



The suburban ethics of care: Caring for shared spaces in suburban regeneration

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ABSTRACT

The future of suburbs is a debated issue. This paper discusses the questions of care during suburban regeneration in the Nordic context, with an emphasis on shared spaces. The empirical research was conducted in the suburban housing estate of Kontula, in Helsinki, Finland. Theoretically, the study is based on the geographies of care and responsibility together with the ethics of care that is interpreted from a spatial perspective. The questions addressed are how (or if) care for shared spaces manifests in suburban strategies, plans, and regeneration projects, and how these caring notions relate to the views of the suburban care-givers interviewed in the study. As a result, the concept of the suburban ethics of care is proposed to describe how suburbs and their changing environments can be approached in a caring manner. The discussion indicates how the suburban ethics of care is a normative, relational, processual, spatial, and political concept and practice.

1. Introduction

The future of suburbs has been widely debated in the Nordic countries. In the Nordics, many suburban housing estates were built in the 1960s and 1970s to answer the needs of an increasing urban population. Some Nordic suburbs remained in a state of stagnation for decades until they became the focus of discussion; first, due to socio-economic and ethnic segregation, and second, because of renewal plans, infill construction, and gentrification (e.g. Baeten & Listerborn, 2016; Hedin et al., 2012; Polanska et al., 2022; Stjernberg, 2019, 2022; Tunström & Wang, 2019). Following scholarly debates elsewhere, the current Nordic focus has gradually diversified into an understanding of the suburb not merely as the opposite of a city centre, but rather as a place of urban life, growth, culture, and change (e.g. Keil, 2018, 2022). Nevertheless, there has remained a notable absence as regards the question of care in suburbs. This article adds to these debates by asking how suburbs and their shared spaces can be the focus of better care. We ask, how (or if) care for shared spaces is manifest in suburban strategies, plans, and regeneration projects, and what this indicates about the governance and planning of such spaces. Furthermore, we ask how these caring notions or actions relate to the views of what we call *suburban care-givers*.

Our research is located in Finland, in the suburb of Kontula in Eastern Helsinki. Kontula is a relatively densely built, high-rise housing estate, originally built in the 1960s (Kokkonen, 2002), and it represents

a rather typical Finnish suburb of that time (see Stjernberg, 2022). The number of inhabitants in Kontula is around 14,000, which makes it one of the largest housing estates in Helsinki. Due to deterioration and the age of the buildings, the area has a considerable maintenance backlog. The main social hub of the suburb is an open-air shopping centre, opened in the 1960s and typical of the old Finnish suburbs. As in many similar neighbourhoods, social life and encounters tend to be concentrated in the shopping centres as they include various services as well as small squares, sitting areas, and routes for pedestrians.

Although the Nordic welfare state model and social-mixing policy have reduced the differentiation in the suburbs in Finland (e.g. Heino & Jauhainen, 2020; Lilius & Hirvonen, 2023), they have not been able to prevent the effects of the 1990s recession or the increase in immigration. Both of these occurrences have deepened socio-economic and ethnic segregation as well as the territorial stigmatisation of suburbs like Kontula (e.g. Jensen et al., 2021; Tunström & Wang, 2019; Tuominen, 2020; Wacquant, 2008; Wacquant et al., 2014). In recent decades, Kontula has been involved in measures taken by the Finnish Ministry of the Environment in their Neighbourhood Programmes aimed at finding solutions for the declining suburbs. Kontula has been the subject of several redevelopment projects (Kokkonen, 2002) and, presently, it is facing large-scale renewal plans as part of the Helsinki Suburban Regeneration Model (Fig. 1). We have analysed the regeneration model as well as the related urban plans from the perspectives of care and in

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relation to the views of suburban care-givers.

Finnish suburbs differ from the stereotypical middle-class neighbourhoods associated with Northern American or Australian suburbs, as they are relatively densely constructed areas with high-rise buildings, affordable housing, basic services, and public transport connections; they are thus closer to the large housing estates in the Central Europe and other Nordic countries. However, we align ourselves with Keil (2018, 2022), Wacquant (2008), and Schafran and Le Moigne (2022) who argue that – despite the differences – urgent questions like segregation, racism, affordability, or status, are common to suburbs in different parts of the Global North. Thus, it is possible to write about the potentialities of the suburban ethics of care in ways that are significant in various geographical contexts.

We interpret suburban space relationally, as an intermixture of different socio-spatial, material, and discursive relations (cf. Massey, 2005), and with the focus being placed on spatial planning and practices. Our emphasis is on *shared suburban spaces*, which we conceptualise as public and semi-public spaces including the processual idea of care. In addition to the physical spaces such as squares, streets, and other places used for encounters where people gather and which are “used in common by the public” (Latham, 2009: 177), we are also interested in the possibilities and obstacles that enable or prevent care occurring in suburban space. As the word *shared* suggests, we highlight “life between buildings” (Gehl, 2011) as well as the actions of sharing and caring that transpire through socio-spatial encounters (Watson, 2009) and

negotiations (Mitchell, 2003). We claim that sharing is caring, which should be a more firmly established aspect in the thinking and planning of suburban spaces.

Our study is based on the geographies of care and responsibility (e.g. Lawson, 2007; McEwan & Goodman, 2010) and on the ethics of care (e.g. Held, 2005; Kittay, 2001; Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1994), which we interpret from a spatial perspective (see Amin, 2012; Milligan & Wiles, 2010; Popke, 2006; Williams, 2017, 2020). While caring has been defined as an activity that maintains, repairs, and preserves the world (Fisher & Tronto, 1990), it can be difficult to reconcile this concept with the grandiose suburban renewal schemes targeting the built and social environment (cf. Jones & Evans, 2013a). The situation is often considerably more critical for people in marginalised or vulnerable life situations as they are dependent on the shared spaces of the city (Jaatsi & Kymäläinen, 2023b; Mitchell & Staeheli, 2006). Therefore, it is important to investigate suburban regeneration relationally and by employing ethical consideration. In this paper, we have developed the concept of a *suburban ethics of care* to provide a better awareness of the relational nature of shared suburban spaces and their transformation.

As an analytical framework, we have applied Joan Tronto's (Tronto, 1994) categorisation of different phases of caring, which include 1) caring about, 2) taking care of, 3) care-giving, and 4) care-receiving. These phases employed by Tronto move from recognising the needs and responsibilities of caring to the actual care practices and their effects. By focusing on the whole process, we were able to approach



Fig. 1. Suburban regeneration is taking place in Kontula. A new apartment block has been built next to the old shopping centre.

suburban spaces and their regeneration from various scales that can be called macro-, meso-, and micro-research on care (Gabauer et al., 2021: 9). These phases are strongly linked to each other, but the process also involves rifts and ruptures. In such contexts, the *politics of care* (Amin, 2012; Madanipour, 2021; McEwan & Goodman, 2010) becomes an important matter that can be explored by asking such questions as *who* is responsible for care in the suburbs and *at whom* is suburban regeneration targeted.

The article proceeds as follows: First, we discuss the concepts of care and care ethics with a focus on their connections to spatial thinking and urban research and planning. The four-step categorisation of caring conceived by Tronto is then explained and how we have applied it in our analysis. We also elaborate on the suburban context of our study. Second, we describe our research data and methods, and present our analysis on how suburban regeneration and the change of shared spaces in Kontula are justified and articulated in the official strategic and planning documents of the City of Helsinki. We also present our findings concerning the views of the suburban care-givers about the regenerations plans in Kontula, and how these views are linked to the conception of care. We conclude the paper by proposing the concept of a *suburban ethics of care* to describe how suburbs and their change can be approached in a caring manner. We also explain how the suburban ethics of care is a normative, relational, processual, spatial, and political concept and practice.

2. Defining the ethics of care

2.1. Care and the cities

Care is claimed to be one of the fundamental values of human life, which can be linked to practice, labour, attitude, and virtue (Held, 2005; Kittay, 2001; Tronto, 1994). There are several attributes related to care, including sympathy, empathy, sensitivity, and responsiveness (Held, 2005), as well as responsibility, attentiveness, nurturance, and compassion (Tronto, 1994). Care is not an abstract concept, as it encompasses practice and action, that is, the act of caring and meeting the needs of others. Care is associated with relational ethics as it is based on interdependency, caring relationships, emotions, and context-specificity instead of universality and objectivity (Metz & Miller, 2016). The ethics of care is a normative moral theory on how we should meet and treat others in a caring manner, and how to establish, maintain, and enhance caring relationships (Noddings, 2013). Originally developed by feminist writers (e.g. Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2013), the ethics of care involves an idea of radical transformation of society, where “care provides a radical basis for rethinking political judgments” (Tronto, 1995: 246).

Fisher and Tronto (1990) define caring as:

“an activity that includes *everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”

(Fisher & Tronto, 1990: 4.)

This definition links care not only to human relations but also to space and nonhuman objects. The spatial notions of care offer important insights about where and how care occurs. Researchers have written about the geographies of care and responsibility (Lawson, 2007; McEwan & Goodman, 2010; Popke, 2006), the landscapes of care (Milligan & Wiles, 2010), caringscapes (Keil, 2022), and place-based ethics of care (Till, 2012), as well as introduced care as a radical concept in geography (Dowler et al., 2019) and a way to promote place-based public value in society (Healey, 2018). In urban research (Wiesel et al., 2020), care is suggested to be an answer to the urban crisis (Gabauer et al., 2021), to represent an alternate urban infrastructure (Alam & Houston, 2020), and work as a means to imagine and build just cities (Low & Iveson, 2016; Power & Williams, 2020; Williams, 2017, 2020). Currently, care

ethics has reached the discourses and some practices of urban planning and design (Bates et al., 2016; Davis, 2022). Many of these views interpret care and space relationally, that is, by seeing care as a collective rather than an individual responsibility, which concerns not only people or places in the immediate vicinity but also the distant others (Massey, 2004; McEwan & Goodman, 2010). Here, responsibility can be interpreted as *response-ability*, as it includes the notion of responsiveness and encounter (Beausoleil, 2017; see also Turner and Tam, 2022) and is targeted towards someone or something else rather than oneself (Till, 2012; Tronto, 1994).

Hence, in the context of cities, caring for shared urban spaces involves the principles of both care and responsibility (Lundman, 2018). The place-based ethics of care implies a responsibility “to each other and the places we inhabit” (Till, 2012: 13) whereas care-full cities emphasise “our collective inter-dependence and responsibility for one another” (Williams, 2020: 7). In urban planning and design, Imrie and Kullman (2016: 10) underline how “to care, as designers, entails responsibility to those who use space”. Embodying care into urban planning involves both legal and professional obligations as well as a more positive caring disposition that “directs designers to engage with people dependent on the built environment, and to discuss, evaluate and respond to their vulnerabilities, desires and needs” (p. 8). Although, overall, prioritising care in urban planning could represent a new approach to planning and design (Bates et al., 2016; Davis, 2022), little empirical research exists about what this would entail in practice.

2.2. The process of caring as an analytical framework

To approach the topics of care and suburbs empirically, we have utilised Joan Tronto's (Tronto, 1994) work on care ethics and politics. Tronto (pp. 105–108) distinguishes between four phases of caring, which are 1) caring about, 2) taking care of, 3) care-giving, and 4) care-receiving. *Caring about* is recognising and assessing the initial need for care, which can occur both at an individual or a societal level. *Taking care of* involves the notion of a personal or collective responsibility that responds to the unmet needs of others. Hence, to take care of is concerned with recognising one's agency and the potential to act. *Care-giving* is the actual practice of caring that involves work and effort and often (but not always, see e.g. Massey, 2004) coming into contact with those in need of care. Finally, *care-receiving* means that the recipient of care responds to the received care, which indicates how the care needs have been met and whether any form of care has really occurred.

We apply Tronto's categorisation as an analytical framework to study how the suburbs and their shared spaces are cared for. First, as regards caring about suburbs, it is necessary to have an understanding of what are designated as the confirmed, recognised, or assumed vulnerabilities and needs of these areas and their residents. Second, taking care of the suburbs requires that some instance or actor acknowledges and takes responsibility for preparing measures that lead to care for the city and its people. Third, care-giving in the suburbs occurs when the actual caring takes place as a context-specific, situated practice. Fourth, care is received in various ways in the suburbs. Care is important and even vital for vulnerable people, referring to those individuals who need or are dependent on external care for various reasons. However, as the suburban regeneration in Kontula is in the early planning phase, we cannot yet study its final processes or effects on such care-receivers. Therefore, we have focused on how the suburban care-givers have expressed the feedback they have received from local people regarding possible changes in the shared suburban spaces. All these different phases of caring overlap and affect each other, indicating that care is fundamentally a relational and processual phenomenon (cf. Metz & Miller, 2016).

3. (Shared) suburban spaces and suburban regeneration

Generally, suburbs refer to the neighbourhoods in the outskirts of a city. Suburbs typically have some specific social, functional, socio-

cultural, and political dimensions regarding their residents, identities, way of life, or the ways of governing, designing, and using suburban spaces (Forsyth, 2012). We understand suburban space in a relational manner, not only as a peri-urban location or a settlement but as a place that forms and is being formed by various socio-spatial, material, and discursive relations (cf. Massey, 2005). In other words, suburban – as an adjective, attribute, or a concept – consists of what Vaughan et al. (2009: 485) call “manifold social complexities” that are related to the differentiated and dynamic spatio-temporalities of suburbs. For us, suburban is meaningful and valuable in its own right but not separate from the wider social and political processes. Hence, we resist reproducing the idea of the suburban simply as a question of segregation and problems, which, nevertheless, does not mean ignoring the inequalities, injustices, or exclusions taking place in suburbs. Our aim is rather to concentrate on the potential of care as manifested in shared suburban spaces.

Shared suburban spaces are both public and semi-public spaces that are physically located outdoors or indoors. The material forms of shared spaces can be various such as streets, squares, and community centres, but – more importantly – they evolve around different socio-spatial encounters and negotiations (Lundman, 2018; Mitchell, 2003; Watson, 2009). Madanipour (2020: 182) argues that “accessible spaces that would offer the possibility of non-commodified social encounters, inclusive expressive presence and active participation can play a noticeable role in democratic social development... by helping the different parts of society being in continuous interaction with each other.” Although there might arise conflicts over the usage and norms of public spaces (Low & Smith, 2006; Mitchell, 2003), more often suburban life involves what Watson (2009: 1581) calls “rubbing along”, meaning the limited encounters where others are recognised “through glance or gaze [...], in talk or silence” (see also Jaatsi & Kymäläinen, 2023a; Huttunen & Juntunen, 2020). We find such shared spaces used for encounters essential for a caring suburb.

How, then, could urban regeneration plans support the call for caring suburbs? Urban regeneration refers to the strategic tools, policies, visions, and actions that strive comprehensively for “a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change” (Robertson et al., 2017: 17). Regeneration plans usually involve adapting the existing built environment (Jones & Evans, 2013b) and improving the conditions of the housing, retail business, and culture to attract investments (Dixon, 2005; Mace, 2013; Miles & Paddison, 2005; Tallon, 2020). The strategies and measures of urban regeneration vary from country to country and between cities, locations, and times (e.g. Porter & Shaw, 2009), and also between the Nordic countries. In Sweden, for example, the suburban change has been drastic, as a result of the habit of selling suburban housing estates to developers, whose actions as regards renovations, evictions, and social cleansing have been widely criticised (e.g. Rannila, 2022; Polanska et al., 2022). In Finland, suburban change is still much governed and planned by the public sector, although urban regeneration projects reveal the influential role of construction companies and property owners in planning processes.

Shared suburban spaces are an interesting setting in which to study how the needs for regeneration are articulated and whether they correspond to the needs of the residents and other actors in the suburbs. One controversy is related to gentrification that follows from urban renewal and can lead to residential displacement (Lees et al., 2013; Slater, 2009) and the removing of “unwanted” people from public spaces (Chaskin & Joseph, 2013; Mitchell & Staeheli, 2006). From a planning perspective based on care, shared spaces are vital if a neighbourhood is to be designed in an inclusive and ethical way. Nonetheless, despite the possible inclusive planning language, the regeneration of shared spaces may be conducted for economic reasons that undermine social contexts and local needs (Inroy, 2000). For these reasons, it is important to empirically study how regeneration takes place in the suburbs.

4. Research materials and methods

In Finland, maintaining, sustaining, and developing urban areas is the responsibility of cities, so the strategies and plans for suburban development are city-specific. In our analysis, we focus on the justification of the current suburban regeneration of Helsinki and Kontula in ten different strategic and city planning documents published by the city of Helsinki (identified in the text with the markings D1–D10). Five of the documents are city-level plans (D1–D5) and five local-level plans with the Kontula area in focus (D6–10). The total number of pages in the documents is c. 650, but we have analysed them only from the perspective of how they dealt with suburbs and their change. We coded the material (see Cope, 2010) based on how suburban regeneration and shared spaces were discussed and whether the issue of care was covered in these contexts. The analysis was theory-guided (Eisenhardt, 1989) so that the starting points for the analysis are the care-related questions of maintenance, continuity, and repair (Fisher & Tronto, 1990) together with the vulnerabilities, desires, and needs of local people (Imrie & Kullman, 2016).

We supplemented the data by analysing 23 semi-structured interviews (identified in the text with the markings R1–R23) that were conducted between 2020 and 2021 either in person or online, and were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised. The interviewees were mainly street-level workers or street bureaucrats (Kuoppa & Kymäläinen, 2022) whom we call *suburban care-givers* (cf. Till, 2012). These care-givers meet and help the people of Kontula as part of their everyday work as employees, volunteers, or citizen activists in the public or private sector, or through NGOs. The interviewees held various professions and positions including, for instance, people working in social care work, youth work, public order, culture, religion, and leisure-time activities. Additionally, some urban planners and city representatives who plan or manage the shared spaces were interviewed.

We analysed the interviews with qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) to examine the extent to which they dealt with suburban renewal and the current or future uses of shared spaces. We coded and categorised the answers based on how the interviewees talked about the following topics: suburban space in general and shared spaces in particular; about care and responsibilities in the suburban context; and about the collaborations that take place in Kontula. We further linked these themes with the suburban regeneration plans and explored the opinions and experiences of interviewees about these plans. We identified the positive sides, the needs, and challenges that the interviewees ascribed to Kontula and the ideas they themselves expressed about suburban change. We also paid attention to *how* the interviewees talked about Kontula and the local people to detect possible caring relationships and attitudes.

5. Care and responsibility during suburban regeneration

5.1. Caring about the suburbs in Helsinki

Following Tronto's notions concerning the phases of caring, *caring about* the suburbs starts from recognising the needs of the area and its people. In suburban regeneration, the objectives are not always based on local demands but are rather consigned to city-level planning and urban management. Therefore, we first examined the macro-level strategic and master plans of Helsinki. In the most recent Helsinki City Plan (D1), one of the planning principles is that different city districts should form “small towns within the city” (p. 70). Suburban development is justified by the existing physical urban infrastructure and urban economics and infill construction is encouraged in those “areas [that] already have urban infrastructure, services, and connections” (p. 41). Social issues, such as the need to tackle socio-spatial segregation, are less discussed in the City Plan. The possible negative effects of suburban regeneration, such as gentrification or changes in social services, are not raised when assessing the possible social effects of the plan (pp. 126–127).

As part of the City Plan, a vision of Helsinki was presented for the year 2050 (D2). In the vision, suburban regeneration is represented as a necessity and urban life as something desirable: “In the future Helsinki, suburban centres have developed into urban centres, enabling an urban lifestyle also outside the conventional central-city areas” (p. 5). As regards the care for shared suburban spaces, the vision is rather one-sided, as public spaces and recreational areas are merely reduced to the “stages” (p. 20) of an urban lifestyle. The realities of suburban street life, including the presence of marginalised or vulnerable people, are missing from the vision, and residents are represented as active consumer-citizens that spend their time in shared spaces by choice and not because of necessity or need.

The Helsinki Housing and Land Use Programme (D3) sets the framework for suburban regeneration in Helsinki. Unlike the City Plan, segregation is seen as a major issue and the theme has been covered extensively in the program. Different statistics are presented to illustrate how residential areas differ socio-economically in Helsinki (pp. 46–51). The aim is to avoid further segregation, which “requires special attention, development, and construction in the ageing suburban high-rise housing estates, where social deprivation seems to be agglomerated” (p. 51). Suburban regeneration is justified by social and socio-economic needs and not by urbanism as a value or a desired lifestyle. However, as the programme focuses on housing and land use, it represents a macro-level and top-down perspective on urban planning and remains rather distant from everyday life. Shared spaces are not covered in the programme as such, but their importance is acknowledged when setting the objectives for suburban regeneration (pp. 85–87).

Helsinki City Strategy 2021–2025 (D4) includes a more versatile picture of the suburbs, suburban life, and suburban development. Segregation is perceived as a major challenge that needs to be resolved with multisectoral collaboration (p. 33). Investing in public spaces, such as parks, playgrounds, and sport facilities, is seen to be a means of increasing well-being and attractiveness, and diminishing segregation (p. 34). Human fragility and vulnerability are mentioned as urban issues (p. 8), and decision-makers are to be held responsible for helping people and solving the problems, for instance, regarding poverty and inequality. In the document, it is also declared that “sharing the common reality in the city is a value in itself” (p. 8), which refers to the interdependency among people and, thus, to the idea of relational ethics. Nevertheless, the strategy highlights that people should have the freedom to live their lives as they wish (p. 8), which seems to imply a mode of individuality rather than of care and collective responsibility. The strategy aims at development and growth, meaning that caring as maintenance, repair, and continuity is mostly neglected.

It is in this above-mentioned policy and strategic context that the Helsinki Suburban Regeneration Model (D5) has been initiated and implemented (see also [Eskelä, 2022](#)). When interpreted through Tronto’s categorisation, the model demonstrates a gradual move towards the phase of taking care of the city, as it has been developed to directly answer the needs of the suburbs. In the model, the suburbs are taken seriously in their own right and not merely due to urban growth. The Suburban Regeneration Model consists of four focal points: vitality, urban environment, services, and commitment, with the latter meaning cross-sectoral collaboration and citizen participation. The objectives are, among others, to increase the attractiveness, safety, and versatility of the suburbs among the residents and the business community; to renew the urban environment and recreational areas; and to meet the service needs of the residents. Anti-segregation, infill construction, and permanent improvement of living conditions are central to the model. Care for shared spaces is recognised, as attention is paid to both public spaces and public services. However, the model relies on the existing urban policies and documents described above, and therefore the general objectives of the model are mostly determined top-down and are not context-specific.

In summary, the justifications and reasoning for suburban regeneration are mixed in the city-level documents. Urban growth and urban

economics offer a rational explanation for developing and densifying the suburbs. Urban lifestyle is promoted as a value and a distinct target. Segregation is seen as a serious problem but is mostly discussed as a statistical issue and less from the perspectives of care and everyday life. Well-being and safety are among the expressed reasons for suburban regeneration, but the idea of human vulnerability is seldom linked to these aspects. Nevertheless, care is not totally absent from the strategic documents. In the Helsinki City Strategy, for instance, social problems are mentioned as an urban challenge, and in the Suburban Regeneration Model, the need for care and public services are recognised. Nonetheless, because the strategic thinking in Helsinki focuses on growth and development, caring in the form of maintenance, repair, and continuity is mostly dismissed.

As regards shared spaces, the improvement of public spaces can be seen to be more concerned with adding to their attractiveness and quality rather than their significance as the sites of everyday life. More emphasis is placed on developing spaces where people can gather and consume time (and money) and less on developing shared spaces through public services or care facilities; both of which would help people to manage their lives. The positive effects of suburban development are assumed to ultimately filter down to everyone, which is best described in the Helsinki Suburban Regeneration Model (D5): “As the vitality of the suburban regeneration areas increases, so does resident satisfaction and the sense of safety. The building stock grows and becomes more versatile and attractive, and segregation trend decreases.”

5.2. Taking care of Kontula through suburban regeneration

We now move on to the meso-level research on suburban regeneration in Kontula and to the phase of caring that, referring to [Tronto \(1994\)](#), can be considered as *taking care of a suburb*. We have focused on a particular suburb, which is appropriate because, by its definition, care is based on partiality and context-specificity ([Metz & Miller, 2016](#)). Socio-economically, Kontula has been considered a low-income and multi-ethnic neighbourhood, indicating the socio-spatial segregation of the area. Social problems and their negative side effects such as substance abuse and restless behaviour are visible in some public places, but so are a sense of mutual trust, cosmopolitanism, and belonging ([Kuoppa & Kymäläinen, 2022](#); [Tuominen, 2020](#)). The supply of public services in Kontula is relatively good and amenities include, for instance, a health centre, a public library, an elementary school, kindergartens, a community centre, a youth centre, and sport facilities such as a skateboarding hall and a swimming pool. Several NGOs are active in Kontula, and there are some specific services such as a day centre for substance abusers that offers health and social counselling for its clients. Most of the services are located in the local open-air shopping centre, which is a lively place with squares, pedestrian areas, and a subway entrance, together with small businesses such as grocery stores, bars, barbershops, flea markets, ethnic restaurants, and cafes ([Figs. 2 and 3](#)).

The Helsinki Suburban Regeneration Model described above offers a backdrop for the future development of Kontula, but it still does not guarantee the realisation of care for the suburb and its residents. For instance, to diminish segregation, the vision 2035 for the district (D6) suggests that “the image of the area should be developed to attract the middle-classes” (p. 6). The vision sets gentrification as one of the main objectives of suburban regeneration, ignoring the people in vulnerable life situations. Moreover, the City of Helsinki has issued specific planning principles for the infill construction in Kontula (D7) but in the document, the development is mainly justified by urban growth and for environmental reasons (p. 6). The role of shared spaces is minimal or not assigned any special attention, although some green areas and parks are to be protected and improved. Nevertheless, the importance of local services is recognised in the planning principles (p. 15).

Of particular concern in the suburban regeneration is the open-air shopping centre of Kontula and its shared spaces. Together with the city of Helsinki, four property companies organised an idea competition



Fig. 2. A square, a public library, and a youth centre as shared suburban spaces in Kontula shopping centre.



Fig. 3. NGOs and bars next to each other in Kontula shopping centre.

for architects in order to find innovative concepts for local development (D8). The objectives were, among others, to increase the attractiveness and importance of Kontula as a neighbourhood centre; to increase purchasing power with dense housing construction; to diversify the demographics; and to strengthen the sense of community and safety (p. 11). The competition favoured new owner-occupied housing that would primarily be targeted at young first-time home-buyers (p. 10). The demolition of the old shopping centre or parts of it were suggested as an option, although this would be done in a way that safeguarded the current services and functions (p. 12). Participatory workshops were organised as well as online participation; however, neither succeeded in properly reaching the marginalised people or immigrant entrepreneurs of the shopping centre (Hewidy, 2022).

The winning proposal, Vaellus (Wandering), was complimented in the assessment report as being “[a] diverse, fresh and well thought out entry” (D9: 55). The proposal (D10) dedicated a separate section to social sustainability associated particularly with public spaces,

openness, and encounters in the new Kontula centre (p. 7). The concept of a loose space, referring to unexpected uses of public spaces (Franck & Stevens, 2006), was adopted to describe how the area was to be developed for younger people. However, the proposal incorporated very few new social services, care solutions, or structural anti-segregation measures into social sustainability, which was also recognised in the assessment report (D9: 59–60). Neither did all the spatial solutions support the idea of a caring suburb. Although the centre was described as looking like “a sun from which the existing building stock is shining” (p. 55), Kontula centre was more or less unrecognisable in the planning illustrations. The proposal involved such amenities as a small city cinema, bicycle workshops, and a local craft brewery (D10: 4), which are more easily associated with the desires of a middle-income creative class (Florida, 2005) than with the needs of those who are dependent on the shared spaces of Kontula.

Although the need for care is acknowledged in the Helsinki Suburban Regeneration Model, the new Kontula seems to be targeted at middle-

class home-buyers and property owners. The lively shopping centre with public spaces and services is presented as a problem that requires demolition and reconstruction rather than maintenance, continuity, and repair. This kind of view that ignores the current value of the suburb is not only uncaring but also socially and culturally unsustainable (see also Hewidy, 2022). Despite encouragement to secure the current services and functions in Kontula, the spatial planning and provision of social services do not seem to adequately fulfil this remit. While the Suburban Regeneration Model aims at commitment and comprehensiveness, ideas and solutions for regeneration have been sought through the architectural competition and a consultant-based vision work. These examples represent rifts in the caring process. However, our subsequent investigation of the micro-level and the actual care-giving practices reveals a more versatile picture regarding caring for shared suburban spaces.

5.3. Care-givers on suburban regeneration in Kontula

To study the actual care practices (cf. Tronto's category of *care-giving*), we now turn to the experiences of the suburban care-givers in Kontula. The interviewed care-givers identified many of the same challenges that were mentioned in the official policy and planning documents – such as how Kontula is a socio-economically difficult area and how multi-generational deprivation is common. The shared spaces of the shopping centre were described as sometimes being wild and scary, with the sense of unsafety around intoxicated people being a shared concern. The interviewees related that some parents were afraid to let their children go to the centre and that “even the roughest of the young do not spend time there” (R21).

Despite the recognised challenges, the interviewees talked positively about Kontula and warmly about the people they work with. Many described its special spirit, the multicultural atmosphere, a certain roughness, and how “the whole society is present there” (R6). The suburban care-givers had many ideas of how the shared spaces of Kontula could be developed. Their solutions varied from very practical suggestions about the locations and opening hours of different services to the maintenance and improvement of green areas and sport facilities. The needs of marginalised and vulnerable people were recognised, and how services and venues should be provided where the people actually are. As R9 said: “people with drug problems don't have such life management skills that they book a time somewhere on internet and then go there on Tuesday next week”. Therefore, shared spaces should include small-scale and accessible social services that are close to people.

Kontula centre was seen as a lively place with vitality and vibrance, which is one of the goals of suburban regeneration. The existing social networks are numerous, active, and agile, so there is strong commitment to caring in the area. As regards the care-receivers and their position in suburban development, the interviewees emphasised real encounters with people, and the need to respect and listen to them. This would not only allow vulnerable people to participate in planning but would also offer opportunities to increase their agency. Human value and dignity were regarded as starting points for encounters, as when R4 described how “it starts from respecting [the marginalised people]”. This could mean very small things, such as organising a picnic and eating strawberries together in the park.

The official plans for suburban regeneration and possible demolition of the shopping centre caused considerable concern among the care-givers and fostered empathy towards the local people and shared spaces. For instance, R8 expressed their fear that the most vulnerable people would suffer “or even die” if the services were shut down. Rebuilding was expected to increase rents, which would lead to a loss of the “Kontula spirit” and drive away small businesses, often run by immigrants. Negative comparisons were made to the nearby suburb of Myllypuro that, paradoxically, has been hailed as a positive example of a suburban regeneration project by the City of Helsinki (D3: 87). The contradiction between the plans and everyday realities arose in one interview, where the planning representations were criticised:

“[T]he residents are given a picture where there are take-away coffee cups and a beautiful shining shopping centre [...]. But when the regeneration is over, the same people with the same problems are still there, and then the realities are even more distant from each other” (R4).

Generally, suburban regeneration was welcomed by the care-givers and the allocation of extra attention and public money to Kontula praised. Appreciation was expressed for the city representatives and planners behind the regeneration scheme as they did participate in the local networks and had listen to various actors. Nevertheless, some remarked that planning and participation had not been sufficiently comprehensive, as the topic is so extensive and there is no one really taking responsibility. The plans were also criticised for not understanding that in addition to making “nice things” for young people, Kontula needs resources and the continuity of activities: “But who pays it?... They trust that the residents would themselves organise action and find funding to do it, but it doesn't go like that” (R6).

The interviewed city planners seemed to have relatively good knowledge about the shared spaces of Kontula and about the background of suburban regeneration. However, it remained unclear how well they understood the everyday life and care needs of the vulnerable people. Some planners identified the need for low threshold services and how important it is to “know the area from inside” (R12). The street-level workers of Kontula were given respect, because “they know everything that happens there” (R13). In general, suburbs and their shared spaces were considered professionally interesting but challenging places for urban planning. R14 described how rewarding it is to tackle the challenges “and when an area starts to improve a bit”, but this requires collective responsibility and collaboration.

Overall, the suburban care-givers presented a more caring view on Kontula and its future than the official policy documents and regeneration plans. They talked empathetically about the suburb and its vulnerable people, while also being concerned about the neighbourhood. They represented caring as maintaining, repairing, and providing continuity in the world (Fisher & Tronto, 1990), and did not regard shared suburban spaces only as targets of development but rather as places from which caring and collective responsibility stem. The suburban care-givers had very practical ideas on how to improve the shared spaces based on the actual care needs of the people in those spaces, including themselves. City planners, too, saw shared suburban spaces as important venues but their idea of care-giving was more related to the built environment and its change than to local people and their care needs. This does not mean that city planners were unempathetic or indifferent towards human interdependency, but their caring was restricted by planning principles, investments, or differing demands. As one planner (R13) said, their work is more strategic, and therefore, the local actors have a highly important agency in suburban change as they know Kontula as an experienced and lived environment.

6. Discussion: The suburban ethics of care

As a result, we present the concept of the *suburban ethics of care* as a means of discussing the nature of care for shared suburban spaces and how it should be approached during suburban regeneration. As a concept and practice, the suburban ethics of care is normative, relational, processual, spatial, and political. Normativity, in this context, means that care is set as a core value for suburban development. Cherishing the elements of care – that is, maintenance, repair, and continuity (Fisher & Tronto, 1990) – does not mean that suburbs should be left outside development. Collective responsibility that is based on care for each other is the key to making care-full cities (Williams, 2017, 2020) and thus care-full suburbs. As the case of Kontula demonstrates, caring for vulnerable individuals is not a high priority in planning documents. With respect to shared suburban spaces, normativity is related to the attitudes regarding the uses of public spaces (cf. Mitchell, 2003).

Gentrification, privatisation of public spaces, and the weakening of social services are not caring actions because they undermine the possibilities of marginalised and vulnerable people to cope in shared suburban spaces. Such measures are also antithetical to the ideas of sensitivity, responsiveness, and nurturance that are linked to the normative conception and practice of care (Held, 2005; Tronto, 1994).

The relationality of the suburban ethics of care concerns both its ethical side and the suburban space itself. As relational ethics are based on interdependencies and relationships (Metz & Miller, 2016; Whatmore, 1997) and relational space on interrelations, interactions, and constant change (Massey, 2005), it is necessary to observe the encounters and clashes that occur around care in the socio-spatial environments of the suburbs. Planning loose spaces (Franck & Stevens, 2006) or providing social services does not alone lead to care in the suburbs but, as Kittay (2001) states, good care comprises labour, attitude, and virtue. In Kontula, suburban care-givers formed caring relationships with the vulnerable people and expressed empathetic and emotional attitude towards the suburb, depicting a strong sense of care towards shared suburban spaces. However, since the experiences and emotions of care-receivers have not been the subject of this study, we do not know how the interrelations appear from their side. Care involves power relations, hierarchies, and bureaucracy (Cox, 2010; Lipsky, 2010; Madanipour, 2021), and confrontations between care-givers and care-receivers are possible.

The processual perspective on care ethics acknowledges different phases of caring that also concern suburban regeneration, as we have demonstrated with our analysis based on Joan Tronto's (Tronto, 1994) work. In Helsinki, the process starts top-down from the city strategies and plans, but considerable formal and informal care already exists in the suburbs. As our analysis indicates, the process of suburban caring includes rifts between macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. This supports the idea of caring being a processual and relational phenomenon. Knowledge about care needs should move more flexibly between different levels of care and planning. Subsequently, the role of suburban care-givers is crucial because they have both professional and local knowledge of the suburbs. From their in-between position, they can encourage the voices of the vulnerable people and articulate what is needed in shared spaces for care to happen (see also Kuoppa & Kymäläinen, 2022). Hence, responsibility for the suburbs and their shared spaces should be collectively distributed and shared among different actors.

The suburban ethics of care is also a spatial concept. Care affects shared suburban spaces and, vice versa, space affects the processes of caring. McEwan and Goodman (2010, 109-110), for whom care is fundamentally a spatial issue, state that “[u]nderstanding care and its relationalities is about exploring its complex connections to responsibility, ethics and feelings, its political and cultural economies and materialities, and the ways in which it is lived as lacking for many and/or abundant for others.” The suburbs form a special setting for care, but they are not detached from wider urban governance. This is also why we claim that a specific suburban ethics of care is needed. Instead of seeing suburbs as the peripheries of cities, the care ethics enables a perception of suburbs and their needs from the inside out. Kontula shopping centre and its shared spaces, for example, are important places for many local actors, immigrant entrepreneurs, and people in vulnerable positions. Therefore, the top-down objective of suburban regeneration to increase vitality in the already-lively suburb of Kontula seems a dubious goal motivated by the neoliberal discourse on urban growth.

Inevitably, this leads to the political side of the ethics of care, or to the politics of care and togetherness (Amin, 2012), where the main questions are who is responsible for care and for whom care is provided. This also concerns suburban regeneration that should employ a much wider and more ethical perspective on shared suburban spaces and their future. In this regard, the suburban ethics of care is a useful approach, as it focuses on collective responsibility, helps to meet the care needs of vulnerable individuals, and assists in revealing “silences, injustices and

neglect in a way that provokes action” (Williams, 2020: 6). If care ethics is not employed in planning, the gap between the goals of regeneration and the realities of everyday life remain distant from each other. The interviews with the care-givers in Kontula showed that challenges exist and change is needed and welcomed, but not necessarily in the ways articulated in the city strategies and planning documents. While the planners should be sensitive and responsive to the “vulnerabilities, desires and needs” of people (Imrie & Kullman, 2016: 8), it is equally important to acknowledge and foster the agency of the suburbanites themselves.

7. Concluding words

The transformation of suburbs in the Nordic countries and elsewhere calls for a recognition of the potential of the suburban ethics of care. The contexts and contents of suburban care may vary, but what endures are the conceptual and ethical dimensions related to the normative, relational, processual, spatial, and political nature of care ethics. According to Noddings (2013), we need to meet and treat others in a caring manner, and this applies as much to segregated suburban housing estates as to middle-class suburban residencies. As we have shown, caring relationships already exist, but they can easily remain unnoticed in the dominant discourses that emphasise the negative development of suburbs. Further research is needed concerning suburban care practices in different contexts and how people in vulnerable positions experience the care they receive (cf. Tronto's phase of care-receiving). Nevertheless, we claim that the suburban ethics of care offers a sustainable way to approach suburban transformation, and shared spaces play a crucial role in this process.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Riina Lundman: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, review & editing, Visualization.

Päivi Kymäläinen: Conceptualization; Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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