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Planning and Living Suburban Urbanity: A Berlin City Extension Revisited

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Abstract

To avoid the shortcomings of large, postwar-era housing developments, city extension planning has shifted towards ideals of social and functional mix, referred to as “urbanity.” In Germany, this shift can be observed since the 1990s, when a new phase of city extensions started as research simultaneously began to focus on the diversification of suburbia. The extent to which the guiding principles for new city extensions have been implemented and their contribution to diversification remain open research questions. In this article, we investigate the relationship between planned goals and lived reality in the first city extension of post-reunification Berlin: Karow-Nord. The estate was planned under the guiding principle (*Leitbild*) of a “new urban periphery” (*Neue Vorstadt*). Based on a qualitative case study, we examine the *Leitbild*’s aims, the assessment of its realization, and residents’ perspectives. The study reveals a discrepancy between the ideal communicated to the public and the actual planning, as the social and functional mix has been subordinated to other goals. Although the neighborhood today is socially mixed, residents do not perceive it as particularly urban. Instead, they value its position between city and countryside, and describe it as village-like. The urban features of Karow-Nord, however, give rise to challenges in the more classic suburban surrounding areas. We discover processes of symbolic boundary-making that are fueled by negatively labelled features of the city and political mobilization against new city expansions. The study contributes to conceptual debates about suburbia and to a reflection of contemporary city expansion planning.

Keywords

boundary-making; city extension; diversification; everyday life; planning ideals; residents’ perspectives; suburban urbanity

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, research on suburbia has experienced a shift (Brake et al., 2001; Brauer, 1993; Phelps et al., 2006). Processes of social and functional diversification and trends toward independence of suburbia from core cities are coming into focus, and the historical heterogeneity of the settlement areas is highlighted (Harris & Larkham, 1999; Hayden, 2004; Lütke & Wood, 2016). Almost parallel to the diagnosis of diversification, many local governments in Germany were planning new city extensions. As urban planning has moved away from the paradigm of functional separation and towards compact urban development, objectives such as functional and social mix, referred to as urbanity, were articulated for the new settlements (Altrock et al., 2024; Dembski et al., 2021; Feldtkeller, 2018; Schmitt, 2021).

As a result of these developments, research is investigating the diversity of suburbia and identifying different forms such as “suburban urbanities” (Vaughan, 2015) and “inner-city suburbanization” (Frank, 2016), with some even questioning the term “suburbia” in general (Forsyth, 2012). On the other hand, the contemporary planning of city expansions in Germany breaks with earlier concepts of monofunctional housing estates by aiming at a functional and social mix. The extent, however, to which life in suburbia is becoming more diverse and urban remains an important question for research in many respects. Studies on social structure, lifestyles, and residents’ perspectives are rare and often continue to focus on “classic suburbia” with detached housing (Hesse, 2012; Keil, 2018; Nijman, 2020; Walks, 2013). Furthermore, valid social geodata at the small-scale level are not available for the entirety of Germany, hindering quantitative research on this subject (Kiesler et al., 2024). A relevant question thus emerges: To what extent have the guiding principles for new city extensions been realized? Do they actually contribute to an “urbanization of the outskirts”?

In this article, we look at one of the first city extensions of the 1990s in Germany. Located in the northeast of Berlin, it was planned under the banner of a “new urban periphery” (*Neue Vorstadt*) with the goals of functional and social mix (Hesse & Wolf, 2005). Almost 30 years after completion, we ask: How do planned ideals and lived reality relate to each other? To investigate, we first analyze the implementation and the relevance of the guiding principles from the perspective of planning actors. Then, the perspectives of residents are examined. Building on the discussion of suburban urbanity, we ask: To what extent is the settlement perceived as urban, and which of its characteristics do residents value most? Before examining the model and its implementation (Section 4), and the residents’ perspectives (Section 5), we review research on social diversification and conceptual debates on urbanity in suburbia (Section 2) and explain the data basis (Section 3). The conclusion reflects the central outcomes of the case study (Section 6).

2. Urbanity on the Outskirts? The Diversification of Suburbia

This diagnosis of diversification has profoundly affected the debate on the definition of “suburbia.” Some scholars even question the relevance of the term “suburbia,” given the diversity of suburban spaces (Forsyth, 2012). Alternative approaches move beyond the location-based definition, such as Walks’ (2013) proposition of a three-dimensional framework based on centralization, differentiation, and functional orientation, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of space on a spectrum between urban and suburban. Frank (2016) introduces the concept of “inner suburbanization,” describing how suburban-like enclaves, characterized by middle-class families and newly built, monofunctional residential areas, are emerging within city centers. At the same time, the concept of “suburban urbanities” (Vaughan, 2015) points

out the importance of infrastructure in suburban areas that can lead to forms of social interaction with urban characteristics. The growing emphasis on diversification has highlighted the importance of the concept of urbanity, typically defined in terms of size, density, and heterogeneity (Wirth, 1938). In Germany, Burdack and Hesse (2006) diagnose a growing resemblance of suburban areas to the city, as they are increasingly dense, socially diverse, and functionally mixed. The shift toward urbanity is reflected in the emergence of the “new urban periphery” concept, which explicitly aims to integrate urban qualities into new city extensions (as discussed in Section 4.1).

While the debate on concepts is quite extensive, there are not many empirical studies on the topic of diversification in Germany. With regard to the “classic suburbia” characterized by detached housing at cities’ fringes, studies assume that the suburban way of life continues to differ from the city and is oriented towards the private family (Menzl, 2017). Czekaj et al. (2003) suggest that in monofunctional suburban quarters, residents’ communication is more restricted to immediate neighbors than in inner-city, mixed-use areas, where street-level publicness fosters casual contacts. Göb (2019) points out that suburban residents primarily feel a sense of belonging to their own homes and families, while the identification with their neighborhood plays a secondary role. These findings echo Fava’s (1956) description of a village-like lifestyle among middle-class suburban families. However, this view has been challenged by research diagnosing a process of social and functional diversification in suburban areas (Brake et al., 2001; Burdack & Hesse, 2006; Siedentop et al., 2006).

Some studies on the regional level investigated social structural diversification. Based on official data, they show that, since the 1990s, more single and older households have been moving to the suburbs, and rental housing has gained in importance (Aring & Herfert, 2001; Friedrich et al., 2013). According to an evaluation of a Germany-wide survey, the distribution of educational and occupational groups has not changed between large cities and suburbia from 2004 to 2018, and suburbs remain the predominant residence for higher income groups, despite lower educational levels compared to large cities (Kiesler & Keller, 2019). Kiesler et al. (2024) use commercial grid data (*Microm*) for German metropolitan regions to identify changes in age structure—which has trended slightly younger in cities compared to suburban areas since 2015—but no change in terms of income groups. Interestingly, the proportion of people without German citizenship increased significantly in both area types since 2012. An evaluation of census data from 2011 and 2022 indicates that the proportion of non-Germans in the suburbs rose from 6.4 to 13.2 percent, compared to 13.0 to 21.6 percent in large cities. Overall, the studies indicate that the outskirts of cities remain the preferred place for higher-income groups. Household and age structures are diversifying moderately, and since the 2010s, there has been a significant increase in non-German citizens. While empirical studies documenting urban lifestyles in the suburbs are hard to find, one exception is Ströbele’s (2017) quantitative analysis of political orientations, which suggests a dominance of urban lifestyles because occupations in the suburbs do not differ fundamentally from those in the city, and many residents commute.

It is unclear whether diversification in Germany’s suburbs is taking place via larger-scale contrasts and forms of segregation, such as between single-family homes and housing estates, or whether there are smaller-scale trends toward mixing. How new city extensions contribute to these dynamics and how urbanity is reflected in the suburbanites’ lived experience remain open questions. A survey among experts in Germany suggests that city extensions built since the 1990s predominantly consist of mid- to high-end, monofunctional residential areas (Freudenau et al., 2021). In terms of infrastructure, these extensions are often hubs for daily needs,

offering better access to services and public transport than traditional detached housing areas (Krüger, 2024). Studies on residents' perspectives, however, are largely missing. While Matthiesen (2002) found resistance to densification among long-time residents in the outskirts of post-reunification Berlin, Basten (2004) highlighted the contrast between planners' and residents' perceptions of space in a city extension of Potsdam. In our study, we ask how far the aim of urbanity in terms of functional and social mix has been realized, and to what extent living in a new urban periphery is perceived as urban. By analyzing the relation between planning and living in a long-term perspective, we contribute to the debate on diversification as well as on concepts of suburbia.

3. Method

This case study draws on semi-structured interviews with experts and residents in Berlin-Karow, supplemented by participant observation. In May 2025, seven interviews with eleven experts were conducted, including former and current key planners for Karow-Nord and northern Berlin. Additionally, we interviewed social workers, local cultural organizers, members of civic associations, and a local politician, recognizing that individuals with role-specific knowledge can be considered experts (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). The interviews centered around the planning processes and characteristics of the neighborhood. Duration ranged from one to three hours.

Some experts facilitated access to residents for a field phase in July 2025. Contact was also established through newsletters, local notices, and personal approaches in public settings like the local library. Snowball sampling was used to get in contact with contrasting groups (Small, 2009). In total, 28 interviews with 34 residents were carried out, including a group discussion among six participants. The topics of conversation revolved around the characteristics of the neighborhood, sense of community, everyday life, infrastructure, use of public space, and the relation to other neighborhoods and the inner city. To contrast perspectives from Karow-Nord with those from the adjacent, older neighborhood, the sample comprises ten residents from Alt-Karow (Table 1). Although women and older individuals are overrepresented, a diverse range of perspectives and residents, including those with migration backgrounds and varying lengths of residence in the neighborhood, is captured in the sample.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the resident sample.

Residence		Gender		Age		Migration Background	
Karow-Nord	24	<i>female</i>	24	18–40	5	<i>yes</i>	7
Alt-Karow	10	<i>male</i>	10	41–64	16	<i>no</i>	27
		<i>diverse</i>	0	65+	13		

During the fieldwork, participant observation was incorporated. We also took part in an official event on citizen participation for a new city extension in northeast Berlin. Observations and reflections were documented in field notes. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, anonymized or pseudonymized. A structured qualitative content analysis was carried out (Kuckartz, 2018). The analysis involved category-oriented structuring of the data, enabling an examination of sample members' statements on specific topics. Two separate category systems were developed for the expert and resident interviews, with some categories overlapping. In the following sections, quotations from the interviews are numbered and identified (e.g., E01 for experts and R02 for residents).

4. Karow-Nord as a “New Urban Periphery”: Guiding Principle and Implementation

4.1. Three Phases of City Extensions and The Neue Vorstadt

Berlin is one of Germany's cities that have been planning large-scale city expansions since the 1990s, thereby entering a new phase of densified settlement construction on the outskirts. Since World War I, three phases of city extension can be distinguished in Germany (Peterek & Bürklin, 2018). The first phase covers the period of prosperity during the Weimar Republic in the 1920s, when modern settlement concepts were implemented. The extensions were planned in contrast to the functionally mixed, rampant industrial city, and were influenced by the model of the garden city. In terms of size and floor height, the buildings are significantly smaller and lower than those built from the late 1950s onwards. The second phase of city expansion lasted until the 1970s in West Germany and until the fall of the Iron Curtain in East Germany. In West Germany, it was initially guided by the concept of the “gegliederte und aufgelockerte Stadt” (“articulated and decentralized city”), later shifting toward “urbanity through density.” In East Germany, the guiding principle was “complex housing construction.” This phase saw the emergence of densified, high-rise housing estates, particularly from the 1960s onwards. Architecture, the single-purpose focus on housing, and a one-sided occupancy by low-income groups through a large share of social housing units have given these estates a bad reputation and turned them into a symbol of failed social housing policy in the 1980s in West Germany (von Saldern, 1995).

In anticipation of growing populations, large cities in western Germany such as Frankfurt am Main, Munich, Hamburg, Freiburg, and Hanover planned new housing developments on their outskirts in the 1990s and initiated a third phase of city extension (Freudenau et al., 2021; Peterek & Bürklin, 2018). A key factor was the distinction from the “mistakes” of the second phase of urban expansion. Social and functional mix as well as moderate density thus became visions for this ongoing phase of city extensions (Altrock et al., 2024; Bornmann et al., 2026; Freudenau et al., 2021, p. 6). In East German cities, the construction of detached houses on the outskirts—discontinued during the GDR era—was catching up during the 1990s. Berlin and adjacent cities, however, planned large-scale urban expansions, as they anticipated strong population growth in this metropolitan region and sought to counteract urban sprawl caused by the catch-up suburbanization. Two housing estates—the garden city of Falkenhöh in Falkensee (1.450 residential units) and Kirchsteigfeld in Potsdam (2.680)—were started, while in Berlin, Karow-Nord was planned with 5.000 residential units, and construction began in 1994 (Basten, 2004; Hesse & Wolf, 2005).

Simultaneously and on the basis of planning Karow-Nord and Kirchsteigfeld, the Berlin Senate developed the *Leitbild* of the *Neue Vorstadt* for new city extensions (Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung und Wohnen [SenStadt], 2018, p. 86–88). This guiding principle was promoted by Stimmann (1993), Senate Building Director, as specific to Berlin, since it intended to tie in with older structures of Berlin in the spirit of a “European city” (SenStadt, 2018). However, with the principles of functional and social mix, an even explicit relation to “urbanity” with the word “Stadt,” and moderate density, the concept formulated objectives that are common for the third phase of city extension. As one member of the Berlin Senate stated, its genesis was strongly influenced by the second phase of city extensions: “Those responsible here were primarily concerned that the model of new housing construction—in terms of design and ideology—was far enough away from the ‘Platte’ [epitome of settlements of the second phase]” (SenStadt, 2018, p. 86).

4.2. Two Assessments: Good Urban Design and Infrastructure, but no Functional and Social Mix

The question of Karow-Nord's ideal and reality has been addressed by Hesse and Wolf (2005), who praise the architectural quality of the expansion, particularly with regard to the design of green spaces, and the provision of social infrastructure. However, they conclude that urbanity in terms of functional and social mix was not achieved (Hesse & Wolf, 2005, p. 20). Given the reluctance of investors and the district government to allocate 20 percent of floor space to services and commerce, the mix of uses was reduced to local amenities. Social mix was sought through different types of housing in terms of floor plans and ownership (Hesse & Wolf, 2005, p. 19). Particularly in the areas adjacent to the detached housing in Alt-Karow, condominiums in low-rise buildings were planned, also to create a smooth transition to the average four-story buildings in Karow-Nord. But low demand, which began about two years after construction started, has torpedoed the realization of further condominiums. New residents came mainly from East Berlin, from large housing estates and surrounding areas, and included fewer young families than expected, so that an older population with an above-average proportion of welfare recipients emerged (Hesse & Wolf, 2005, p. 20).

Ten years after Hesse and Wolf's assessment, the Berlin Senate commissioned a study evaluating 15 housing estates built since the 1990s in terms of aspirations and reality. Karow-Nord receives special attention as a so-called "prototype" of the *Neue Vorstadt* (SenStadt, 2018, p. 86–139). Similar to Hesse and Wolf, the architectural qualities are described as successful, as is the provision of daily infrastructure (Figure 1). For the non-achievement of functional and social mix, the contextual factors since reunification are cited. After euphoric years of change following reunification, when an economic and population boom was expected and the "new urban peripheries" were planned, disillusionment set in (SenStadt, 2018, pp. 26–28). This began with Berlin's failed candidacy for the Olympics in 1993. The "phase of disillusionment" was exacerbated in 1995 with a decline in population and an economic recession lasting several years. This



Figure 1. Central square in Karow-Nord (photo by the authors).

prompted a change in strategy: Hans Stimmann announced in 1996 that the concept of the *Neue Vorstadt* was no longer valid and that inner-city development would take priority. The model of the “European city” was transferred from the periphery to the center, under the slogan *Planwerk Innenstadt*.

The previous studies cite the miscalculation of population growth as the main reason for the failure to achieve urban qualities. In 1996, significant vacancy in the rapidly constructed Karow-Nord emerged, and instead of the planned 5.000 apartments, only 4.505 were ultimately built (Hesse & Wolf, 2005, p. 19). The lower population growth also put further planned city extensions on hold, and building densities of the realized projects were reduced (SenStadt, 2018, pp. 90–93). According to both studies, a functional and social mix was hardly feasible in a context in which suburban areas were less densely populated than expected, networking effects with surrounding “new urban peripheries” were lacking, and socially privileged groups preferred detached housing.

4.3. Housing Supply and a Compact Alternative to Detached Homes

What do local government planners have to say about the ideal and reality of Karow-Nord almost 30 years after completion? We interviewed three planners: the former chief planner and a planner of another city expansion who later headed a new Senate department for housing projects in the mid-2010s—both were identified as central figures in the planning process and, despite their retirement, remained accessible to provide rare, first-hand insights—alongside a third planner currently responsible for projects in northeast Berlin. Firstly, the interviews with the two now-retired planners reveal that the implementation of Karow-Nord followed a pragmatic approach, and urbanity in terms of social and functional mix only played a secondary role. Following the chief planner of Karow-Nord, the model of the “new urban periphery” was rather a byproduct:

We didn't have a deductive urban planning and design concept. There were projects in the city center or related to transportation, the fastest ones, we always looked at them and asked: What are the consequences for the overall urban discussion? And since Karow was really the fastest project, Stimmann said: “Hey, I can't sit in all these design meetings, let's make some guiding principles so that it can be generalized.” (E01)

He emphasizes a pragmatic planning approach, which was supported by the fact of tumultuous change and a public debate focusing on broader issues:

We were always glad that we were able to work on our projects in the shadow of the big decisions: Brandenburg Gate open or closed? Or how does the government axis look like?...We were lucky in some cases to be able to make our Senate decision after the decisions of these federal institutions: Should we build Karow-Nord or not? It was more by chance, but that's why the public hardly noticed what we started in the northeast. (E01)

Both of the former planners we interviewed highlight quick housing construction, derived from the growth expectations, and a compact settlement structure with a good quality of housing and infrastructure as central goals. A planning team composed of members from East and West Berlin searched along the five large star-shaped S-Bahn transport axes running outwards from the city within a radius of two kilometers for locations. For the field on which Karow-Nord was built, development plans for single-family and terraced

houses from the 1930s were found. “But it was clear to us that we weren’t going to build detached houses, but apartments. And then we discussed floor area ratios and a few test designs, and we said: Okay, 5.000 apartments would have to go there” (E01). The former head of the department for larger housing projects emphasizes that a good quality of architecture, urban design, and infrastructure were intended to dissuade people from single-family homes and “classic, randomly placed row houses” (E05). They were aware of the reservations about compact settlement forms in the surrounding area, hence why they wanted to convince people with the “neighborhood benefits” (E05) of compactness. The organization of a civic participation process for Karow-Nord, however, was only minimal. According to the chief planner, there was an informal event in Alt-Karow described as a casual gathering with “beer tables.” The wishes of local residents were taken into account, and they reportedly concerned design qualities such as pointed roofs, courtyards, and open spaces.

That urbanity has been a subordinated goal of the planning of Karow-Nord stems from the fact that functional and social mix have been abandoned as soon as obstacles occurred. The chief planner speaks about a lack of interest by investors. Regarding social mix, investors did not want to construct unsubsidized dwellings. Coming from a Berlin system in which, until 1990, housing construction was almost exclusively state-subsidized due to rent controls (even in the western part), only five percent of the apartments were agreed to be privately financed. As a resident monitoring study conducted until 2002 shows, of the 4.505 apartments completed by 2000, indeed 196 (5%) were not built with the first (1.948 units, 43%) or second (2.361 units, 52%) subsidy programs (*Förderweg*) for social housing (Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, 2002). This surprisingly high proportion of social housing clearly contradicts the idea not to repeat the mistakes of the second phase of city extension, even though the availability of social housing at that time might have been less socially selective than today.

In their overall assessment, both planners rate Karow-Nord quite positively. Again, they speak primarily about qualities of architecture, housing, and design, as well as the availability of everyday amenities. The main critical point in their view is the traffic connectivity. A better transport infrastructure in terms of a second S-Bahn station and a connecting road to the Federal Highway was never realized, and both are skeptical that this will be improved. The perspective of the planner who is currently in charge of city expansion in northeast Berlin differs significantly from that of the two retired urban planners:

So, in the 1990s, housing estates were built; they were all criticized. We have examined them critically, and that’s why we no longer talk about estates [*Siedlungen*]. There is also a brochure....The term “estate” implies a residential area, only living, whereas with “quarter” or “new urban quarter,” we like to strengthen both...we wanted to create a neighborhood where people live and work. (E06)

The quote sounds as if functional mix is a new planning goal—but, like social mix, it was already part of the *Neue Vorstadt* concept. By “a brochure,” the planner refers to the Senate study we mentioned (see Section 4.2), which cites the false expectation of population growth as the main reason why urbanity was not achieved. It is unclear whether the concept of “new urban quarter” (*Neue Stadtquartiere*), which the planner stresses—because the term “quarter” tends to evoke the hope of an urban quarter” (E06)—actually represents a useful innovation for the planning of city extensions. We come back to this question after the analysis of the resident perspectives.

5. Suburbanites' Perspectives on Urbanity

5.1. Enjoying the “In-Between” and “Village-Like”

When we asked inhabitants of Karow-Nord how they would describe it to outsiders, the respondents paint a fairly consistent picture. One person who has lived in the area since its completion says: “I find it a pleasant place to live, because you can get into the city quickly and also to the countryside very quickly” (R08). Another resident elaborates:

It's a bit like a village in itself. We have pretty much everything we need for basic necessities. But if you think a little further, about cultural institutions, variety, if you want to go out for a meal or something, it's completely different from Mitte or Friedrichshain, Kreuzberg [districts of the inner city]. (R04)

Described as “village-like” or “small-town,” the location of the settlement between the center of Berlin and rural Brandenburg is an integral part of living there (see Figure 2). For access to a wider range of cultural activities, goods, and services, residents rely on the inner city. At the same time, Karow-Nord is noted for its good supply of everyday necessities and social infrastructure, such as schools and doctors. This intermediate position is described as contributing to a great satisfaction with the living situation. As one resident puts it: “We say, we live in Berlin, but we live in a small village. And we also say, our village is beautiful” (R16). The city is an option at hand, and on the outskirts one can enjoy quietness, safety, proximity to nature, relatively affordable housing costs, and family-friendliness. Almost everyone in the sample—with or without children—emphasizes the good



Figure 2. Aerial view of Karow-Nord (center) next to parts of Alt-Karow (left). Source: Roletschek (2009).

facilities for families, including playgrounds, kindergartens, and schools. Residents with children often mention that they moved to Karow-Nord because of the family-friendliness, which is also associated with the qualities of tranquility, safety, proximity to nature, and short distances in everyday life.

The perception of living in Karow-Nord comes much closer to the descriptions of classical suburbia as described by Fava (1956) than living in an urban area. The qualities which are appreciated on site are overwhelmingly not related to urbanity; rather, they are articulated in contrast to living in the city. The city is appreciated as a nearby opportunity and variety. On the other hand, the perception of living in Karow-Nord differs from what Göb (2019) describes for settlements of detached homes, where inhabitants primarily identify with their family and home. The residents mostly feel a sense of belonging to Karow-Nord, which offers an infrastructure for daily needs—apart from jobs—and is described as “village-like” or “small-town” because of the manageable scale, short distances, and social legibility in terms of social relations. Asked if Karow-Nord is more urban or rural, a resident describes it as more urban because there is still something going on in the streets until the late evening. However, it is not really urban either, “because somehow there are connections. As I said, you know one or the other by sight. And you also know roughly where they belong. In which corner.” In summary, the resident calls Karow-Nord a “something in-between [Zwischending]” (R08). This position “in-between” is also supported by daily routines of commuting to work. Interestingly, only a few respondents describe the lack of functional mix in terms of job opportunities as a deficit; rather, they see their routes to work as alternation.

5.2. Challenges of Social Mix: Symbolic Boundaries and the Fear of Negative Features of the City

Alt-Karow, the adjacent neighborhood of Karow-Nord with a historical village center (parts of it seen in Figure 2, left side), is characterized by detached housing and had a population of around 5,000 inhabitants at the time of reunification. As Table 2 shows, the population of Alt-Karow has grown over the past 35 years—primarily due to the construction of single-family homes—and the residents there can be described as belonging to an (upper) middle class. There is a clear status gap between Alt-Karow and Karow-Nord, with the former being equipped with more economic capital (ownership of homes, income). In Alt-Karow, the proportion of single parents, welfare recipients, and people with a migration background is also significantly lower, whereas the proportion of married couples and the average age are higher—even compared to Berlin as a whole. In contrast, the social structure of Karow-Nord comes much closer to the average of Berlin. Deviations indicated by Table 2 concern primarily a lower proportion of persons with a migration background and single persons, but more single parents. If the population of Berlin is taken as a benchmark, it can be said that the social structure of Karow-Nord is relatively mixed.

Residents also generally describe the population of Karow-Nord as “mixed” and (lower) middle class. When speaking about the social composition of the neighborhood, an influx of people with a migration background over the last few years is often reported. The “internationality” of the settlement is an important issue in Karow as a whole. The prominence of this issue is also due to refugee housing, partly located in Karow-Nord, but also in the direction of Buch, in large housing estates a few kilometers north of Karow. Even though some challenges related to the rising share of migrants reported by the interviewees (e.g., language barriers in schools) are plausible, it seems that migrants often serve as a kind of scapegoat for a broad range of criticised aspects. We interpret the distancing from migrants as one crucial element of processes of symbolic boundary making in Karow (cf. Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Wessendorf & Monson, 2023).

Table 2. Socio-structural data of Karow.

Residence	Karow-Nord	Alt-Karow	Berlin total
Population	11.764	8.421	3.897.145
Average age	40.15	47.43	42.8
Residents without German citizenship	17.2%	6.1%	24.9%
Residents with migrant background	27.1%	12.9%	41.1%
Persons with 5 or more years of residence (as of 2022)	66.4%	78.6%	65.5%
Single persons	22%	16.3%	32%
Married couples	38.6%	53.6%	35.9%
Single parents	14%	4.7%	7.3%
Median income of full-time employees (as of 2023)	€3.611	€4.428	€4.190
Unemployment rate	4.6%	1.4%	5.1%
Full-time employees in the lower pay bracket	14.5%	8.2%	14.8%
Social welfare recipients (SGB II & XII)	10.7%	2.1%	10.7%

Notes: Values as of 2024, unless stated otherwise; median income for Alt-Karow: weighted average of the median incomes of planning areas Karow Bahnhof and Karow Ost; lower pay bracket defined as less than two-thirds of the median pay of all full-time employees. Source: Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg (2025a, 2025b, 2025c), Bezirksamt Pankow (2023), and Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen und Wohnen (2025).

The most evident is the distancing from migrants in the form of discrimination, as noted by experts, but particularly by two interviewed residents of African descent. They report regular and sometimes severe experiences of discrimination, such as comments on the street or while shopping. A mother recounting an episode with a store clerk who yelled at her and harassed her while paying, says: “People just get annoyed. They think you’re having children for money” (R16). The distancing from migrants is then verbally evident in some resident interviews:

Those who don’t go to work get an apartment. They get a WBS [certificate of eligibility for social housing]....And they all run around here with their cell phones, speaking foreign languages, and get an apartment. And those who go to work earn too much for a WBS. And they have to look for an apartment on the free housing market. And I think you know what’s going on there. (R06)

The quote comes from one of the few residents who is not satisfied with living in Karow-Nord. Interestingly, the “dissatisfied” in our sample share the perception of being financially tied to the neighborhood and having already moved there as a choice between lesser evils (cf. Karsten, 2020). The resident is complaining that low-income households and people with migrant backgrounds have been “pushed out” of the inner-city in recent years and made Karow-Nord “full”—in contrast to the “emptiness” he experienced as one of the first residents. He complains about many phenomena, such as increasing littering, a rise in violence in schools, and overcrowded public transport systems and streets. The distancing from migrants is thus intertwined with further qualities such as low social status and the image of fullness or overcrowding, which leads to problems in infrastructure such as schools, traffic, or waste management. We interpret this overlapping of attributions as symbolic boundary-making, where negative labels of the “city” or “urbanity” are being fused. In a way, it is the “urban” character of the social mix of Karow-Nord which provokes further fear of negative features of the city like insecurity, crime, overcrowding, or density.

Also, rising anonymity—another feature of “the city”—is attributed to migrants. This holds true for some older, single households. They argue that the international residents and their languages cause them to lose familiar points of reference and are one reason for growing loneliness. In comparison to the last quoted resident, they formulate the symbolic boundary moderately, and underline that they primarily lack infrastructure in Karow-Nord which enables meetings and community building. The desire for more community-building amenities is shared by some other single households and single mothers in our sample—household groups which are typically at risk of loneliness (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2024). It is probable, however, that the symbolic boundary-making in Karow reinforces the wish for more community. For example, some residents with an immigrant background express this desire, coupled with a sense of alienation stemming from experiences of discrimination.

Finally, symbolic boundaries are drawn between Alt-Karow and Karow-Nord. One long-term inhabitant, who is also active in local politics, describes Karow-Nord as follows:

A UFO on a green field, with a very, very high proportion of social housing, architecturally and urbanistically, in my opinion—well, that’s how they built back then—completely misplanned....The effect was that, after it was finished, there were many vacancies, up to ten percent, and then around 2000, a very large Russian-German community settled in Karow, which then left again after ten to fifteen years....Nothing has grown together there....You have a family house, one and a half or two stories, and then you put a five-and-a-half-story building 20 meters next to it, so, no, that’s an urbanistic separation, clearly recognizable, old and new. Karow still suffers from this today. (E07)

The metaphor of a UFO for Karow-Nord was not invented by this resident—it is a recurring term. Symbolic boundaries from Alt-Karowers do not only address the social structure, but typically the building height and density of the settlement, which are considered incompatible with the single-family homes. Of course, not every resident in Alt-Karow is drawing boundaries; e.g., we interviewed a person who moved to Karow-Nord whose parents still reside in Alt-Karow. Residents from Alt-Karow also regularly use infrastructure like kindergartens, schools, supermarkets, or the public library in Karow-Nord.

5.3. Anti-Urbanization Discourse and Political Mobilisation

The symbolic boundaries which are drawn from Alt-Karowers towards the “UFO” as well as between residents of Karow-Nord have a political dimension. The planning of city extensions, which were put on hold during Berlin’s “phase of disillusionment” in the mid-1990s, has been revived due to the shortage of affordable housing and renewed population growth. A significant proportion is planned in Pankow, a large district in the northeast where Karow is located and which still features a high proportion of undeveloped land (Gerlach, 2021). “New urban quarters” on a scale comparable to Karow-Nord are also planned for the green spaces directly adjacent to Karow, including former sewage fields (Stadtentwicklungsamt Pankow, 2021).

The planning of city extensions in northern Pankow is a hotly debated political issue. Numerous citizens’ initiatives have formed, mobilizing with varying but essentially consistent arguments. An initiative was launched in Karow, registered in 2021 as the association *Wir für Karow e.V.* (“We for Karow”). It explicitly opposes development forms similar to Karow-Nord, advocating for the preservation of the village structure and green spaces, as well as infrastructure measures, especially regarding transportation. According to

participants of the initiative, it was formed in response to a “token citizen participation” by the Senate in 2018:

There was a framework plan for the construction areas here, and there was great agitation in the spot. The final result was, they presented options that would have allowed 12- and 13-story buildings in the middle of single-family home areas. (E03)

The main arguments against city expansions are listed:

Märkisches Viertel, Gropiusstadt: There are twelve-story buildings right next to single-family homes on the other side of the street. Impossible! For both sides, impossible. People are being robbed of their homes [*Heimat*], so to speak. And those who move in, Märkisches Viertel is a great example of this, they’ve been promising to build a subway there for 50 years; it wouldn’t have been a big deal, it’s not far. Do you think it’s there? (E03)

Large housing estates of the second phase of city expansion serve as a specter of immense density and height, but also—as is often revealed later—of a low-status and international population that “overloads” infrastructures such as the transport system. The initiatives’ demands for adequate transport infrastructure, citizen participation, or nature conservation do indeed address weaknesses in the implementation of Karow-Nord. However, the decisive factor here is the logic of exaggeration, which also fuels the boundary-making in everyday life. As one resident of Alt-Karow, who had purchased a plot of land adjacent to a field during the GDR era, explains: “Then, wherever there are still open fields, real monsters will be put up. And we don’t yet know whether it will stop at ten stories. Because we’re being taken for a ride without end” (R14). He goes on to explain that the construction of new housing estates will lead to a strengthening of the right-wing populist AfD party: “So if anything is boiling up here, it’s the AfD....They were the only ones who stood up back then when Buch and Karow were basically flooded with foreigners” (R14).

The anti-urbanization discourse against new city extensions is indeed adaptable to mobilizations of the populist radical right party AfD, and coalitions between both are likely to form (Domann, 2024). These coalitions are mentioned by the interviewed planner responsible for city extensions in Pankow as one reason why he resigned from some projects. Interestingly, the anti-urbanization discourse does not cite the image of the city when qualities like congestion, insecurity, poverty, or destruction of nature are labelled, but rather of city extensions of the second phase. This image seems to be quite effective, as it was used already in the 1980s as a persuasive argument against state-subsidized social housing and revived in debates over the reintroduction of a nonprofit housing sector in Germany (Voigtländer, 2016).

6. Conclusion

This article has examined Berlin’s first city extension in the post-reunification period from the perspective of how planned ideals and lived reality relate to each other. The re-examination of the planning process has shown that urbanity in terms of social and functional mix was a subordinated goal, despite being officially highlighted by the concept of the “new urban periphery.” This result points to a discrepancy between the vision communicated to the public and the actual planning that may often apply to city expansions since the 1990s in Germany, as one of the few existing studies indicates that they are predominantly neither socially

nor functionally mixed (Freudenau et al., 2021). Concerning social mix, the planning of Karow-Nord was influenced by a path dependency on a governance constellation, as housing construction in Berlin was subsidized by the state until reunification. Although social housing in Germany experienced a resurgence in the post-reunification period, a subsidy rate of 95 percent of apartments is unlikely to be found in other city expansions. Paradoxically, Karow-Nord's social structure is relatively mixed today. But as social housing in Germany is predominantly a temporary arrangement, only parts of the first subsidy programs remain as social housing, which made up 43 percent of the whole stock during construction. In addition, the architecture, urban design, and provision of daily infrastructure contribute to the attractiveness of the settlement for a wider range of social status groups today.

The case study demonstrates how the urban characteristics of relative social mix and density give rise to challenges on the outskirts of the city, where traditional village and classic suburban structures predominate. Watt (2009) has shown in his research on a newly built single-family housing development on the outskirts of London, which is embedded in an area with public housing and lower-status groups, that the affluent middle-class residents develop a selective sense of belonging to their "oasis." They draw symbolic boundaries to the surroundings, whose infrastructure they do not even use. In a way, we see an inverse situation in our case study. Residents of the surrounding areas of Karow-Nord draw boundaries to the so-called "UFO" and articulate a selective sense of belonging to their "village." But differently from what Watt describes, we also observe symbolic boundary-making *within* the different neighborhoods, particularly in Karow-Nord, where migrants and lower-status groups are associated with negative aspects of the city such as insecurity, congestion, and anonymity. The frontiers are not as clear as the juxtaposition of "new" and "old" suggests, and Karow-Nord serves as a new hub of infrastructure also for residents of the surrounding areas.

Remarkably, residents of Karow-Nord also describe their neighborhood as village-like. They appreciate characteristics like tranquility, family-friendliness, security, nature, social legibility, and manageable size, which they see as contrasting with life in the city. However, they also highly value the inner city as a source of variety at hand. Hence, transport infrastructure is crucial for them, apart from the fact that commuting is the norm. Even though Karow-Nord is a different type of suburb than a historic village, a detached housing area, or a city extension of the second phase, the description of its intermediate position between city and countryside by residents underlines the significance of geographical location. In light of the ongoing debate on concepts, this finding suggests that location remains a key factor in defining suburbia, and that living on the outskirts of a city is already a quality in itself. Regarding the concept of "suburban urbanity," it can be said that suburbanites in this study value urbanity particularly in terms of infrastructure for basic needs, social interaction, and good transportation links to the inner city.

Finally, the case study suggests that planning urbanity on the fringe of cities might not always be the best option. At the least, the notion of urbanity should be reconsidered, since it risks provoking resentment among a population that appreciates living outside the center but with the city at hand. In the Berlin context, we actually see an emerging coalition between anti-urbanisation discourses and right-wing populism (Domann, 2024), which Dunn (2024) also describes in a case study from Sweden. The actual concept of the "New urban quarter" in Berlin might better be replaced, for example, by a term connecting to the model of the garden city. This is, of course, no argument against the aims of social, functional mix and compactness. These goals make sense, but their implementation should be adapted through civic participation and to the specific location. Due to rising housing costs and increasing social diversity, city expansion planning has become more challenging and

requires greater negotiation than it did 30 years ago, also given that the suburbs remain the preferred location for high-income groups.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request, depending on interviewees' consent.

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