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Rethinking Values and Evaluation in Urban Planning. New Perspectives for Moral Geography: Insights From a German Case Study

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Abstract

Although moral concepts shape human behavior, they are rarely communicated explicitly. This contradiction is also evident in geographical debates. Through studies on the intertwining of moral aspects, spatio-temporal patterns, and social relationships, geographers have significantly contributed to uncovering moral concepts and better understanding the mechanisms of their spatialization in various spatio-temporal and societal contexts. However, despite being the epitome of spatially effective practices, spatial planning has been infrequently considered. Therefore, this article focuses on spatial planning. It addresses the call for a pragmatic reformulation of values and demonstrates that this approach overlaps with the sociology of valuation and evaluation. It emphasizes the importance of evaluative practices as a constitutive element for values and views evaluation as a bridge between values and everyday evaluative practices. Against this backdrop, the study examines urban land-use planning in Germany to investigate which evaluation criteria planners use to assess land use in planning processes. It shows how these criteria are interpreted and what value references are established in this context. Based on an exploratory case study, it becomes clear that the pragmatic research approach can provide deeper context-sensitive insights into the motivations behind planning decisions as well as their normative foundations. Thus, it represents a promising approach for conceptualizing values as a research subject within the field of moral geography.

Keywords values, evaluation, urban planning, planning practices, Germany

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1. Introduction

Moral concepts shape human behavior. They can be understood as a system of norms, ideals, and values. These elements represent social institutions and convey how individuals ought to act morally (Birnbacher, 2013). They are ubiquitous and permeate nearly all areas of life; however, they are rarely communicated explicitly. Geographical debates are not exempt from this phenomenon (Ermann & Redepenning, 2010; Lee & Smith, 2004). Research in the tradition of *moral geography* aims to make these concepts visible within their spatio-temporal contexts and to investigate how associated practices manifest spatially (Ermann & Redepenning, 2010).

Spatial planning¹ holds particular significance as an embodiment of spatially effective practices. All planning practices are normative since they are designed to prepare actions and create conditions for future decisions (Langhagen-Rohrbach, 2010). This implies that planning practices contain value judgments and assumptions about what is desirable or sensible for the future, thereby always reflecting specific objectives or preferences. Consequently, planning practices exist in a tension between what is and what ought to be (Levin-Keitel & Behrend, 2022). Furthermore, planning decisions have long-term consequences for people and the environment. Accordingly, planning practices are morally charged (Hillier, 2004). As Setten and Brown (2009) state, planning decisions are always oriented towards the best or right course of action. They reflect moral concepts and judgments about people, things, and practices while simultaneously generating them in a co-constitutive, morally charged process (Setten & Brown, 2009).

In democratic states, spatial planning must always disclose and legitimize its normative foundations, including moral considerations (Löb, 2008). Faced with plural politics and often conflicting objectives, such as climate protection versus housing development, spatial planning increasingly encounters moral challenges (Lauria & Long, 2017, 2019). This reinforces the need for a debate on ethical issues in spatial planning (Campbell, 2012). Here, moral geography offers valuable tools for unpacking and reflecting on the moral concepts and judgments embedded in planning processes (e.g., Hillier, 2004; Lake, 2024; Setten, 2004).

Central to this ethical reflection is the role of judgment, which enables planners to distinguish be-

tween good and bad and better and worse decisions (Campbell, 2012). In this context, questions of values are crucial for understanding the normative foundations of planning decisions. Justifications in planning processes are often grounded in underlying values (Schmidt, 2023). However, the pluralization of values and increasingly diverse lifestyles (Löb, 2008) complicate the question of which fundamental values apply in various contexts. This raises a crucial issue: Which values are applied in planning processes, and whose values ultimately shape planning outcomes (Lake, 2024)? Despite the importance of these questions, empirical research on spatial planning remains limited.

Starting from this research gap, we examine urban planning in Germany through an exploratory case study, adopting a pragmatic approach. This perspective views values as socially constructed and focuses on the conditions and processes through which they are constructed and continuously (re-)negotiated (Muniesa, 2012). Rather than treating values as fixed, we analyze how they emerge and evolve within specific socio-political contexts. Central to our study is evaluation as a process of assessing, which we understand as mediating between overarching values and the everyday practices and practical decisions planners make.

Following the critique by Kjellberg & Mallaard (2013) of conventional approaches that rely on predetermined evaluation criteria such as legal certainty or economic efficiency, we focus on how these criteria are interpreted and made meaningful in practice. Our aim is not merely to identify which criteria are used in land use evaluations, but to explore how worth is actively constructed in everyday planning contexts (Heinich, 2020a). We choose a pragmatic approach because it offers promising solutions to conceptual and methodological challenges associated with traditional conceptualizations and analyses of values.

This pragmatic lens also aligns with current debates in moral geography. By centering evaluation as a form of practice, this approach responds to Schmidt's (2022, 2023, 2024) call for a reorientation within the field of moral geography and allows us to investigate *lived moral geographies* in their everyday reality rather than abstract ethical principles. It also contributes to Barnett's (2014) proposal for a pluralistic *geographies of worth*, a research program for moral geography that shifts attention to everyday evaluative rou-

tines. The contributions from social theory cited by Barnett (2014) have been addressed primarily within economic geography and cultural economy (Hussels et al., 2024; Lake, 2024). Meanwhile, a new field has emerged within sociology, the *sociology of valuation and evaluation* (SVE; Krüger et al., 2024). In our contribution, we build on Barnett's (2014) reflections by making recent work from this area accessible to the field of moral geography.

The next chapter addresses the call to reformulate values within moral geography and connects to current sociological debates on valuation and evaluation processes. Building on this foundation, Chapter 3 shows in how far planning practices can be understood as evaluative practices. Chapter 4 describes our methodology, while section five introduces the case study. We then present our findings, focusing on four distinct evaluation patterns. This is followed by a discussion that critically engages with the results before concluding with key insights and outlining potential contributions of conceptualizing values as a research subject.

2. Reformulating Values in Moral Geography

Influenced by social theory's *normative turn* (Sayer & Storper, 1997) during the 1990s, numerous conceptual and empirical studies in the tradition of moral geography have demonstrated that space, spatially effective practices, and morality are intricately intertwined. These aspects must always be considered in conjunction (Barnett, 2012; 2014; Lee & Smith, 2004; Olson, 2015, 2016, 2018; Schmidt, 2022, 2023, 2024). Much of the literature on moral geography is strongly aligned with Western moral philosophy (Barnes, 2008; Barnett, 2012, 2014; Schmidt, 2024). However, an increasingly substantial body of literature challenges this orientation, questioning the dominance of traditional moral philosophical frameworks (Barnett, 2012; Olson, 2018; Schmidt, 2022, 2023, 2024). This critique also extends to the conceptualization of values (Barnett, 2014; Lake, 2024; Schmidt, 2023), which is connected to the broader debate surrounding the reforming of the understanding of normativity (Barnett, 2012, 2014).

It is proposed that the normative dimension of human life should be practically situated. This approach critiques the idea that normativity resides solely within prescriptive domains or utopian ideals (Barnett,

2012, 2014). Barnett (2012) interprets this understanding as indicative of a stark separation between causality and reasonable spontaneity and between necessity and freedom. He argues that this perspective neglects how normativity manifests spatially while relying on ordinary forms of rationality. Normativity, he contends, cannot be addressed without acknowledging its practical implications in everyday contexts. To bridge this divide, normativity must be understood practically and situated within the world (Barnett, 2012, 2014).

In his progress report on geography and ethics, Barnett (2012) advocates for viewing normativity as practical reasoning. This perspective encompasses all phenomena for which it is appropriate to apply normative concepts (Rouse, 2007). Consequently, normativity is not confined to morality alone but is understood as a force compelling individuals to act in specific ways (Barnett, 2014). This shift allows for a focus on normativity as an attribute of practices, defined as embodied situated actions, whereby thought is less a cognitive construct and more embedded within worldly contexts. In doing so, intentionality is acknowledged while mind and body are conceived as a continuum, bridging habits and conventions and leading to an inquiry into how values are embedded in ordinary spatial practices (Barnett, 2012).

Generally speaking, values in moral geography represent something desirable or valuable (Smith, 2000). However, differing views exist regarding whether values exist independently from human evaluations (Schmidt, 2023). This discussion is shaped by two contrasting moral philosophical perspectives: value objectivism argues for independent value facts, while value subjectivism posits that values are always tied to human subjective preferences (Astolfi, 2020).

Recent contributions to reforming normativity propose a pragmatic redefinition of values, emphasizing their context-specific and dynamic character (Barnett, 2014; Lake, 2024; Schmidt, 2023). They propose a departure from the dichotomy between objective and subjective values (Barnett, 2014; Lake, 2024; Schmidt, 2023) following Buttimer's assertion that "neither objectivist nor subjectivist approaches to ethics adequately deal with the ambiguous arena of ideals and conflicts" (Buttimer, 1974, p. 1). Value objectivism risks reducing values to abstract, universal principles. This approach can lead to exclusionary or chauvinistic claims in which specific values are re-

garded as superior, while those from other cultures are devalued or ignored (Barnett, 2014; Schmidt, 2023). Such an approach fosters one-sided perspectives, complicating dialogue about diverse values across cultural contexts (Schmidt, 2023). Conversely, value subjectivism risks descending into moral relativism, where all values are seen as purely subjective, implying no culturally independent reference point remains. Furthermore, it questions defining objective moral standards for action (Schmidt, 2023). Within pragmatic reorientation, some authors (Barnett, 2014; Lake, 2024; Schmidt, 2023) see potential solutions for addressing these problems of values, which are grounded in the dualistic perspective.

As the introduction indicates, the pragmatic approach characterizes values not as timeless truths but as transactional, situation-specific, and context-bound (Muniesa, 2012). This means that values are conceptualized as neither purely individualistic, addressing the problem of relativism, nor universal, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of exclusivity and moral hierarchy. Thus, evaluation functions as a bridge between overarching principles and their practical implementation. Barnett (2014) identifies this potential for fostering pluralistic geographies of worth by investigating various evaluative practices and their negotiations, mainly focusing on routine aspects of these evaluations. In formulating his program, he draws on works from social theory. These contributions laid the foundation for the field of research known as SVE. With a few exceptions (Hussels et al., 2024; Lake, 2024), they have been little cited in geography.

Schmidt (2023) establishes connections between pragmatic redefinitions of values and the concept of lived moral geographies. This concept focuses on individuals' actual experiences regarding morality and values while examining how they make moral decisions in their daily realities. It highlights how social, cultural, and spatial conditions influence these choices. Normativity is thus viewed as embedded within social practices generated through concrete actions. Investigating lived moral geographies contributes to a better understanding of how normativity is anchored in these practices. This approach contrasts with abstract moral theories and principles that are often disconnected from people's real experiences. From our point of view, it is, therefore, worthwhile to take the geographies of worth and develop them further through current contributions from the field of SVE.

3. Valuation Practices in Urban Planning

Values are a central object of research within sociology (Parsons, 1968; Spates, 1983; Weber, 1905/1988), as they constitute the social order and shape our understanding of reality. They motivate human behavior, guide interactions, and play a crucial role in personal and collective identity (Thome, 2019).

Although many researchers share these assumptions, sociological research on values, like moral geography, is characterized by varying conceptualizations. In light of Schmidt's demands for reorienting the subfield of moral geography (see Chapter 2), pragmatic approaches from the SVE warrant particular attention. Therefore, we focus on these approaches in Chapter 3.1 and illustrate in Chapter 3.2 how these conceptual and analytical assumptions influence the examination of evaluations within the planning process.

3.1 Sociology of Valuation

The relatively young field of SVE has been significantly shaped by pragmatic research approaches (Heinich, 2024). Similar to approaches like the geographies of worth, values are not regarded here as given entities but rather as "shared mental representations" (Heinich, 2020a, p. 77). This perspective underscores the socially constructed nature of values, whether applied to material or immaterial goods. Within this framework, values are not confined to purely economic or moral dimensions but are instead understood as dynamic constructs shaped by collective meaning-making processes (Heinich, 2020a; 2020b).

Heinich (2020b) distinguishes between three meanings of value in this regard: First, value in the singular can be understood as the result of various operations through which a specific quality is assigned to an object; this applies to any object regardless of whether it is abstract or tangible. This relates to value as an object of worth. Second, the value(s) as good refers to something abstract or tangible that receives positive appreciation. The third case pertains to value as an abstract principle regulating valuations; in this sense, value functions as an end (Heinich, 2020b).

While Heinich (2020a, 2020b) predominantly uses the term valuation, other authors rather distinguish between the term valuation as "the process of giving worth" (Kjellberg & Mallard, 2013, p. 20) and the term

evaluation as the “process of assessing” (Kjellberg & Mallard, 2013, p. 20). This differentiation goes back to Dewey’s work (1939/2008). However, this analytical separation is often difficult to observe empirically, as both typically coincide. This article uses the term evaluation as we believe it is better suited to the urban planning context. Nevertheless, we understand evaluation here as a socially embedded practice of weighing values, where context, interactions, and negotiations influence the underlying criteria and judgments.

The pragmatic definitions of values have a common characteristic: Value(s) are temporally and spatially dependent (Heinich, 2020a; Lamont, 2012). Consequently, there is consensus that social practices are crucial for constructing, distributing, and differentiating values. These practices encompass all activities associated with the attribution of values and are inherently performative, meaning evaluations are closely linked with activities. Active actors “produce qualities and values in and through practices” (Berli et al., 2021, p. 6; authors’ translation). As a result, these practices are seen as standardizing processes that generate mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and hierarchies (Bowker & Star, 2000). Therefore, the SVE focuses on these practices (Nicolae et al., 2019), considering interactions between activity, evaluative objects, evaluative instruments, and their respective contexts (Berli et al., 2021). It is important to note that evaluations may vary depending on context (Heinich, 2024).

Within the diverse field of SVE, various aspects of evaluative practices are examined, including quantification, legitimization, categorization, or classification (Krüger & Reinhart, 2017; Lamont, 2012). Nevertheless, distinguishing between attribution of value and evaluation highlights the inherent evaluative aspect of all evaluation activities: Each evaluation relies on an intersubjectively validated matrix. This matrix is essential for comparing evaluated objects and thus enables informed assessments (Lamont, 2012). It rests upon values and underlying standards or norms for evaluations, where evaluation criteria are interpreted and contextualized accordingly (Berli et al., 2021).

It is crucial to emphasize that this underlying matrix is subject to social negotiation processes and is frequently associated with conflicts and power struggles (Bourdieu, 1993). As a result, evaluations are based on competing criteria, which can render evaluative practices potentially conflict-laden (Berli et al., 2021).

Building on this perspective, we understand urban planning as an activity characterized by evaluative practices. In other words, planning consists of numerous evaluations based on specific values. This raises the question of which criteria underpin land use decisions within planning processes, how these criteria are interpreted and negotiated, and how these actions generate values in the sense of principles. Against this backdrop, we outline below the foundations for urban land-use planning while demonstrating how these conceptual and analytical assumptions impact our research approach.

3.2 Land-Use Decision-Making Practices as Valuation Practices

Land use decisions in Germany are primarily seen as a state task. To this end, a complex decentralized planning system has been established to develop, organize, and secure the national territory. For plots of land in a municipal territory, land use decisions on building use and other utilization are the responsibility of municipalities (Article 28[2], first sentence of the German Grundgesetz [GG; Basic Law], 2025).

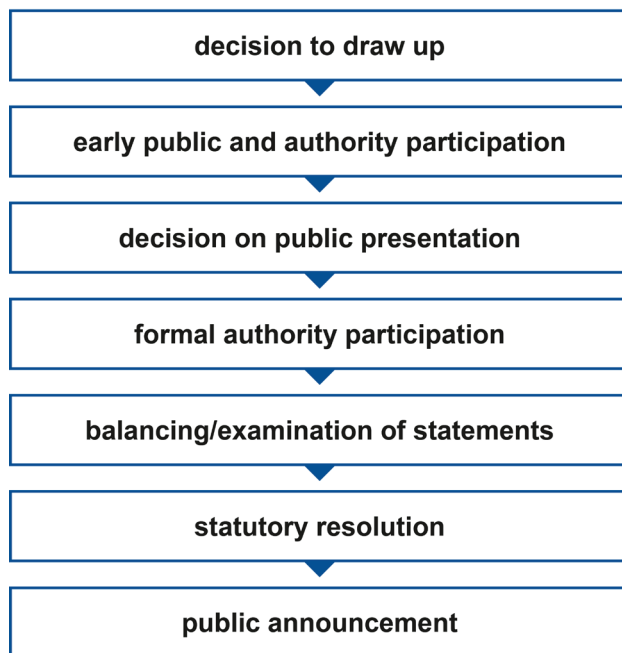
The binding land-use plan is a key legal tool to ensure orderly, socially responsible, and sustainable land use within a municipality. It sets legally binding regulations for building use and other development in a specific sub-area (Section 8 of the German Baugesetzbuch [BauGB; German Federal Building Code], 2025), applicable to both public and private parties. The plan can be challenged in court, and its legality must be reviewed.

The municipality can resort to a special binding land-use plan if a developer is involved in the construction project. The project-related binding land-use plan obliges the developer to realize the construction project within a specific period and to bear all or part of the planning and development costs (Section 12 BauGB, 2025).

The plan preparation procedure is prescribed by law (see Figure 1; Sections 1–13a BauGB, 2025). It is based on a political-administrative process in which the municipal administration and local council work together. The municipal council, consisting of municipal representatives, is responsible for the decisions on preparing a binding land-use plan, the public presentation of the draft, and the adoption of the plan. The

municipal administration is responsible for preparing the binding land-use plan. In this context, they must examine various planning alternatives. Moreover, as required, they carry out participation procedures, commission experts, and external planning offices.

Figure 1 Procedural Steps in the Binding Land-Use Planning Procedure Based on the German Federal Building Code



Note. Source: Own representation based on the German Federal Building Code (BauGB), 2025.

For examining different planning alternatives, urban planning criteria are important that characterize the future appearance of the planned area. This includes statements on the following aspects:

- Category of use (Sections 1–15 of the German Bau-nutzungsverordnung [BauNVO; Federal Land Utilization Ordinance], 2023): These provisions define the general purpose of building areas, based on a catalog of 11 land use types, such as residential, commercial, and mixed-use areas, each with different permitted uses.
- Degree of building coverage (Sections 16–21a BauNVO, 2023): These regulations specify measurements such as the floor-space index, which reflects the ratio of built-up area to plot size and indicates the development density of the planned area.

The decision in favor of a specific planning alternative must be documented in an explanatory memorandum

(Section 9[8] BauGB, 2025). The primary purpose of the explanatory memorandum is to explain the objectives, purposes, and main effects of the binding land-use plan for those affected by the planning (Section 2a, second sentence, first number BauGB, 2025). It should also explain the determinations made in more detail and fairly weigh the public and private interests (Section 1[7] BauGB, 2025). The explanatory statement also includes an environmental report (Section 2a, third sentence BauGB, 2025). The environmental report presents the environmental assessment results (Section 2[4], first sentence BauGB, 2025). This includes, for example, the impact of noise on people and the environment. In addition, a summarizing statement must be prepared. This should state “how the environmental concerns and the results of the public and official participation have been taken into account in the development plan” (authors’ translation) and justify the planning again (Section 10a[1] BauGB, 2025).

Land-use decisions at the municipal level in Germany are highly standardized by law. However, the legislator grants municipalities “freedom of design in planning due to their specific expertise in the concrete planning situation” (Baumgart & Rüdiger, 2022, p. 52; authors’ translation). Consequently, decisions on the permissibility of building projects in urban land-use planning can vary.

Against this backdrop, the SVE offers a perspective for understanding different decisions as context-sensitive evaluation practices. Urban land-use planning reveals an ongoing process in which evaluation criteria are interpreted and interlinked, particularly those defining the “urban appearance” of a planning area (Zemke, 2018, p. 99; authors’ translation) and its “visible and formative structures” (Reicher, 2019, p. 3; authors’ translation). Consequently, the binding land-use plan stipulations reflect decisions on interpreting and prioritizing professional criteria.

Assuming that evaluation criteria are inherently in tension, the binding land-use plan emerges as a “complex compromise between competing evaluation criteria” (Berli et al., 2021, p. 6, authors’ translation). As these criteria are legally relevant and shaped by procedural context, this article examines how public sector planners interpret these criteria during plan preparation. The analytical focus is on the conceptual phase. Therefore, we focus primarily on the plan concept, which reflects the intended use of the planning area.

4. Methodology

Based on data from a larger research project² on values and evaluation in political spatial planning processes, we conducted an exploratory case study with a qualitative content analysis to gain insights into planners' evaluation practices (Yin, 2018). The analysis focuses on the municipal planning level in Germany, using a legally binding land-use plan as the starting point. Following the assumption that valuation is best studied when there is a problem (Kjellberg & Mallard, 2013), the criteria for selecting the legally binding land-use plan for the case study were conflicting interests in the process. Preliminary discussions with planners informed this choice, alongside their willingness to participate and discuss the planning procedure.

This criterion was essential because the official documents primarily reflect the legal aspects of land use decisions and provide limited information about the context behind these evaluations. As a result, it is unclear whether other factors influenced the decision-making process. Additionally, their normative nature makes it difficult to fully understand any conflicting evaluation criteria. To address this, we gathered the official planning documents and conducted one qualitative interview with two interviewees to gain deeper insight into the planning rationale. The official documents were used to obtain information about the planning goals and the official explanations, while the qualitative interview provided more profound insights into the underlying evaluations and their context, offering the interviewees a valuable opportunity to step back from their daily routines, fostering a more reflective perspective that aligns well with our explorative approach (Helfferich, 2019; Meuser & Nagel, 1991).

Our interview partners, recruited from the binding land-use plan case study, were two public sector planners who worked on the plan and were well-acquainted with the planning process. One of the authors conducted the semi-structured interview in German in April 2023, shortly before the legally binding land-use plan's formal adoption. The interview took place at the municipal urban planning office and lasted approximately two hours. It addressed key aspects of the planning procedure, including its central milestones. The interview was digitally recorded, fully transcribed using software, subsequently reviewed for accuracy, and anonymized to remove references to the municipality or specific planning context.

Then, we analyzed the transcript using qualitative content analysis with MaxQDA, a qualitative text analysis software, following Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022). Our analytical approach focused on identifying patterns in land use evaluation. We engaged in extensive exploratory coding, employing both top-down categories derived from existing theoretical frameworks and codes generated directly from the data. Our findings were primarily shaped by inductive coding, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of land-use evaluation patterns.

5. Case Study: Neighborhood Development in a Large German City

This study draws on a case study of a binding land-use planning procedure in a large German city to examine how evaluation criteria are interpreted in planning practice. The case was selected due to its illustrative potential, as it involved contested objectives, significant public attention, and the need for professional judgment under political and temporal constraints.

The planning process, from early 2021 to spring 2023 (see Figure 2), concerned an inner-city brownfield site of around three hectares, between a river and a busy road with public transport access. The site lies within a mixed urban context, featuring Wilhelminian-style buildings, green spaces, and a local social infrastructure (see Figure 3). The planning aimed to create a new residential and commercial neighborhood. The project was initiated following a change in ownership, with a new investor pursuing a revised concept rather than continuing previous plans for recreational use.

According to the explanatory memorandum (2023), the envisioned neighborhood was to include seven buildings, a mix of housing types (including subsidized housing), and extensive green features. A key point of contention was the proposed high density and inclusion of a large-scale retail center (1,900 m²) and a high-rise element of up to 11 stories. The investor framed these features as promoting "urbanity" and "short distances" (explanatory memorandum, 2023; authors' translation), in line with national planning principles such as internal development and economic land use (Section 1[5] and 1a[2] BauGB, 2025).

The investor's concept faced significant resistance from residents, who formed a citizens' initiative that criticized the proposal's density, potential traffic im-

Figure 2 Overview of Central Milestones in the Selected Urban Land-Use Planning Process

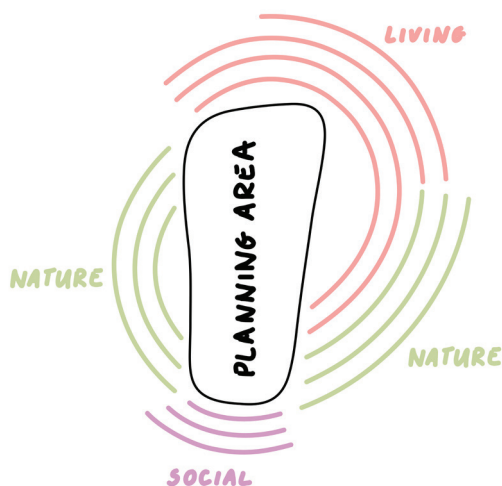


Note. Source: Own representation. Abbreviation used in the Figure: German Federal Building Code (BauGB), 2025.

fact, and loss of green space. During the early public participation phase, 51 formal comments were submitted. While not all were taken up, several prompted substantive changes: The retail center and high-rise component were removed, height limits were adjusted, and traffic-related concerns were addressed through reduced commercial uses.

This case offers valuable insight into the evaluative practices of public sector planners confronted with divergent normative expectations, institutional constraints, and competing stakeholder claims, making it particularly suitable for analyzing how values are constructed and negotiated in planning.

Figure 3 Immediate Surroundings of the Construction Area



Note. Source: Illustration by Luisa Nagel (2025).

6. Results: How Planners Evaluated Land Use in Urban Planning

This section presents the findings from the qualitative content analysis of a binding land-use planning process in a large German city. Focusing on evaluation criteria, the type and degree of building coverage, we identify four patterns that illustrate how planners interpret and contextualize these urban planning criteria. These patterns reflect interactions between different evaluation criteria, value attributions, and context-related aspects, and are illustrated with selected interview excerpts.

6.1 Establishing a Reference to the (Historical) Development of the Planned Area

A central pattern for evaluating the planning project is characterized by referencing the (historical) development of the planned area. This becomes clear in connection with both the category of use and the degree of building coverage. For example, the two interviewees argued that the new development of the planned area was in line with the city's development intentions (planner one). In this context, they picked up on the existing situation by referring to the previous investor's failed building project. They described the existing building as a "ruined building" (planner one) and an "eyesore" (planner two) and stated that both politicians and the general public were critical of the site.

The negative evaluation in the interview references aesthetics as an underlying value principle when discussing the optical impression of decay. For example, describing the building as a ruined building or eyesore highlights the negative optical impression shared by politicians and the general public, thus uniting their perspectives. There was a broad consensus that the existing buildings had to be removed (planner two), that is, the population and local politicians viewed the situation negatively. Moreover, the expressions in the interview also stress an underlying urge to act. Decay in an urban area is negatively valued, and politicians and city planners feel responsible for developing the area. Social acceptance played a crucial role. Against this background, both interviewees welcomed the reactivation of the area. Planner one stated: "The urban development blight will be remedied, and the basic parameters were right ... you can still argue about the design." This reflects a welcomed alignment between the investor's concrete idea to develop the site and its political relevance: the investor's proposal provided planners with a clear direction to work with. It follows that reactivation was a priority planning objective and, therefore, a primary evaluation criterion. However, it is also clear that the project must first fulfill the legal and municipal requirements before urban design issues become relevant.

While the reactivation of the area and legal compliance were priority criteria in the planning evaluation, urban planning criteria were considered of secondary importance. It is clear from the interview that the urban design of the residential and commercial neighborhood in the selected urban land-use planning process, as in others, was primarily concerned with the issue of the degree of building coverage. Planner two said: "Binding land-use plans, that is always a question of density."

Consequently, the degree of building coverage was a decisive criterion in the planning evaluation. There was political support for the density of development, and the planning authorities initially upheld the investor's proposal for high-density development. The interviewees describe the investor's apparent preference for high-density development, justified by the economic value of maximizing land use. However, they acknowledge the need to balance competing interests, raising the question of whether the proposed density is appropriate for the specific urban context and, if so, to what extent it can be justified.

Here, both planners were confronted with conflicting points of view: While the investor had aimed for a high density of development, the citizens had considered the investor's ideas too dense. The discussion with the citizens' initiative focused on identifying the appropriate degree of building coverage. While one of the two planners recognized the appeal of the lower density of development with green spaces, describing it as "cute" (planner one), both public sector planners were open to the idea of a high density of development, suggesting that it "might not be wrong at this spot" (planner one). This perspective reflects an effort to balance urban efficiency and the benefits of a high degree of building coverage with the aesthetic and functional appeal of more open, green designs. The concept of urbanity seems to play a role in this context.

Concerning the historical development of the planned area, both public sector planners interviewed emphasized that the planning decision on determining the density of development was a balancing act. Planner two explained in this context: "There used to be a factory on the site; it was already dense somehow." However, they conceded that this question could also be answered differently: "Do I have to build densely on the [name of the river] bank now, or should I perhaps make it more open, climate, and so forth?" (planner two). For this particular area, they draw on the historical precedent of the density of development being part of the former identity of the site as a rationale while also considering ecological values, such as addressing climate issues, in their justification. This highlights a deeply contextual understanding that integrates both spatial and temporal dimensions, ensuring that development aligns with the area's past while addressing its present and future needs.

The two planners also recount a contrasting example of strong resistance to high-density development in a small, wealthy neighborhood. This example was a project facing significant public opposition and extreme, hostile reactions characterized by a NIMBY (Not in my backyard) attitude. Resistance was driven by fears and prejudices, including concerns about social decline associated with less affluent residents and the perception that the higher-density housing complex did not fit the character of the affluent area. This example highlights the residents' aesthetics, social exclusivity, and territorial identity values. While the two planners highlight these prejudices, they implicitly express a value for a more inclusive urban

structure where diverse social groups coexist. These contrasting values— residents' preference for exclusivity versus broader societal goals of inclusivity and urban sustainability—underscore the inherent tensions in urban land-use planning decisions surrounding the density of development.

6.2 Establishing a Connection to the Surrounding Area

It is evident that the interpretation of evaluation criteria extended beyond the development of the planned area to encompass its existing environmental context. This pattern is reflected in the explanation given by one of the two planners regarding the foundations of the investor's original concept for developing the area:

The first draft was like, well, we are [here] in the Wilhelminian era, so we have to make a bit of a perimeter block development, we have to get right up to the street, and then there are also tower blocks somewhere in the south of the city. Thus, always build tower blocks. (planner two)

The statement clarifies that the investor's argumentation had not convinced this planner, although the investor had also referenced the planned area's neighborhood. Planner two elaborates that the investor had "considered the surroundings somewhat more locally." Still, from a planning perspective, only the immediate surroundings of the planned area are decisive for the urban design. Accordingly, the high-rise building was to be questioned. The heights of the buildings were adjusted in the binding land-use planning process: "This is where the planning objectives have changed, and these are, for example, the points that were then relevant, so that, so to speak, height developments adapt to existing buildings" (planner two). It is, therefore, evident that the immediate surroundings of the planned area set the standard, primarily due to citizens' participation, by which future use must be oriented. This emphasizes the values of preservation and conservation in maintaining architectural continuity and respecting the existing settlement structure.

References to the surroundings are also made when interpreting the permissibility of the planned use. For example, both public sector planners argued that the site was "suitable" by referring to the site's emissions pollution, which was compatible with residential use

due to the neighboring uses. In this context, they also referred to another site in the municipal area. In contrast to the planned area, they considered this other site less suitable, as there was also commercial use in the neighborhood, which meant that the noise pollution there ruled out residential use (planner two). The example shows that the interpretation of whether the type of use is permissible depends on the location and the local conditions and that the criterion of compatibility of the use is taken into account. This also makes strong references to values such as health and protection against danger, as a decision as to which use is approved for the area depends on whether the existing neighborhood is endangered by it or whether the surrounding use poses a risk to future residents.

However, planners face the challenge that the compatibility criterion is not unambiguous. Even if the stakeholders use the immediate surroundings of the planned area as a reference, they can come to different conclusions. This can be seen, for example, in the comments received: "We just received a lot of comments from the public for this early participation that said it is too big, it is too fat, it is too loud, it is [on the river, name of the river], it has to be smaller" (planner one). From the planners' point of view, the citizens aimed to bring the investor's original idea to "an acceptable level" (planner one). However, it is unclear what this should look like in this location:

You can also have different opinions about what a tolerable level is and how dense it should be. Whether it is a charming, small-scale development with a high proportion of greenery or whether it is more metropolitan and more compact and higher ... That is another process of weighing up; everyone has their own opinion. (planner two)

6.3 Establishing a Link to Expertise Knowledge, Planners' Self-Conception, and Own Experience

While planners are sometimes accused of being "obstructionists" in urban planning processes, the interviewees reject this characterization. Instead, they emphasize their role as advisors who provide guidance by identifying key framework conditions, challenges, and risks early in the process. Rather than outright rejecting proposals, they advocate for a balanced approach that encourages reflection on constraints to ensure all relevant factors are considered in plan-

ning decisions (planner one). Thus, the planner's role embodies values such as pragmatism, transparency, and constructive engagement in the planning process. This ensures that critical factors are proactively addressed and constraints carefully evaluated. Such a consultative, solution-oriented approach fosters informed decision-making and promotes balanced urban development.

Against this background, public sector planners repeatedly refer to their expertise, knowledge, self-conception as planners, and personal experiences when establishing evaluation criteria. This becomes particularly clear when determining the degree of building coverage. Planner two explained the decision-making process as follows: "Well, I almost said a professional sense for the place. ... What feels compatible?" Therefore, the interpretation of compatibility depends not only on the surroundings of the planned area and legal requirements but also on planning experience. Consequently, both planners stress that valuations cannot be generalized but have to be context-specific.

Another statement illustrates this notion:

So we have a feeling for our city, and we know where things are happening. We also generally know where mining is. We usually know in advance where there are contaminated sites or where there were pits, where the building ground is difficult. (planner one)

This knowledge can be described as contextual or location-specific expertise that plays a crucial role in planning decisions. The use of the term "feeling" in this statement highlights a sense of familiarity and connection to place, which can be linked to values like identity and local attachment.

Moreover, planners value the citizens' initiative for its technical expertise and constructive communication. This appreciation is shown in both planners' recognition of the well-prepared content: "They [the citizens' initiative] wrote 17 pages properly" (planner one) and "And not just any nonsense" (planner two). The two planners also positively assess how this initiative avoids polemical or unfounded arguments when presenting their issues. They highlight that this initiative demonstrated a "serious presentation" (planner two) and "constructive" (planner one) behavior, which they contrast with the stereotypical perception of "typi-

cal" protest movements associated with noise, NIMBY attitude, and (rather obstructive) conflict.

This suggests that these planners value constructive, and perhaps even emotionally restrained, cooperation with citizens who communicate using shared expertise language. Such interactions render contributions more appreciable and valuable. Moreover, it reflects an appreciation of behaviors and forms of expression that align with the planners' professional practices. Another evaluation criterion addressed by the two public sector planners interviewed concerning their expertise, self-image as planners, and experience was legal certainty. One of them articulated their demands regarding planning evaluations as follows:

I cannot speculate on whether someone will sue or not. I have to speculate as to whether the content will open up a gateway, so to speak. And if I allow a planning decision to be made, so to speak, or submit it to the city council that is not legally secure, so to speak, then I am doing my job badly and more or less risking my job. (planner two)

It follows that a legally compliant evaluation must withstand judicial scrutiny while embodying values such as responsibility, competence, and professionalism. In this context, both interviewees repeatedly emphasized that producing legally sound plan evaluations takes time. They highlighted the negative consequences of time pressure: "Under time pressure, then you sometimes overlook things" (planner two). Herein lies another pattern in valuation practices.

6.4 Establishing a Link to the Urban Planning Process and Working Environment

Both planners referenced the specific planning process and their broader working environment when evaluating the plan concept. Their statements reveal that, although the process for this project was not commonplace, internal administrative factors significantly influenced the interpretation of the evaluation criteria.

The two planners indicated that they were dissatisfied with the planning process. Planner one noted that the planning process was imposed on them from a higher administrative level, stressing that "(i)t was also taken really seriously." Both planners described the process as "very resource-consuming" (planner

one), involving weekly video conferences (planner one). At several points in the interview, the planners mentioned that they felt considerable pressure due to simultaneous responsibilities for other projects (planner one). Nevertheless, both planners emphasized that this particular project had high priority and needed to be implemented quickly. Consequently, they experienced significant time pressure. Furthermore, the administration had differing opinions regarding how the case should be classified in terms of planning law (planner one). While they described the cooperation with many colleagues as fundamentally constructive, they found these circumstances burdensome: “Then we were in a kind of, I know, I do not want to call it a limbo, but there were definitely controversial opinions within the administration, that is clear” (planner one).

These statements illustrate how planners navigated the tension between due diligence and pressure to act. This situation highlights their internal conflict:

We are making every effort to identify any remaining issues because we have a certain quality standard that we uphold. Especially with such highly charged projects, we always keep in mind that there is likely to be someone who will file a complaint within this time frame. The more thoroughly we handle things and coordinate beforehand to ensure everything is in order, the more secure we can feel during this period. (planner one)

Ultimately, while these two public sector planners strive to fulfill their duties to the best of their knowledge and belief, they cannot fully meet their standards in this urban planning process.

7. Discussion

This paper examined how values are constructed within municipal land-use planning in Germany. Drawing on an explorative case study of a legally binding land-use procedure, we analyzed how public sector planners interpret evaluative criteria. Our aim was not merely to identify which criteria applied but to explore how value(s) are actively constructed in everyday planning contexts through the criteria interpretation (Heinich, 2020a).

Focusing on urban planning criteria, particularly the type and degree of building coverage, we identified four patterns of interaction between evaluation criteria, value attributions, and context-related aspects. These were shaped by the planners’ expertise, their professional self-conception, institutional settings, the organizational environment, and spatio-temporal references. The findings contribute to a more profound understanding of urban planning as a value-laden activity and broader debates on geographies of worth.

This study illustrated in a concrete urban planning context that evaluation in urban planning is not a static or linear application of predefined criteria but emerges as a dynamic, context-dependent, and socially negotiated practice. While this has been broadly acknowledged, our analysis connects this insight to ongoing sociological debates on evaluation and moral reasoning, highlighting how evaluative practices unfold in situ. Planners justify decisions, such as those on density, by referencing the industrial history of the site, the surrounding built environment, and societal expectations. The data underscore the indeterminacy of evaluative terms like “compatibility” or “tolerable level,” which allowed for multiple interpretations. Planners and citizens referred to similar spatial references, such as the surrounding neighborhood, but reached divergent conclusions. This ambiguity is consistent with the discretionary powers afforded by German planning law (Section 1[5–7]) BauGB, 2025).

Our findings on the criterion of density of built use are particularly revealing. Decisions regarding the degree of built use are not only central to the evaluative logic of planning but also carry significant spatio-temporal implications for affected local actors. While density is often treated as a technical or regulatory issue, our analysis highlights its deeply value-laden character. Values attached along the spectrum from low to high density vary across actor groups and are sometimes explicitly articulated but often remain implicit. The differing evaluations of the density of built use intersect with broader questions of inclusion and exclusion (Bowker & Star, 2000). This suggests that density functions as a planning parameter and a contested site of moral and social meaning, embedded in plural and sometimes conflicting value matrices.

They also align with recent scholarship in the SVE, which emphasizes that evaluative practices are based on an underlying value matrix (Lamont, 2012) and

shaped by social negotiations of normative frameworks (Berli et al., 2021; Bourdieu, 1993). These negotiations involve determining which metric is considered acceptable in the specific context of evaluation. By tracing how planners referenced historical legacies, public sentiments, and their spatial familiarity, interpreting evaluation criteria, we demonstrate how values are produced and negotiated through evaluative practice in urban planning. Our findings show that values are not applied as fixed standards but are negotiated in context. Moral reasoning emerges here as relational and situated, supporting the pragmatic view of morality proposed in moral geography. In this respect, our findings resonate with Barnett's (2012, 2014) argument that normativity is not confined to formalized moral reasoning but is embedded in ordinary, situated practices and judgments, a perspective that connects directly with recent work by Schmidt (2023) on lived moral geographies.

The lived, situated nature of normativity is also visible in planners' statements. When planners express a sense of compatibility or a feeling for the place, they indicate embodied, intuitive assessments grounded in their professional experience and spatial familiarity. Such statements illustrate how affect, habitus, and spatial attachment inform land-use decision-making in practice.

This shows that planners operate within a landscape of plural, partially overlapping, and sometimes conflicting value logics. Legal certainty, procedural correctness, and administrative deadlines constituted formalized orders of worth. Simultaneously, planners invoked experiential judgments and value contributions from citizens who communicated in technically informed, constructive ways. Particularly telling was the planners' appreciation for a well-argued citizen initiative, suggesting an implicit hierarchy of participation bias on tone and perceived competence. These findings support the view that participatory processes are shaped by exclusivity and epistemic and procedural norms.

While the single-case design of this study limits empirical generalizability, its analytical depth enables theoretical inferences that extend beyond the immediate case. By closely tracing evaluative practices in context, we contribute to broader conceptual debates on evaluation, normativity, and the situated nature of planning decisions. Interviews, although widely used in SVE (Heinich, 2020b), primarily capture verbal representations.

In sum, urban planning emerges here as a contested field of value negotiation. Evaluations are shaped by conflicting criteria, embodied knowledge, affective attachments, temporal pressures, and institutional structures. This study contributes to moral geography by empirically tracing how values are enacted, contested, and stabilized in everyday planning practice.

8. Conclusion and Outlook

This article explored how values are constructed and enacted in urban land-use planning. Drawing on a qualitative case study of a binding land-use procedure in Germany, we examined how public sector planners interpret evaluative criteria in situ. Bridging approaches from SVE and moral geography, the study contributes to understanding urban planning not merely as a technical or legal task but as an evaluative and morally charged practice. Rather than treating values as predefined or stable, we conceptualized them as socially constructed, negotiated through legal norms, spatial context, institutional demands, and professional reasoning.

Our findings show that land-use decisions in urban planning are shaped by multiple and sometimes conflicting value logics. Regulatory requirements, political deliverability, and administrative feasibility represent formalized value hierarchies that frequently dominate. Simultaneously, planners draw on embodied, intuitive knowledge, what an interviewee described as "sense for the place," to assess appropriateness and compatibility. This underscores how moral reasoning in planning emerges through the interplay of codified norms and situational judgment.

Temporal structures also proved central to evaluation. Administrative timelines and political urgency did not merely constrain deliberation but actively shaped what counted as a legitimate or feasible outcome. Time thus operated as a moral force in its own right, an axis of evaluation that influenced both the content and the pace of planning decisions.

Further, the strongly expressed recognition of a technically sound and calmly presented citizens' initiative illustrates participatory evaluation's performative and hierarchical nature. Our findings suggest that the content and the communicative form of public input matter, reflecting implicit epistemic norms that priv-

illegal procedural rationality and professionalized language.

In sum, this study advances a pragmatic, empirically grounded perspective on values as elements of normativity in spatial planning, foregrounding planning as a site of moral negotiation and value construction embedded in place, time, and professional practice. However, we have only scratched the surface of the evaluation iceberg. The findings open up several promising directions for future research on the interaction of SVE and moral geography.

Future studies should include additional case studies to explore how value conflicts manifest under different planning systems and institutional settings. Participatory observations could help capture the embodiment and procedural dimensions of evaluative practices that remain opaque in interview-based research. This would allow a better understanding of how evaluations are enacted through professional routines, bodily presence, and affective judgments.

In addition, further research should develop the approach by integrating spatial theories and temporal perspectives. This includes a more explicit examination of how values attached to urban planning criteria, such as density of built use, are mobilized in planning processes, particularly concerning their implicitness. Conceptualizing and making these underlying value orders visible is crucial, not only for advancing evaluation theory in planning but also for addressing democratic concerns around inclusion and representation. Decisions about urban density shape access to space, resources, and infrastructure, and are thus deeply intertwined with questions of social justice. Understanding the moral and normative logics behind these decisions is essential for ensuring more equitable planning outcomes.

Notes

¹ In this article, we take a narrow view of planning, that is, when it comes to spatial or urban planning, we understand planning as a governmental task. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that this task is carried out by individual planners whose actions occur within the administrative structure framework.

² For more information on the research project “VALPLAN—Values and valuing in political spatial planning processes,” see <https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/463567980>

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