

# I Am Living My Dream... For Now.”: Reimagining Suburban Living in Slovakia

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DOI: DOI: 10.62800/NR.2025.3.02

People moving to the suburbs of Bratislava, the Slovak capital, often see this step as a route to personal and family security, social mobility, and a family-focused lifestyle. While some have successfully adapted to the suburban life, others have struggled to develop a sense of belonging, sometimes leading to a return to the city. Based on twenty ethnographic case studies, this paper examines how suburban placemaking, belonging, and homemaking connect and develop through individual trajectories, perceptions, and lived experiences. It emphasizes how suburban stories are shaped by residents' ongoing efforts to reimagine and renegotiate their homes regarding their daily life and how communication and care are organized within their families, both at present and in their envisioned futures.

**Key words:** suburb, Central Europe, placemaking, belonging, home

**Acknowledgement:** The paper was realized with the support of the scientific research projects Suburbanization: Community, Identity, and Everydayness, APVV-20-042, and Intergenerational Relationships in Families and Communities: An Ethnological Perspective, VEGA 2/0053/22.

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**Jak citovať / How to cite:** G. Lutherová, Soňa. 2025. “I Am Living My Dream... For Now.”: Reimagining Suburban Living in Slovakia. *Národopisná revue* 35 (3): 168–180. <https://doi.org/10.62800/NR.2025.3.02>

## Introduction

Imagine a Central European capital. Regardless of the direction you take to leave the city, the last residential areas featuring blocks of buildings from the socialist era gradually fade away, and the urban landscape gives way to agricultural land. You can rarely spot industrial buildings or warehouses as you traverse the fields along the highways, leading to villages that were once administratively autonomous from the urban center. The outskirts of these settlements markedly differ from the older central areas, showcasing uniform houses lining streets named after orchards or fruit trees. You may also notice gated communities with mansions concealed behind cement walls or gardening colonies with old weekend houses converted into permanent residences for current generations.

The suburbs surrounding Central and Eastern European cities, as a liminal space where urban and rural environments converge, began to evolve during the post-socialist era in the conditions of the liberalization of land markets and rapid institutional change (Hirt 2007; Sýkora – Ouředníček 2007; Ferencuhová 2011; Stanilov – Sýkora 2014; Šuška – Šveda 2023). The often uncoordinated and insufficiently regulated development of suburban areas has primarily been driven by decisions at the municipal level, and regional governance lacked the capacity to effectively oversee or correct these lower-level decisions (Lokšová – Galčanová Batista 2021; Šuška – Šveda 2023).

As suburbanization in Slovakia epitomizes the broader transformation processes of the 1990s and 2000s,

marked by profound and often unforeseen socio-economic shifts reflected in the demographic patterns and the material landscape, it has attracted significant attention from human geographers, demographers, sociologists, and others (Falt'an 2009; Šveda – Šuška 2019, 2020; Šuška – Šveda 2023). However, in Slovak ethnology, the interest remains scarce (Beňušková 2016; Bošelová 2019; Janto 2020). Ethnologists shift the focus from built environments and population distribution to transformations in social dynamics and lifestyles, including the relationships between the “old” and “new” residents. The tensions among various groups of suburban residents are exemplified anecdotally by clashes between neighbors over noise disturbances caused by poultry or people working in their yards on weekends, as seen in the subsequent discussion on an online social site. A small poultry breeder sought suggestions on resolving a conflict with her neighbors and received mixed responses. Most discussants supported her, like this one: *“Are your neighbors newcomers or locals? If someone in the village is bothered by the smell of poultry, stables, or manure, they should move (back) to the city!”* (Modrý koník 2015) Conversely, fewer discussants empathized with the neighbors: *“Personally, I think it would probably bother me too, no offense. I understand you want organic products for your kids, but poultry smells,*

*and that early morning cackling... I had a grandma in the countryside, so I know what it's like. Most people move to the countryside for peace and quiet.”* (Modrý koník 2015) Besides gaining insight into the social dynamics of the different groups of residents, we can examine how people characterize their lives in a suburban area during the discussion. They encompass implicit and explicit notions about the place itself, its character, materiality, noises, and smells, as well as about who the people living in the suburbs are and what their lifestyles are. The fundamental issue dominating the online discussion concerns who the actors perceive as rightfully belonging in the place and, therefore, being entitled to voice their opinions and shape the suburban environment according to their preferences.

Places are not imposing realms, confining or imprisoning people's activities. Residents of suburbs engage in placemaking by experiencing, engaging with, and appropriating the place (Tuan 1977; Myers 2002; Low 2009; Wieczorek 2019). When people navigate through this process, the social and cultural meanings they attach to the place become difficult to grasp beyond its immediate material form (Wieczorek 2019). They may see the suburbs as a place of safety, where they feel at ease, connected, and able to call it their own. However, it may also become a place of uncertainty, and they construct their residence



Fig. 1. An aerial perspective on the suburban landscape of Bratislava. Photo by Soňa G. Lutherová, 31. 3. 2023

as a temporary arrangement. If the sociocultural meanings constructed by inhabitants form a sustainable whole, they foster a sense of belonging. It is established both narratively and through various practices, setting boundaries between here and there, and between those who belong and those who do not (Lovell 1998).

“To belong” is not a static state, but rather an ongoing process that is neither solely an individual practice nor a collective one. When we think about a place, we should consider it as comprising multiple spaces, each holding different meanings for different people. By acknowledging the embodied nature of place, Setha Low highlights a subjective, person-centered experience of place (Low 2009). Our perception of the symbolic or emotional borders is influenced by various societal norms, including the aspirations for an ideal home (Clarke 2001; G. Lutherová 2014), and it is intertwined with profound emotions related to self-perception (Miller 2001; Clarke 2001; Cieraad 1999).

This text originates from a research project on the diverse suburban environment of the Slovak capital of Bratislava. I focus on how the newcomers living in different suburbs perceive, experience, and narrate their lives in suburbia. First, I provide a brief overview of the phenomenon of suburbanization within the local context. Then, I introduce my fieldwork concerning the research terrain, sample, and methods. Ultimately, I untangle the complex and dynamic relationship between suburban place-making, belonging, and the process of creating a home through theoretical and methodological considerations and data analysis.

### **A Brief Insight into the Slovak Suburban Story**

The post-socialist transformation in Slovakia led to the breakdown of migration patterns from the socialist era, resulting in a shift in development dynamics within urban regions from their core to surrounding suburban areas (Podolák 2007; Gajdoš – Moravanská 2011; Šveda – Šuška 2019; among others). Pavel Šuška and Martin Šveda characterized the suburbanization of the Slovak capital, Bratislava, as “one of the most significant transformations of settlement and socio-spatial relations in the post-socialist (Slovak) history (Šuška – Šveda 2023: 3).” The development has significantly changed the character of this region, with more than 50 thousand dwellings

built in the settlements around Bratislava and an influx of 90 thousand registered residents (Šuška – Šveda 2023). Yet, instead of comprehensive urban planning, the rapid expansion occurred within a fragmented administrative structure in which regional administration was unable to sufficiently regulate decisions at local levels of governance (Šuška – Šveda 2023). This led to situations where private developers prioritized housing construction over essential infrastructure, leaving many suburban residents dependent on the city center for work, education, healthcare, or other services.

The heterogeneous suburban development around Bratislava ranges from intensive residential construction and development projects in new cohesive suburban areas, primarily attracting migrants from the city, to individual constructions or renovations in more distant hinterlands, where migrants from other Slovak regions tend to settle (Šveda 2016). The suburbanization was driven by a growing middle class seeking private homeownership (Hirt 2007; Stanilov – Sýkora 2014; Sýkora – Bouzarovski 2012), while the newcomers were mainly well-educated middle-to-upper-class professionals, typically in their late twenties and thirties, often having vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds than “the locals” (Falt’an 2009; Šveda 2016; Novotný – Pregi 2017; Pregi – Novotný 2019). As the rapid suburban development of Bratislava’s surroundings began more than 20 years ago, some newcomers have already become an integral part of the local community, bringing their children up there and establishing ties in the social and material environment. Others had lived there temporarily and moved back to the urban center, and the new ones are still moving to the suburbs. This allows us to examine diverse narratives, perceptions, and experiences, as people create different suburban trajectories.

### **Who Do I Study and How?**

The title of this chapter echoes the question posed by Šuška and Šveda in the introduction to their edited volume on suburbanization in Bratislava (Šveda – Šuška 2019: 10). At its core, it addresses the dilemma of what constitutes a suburb. Since this term encompasses various forms, functions, and social realities (Hanlon – Vicino 2019), some scholars, albeit rhetorically, question whether suburbs exist if there is no minimum definition

to which all areas would conform (Harris 2010; Vaughan et al 2009; Vaughan et al 2015). While suburbanization takes a variety of physical or procedural forms (Forsyth 2019), Šuška and Šveda emphasize regular commuting to the city, primarily for work or education, as its key feature (Šveda – Šuška 2019). Although this perspective may be challenged by shifting routines, post-pandemic changes in work patterns, and the rise of remote or hybrid models, such trends remain limited in Slovakia (Eurostat, 2025). However, commuting needs may also be altered by individual situations, such as being on parental leave or retirement. As I will show later, travel to Bratislava becomes temporarily or permanently irrelevant for some of my research partners. Still, the city's attracting force anchors suburban life (Harris – Lehrer 2018).

This paper draws on the experiences of twenty research partners who relocated to the different suburbs around Bratislava over the past twenty years. Despite the variation in the timing of their migration, I categorized them all as “newcomers” to the suburbs, which enabled me to examine different stages of their individual suburban trajectories. The sample features an equal representation of men and women, encompassing a diverse age range from individuals in their early thirties to those in their seventies. At the time of the research, they all lived in 12 different suburban locations around Bratislava, spanning all geographical directions, including two individuals residing in cross-border suburban settlements

across the state border in Hungary (Rajka and Levél). The aim of the multi-sited research design was to explore how diverse suburban environments mediate the processes of homemaking and belonging, primarily concerning the materiality of place, but through the intimate, narrative, and temporal dimensions of respondents' lives. The research participants were approached through a combination of snowball sampling and the use of local gatekeepers.

During the fieldwork, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews (audio-recorded), combined with walking interviews and participant observation. The latter methods were particularly suited to exploring place-based reflections and experiences, as they enabled participants to articulate their everyday routines and sensory engagement with the suburban environment. I also conducted a series of on-camera interviews that focused on how research partners reimagined suburbs as home and cultivated a sense of belonging. The presence of the camera created a distinct research situation (G. Lutherová – Vofanská 2024b), in which participants appeared more aware and deliberate in their responses. In some cases, the camera seemed to deepen self-reflection; in others, it introduced emotional constraints, as research partners avoided or rephrased sensitive topics during the audio-visually recorded sessions. All data were pseudo-anonymized and subjected to inductive content analysis.



Fig. 2. Ongoing construction in Bratislava's suburban areas. Photo by Soňa G. Lutherová, 31. 3. 2023

### Moving to the Suburbs

The global myth of suburban life is characterized by notions of privatization, social conformity, environmental unsustainability, and a sense of melancholy (McDonogh 2006). It originated from a post-war American suburban experience, once mythically depicted as a white, upper-class ideal, excluded from the social frictions of urban areas (Airgood-Obrycki – Price 2019). Elena Mannová situates myth between “irrational visions of uncritically accepted ideas” and “simple fabrications and delusions” (Mannová 2005). Mythmaking as a fluid and processual part of the collective consciousness influences how people perceive the world around them. According to Roland Barthes, myth neither conceals nor reveals, but establishes reality that appears to be natural, even though it is, in fact, functional and “tailor-made” for its recipients (Barthes 1972).

In the context of the post-socialist transformation, the myth of suburbia has been constructed as an epitome of the middle-class ideal. As one of my research partners, Peter, described, developers’ marketing campaigns portrayed suburban life as peaceful and village-like, centered around a detached house inhabited by a nuclear family. Peter and his wife moved to the suburbs from Petržalka, Bratislava’s largest socialist-era housing estate. They were planning to start a new family and were drawn to the idea of living in their own house and close to nature. He recalls the developer’s advertisement that motivated them to move to the suburbs: “*Swap your flat in a ‘panelák’<sup>1</sup> for a house!*”



Fig. 3. Living in the suburbs: negotiating between ideals and reality. Photo by Soňa G. Lutherová, 14. 4. 2023

The desire to trade an apartment in a socialist-era block for a new single-family house with a yard is a recurring theme in my research partners’ narratives. Other research partners also emphasized the question of “*lower prices for greater value*” and the motivation to secure the family’s future through homeownership, responding to the precarious housing market in Slovakia (Špirková et al. 2009; Hlinčíková 2024). However, their narratives uncover that the desire to own a single-family house holds deeper, more intimate meanings, concerning the family’s safety, privacy, and future prosperity (G. Lutherová 2014). These are often mixed with more pragmatic financial reasoning. As explained by Zuzana, who is currently on parental leave with her first child:

*“We had just gotten married and were renting in Bratislava. And then we found out we were going to have a baby... So, we started looking for a place of our own, but in Bratislava it was... well, what we could actually afford right after university was at most a two-room flat in Bratislava [...]. I met a guy who said he lived in Rajka. [...] He was telling me about the gardens, the little houses, these villa-style homes... So, we came to this green field and said, okay, this could be our home.”* (Zuzana, 30)

Zuzana explained that she moved to Rajka with an idealized vision of suburban life, though her current housing situation only partially mirrors that ideal. The family has a small private yard attached to their ground-level apartment in a small three-story residential building, with one apartment on each level. The building is situated in a gated area of a block of structures at the very edge of the village, surrounded by construction sites and fields and lacking infrastructure, sidewalks, or public lighting. When she wanted to socialize while her husband was at work, she needed to walk through the fields and backroads to the center of the village or travel to Bratislava. Combined with the fact that she does not speak Hungarian, the opportunities were limited. To overcome the seclusion, Zuzana participates in community activities organized by Slovak mothers with small children living in the village. Additionally, she persuaded a friendly couple from Bratislava to relocate to their neighborhood. Ultimately, she views what some might find unsatisfactory as the best possible housing solution, given her financial circumstances.

In the narratives about research partners' relocations to the suburbs, the practical reasoning often intertwines with more emotional and idealized portrayals of suburban life, especially regarding the closeness to nature and the desire to create a comfortable home for one's family. *"Living your whole life like being on vacation,"* (Toscana n.d.) as mentioned in one of the developers' advertisements, alongside the notion that *"planting a tall hedge is, of course, a given"* (ibid.), presents specific qualities of daily life that draw on idealistic concepts of intimacy and privacy, while invoking the social aspirations of potential buyers. *"For us, moving to the suburbs was our attempt to retreat into silence,"* explains 49-year-old Eliška, echoing the slogans of the sales agents, and implying with her facial expression and the tone of her voice that the "silence" means more than the auditory quality of the environment.

Andrej, a recent retiree, and his wife decided to move to Hamuliakovo after returning to Slovakia following years of living and working abroad:

*"We made that decision because, as retirees, we didn't want to stay in the center of Bratislava, where we would have had to travel quite a distance just to reach nature."* (Andrej, 73)

Further in the interview, he admitted that their decision was also motivated by tensions with their neighbors in the downtown apartment building, which hindered them from renovating their apartment to their liking. However, his wife, Helena, experienced the move differently, feeling isolated as she was retired and unable to drive, which limited her socializing opportunities. For Andrej, life in suburbia represented newfound peace and freedom, but for Helena, it felt like exile in the first couple of years. Her perception changed with their frequent, month-long visits to their children, who have been living abroad. Today, suburbia remains a refuge – but the one she chooses to leave regularly. Simultaneously, she clings to the promise of their future relocation to the city, where they have already bought an apartment.

The social relationships with neighbors and the varying dynamics between the city and the suburbs often influence research partners' reasoning for moving. However, these aspects can be perceived and experienced in different ways. While some individuals cited moving to the suburbs as a desire to be part of a close-knit

community, others viewed suburbia as a quiet or isolated place because they struggled to establish meaningful social connections there. Jozef articulates the clash between his expectations before relocation to Dunajská Lužná and the daily reality after:

*"My then-partner and I had some hopes – we expected a community of young people since it was a new street mostly made up of young families. Looking back now, I see those expectations as rather naïve, given what actually developed in that regard. At the same time... we finally wanted to live in a property of our own and stop spending money on rent because it seemed more logical to pay for something we would eventually own."* (Jozef, 44)

Jozef combines rational reasoning about financial possibilities with a more emotional perspective and describes his decision to live in suburbia as *"falling for a trap."* Suburban life can represent both freedom and a burden, tying individuals to a place while limiting their ability to belong. How, then, do newcomers navigate the contradictory conditions of suburbia, and to put it in the words of Tim Ingold, how does it influence the way they see their dwelling, and how does it become a home (Ingold 2000: 185)?



Fig. 4. A suburban neighbourhood.  
Photo by Soňa G. Lutherová, 10. 4. 2023

### Root-Planting in the Suburbs

*“What are we missing? I think we’re not missing anything. In Lozorno, probably nothing. If some shops were here... like Tesco, it would already feel forced, unnecessary. Everything is nearby. [...] Really, it’s like a dream home, a dream come true. I actually dreamed about this place, so I recognized it. So, you could say it’s my dream place to live.”* (Michal, 55)

Although Michal lives on the outskirts of Lozorno, physically excluded from the local community, he describes it as his *“dream home.”* For others, the suburban experience can be easily marred by feelings of disconnectedness and isolation, particularly in specific situations, such as retirement or maternity leave, as exemplified by seventy-year-old retiree Milena. She recalled the period when she and her husband, who was still working at that time, moved into their weekend house in Dunajská Lužná, transforming it into a full-time residence:

*“The soil there is good, high-quality black earth. And for us gardeners, that’s essential. In addition to gardening, we also wanted some bonus: water, the lake, Košariská, which is nearby... In the mornings, when people from the surrounding houses left for work in Bratislava, I was de facto left alone in the whole settlement. The only living sounds I could hear were birds – crows nad magpies. It was really tough.”* (Milena, 70)

Although Milena had owned the place as a weekend retreat before fully relocating, she felt overwhelmed by a sense of isolation afterward. Her narrative reflects the idea that the suburbs are *“dormitories”* where people come only to sleep during the workweek. She also pointed out several obstacles to her well-being while living in the suburbs, including rapid development in the area, a high influx of new residents, and the privatization of nearby spaces, such as the restriction of public access to the lake. After what she describes as the *“saddest time in her life,”* she urged her husband to move back to the city and use the house for weekend leisure once again.

In the suburban areas around Bratislava, several gardening colonies have evolved into residential neighborhoods, mainly occupied by retirees or economically active individuals who commute or work remotely (Beňušková 2016). Feri, who lives in a gardening colony in the western parts of Bratislava, perceives his suburban housing differently from Milena’s. He described his

permanent move to the colony as gradual, as well as the area’s transformation, while the plots were converted one after another into permanent residences. He noted that the development of the settlement was not only *“natural”* but also *“not orchestrated from the outside.”*

However, Feri believed the community lacked opportunities for spontaneous social interaction due to the absence of public spaces. After retiring, he started a café trailer as a meeting point for the local community and bikers passing through. According to him, this secured his position at the center of local social life, and he said he has *“never been bored since.”*

These two contrasting cases illustrate how individuals adapt to the social environment in suburban areas. We can infer that their different experiences are linked to specific characteristics and conditions within the neighborhoods, which are shaped by various factors such as the privatization of public space, limited access to public transportation, or other potential constraints. However, the process of adaptation is more circumstantial. It is a complex negotiation involving temporal rhythms, personal trajectories, and access to formal and informal resources. While Feri transformed his surroundings into a vibrant social space, Milena’s story underscores how isolation and rapid environmental change can erode the very conditions needed to feel at home, ultimately leading to her withdrawal back to the city. If Feri suggests that *“relationships among neighbors”* are indeed *“the cornerstone of a sustainable community,”* we must ask: for whom does this hold true, and what structural preconditions make such relationships possible or not?

One of my research partners, Eliška, emotionally reflected on her attachment to her settlement in Lozorno and its surroundings:

*“For us, a dream came true – it’s as if we’re living our holiday here, and we truly feel like we’re at the cottage. We have a garden that connects right to the forest, we’re within walking distance of the reservoir, we go to a spot with fresh spring water, and we have friends here – so... it completely fulfilled our vision. It really is our home.”* (Eliška, 49)

Eliška weaved together the materiality of the place with the social context and her lifestyle, implying her perception of self. As Janto observes, many newcomers lack interest in engaging with the local community, prefer privacy and maintaining social ties from the city, and

reflect the social habits formed in urban environments (Janto 2020). One of my research partners, Jaro, explained the social dynamics in the suburbs by looking at the height and material of the walls around private yards:

*"I'm not really a big fan of those three-meter walls. What I actually like about the old village, for instance, is that, sure, you have a (see-through) fence, but it's about fifty centimeters tall, or I don't know... maybe sixty centimeters. So basically, you can still see into the yard when you're walking down the street, right? But here, like, what you see a lot is people moving from the city to the countryside, and they still want to stay kind of... incognito, even in the village. Or rather, they want to keep that, what do you call it... that impersonality of the city."* (Jaro, 42)

Another research partner, Jozef, seems to fall into "an opposite group" from Jaro, feeling detached from the space behind the immediate walls of his apartment:

*"My neighborhood – the space beyond the fence – I don't really perceive it (as home). I definitely don't see it as part of my living space."* (Jozef, 44)

However, the specific circumstances profoundly influence Jozef's perception of his dwelling. The building he lives in, particularly his apartment, was constructed in conflict with the municipal land-use plan due to the rapid and insufficiently controlled development in the area. For many years, he has faced the threat of a highway being built directly behind his living room windows. This alienated him from the place and negatively shaped his suburban experience.

When people engage with their living environment and develop an emotional attachment to their home, street, neighborhood, or surrounding area, suburban placemaking seamlessly blends into the homemaking process. However, when this process is disrupted, it creates a barrier that is difficult to overcome and disrupts individual "root-planting," including the cultivation of social relationships, which are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging to the place. Again, home boundaries are defined not only by physical dimensions but also by the social relationships that shape them. When Andrej portrays Hamuliakovo as a place to find "peace from the people finally," another retiree, Miloš, praises the "authentic connection" and "family-like relationships" with his neighbors and broader community.

As one of my research partners, Mira, explains, the process of establishing close social relationships is also closely linked to the individual's perception of self in the local community:

*"Even on our street, there are people who moved here too, and over all these years, they haven't participated in a single event organized by the village. They don't even try, in any way, to give something of themselves, of their person, to the village. So, I find it quite strange that someone can live here and remain so detached – like it's just a house for them, just a place to live, and they don't perceive anything beyond that. And many of them aren't even officially Lozorno residents. They're not registered in Lozorno."* (Mira, 50)

Suburban residents' lives, some more than others, are closely tied to their connections in the city, where they frequently commute for work, education, health-care, shopping (beyond daily grocery shopping), culture, and participate in informal leisure activities. While formal residency might appear as a mere bureaucratic detail, it can also signal one's intimate relationship to the place, or the symbolic act through which dwelling becomes a home (Ingold 2000), and the absence of this commitment can reveal the provisional nature of their suburban trajectory.

Ultimately, forging social connections during off-work hours requires participation in the settlement's social life, such as attending public events, engaging in various activities, among which the research partners mentioned maintenance or renovation of public spaces, participation in leisure activities as, for example, group cycling, support of local sport teams, or attendance of religious practices such as Sunday Mass. Katarína, who has lived in the suburbs for eighteen years, states that she never managed to "blend in." She described how her organization of daily practicalities taking place in Bratislava hindered her from forming an attachment to Šamorín and its social and physical environment:

*"To feel like I belong here, I would need to have much deeper relationships and be much more involved in the Šamorín community than I currently am... I don't work here, my children don't go to school here, and I don't have any activities that I do for this town or in this town."* (Katarína, 52)

The suburban experience of women is often shaped by the normative perception of gender roles and the division of tasks in families (Hirt 2008). This echoes in Jana's story:

*"I remember it felt so easy. There was a kind of lightness to it when we moved here because I had this little baby, my daughter, and I immediately sort of infiltrated the group of moms who had kids around the same age, through the community center for mothers."* (Jana, 60)

Jana's story demonstrates how she integrated into the community through shared routines in caregiving. However, her social connections and feeling of belonging weakened once she started to commute for work to Bratislava, and her children started to attend schools and after-school activities there:

*"I think it's really convenient to live in a family house with a garden when you have small children. That's when it's ideal. But over time, once the kids start going to various after-school activities, mostly in Bratislava, it becomes a problem."* (Jana, 60)

Once her daughters entered their teenage years, Jana's family apartment in the city became their gathering place, and they gradually moved there. Following her divorce, Jana found herself alone in the large house

in Miloslavov. Today, she views suburbs as suitable for young families and retired couples rather than for individuals who are in different periods of their life trajectory, are alone, or need assistance caring for dependents or themselves. The temporal aspect adds another layer to her suburban experience, as her family situation changed over time. Because of this, she describes that the house *"started to feel too big once I was there alone,"* and she will probably move back to Bratislava soon. Her story uncovers the temporality of the perception of suburban life.

Jana's perception of the suburb as fitting a particular stage in the family trajectory is supported by Eliška, who demonstrates how suburban life can become increasingly burdensome throughout the family trajectory. When her kids reached the age of daily commuting to the city, but could not travel independently, she juggled commuting, paid work, and household chores. With her husband's time-intensive job and no grandparental support available, Eliška had to adjust her working conditions accordingly:

*"I can't imagine working full-time in some corporate job... The price I paid was having far less space to devote to work, especially during that most intense period when the kids weren't yet old enough to travel (to the city) on their own."* (Eliška, 49)



Fig. 5. Practices of motherhood in suburban contexts. Photo by Soňa G. Lutherová, 15. 2. 2023

Eliška's experience highlights the gendered and temporal dimension of suburban care: the suburban environment can sometimes facilitate social integration, create a sense of belonging, and later become a site of logistical strain. Another research partner, Martina, who recently got divorced, doubles down on this argument:

*"In the short term, I want to stay here, mainly while the children are still small. Afterward, they might actually prefer moving back to the city..."* (Martina, 35)

Sometimes, the situation in the lives of the residents changes unexpectedly, and they re-negotiate their perception of their suburban experience. Peter, who moved to Čierna Voda with his wife, became a widower soon after. He decided to stay in the suburbs with his infant son, as he explains, mainly for practical and specifically financial reasons. After years of being a suburban resident, he describes his position there as follows:

*"I (still) don't really fit into that typical template of 'dad, mom, little family, two cars, off to work in the morning, back from work in the evening, grilling in the garden.' For one, it's just me and my son there, and for another, we're more all over the place with sports and less into those neighborly barbecues and that, I don't know, maybe mainstream kind of thing or whatever. Also, in terms of taste and stuff like that."* (Peter, 41)

Peter distanced himself from what he views as an ideal normative suburban lifestyle, associating it with the heteronormative nuclear family and the middle-class suburban domesticity that he considers conservative and routine. He presents himself as someone who does not meet this ideal, resonating with Nadia Lovell's notion of not conforming to the symbolic boundaries of the given place (Lovell 1998). As Peter's son grew older and formed social connections with his peers by playing on the street and attending the local school, Peter gradually felt more at home in the suburbs. He also strengthened his relationships with his immediate neighbors through *"long-distance socializing"* during the COVID-19 pandemic. Homemaking as a process requires time, effort, and may involve incidental elements.

*"I always thought I would move back to the city, but the pandemic changed my perspective – I've arranged my daily logistics, I no longer have commuting issues, and I appreciate the peace and the better living environment. I can finally even imagine living here in old age."* (Peter, 41)

Residents' attachment to place is often reflected in how they imagine their future in the suburbs, whether as a permanent home or a temporary phase. Some maintained a city apartment for emergencies or led hybrid lives, balancing two households during long workdays



Fig. 6. An aerial perspective on the suburban landscape of Bratislava. Photo by Soňa G. Lutherová, 31. 3. 2023

and the “more relaxed” suburban days, using this arrangement as both a practical solution and a safeguard for the future. Others, like Zuzana, a first-time mother living in Hungarian Rajka, initially emphasized the convenience of suburban life. Yet in a later on-camera interview, she revealed plans to move back to Slovakia, bringing us once again to the temporality of belonging:

*“I think we’ll live here for the next few years, but I wouldn’t dare to say how many... I feel like my husband and I are being drawn back to Slovakia, and we’ll want to return to Central Slovakia, where we both come from.”* (Zuzana, 30)

Zuzana’s evolving perspective underscores how the formation of attachment to the suburb is closely linked to the perception of self and projected life trajectory. This interplay between belonging and self-identification is also present in Michal’s narrative. He describes himself as a “local patriot,” articulating his emotional commitment and symbolic root-planting in the place:

*“I consider myself a local patriot because I care about what’s happening in this municipality and its future... It’s like I’ve always wanted to live and even die here. I guess that’s what local patriotism is – that if I were to die here, I’d truly want to be buried here. Yeah, for example, that’s something I feel – that this is local patriotism.”* (Michal, 58)

Feri invokes the same through an intergenerational dimension in his family and exemplifies how a suburban home may become a site of imagined permanence, where spatial, temporal, and familial continuity converge:

*“If heaven exists, I’d like to be able to watch my great-great-grandchildren still running around the garden I used to mow.”* (Feri, 65)

## Conclusion

As I watched my audiovisual observations from the suburbs, I noticed that the new streets and houses looked sometimes nearly indistinguishable from the older ones, as time has obscured the differences. The bushes and trees in the yards have matured. On one of the videos, it was noon on a workday, and the yards were nearly empty. I saw an older man tending to a small public plot at the edge of the street. I also encountered new apartment houses surrounded by construction sites. Cables protruded from the ground, ready to be-

come future utilities. Some of the houses were already occupied, and while I could hardly see past the freshly constructed walls surrounding the property, a few mothers watched over their children on bikes as they rode across the cement area in front of the private garage. My observations exemplified the partial impressions of the suburban environment, the perception of places from an outsider’s perspective.

The research partners detailed various benefits of living in the suburbs, such as closeness to nature, a safe environment for children to play, and quiet tranquility for older adults. Their stories revealed how a mix of practical and emotional reasoning continually shapes their attitudes and perceptions. Research has shown that suburban experiences and people’s evaluations of their living environment are closely tied to their personal views of themselves and their daily lives, changing in time.

Some suburban stories of the newcomers seem more “successful” than others. These residents have managed to plant roots in suburbia and construct a sense of home; sometimes against the odds and despite numerous challenges, including the need to reorganize daily routines due to inadequate infrastructure, initial social isolation, or the burden of long commutes to the city. Their suburban experiences are not only shaped by their age and gender, but also the organization of communication and care within their families. This resonates with Nadia Lovell’s notion of belonging as a dynamic process embedded in locality, memory, and materiality (Lovell 1998). To Lovell, belonging is “a way of remembering” (ibid: 1), but these memories are continually reconstructed to align with present and imagined future circumstances.

The way people attach to the place is particularly visible in the stories of suburban mothers, who may become part of the local social fabric through shared caregiving practices, yet loosen these ties when daily routines require regular commuting to the city for work, school, or after-school activities of their children. When people feel alienated from the place, living in suburbia becomes unsustainable. Those who continually reimagine and renegotiate their place in suburbia transform their suburban home into an intergenerational link, connecting personal and family histories with hopes for the future.

## NOTES:

1. An apartment building made of prefabricated reinforced concrete panels.

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