selection of specific plots of land earmarked for development, the density of development, and the question of what infrastructure is to be provided. Such early preliminary decisions act as cornerstones for the subsequent formal land-use planning process.

The approaches of Sorensen and Sydow complement this project logic: Sorensen focuses on the critical junctures where decisions diverge between different development paths, whilst Sydow describes the subsequent consolidation. The project logic further explains why early decisions in complex property projects are particularly consequential. Preliminary decision-making processes in suburban residential development can therefore be understood as critical junctures where core parameters, such as location, density, infrastructure, ownership structure, and the fundamental project framework, are determined. In the sense of path dependency, these early mechanisms ultimately shape political decisions and subsequent planning law.

2.2.3. The Influence of Power and Interests on Project Ideas

Power and interpretative authority play a central role in planning processes. Particularly during the early phases of the land-use planning process, it is often individual key figures who influence how problem situations are framed and which planning options are actively considered. They do so on the basis of their formal positions, their specialized knowledge, and their extensive networks. In the German context, Reuter has examined the influence of power in urban development in depth and embedded it firmly within planning theory (Reuter, 2000, 2023).

In an international context, Flyvbjerg (1998) has particularly elaborated on the power dynamics within the land-use planning process. The starting point for his central observation is that actors with power define what is considered rational and real. Accordingly, it is not only arguments that count in the planning process, but also communication, position, and demeanour. These determine which interpretations of need, location, or benefit prevail—and which options are excluded at an early stage. He also highlights that powerful actors construct justifications post hoc for decisions that have already been made. Flyvbjerg refers to this mechanism as rationalisation. In his empirical studies, this was observed among all key actors: decisions were subsequently presented as rational, necessary, or without alternative. Yet these rationalisation processes do not necessarily amount to deliberate manipulation; rather, stakeholders often classify their own decisions as rational, and believe in their own justifications. Furthermore, the actual power struggles are played out backstage—in preliminary discussions, bilateral consultations, and internal meetings. Public statements and procedures then merely document the positions that have already been rationalised in this way (Flyvbjerg, 1998, pp. 227–229).

Preliminary decision-making processes can therefore be interpreted as those path-setting decisions in which it is determined which project ideas appear rational and legitimate, and which options—despite the formal openness of the procedures—are in fact weeded out at an early stage. These processes are shaped in particular by the key players. Depending on the power they wield within the specific institutional context in which the project is being developed, and how they exercise it, they have a decisive influence on the early planning phase.

2.3. Constellations of Actors in Development Processes

In addition to the mechanisms, the actors involved are crucial to understanding preliminary decision-making processes. In suburban communities in particular, private companies often take on the development and implementation of housing projects, as public resources and implementation capacities are limited. These actors usually operate on a project-by-project basis and with a strong focus on economic viability and feasibility. For an understanding of preliminary decisions, it is therefore not only relevant which institutional procedures are in place, but also which actors are involved at an early stage in the development of project ideas and what interests and resources they bring to bear.

Heurkens (2018, pp. 111–117) categorises these private actors into four basic forms of project development. Although this typology emerged against a market-driven backdrop, where local authorities in these contexts play a less interventionist role than those in continental Europe, it effectively structures private agency. The first is *developer-led urban developments*, where traditional developers finance land using equity and debt to implement projects independently. The second encompasses *investor-led* forms, where institutional investors develop or acquire property for their own portfolios. The third includes *community-led* developments, where residents, landowners, or local entrepreneurs initiate smaller projects on their own land. Finally, *corporation-led* developments involve non-property corporations influencing urban growth, historically through company housing, and today via smart city initiatives. This typology illustrates the diverse range of private influence in preliminary decision-making.

Crucially, private actors do not merely emerge in later planning phases, but frequently act early on as policy entrepreneurs (see Section 2.2.1). Their role spans beyond providing capital or project concepts to the active framing through which project ideas appear realistic, compatible, and deserving of support (see Section 2.2.3). Simultaneously, their impact depends on their relationships and negotiating position vis-à-vis municipal decision-makers (see Section 2.1).

Local actors, such as mayors, department heads, or party group leaders, are not passive recipients of private initiatives, but actively help shape the interface between private interests and public planning requirements. They decide which projects are politically supported, administratively pursued, or informally pre-structured. The specific constellation of local and private actors thus has a decisive influence on which project ideas emerge, are adapted, and ultimately formalised during the informal phase.

2.4. Conceptual Analytical Model and Derivation of Key Analytical Questions

The theoretical perspectives outlined in Sections 2.2 and 2.3 demonstrate that preliminary decision-making processes in suburban residential development should not be viewed merely as a preliminary stage of formal land-use planning. Rather, they constitute an independent phase of decision-making in which key directions

for subsequent planning are already set. This phase is characterised by informal consultations, limited transparency, and specific actor constellations. In order to systematically capture these processes empirically, these theoretical approaches are synthesised below into a conceptual analytical model based on five analytical dimensions:

The first dimension concerns the initiation of a project. The literature on agenda-setting and the multiple-streams framework highlights that new residential developments in suburban municipalities are rarely the result of systematic, needs-based planning. Instead, they are typically triggered by specific site opportunities, political windows of opportunity, and strategic actors. It is therefore crucial to determine what triggers a preliminary decision-making process and from whom the initial initiative originates.

The second dimension involves identifying the key actors who shape the process in its early phase. Theoretical approaches to power, rationality, and private actor constellations show that, in preliminary processes, only certain actors possess the capacity to substantially structure the outcomes. For the analysis, it is therefore necessary to identify which actor groups play a leading role in individual cases and how their scope of influence differs.

The third dimension examines the respective negotiating arena. The literature suggests that crucial consultations often take place not in formal planning procedures, but in informal and sometimes confidential settings. For the analysis, it is therefore necessary to clarify in which constellations preliminary decisions are prepared or made, and how these arenas influence subsequent planning.

The fourth dimension identifies the decision-relevant parameters that are already established or pre-structured in the early phase. The discussions on critical junctures, path dependency, and project logic show that early decisions can significantly limit the subsequent scope for action. It is therefore relevant for the analysis to determine which parameters are established right at the outset and what significance this has for the further course of the planning process.

Finally, the fifth dimension examines the path effects of early decisions on subsequent planning. Preliminary decision-making processes are not merely preparatory steps; they often shape the content of the subsequent procedure. For the analysis, it is therefore necessary to examine how early determinations structure or restrict subsequent formal decisions, participatory processes, and opportunities for change.

This five-dimensional framework guides the systematic analysis of the case studies, evaluating them according to a uniform scheme to highlight both differences and shared structural features.

In summary, the following key questions for the empirical analysis can be derived from the conceptual model:

- How is a preliminary decision-making process initiated?
- Which actors play a decisive role in the early phase?
- In which arenas are preliminary decisions prepared or made?
- Which parameters are established or pre-structured at an early stage?
- What effects do these early determinations have on subsequent planning?

3. Methodological Approach and Study Area

Based on the analytical model, the empirical analysis examines these five dimensions through a comparative case-study design. Investigating preliminary decision-making processes requires a detailed chronology of the developmental stages leading up to formal planning. This involves identifying the specific actors involved and their influence on the process. Given the informal, undocumented nature of these early phases, an exploratory research design was employed, which is particularly suitable for such under-researched phenomena (Döring, 2023).

The study area covers the Hamburg surrounding region, comprising the districts of Pinneberg, Segeberg, Stormarn, Lauenburg, Harburg, and Stade. The Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg itself was excluded, as this major city, with a population of 1.9 million, has fundamentally different framework conditions to those in the surrounding municipalities. These include, among other things, hierarchical control, its own land holdings, substantial financial resources, and extensive planning capacities (BSW, 2024).

The investigation of the preliminary decision-making processes was conducted using two empirical approaches. Firstly, the development of individual or multiple building sites in seven municipalities was examined in depth through research into all available information. Publicly available planning documents, such as resolutions relating to the land-use plan, minutes, concepts, or newspaper articles, were used as a basis for this. These results were verified and refined through interviews with municipal planning stakeholders in the respective case-related municipalities. Secondly, 12 interviews were held with experts who have extensive and varied experience in the development of new building sites in suburban municipalities. These included, firstly, officials in the districts responsible for many municipalities in the areas of district development and regional planning; secondly, owners of established private urban planning consultancies; and thirdly, private-sector developers and promoters of new building sites.

The experts interviewed and the planning projects examined thus represent a spectrum of contexts and perspectives. The interviews with municipal stakeholders were not all case-specific. While some of them referred to concrete planning processes in individual municipalities, others provided broader practice-based assessments drawn from professional experience. During the analysis, case-specific statements were treated separately from broader practice-based assessments in order to preserve the different epistemic value of the two types of interviews. Planning projects with a start date from 2010 onwards were examined, so that those involved could clearly recall the planning process. The empirical material comprises seven anonymised case studies selected to capture variation in municipality type, development dynamics, spatial position, and project scale. Table 1 summarises the main characteristics of the cases and the respective data basis used in the analysis.

Table 1. Structural characteristics and data basis of the investigated suburban case studies.

Case	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Type	medium-sized city	medium-sized city	medium-sized city	medium-sized city	small town	small town	rural community
Municipality							
Development 2018–2023 (BBSR)	above-average growing	growing	above-average growing	above-average growing	above-average growing	growing	growing
Location	central	central	central	central	peripheral	peripheral	peripheral
Tight housing market area (§ 201a BauGB)	designated	designated	designated	designated	designated	—	—
Project location	integrated	outskirts	outskirts	integrated	outskirts	integrated	integrated
Development stage	planning phase	planning phase	implementation phase	completed	completed	planning phase	planning phase
Area (Size class)	> 30 ha	> 30 ha	10–30 ha	> 30 ha	10–30 ha	< 10 ha	< 10 ha
Housing units (Size class)	> 250 units	> 250 units	> 250 units	> 250 units	50–250 units	> 250 units	< 50 units
Developer/investor	municipal development company/private developer	private developer/urban development contract	private developer/urban development contract	private developer/urban development contract	private developer	private developer/urban development contract	private developer
Project Details							

All interviews were conducted as semi-structured expert interviews, before being recorded, transcribed, and analysed using MAXQDA. The framework for the interviews was formed by the five guiding questions derived from the theory. These also served as the basis for the creation of a coding system, which was used to carry out a qualitative content analysis. During the text analysis, further codes were added inductively.

The overarching aim was to record the chronology of individual cases and the experts' assessments across all cases in a differentiated manner within a database. The material was analysed in an iterative and interpretive manner. Rather than applying a rigid pre-defined typology, the analysis aimed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and contrasts across the interviews and documentary evidence. These observations were then condensed into analytical categories that help structure the empirical findings and support the synthesis of the process model presented in the following section. This approach reflects the exploratory nature of the study and the fact that the interview material combined case-related insights with broader professional experience, which was taken into account in the interpretation.

4. Empirical Results: Actors, Processes, and Development Paths in the Early Phases

4.1. A Process Model of Actors and Phases in Suburban Residential Developments

The analysis of the interviews and documentary evidence shows that the development of new residential areas does not begin with the formal land-use planning procedure but is already shaped in an upstream phase by informal consultations and preliminary decisions among specific constellations of actors, operating within higher-level planning frameworks. Across the cases examined, recurring patterns can be identified regarding five analytical dimensions: project initiation, the key actors involved, the informal arenas of negotiation, the early definition of core parameters, and the subsequent path effects on formal planning. These patterns form the basis of the synthetic model presented in Section 4.2.

The model is structured on two levels: the actor level and the process level. At the actor level, the groups that are consistently significant throughout the development of new building areas are depicted. Six groups were identified from the interview material: mayors, local politicians, and the local authority administration on the public sector side; alongside landowners, project developers, and, where applicable, commissioned planning consultancies on the private sector side. In addition, further actors may be involved in individual phases who may be relevant to the process at specific points but do not play a defining role throughout; they are therefore not listed as constant components in the model.

At the process level, the model depicts the development and planning process as a chronological sequence of phases and procedural steps. To ensure that the empirical findings are compatible with the institutional framework of urban land-use planning, this structure is fundamentally based on the sequence of the land-use planning procedure under the BauGB. However, the interviews clearly showed that key decisions are made even before the formal procedure begins, exerting a decisive influence on the subsequent course of planning. For this reason, the following analysis focuses on these processes preceding the formal planning procedure. A distinction is made between two phases: the initial phase and the concept phase, which are described in more detail in Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2.

Figures 2 to 4 in Section 4.2 present these two levels in a standardised graphical format (see Figure 1 for the legend). The groups of actors are positioned in the same places in all figures; only the style of presentation varies. Highlighting is used to indicate which actors are particularly influential in the respective phase (the actor type) and which forms of collaboration were central to the progress of the process (the intensity of collaboration). In addition, the actors are colour-coded to highlight their group affiliation (the actor group). In this way, the figures visualise the recurring constellations across the cases on which the model is based.

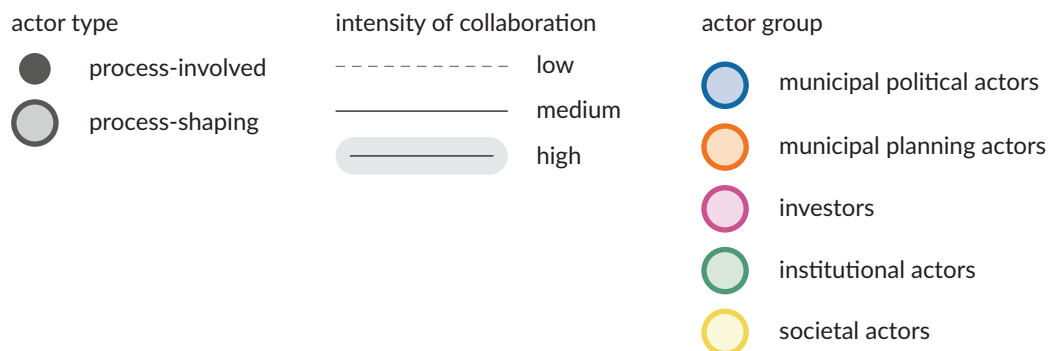


Figure 1. Legend for the process model.

The analytical value of the model lies in the fact that it does not isolate the significance of individual groups of actors but rather reveals their phase-specific impact on the overall process. For each phase, it becomes clear which actors shape the process in a particular way and which relationships between them are central to the progress of the development. This makes it possible to understand how influence, coordination, and decision-making power shift over the course of the process, thereby revealing at which points the subsequent development of a building site is substantively shaped.

4.2. Initial and Concept Phase Before the Official Start of Planning

4.2.1. Initial Phase

To analyze the structural dynamics of the initial phase, this section examines how the process of project initiation unfolds, tracing how specific key actors navigate informal arenas to negotiate core parameters and manage early path effects. During the initial phase, the fundamental parameters of a potential project are determined: whether and where a new residential development area is to be created, and the approximate scale of the planned construction. Chronologically, this phase is bounded by higher-level legal and material filters; regional planning frameworks and the municipal preparatory land-use plan act as structural preconditions, systematically filtering out environmentally protected or restricted land from the start. This structural grid heavily determines how land becomes available and which plots can realistically be optioned or acquired by developers. Within this pre-filtered framework, the immediate momentum for a project relies on specific resource interdependencies between public and private actors. Based on the tension between developer-led and community-led urban development (Heurkens, 2018), the empirical material highlights three distinct pathways of project initiation within the region:

- Scenario 1 (developer-led initiation; see Figure 2): In this highly prevalent scenario, private project developers act as strategic policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 2014). They identify market opportunities,

secure land parcels, and subsequently introduce these assembled sites into the municipal arena. This dynamic was the defining force in cases B, C, E, and G (see Table 1). In these instances, the developers exploited local growth pressures by presenting pre-packaged development concepts to the local administration, effectively utilizing their control over the land to open a policy window and persuade the municipality to initiate formal planning. In practice, developers secure these sites by purchasing land “subject to conditions precedent,” requiring that the “binding land-use plan (Bebauungsplan) must have entered into force...and the corresponding development agreements, infrastructure contracts, and associated agreements...be signed for the contract to take effect” (Interview with project developer).

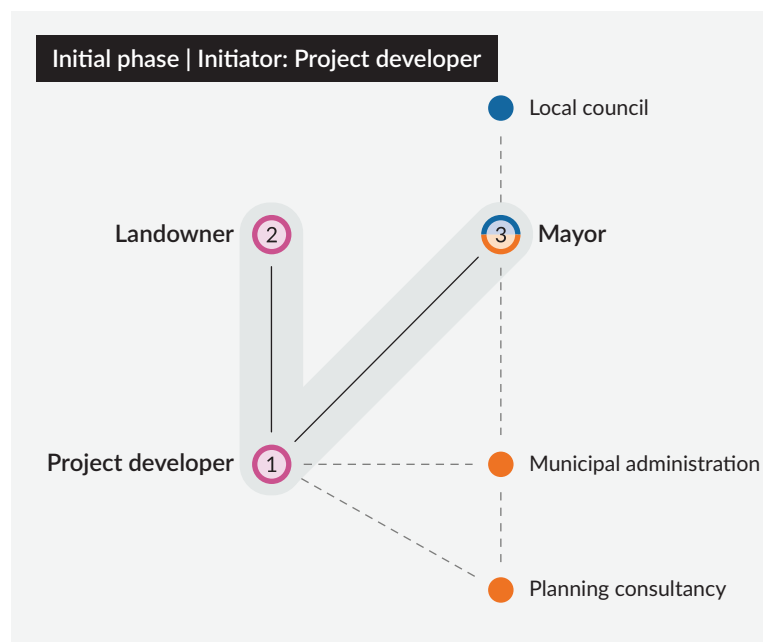


Figure 2. Developer-led initiation.

- Scenario 2 (Municipality-led initiation; see Figure 3): Conversely, the impetus can originate from the public sector, typically spearheaded by the mayor and technically supported by the local administration. In this community-led pathway, observed in cases A, D, and F (see Table 1), the municipality actively shapes the problem and political streams (Kingdon, 2014). The local authority actively addresses housing shortages or strategic urban growth by exploring land purchase options, building political consensus within local councils, and subsequently inviting private developers to execute the municipal vision.

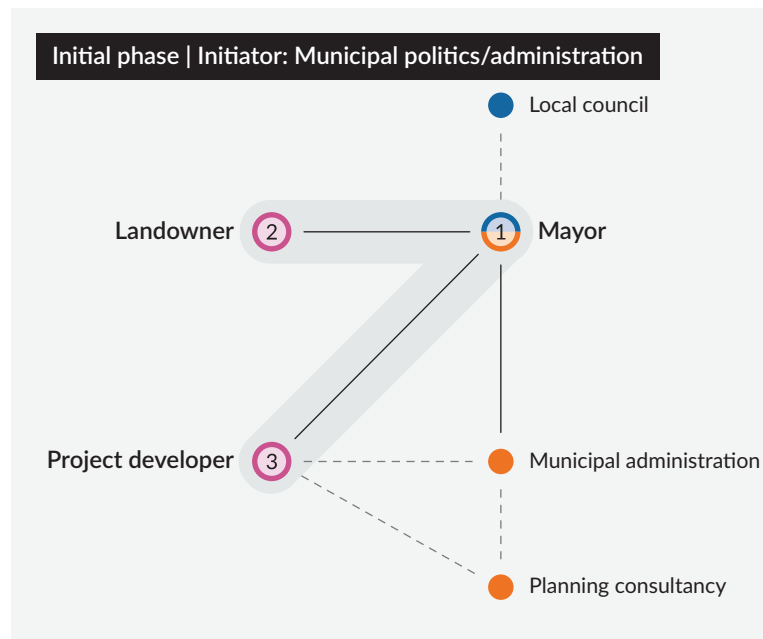


Figure 3. Municipality-led initiation.

- Scenario 3 (Landowner-driven initiation; see Figure 4): In addition to these highly institutionalised pathways, the cross-case interviews reveal a third dynamic where the impetus originates directly from private landowners or local farmers. This highlights that even outside of large-scale corporate development, local land asset holders can trigger the initial phase by introducing their resource—land ownership—into the political arena.

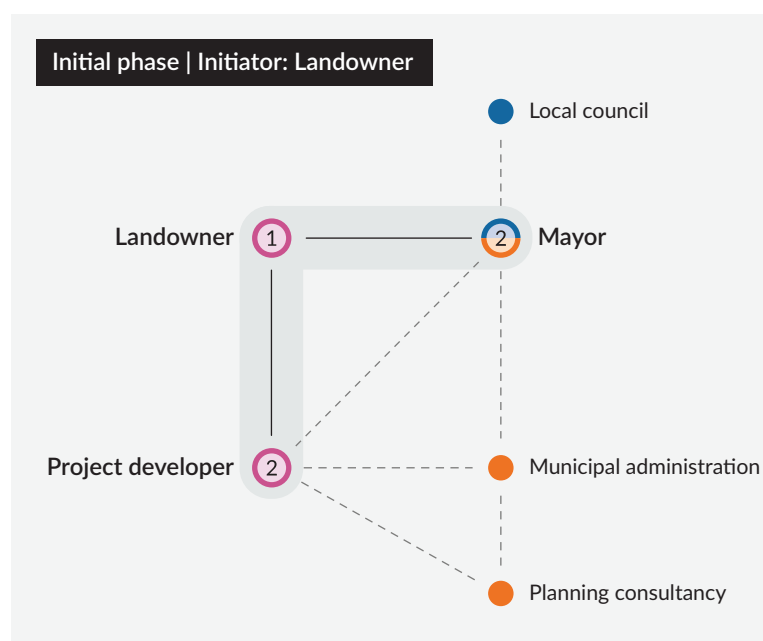


Figure 4. Landowner-driven initiation.

Regardless of which scenario triggers the process, the initial phase is characterised by a structural asymmetry. The availability of plots of land, coupled with the early establishment of the economic framework, is, in effect, a prerequisite for the commencement of the subsequent formal planning process. The conclusion of conditional contracts of sale, or at the very least the alignment of expected purchase prices—based on early informal agreements regarding building densities and typologies—effectively provides the foundational framework for all subsequent planning.

From an analytical perspective, this confidential, highly personalised stage relies entirely on informal coordination. These preliminary agreements effectively rule out alternative options and predetermine the subsequent formal planning path.

4.2.2. Concept Phase and Transition to the Planning Phase

The concept phase serves to flesh out the fundamental development idea in terms of space, content, and organisation (see Figure 5). Whilst the initial phase focuses primarily on land availability and basic feasibility, the concept phase develops the project's content sufficiently to serve as a basis for further municipal consultation and the subsequent formal procedure. The analysis of the concept phase shows how, building upon the established parameters, the configuration of key actors shifts within formalised informal arenas, thereby cementing specific core parameters and long-term path effects.

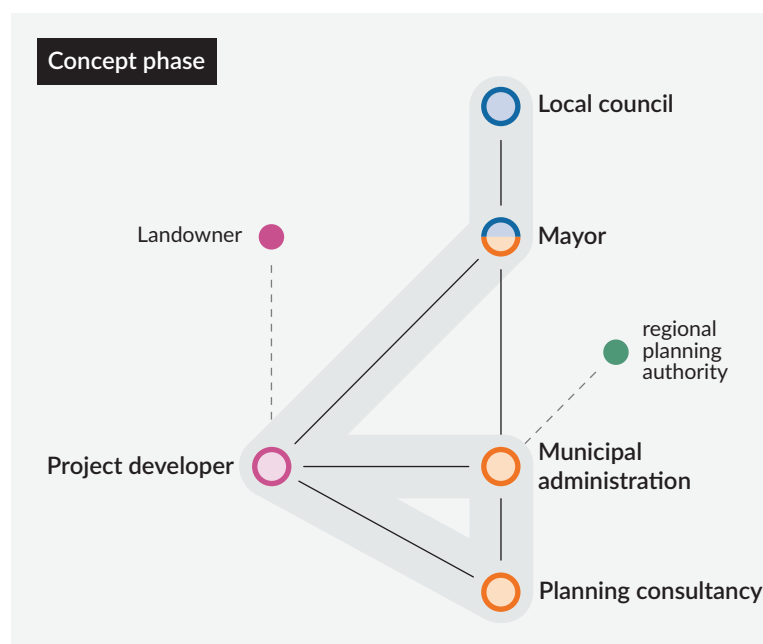


Figure 5. Actor constellations in the concept phase.

In contrast to the initial phase, the circle of stakeholders expands slightly, though key consultations remain small-scale. The local authority, particularly the mayor, remains the central figure who aggregates interests, assesses political feasibility, and coordinates internally with the administration. Depending on the circumstances, private stakeholders, landowners, project developers, and planning consultancies are already involved, contributing initial urban design concepts or land-use ideas. In practice, developers do not commission drafts without securing a preliminary assessment from the local leadership; they require “some

signal from the political factions or the mayor [that] ‘it is not forbidden to think about it.’” Only after this informal clearance do they approach a planning consultancy to draft concepts, with the planner noting that “then they come to us and we draw something up, and if the administration likes it, you then proceed to the committee, to the non-public section” (Interview with planning consultancy).

The local authority also plays a role in this phase, either as the implementing body or as an interface where planning details are generated, and initial consultations with regional planning authorities take place.

From an analytical perspective, the crucial aspect of this phase is that the initial idea consolidates into a robust plan. This shifts the focus from whether a development is possible to how it should be specifically designed and which requirements need to be reconciled. By consolidating these key parameters, the concept phase marks the transition from informal agreements to the substantive preparation of the formal procedure. This structural pattern is further validated by the broader urban planning expertise gathered in the study—as one interviewed planner observed: “There is already a [fixed] preconception at the very beginning, usually via the development contractor or the administration. That is often the case, actually a rule. And only rarely is this [early phase] open” (Interview with planning consultancy).

In planning procedures, particularly for new development areas, public criticism regarding the project’s necessity or design is increasingly common. The overarching background interviews with district administration planners, planning consultancies, and project developers reveal that this rise in critical voices appears to be largely determined by two factors:

- Municipality size: The size of the population dictates the size of the administration and the number of political decision-makers. In smaller municipalities, a smaller circle of preliminary decision-makers leads to greater individual influence and a more pragmatic approach. As one planner observed regarding these small-scale political dynamics:

The smaller the municipality, the more successful the negotiation process in the political arena...The committee has five people, (...) they come together, the mayor explains it to them, and then someone says, ‘this is important to me,’ and then there is a brief negotiation... There is a certain willingness to compromise, but the core objective is not abandoned. And if there is anyone in such a 5,000-inhabitant municipality who opposes it, they are very quickly sidelined if it aligns with the municipal interest. (Interview with planning consultancy)

Conversely, the interviewed experts observe that the potential for political and public opposition grows with the size and complexity of a municipality’s political structures.

- Planning culture: The nature of a municipality’s planning culture—whether pragmatic or ambitious—considerably influences the political discourse. The interviews with these district planners, private offices, and developers highlight that mayors in larger towns or municipalities with a strong planning culture tend to act more cautiously, often delaying decisions, which extends the planning timeline compared to smaller, more pragmatic municipalities.

Overall, across the cases examined, the key parameters developed during the initial and concept phases were successfully carried through into the formal planning and implementation stages. Although individual adjustments had to be made later due to newly emerging problems or changes in framework conditions (which usually only come to light during the planning phase once authorities and other public interest bodies become involved), the core projects were implemented as initially outlined. Neither the local council nor public participation led to any significant changes to the planning. This stability is underscored by planners who emphasize that once an initial consensus is reached in the informal arenas, the formal process rarely derails:

If there is basic goodwill in this non-public part, then the project runs through to the end, and all parties stick to it... Once the fundamental decision is made, it runs; the project developers have invested, and they need a return, [with another practitioner noting that they] have never experienced a project actually failing at the end. (Interview with planning consultancy).

5. Conclusions for Suburban Residential Developments

5.1. Key Findings on Preliminary Decision-Making Processes

The empirical analysis demonstrates that the development of new residential development areas in suburban municipalities does not begin with the formal land-use planning procedure. Instead, it commences during an earlier phase of informal preliminary decision-making. This early phase clarifies whether a specific development area will be pursued, the spatial and substantive key parameters for the planning, and the political and economic conditions under which it appears feasible.

The findings can be structured along the five analytical dimensions developed in Section 2.4:

- **Project initiation:** New residential projects emerge from specific constellations where land availability, municipal development interests, and the initiative of individual actors interact. The initiation of new residential areas should therefore not be understood solely as the implementation of planning-based needs and pre-existing concepts. To a significant extent, it results from opportunity structures that set specific projects in motion.
- **Key actors:** The early phase is characterised by a comparatively small circle of key actors. Depending on the case, the initial impetus comes from landowners, project developers, or local stakeholders, with mayors always closely involved alongside the municipal administration. However, these actor constellations are asymmetrical—influence is concentrated among stakeholders who possess crucial, project-defining resources, namely political access, land, capital, or project development expertise.
- **Negotiating arenas:** Key consultations take place in informal and non-public forums. Even before a project becomes visible to the local council or the public, key issues are clarified in confidential discussions, bilateral consultations, and small coordination meetings. These forums are not merely preparatory in an organisational sense; they actively shape the content of the subsequent planning process, as it is here, early on, that decisions are made regarding which options to pursue and which to rule out.
- **Key parameters:** Key parameters of the subsequent development are already established, or at least heavily pre-structured, during the initial and conceptual phases. These include, in particular, the location,

the approximate scale of the development, the securing of land, economic expectations, and initial ideas regarding the implementation strategy. Once agreed upon by the key stakeholders, these parameters form a highly stable framework for the subsequent formal procedure.

- Path effects: These early decisions generate significant path effects. The cases examined show that the basic assumptions established in the preliminary decision-making phase are rarely questioned to any significant extent in later planning stages. Although subsequent adjustments are made due to technical requirements, public comments, or minor conflicts over details, the fundamental logic and scope of the project generally remain intact. The results thus confirm the assumption developed in Section 2 that preliminary decision-making processes constitute a distinct early phase that significantly shapes subsequent development paths in advance.

5.2. Placing the Results Within the Discussion of Early Planning Processes

Above all, the findings contribute to a more precise understanding of early planning processes in suburban residential development. They demonstrate that the emergence of new development areas cannot be adequately explained by looking exclusively at the formal land-use planning procedure. Instead, a significant part of the decision-making takes place beforehand, a phase in which these areas are initiated, examined, coordinated, and gradually consolidated.

At the same time, the findings confirm the validity of the theoretical perspectives outlined in Section 2. The multiple-streams framework explains why certain project ideas are pursued under specific local conditions, while others fail to materialize. Similarly, the concepts of critical junctures and path dependency illustrate why early decisions regarding land use, the scope of development, and implementation logic have long-term consequences for subsequent planning steps. Furthermore, the findings on actor constellations and informal negotiation arenas underscore that these early processes are heavily shaped by position-bound resources, institutional roles, and strategic options for action.

Beyond the specific study area, the results point to a broader issue in planning theory. Whenever local authorities rely on the participation of private owners and, frequently, private project developers when developing new residential areas, informal coordination in the early stages becomes critical. While the institutional framework may vary, the fundamental phenomenon of early pre-structuring of subsequent planning through decisions on land, stakeholders, and development parameters remains universally relevant.

5.3. Methodological Reflection and Limitations of the Study

As an exploratory qualitative investigation, this study does not aim for statistical representativeness, but to reconstruct typical constellations, process patterns, and decision-making logics. Case selection was structured to identify recurring structures across different municipality sizes and project scales.

However, the generalizability of the results is limited in several respects. Firstly, only projects that were actually pursued and realised were considered. The study thus provides insight into realized development pathways, but not into projects that failed at an early stage or were abandoned during the process. The analyzed cases are therefore restricted to contexts where no major discrepancies with overarching planning documents occurred, or where any such misalignments could be resolved without significant obstacles.

Secondly, the cases analysed predominantly involve developments with relatively few conflicts, in which the fundamental legitimacy of the new sites was not massively contested. Cases involving significant ecological, legal, or political conflicts may exhibit different dynamics. Thirdly, the findings relate specifically to growing municipalities in the Hamburg region and cannot, therefore, be readily transferred to other spatial or institutional contexts.

These limitations qualify the scope of the findings but do not fundamentally undermine their analytical value. The interview material displays a high degree of consistency across the individual cases, and the reconstructed patterns have been confirmed by stakeholders with experience in a large number of planning processes. In particular, the assessments from planning consultancies, district administrations, and developers support the central observation that land availability, informal coordination, and early political endorsement are of considerable importance for the development of new building areas.

5.4. Implications for Planning and Settlement Development

Our results demonstrate that the spatial form and location of suburban residential developments are significantly shaped before formal planning begins. When pivotal structural decisions are made informally within small circles of actors through a largely pragmatic approach, sustainability requirements—across environmental, social, and spatial dimensions—are likely to receive less consideration. Consequently, integrating these aspects into subsequent planning processes becomes considerably more challenging.

To counteract this, strengthening municipal agency during these formative stages is critical. Local authorities require resources to guide concept development before land transactions, design proposals, or political commitments entrench path dependencies. This necessitates proactive land policies, cooperative frameworks, and institutional structures that align suburban growth with long-term spatial and environmental objectives. In Germany, federal states and districts could operationalize this by establishing building land funds and regional development companies to support smaller authorities in this ecological optimization.

Overall, our findings underscore that private land ownership remains a decisive factor in urban development. In Germany, legal interventions or expropriations are restricted to major infrastructure or highly resource-intensive urban development measures (*Städtebauliche Entwicklungsmaßnahmen*), which smaller municipalities rarely have the capacity to deploy. In practice, formal project planning is contingent upon securing land availability—or fails entirely if land issues are ignored. While this political-economic reality applies worldwide, land availability is rarely addressed in spatial science curricula or standard planning concepts. Given pressing ecological and socio-economic challenges, spatial research must focus more intensively on instruments that improve land availability for sustainable development and inner-city regeneration.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The qualitative data generated during this study cannot be shared publicly due to the personal data and privacy restrictions agreed upon with the participants.

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