

Suburban Development and City Extensions

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Abstract

This thematic issue focuses on newly planned and currently transforming districts at the outskirts of major metropolitan areas in Europe. After reurbanisation and inner development dominated urban research debates as well as planning practice from the turn of the century onwards, in the wake of continuing influx into large cities and a subsequent shortage of affordable housing, suburbanisation is coming back into focus. The contributions in this thematic issue are clustered within three key thematic areas: (a) sustainability and the planning of urban expansion, (b) planning imaginaries and the realities of suburban living, and (c) governance, conflict, and negotiation. The contributing authors have analysed case studies in Spain, Ireland, Poland, Hungary, and Germany. While each case is different and analysed through a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, all show that suburbanisation is a timely and highly relevant topic that serves as a powerful lens for making current planning ideals and guidelines, contradictions and challenges, as well as societal power relations visible.

Keywords

city extension; governance; housing pressure; planning imaginaries; social infrastructure; suburban living; suburbanisation; sustainability; urban density; urban peripheries

1. Urban Peripheries Back in Focus

After decades in which “reurbanisation” occupied a prominent place in urban research and planning debates, urban peripheries have returned to the centre of attention. This is reflected both by the heterogeneity of developments in different parts of the world and by a growing awareness of the complexity of urbanisation phenomena. Whilst an initial schematic classification of the future challenges of urban development in a

global context—set out around the turn of the millennium in the preparatory report for the Urban 21 World Conference on the Future of Cities in Berlin in 2000—assumed that cities could be broadly categorised into three groups (“developed and ageing,” “dynamically growing,” and “excessively growing”), the international debate on urban development paradigms has since proliferated.

The report succeeded in directing attention towards the clearly discernible—though often oversimplified—challenges posed by uncontrolled informal migration on the outskirts of the megacities of the Global South, and in identifying this as one of the key issues in urban development in the 21st century, with all the associated complex issues of governability, sustainable development, political dominance, alternative development paths, and much more. Furthermore, the classification at that time foreshadowed an in-depth examination of stagnating or even shrinking cities often undergoing comprehensive transformation in old industrialised regions across various continents. This gained momentum in many places, particularly in the 2000s, and not only transcended the limited scope of debate in the North of England or the Rust Belt in the USA, but has become one of the key paradigms of urban development worldwide.

Nevertheless, even at that time, the oversimplification and the associated over-emphasis on a model of “good governance” were evident limitations. Whilst this certainly directed attention towards successful model cities and the broader societal prerequisites for sustainable and future-proof urban development, it was nevertheless hardly capable of doing justice to the scale and diversity of the challenges. Since then, the global perspective has broadened enormously in the first decades of the new millennium. Concepts such as “planetary urbanisation” and, with regard to urban peripheries, comprehensive analytical efforts such as the in-depth study of manifestations of the “suburban planet” have made a significant contribution to this.

Alongside the aforementioned temporary shift in academic discourse towards “re-urbanisation” and infill development—particularly observable in Western industrialised countries—suburbanisation processes continued, even as urban expansion lost considerable momentum. At the same time, the foundations were laid for a more systematic understanding of urban peripheries and the developments taking place there. However, many of the insights generated in this context remained strongly influenced by geography and sociology, whilst the disciplines of urban design and planning appeared to show only limited interest.

To a certain extent, this can be attributed to the planning context in which the aforementioned developments took place: Reflections, guiding principles, and policy concepts aimed at exploring more sustainable spatial development centred on approaches and sets of strategies such as the energy optimisation of the building sector, the regeneration of existing neighbourhoods—and in particular their public spaces—steps towards a “mobility transition” and the scope for space-saving urban and infill development. However, these were frequently discussed specifically in inner-city settings or entirely independently of specific site conditions in variously characterised parts of metropolitan areas. To illustrate this point, two prominent examples among many are worth mentioning: firstly, the focus of the normative urban development debate on the “15-minute city”—a concept applicable across different urban contexts, but frequently discussed through examples of dense urban neighbourhoods—and secondly, the emphasis placed on ambitious schemes to curb motorised private transport in city centres from Paris to Barcelona.

2. Renewed Urban Expansion as a Planning Challenge

Against the backdrop of these trends, urban expansion has gained new significance in planning practice in many places. This can be seen, perhaps indirectly, or even coincidentally—in conjunction with a general political “shift to the right” and the associated increased attention to the concerns of residents of urban peripheries or rural areas. In any case, it may also be regarded as a paradoxical consequence of the “success story” of planning’s focus on urban infill development, with its increasing conflicts arising from redensification measures and the exploitation of easily realised “potential.”

This raises fundamental questions: In the face of mounting pressure on housing markets, particularly in metropolitan areas, to what extent are planning research and practice prepared to deal with a renewed surge in suburbanisation? Do they pursue normative sustainability goals or contribute to their implementation? This is where the current thematic issue comes in. It addresses issues that have been inadequately researched, ranging from the needs, lifestyles, and socialisation of today’s suburban residents, to the ambitions, strategies, and courses of action of the stakeholders involved in planning new neighbourhoods on the outskirts, and processes involved in their realisation.

An international perspective seemed particularly fruitful in this regard, even though we, three editors, have, for the past three years, been part of a larger, DFG-funded research group that examines these developments primarily in German metropolitan areas, drawing on perspectives from landscape planning, urban planning and the social sciences. This research context also inspired and shaped the composition of this thematic issue. The call itself was deliberately international and also attracted proposals from contexts beyond Europe. The contributions eventually assembled in this issue, however, concentrate empirically on European cases. They range from Germany and Hungary to Ireland, Poland, and Spain, bringing different planning traditions, institutional settings, and trajectories of suburban development together.

3. Three Key Thematic Areas of Contemporary Suburban Development

Essentially, this has resulted in three broadly defined clusters of contributions: the first, which addresses planning principles and planning evaluation, with a focus on sustainability; the second, which, against the backdrop of the question of sensible approaches to contemporary urban expansion planning, examines the tension between planners and the imagined needs of (future) residents; and the third, which addresses the conflicts, negotiations and governance arrangements that arise during planning and implementation.

3.1. Sustainability and the Planning of Urban Expansion

The contributions in the first cluster show how discourses on, as well as planning and development of new suburban developments, are much more complex than they were in the 1990s or early 2000s. Planners nowadays justify the need to expand differently and more elaborately, aiming to navigate the inevitable contradictions and dilemmas between urban expansion and (ecological) sustainability concerns. These contradictions become especially obvious in the analysis of political discourses of urban expansion on hitherto unsealed green space. Using Munich and Hamburg as case studies, Bochinski et al. (2026) carve out three distinct discourses that frame the existing options differently. The dominant discourse is one that seemingly reconciles the need for new housing with the preservation of green spaces, thereby obscuring

some of the underlying conflicts and frictions. Swiacki et al.'s (2026) contribution compares suburbanisation patterns in five major German cities (Hamburg, Munich, Frankfurt, Berlin, Freiburg), again with a particular focus on the contradictions of development and sustainability concerns. They show a great variation, both between and within the cities, with regard to the containment of urban sprawl, the use and efficiency of materials, and the planned mobility infrastructure. Bornmann et al.'s (2026) article underpins the varied objectives and ambitions for new suburban developments. They analyse 69 city expansion projects in Germany that have been planned between 2008 and 2025. They conclude that sustainability concerns are more prominent nowadays, while at the same time a redefinition of sustainability is taking place in conjunction with the new developments. Hayes (2026) adds an Irish perspective to this cluster. His ex-post policy evaluation of the National Planning Framework of the Republic of Ireland shows that apparent policy conformance at the national level can conceal substantial variation at regional and settlement scales, and that the objectives of balanced regional growth and compact settlement development may come into tension with one another.

3.2. Planning Imaginaries and the Realities of Suburban Living

The second cluster brings together another set of contradictions, namely those between planning ideas, imagined (future) residents' needs and the realities of suburban living. Teske et al. (2026) look at children's wellbeing through the lens of suburban green space planning. While well-being is conceptualised as multidimensional and also includes aspects of personal growth and independence, agency, autonomy and identity, planners are most readily able to translate safety and security into planning practice, while agency, autonomy and identity are harder to operationalise. Bertram et al. (2026) contrast planning efforts to support the compatibility of paid and care work with residents' lived experiences in the newly built district of Munich-Freiham. Their findings suggest that planning is still mostly geared towards an imagined "standard" family and that the spatial interdependencies between caregiving, paid work and everyday mobility remain insufficiently addressed. Krüger's (2026) contribution similarly reveals uneven institutionalisation within social infrastructure planning: While schools and kindergartens are firmly embedded in legal frameworks and municipal planning routines, other youth facilities are less formalised, and provision for older people remains particularly fragmented and weakly integrated into spatial planning. The contributions by Keller and Jehnichen (2026) and Siedentop et al. (2026) shift the perspective from newly planned extensions to existing peripheral neighbourhoods. While the first explores frictions between planned goals and lived reality in a large housing estate from the 1990s in Berlin, the latter compares average rent levels in similar housing estates across Germany with the respective citywide average, highlighting the continuing role in the provision of comparatively affordable housing.

3.3. Governance, Conflict and Negotiation

The third cluster takes a closer look at conflicts and negotiations between different groups in transforming as well as newly emerging suburban developments. Große and Krüger (2026) as well as Wróbel and Lorens (2026) discuss suburbanisation as a governance issue. Große and Krüger focus on steering and decision-making before the start of the formal planning processes for new development projects in the Hamburg metropolitan region. They show how important parameters such as location, scale and density may already be pre-structured through informal negotiations before formal planning and public participation begin. Wróbel and Lorens look at three development projects in Gdańsk that make the interplay between

planning instruments, market dynamics and social acceptance visible. Their distinction between “wanted” and “unwanted” suburbanisation highlights how acceptance depends on the alignment—or misalignment—between municipal objectives, market interests and local expectations. Gorczyca et al. (2026) concentrate on redensification on urban green spaces in four major cities in Poland. They use environmental justice as an analytical framework to illustrate conflicts between the preservation of green areas and the construction of new housing in a post-socialist context. Their findings point in particular to procedural and recognitional inequalities, including weak recognition of community ecological knowledge and limitations of formal consultation processes. Crosas-Armengol et al. (2026) use two neighbourhoods in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area as case studies to make explicit the tensions that can arise between planning efforts to make established suburban areas more sustainable through upgrading, improved infrastructure and selective densification and residents’ everyday priorities. Bagyura et al. (2026) describe and analyse transformation conflicts in the outskirts of Budapest. They show how, under particular institutional conditions, groups of higher socio-economic status use their political influence to redirect local development priorities to the detriment of long-term residents.

4. Varieties, Tensions, and Transformations in Contemporary Suburban Development

Across the cases from Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Poland and Spain, contemporary suburban development is less defined by a common spatial model than by a shared set of tensions that take different spatial and institutional forms.

Dense and compact development coexists with persistent low-density growth; large-scale new extensions stand alongside the incremental transformation of established suburban areas. In Germany, this heterogeneity is visible both between and within metropolitan regions (Swiacki et al., 2026), while the Irish case demonstrates that different spatial scales may follow quite different development logics even under a common national policy framework (Hayes, 2026). The Spanish, Polish, and Hungarian contributions further show how inherited settlement structures and planning systems continue to shape contemporary suburban development (Bagyura et al., 2026; Crosas-Armengol et al., 2026; Wróbel & Lorens, 2026). The cases also show that contemporary suburban development is not only about producing new urban extensions. Established peripheral areas are being upgraded, selectively densified or otherwise transformed (Crosas-Armengol et al., 2026), while older large housing estates are gaining renewed importance as comparatively affordable parts of metropolitan housing markets (Siedentop et al., 2026). Rather than returning to an earlier model of suburbia, current developments therefore combine and rework different urban and suburban principles under highly specific conditions.

Several contributions examine how sustainability is being rearticulated in the context of urban expansion. Sustainability has long served as a central normative reference in planning, yet what is changing is the way it is mobilised: Rather than functioning primarily as a rationale for limiting outward growth, it is increasingly used by planning and policy actors to frame, justify and shape new peripheral development itself (Bochinski et al., 2026; Bornmann et al., 2026). Compactness, mixed uses, sustainable mobility, green infrastructure and social inclusion become key elements through which city extensions are presented as compatible with broader sustainability goals (Bornmann et al., 2026). Yet this reframing does not dissolve conflicts over land consumption, housing provision or environmental protection. Instead, sustainability itself becomes part of the negotiation between competing objectives (Bochinski et al., 2026). In some cases, its meaning is

broadened or redefined in order to accommodate urban expansion; in others, different sustainability objectives come into conflict when translated across spatial scales or into particular development contexts (Bornmann et al., 2026; Hayes, 2026). The Barcelona cases make this dimension particularly visible: Densification is promoted as a means of improving the long-term sustainability and viability of low-density suburban areas, while residents may perceive this intervention precisely as a threat to the qualities they associate with suburban living (Crosas-Armengol et al., 2026).

The contributions on everyday life point to a different kind of selectivity. While the gap between planning intentions and residents' experiences cannot simply be attributed to planners being unaware of changing social needs, the cases in Germany show that some needs are more readily translated into planning instruments and practices than others. Requirements that can be linked to statutory responsibilities, established standards, benchmarks or clearly defined spatial provisions tend to become more visible and actionable. Needs that are relational, temporally changing or difficult to assign to a particular sector are more difficult to institutionalise. This can be seen in the planning of children's environments, where safety can be operationalised more readily than autonomy or appropriation (Teske et al., 2026); in the continued separation of care and paid work (Bertram et al., 2026); and in the very different institutional positions of schools, youth facilities and infrastructures for older people (Krüger, 2026). Planning therefore does not simply respond to social needs; it filters and translates them through existing institutional and professional structures.

Contemporary suburbanisation also reveals distinct patterns of governance and power. Important development parameters may already be negotiated before formal planning procedures begin, as the cases from the Hamburg metropolitan region show, where confidential negotiations among mayors, landowners and developers can pre-structure core project parameters and constrain later formal planning and public input (Große & Krüger, 2026). In these settings, private developers may also become important agenda-setting actors, particularly where smaller municipalities have limited land ownership, financial resources or planning capacity (Große & Krüger, 2026). In Gdańsk, the use of exceptional planning instruments such as the *lex developer* allows housing development despite provisions in binding local plans. It creates a dual planning regime and shifts the conditions under which municipal objectives, developer interests and local expectations are negotiated (Wróbel & Lorens, 2026). In the Budapest agglomeration, organised groups of higher-status newcomers can convert social, cultural and economic resources into political influence and redirect local development priorities, in some cases to the disadvantage of long-term residents (Bagyura et al., 2026). The Polish green-space cases show a contrasting pattern: Grassroots mobilisation can succeed in protecting contested sites, while activists may nevertheless remain outside durable governance arrangements and procedural and recognitional inequalities persist (Gorczyca et al., 2026). The Polish and Hungarian cases in particular show how institutional histories and fragmented governance arrangements shape who is able to influence suburban development, while the German cases reveal similar asymmetries within formally highly regulated planning systems. Governance therefore helps to produce, contest and stabilise particular forms of suburban development.

Returning to the questions raised at the beginning, the contributions show that planning research and practice are responding to renewed suburbanisation through context-specific strategies rather than a single model. Sustainability remains a central goal, but its meaning and implementation are negotiated alongside housing pressures, residents' everyday needs and institutional arrangements. Several questions remain open

for further research. Much of the existing debate, including several contributions to this issue, remains centred on metropolitan growth regions and large-scale city extensions. More comparative research is needed on suburbanisation in small and medium-sized cities, where development pressures, municipal resources, planning capacities and governance constellations may differ substantially from those of major metropolitan regions. At the same time, we still know comparatively little about who moves into, remains in, or leaves different types of suburban areas, and how spatial configurations are experienced in everyday life across different social groups and stages of life. This includes questions of health and well-being, stress and recovery, perceptions of density, access to open space, mobility, social infrastructure and belonging, as well as how these experiences change as neighbourhoods mature. The contributions in this issue already reveal gaps between planning intentions, built environments and lived practices (Bertram et al., 2026; Keller & Jehnichen, 2026; Teske et al., 2026), but these relationships require more longitudinal and comparative investigation across different settlement types and urbanisation contexts.

This shifts the focus from suburbia as a fixed settlement category to suburbanisation as a spatial, social and institutional process unfolding across territorial scales and over time. It also connects the study of newly produced urban extensions with the transformation of established peripheries and, importantly, with places beyond the large metropolitan regions that have so far dominated much of the debate.

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