



# Ethics in Professional Urban Planning Practice: Evidence and Implications

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## ABSTRACT

Ethical issues are fundamental to professional urban planning, as planning decisions determine the distribution of resources, risks, and opportunities within urban environments. Despite increased scholarly attention, ethical concerns in planning remain fragmented and are frequently overlooked in practice. This study conducts a systematic literature review following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, analysing 47 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025 across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and supplementary citation tracking to examine how ethical challenges shape professional urban planning practice and spatial outcomes. The review systematically identifies recurring ethical challenges in professional urban planning. It assesses their influence on governance practices and spatial outcomes. Moreover, it further identifies six prevalent ethical challenges: ambiguous definitions of the public interest, persistent social and spatial injustice, limitations in participatory and procedural ethics, power imbalances and restricted professional autonomy, conflicts of interest undermining integrity, and inconsistent attention to environmental responsibility and climate justice. These challenges are embedded within governance systems rather than being solely attributable to individual shortcomings. Communicative planning theory demonstrates that inadequate participation can diminish legitimacy and decision quality. In contrast, justice-based theories indicate that planning practices may perpetuate inequality and displacement. Institutional perspectives further reveal that organisational and political constraints can impede planners' capacity to act ethically. The review concludes that addressing these challenges requires integrating ethics into participation standards, governance structures, and professional safeguards. Institutionalising ethical reasoning within planning practice is essential for enhancing legitimacy, equity, and sustainable urban outcomes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ethical considerations are central to professional urban planning practice, shaping the distribution of resources, the management of risks, and the creation of opportunities for communities. Urban planners should therefore balance economic development, social equity, environmental sustainability, and democratic principles while

navigating political pressures and uncertainty. Ethics have become central to both planning theory and practice, particularly in relation to the public good, justice, and professional responsibility (Campbell, 2016; Fainstein, 2010). Increasing urban inequality, housing shortages, climate-related risks, and evolving governance structures have intensified the significance of ethical questions. Concurrently, demands for greater transparency, accountability, and public participation

have expanded the ethical obligations of planning institutions and professionals (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Bulkeley and Newell, 2023; Matamanda et al., 2024). In response, scholars are investigating how planners conceptualise the public interest, advance equity, foster participation, wield authority, and fulfil environmental responsibilities (Legacy et al., 2024; Senior et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2021). Addressing these ethical challenges is essential to advancing urban planning and underscores the importance of this subject.

Although research on ethics in urban planning is expanding, the literature remains fragmented. Most studies address specific domains, such as participatory planning (Legacy et al., 2024; Quick and Bryson, 2022), climate justice and environmental planning (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2021), housing and spatial inequality (Pereira and Farber, 2023; Matamanda et al., 2024), or governance and professional independence (Eriksson et al., 2021; Foroughi et al., 2023). Understanding the interconnections among these ethical issues across planning systems can facilitate a more integrated approach for both professionals and researchers. Existing reviews of planning ethics and governance typically concentrate on individual topics, such as participation, sustainability, or justice, and seldom provide a comprehensive overview of ethical challenges spanning multiple areas (Healey, 2015; Durrant et al., 2023). To date, no systematic review has synthesised recent empirical studies to examine ethical issues in professional urban planning holistically or to evaluate the collective impact of these challenges on planning practice and outcomes. In the absence of such an overview, it is difficult for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to recognise planning ethics as a central component of contemporary practice. This study addresses this gap by systematically reviewing empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025 that investigate ethical challenges in professional urban planning. Adhering to PRISMA 2020 guidelines, this review synthesises evidence from diverse planning contexts to tackle two research questions: *What ethical issues are most frequently examined within the professional urban planning literature? In what ways do these ethical challenges influence urban planning practices and their resulting outcomes?*

The review contributes to the planning scientific community by providing the first systematic synthesis of recent empirical research on professional planning ethics and by integrating normative, procedural, distributive, and institutional perspectives into a coherent analytical framework. It advances the concept of institutionalised planning ethics, demonstrating that ethical challenges are embedded in governance structures and materialise in land-use decisions, spatial inequality, and climate planning outcomes. In doing so, it reframes ethics as a structural

feature of urban planning systems rather than merely an individual professional concern.

## 2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Theoretical framing

Urban planning ethics influence the development of cities and communities by integrating moral principles with professional responsibility. Urban planners are required to advance the public good and balance values such as equity, efficiency, sustainability, and democracy, while exercising sound judgment in complex political and institutional environments (Campbell, 2016). In this context, they are professionals trained to conceive, design, and implement urban policies and plans, especially those related to land and building transformation and the provision of urban infrastructure and services. They also perform ancillary operations necessary to support these core functions (Moroni and Kasińska, 2020).

This review integrates multiple planning theories to examine the persistence of ethical issues in urban planning and how they are addressed in the research literature. Planning ethics and public interest theory reveal that planning is shaped by competing objectives, including economic efficiency, social equity, and environmental sustainability (Campbell, 2016; Feinstein, 2010). These frameworks help identify recurring ethical challenges, such as ambiguous definitions of public interest, questions of justice, and professional responsibility. Communicative planning theory highlights participation, transparency, and deliberation as central ethical principles, which explains the frequent emphasis on participation and legitimacy in the reviewed studies (Healey, 2015). Institutional and governance theories suggest that planners' ethical decisions are often constrained by organisational structures, political dynamics, and market-oriented systems (Durrant et al., 2023; Foroughi et al., 2023). Justice-based theories, particularly those focused on spatial and environmental justice, offer analytical tools for evaluating the impacts of planning decisions on diverse groups, particularly in housing and climate planning (Anguelovski et al., 2019).

This review, therefore, integrates planning ethics, public-interest theory, communicative planning, justice-based frameworks, and institutional governance into a single analytical framework. Planning ethics and public-interest theory focus on tensions between equity, efficiency, sustainability, and democracy.

Communicative planning emphasises fair procedures, participation, and inclusion. Justice-based frameworks assess outcomes such as inequality, displacement, and climate justice. Institutional theory examines how power, accountability, professional independence, and conflicts of interest influence ethical

decision-making. Collectively, these perspectives indicate that planning ethics should be embedded in governance systems rather than treated solely as a personal moral responsibility.

## 2.2. Methodology

### 2.2.1. Research design and review framework

This study adopts a systematic review design structured according to the PRISMA 2020 Statement (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA was employed to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and rigour in identifying, screening, and synthesising empirical research on ethics in professional urban planning. The review followed a clearly defined search strategy, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, documented screening stages, and structured thematic synthesis. PRISMA was selected for its transparent, repeatable methodology in identifying, screening, and summarising peer-reviewed research, which reduces selection bias and enhances the quality of reviews addressing ethical issues in urban planning (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA 2020 framework also facilitates transparent reporting of eligibility criteria, including time limits, provided these are clearly stated and consistently applied (Rethlefsen et al., 2021). The research included only empirical studies to ensure that findings reflect actual planning practice rather than theoretical discourse.

Studies published between 2020 and 2025 were included to maintain relevance to contemporary urban planning and ethical challenges. This period encompasses significant developments in climate justice, participation, governance, and digitalisation. Foundational literature was referenced for background context but excluded from the primary analysis to preserve methodological consistency. This approach aligns with PRISMA 2020 guidance and established best practices for systematic reviews in the social sciences.

### 2.2.2. Data sources and search strategy

A comprehensive literature search was performed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for studies published from January 2020 to March 2025. The search utilised terms such as “urban planning ethics”, “professional ethics in planning”, “ethical issues in urban planning”, “planning practice AND ethics”, “justice OR equity AND planning”, and “public participation AND planning ethics”. The full search strings for Scopus and WoS are provided in the appendix. Additional relevant empirical studies were identified through citation chaining and both backward and forward citation tracking of key articles. To broaden the scope of the review, Google Scholar was used as a supplementary tool to trace both backward

and forward citations of pivotal articles identified in Scopus and Web of Science. Its limited filtering options meant it was not chosen as a primary database. The screening process focused on the top 200 most relevant results, selecting only peer-reviewed journal articles that fit the established inclusion criteria. To enhance rigour and reproducibility, a structured thematic synthesis guided the study. Open coding uncovered recurring ethical issues and impacts, which were then grouped through ongoing comparison. Each coding decision was carefully checked against predefined thematic criteria to maintain consistency and minimise interpretive bias.

## 2.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were explicitly set from the start to ensure the review focused on high-quality, relevant, and comparable evidence on ethical issues in professional urban planning. Studies had to meet five specific criteria to be included. Firstly, only peer-reviewed journal articles were included to keep a consistent academic standard. Secondly, studies had to be empirical, using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research based on systematic data. Thirdly, studies should directly address ethical issues in professional urban planning, including ethics, justice, equity, public interest, accountability, and professional responsibility in planning practice and decision-making. Next, only studies published in English were included to maintain consistency in the study. Eventually, the review considered studies published from 2020 to 2025 to reflect the current planning context, shaped by climate governance, participatory reforms, and changing institutions. Research articles that did not meet these criteria were excluded, namely purely theoretical or philosophical papers, focusing on empirical evidence rather than arguments about what should be done; studies that focused solely on technical planning tools or methods, without discussing ethical issues or professional practice; research on other professions, such as architecture, engineering, or urban design, that lacked a clear focus on planning; editorials, commentaries, conference papers, and other non-peer-reviewed sources, as to maintain a consistent and reliable evidence base.

## 2.4. Selection of studies

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram outlining the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies in this systematic review, detailing the selection process for empirical studies from the initial search results. It also demonstrates the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria at each stage. Figure 1 illustrates that the database search and citation tracking identified 412

records. After duplicate removal, 326 studies underwent title and abstract screening.

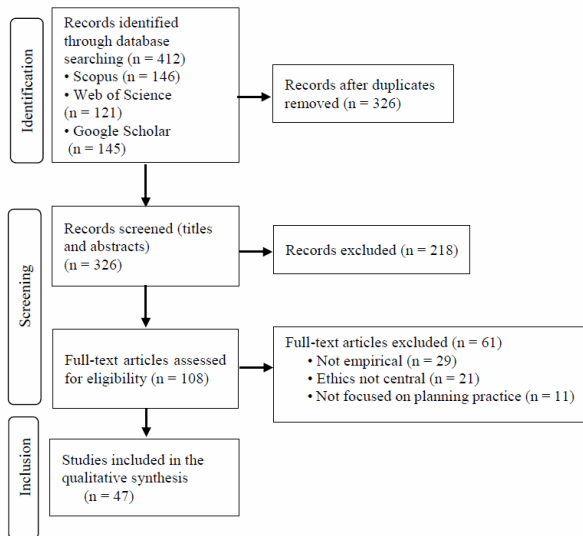


Fig. 1. Flow diagram of literature search and study selection (source: adopted with modifications from Page et al., 2021).

Studies were excluded if they did not address ethical issues, lacked empirical data, or were unrelated to professional urban planning. The full texts of 108 articles were assessed, with 61 excluded for being purely theoretical, focusing exclusively on technical tools without ethical discussion, or addressing non-planning professions. The final review comprises 47 empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025. Table 1 presents the geographic distribution of contributing authors.

Table 1. Geographic distribution of contributing authors.

Geographic region	Number of studies	(%)	Planning contexts represented
Europe	18	38.3	Participation, governance, professional ethics, and climate planning
North America	11	23.4	Climate justice, housing inequality, participation, and public interest
Global South (Africa, Asia, Latin America)	12	25.5	Informality, governance capacity, participation ethics, and equity
Australia and New Zealand	4	8.5	Professional autonomy, governance, and strategic planning
Cross-national / Comparative studies	2	4.3	Ethics frameworks, justice indicators, and comparative governance
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>100</b>	

Source: compiled by the author based on systematic review data.

The reviewed studies are concentrated in Europe and North America, which together account for over 60% of the empirical evidence. This imbalance

reflects the inclusion criteria of this review. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English were included, and the main databases used, Scopus and Web of Science, mostly index English-language journals. As a result, empirical research published in other languages may be underrepresented. Significant research on urban planning may exist in Spanish (Latin America), Chinese, French, or German, where national planning traditions and ethical debates often develop within local academic communities. Therefore, the geographic distribution in this review should not be taken to indicate the global distribution of planning ethics research, but rather to reflect the scope of English-language empirical studies available through the selected databases.

### 2.5. Data extraction and analysis

Data from all included studies were extracted using a structured template designed to capture information pertinent to the research questions. The extracted data encompassed study context, methodological approach, ethical issues addressed, and reported impacts on planning practice or outcomes. The research employed a thematic synthesis approach. Initially, relevant text from each study was inductively coded to identify ethical issues and their associated impacts. Subsequently, codes were organised into descriptive categories through constant comparison across studies. These categories were then synthesised into six analytical themes that structure the results section and address research questions one and two. To strengthen analytical rigour, citation density and co-occurrence, analyses were conducted to evaluate the distribution of evidence across themes and to identify interconnections between ethical impacts. Empirical findings were consistently distinguished from normative interpretation throughout the study.

Statistical weighting coefficients were not applied to individual studies in this review. Unlike meta-analyses that aggregate comparable quantitative results, the included studies show substantial variation in methodology, case-study scope, and analytical approaches. Weighting by sample size or other quantitative criteria could distort the interpretation of qualitative and mixed-method evidence. Each study was treated as an analytical unit within the thematic synthesis. Patterns in the literature were assessed using thematic coding and co-occurrence analysis. This structured approach helped identify dominant ethical themes while preserving the diversity of methodological approaches in the reviewed studies.

### 2.6. Data quality control

Data quality control is essential in systematic reviews as it ensures accuracy of results, minimises

bias, enhances transparency, and supports the derivation of reliable conclusions (Bown and Sutton, 2010). Multiple strategies were employed to ensure the rigour and reliability of the review. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were systematically applied during screening, with particular emphasis on publication date (2020–2025), empirical methodology, and relevance to professional urban planning practice. Title–abstract and full-text screening decisions were cross-verified to minimise selection bias, and discrepancies were solved using predefined criteria. A standardised data extraction protocol facilitated consistent documentation of study context, methods, ethical considerations, and reported impacts. Analytical robustness was enhanced through citation density and co-occurrence analyses, which evaluated the balance of evidence and thematic interconnections. During synthesis, empirical findings were clearly distinguished from normative claims to ensure that conclusions reflected observed planning practice.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1. Ethical issues in the professional urban planning practice**

This section synthesises the main ethical challenges identified in the reviewed empirical studies. It examines their impact on professional urban planning. The analysis shows that ethical issues are structural elements within governance systems, not isolated individual dilemmas. Six interrelated themes emerge: public interest ambiguity, social justice, participation, power, integrity, and environmental responsibility. Together, these themes demonstrate how ethical tensions influence planning processes, decisions, and outcomes.

##### **3.1.1. Ambiguity and contestation of the public interest**

Urban planning constitutes a form of state intervention that primarily operates at the local level and is influenced by political priorities, institutional frameworks, and broader social transformations (Campbell and Marshall, 2000). A persistent challenge is the absence of a clear, widely accepted definition of the public interest within planning theory and practice (Orji et al., 2024). Recent research indicates that planners frequently adopt a pragmatic approach to the public interest, allowing political demands, organisational constraints, and market forces to shape their decisions consequently undermining ethical standards. Under political or development pressures, planners tend to rely on personal judgment and professional experience when guidance is limited or ambiguous (Andres et al., 2023; Bakunowitsch et al.,

2024). Comparative analyses reveal that the concept of the public interest is often invoked to justify growth or to support elite groups, while the needs of marginalised populations are frequently overlooked (Machakaire and Mokhele, 2024; Clements, 2024). Governance research further demonstrates that, in the absence of a precise definition, ethical responsibility becomes dispersed among multiple actors and organisations, thereby weakening accountability and resulting in divergent interpretations of ethical obligations (Fan, 2025; Richardson and White, 2021; Sheydayi and Dadashpoor, 2022). These findings illustrate persistent interpretive tensions surrounding the public interest in contemporary planning.

##### **3.1.2. Social justice and equity as ethical concerns**

Social justice and equity are widely recognised as fundamental ethical principles in urban planning. However, research indicates a persistent gap between these values and their implementation in practice (Amegavi et al., 2025). Although planning policies, professional codes, and academic discourse frequently emphasise justice, these ideals are often subordinated to market forces, political agendas, and institutional constraints (Antipova et al., 2020). Consequently, ethical decision-making in planning is frequently compromised, raising concerns about whose interests are ultimately prioritised (Akaabre et al., 2025). Empirical studies on housing and urban redevelopment consistently reveal these ethical tensions. Despite frequent identification of equity as a primary objective, decisions are predominantly influenced by market-driven, growth-oriented priorities. Such approaches often result in displacement, reduced housing affordability, and increased risks for low-income and marginalised populations, outcomes that conflict with the ethical obligation to prevent harm and promote fairness (Matamanda et al., 2024; Te Lintelo et al., 2024; Pereira and Farber, 2023). Comparable challenges are evident in transport planning, where efficiency and cost reduction are often prioritised over equitable access. These decisions can restrict mobility for disadvantaged individuals and peripheral communities, thereby undermining the planners' ethical responsibility to ensure universal access to essential services (Feitosa et al., 2024; Lo Piccolo and Picone, 2023). Reviews and international studies further demonstrate that justice and equity are frequently regarded as aspirational goals rather than binding ethical imperatives. Ethical principles are seldom translated into precise definitions, measurable standards, or practical instruments for routine planning decisions (Rot et al., 2025; Anguelovski et al., 2019). This ambiguity disperses ethical responsibility across institutions, diminishes accountability, and perpetuates

inequitable outcomes. In the absence of robust ethical frameworks and effective accountability mechanisms, urban planning is likely to perpetuate rather than resolve existing social and spatial injustices.

### **3.1.3. Participation, inclusion, and procedural ethics**

Participation, inclusion, and procedural ethics are central to democratic urban planning (Wenzel et al., 2025; Clark, 2021). Ethical planning processes ensure that diverse stakeholders, especially marginalised groups, have genuine opportunities to influence decisions that shape their living environments. Participation enhances legitimacy and trust, but only when procedures are transparent, fair, and free from domination by powerful interests (Davoudi and Ormerod, 2025). Procedural ethics focuses on how decisions are made, emphasising equity, respect, and accountability throughout planning processes. When participation is meaningful and inclusive, urban planning outcomes are more just, resilient, and responsive to community needs (Sondou et al., 2025; Cannon et al., 2024; McGill, 2024; Barry, 2024).

Ethical issues around public participation and procedural justice are widely discussed in the literature. Even though there is strong support for participatory planning, research shows that these efforts often fall short. Case studies reveal that participation usually means consultation, not shared decision-making, which limits how much communities can shape outcomes (Hofer, 2025; Legacy et al., 2024; Senior et al., 2023). Studies from both the Global North and South find that marginalised groups are often left out due to complex language, insufficient information, or institutional barriers (Zakhour, 2020; Foroughi et al., 2023; Forde, 2024). Surveys and mixed-method research also show that people's opinions about participation are closely linked to trust and legitimacy. When participation is unethical, public support for planning declines (Alhassan, 2025; Quick and Bryson, 2022; van de Wetering and Groenleer, 2024). Overall, these studies reveal that procedural ethics remains a significant and well-known challenge in planning.

### **3.1.4. Power relations, accountability, and professional autonomy**

Power dynamics, accountability, and professional independence are central to urban planning practice. Political, economic, and institutional factors frequently shape planning decisions, often favouring those with greater influence (Essien and Jesse, 2024). Accountability mechanisms are designed to ensure that planners prioritise the public good. At the same time, professional autonomy enables the application of specialised expertise and judgment. Achieving an

appropriate balance among these elements is essential for transparent, ethical, and compelling urban governance (Flyvbjerg, 2002). Numerous studies identify ethical challenges in planning, including power imbalances, accountability concerns, and constraints on planners' independence. In various governance contexts, planners frequently face restrictions on their ability to make ethical decisions. Empirical evidence indicates that planners are regularly pressured to modify their recommendations to align with prevailing agendas, potentially compromising impartiality (Eriksson et al., 2021; Barry and Legacy, 2022). Additional research demonstrates that market-driven planning systems intensify these pressures and heighten power disparities among officials, developers, and communities (Alexander et al., 2022; Chang, 2021). Analyses of professional practice further reveal that ethical responsibility is typically assigned to individuals, despite broader systemic factors that can impede planners' ability to resist unethical directives (Bakunowitsch et al., 2024; Mutambik, 2024). Collectively, these studies underscore that power and accountability constitute significant ethical concerns in urban planning.

### **3.1.5. Professional integrity and conflicts of interest**

Professional integrity in urban planning involves serving the public interest through fair, transparent, and evidence-based decision-making while adhering to the ethical standards outlined in professional codes of conduct (Sturzaker and Hickman, 2024). Planners may encounter conflicts of interest when personal, financial, or professional relationships influence, or appear to influence, their judgment, potentially resulting in biased decisions and diminished public trust. Effective governance relies on disclosure, recusal when appropriate, and robust ethical oversight to maintain fairness and credibility in planning processes. Upholding ethical standards is essential to establishing the planners' legitimacy in complex urban environments (Machakaire and Mokhele, 2024). Key research topics include professional integrity, conflicts of interest, and the enforcement of ethical standards within urban planning. Empirical studies indicate persistent gaps between formal ethical guidelines and actual practice. Evidence suggests that planners frequently hesitate to report unethical conduct due to concerns about retaliation or negative career consequences (Eriksson et al., 2021; Mutambik, 2024).

Additionally, surveys demonstrate that many planning organisations lack consistent awareness or application of ethical codes, thereby reducing their effectiveness (Barry and Legacy, 2022). Research on public-private partnerships highlights that ambiguous boundaries between public service and private interests can generate ethical dilemmas, particularly when

planners exercise significant discretion (Alexander et al., 2022; Te Lintelo et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings underscore the ongoing challenges of managing integrity and conflicts of interest in urban planning.

**3.1.6. Environmental responsibility and climate justice**

Environmental responsibility is now a key ethical issue in urban planning, especially as climate change and sustainability become more urgent. Although awareness of these issues has grown, planners’ actions often lag (Sarkheyli et al., 2025). Case studies show that climate adaptation and greening projects tend to focus on wealthier areas, thereby exacerbating environmental injustice (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Anguelovski and Connolly, 2023). Policy reviews also find that justice is often discussed in theory but rarely put into practice (Shi et al., 2021; Maes et al., 2021). Research points to conflicts between long-term environmental ethics and short-term political or economic goals, which can undermine sustainability (Jiang et al., 2021; Davoudi and Ormerod, 2025).

Overall, while environmental ethics are receiving more attention, they are still not fully incorporated into urban planning practice. In summary, the 47 empirical studies reviewed show that ethical issues in urban planning often involve unclear public interest, social justice and equity, participation and procedural ethics, power and accountability, professional integrity, and environmental responsibility. The evidence suggests these challenges are widespread and deeply rooted in current planning systems, rather than being rare exceptions. Table 2 presents the distribution of ethical themes across empirical urban planning studies and shows how frequently different ethical issues arise in the literature and highlights differences in research focus.

Participation and procedural ethics appear in 42.6% of studies, making them the most common ethical concerns in urban planning. Nearly half of

recent research looks at inclusion, deliberation, and fairness in planning. Social justice and equity issues are found in 38.3% of studies, showing their importance across various planning areas. This means justice is now a key topic in research, especially in housing, transportation, and climate planning. However, a high percentage does not necessarily mean that justice principles are effectively put into practice. The matrix also shows that public interest ambiguity and issues of power, accountability, and professional autonomy appear in about one-third of the studies (31.9% and 29.8%, respectively). This means that many recent studies recognise ethical challenges coming from governance structures and power dynamics, not just from individual actions.

Table 2. Prevalence of ethical issues in professional urban planning literature.

Ethical theme	No. of studies	% of corpus (n = 47)
Participation and procedural ethics	20	42.6
Social justice and equity	18	38.3
Public interest ambiguity	15	31.9
Power, accountability and autonomy	14	29.8
Environmental responsibility and climate justice	10	21.3
Professional integrity and conflicts of interest	9	19.1

Source: compiled by the author based on systematic review data.

In contrast, environmental responsibility and climate justice are discussed in just over one-fifth of studies (21.3%). In comparison, professional integrity and conflicts of interest are reported in fewer than 1 in 5 cases (19.1%). These lower numbers suggest that, even though professional codes place greater emphasis on sustainability and integrity, research has not examined these topics as much as participation and justice.

Table 3. Co-occurrence matrix on ethical theme pairings across planning studies.

Ethical Theme	Public interest	Justice and equity	Participation	Power and autonomy	Integrity	Environmental ethics
Public interest	<b>15</b>	11	10	12	8	7
Justice and equity	11	<b>18</b>	14	10	6	9
Participation	10	14	<b>20</b>	13	7	6
Power and autonomy	12	10	13	<b>14</b>	9	5
Integrity	8	6	7	9	<b>9</b>	4
Environmental ethics	7	9	6	5	4	<b>10</b>

Source: compiled by the author based on systematic review data.

Overall, according to Table 2, ethical concerns are common in planning research but are not consistently addressed. Participation and justice get the most attention, while integrity and climate-related ethics are less studied. This gap points to opportunities for future research to broaden the ethical focus in urban

planning. Table 3 presents a co-occurrence matrix exhibiting how ethical themes in professional urban planning overlap across the 47 studies in the review. This helps disclose whether ethical issues are studied separately or as connected parts of planning practice. Diagonal values show the total number of studies for

each theme, and studies can be counted in more than one theme pairing. Table 3 indicates that ethical issues in professional urban planning are closely interconnected.

The strongest links are between participation and justice (14 studies), public interest and power/autonomy (12 studies), and participation and power/autonomy (13 studies). These findings suggest that research often frames ethical challenges as structural governance issues rather than individual moral failings. For example, research on participation shows that exclusionary processes lead to inequitable outcomes. Furthermore, the established relationship between public interest and power indicates that the allocation of benefits is determined by political influence, institutional authority, and professional judgment. Justice and equity emerge as central themes, with justice linked to participation (14 studies), public interest (11), environmental ethics (9), and power/autonomy (10). This pattern suggests that justice serves as a guiding principle for understanding ethical issues in planning research, yet is less often associated with professional integrity (6 studies), indicating that distributional concerns are more commonly examined in relation to planning outcomes than to individual professional behaviour. Moreover, Table 3 highlights some more isolated themes. Ethical issues such as professional integrity and conflicts of interest are less connected to other topics, especially environmental ethics (4 studies) and participation (7 studies). This implies that integrity is typically examined within organisations or professional contexts, rather than as part of broader discussions about justice or sustainability. While environmental responsibility and climate justice are gaining importance, they show only moderate links to justice (9 studies) and public interest (7 studies), and even weaker links to power and integrity. This indicates that research often approaches environmental ethics as a policy issue rather than as closely related to governance or professional behaviour. Overall, the co-occurrence matrix supports the view that ethical issues in professional urban planning are systemic and interconnected. Challenges involving participation, justice, public interest, and power often overlap, so addressing a single issue is unlikely to achieve meaningful change. The separation of integrity and environmental ethics reveals gaps in current research. It highlights opportunities for future studies to connect better professional behaviour, governance ethics, and sustainability outcomes.

### **3.2. Impacts of ethical issues on urban planning practice and outcomes**

Building on the identified ethical themes, this section examines how these challenges translate into institutional dynamics and spatial planning outcomes.

#### ***3.2.1. Inequality, displacement, and uneven distribution***

Justice-related shortcomings identified in subsection 3.1 translate directly into spatial inequalities. Empirical studies show that when distributive principles are weakly institutionalised, planning decisions reinforce uneven land-use allocation, displacement pressures, and unequal access to services and infrastructure. Displacement driven by rising costs and development pressures deepens inequity. At the same time, the unequal spatial distribution of resources undermines fair opportunities for wellbeing and participation (Harting and Radi, 2020; Li et al., 2025). Ethical planning seeks to reduce these inequities by prioritising equitable access, protecting residents from involuntary displacement, and ensuring that urban benefits are fairly shared across all groups (Schnelzer, 2025). Justice-related shortcomings translate directly into spatial inequalities, including displacement, uneven service access, and exclusionary land-use outcomes. Across housing, transport, and climate planning, distributive gaps materialise in measurable spatial disparities. Analyses of climate and environmental planning reveal that projects described as sustainability or resilience initiatives may result in unequal benefits and displacement when distributive justice is not integrated into their implementation. Case studies indicate that urban greening and adaptation investments are often concentrated in wealthier neighbourhoods, thereby increasing land values and heightening the risk of displacement for lower-income residents (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2021; Anguelovski and Connolly, 2023). Comparable patterns are observed in housing and infrastructure planning, where market-driven interpretations of public interest can result in exclusion (Pereira and Farber, 2023; Matamanda et al., 2024). These patterns demonstrate how governance-mediated decisions shape settlement patterns and territorial inequality.

#### ***3.2.2. Impacts on legitimacy, trust, and public acceptance***

Ethical concerns about participation, transparency, and accountability clearly affect how legitimate planning appears and how much the public trusts it (Herzog et al., 2024). Studies show that when people see planning as unfair or unethical, their trust in planning institutions declines, making it harder for plans to be accepted (Forde, 2024; Alhassan, 2025). Research shows that when participation is limited or predetermined, it reduces perceived legitimacy and increases the likelihood of public opposition to planning decisions (Legacy et al., 2024). Surveys and mixed-method studies also reveal that people are more willing to take part in planning when they believe the process is fair, responsive, and ethical (Quick and Bryson, 2022;

Alhassan, 2025). Evidence from regions such as Europe, Africa, and the Global South shows that when participation lacks ethical standards, there are more appeals, delays, and resistance to implementing plans (Zakhour, 2020; Sarmiento et al., 2023). This implies that legitimacy is not just a moral issue but also a practical one in ethical planning.

### **3.2.3. Decision quality, knowledge use, and implementation capacity**

Ethical considerations shape planning decisions by determining which forms of knowledge are incorporated. Empirical studies indicate that limited or inequitable participation reduces the diversity and relevance of information in planning processes, thereby diminishing the quality and practicality of resulting plans. Research in municipal planning demonstrates that barriers such as technical language, restricted access to information, and unequal opportunities for participation frequently exclude marginalised groups. Consequently, plans often fail to prioritise local needs or reflect lived experiences (Zakhour, 2020; Senior et al., 2023). Additional studies converge on the finding that when participation disproportionately benefits organised or well-resourced groups, planning outcomes tend to reflect their interests rather than broader community priorities (Sibanda, 2021; Mark and Escher, 2025). These ethical shortcomings have tangible consequences: evidence suggests that inadequate ethical standards in planning processes can result in implementation challenges, stakeholder conflicts, and costly plan revisions (Machakaire and Mokhele, 2024; Davoudi and Ormerod, 2025).

### **3.2.4. Professional autonomy and ethical agency**

Existing research demonstrates that ethical issues influence urban planning by constraining professional autonomy and shaping ethical decision-making. Interviews and surveys indicate that planners frequently operate within institutional contexts that limit ethical choices. Studies from both the public and private sectors report that planners experience pressure to align their recommendations with political objectives, developer interests, or organisational priorities, which can impede their ability to uphold ethical commitments to the public good and fairness (Eriksson et al., 2021; Andres et al., 2023; Bakunowitsch et al., 2024). Additional research indicates that planners may alter or moderate their professional opinions to avoid conflict or mitigate career risks (Gébert et al., 2023; Barry and Legacy, 2022). Collectively, these findings indicate that ethical issues shape planning outcomes not only through

formal decisions but also through planners' everyday practices.

### **3.2.5. Governance quality, accountability, and institutional performance**

Ethical considerations such as accountability, integrity, and power relations significantly influence institutional governance and performance. Existing research demonstrates that weak accountability and conflicts of interest can lead to regulatory capture, biased decision-making, and diminished credibility. Analyses of planning systems indicate that informal power networks and market-oriented approaches often reduce transparency and undermine ethical oversight, thereby affecting outcomes and eroding public trust (Alexander et al., 2022; Chang, 2021; Sheydayi and Dadashpoor, 2022). Professional surveys further reveal persistent gaps between ethical codes and their enforcement, thereby limiting their effectiveness in practice (Mutambik, 2024). Collectively, these findings suggest that ethical challenges are embedded in institutional structures rather than attributable solely to individual misconduct.

### **3.2.6. Climate governance and environmental justice**

Recent studies show that ethical issues play a significant role in climate governance, especially in turning justice from a principle into real action. Although justice is now a common term in climate planning, how it is put into practice varies widely. Reviews of plans and case studies find that cities use justice-focused tools like equity indicators, funding choices, and accountability measures in different ways. This leads to uneven protection for vulnerable groups (Shi et al., 2021; Maes et al., 2021; Swanson, 2021). If ethical commitments are used only as slogans, climate planning can become "ethics-washing", giving the appearance of fairness without real change (Anguelovski et al., 2019). The literature exposes that ethical issues have a substantial impact on urban planning. They determine who benefits or is harmed by planning decisions (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Pereira and Farber, 2023), affect public trust and legitimacy (Legacy et al., 2024; Quick and Bryson, 2022), influence the quality of decisions, and shape how effective plans are carried out (Zakhour, 2020; Machakaire and Mokhele, 2024). Ethical issues also affect professional independence and responsibility (Eriksson et al., 2021; Andres et al., 2023), as well as the fairness and effectiveness of climate governance (Shi et al., 2021; Maes et al., 2021). In short, ethical issues are central to effective, fair, and sustainable urban planning.

Table 4 renders the percentage of the 47 reviewed studies that report each type of impact and shows that most research on ethical issues in urban planning focuses on spatial outcomes and climate governance. This highlights how vital topics such as climate justice, affordable housing, and displacement

are in recent studies (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2021; Maes et al., 2021), many of which also examine how ethical gaps in participation and transparency influence legitimacy and public trust (Legacy et al., 2024; Quick and Bryson, 2022).

Table 4. Impacts of ethical issues on urban planning practice and outcomes.

Impact theme	No. of studies	% of corpus (n = 47)	Representative authors
Inequality and displacement	21	44.7	Anguelovski et al. (2019); Pereira and Farber (2023); Matamanda et al. (2024)
Legitimacy, trust, and public acceptance	18	38.3	Legacy et al. (2024); Quick and Bryson (2022); Zakhour (2020); van de Wetering and Groenleer (2024)
Decision quality, knowledge use, and implementation	16	34.0	Zakhour (2020); Senior et al. (2023); Machakaire and Mokhele (2024); Davoudi and Ormerod (2025)
Professional autonomy and ethical agency	14	29.8	Eriksson et al. (2021); Andres et al. (2023); Bakunowitsch et al. (2024)
Governance quality and accountability	13	27.7	Alexander et al. (2022); Chang (2021); Mutambik (2024); Sheydayi and Dadashpoor (2022)
Climate governance and environmental justice	19	40.4	Shi (2021); Maes et al. (2021); Anguelovski and Connolly (2023); Swanson (2021)

Source: compiled by the author based on systematic review data.

Table 4 reveals that ethical issues in urban planning often result in inequality and displacement, found in 21 studies (44.7%). This pattern indicates that ethical problems most clearly manifest in uneven outcomes, especially in housing, land-use changes, infrastructure, and redevelopment. The studies suggest that a lack of focus on equity, unclear definitions of the public interest, and little accountability are linked with exclusion and increased displacement. In connection with these spatial effects, 19 studies (40.4%) report impacts on climate governance and environmental justice. The results show that ethical factors influence how climate policies are prioritised and enacted, leading to an uneven distribution of environmental benefits and protections when justice-oriented principles are weakly applied. The frequent overlap of climate governance impacts with inequality and displacement suggests that decisions in environmental planning often yield social and spatial effects simultaneously.

Impacts on legitimacy, trust, and public acceptance appear in 18 studies (38.3%). This highlights

the crucial role of ethical behaviour in maintaining public trust in planning systems. The studies consistently demonstrate that a lack of participation, transparency, and fairness decreases trust, increases conflict, and leads to resistance against implementation, which often affects decision quality and governance, as well. Ethical issues also influence decision quality, knowledge use, and implementation, as detailed in 16 studies (34.0%). They show that exclusionary processes limit the range and relevance of information used in planning decisions, leading to outcomes that are less responsive to local needs. At the professional and institutional levels, issues affect professional independence and ethical responsibility (29.8% of studies).

In comparison, governance quality and accountability appear in 13 studies (27.7%), reflecting structural conditions that limit ethical action. Overall, the overlap in frequency among these impact themes suggests that ethical issues in urban planning often produce multiple, interconnected effects rather than isolated outcomes.

Table 5. Co-occurrence matrix of impact themes intersect across the empirical studies.

Theme	A	B	C	D	E	F
A. Spatial outcome	21	9	8	3	7	15
B. Legitimacy and trust	9	18	11	5	8	4
C. Decision quality	8	11	16	4	6	3
D. Professional autonomy	3	5	4	14	9	1
E. Governance and Accountability	7	8	6	9	13	4
F. Climate governance	15	4	3	1	4	19

Source: compiled by the author based on systematic review data.

This pattern is further explored in the co-occurrence matrix (Table 5), which suggests that ethical

issues in urban planning often manifest through interconnected effects on spatial outcomes, legitimacy,

and climate governance, rather than as separate impacts, highlighting structural links that shape planning practice and outcomes.

The strongest links are between spatial outcomes, such as inequality and displacement, and themes of climate governance and environmental justice. These appear together in 15 out of 47 studies. This shows that ethical issues in climate planning go beyond environmental performance and have significant social impacts. Moreover, climate adaptation, mitigation, and greening often change land markets, affect housing prices, and shape who can access city amenities. This raises ethical questions about who benefits from planning and who pays the price. The strong link between these themes shows that ethical issues in climate governance lead to changes in urban spaces. It also supports the idea that environmental ethics in planning are closely tied to social justice. The matrix gives evidence for the growing focus on climate justice in current planning research. Another noticeable pattern is the strong connection between legitimacy and public trust, as well as between decision quality and the ability to implement, which appears in 11 studies.

This relationship suggests that shortcomings in participation and fair processes affect planning results in two linked ways. Firstly, weak ethical processes lower public confidence and acceptance. Secondly, they degrade the quality of the information and knowledge used in planning decisions, limiting the practicality and strength of the plans. The matrix indicates that legitimacy is not just a goal but also a key function: ethical participation boosts both public trust and the effectiveness of planning work. This finding reinforces the argument that procedural ethics are crucial to planning performance and to shaping public perception.

The connection between professional autonomy and ethical agency, along with governance quality and accountability, appears in 9 studies. This pattern reveals the institutional side of planning ethics. It suggests that planners can act ethically only when governance structures, organisational hierarchies, and accountability measures support them. When governance systems are unclear, market-driven, or politically influenced, planners' ethical choices are constrained, leading to compromises in their professional judgment. The matrix supports the idea that ethical issues in planning come from structural factors rather than just individual actions. They are rooted in the institutional settings that shape behaviours. Ethical impacts arise not only from formal decisions but also from daily professional activities, both of which are influenced by governance design.

Interestingly, the matrix reveals a low connection between climate governance and professional autonomy, found together in only one

study. This indicates a gap in the existing literature. While climate ethics are often discussed in terms of social outcomes and justice, fewer studies examine how planners' roles, discretion, and ethical choices shape climate planning decisions. This gap is essential. If we do not examine professional autonomy, discussions of ethical climate planning may overlook how institutional constraints affect the planners' ability to achieve justice-oriented climate goals. The matrix thus points to a clear path for future research at the crossroads of climate ethics and professional practice.

Overall, the co-occurrence matrix implies that ethical issues in urban planning have complex, intertwined impacts. Spatial inequality, legitimacy, decision quality, governance, and environmental justice are interlinked rather than separate. Shortcomings in one area, such as participation, can trigger a chain reaction that affects trust, implementation, and social outcomes. This holistic view reinforces the study's main conclusion: ethical issues in urban planning are not isolated problems but interconnected structural factors that shape the effectiveness, fairness, and sustainability of planning. Understanding these links is vital to creating ethical reforms addressing root problems rather than just symptoms.

Ethical challenges often arise in urban planning, especially in land-use decisions. Ambiguous definitions of public interest, growth-driven rezoning, and insufficient accountability can lead to exclusionary land allocation, unequal access to services, and rising housing costs. Zoning policies that prioritise market value over affordability increase segregation and displacement, particularly in areas facing redevelopment or climate adaptation. Limited public participation also affects how infrastructure, amenities, and environmental protections are distributed. As a result, ethical governance is crucial in shaping spatial structures, settlement patterns, and the fair distribution of opportunities and risks in urban environments.

### 3.3. Conceptual synthesis of the findings

Figure 2 synthesises the review findings by connecting six ethical themes to spatial planning outcomes through governance and institutional frameworks. Drawing on urban planning ethics, communicative theory, justice frameworks, and institutional perspectives, the figure shows ethics functioning across normative, procedural, and structural dimensions. The ethical themes: public interest ambiguity, justice and equity, participation and procedural ethics, power and professional autonomy, integrity, and environmental responsibility are mediated by governance arrangements that influence planning decisions.

The identified spatial outcomes demonstrate the consequences of ethical shortcomings. For instance,

ambiguous interpretations of the public interest may legitimise market-driven rezoning of land use, thereby exacerbating spatial segregation in urban areas. Inadequate participation processes can influence which neighbourhoods receive infrastructure or environmental investment. Likewise, insufficient attention to environmental responsibility may result in uneven climate protection across different territories. The figure supports the central argument of this study: urban planning ethics should be conceptualised as

institutionalised. Ethical practice depends not only on individual professional judgement but also on governance structures that embed justice, accountability, and environmental responsibility within land-use and zoning systems. This framework reconceptualises planning ethics as a structural determinant of spatial order, demonstrating that the organisation of urban space is fundamentally connected to the institutionalisation of ethical principles within governance systems.

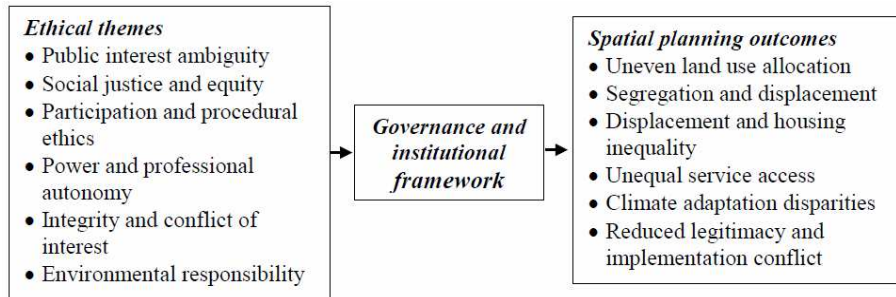


Fig. 2. Conceptual framework linking ethical themes to spatial planning outcomes (source: compiled by the author based on systematic review data).

**4. CONCLUSIONS**

This review demonstrates that ethics are fundamental to the effectiveness, legitimacy, and overall value of urban planning. Ethical considerations influence planning decisions by determining which interests are prioritised and how benefits and burdens are distributed within cities. The evidence indicates that challenges such as ambiguous definitions of the public interest, persistent inequalities, limited stakeholder participation, constrained professional autonomy, and inconsistent environmental responsibility are prevalent in contemporary planning practice. These ethical issues impact urban design, public trust, decision-making quality, and the governance of planning processes. A lack of ethical standards undermines both fairness and the capacity of planning institutions to implement policies and achieve sustainable outcomes. Addressing ethical challenges, therefore, enhances both the normative foundations and the practical effectiveness of urban planning.

The current findings emphasise that ethics should be regarded as an institutional concern rather than solely an individual responsibility. Theories of planning ethics and the public interest reveal persistent tensions among fairness, efficiency, and sustainability. Communicative planning theory holds that participation is ethical only when it leads to genuine shifts in power and influence. In contrast, institutional governance perspectives assert that ethical conduct depends on organisational structures and mechanisms of accountability. Additionally, theories of justice underscore the importance of evaluating planning processes by the fairness and transparency of their outcomes. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate

that ethics are integral to the development of equitable, democratic, and resilient urban planning systems. The present review indicates that ethical standards and dilemmas in urban planning differ markedly across national contexts. These differences stem from variations in governance systems, legal frameworks, professional planning traditions, and institutional capacities. In countries with established planning systems and strong regulatory oversight, ethical debates focus on accountability, transparency, and conflicts of interest. In contrast, rapidly urbanising regions with limited institutional capacity often face ethical challenges related to informality, governance constraints, and limited opportunities for public participation. Recognising these contextual distinctions is crucial for understanding planning ethics as a structurally embedded aspect of planning systems rather than as a universal set of professional norms.

Planning authorities should integrate ethical principles such as public interest, justice, equity, and environmental responsibility into routine practice rather than treating them as abstract ideals. The evaluation of planning proposals should be guided by explicit ethical standards, ensuring that considerations such as displacement, equitable access to services, and social vulnerability are weighed alongside economic growth. In this manner, ethical objectives are translated into tangible planning decisions. Enhancing genuine public participation constitutes a fundamental ethical obligation in urban planning. Studies indicate that public involvement often becomes a procedural formality, undermining trust and leading to suboptimal decisions.

Planning organisations should develop mechanisms that enable all stakeholders, particularly

marginalised groups, to meaningfully influence outcomes. This involves improving information accessibility, ensuring inclusive decision-making processes, and providing transparent feedback on the impact of public input on final decisions. Fair and transparent participation fosters trust, reduces conflict, and increases the likelihood of successful planning outcomes.

At the professional level, planners require institutional support to act ethically in environments shaped by political pressure and organisational hierarchies. Planners need support from their professional institutions and regulatory bodies to act ethically, especially when facing political pressure, strict hierarchies, or market demands. Professional bodies should establish explicit protections for ethical choices, including safe avenues for reporting problems and safeguards against retaliation. Ethics training through continuous professional development should go beyond theory and help planners address real-life challenges, power dynamics, and the limits they face at work. These steps further advance independent action and ethical decision-making.

Governance and accountability systems should match ethical goals. When oversight is weak or responsibilities are unclear, unethical actions can persist, especially in complex settings such as public-private partnerships. To prevent this, there needs to be greater transparency, clear roles in decision-making, and consistent enforcement of ethical rules by regulatory bodies and professional institutions. Thus, ethical promises lead to fair and trustworthy results. As such, ethics should be at the heart of climate and sustainability planning. As environmental projects become more common, they can worsen inequality if justice is not a central focus. Planning authorities should support climate justice by helping vulnerable groups, tracking who gains and who loses from sustainability efforts, and ensuring that environmental actions do not cause additional displacement or exclusion. Ethics must be a fundamental part of planning, essential for trust, resilience, and lasting public value, not just an afterthought. Further research is needed to investigate the ethical implications of artificial intelligence, big data, and algorithmic decision-making in urban planning, especially for smart city initiatives. As digital tools play a larger role in planning, it is essential to address concerns about data governance, transparency, algorithmic bias, and accountability to ensure digitalisation supports equitable and inclusive urban development.

This review has several limitations. Firstly, it includes only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2020 and 2025. Consequently, relevant empirical research published in other languages, such as Spanish, Chinese, French, or German, may not be represented. This limitation partly

explains the concentration of studies from Europe and North America observed in the review. Secondly, the literature search relied mainly on Scopus, Google Scholar and Web of Science databases, supplemented by citation tracking, which may exclude some regional publications not indexed in these databases. Thirdly, the study employs a qualitative systematic review with thematic synthesis rather than statistical meta-analysis. As the included studies differ widely in methodology and context, weighting coefficients were not applied, and findings should be interpreted as conceptual patterns across the literature.

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## APPENDIX

### 1. Sorpus search string

*TITLE-ABS-KEY* (“urban planning” OR “city planning” OR “spatial planning” OR “land use planning”) AND (*ethic\** OR “professional ethics” OR “planning ethics” OR “ethical issue\*” OR “public interest” OR justice OR equity OR “climate justice” OR accountability OR “professional autonomy” OR “conflict\* of interest” OR participation) AND (“planning practice” OR planner\* OR practitioner\*)

AND PUBYEAR >= 2020

AND PUBYEAR <= 2025

AND DOCTYPE(ar)

AND LANGUAGE(English)

### 2. WOS Search string

*TS*=((“urban planning” OR “spatial planning” OR “land use planning”)) AND (*ethic\** OR “professional ethic\*” OR “public interest” OR “social justice” OR “climate justice” OR accountability OR “professional autonomy” OR “conflict\* of interest” OR participation) AND (planner\* OR “planning practice”)

AND PY = (2020-2025)

AND DT = (Article)

AND LA = (English)