The Promises of Digital Engagement Platforms in Urban Planning: Between Obligation and Optimisation

By

Hong Ngoc Pham

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose. I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged.

Hong Ngoc Pham

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Authorship Attribution Statement

This thesis contains material previously published in Digital Geography and Society (Pham, 2024). This material comprises sections of the empirical analysis, including interview excerpts and quotes from documents that formed the discourse analysis. I designed the study, analysed the data and wrote the drafts of the manuscript.

In addition, no content produced by generative AI tools has been used in the preparation of this thesis.

Hong Ngoc Pham, 27th June 2025

As supervisor for the candidature upon which this thesis is based, I can confirm that the authorship attribution statements above are correct.

Dallas Rogers, 27th June 2025

Abstract

Digital engagement platforms are increasingly used by built environment professionals to streamline public participation, often as part of statutory requirements. This thesis critically examines how business and technological logics (e.g. scale and growth) of these platforms intersect with Western liberal planning values such as democracy, equity, and justice in the UK (England) and Australian (NSW) planning contexts. While urban and planning research tends to focus on improving these technologies for better public input, critical perspectives on digital engagement in planning remain limited, particularly compared to emerging critiques of PropTech in housing and real estate. This analysis addresses that gap by exploring what these engagement platforms promise to do, and the practitioners' understandings and worldviews of it.

Drawing on the anthropology of planning, the research uses a multi-sited, mixed qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and discourse analysis. Findings reveal that practitioners framed the digitalisation of engagement as morally aligned with planning's democratic ethos as, through automation and datafication, they could listen better to communities, reach more people, and value community voices. Yet in practice, these goals were often tempered by political and economic imperatives. Datafication was used not just for engaging 'better' but for constructing persuasive narratives to legitimise decisions. Therefore, digital engagement platforms were not neutral tools as they were promised to be but served to reinforce planning values and confer legitimacy.

Underlying this digital shift was a moral impetus to improve democratic participation and planning outcomes. The thesis ultimately proposes a critical urban theory of moral planning, framing planning as a moral field where virtue, legitimacy and governance are continually

negotiated, not just through policy or process, but also through the technologies that now mediate civic participation.

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Chapter 1 | Introduction: Digitalising Public Participation

Chapter abstract

The introductory chapter opens with a background on digital engagement platforms and the political context from which they emerged. Recent reform proposals for PropTech innovation and disruption surfaced as a response to housing crises and public distrust. But the message of increasing participation was nothing novel; public participation has always been part of the democratic ethos in planning, it is 'written into' planning governance structures. I situate digital engagement platforms within this tradition and lineage. I then discuss the key terms in the thesis, including planning promises, *which refers to the act of making plans for the future and is deeply imbued with obligations, expectations, and power relations. Finally, I summarise the three promises of digital engagement platforms found in this study and the research implications for urban planning theory.*

. . .

Crisis and the political will for disruption

Digital engagement platforms are increasingly used by built environment professionals to streamline public participation, often as part of statutory requirements (Falco & Kleinhans, 2018; Hossu et al., 2022; Nunes Silva, 2020; Staffans et al., 2020). Many of them are developed by private technology and software companies who work with a range of clients, including local government, property development, and housing associations—basically the actors who have a legal obligation to consult the public on local plans and development proposals or see it as standard practice. While some forms of digitalisation include augmented reality (AR), virtual exhibition rooms, and engagement phone 'apps' (Wilson et al., 2019; Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2021a), others are simpler like incorporating

online survey tools and social media into a community engagement strategy (Alam et al., 2022; Baborska-Narozny et al., 2018; Nyseth et al., 2019). Generally speaking, having an array of these digital engagement channels is part of a planner or developer's toolkit.

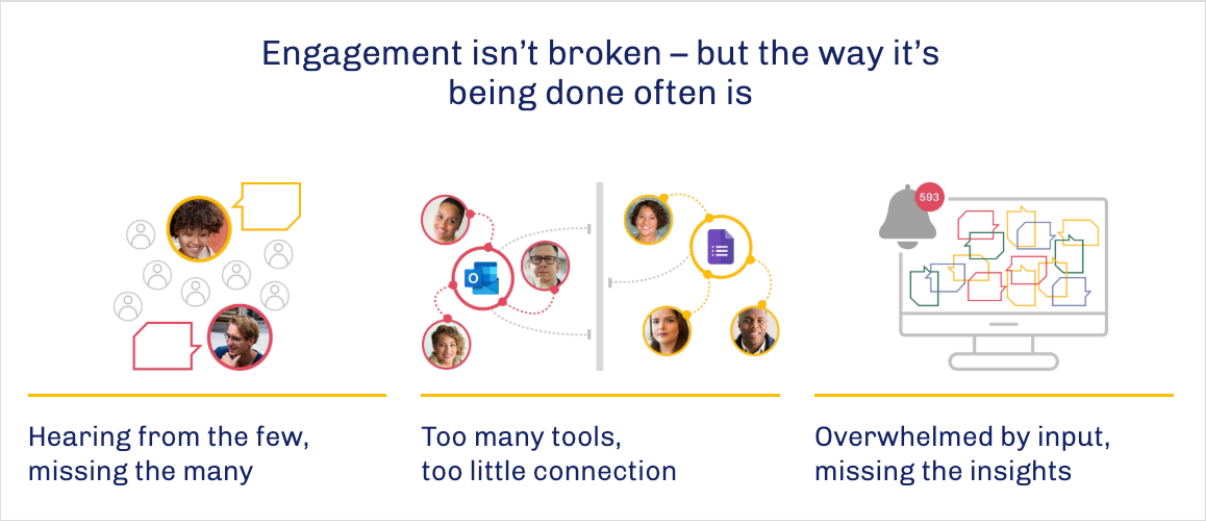
However, over time, a distinct group of digital engagement technologies started to form. These are engagement platforms that offer an 'all-inclusive' public participation portal, including all the digital engagement technologies listed above but in one place. Although many are specialised technologies focused on the statutory engagement phase in planning, it is worth noting that some of the companies involved in the study did overlap with the broader real estate, property development, and housing sectors. Several of these PropTech companies, for instance, worked with corporate landlords and housing associations on tenant engagement or with property developers for early non-statutory engagement. In addition, a few other platforms engaged with sectors outside of property like tourism, energy, transport, and local government policy.

Nonetheless, the common financial model that digital engagement platforms operated on was Software-as-a-Service (SaaS), meaning, through a subscription (with multiple tiered options), customers gain access to the platform and data. The more you pay, the more access granted to the engagement and analysis functions (see Srnicek, 2019). What made these platforms distinct from other engagement technology was their 'disruption' rhetoric (Pham, 2024; White et al., 2024), namely how they promised to increase 'trust and transparency' and thereby improve democratic planning (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government [MHCLG], 2020). The question being raised by industry was whether planning democracy was failing. Was the planning system faulty? Indeed, many digital engagement platforms like GoVocal (previously CitizenLab) referred to planning as a 'broken system' (Figure 1.1), and that they (PropTech companies) could help fix the problem. Increasingly

becoming part of political discourse was the notion that existing planning structures and the participation process needed to be reformed.

Figure 1.1

Broken Engagement



Note: The landing page of the digital engagement platform, GoVocal, suggests public particpation is "broken" (Go Vocal, n.d.) and thus technological 'disruption' in the planning system is imperative for planning democracy.

The disruption of digital engagement platforms (or what they promised to do) was important within the context of liberal democratic planning systems given public participation is an essential, almost *virtuous* aspect of urban democracies (Barry & Legacy, 2023). The planning system is supposed to be fair, equitable, and just (Amin, 2006; Fainstein, 2011; Sennett, 2017): it should be working *for* the public not against them. So, according to this ethos, to make *good and sustainable* places, communities must not only be involved but are made central to planning decision-making. Public participation is an integral aspect of not only how we understand urban democracies, but that it should and must work democratically—although, of course, the meaning of democratic planning is a contested

subject and might always be debated. Throughout the thesis, I call this the moral impetus of public participation in planning.

With the housing shortage and unaffordability crisis, however, and the increase in public distrust towards local government authorities and developers to deliver more and better housing supply, greater scrutiny has been placed on the planning system and governments to plan and develop more housing (Goode, 2025; Gurran & Bramley, 2017). Digital engagement platforms were borne out of this context, many of them directly responding to the growing distrust, and drew on the fundamental democratic planning virtues that existed in the industry (Boland et al., 2022). On top of this, the COVID-19 pandemic made digital engagement platforms a necessary public consultation alternative for planners and developers to continue 'business as usual' (Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2022). What made these platforms unique from other technologies was their emphasis on scale, growth, and reach, and that by having 'access to' or being able to capture more people than more traditional methods of engagement, practitioners could 'democratise' public participation (BBC, 2020). The promise of disruption was also about changing the nature of urban democracies, from technocratic forms of governance (led by planning and development experts) and towards embracing local community voices, or so they proclaimed.

The thesis interrogates the promises made in planning through a close study of digital engagement platforms in the UK (England) and Australia (NSW). Drawing on Abram and Weszkalnys' (2022) definition of planning promises—the act of making plans for a "desired future" (p. 3), which comes with it sets of obligations, expectations, and power relations between citizens and state (and private sector actors)—the thesis examines the kinds of promises being made in and through digital engagement platforms, especially on meanings of democracy and community. Abram and Weszkalnys (2022) define planning as the "manifestation of what people think is possible and desirable, and what the future promises

for the better" (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2022, p. 4). Following this line of analysis, the thesis critically examines how business and technological logics (e.g., scale and growth) of these platforms intersect with Western liberal planning values such as democracy, equity, and justice, the combination of which represents the planning industry's proposition for a 'better future'.

In this chapter, I will first introduce the emergence of digital engagement platforms (and PropTech, which I will use interchangeably) in planning politics. Next, I explain the 'democratic ethos' in planning, and situate digital engagement platforms here as part of a planning practice lineage. While public participation is a statutory component of planning in the case study sites—England and NSW—how it is practiced and what it *means* remains contested. I therefore propose an analysis of the promises of digital engagement platforms, especially how it seeks to reimagine public participation. The section after walks through the key definitions of participatory promises in the planning context. I then outline the three promises found in the study, and finally the research implications.

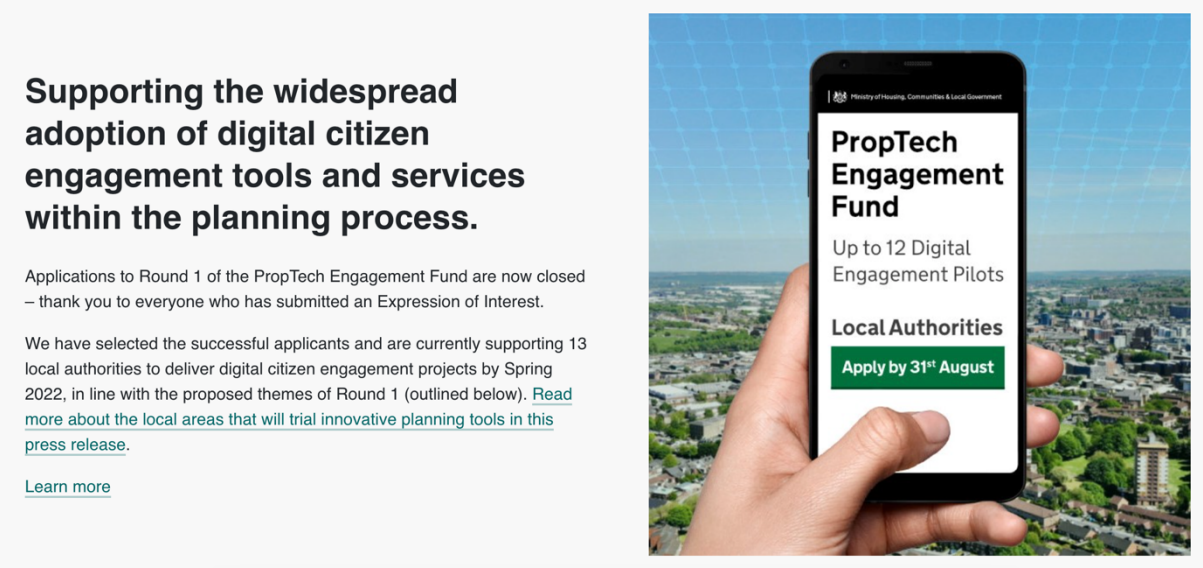
PropTech and innovation

Digital engagement platforms gained notable traction in England when they secured Government endorsement (and funding) under Boris Johnson's leadership in 2020. The Conservative Government at the time released a White Paper called *Planning for the Future* (MHCLG, 2020), which proposed to deal with the housing crisis by digitalising the planning system. Their key goal for increasing housing supply was to use technology for making easier and faster decisions on building better housing. One of the areas targeted for digitalisation was statutory public consultations, which the Government argued was a significant barrier to the development of new housing (MHCLG, 2020). By digitalising public consultations, their aim was to streamline the decision-making process and "finally build the homes we all need

and the future we all want to see" (MHCLG, 2020, p. 6). Drawing directly from the White Paper, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) launched the PropTech Engagement Fund in August 2021, which proposed cross-sectoral collaboration between local planning authorities and "emerging market offerings," the private digital engagement suppliers (Local Digital, 2024a). The vision was to help Councils understand the barriers to community engagement among their constituents and "adopt these tools at scale" (Local Digital, 2024). Figure 1.2 was taken from an announcement post on their Local Digital webpage, highlighting their promise of "widespread adoption of digital citizen engagement tools" (Local Digital, 2024).

Figure 1.2

PropTech Engagement Fund



Note: The PropTech Engagement Fund was set up by the UK MHCLG (which then became the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities [DLUHC]) to increase citizen engagement using digital technology (Local Digital, 2024).

The first round focused on public participation in "plan-making process and development management", specifically *Regulation 18 and 19*, communications and

publicity, and public feedback analysis (Local Digital, 2024). *Regulation 18* refers to initial consultation on draft planning proposals with relevant civic and professional stakeholders, whereas *Regulation 19* is the final stage of publication before submission to the Secretary of State for approval, which goes out to the same stakeholders for review. The second round of the Fund took place shortly after in January 2022, but this time it expanded the themes to master planning, Council-led development, estate regeneration, community development, and a wildcard (Local Digital, 2024b). By the third round, the Fund was renamed the 'PropTech Innovation Fund', removing 'Engagement', although the program maintained the public engagement focus. Again, the themes became more specific, on ways of using 1) virtual reality (VR) and AR to improve planning visualisation, providing 2) interoperability and integration of software platforms and data, and integrating 3) artificial intelligence (AI) and natural language processing (NLP) (Local Digital, 2024c). At the time of writing the thesis, the Fund is in its fourth and final round, with projects on improving land assessment using and gathering public feedback through digital visualisation (The Digital Planning Team, 2024). However, with the recently elected UK Labour Government, planning reform proposals have since shifted gears slightly. In the concluding chapter (Chapter 7), I return to what this means for digital engagement platforms going forward. But across these rounds, there was an ambitious agenda for digital engagement in the UK, especially around improving democracy and trust and transparency in the planning system.

In fact, discussions about ways to resolve public distrust had already been taking place, demonstrated by private sector reports like *Rebuilding Trust* by property developer and investment firm Grosvenor (2019), which went on to become a popular reference for practitioners, at conferences and events, even in the interviews I conducted. At the time of the report's publication, the UK planning system was also deeply mired by scandals and controversy, notably, the Grenfell Tower fire (Casciani, 2024; Hodkinson, 2019), let alone by

the decades of neoliberal economic policies on housing, plus austerity and the devastating impacts on social housing residents (Bogue, 2019; Mckenzie, 2015). Statutory public engagement in planning was (and still is) a deeply contentious and politicised space. Therefore, restoring public trust in government and the planning system was critical surrounding the emergence of digital engagement platforms, manifesting in a growing discourse around transparency, democracy, and justice.

In contrast, the distrust issue in the Australian planning context was much less prominent with regards to digital engagement, although it was still touched upon by technology companies, as I will demonstrate throughout the analysis chapters (Chapters 4 to 6). Despite the recent appetite to digitalise the planning system (Daniel et al., 2024), Australian digital engagement platforms have been largely marketed as tools for increasing efficiencies and capacity building within governments and less about re-establishing democratic virtues. Issues of trust and transparency are still apparent; however, in this study, these concepts were framed more in terms of reinforcing community relations (which forms a key argument of planning and care ethics in Chapter 4).

The thesis examines digital engagement platforms that are commonly used in the English and NSW planning contexts. The UK government's push for the digitalisation of planning formed the foundation of this study, especially in relation to the politics around trust and transparency. From there, I compare how digital engagement platforms targeted at the planning sector operated and were marketed in Australia. NSW's planning politics have similarly grappled with the housing affordability and shortage crisis (Gurran & Ruming, 2016). Interestingly, in the NSW Housing Strategy document, *Housing 2041* (NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment [DPIE], 2021), NSW DPIE made similar claims when it was a conservative government to "improve the quality, transparency and accessibility of housing data…to better understand and address the housing needs and

aspirations of NSW communities (NSW DPIE, 2021, p. 29). It speaks to an analogous vision in which digitalisation and data can help create "more robust, evidence-based decisions for housing today and into the future" (NSW DPIE, 2021, p. 29).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Committee for Sydney (2018) were thinking about ways of using digital 'smart' technology to increase diversity and inclusion in the development of Sydney as a 'smart city'. Digital technology was seen by participation practitioners as a necessary tool for public participation, but not exactly a replacement (Butler et al., 2020). The appeal of digital technology was being able to access a younger and more diverse public, while still deploying traditional and other innovative non-digital methods (Butler et al., 2020). Leading up to this point in NSW, there was certainly industry demand for more 'innovative' solutions, not specifically about digital technology, but for the way participation was being done as it was not working for local planning authorities who felt "disenchanted" about few community members showing up to engagement exhibitions (NSW Division of Local Government [DLG], 2013, p. 39). Unless the planning industry changed the way they talked about and conducted public participation, it was "inevitable that a sense of distrust [would] be generated about the engagement process" (PlanningNSW, 2003, p. 7). However, unlike the UK, digital technology in NSW planning politics was not a panacea for public distrust. Although digital engagement platforms in the UK rose in popularity as public distrust in planners and developers became increasingly more of an issue (Grosvenor, 2019), in NSW, engagement platforms served mainly for practitioners to continue doing their jobs well but more effectively (NSW DLG, 2013).

Despite having quite different politics around digital engagement, the public participation process, public expectations on accountability, and the prevalence of digital engagement platforms were comparable in the English and NSW cases. I will explore the promises of digital engagement platforms in these two Western liberal democratic planning

systems to show how claims of improving 'trust and transparency' are made by various planning industry actors in response to political pressure and statutory obligations. Future research may investigate promises in contrasting planning contexts comparing different government systems and politics. However, this was not within the scope of this PhD research project. In addition, the federal system in Australia means that each state has its own planning legislation, so I focused only on NSW, where I was based at the University of Sydney. The thesis is thus about two planning contexts both experiencing housing affordability and shortage crises, and solutions for which were sought through the planning system and digital technology.

Also, it is important to note here that by the time I finish writing and submit the thesis, the analysis may resemble an historical account of sorts, of a point in time when the digitalisation of participation was a big talking point in UK planning politics. I started my PhD research in 2021 and towards the end of my writing period in mid-2025, both the UK and NSW elected Labour Governments after conservative leadership. This research reflects a specific timeframe (2021-2025) and is a meditation on the planning promises of improved democracy and decision-making which digital engagement platforms inspired among industry practitioners. As the final hurrah to the UK Conservative Government's efforts to digitalise the planning system, MP Rachel Maclean's statement in the concluding report for the Conservative's digital planning programme is a reminder of the promises they made around the digitalisation of planning:

> We believe the planning system should deliver the things that communities need, making places liveable, sustainable, and beautiful. It should be trusted by communities, who should be empowered and able to engage with what gets built and where. To do this, the system needs to be faster, more efficient and more certain. It needs to be clearer to citizens, communities and developers what the rules and

> permissions are to enable a better conversation about what land is allocated and what is built. (The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities [DLUHC], 2023, p. 2)

While digital technology offered a new and 'innovative' solution to the political problems facing planners and developers regarding public distrust, these matters speak to core 'planning virtues' (Barry & Legacy, 2023) of fairness, accessibility, and at the heart of it, democratic values, or else what others have called the 'democratic ethos' (Bond, 2019; Inch, 2015; Mouffe, 1997). As Boland et al. (2021) suggest, digitalisation highlights an industry concern with a democratic "deficit and digital divide" (p. 156). But what does democracy mean in the planning context and how is it 'written into' and practiced through the system? I address this in the following section, to develop further context for the planning promises of digital engagement platforms.

The democratic ethos in urban governance

Within strategic planning documents and proposals, and legislation and regulation, lie implicit arguments about what constitute societal problems requiring attention and intervention (Bacchi, 2012). In this section, I discuss the state of public participation and digital engagement technologies in planning policy, especially in reform proposals, where public trust and engagement in formal consultation processes are integral to planning democracy. I then discuss how the democratic ethos exists through the layers of government in the English and NSW planning systems. Ultimately, maintaining democratic governance is a fundamental promise of planning, with which digital engagement platforms are tightly bound.

In NSW, an earlier engagement guidance document called 'Community Engagement in the NSW Planning System' by a previous State planning department, PlanningNSW,

claimed there was a lack of trust and transparency in public engagement among the public (PlanningNSW, 2003). It is especially interesting because it reflects similar language as the rhetoric used by the UK DLUHC in their more recent campaign for digital planning, despite being over twenty years old. In this document, trust and building relationships with communities were central to the democratic ethos in planning. For example, PlanningNSW state:

> Community engagement is not a magic wand that can be waved to make all parties happy. If community engagements are not conducted in good faith and do not fully engage the community, they can be perceived as cynical and manipulative exercises. They may also be seen as tokenism responding to dominant voices and ignoring the broader community, as a means of co-opting groups or defusing opposition, as falsely raising public expectations, or as substitutes for good government and sound policy making (PlanningNSW, 2003, p. 7).

Public participation should reflect a 'healthy' democracy, according to Planning NSW (2003), in which the public can freely participate in matters that concern them. While 'trust and transparency' were the top priorities for the planFIRST planning reform in 2002, it remains relevant in present day. In more recent iterations of NSW state planning documents, to create a true planning democracy, public participation must be a genuine effort by practitioners, by reaching out to relevant people and providing them with 'real' opportunities to impact decision-making, otherwise, further political problems are created, and financial risk to projects are increased (NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure [DPHI], 2024; NSW DPIE, 2019).

But what is 'genuine' public consultation, exactly? NSW DLG (2013) states public participation must involve diverse perspectives, particularly those groups of people "whose

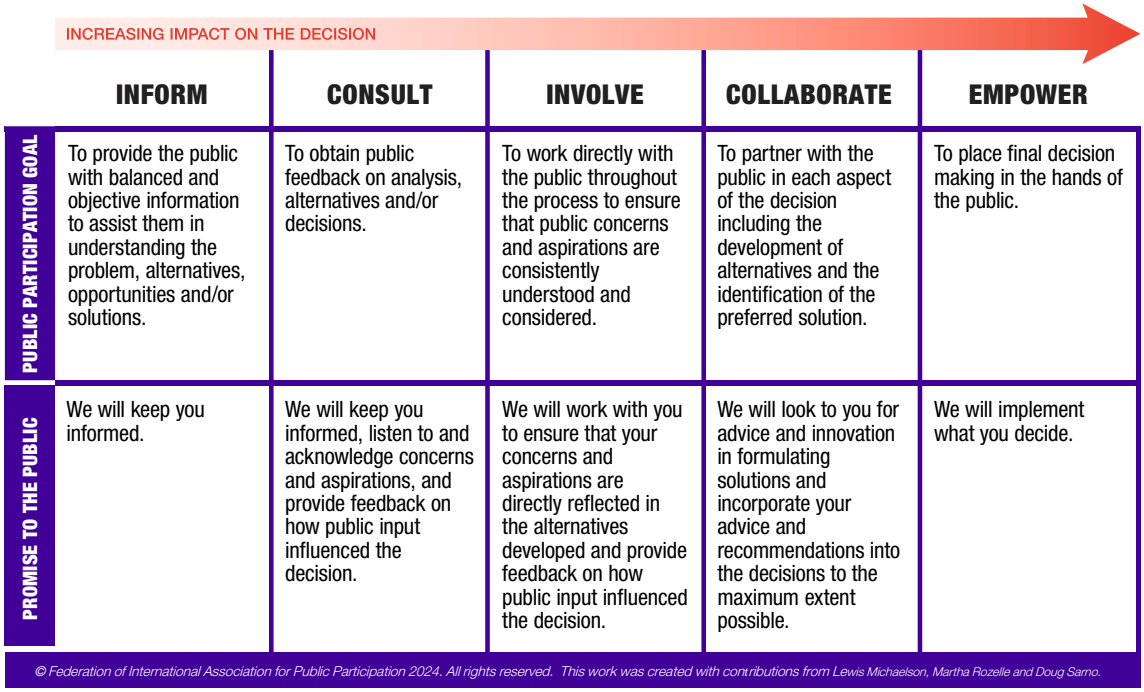
voice[s] may not normally be heard in community discussions… includ[ing] people with disabilities, Aboriginal communities, people from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, young people, people in geographically isolated areas, single parents, and the elderly" (NSW DLG, p. 39). The proper practice of democracy here looks like the involvement of as many different groups of people as possible, which is framed as a way to truly capture a population's general sentiment, desires, and needs. And, despite the inevitable differences between individuals and groups that will arise in the participation process, the document states practitioners should encourage "cross-generational discussions and debate" through forums that build "shared understanding" (NSW DLG, p. 39). From a governance perspective, good public participation is about "balancing everyone's different needs" (DPIE, 2020, p. 2).

Much of the NSW government guidance for public participation has been deferred to the industry peak body, International Association for Public Participation (IAP2). IAP2 offer a spectrum of participation, a guidance for the types of participation practitioners might choose to do in their development or planning projects, depending on what is necessary or relevant to their specific site and community. Figure 1.3 shows the five categories defined by IAP2, differing by the extent of public involvement in decision-making, from informing communities about an upcoming project (such as delivering pamphlets through the post), to full autonomy and self-determination (e.g., community boards or elections).

Interestingly, IAP2's guidance is informed by their 'core values', including the "belief that those who are affected by a decision have the right to be involved in the decision-making process" (IAP2, 2025). But these are not regulatory guidelines, just guidance for conducting public participation. Like the English planning system, Councils across NSW each produce their own regulation around public participation, including requirements for giving public notice, consultations, and presentations or public exhibitions.

Figure 1.3

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Engagement



Note: The spectrum of public participation, with the bottom row described as the "promise to the public." Image used with permission. © Federation of International Association for Public Participation 2024. All rights reserved. This work was created with contributions from Lewis Michaelson, Martha Rozelle, and Doug Sarno. www.iap2.org

In fact, what both planning contexts have in common is a that local planning authorities (i.e., local Councils in England and Australia) are responsible for developing their own public participation guidelines and regulation. The purpose of a devolved system such as this for public participation is to give local governments relative autonomy over their planning regulation and local plans to meet local needs, as opposed to being centrally determined—somewhat characteristic of liberal democratic governance (Fung, 2004). Both the legislative acts in England and NSW emphasise the importance of public participation.

For instance, England's planning legislation is the *Planning Act 2008*, which gives power to the Secretary of State who determines the National Policy Framework, emphasises the use of early engagement under the 'Decision-Making' section, particularly using positive and creative engagement methods, a 'full range' of planning tools, and a combination of public and private resources in order to make the decision-making process as 'streamlined' as possible (MHCLG, 2024, p. 13). Interesting is the importance of housing-building, as well. In the very first paragraph, it states the policies in this framework should help guide "local prepared plans [to] provide for sufficient housing and other development in a sustainable manner" (MHCLG, 2024, p. 4).

Conversely, as a federal government system, each state and territory in Australia has its own planning legislation and state government planning agency. The comparable legislation in NSW to England's Planning Act is the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (also known as 'the Act') which claims "opportunities for community participation" as one of the key objects of the legislative document, among others such as "to promote good design", "to promote the proper construction", "to promote the social and economic welfare of the community and a better environment", and, resembling some of the same priorities as England, "to promote the delivery and maintenance of affordable housing" (*Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979).* The Act is supported by the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2000,* which defines notice periods, and the length of time consultations must be live for, a mandatory 28 days, whereas the requirement in England is a minimum of 21 days for most development proposals and plans (MHCLG, 2022), although expectations and guidelines for public consultations are really determined by local planning authorities (typically the District or Borough Councils). However, Local Plans per council do require a statement of community involvement (Regulation 18) and a final round of publicity

or comments (Regulation 19), as I mentioned earlier, which then goes to the Secretary of State for approval (*Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004*).

How these documents are assessed by local planning authorities may vary. In NSW, for instance, the parameters and assessment of public participation at the local government level are similarly decided upon by local Councils who must develop their own Community Participation Plans (CPP) (NSW DLG, 2013). What makes it unique from the English context is the Act recommends value principles for developing CPPs in Section 2.23, such as making sure participation opportunities are as inclusive as possible, that those involved are a genuine representation of the relevant community, engagement is meaningful, and decisions are communicated in an open and transparent way.

NSW involves another statutory engagement plan called the Community Engagement Strategy (CES), which is part of the Community Strategic Plan, a mandatory document that Councils must produce after a local government election. The Community Strategic Plan is informed by the *Local Government Act 1993*, a separate act. However, the CPP and the CES can be merged, likely because it covers almost the same content (NSW Office of Local Government [OLG], 2021). Notable here is the CES must demonstrate social justice principles: equity, access, participation, and rights (NSW OLG, 2021, p. 25), which contrasts with the somewhat vaguer language in much of the planning legislation and regulation documents in England.

I describe these planning structures because planning legislation and regulation not only set the legal obligations (statutory requirements) but also informs the sectoral roles and the resulting industry relationships (for example, between local government, the private and non-profit sectors, other third party providers, and of course civilians), structures of management (including decision-making processes), and the content of local strategies and plans (see Pierre, 2011). But, importantly, behind all these documents, the purpose of good

public participation practice to create better places for people and society writ large. As the Department of Communities and Local Government's (2015) *Plain English guide to the Planning System* states, "Planning ensures that the right development happens in the right place at the right time, benefitting communities and the economy" (p. 4). The planning system promises to produce the best outcomes for people through regulatory processes like public participation which contain within it the democratic ethos.

In this way, I set about researching digital engagement platforms as an extension of the democratic ethos in planning. How do they advance some of the claims of planning demonstrated through legislation and policies, such as democracy, social equity, or even affordable housing? To answer this, I draw upon the concept of 'planning promises' introduced to the planning literature by anthropologists Abram and Weszkalnys (2022), which I shall elucidate in the next section. Thus, the aim of this research project is to understand what digital engagement platforms purported to do for public participation and planning democracy. My research questions are twofold, summarised in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1

Research Questions

Research Questions
• What kind of 'promises' do digital engagement platforms and the practitioners behind them offer? • How do these 'promises' play out materially and subjectively? • What are the implications for planning theory and urban studies?

Note: The sets of questions I aim to answer in the thesis.

Firstly, I am interested in what exactly was being promised through digital engagement platforms by the planning industry (namely the planners, developers, and PropTech companies) to the public and to each other. Secondly, by framing the digitalisation of public participation as a *promise*, which come with certain expectations of behaviour and outcomes,

how might this inform the way we understand and (re)imagine urban planning politics and governance?

Public participation plays an important role in determining what the planning promise becomes as it is designed to elicit key community needs and priorities, which are then implemented in planning proposals, whether they are strategic plans or development projects. Yet, the promise is greater than just delivering on a project or meeting goals that were decided upon with the public. It speaks to a democratic ethos that planning must abide by if it exists within a liberal democratic context (Fung, 2004; Tronto, 2016). The planning system—and its mechanisms like statutory public participation—therefore makes a particular promise for improved democracy, the crux of my research project and query, which I shall now explain.

Making, keeping, and breaking promises

The promises of digital engagement platforms are the main object of interrogation in this thesis. In urban studies, promises are understood as the *potential* for something, an imagination for how cities *could be* and how they could cater to different types of people (Tajbakhsh, 2001). In anthropology, however, promises are actions between people that are imbued in obligations and expectations (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2022). With promises, come a tacit social contract between parties, and how each side plays determines the nature of the relationship (see Mauss, 2004). Promises are part and parcel to planning politics as it shapes the relationship between planners or developers and the community stakeholders. Through my analysis chapters (Chapter 4 to 6), I argue planning bureaucracy and mechanisms such as public consultation represent the promise of creating good places for people through a democratic planning process that responds to the public's needs. While the public are generally the receiver of the promise of participation, different industry stakeholders are

similarly ‘sold’ certain promises that benefit them. Therefore, any actor who has an economic or political interest in planning and development decisions engages in the production and distribution of such promises.

The planning system is a large promise machine; it produces many promises—big promises, small promises, some promises are high stakes and politically charged, others less so and perhaps go under the radar, hence why promises may be broken without repercussion (Baxtrom, 2013). But, while some promises are a legal requirement, keeping them may not always be the case; the promise itself becomes elusive (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2022). Abram and Weszkalnys (2022) position planning and development proposals as offerings to the public, a declaration of commitment to the delivery of services, infrastructure, facilities and amenities and policy usually within a timeframe, and it engenders political relations and sets of obligations, which I advance in Chapter 4. These can manifest as planning documentation outlining the strategies (objectives and actions), design proposals, and project timelines. This is precisely where the politics around keeping the promises emerge; it is where the public tends to notice the discrepancy between expectations (based on what was promised to them) and the final plans or built outcomes (Thompson & Zadow, 2009). Depending on the political regime and power dynamics, unfulfilled promises may spark public discontent and even protest, or may not change anything at all (Gledhill, 2022; James, 2022). Perhaps false promises are even expected, so plans never actually move forward, stuck in an eternal present (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2011; see also Hutter & Wiechmann, 2022). The thesis interrogates the promises of improving and reforming public participation through digital engagement platforms, the practitioners’ understandings and worldviews of it. The key findings and arguments from my analysis are summarised in the following section.

Outline of thesis: The three promises

In Chapter 2, I carry out a literature review that examines how planning promises are framed in the urban and planning literature. I provide context of the promises made about planning governance and participation, particularly concerning debates on democracy (i.e., antagonistic, agonistic, or hybrid). I then examine the literature surrounding the key promises of digital engagement platforms that I identify in the analysis chapters (Chapters 4 to 6). There are generally two schools of thought on planning promises: first is an interventionalist agenda in which promises are made *through* the research; and second is through critical inquiry that sees promises as a mechanism for, or application of certain planning and real estate mentalities, which is often linked to maintaining uneven power dynamics. I highlight through the literature review a lack of critical research on digital engagement platforms and their promises, with much of the studies focused on 'solving' problems of participation (i.e., not being democratic enough) rather than interrogating the 'problem' itself. As a result, I argue this kind of interventionalist research in urban studies can be trapped by its own moral claims and 'problem' statements. While practical solutions inevitably come from a value statement of sorts—it is after all about formulating an argument (Rydin, 2003)—too much focus on a solution can hinder critical understanding of the effects of these technologies.

To interrogate these technologies, the methods discussion (Chapter 3) thus positions planning promises as a product and process of planning *culture* (Abram, 2016). I argue the kinds of promises on display reflect the priorities, beliefs, and norms and expectations set by industry actors (Murdoch & Abram, 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020). Because promises are produced and manifest in different ways, through documentation and digital artifacts like websites, at public events, and even upon subjective or individual reflection, I designed the research methods to target these different expressions using the approach of *multi-sitedness* (Marcus, 1995) and mixed qualitative methods. In Chapter 3, I also critically reflect on

performance and ‘expert’ personas, which form the methodological implications of a cultural approach to planning and researching practitioners as planning subjects. Drawing on my disciplinary background in anthropology, the methods discussion lays the theoretical groundwork for Chapters 4 to 6, where I dissect the logics and reasoning, ideological perspectives, and belief systems held by planners, developers, consultants, and PropTech companies, necessary for understanding the promises of digital engagement platforms, which I summarise below.

1. Care ethics, reciprocity, and obligation: How practitioners viewed themselves

In Chapter 4, the first data analysis chapter, I explore the sense of responsibility among practitioners to improve planning system using digital engagement platforms through an ethics of care (Casalini, 2020; Urban & Ward, 2020). Their ethics of care, however, was not entirely altruistic as the purpose of improving relations with communities and participation practice was ultimately to obtain a desired planning outcome: to garner community support. Chapter 4 describes how practitioners dealt with the commercial and institutional demands that ended up shaping the moral and ethical promises they made for and about themselves.

I start the analysis by showing how practitioners perceived their relationships to the public and to each other in the industry, for example, the sense of responsibility and duty they felt as planning practitioners to deliver good planning and development results. In response to the lack of public trust in the planning system, practitioners felt impelled to demonstrate a more caring participation practice by using digital technology. Through these platforms, for instance, they could listen better to the public’s needs as the engagement data would be more efficiently reported. As a result, they fostered their own ethics of care, including empathy and active listening, respect, and communication transparency.

However, their care ethics was largely shaped by their professional roles and obligations as built environment professionals, not least because public participation was a statutory requirement. Indeed, the platforms themselves were designed specifically for planners and developers' consultation needs, rather than the publics', for instance. As a result, practitioners developed what I call a 'passive reciprocity' ethics of care in which they cared about improving the public's experience with statutory engagement but motivated by the potential that it would in turn increase the chances of project success. Improving public participation through digitalisation was not a 'free gift'—a concept I discuss in further detail using Mauss (2004) in Chapter 4—nor was it a transactional exchange of equal values. Rather, their ethics of care sat somewhere in between a free gift and a transactional exchange of equal values. The expectation of a return (reciprocity) was expected as an outcome of caring for the public, hence *passive* reciprocity, but was characterised by the condition that it streamlined planning approval. Chapter 4 takes a critical look at practitioners' ethics of care in action.

2. Scale, democracy, and community: How practitioners viewed the public

The second promise of digital engagement platforms was it would increase democratic engagement by *scaling* democracy (Chapter 5). By employing this PropTech business logic, public participation would become easier, faster, and able to capture more people. Practitioners understood democracy as being the process of gathering people's opinions and insights, which they believed they could streamline using engagement platforms and at a large *technological scale*. If they could do this, they believed it would increase democratic engagement in planning. Technological scale, however, was not just about expansion (i.e., increasing the number of people using the platforms), but it was also about targeting and filtering 'the public'. As opposed to other notions of scale of expansion and

growth (Tsing, 2012), scale in this case honed information. In other words, scale was more than just casting a wider net, it was being able to filter every person captured by their demographic characteristics and the engagement responses they gave. The outcome of the filtering process is what I call 'data abstraction,' because gathering as much data on the community as possible meant they could piece together new narratives about public needs, desires, and opinions, for planning documentation. By accessing various datapoints on the people that make up a community, the planners and developers could abstract this information and create a compelling and supporting evidence about the 'community' for their plans or development proposals.

3. Values and meaning making: How practitioners viewed the planning system

The ultimate promise of digital engagement platforms was to align all industry stakeholders so that there were shared mission and interest, which forms my third analysis chapter (Chapter 6). The idea was to create a new value system that considered the planning virtues of democracy, fairness, justice, and equity, alongside business incentives and political motivations. By taking all these perspectives and creating a collective value statement, it was an industry attempt to build 'consensus'. This new value system also included changing how communities were being *valued* in the planning process, including taking public feedback seriously in the decision-making process, and to create a 'shared value system' in which communities were at least of equal importance to economic or political considerations. I describe this as the enmeshment of values, a political effort among industry stakeholders to make structural changes to planning processes by merging different (and perhaps contradictory) values together, creating a new logic and meaning for public participation. They brought to the forefront the benefits of community voices to the business, political, and

social outcomes of planning and development, treating public participation as an economic *and* social 'asset'.

Rationalising planning morals: Research implications

The 'promises' of digital engagement therefore indicates the planning system is deeply imbued in questions of morality: it makes moral claims about how places should be made, how people should be treated and organised, and asks of its practitioners to make moral actions and decisions, sometimes in the face of competing interests (Lennon, 2021; Wachs, 2017). As I have also laid out in the previous section on the democratic ethos in planning structures, morality is a core driver of how cities and places are imagined, developed, and organised. In digital engagement platforms, however, moral principles are rationalised as being good for business and political relations with the public. An important argument I make throughout the analysis, and one which I will return to in the closing chapter, is when digital engagement platform logics intersect with planning virtues, morality is justified *through* datafication, evidence building, and documentation. Therefore, in terms of its structural position within the broader PropTech landscape (Shaw, 2020a), digital engagement platforms are situated at the governance edge, serving as an intermediary function between built environment practitioners and the public with whom they are legally obliged to consult.

The analysis critically examines how business and technological logics (e.g. scale and growth) of these platforms intersect with Western liberal planning values such as democracy, equity, and justice. As such, findings from Chapters 4 to 6 reveal that practitioners framed the digitalisation of engagement as morally aligned with planning's democratic ethos as, through automation and datafication, they could better listen to communities (Chapter 4), reach more people (Chapter 5), and value community voices (Chapter 6). These platforms justified

planning moralities as it made economic sense to do the 'good deed'. Digitalisation provided an opportunity for 'better' place-making as it represented community's needs more accurately and efficiently, but it was also deemed 'sensible' decision-making by ensuring higher chance of occupancy and use, the sense of commercial pragmatism. Designs and plans became more 'feasible' having properly consulted the public. So, rather than being disruptive technologies, digital engagement platforms reinstated and moralised existing planning structures.

In addition, the digital engagement discourse draws upon a rationality logic, which is typical for planning policy reform, where it is about convincing a public of the need for a planning policy reform (Rydin, 2003). Rydin (2003) calls this 'procedural rationality', a rational policy process used to justify decisions and reform proposals. Whereas Rydin's research on environmental planning focuses primarily on technocratic legitimacy, digital engagement platforms in addition offered *moral legitimacy*.

Together, these findings show that planning is a moral field where virtue, legitimacy, and governance are constantly negotiated through planning policy and technologies. The analysis draws upon a body of work that acknowledges that planning and participation are products of certain mentalities (Rogers, 2017), ideologies, and logics (Gunder, 2010; Shepherd et al., 2020), which make up planning worldviews and ways of organising people and places. While Hayden (1996) argues institutionalised and structured logics are used to legitimise bureaucratic practices of granting and denying citizenship, the same could be said of planning and even digital engagement platforms, but doing the opposite, of (rhetorically) seeking and redefining community inclusion and democracy. Power is established and enacted often through mundane bureaucratic and governance structures and processes (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002).

Through the three distinct 'promises' identified in this analysis, practitioners delivering or developing the digital engagement platforms engaged in a constant negotiation

between the moral claims of justice and equity and what made most sense to the business or planning procedure (including Councils, developers, and PropTech managers alike). The negotiations were not always clearly resolved, although there was an attempt to reconcile conflicting interests by absolving moral, political, economic considerations into a single (new) *value system* (Chapter 6). To determine whether practitioners successfully delivered this value system is not the purpose of the thesis, rather it is to illustrate the rhetorical lengths to which practitioners go to drive home a particular vision of urban democracy. Morality is often used as a way for conceptualising and making worlds; it helps structure social relations, power, and knowledge (Ticktin, 2011). Morality drives planning principles, policy reform, and therefore the ways in which cities are imagined, built, and managed (Chapter 7). Running throughout this digital movement was a moral impetus improve democratic participation and planning outcomes. Understanding how the clients of digital engagement platforms navigate between the different obligations or objectives can reveal a lot about the actual planning structures in place, such as what is considered a priority or a 'non-negotiable'.

The thesis makes a case for bringing forward these issues of morality to planning theory and urban studies, as both methodological intervention (in which researchers must consider their own moral claims in their research) and object of study, to critically examine the moral judgements being made about people and places through urban planning governance, practices, and logics. Planning promises are a publicly made commitment by organisations to do something *for* or in the interest of a public body, to whom they are tied in legal and political ways. These promises can be performative, and they can be broken (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2022). The thesis ultimately proposes an urban theory of moral planning, framing planning as a space where morality is continually constructed and negotiated, not just through policy or process, but also through the technologies that now mediate civic participation. In the next chapter, I explore the promises that have been made in the planning

and urban literature, many of which make moral claims themselves about social cohesion, democracy, and creating fair and ‘thriving’ cities, as well as the literature that critically dissects these promises as functions of power.

Chapter 2 | Urban Promises as Intervention and Object of Study

Chapter abstract

The aim of the literature review is to position the thesis within a body of planning and urban theory, while highlighting areas where anthropological and social theory can contribute. The thesis investigates what promises are being made through digital engagement platforms within planning politics. To better understand the underlying ideas and assumptions that drive and sustain these types of planning tools and interventions, the review is organised by the key promises identified in the literature. These promises include: the democratic ethos in planning, the care-full cities agenda, the role of digital technology in cities, and values in cities. From the review, I find that the urban promises in the literature fall into one of two buckets: 1) as an intervention in planning theory and practice, or 2) as the object of inquiry itself.

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Outline of the literature review

The previous chapter introduced digital engagement platforms in planning and the democratic ethos that is embedded within the planning system. I position these technologies as belonging to the planning world in which one of the major promises is making urban governance and planning democracy fair and equitable. Therefore, in this chapter, I review the main planning promises made about public participation by organising them by themes: 1) care and planning, 2) platform technology studies, and 3) values production in cities. Because the critical research on digital engagement platforms is still developing, especially studies that interrogate the political discourses behind them, I examine these broader themes to understand what kind of promises are being made through the planning system, even by

planning academics themselves. The connecting tissue between the themes is there are promissory statements made about what urban planning or cities can (and cannot) do. The outline of the literature review is as follows.

I start by summarising what has already been said about **digital engagement platforms**. Much of this research is design-oriented, aimed at improving the public participation process and experience, therefore fitting quite neatly into an interventionalist line of reasoning. While I approach my research from a different conceptual angle, it is still necessary to review how planning and urban scholars position these platforms, as they make important promises themselves.

I then examine the **democratic ethos in planning** (Bond, 2019; Inch, 2015; Mouffe, 1997), by way of extending my arguments in the opening chapter of the thesis. A core promise of planning governance and participatory processes is ensuring community voices are heard in plan-making and urban development (Knaps et al., 2024). However, neoliberal planning present a challenge to the democratic virtues of planning (Gunder, 2010; Zanotto, 2020). Thus, this section sets the scene for the contested politics of planning and participation that I engage with for the remainder of the literature review and throughout the analysis.

Then, the following sections will investigate the three key themes I explore in my empirical chapters (Chapter 4 to 6). First, I review the **care-full cities agenda** (Jon, 2020a; Power & Williams, 2020; Wiesel et al., 2020), which emerged as a response to neoliberal capitalism and its 'ruins' (Tsing, 2012) on democratic participation (Tronto, 2013) and peoples' 'right to the city' (Harvey, 2003; Lefebvre, 2008; Marcuse, 2009). Drawing on Tronto & Fisher's (1990) definition of care, which is "everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible" (p. 40), these studies view care as a conceptual tool for understanding how urban infrastructures affect people through complex and often unequal social relations (Gabauer et al., 2021; Power &

Mee, 2020; Saltiel, 2021; Williams, 2020), while others examine care as a set of principles to plan better (Binet et al., 2023; Bond & Barth, 2020; Fainstein, 2011).

The next set of themes I explore is **the role of digital technology in cities.** The prevalence of digital platform technology in cities has garnered the attention of urban researchers (Barns, 2020; M. Graham, 2020; Iveson & Maalsen, 2019; Leszczynski, 2020; Stehlin et al., 2020; Tagliaro et al., 2025; Törnberg & Söderström, 2025), particularly in housing and real estate (Faxon et al., 2024; Ferreri & Sanyal, 2022; Fields & Rogers, 2021; Rogers et al., 2024; Wallace et al., 2025), who are concerned about the role of digital technology in advancing unequal power structures and exacerbating harms (Boeing, 2020; Maalsen et al., 2021; Wolifson et al., 2024). Whereas careful planning is framed as potential intervention among planning and urban theorists, digital technologies have been the object of scrutiny. Designed to 'disrupt' sectors and practices considered slow and outdated (White et al., 2024), critical scholars argue these technologies instead streamline profit-driven financialised processes, where the increased benefits go to the companies and landlords using the technology (McElroy, 2023, 2024; McElroy & Vergerio, 2022; Porter et al., 2019; Sadowski, 2020b). The review of the digital technology literature suggests digital technologies have been a failed intervention in housing and planning, a broken promise, where ideology (of technological disruption) and outcomes conflict (Boland et al., 2022; Pham, 2024; Potts et al., 2024).

Finally, I examine **values in cities**, including housing and real estate value that shape how cities are imagined and developed (D'Avella, 2019; Harvey, 2007; Logan & Molotch, 2007; McFarlane, 2023), as well as the contested public value in planning (Healey, 2018). In housing studies, it is recognised there are not just economic values shaping cities, but a combination of financial and cultural values that often compete against each other depending on the different actors at play (Maalsen et al., 2024; McAuliffe & Rogers, 2018; Robin, 2022;

Troy et al., 2024). However, emerging calls to change urban assumptions of value (Lake, 2024; Streule, 2023) suggest value is changeable, although it is unclear in whose favour, and might remain equally contested (Metzger & Wiberg, 2018).

In each of these sections, I highlight the contribution of anthropological theory to the debates in urban and planning research and the empirical gaps, which the thesis addresses. The empirical gap is a robust and critical look at the promises that digital engagement platforms make (i.e., going beyond the design-led research). While urban and planning research tends to focus on improving these technologies for better public input, critical perspectives on digital engagement in planning remain limited, particularly compared to emerging critiques of PropTech in housing and real estate.

Another key finding from the literature review is a moral imperative throughout these conceptual interventions becomes apparent (see Wachs, 2017). Planning promises are imbued in questions of morality (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2022). As a sector, planning defines what good and bad practice is, to dispel the 'bad' and pursue the 'good' (Lennon & Fox-Rogers, 2017). The literature I examine in this chapter either pushes forward and contributes to definitions of 'good' planning or analyses it as a research object in planning politics. The literature therefore sits within one of two lines on inquiry: 1) as an intervention in planning theory and practice, or 2) as the object of inquiry itself. They either propose planning promises, or they critique it, respectively. The supplementary gap in this literature review, and one that transitions into the methodology chapter, is understanding digital engagement platforms as a cultural subject. Table 2.1 below summarises the planning promises I identify in the literature review and the research gaps I address in the following empirical analysis chapters (Chapter 4 to 6).

Table 2.1

Planning Promises in the Literature and Research Gaps

Planning Promise	Key Points of Discussion	Research Gap
Care-full planning	Understanding urban infrastructures and governance through care lens exposes inequalities and non-caring regimes.	An interrogation of the definition of care that industry practitioners apply in their work and how they use it to justify their work and professional roles.
Technological 'disruption'	Criticism on digital technology for uploading, changing, or exacerbating existing problems and unequal power relations.	An examination of the technological and economic logics of scale in platforms (not just rentier capitalism), and the impacts of scale on some of the core planning virtues of democracy and community.
Values shaping planning and real estate	The housing, real estate, and planning sectors are made up of competing value systems. The inherent differences in values inform urban politics.	An understanding of how some values merge (such as economic and democratic values) in digital engagement, and the new political statements being told through this hybrid value system.

Note: The table highlights the key debates within each of the 'planning promises' I investigate and the contributions I make in Chapters 4 to 6.

Looking beyond design-led research

New technologies in planning like digital engagement platforms are interesting products of political promises, especially in planning reform discourse as it often makes claim to innovation and newness (see Maalsen, 2022; McGuirk et al., 2022; Tironi, 2020). As a result, digital engagement platforms are a rich site to understand contemporary and emerging planning politics and ideas and practices of democracy (Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2021b). However, research on digital technology used for public participation in planning has largely been explored through a design lens (Anaafo & Appiah Takyi, 2021; Hudson-Smith &

Shakeri, 2022) and as such, this line of research has been interested in measuring the impact or success of certain digital technology in streamlining and simplifying the public participation process for both the community users and the industry practitioners delivering public engagement (Gonçalves et al., 2024; Thompson & Zadow, 2009; Wilson et al., 2019). Even critical studies of digital engagement platforms aim to understand "the organizational conditions for the successful adoption and implementation" (Kleinhans et al., 2022, p. 770) of these technologies. In particular, they look at how digital engagement platforms can be designed better to promote democratic planning principles, such as transparency (Kleinhans et al., 2022), equity and inclusivity (Akers, 2022; Williamson & Ruming, 2020), and community empowerment (Galassi et al., 2021).

While it has been recommended by planning researchers that planners need to be conscious of the limitations of digital engagement platforms in genuinely improving dialogue with communities (Gower et al., 2023), the critique remains within the confines of how well or not these platforms achieve democracy. In fact, the planning literature tends to position digital engagement technologies as an 'opportunity' to improve public participation practices and democratic values (Lieven et al., 2021; Webster & Leleux, 2018). Therefore, much of the planning research is 'testing' these opportunities, with the assumption that the purpose of engagement technologies is to reinforce planning democracy. In a study on the strengths and limitations of digital engagement platforms, Tseng et al. (2024) suggests that while their research is not necessarily design-led, they state platforms create siloes of information and communication channels, as well as potentially opening up democracy once the wider public can access it. Although these authors take on more of an agnostic stance (in terms of design outcomes), their research still comments on the bounds and effectiveness of digital engagement platforms. Because there is an assumed benchmark for what digital engagement platforms should be, their research speaks primarily to the design-led literature.

Building on these studies, my research moves beyond uncovering solutions for digital engagement platforms. Like Sadowski (2021), I am interested in the ideologies and dreams or visions behind these digital technologies that have claimed to do so much for planning governance. As I introduced in the previous chapter, digital engagement platforms were part of the political 'promises' (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2022) made by certain planning authorities (such as planners, developers, and PropTech companies) about improving democracy in planning processes. These platforms are an integral part of planning politics, especially in the UK where it gained immense popularity among engagement practitioners during a crisis in public distrust (Falco & Kleinhans, 2018; Grosvenor, 2019). Yet, these platform technologies are not scrutinised nearly in the same way as other forms of digital technology in the housing and planning literature (Potts et al., 2024), despite making bold promissory claims about planning principles like justice, fairness, equity, and democracy. Without critically dissecting how these promises emerge and evolve, research on digital engagement technology risks getting caught up in its own promises and moral assumptions, which many design-led research tends to fall into (Abram, 2016).

The following literature review is therefore structured around the politics of planning, the promises, and the 'powerful ideas' driving it (Davy, 2020). It speaks to a body of a literature that reflects on how and why certain planning processes, activities, and logics exist and what promises are being made and delivered, the most prominent one being the planning system's ability (and necessity) to build social cohesion and reinforce democracy. This is the first set of planning promises I shall examine.

Democratic virtues and urban governance

Urban planning and development have been theorised in urban studies as a medium through which to produce democratic, fair, inclusive places, from Henri Lefebvre's (2008)

'right to the city' where he calls on civilians to take matters into their own hands, to Richard Sennett's (2005) 'open city' that embraces urban complexity and connection (Harvey, 2003; Marcuse, 2009; McCann, 2002). As an integral part of the planning process, public participation, in particular, has been deemed a useful research site to explore better and more inclusive urban governance (Legacy et al., 2012, 2014; Parker & Street, 2018), including ways to "maximise" co-creation practices and its potential to "bring about positive change" (Carpenter et al., 2021, p. 1906).

However, a significant portion of the literature on urban social cohesion is dedicated to debates on how best to deliver democracy. At the crux of planning democracy is a politics of difference in "shared space", of otherness and strangers or strangeness, which Amin (2006) argues can be mobilised "for common gain and against harm and want" (Amin, 2006, p. 1021). Much of the literature on urban governance carry the assumption that urban places engender oppositional politics, of people vying for space and sense of place (Harvey, 2007; Sassen, 2003), and that boundaries between people, in terms of ethnic, race, class, gender differences, are the reasons for urban discontent (Amin, 2006). Therefore, the decision-making processes and planning structures that liberal and social democratic countries especially utilise to deal with these population differences, tend to align with their democratic values, these ideas of equality, justice and fairness, and freedom of speech (Baiocchi & Ganuza Fernández, 2017).

But how do planning and development professionals within urban democracies exactly practice these principles? The debates about how to 'do' democracy in urban planning has predominantly been between two schools of thought: communicative action (or consensus building) (Habermas, 2007) and agonistic politics (Mouffe, 2013). Habermas' (2007) communicative action was particularly influential in planning theory because of this assumed politics of difference, which accepts an antagonistic urban politics where public

consensus is reached through difference and ‘rational’ debate. The digital engagement technology literature tends to support Habermas’ ideas of building consensus among the public and securing mutual agreements between stakeholders (Gower et al., 2023). Conversely, Mouffe (2013) argues communicative action remains exclusionary, combative, and non-reciprocal. Instead, Mouffe proposes an agonistic politics, which relies on oppositional actors to mutually respect one another and trust in the democratic principles of ‘liberty and equality’.

Interestingly, Mouffe shares Habermas’ idea that politics is a rational process, in which everybody must believe in and cooperate in the system. However, she posits there are multiple hegemonies that exist simultaneously (the pluralisation of hegemony) that are not necessarily in competition with each other, as Habermas’ communicative action would otherwise argue. The ‘democratic ideal’ is acknowledging that “people are multiple but also divided” (Mouffe, 2013, p. xiv). Agonistic politics allows the public to reshape the planning agenda rather than coming to a ‘compromise’ as one would with consensus-building (Mouat et al., 2013).

For Rydin and Natarajan (2016), public participation is concerned with how ideas about places manifest within individual participants and group settings, and even through objects. They argue engagement results that are derived from public consultations are a collective knowledge of the group of people involved in a “generalised” consensus (p. 1244). It is a collaborative and somewhat contingent process as it depends on who is involved and the social dynamics in the room.

Yet, debates for and against antagonistic or agonistic politics is perhaps not as fruitful in practice, as Bond (2011, 2019) suggests because, for either framework, without the necessary critical inquiry into power, hegemony, and knowledge, they are both susceptible to reproducing inequitable political and power relations (McGuirk, 2001). Moving beyond the

antagonistic-agonistic debate, Bond (2011) argues that urban democracies must feature in practice reflexive thinking about the processes and logics behind decision-making structures, be open to alternative and perhaps hegemonically disruptive outcomes, and driven by community participants. Rather than Mouffe's 'democratic ideal', Bond (2011) suggests embracing a "democratic ethos" that takes on whatever planning governance framework, even if piecemeal, that makes sense to the specific context. Planning participation can be both consensus-building and antagonistic and should be able to move between both (Legacy, 2017a). Seeing it this way makes visible the informal spaces (e.g., community groups) in which local organising takes place (Cooke & Kothari, 2007; Legacy et al., 2019).

In addition, embracing debate, difference, and affect/passion (non-rational), might be difficult to facilitate in practice (Healey, 2006; Inch, 2015). Inch (2015) states missing are suggestions for how to allow productive 'difference' to foster in systems where decisions and therefore agreement must be made. Practitioners and active publics attempt to participate in this spirit, but what it usually culminates in is a diffused version of communicative or agonistic democracy, limited by the various policy and legal and resourcing parameters, least of all simply the appetite or interest in debate and participating in planning matters (Inch, 2015).

As a result, Inch (2015) states both communicative and agonistic forms of democracy ask a lot from the public who want to exercise their 'democratic right' to participate in planning issues. It requires time to understand the planning system and effort to organise and campaign or contact the local authorities or community leaders (Inch, 2015). The lack of public trust and frustration towards developers and local planning authorities can be attributed to poor procedural structures in place that ensure democratic participation in planning is possible (Inch, 2015).

In all of this, communicative and agonistic urban politics debate what "constitutes legitimate political behaviour" (Inch, 2015, p. 409), which is, in other words, defining what planning processes are acceptable or not. However, it is quite messy pursuing these ideals. In fact, planning theory tends to look like a continuum, planning ideals and guidance build upon each other over time, rather than sitting in clear distinct boxes (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010). Van Wymeersch et al. (2019) state participatory planning processes accommodate contradictory 'realities' of democracy, often simultaneously at work. The "over-ontologising" of planning participation in academia takes away the "actually existing" reality of the planning system and the structural avenues through which these democratic ideas unfold and materialise (Van Wymeersch et al., 2019). Planning should be less about which kind of democracy should be promoted through planning research and theory, and more about the "complexities and ambivalences of actually existing participatory planning processes" (Van Wymeersch et al., 2019, p. 360).

Also, it is important to critique these promises given that, as Gunder (2010) argues, Habermas' communicative action theory emerged from the neoliberal and 'globalised' thinking of the time, which "sought to promise fantasies of harmony, security and above all—enjoyment—within the cities and populations for which planning provides both hope and discipline" (p. 309). In this way, planning became an effective vessel for neoliberalism, but done in the guise of democracy, progress, and growth, which I shall now examine.

Neoliberalism and the effect on democratic virtues

Some of the major assumptions of neoliberal planning include exercising ones' democratic rights through the 'market' and that competition brings out the best in urban development and design (Baeten, 2012; Brenner et al., 2010a; Gunder, 2010). Its major promise was to make reality the "utopian transcendent ideals of sustainability, progress, and

betterment" (Gunder, 2010, p. 308) but primarily through market logics. The paradox of neoliberalism is "the neoliberal project is incompatible with democracy, but it has to come to terms with it in order to be deployed" (Tulumello, 2016, p. 199; also Taşan-Kok, 2012); put simply, neoliberalism claims democracy and as a result has created a logic around it.

One of the main criticisms of neoliberal planning is that it ends up keeping certain actors in business, legitimised through public discourse and especially through Habermas' communicative action (Purcell, 2009). Neoliberal planners cement neoliberalism as the "dominant 'common sense', so that market competition—creating a 'business-friendly' climate—comes to be seen as *necessary* (and even the only) value in decision-making" (Purcell, 2009, p. 143). Purcell (2009) argues the focus on collaboration and community consensus is a way of obscuring the neoliberal market forces at play. In fact, 'bottom-up' communicative planning empowers neoliberal agents and motives (Roy, 2015), used by key stakeholders as an ideological device to get what they want, rather than to genuinely consider communities' voices (Bengs, 2005).

But, while there is this hegemonic quality to it (Purcell, 2009), neoliberalism works through planning through various "strategies of legitimation" (Davoudi et al., 2020, p. 30) including planning policy, regulation and governance processes. The presentation of neoliberalism is not always so neat or absolute, though. Private sector corporations, for instance, play an increasing role in the planning system (Sager, 2011; Stone et al., 2018). Through loopholes like 'market-led' or 'unsolicited' evaluation frameworks, developers directly submit proposals to politicians (Gibson et al., 2023; Stone et al., 2018). Guided by the neoliberal assumption that market-driven enterprise produces better (more competitively priced and efficient) results, these practices fail to fulfil the values of competition and choice anyway (Stone et al., 2018). Using neoliberal ideals to pave way for this, Stone et al. (2018)

argue developers instead attempt to bypass public engagement, an essential aspect of planning democracy.

The new focus on economic performance in auditing is another way neoliberalism works through the planning system, but this time it undermines both the democratic virtues of a planning democracy and technocratic nature of government planning (Schatz & Rogers, 2016). Schatz and Rogers (2016) describe strategic and regulatory planning policies as a combination of technocratic, participatory, and market-centric planning governance processes, which clash in practice. Another example of neoliberal planning is the marketisation of planning processes like public participation through the consultancy model, which not only gate-keeps public participation expertise (Barry & Legacy, 2023) but also favours market gain and control, undermining the planning virtues of democracy, equity (Gibson et al., 2023). Public engagement is highly valued by planners and developers from a commercial perspective as it tends to fast track the planning application process if the public appears to have already been consulted or are on board with the plans (Olesen, 2014).

Rather than treating public participation as a practice of local democracy, practitioners (and especially consultants) take advantage of this planning requirement by marketising the "specialised" knowledge they purport to have (Barry & Legacy, 2023). In fact, communities are often seen as threats to property development and economic growth particularly in cities because any objections generally happen at the statutory public consultation phase (Ruming & Gurran, 2014). Community consultation therefore becomes part of risk management that only certain consultants are qualified to handle. In addition, peak industry bodies like the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) function as a 'legitimising' tool, not just for democratic legitimacy (Zakhour, 2020), but also legitimacy for the very existence of participation consultants (Barry & Legacy, 2023). Barry and Legacy (2023) explain because the IAP2 is widely accepted and followed by the industry, certification and membership offer

almost a ‘stamp of approval’, further adding legitimacy to a consultancy’s credentials. But it also gate-keeps public participation training, guidance, and code of practice through its exclusive membership.

In these examples, neoliberalism does not necessarily take over planning governance but changes aspects of it through piecemeal adoption across government (McGuirk, 2005). Over time and in different planning contexts, this creates “variegated neoliberalisation” (Brenner et al., 2010, p. 206). Rather than strict belief in markets and the “hollowing-out” of government (McGuirk, 2005, p. 64), McGuirk states neoliberalism in the NSW strategic planning context takes shape as a “hybrid form of governance in which state capacity endures rather than dissolves” (2005, p. 60). These hybrid forms of urban governance rather “leverages state monopoly power and abjures market competition” and advances “high-level public–private coordination, technical and financial expertise and confidential deal-making over major urban projects” (Gibson et al., 2023, p. 183). Government and private enterprise form a private alliance, not just to avoid normal channels of the planning process, but also to maintain better control and oversight over planning outcomes (Gibson et al., 2023).

This has resulted in alternative forms of governance led by communities and industry professionals, who have taken issues into their own hands, because of the failed promises of (neoliberal) planning. McAuliffe & Rogers (2018), for example, document how citizens (public, government, private sector actors) find ways outside of formal planning processes to get what they want out of urban development, including protesting or deal-making. They can also engage in informal and informal structures in planning—government, private sector, and community—the boundaries between which are not so structured (Rogers, 2016). Public participation is a political arena for challenging normative urban governance. Legacy and Van Den Nouwelant (2015) similarly follow a collection of community groups from across the inner-west suburbs in Sydney who came together to muster approval for a cycling

infrastructure plan called the Green Way. The authors define this type of community action *guerrilla governance*, the "legitimised agitation from beyond government" (Legacy & Van den Nouwelant, 2015, p. 209) by using various pathways, including policy, lobbying efforts, and campaigning to increase political traction. Guerrilla governance emerged because planning channels did not work for the community members. Collectively, as the 'Friends of the Greenway', they managed to get local Councils, community and industry stakeholders, and government agencies involved to finally oversee the construction and completion phase of the cycling infrastructure.

To summarise the sections thus far, the literature on social cohesion and planning democracy looks at ways of improving participation, primarily among planning theorists who reinforce planning promises of democracy, taking on an interventionalist agenda. Conversely, criticisms on neoliberal planning challenge the genuineness of these promises and showcases how the neoliberal promise manifests in different ways through cities but has also failed to deliver one of the key tenets of its promise: the democratic ethos and with it, ideas of equality, fairness, justice, and so on. Instead, in this system, community groups have had to organise themselves, which is arguably one of the key mechanisms of neoliberalism (Muehlebach, 2012).

Many of these debates consider how well or not planning fulfils its promises to deliver fairer, more just places for people. While I briefly touched upon alternative ways that industry and civilian actors have navigated the planning system to get their own needs met, through or beyond the neoliberal system, in the next section, I will explore in more depth the alternative promises set out by academics (such as the care agenda) and industry professionals in planning and property (technological scale and values). The following three sections in the literature correspond to the main ideas I examine in the empirical analysis chapters (Chapters 4 to 6). Returning to Gunder's (2010) statement on neoliberal planning as

being largely shaped by the dominant political values at the time, he asks at the end of the article:

> What new ideological positions are evolving for planning as 'recovery' from the current global economic recession takes global capitalism onto new twists and ideological turns? What will be the future ideology of space, and will it continue to be articulated by the planning discipline? (Gunder, 2010, p. 309)

In the next section, I examine care as an emerging ideology of space from the failings of neoliberalism (Tronto, 2013). As a new framework for understanding cities, the care agenda has been promised to be a better way of informing urban design and planning policy.

The care-full cities agenda

Improving urban infrastructure and democracy

The care agenda in cities has been proposed by human geographers as both an intervention, a theory through which to improve human and more-than-human livelihoods in cities (Binet et al., 2023; Davoudi & Ormerod, 2025), as well as a conceptual framework for understanding cities (Williams, 2020). By seeing cities as places of care, or infrastructures of care, the ways in which places serve and underserve people, and therefore how inequality unfolds can be better understood (Power & Mee, 2020). The care-full cities agenda in urban planning and policy advocates for the promise of improvement and betterment. By applying the care lens ethics to urban planning and design, cities can help its inhabitants (human and more than human) *thrive,* and repair damages caused by neoliberal and extractive forms of planning and development (Brugère, 2020; Casalini, 2020). Care is a response to the destruction caused by neoliberal policies and a reimagination of a planning future that is just and equitable (Held, 2006; Jupp, 2023; Tronto, 2013; Wiesel et al., 2020).

One such framework is ‘care infrastructures’ (Power & Mee, 2020), which looks at the organisation and distribution of care across space and between individuals and institutions. Sometimes care exists in subtle and subversive ways, taking place beyond or between dominant structures, coined by Power et al. (2022) as the *shadow care infrastructures*. These are the connections of care that are informal or ad-hoc; they are not necessarily designed, regulated, or maintained by government or private institutions, and they are often grassroots or individually constructed (Power et al., 2022; Wiesel et al., 2025). Williams (2020), for instance, explores care in the everyday management practices of a local women’s library. By shining light on mundane moments, like the placement of a chair by a collection of books on domestic violence and trauma, Williams (2020) argues care flourishes in unexpected ways and, by accentuating these existing ‘shadow’ infrastructures, the author argues academics can trace how care is facilitated and (re)produced in cities.

Others have investigated existing practices and policies through a care framework to measure how *care-full* they are, from national policymaking (Martino et al., 2020), to informal and formal community organising (Alam & Houston, 2020), to social housing (Power & Bergan, 2019), and climate change adaptation strategies (Bond & Barth, 2020). In these studies, care ethics highlight the potential of urban planning, governance, and infrastructures to not only help maintain and repair the world in which we live (Power & Williams, 2020) but create ‘just cities’ that promote equitable social wellbeing and opportunities (Fainstein, 2011). There is also evidence of communities creating ‘caring cities’ through commons (Kussy et al., 2023), not simply as a response to the effects of neoliberalism, but with focus on crisis management (Sanchez, 2023).

Care is not without its limitations, though; it can also cause inadvertent injustice or harm and non-care. For example, when care is distributed and granted discriminately, offering care to some and not others (Power & Mee, 2019), or when care is set up to do good on the

surface (rhetorically or politically), but behind closed doors, produces harm (Flanagan, 2018). Certain "care-full" practices can indeed "degrade care, or promote forms of neglect" (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017, p. 55).

Tronto (2017) warns too many researchers assume that neoliberalism is the 'reality' in which care exists or prevails. She argues there is an urgent need to change our critical academic frameworks. She states the meanings of choice, freedom, and the rights of individuals in democracies that have defined neoliberalism for so long (Harvey, 2005) must be deconstructed. What is ironic, is that these neoliberal values can only exist if there is an equal distribution of care, which she calls the 'caring democracy' (Tronto, 2013), yet marketisation and competition do not allow for this. In a neoliberal regime, people can choose to help others, or they can manage their affairs within their family unit; it is not the government's role to intervene and provide care (Harvey, 2005). So, how can democracy function if care is discriminatory and unequally distributed? Tronto (2016) asks, how is a neoliberal state ever a free and fair state? Instead, she proposes a *caring democracy:* the equal distribution of care across society, including creating the circumstances in which caregivers can provide care and care-recipients are able to receive it (Tronto, 2013). To combat neoliberalism, there must be a total overhaul of democracy (Purcell, 2009).

Care practices present new social and political connections between individuals and populations (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; McLean & Maalsen, 2021; Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017). It also reconfigures the power relations between actors, reversing extractive models of place-making that emphasise accumulation and growth (Lawson, 2007), and rather encourages co-designing places with people and more-than-human actors, which has inspired a new materialist and post-humanist stream in urban geography and planning theory (Alam & Houston, 2020; Jon, 2020b; Maalsen, 2023); although, Jon (2020b) argues that the *human* in

more-than-human relations remains central to a planning of care and justice because it is precisely empathy, a trait that tends to belong to humans, that makes caring possible.

In a similar vein to Tronto's (2013) caring democracy, Urban & Ward (2020) suggest that care theorists should move away from researching 'care work' and towards a moral and political theory of care that "places the considerations regarding care firmly in the public domain and incorporates care, vulnerability and interdependency into the concept of a 'normal' subject of politics" (Urban & Ward, 2020, p. 13). This study similarly examines the ethics of care, understanding how it is used to motivate institutional actors (planning authorities, developers, etc.) into making certain decisions for and about the public or, as I will argue in Chapter 4, for themselves, really. Urban and Ward (2020) argue there needs to be greater focus on the ethical dimensions of care, the rules around providing and accepting care (how it works in action), and ultimately, how it fits within and perhaps reinforces systems. Therefore, what is missing in the planning and urban studies literature on care ethics, which I have reviewed here, is a closer examination of how care ethics are interpreted and understood by the industry actors delivering 'careful planning' and how this shapes the type of products or built outcomes they present.

In addition, the care literature in urban and planning research focuses on infrastructures and processes because, in these contexts, care is viewed as a *relational* concept and practice (Alam & Houston, 2020; Bond & Barth, 2020), the notion that actors are brought into being by a multitude of systems and social relations (see Barad, 2007). Urban scholars of care have focused on the outcomes of care, and the urban structures through a care theory. My point of departure is to examine the care ethics of the people carrying out these care practices. To do this, I turn to the anthropology of ethics, in particular, the theories of moral economy, gift exchange and reciprocity to investigate the political motivations of

care, including how ethical arguments are made and ethical positions are interpreted (Muehlebach, 2012).

Anthropology of ethics, gifts, and exchange

Anthropological theory helps to break down how an ethics of care might work through the planning system. Care ethics is not simply a list of rules or a charter which people use to inform their behaviours, nor is it a 'feeling' or altruistic act of kindness, rather it is a political tool (Sahlins, 2017). My contribution in Chapter 4 is connecting the urban and planning theory of care-full cities with anthropological studies of ethics. Ethics exist in different kinds of exchange and relations between people, whether trading products (commerce) or favours, in which some exchanges are equal, while others are more exploitative. The degree to which we accept the type of reciprocity depends upon expectations about the relationship (Sahlins, 2017). It is precisely this feeling—of expectation—that contains within it a code of ethics (Fassin, 2012a; Laidlaw, 2014). What appears to be right or wrong comes from an ethical understanding of the world, and this becomes an important consideration for the ethics of care in planning given the virtuous statements made in careful planning frameworks about the industry's responsibility towards people and the planet (Wachs, 2017).

I start with exchange theory as it describes the different kinds of relationships and expectations of reciprocity. In *Stone Age Economics,* Sahlins (2017) introduces a typology of exchanges (Table 2.1), which vary by the kinds of expectations of reciprocity between actors, including forms of market exchange (trade), as well as gifting, which is usually considered altruistic. He proposes three main types of reciprocity found in exchange: 1) *generalised reciprocity*, giving without the guarantee of a return, but usually with a vague expectation for a return that is not defined by value or time (for example, offering a favour to a friend or

hosting a party); 2) *balanced reciprocity*, the immediate and direct return of the thing exchanged of equal value (imagine retail shopping or any other exchange of money for a product or service); and 3) *negative reciprocity,* engaging in an exchange with the aim of maximising a net gain by extracting something from the other (i.e., thieving or taking advantage of somebody).

Table 2.2

Sahlins' Typology of Exchange

Type	Reciprocal Exchange	Obligations
Generalised	Altruistic	No obligations
Balanced	Transactional	Mutual obligations
Negative	Exploitative	No obligations

Note: Adapted from Sahlins' (2017) exchange theory.

There are of course nuances in these types of reciprocity, such as what might appear to be *balanced* could be *negative*, depending on whether the 'value' is considered fair by both parties; balanced can also easily slip into exploitative or coercive territory. Further, values may change abruptly, so what is considered balanced is always up for negotiation. Graeber (2001) suggests replacing generalised, balanced, and negative reciprocity with 'open' versus 'closed' reciprocity to illustrate the fluidity of these exchanges and their corresponding obligations.

Malinowski (2002) importantly argued that gift-giving was not altruistic, as previously assumed, but served as a political tool that bound people together in unequal ways. Expanding on this, Marcel Mauss' (2004) seminal essay, *The Gift,* states the 'object' that is given is imbued with obligations. After receiving the gift, the beneficiary becomes engaged in a contract where they must either return the gift or its equivalent or pass it onto another person. In many cases, keeping the 'gift' would be immoral and consequential (Mauss, 2004, p. 15). Gifts establish new social ties. By accepting a gift, a person enters a network of

obligations, with certain expectations placed upon them. They are judged by how well they meet these expectations, which can then determine where they stand in relation to others. As Mauss famously says, there is no such thing as a 'free gift'.

I frame care ethics among practitioners as a sort of gift in planning bureaucracy. The exchange of it raises interesting questions about obligations in the planning sector and how care ethics are experienced or practiced. Of course, forms of care delivered by institutions, are not new, nor are they limited to planning. In fact, care ethics reflects broader politics, in which it is deployed to mobilise and compel people into doing things for others (and beyond themselves) (Hobart & Kneese, 2020), or as a subversive response to neoliberal exploitation, a grassroots effort to undo the impacts of capitalism (Tsing, 2012, 2021). Anthropologists have demonstrated how difficult it is to remove care ethics from neoliberal practices and seeing how care is fostered in neoliberal contexts can demonstrate the immense agency of people in shaping it, for good or bad.

For example, Koch and James (2022) research the role of 'advisors' in public and social services like immigration, social housing, and home loans, detailing how advisors must grapple with notions of deservedness and undeservedness when dealing with recipients, based on their own conceptions of social justice, while also managing the commercial imperatives of their organisations. In the social housing context, Wilde (2022) documents how care is compromised among local Councils who struggle to maintain both relations with landlords and adequate support to tenants. And, in the contrary, Andrea Muehlebach's (2012) ethnography about voluntarism in post-welfare Italy suggests that an ethics of care is cultivated through individuals by the state to reinforce neoliberal policies. In Muehlebach's research, ideas of selflessness and care among Socialist and Catholic volunteers is instituted by the government through schools and other state institutions to reinforce neoliberal policies, hinging on individual actors to deliver care and services to those in need.

While care has been examined in housing and planning policy and systems, there is notably an empirical gap on ethics. Chapter 4 will identify and define the ethics of care deployed by industry actors about digital engagement platforms and dwell on their sense of obligations and responsibilities as particular actors in the planning system (from private developers, Council planners, and PropTech companies). Specifically, I analyse the promise of delivering a more caring public participation process, for instance, how care ethics shaped planners and developers' (the clients of these platforms) narratives about digitalising planning democracy and their roles in delivering it. The research gap is a closer inspection of the care discourse and logic in planning practice and how it was used by certain actors in the planning system (Urban & Ward, 2020), rather than just a framework for planning practice. Who does careful planning serve and how does care unfold as a planning belief system?

It is crucial to remember that the definition of "good" is subjective in planning and urban design and can be selectively offered and done at the expense of certain people (Criado-Perez, 2019); care is not equally distributed. Therefore, who 'cares' and for what reasons are questions that should be the forefront of a critical assessment of urban planning (Sennett, 2018). From communicative action and agonism to care-full cities, these are ideological statements about how cities should function and be managed; they make arguments about fairness and equality.

The care literature in planning and urban research is about improving and bettering the industry, a response to failed promises of neoliberal planning, whereas the anthropology of ethics frames care as something that is integral to the political relations between industry actors and the public whom they serve. Anthropology problematises the care ethics and morality that undergirds planning and participation principles. In this light, care can be understood as an ideological framework that was formed to 'correct' neoliberal failings in the planning (Shepherd et al., 2020), development and housing sectors. It was a collective

movement and therefore a politics of changing the way urban planning and design were practiced and researched, to examine the spaces in which care could flourish and re-conceptualise cities as caring places. But positionality is important; knowing which actors are delivering care or purporting care in their practice can be revealing about other political structures (for example, Muehlebach, 2012), as well as why care ethics are being used or displayed.

But, whilst the care agenda sought political change through the urban and planning academic disciplines, another response was digital technology, this time driven by industry. As I stated at the beginning of the chapter, much of the research on digital engagement platforms studies the effectiveness of these platforms, so the next section highlights the critical research on digital technology in cities.

Technological 'disruption' and scale in cities

Reinforcing, exacerbating, and transforming harms

Digital disruption seeks to streamline processes in planning and housing, to improve efficiency and built environment outcomes (Barns, 2020). Targeted at landlords, agents, property investors, and developers, these technologies 'upload' the same processes and logics onto a different medium (Fields, 2024; Rogers, 2017), and as a result, helps consolidate their power and capital (Fields & Rogers, 2021; Rogers et al., 2024). Although there are cases of digital technologies facilitating informal structures of care and variegated forms of social cohesion and democracy (McLean & Maalsen, 2021) or reinforcing other social and cultural values (Frost, 2020), critical urbanism researchers are wary of the impact of the extractive logics underlying the function of these technologies (Ahmed & Hammarstedt, 2008; Maalsen et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2024; White, 2024). A key concern has been its capacity to

exacerbate existing extractive housing financialisation models by streamlining practices that create unequal power relations, causing further harm (Maalsen et al., 2021).

Real estate platform technologies are also capable of changing real estate industry beyond the "bricks and mortar" construction, including venture capital investment firms who influence real estate development and speculation 'at a distance' (Fields & Rogers, 2021). The increased degree of separation transforms the relationships between actors—it becomes transactional and measured by financial metrics (Fields, 2022)—as well as paving new wasy of understanding and valuing land (Shaw, 2020b). Platforms control a lot yet remain unaccountable as it can be simultaneously embedded and dis-embedded (Graham, 2020; Sadowski, 2020a; Srnicek, 2024).

Barns (2020) argue platforms can fundamentally change the way we do city governance, how we manage city services, and conceptualise the ownership of city space. Considering the history of rentier capitalism and other extractive logics behind platform technologies, these digital tools are more than just about extracting value, but it is also a space to exercise dominion over (Sadowski, 2021). Perhaps the most pernicious of these technologies are the digital platforms that draw on rentier capitalism (Christophers, 2020; Sadowski, 2020b). These platform technologies significantly change the planning landscape by transforming social and economic relations and power dynamics (Porter et al., 2019). But how do they do this? What are the mechanisms behind these technologies? It is primarily to do with monopolised control over data (Rogers et al., 2024).

Monopoly appears to be a key feature to both rent (housing) and platform capitalism (control of data) (Christophers, 2020; Sadowski, 2019, 2020b). Srnicek (2019) describes how the current state and future of digital platforms are closely linked to the recent history of capitalism, namely the 1970s downturn, the boom and bust of the 1990s, and the 2008 crisis. In the 'informational age', data is a valuable resource, and platforms have become the perfect

apparatus from which to extract it (p. 90). It relies on *network effects*, which means "the more people who use the platform, the more valuable the platform becomes for everyone else" (Srnicek, 2019, p. 45). Platforms profit off this because people equate to data, which companies will purchase for advertising and market research activities. Data has become such a valuable resource that companies are monopolising their platforms across different sectors to gain access to new types of data, from monitoring people's health to driving; it is no longer just through social media, but data can now be tracked and gathered from all other aspects of life with digital technology (Srnicek, 2019). Sadowski (2020a) calls digital platforms "a ubiquitous renter that endeavours to insert itself into spaces, things, and interactions—especially ones that were not previously subject to rentier relations—in order to control access and capture value" (Sadowski, 2020a, p. 564).

Digital planning is slightly different from housing and real estate platforms, though. It is less about capital and extraction, and more about streamlining decision-making and bureaucratic processes (Daniel et al., 2024). While private property and rentier platformism (Sadowski, 2020) is an obvious partnership—less so is how logics of extraction work through planning and urban governance processes. In public participation, Legacy et al. (2019) argues information and communications technology and public participation methods are devices of dominant planning governance and hegemony, predicated on consensus-building theory. As a result, any other form of public participation would be too disruptive to these structures. Really, these technologies are about the performance of disruption to indicate political change, but change very little at all (Boland et al., 2022). For example, in a critical study of digital engagement platforms, Tseng et al. (2024) argue these technologies enforce epistemic enclosures that restrict scale, object and temporality of urban knowledge, which lead to individualistic and aggregated democracy (a limitation). But, at the same time, it fosters epistemic opening for democracy when wider publics join to form collective knowledge.

Their research is one of the few that examines the promises of democracy inherent in digital engagement platforms, which I will return to in Chapter 5.

Some digital technologies have been found to reinforce racial prejudice about space through municipal redlining (Safransky, 2020). Importantly, by bringing it to attention, Safransky (2020) "re-politicize[s] data-driven analytics" (p. 202) that is too often posed as 'objective' devices for decision-making. Similarly, Potts et al. (2024) suggest digitalising planning does not produce more efficient or inclusive planning outcomes, but the opposite. Many urban and planning researchers promote the promise of "inclusion as the democratising impact of digital technologies" by nature of exploring how technologies could be used in planning (Potts et al., 2024, p. 2437). However, as we are in the midst of identity politics and online misinformation, digital engagement platforms make power and social relations more complex and the challenge of unifying people about issues more difficult resolve (Potts et al., 2024). Potts et al. (2024) argue that perhaps planning is supposed to be this way and trying to streamline or simplify it is a moot cause. Planning is a lengthy process precisely because populations, small or large, inevitably clash and so coming to a unified position, which almost always involves a degree of compromise from all parties, involves careful deliberation (Potts et al., 2024), the opposite of what these platforms promise to do. Indeed, the logics behind digital technologies tend to reflect the general ideologies and theories about the organisation of people and space in cities (Kitchin et al., 2016). Digital platforms represent the political relations of the people behind the development of these technologies, which Kitchen et al. (2016) calls the "complex socio-technical assemblages" (p. 93).

In digital technology and platforms, growth is also understood in terms of scale, the ability to expand and maximise revenue without increasing the cost of production too much (Seaver, 2021; Tsing, 2012). However, PropTech has not quite been explored in this way. Platforms have unique ability to scale because they can host many customers who can use it

at the same time, through the 'dashboard' (Srnicek, 2019). Indeed, revenue comes from gaining access to these platforms and data, hence the SaaS model. Scale is a defining characteristic of platform technology, but it is also a particular worldview that is about, as both Sadowski (2021) and Tsing (2012) argue, control and domination. Therefore, as a technological and economic logic, scale may be able to explain how growth and democracy are reconciled within the political and public discourse of digital engagement platforms (Chapter 1).

Scale as a worldview

Tsing (2012) argues technological and business scales have roots in colonialism, referencing European sugarcane plantations (in particular, the Portuguese in Brazil) that relied on African slave labour and experimented with "standardis[ing] and segregate[ing]" (p. 510) the cane sugar plant. Scale was fundamental to this enterprise, perhaps even the goal, of alienating both the slave labourers and the cane plant in pursuit of colonial (and capital) power and control, with further implications on colonialism, industrialisation, and big business (Tsing, 2012; see also Blomley, 2003; Rogers et al., 2025). Scale creates products or processes that can "expand without changing" (Tsing, 2012, p. 507). This kind of expansion is primarily about quantity. For example, the production of more products or more customers using a particular service, yet the product or service itself remains the same. Like rentier platforms, scale has a fixation on economic growth and extraction.

Tsing (2012) argues the key component of technological and business scale is that it is an extraction tool, to glean out an optimised and "perfectly nested" form that can be replicated repeatedly. When this happens, the thing gets stripped out of its world and becomes a 'non-social element' (Tsing, 2012). However, certain things that are contingent upon 'transformative relationships' cannot be scaled as successfully (Tsing, 2012). She uses the

example of the matsutake mushroom, which grows only in the ruins of space, making it impossible to cultivate and produce at scale (Tsing, 2012). Matsutake mushrooms rely on the surrounding nutrients and organisms, without which it cannot survive (Tsing, 2021). So, the only way to produce the mushroom at scale is to replicate the same conditions, which, for the capitalist, would be too costly (Tsing, 2021).

Transformative relationships consist of the various actors and situations that can alter the course of something (Tsing, 2012). While scale requires uniformity, precision, and predictability, some things are impossible to scale, things that are so difficult to be reduced into a precise unit (Tsing, 2012). In Chapter 5, I examine the promise of scaling democracy using digital engagement platforms—the attempt to streamline, simplify and, in effect, "strip away" the transformative relationships that help maintain democratic engagement. The theory of scale (and non-scalability) is important to consider in the context of digital engagement as it makes similar promises of progress and efficiency, but potentially at the cost of democracy, which conversely requires these transformative relationships, contingencies, and diversity (Tsing, 2012).

Scale is itself a worldview or belief system that is culturally tied to people and place (Jones, 1998). Beyond the business and start-up world, scale is an abstract concept used to connect something small to something big (Jones, 1998). In more recent and critical geography scholarship, scale has been considered both as epistemology (how scale frames our understandings of the world) and ontology (how aspects of the world are objects of scale) (Jones, 1998). As epistemology, scale "is a representational trope, a way of framing political spatiality that in turn has material effects" (Jones, 1998, p. 27), while also "situated relationally within a community of readers who give the practice of scale meaning" (p. 26; see also Anderson, 2006; Cody, 2011; Cohen, 2013; Warner, 2010). This means scale is variable, used in different ways for different ends (Gal, 2019; McMaster & Sheppard, 2004).

In fact, people can merge seemingly conflicting logics of scale through process of de-correlation to make sense of the (sometimes contradictory) social context and situations, actions, behaviours, and relations with others (Seaver, 2021). Scale is considered a process or network with moving parts and sets of relations (Cox, 1998), and within this space, there are mutual obligations, duty, responsibility, etc. (Howitt, 2002). It creates an "ethical relation" between political agents (Howitt, 2002).

Having explored technological disruption in cities and scale as a framework for imagining and organising and people and places, missing is an in-depth exploration of the business logics of digital engagement platforms and its impact on public participation in planning. As I have laid out, much of the critical literature on PropTech is about extracting value from land and property, and less on public participation, which is central to the work of planners and property developers as a legal requirement for development proposals and applications. Therefore, the dynamic between digital platform suppliers and planning actors required to do public engagement is worth investigating, especially with regards to how the technology business logics intersect with the participation process and planning virtues of democracy (Barry & Legacy, 2023).

Digital engagement platforms work differently to real estate platforms; the former seeks to streamline planning bureaucracy, whereas the latter expediates financial accumulation strategies. Rentier capitalism and the resulting exacerbation of harms on people, although plays a part in digital engagement platforms, does not adequately address issues of democracy and decision-making, which are at the core of statutory public consultation. In Chapter 5, I go into more detail the role of scale in digital engagement platforms, not only to streamline planning processes like public participation, but also to expand planning democracy, at least conceptually to begin with. The scale logic plays a significant role in delivering this promise. However, like the matsutake mushroom, public

participation is difficult to scale because of other transformation relations (Tsing, 2012): the layers of governance and various interested parties involved (Chapter 5). I argue digital engagement platforms attempt to streamline one aspect of the statutory participation process (gathering, analysing, and reporting community feedback), but rather than scaling democracy (increasing democracy), they scaled the concept of community through data abstraction. This, I argue meant they could get more data and information out of the people with whom they engaged on the platforms but not necessarily improve the quality of engagement.

Tsing's (2012) theory of scale is important to consider here because it provides us with a case for how scale does not always work and why not (i.e., because of the transformative social relationships). In Chapter 5, I examine what was meant by scale in the digital engagement platform context and analyse whether their logics and promises of scale were fulfilled or not. The analysis chapter prompts a rethinking of planning terms like democracy and community in urban studies. With digital engagement platforms, scale was most concerned with increasing democracy, access, and equity in planning decision-making. However, scale is still a discursive and rhetorical device, a 'promise' of improving democracy, and as such, makes a moral statement about planning governance and participation: by using digital technology to scale public participation, it was framed by practitioners that more people (the public) would have access to local decision-making. Even scale, a business and technological logic applied to make planning more efficient, is immersed in a moral and political world. The final part of the literature review explores values principles in cities, the re-invention of which was the penultimate promise of digital engagement platforms.

The (re)production of values in cities

Housing, real estate, and planning (public) values

Housing, property, and land are objects through which values are established and contested (Lake, 2024; Maso et al., 2021; Rogers & McAuliffe, 2023; Spangler, 2020). In housing and real estate, in particular, economic values and developer logics are the dominant value system, where the privatisation and financialisation of land and property reign high, although this is not to say that other value systems do not persist and sometimes challenge them (Maalsen et al., 2024; McAuliffe & Rogers, 2019). Even still, among 'expert' planners and developers, their knowledge about real estate legitimises what is considered 'valuable' through a performance of financial logics, including calculating and predicting risk (Robin, 2022; Troy et al., 2024). Yet, as evidenced by neoliberal planning that was surveyed earlier in the chapter, these values, which we often think about as concrete and static objects, equally draw upon moral values of individuality and personal freedoms but through the channel of markets (Gunder, 2010; Harvey, 2005).

To resolve these conflicting values (i.e., economic and moral), McAuliffe & Rogers (2019) propose 'value pluralism', which recognises there are multiple "regimes of value" in cities, including how and where financial investment and government funding in development and planning are distributed, as well as the vision for a city (what is *important*)—such as health and wellbeing, sustainability and biodiversity, culture and arts, transport, and connectivity (see Amin, 2006; Friedmann, 2000). In a later study, Rogers and McAuliffe (2023) develop this idea further in the form of agonistic politics in which all values are equal and should (and must) conflict (see Mouffe, 2013; Wenman, 2013). Focusing on the Australian housing context, they identify three clusters of housing value: capitalist notions of property, land as having Indigenous significance, and the political discourse of

housing as a human right (Rogers & McAuliffe, 2023). However, they argue these forms of value are fundamentally different from each other and the politics of housing, as a result, lies exactly in the competitive 'tournament' of these values (Rogers & McAuliffe, 2023). Indeed, the housing industry often reflects the dominant values of the time (McAuliffe & Rogers, 2019).

The economic or financial value of housing fits under Graeber's (2001) general definition of value as housing that is quantified through actions (i.e., services) or objects (i.e., products) (Kockelman, 2010). However, *how much* 'value' is assigned to something like land and property involves a discernment of what it might mean to people and how it might be used, which is incredibly qualitative and subjective in nature, perhaps even *wishful* (or speculative). It relates to Graeber's (2001) definition of value, which I will explore in more detail shortly, as making actions and associated objects meaningful. How these values on land and property are established and negotiated across space by different sets of actors creates geographical differences in the way that places are (unevenly) developed (Harvey, 2007; Metzger & Wiberg, 2018).

In the planning context, however, there are many kinds of values, which similarly compete against each other; they are prioritised by what most needs to be addressed in the broader planning politics but responds more to the public given the political obligations of planners. Planning academics have spoken about it in terms of creating public value, mainly to do with meeting community needs and interests (Healey, 2022; Holman et al., 2018) and the potential conflicts around defining it (Herzog et al., 2024). Healey (2018) argues creating public value requires active discussion and debate among civil society. Public value is "what a 'public', a community of citizens in some form, have come to 'care about' collectively and seek to produce and sustain as qualities and resources available to them" (Healey, 2018, p.

66). The different types of public value include material value, social infrastructure, socio-cultural habits and potentialities, and governance capacity (Healey, 2022).

In the technology space, Barns (2020) calls for an ethics of public value, highlighting the planning sector's obligations to plan and develop in the public interest. Barns (2020) asks for new definition of public interest that is not about consumer rights and privacy and market competition, but "as one that balances the enduring value and appeal of networked sociality with the value extracted from our relational selves in support of machine-learning tools and interfaces" (p. 199). By this, Barns means using platforms to enhance communities, not extract from them.

In addition, public participation is about translating the public's values (as in what they consider important) into development or design decisions, making it relevant to the project proposals (Rydin & Natarajan, 2016). Rydin and Natarajan (2016) documents that what often appears to be emotional responses, for instance, are translated by practitioners into planning 'speech' during public consultation workshops. The emotional responses are things like memories, memories associated with a place, sense of affiliation or connection, or opinions about the design or function, which are not quite 'readable' or have technical meaning in the planning bureaucratic context. Therefore, through planning expertise and translation, the 'currency' of emotional engagement in this moment changes from one that has personal meaning to one that can be actioned in a planning framework. For example, people's yearning for, or lamentations toward certain buildings and places "had to be reframed in terms consistent with heritage and nature conservation" (Rydin & Natarajan, 2016, p. 1244). Here, public value is translated and qualified (not necessarily quantified) into a planning framework that can then be measured as evidence for a project proposal. Rydin and Natarajan's (2016) work will later prove to be prescient in the digital engagement context of gaining public consent and approval.

The literature on values in housing and planning indicates planning is closely tied to meaning making. While in housing and real estate, there are many types of value vying for dominance, planning values are mainly concerned with building 'public interest'. What is missing from the planning literature is a breakdown of what values means. Planning theorist Huw Thomas (2017) contends that academics in planning and urban studies tend to view the discipline with "specialised technical expertise" which is a "fundamental component of controlling entry to it" (p. 1), a misguided attempt to "divorce planning from politics" (p. 2). As I have done throughout this chapter for the other 'promises', I turn to social theory and anthropological perspectives to further conceptualise values in planning as part of a moral process, and point to the political implications of it, particularly in relation to meaning making (Kockelman, 2010). Value has to do with not only where funding and investment goes, but also what is deemed important, which is fundamentally a conceptual problem; it is an issue of meaning and definition (Graeber, 2001; Mazzucato, 2018).

Values and meaning making

From a social theory and anthropological perspective, much like care and scale, values are not only used to justify certain practices, but to see the world. Graeber (2001) defines value as the process and outcome of making actors and (their) actions *meaningful* and "doing so always, necessarily involves some sort of public recognition and comparison" (p. 76). Indeed, there is a *public*ness to values; it is socially learned and a shared concept, yet it is also deeply personal and individual. It also requires an audience to verify or qualify it and participate in its exchange, which means priorities and importance will always change and merge with whatever else is important at the time (McAuliffe & Rogers, 2019).

Values that exist more in the public domain (like notions of freedom or human rights, etc.), that typically have a political flair, often are questioned by different aspects of the

public, and in a democratic political system, at least ideologically, this contention should lead to public debate and processes of accountability and meeting consensus (Habermas, 2007). Like McAuliffe and Rogers' (2019) value pluralism, Graeber (2013) argues it is exactly the negotiation and transformation of these multiple and different "totalising claims" on value that defines political life and societal structures. Societies that have "more competing arenas" of value are more likely to "mak[e] much more ambitious claims, to personal commitment (faith) or to actually representing the ultimate truth or meaning of existence" (Graeber, 2013, p. 232). Graeber (2013) states values are "political move[s]…that will tend to be made in the context of competing claims of value" (p. 232).

Cultural understandings of values posit that monetary and moral values are different because the meaning that we assign to the thing that holds the value is different. In this way, an object can be both a symbol of high morality (or class and dignity) as well as financially valuable (Kockelman, 2010). What monetary and moral values have in common is some sort of reason behind it that makes an action or thing important and worthy (to desire, seek, and pursue, to perform, or to invest one's money and time in) (Graeber, 2001). Kockelman (2010) reconciles the issue of having the multiple and contradictory forms of values by arguing that through complex modes of meaning-making ('*interpretation'*), values become almost one in the same, representing each other. He states that with value systems, it is "never entirely clear whether morality or money, custom or emotion, has the upper hand" (Kockelman, 2010, p. 157), but it is a mixture of these things depending on the context and actors involved. The contingency of how values are formed are the "moments of valuation" (Souleles et al., 2023, p. 163), where new meanings for objects, services, or behaviours are negotiated.

There have also been debates on whether values are real or imagined. Graeber argues imagination certainly plays a role in realising (making real) values as it ends up creating an "all-embracing totality of some sort or another, a kind of universe" (Graeber, 2001, p. 226;

also Eiss & Pedersen, 2002). But it is not just culturally produced or relative to the actors and situations, there is something constant about certain objects, which give them human value (Simmel, 2011). Values are a culmination of the 'real' and imagined (Robbins, 1994). Still, there is a process of conceptualisation (of making objects valuable), which allow for variability, such as the different kinds of value attached to the same object and how an object might change in value over time (Kockelman; 2010; Simmel, 2011). Values are very much 'real', it exists beyond our minds and what we might perceive and must be taken seriously (Sayer, 2011). This is interesting and indeed *valuable* for planning theory, as it helps explain how planning values change over time and vary across industry actors. Tracing how industries like the planning system define 'value' is important for understanding the kind of politics (vision of democracy) being enacted. While defining public value and public interest is useful for planning research (particularly policy-led research), this too risks putting researchers down the line of pushing for a moral agenda, rather than investigating how these different values work, sometimes in contention with each other, as Rogers and McAuliffe (2023) notice in the Australian housing system.

In Chapter 6, I address this gap in the literature by examining the changing value systems driving digital engagement among planning industry professionals and organisations. I draw upon the notion that planning is a process that involves different layers of obligations, relations and (sometimes tacit) agreements that are "not vague desire, but explicit states of affairs implied by deeply held values" (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2022, p. 11). Chapter 6 examines what these values are.

Summary and the gaps in the literature

Throughout the literature review, I examine how promises have been articulated in urban and planning research as both an intervention and object of study. First, the

interventionalist, solutions-oriented approach to research involves informing change to industry knowledge, practice and policy. In particular, debates have examined ways of making the planning system more democratic, including considerations of who makes a 'public' and where they go to participate in a democracy (Habermas, 2007), but also how planning and its various mechanisms, such as public participation and digital engagement technology, could be improved.

A key finding of the literature review is that interventionalist researchers tend to make their own promissory statements and moral judgements through their assumptions about how the planning system should work, many of which purport ideological perspectives, such as the careful cities agenda in urban research. This includes research that make value statements about creating fair, just, and democratic planning processes. A key research gap I have highlighted is dismantling care ethics, drawing upon anthropological theory of ethics and gift exchange (Mauss, 2004; Sahlins, 2017) to better understand how industry actors deploy and conceptualise it in their practice. Chapter 4 thus addresses this gap.

In contrast to the care literature, critical studies of digital technology and values in cities interrogate the promises they make (Sadowski, 2021). Indeed, they allude to alternative solutions by nature of their critique. For example, the social harms exacerbated by digital technologies in housing and real estate (Maalsen et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2024) suggest current regulation and policy is failing people (Maharawal & McElroy, 2018); while in planning, too often financial values are prioritised over public value (Healey, 2022; McAuliffe & Rogers, 2019; Oulahen & Ventura, 2023a). In both areas of research, anthropological perspectives on industry and professional worldviews (Graeber, 2019; Ho, 2009; Holmes & Marcus, 2007) help explain how certain logics and belief systems emerge and diverge. Chapters 5 and 6 examine the scale logic and changing values systems in the digitalisation of public participation, respectively.

The overarching gap in the literature is therefore empirical research on the digitalisation of public participation through a cultural understanding of planning promises, i.e., looking beyond design- and policy-led research, and rather examining meanings and motivations. The emergence of digital engagement platforms in the statutory public participation process is an important moment for the planning system (Chapter 1) and has not been scrutinised in nearly the same way as critical research in real estate and housing (Fields & Rogers, 2021). Understanding the purpose and effects of digital engagement platforms therefore can give us crucial insight into the political narratives shaping the planning sector and why. By critically analysing planning promises in this way, it gives us a framework to better gauge how digital technologies are shaping the ways we imagine and practice urban democracy and public participation.

In addition, this gap offers methodological implications to planning theory and research: looking at the promises of digital engagement platforms as a 'cultural' object, as something that is informed and produced by social and political relations. By 'cultural', I mean the worldviews that industry practitioners, including the planners, developers, participation consultants, and digital technology companies involved in this study, deploy or realise through digital engagement platforms (Abram, 2016). What is missing is an in-depth understanding of the content or quality of the promises of digital engagement platforms and what it actually means for planning and participation—how did the emerging logics behind digital engagement platforms intersect with planning principles of democracy, social cohesion, and care, for instance?

While planning theorists and academics investigate planning in order to fix conflict, in doing so, they discount the meaning of the conflict itself (Abram, 2016). Gunder (2010) similarly states that planners are so "induced by the promise of the resolution of the identified deficiency, which the plan or expert's policy prescription appears to provide" (p. 308); they

are hypnotised by their own technocratic expertise and solutions. Instead, I propose a critical and self-reflexive reading of planning and participation, by viewing planning and participation as a site for various actors in civic society to define, challenge, and negotiate what is important to them currently and in the future.

As a result, public engagement and planning in a Western liberal democratic context is set up to not only uphold particular liberal democratic values, but it is also an arena in which morality—what we consider right and wrong—is reconsidered and reshaped (Angelo & Baiocchi, 2024). The literature review highlights a connection between planning and morality (Bickenbach et al., 2017), which perhaps has been avoided or unidentified because morality is tacitly and inherently embedded within planning theory (Wachs, 2017). By exposing the moral imperatives of planning—the methods for which I explore in the following chapter—we can fully come to terms with planning promises, whom it benefits, and whether or not these promises are fulfilled (Lennon & Fox-Rogers, 2017).

Therefore, this perspective positions planning not only as a vessel for political ideologies and beliefs, but an important player in the distribution of power and the reproduction of knowledge of city planning. Planning can be used politically to appease the public, conceal problems, or stall projects (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2022) and it is a tool that can be interpreted and wielded by actors in different ways. Understanding planning in this way therefore opens it up to more critical reflections on the very assumptions and hegemonic logics that prop up planning structures and institutions (Rogers, 2017). The next chapter walks through the methodological framework for understanding the planning promises of digital engagement platforms and the mixed qualitative methods involved in bringing it to light.

Chapter 3 | Understanding Promises Through Multi-Sited, Mixed Qualitative Methods

Chapter abstract

This chapter outlines the methods used in the mixed qualitative study. I begin by defining my theoretical framework drawing on the anthropology of planning and ethnographic theory to conceptualise planning as a cultural subject. Using the multi-sited ethnography approach (Marcus, 1995), I then identify three 'sites' from which to understand promises: the person, industry events, and documents. This informs the following methods I selected: semi-structured interviews, participant-observations, and discourse analysis, respectively. To close the chapter, I critically reflect on performance and 'expert' personas that significantly shaped the object of study, which was not the digital engagement platforms themselves but the promises being made about them, an important but subtle distinction I make throughout the thesis.

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Introduction: Deconstructing planning practices and logics

In the previous chapter, I explored the promises made in and through urbanism. On the one hand, scholars position the promise of planning as an interventionalist mechanism, to support alternative and new ways of conceptualising the planning system in efforts to make it *better*—for example, the debates on social cohesion and the care-full planning agenda. On the other hand, critical urban researchers interrogate these promises as an object of power and politics used by certain actors to shape a planning system that benefits them—i.e., neoliberal planning and PropTech. Research on digital engagement platforms tends to sit under the

former, and so the research gap I identify is a critical analysis of digital engagement platforms and the promises they make about democratic planning and communities.

Planning promises are a useful research site for understanding what exactly motivates industry practitioners, whether it is capital, democratic vision, notions of justice, and so on (Fainstein, 2011; Sassen, 2003; Sennett, 2017). Positioning planning practices and logics as promises in this way challenges the assumptions held within the planning discipline about how people and places *should be organised*. Given most research on digital engagement platforms implies a 'should' statement, the framework of promises suggests there is a moral imperative or moral argument being made, in which systemic planning processes are not matter of fact or 'natural', but they are value propositions about what is important, necessary and desirable.

This chapter will explain the theoretical framework I use to examine digital engagement platforms and its promises about democracy, which I conceptualise as an outcome of a hegemonic promise that runs throughout the planning industry, one that seeks to make urban development more *democratic*, *fair*, and *equitable* (see Chapter 1). Digital engagement platforms add a new critical dimension to this promise given its connection to a suite of other financial and business logics, namely, to do with scale, growth, expansion, and technological 'disruption' (White et al. 2024; Pham, 2024). Below is a reminder of the research questions I had set out to investigate:

- What kind of 'promises' do digital engagement platforms and the practitioners behind them offer?
- How do these 'promises' play out materially and subjectively?
- What are the implications to urban studies and planning theory?

In this chapter, I firstly describe the ontological framework within which my research presides. Drawing on the anthropology of planning (Abram, 2016), my thesis positions

planning as a site of cultural (re)production: i.e., planning itself is a product of culture. Yet, I recognise this is only one 'partial truth' in the broader fabric of 'reality', which might include other conceptions of planning. My ontological position is thus the following: research knowledge is context specific, framed around particular questions, sets of research tools, and actors or participants who end up shaping the project themselves. The thesis makes no universal claims about digital engagement platforms or planning promises in general. Rather it points to an outcome or phenomenon that arises out of these factors culminating in a particular time and place. I also draw upon ethnographic theory to capture the complexity and sometimes messiness of social and cultural phenomenon, which planning is not immune to. Specifically, the thesis offers a 'partial' view of the promises behind digital engagement platforms and planning more broadly.

To bring this ontology into the field, I next describe the multi-sited approach (Marcus, 1995) I employ to identify where planning promises were being made or expressed, which include the person, events, and documents. I analyse these sites as certain 'cultural texts' (Geertz, 1973). Because there was a performative aspect to these promises, I use the multiple 'sites' to examine what was being projected outward about digital engagement platforms, as well as perspectives from the people who developed and used it. This informs the mixed qualitative methods, outlined below, which includes semi-structured interviews, participant-observations, and discourse analysis. I close the chapter with a critical reflection on the methods, specifically on performance and 'expert' personas, and the methodological implications of researching planning experts as cultural agents (Abram, 2016). By understanding planning through this method, urban scholars can examine industry 'expertise' as part of a broader industry attempt at projecting a proposition and image of the world (Ho, 2009).

The anthropology of planning

Identifying the promises behind the digital engagement platforms requires a theoretical framework that acknowledges the cultural production of planning. The analysis contends that planning processes and tools reflect the worldviews of those delivering and using it and broader power relations (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2022). Indeed, the rationalities of planning are both powerful discursive repertoires and reflections of the contexts in which they unfold (Murdoch & Abram, 2017). As such, digital engagement platforms are examined as a 'cultural' site where knowledges about cities and placemaking are (re)produced. Specifically, it is a fruitful object of study for understanding the ideologies and beliefs of the professional actors responsible for these technologies.

Abram (2016) proposes an anthropology of planning, which sees planning as a precisely this dynamic cultural site "found at the very centre of the complex mess of technology, politics, culture and economics that creates our urban society and its physical presence" (Rydin, 2011, p. 2). Abram and Weszkalnys (2022) define planning as an "assemblage of activities, instruments, models, and regulations aimed at ordering society through a set of social and spatial techniques" (p. 3). Planning *as* culture can bring new insights into planning theory and research—for example, understandings of bodies, identity, belonging, and citizenship, temporality, and ownership shape how cities are developed and governed (Abram, 2014, 2016). A 'cultural' understanding of planning suggests that planning itself is a product of various economic, political, and social factors. Indeed, the ideas behind planning in the English and Australian contexts, such as fairness, justice, equity, and community, are embedded within and shaped by Western liberal democratic planning principles (see Chapter 1).

Planning promises are therefore part of planning 'culture' and politics (Grant, 2010), but it does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it is a part of political life and can reveal a lot about

who gets to make the decisions about cities. Planning represents peoples' desires for themselves and the future (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2022), as a marker of ambition and imaginative or utopian vision (Rutheiser, 1996), an expression of activism (D'Avella, 2019), or as a tool to wield state power over the production of urban space (Caldeira & Holston, 2007). Planning is more than just a set of technical structures (i.e., policies and regulation on land use and development); rather, these very structures are reflections of the logics among those who establish and implement them, whether they are economic, political or even guided by moral principles and belief systems (Rydin, 2003).

In addition, the cultural framework of planning practices offers nuanced analysis of digital engagement platforms, beyond the design-led research agenda (Fredericks & Foth, 2013; Galassi et al., 2021; Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2021b). Instead, this analysis locates and contextualises the promises of digital engagement platforms among the different industry practitioners involved in delivering these technologies.

Interestingly, in planning theory, research on ideologies similarly bring attention to the rhetorical or discursive power of the planning system (Davoudi et al., 2020; Rydin, 2003), as well as the complex belief systems that drive it (Gunder, 2010; Inch & Shepherd, 2020; Shepherd, 2018). Ideologies tend to be so inherent or deeply learned that it is often mistaken for 'truth' and goes undetected, requiring a 'trained eye' to apprehend it (Freeden, 1996, p. 6). The sustained impact of ideology, or its ability to become a taken-for-granted reality comes from resonating with the concerns, needs and desires shared by groups of people (Hall & Davies, 1983). Ideologies matter in planning politics "because they have the power to shape the terms by which political and social reality is understood, articulated, and (re)shaped through planning practices" (Shepherd et al., 2020, p. 5; also Harvey, 2016).

Therefore, planning ideologies can change over time; they can even "create logical incoherence which finds expression [for instance] in a fragmented policy framework"

(Shepherd, 2018, p. 510) or what Purcell (2009) calls "counter-projects" (p. 144)—the conflicting narratives found in planning. Because of this contested nature, planning is not an ideology itself, rather it is the institution through which ideologies are developed, expressed, and challenged (Shepherd et al., 2020). The anthropology of planning aligns well with this existing planning theory. It is these 'powerful ideas' (Davy, 2020), which I explored in Chapter 2, that drives planning, as both an "overarching justifier or legitimator of systemic processes and as something deeply involved in the micro and everyday management of governing" (Marshall, 2020, p. 21).

In Chapter 2, I also explored how forms of urban governance and democratic participation have changed over time, from a school of thought that saw debate and consensus as a productive and *good* thing for urban democracy (Habermas, 2007), to recent iterations of it that argues for respectful disagreement and embracing difference (Mouffe, 2013), to neither or both, or somewhere in between (Bond, 2011; Legacy, 2017b). These changes or fluctuations in logics suggest that planning is shapable and inextricable from not only people's ideologies, beliefs, and values, but the social, political, and economic logics and structures that equally mould it (Shepherd, 2018).

As a result of this variability, the analysis cannot offer a complete or totalising theory of digital engagement platforms or on planning promises, rather, the aim is to provide an empirical snapshot. The fieldwork is specific to the period 2021 to 2025 and looks only at the planning contexts of England and NSW. This, in effect, means the research sits within a political, economic, and social context or what I shall call 'ethnographic scope'.

Ethnographic scope and "partial truths"

Ethnography is typically known for its narrative style of writing, descriptions of characters and instances or plots from participant-observations. However, the stories and

objects told through ethnographies are specially selected (McGranahan, 2020). Ethnographies of planning, for example, tend to focus on the actors involved in planning and their experiences (Greed, 1994; Schoneboom et al., 2022). They also offer a broader look at how the different actors all fit in together within a scheme (Weszkalnys, 2022) or through urban outcomes and form over time (Harms, 2010). Following this logic and through my own mixed qualitative methods, the thesis tells a particular story of digital engagement platforms and the promises made by certain actors, from PropTech companies to private developers and Council planners. The thesis offers what Clifford (2023) calls the "partial truth" of digital engagement platforms, in which the data was captured through a particular theoretical framework (shaped by the research questions I had set out to explore) and collected from "an open-ended series of contingent, power laden encounters" (Clifford, 2023, p. 8). Using the metaphor of capturing a photograph, anthropologist Donna Haraway (1988) describes ethnography as "highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organising worlds" (p. 583).

This type of 'scopic' understanding of research and reality or 'truth' significantly shapes the modes of analysis of this study. For example, by focusing on planning promises, whether directly from key planning professionals themselves or expressed through documentation, the thesis describes a moment in time when planners and developers were grappling with the housing and cost-of-living crisis and mustering a 'solution' in the face of public scrutiny and distrust. Promises are therefore specific to this time and place, and the thesis is really an analysis of these sets of circumstances.

Yet, it is still part of a larger quilt about planning, participation, and digital technology; this larger quilt represents the many research outcomes and possibilities from different disciplines, methods, and ontological frameworks, which Haraway (1988) states are "the varied apparatuses of visual production" (p. 588). Researchers might look at the same

object (digital engagement platforms), but *what they see* and then *how they articulate it* to others can produce very different findings, despite it being the same thing to begin with (Haraway, 1988). In the world of "partial truths", multiple analyses of the same thing may exist and might even contradict each other. However, crucially, they do not negate each other; instead, they add to the overall story of a certain phenomenon and are equally valid and important (Haraway, 1988).

In this way, complete knowledge may never be accomplished. In any case, seeking complete knowledge is not the goal of this study. In fact, seeking it can hinder uncovering the partial truth and knowledge itself; what we are left with is a "fetishized perfect subject" (Haraway 1988, p. 586). Instead, knowledge is "the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions—of views from somewhere" (Haraway, 1988, p. 590). What we know is only a partial truth of reality and is brought together through connections and lines of narrative (Geertz, 1973; Ingold, 2021).

As such, it is worth briefly mentioning here my positionality as a PhD student, having worked in PropTech prior to undertaking this research, and my disciplinary background in anthropology. These factors inevitably shaped the set of questions and themes I set out to explore and the qualitative data I had access to. For example, as I will describe in more detail shortly in this chapter, anthropological theories of knowledge production, morality, and ethics, deeply informed my critical analysis of digital engagement platforms. My academic background was an opportunity to contribute an urban theory that drew on anthropological sensibilities in understanding city governance and engagement technology (Chapter 7).

Meanwhile, my professional experience in PropTech certainly exposed me to the industry and inspired my initial research proposal given I had firsthand experience working precisely in digital engagement in London, UK. This meant I also had access to professional

networks in the UK; though, for transparency, my interview recruitment strategy involved a 'passive snowball' effect by using social media posts to draw in possible interview participants or contacting public emails. While I had success attracting research interest in the UK, finding NSW-based interviews proved to be more challenging due to my smaller network, which is reflected in the uneven distribution of interviews (England: 15 interviews; NSW: 11 interviews) as outlined in Table 3.3. In addition, being a PhD student affected some interview dynamics and, as a result, the quality of data (which I explore at the end of the chapter under 'Performance and 'expert' personas').

While I draw upon ethnographic theory, I acknowledge the analysis is not (strictly speaking) an ethnographic account of digital engagement platforms, per se, rather it is an in-depth qualitative study of the *promises* being made through them. The social, legal, and physical boundaries set by planning institutions and businesses made it difficult to conduct a full ethnography of digital engagement platforms, for example, obtaining the behind-the-scenes observations of meetings among planners and developers about their digital engagement campaigns or observing how they navigated the platforms and created online surveys. Acknowledging the limitations of ethnography in this context, the analysis focuses on the 'promises' made by PropTech, planners, and developers: what they hoped to achieve, their vision for planning governance and public participation, as opposed to how these platforms were developed and used by clients daily.

Holmes and Marcus (2007) state the lack of access to these spaces does not mean ethnography or rich qualitative research of professional institutions are impossible. One way to do this is to refashion the method so that the research topic is not centred around *locality*, but around *local ideologies,* or the "illicit, marginal social thought" that takes place "within practices dominated by the technocratic ethos" (Holmes & Marcus, 2007, p. 237). Holmes and Marcus (2007) take this further by arguing that experts and professionals are capable of

critically interrogating their institutions and their roles within it, causing us to rethink the relations and power dynamics between researcher and researched. They call this the *para-ethnographic dimension*, whereby two social realities take place at once: the institutions themselves, and the individuals behind them who perform their own analysis and interpretations of their institutions (Holmes and Marcus, 2007).

Expert participants' self-reflexiveness, however, should not always be seen as neutral or 'objective'. The information and data they provide should serve as a window into broader social and political issues (Ho, 2009). This research project examines what narratives are being told through planning promises and what it says about broader planning politics. Therefore, the analysis is organised by a series of moments captured from different perspectives that collectively creates a partial truth about digitalisation and public participation. In the next section, I shall introduce the multi-sited approach necessary for finding and recording the expressions of the digital engagement promises.

Multi-sitedness: Finding the 'promises'

If what we know is a partial snapshot of 'reality', and one way (among many) of understanding planning is through a cultural lens, then one way to study something like planning promises is seeing it as *cultural text* (Geertz, 1973). As such, the analysis offers another way "of seeing the city, of reading its text and finding an interpretive frame within which to locate the million and one surprises that confront us on the street" (Harvey, 1994, p.1)—the 'street' being a metaphor for how cities are experienced subjectively, or 'on the ground'. So, finding promises is not just analysing what is being overtly represented, but how they compare to other forms of representation that takes place more privately or spontaneously (King, 1996). In this section, I describe multi-sited research that advocates for

the textual reading of culture, which is found in many places. Marcus (1995) defines multi-sited research as being

> designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography. (Marcus, 1995, p. 105)

Inspired by Marcus' (1995) "follow the metaphor", the analysis looks at the places in which planning promises show up, such as documents (participation guidance, policy papers, websites), industry conferences and events, and the people directly involved in delivering digital engagement. The method speaks to the partiality of ethnography that I outlined earlier. However, by looking at the same object (promises) from multiple sites, I bring these insights together for a more holistic or well-rounded analysis.

Burrell (2009) similarly defines the field site as a network, which may include physical, virtual, and imagined spaces, but are all connected by the topic or social phenomena that the researcher is undertaking. This format acknowledges cultures are "increasingly in circulation" (Marcus, 1998, p. 5). It is also not always a tangible object. For ideologies, belief systems, and dreams and desires, for instance, finding where these intangible objects exist is important:

> When the thing traced is within the realm of discourse and modes of thought, then the circulation of signs and symbols, and metaphors guides the design of ethnography. This mode involves trying to trace the social correlates and groundings of associations that are most clearly alive in language use and print or visual media. (Marcus, 1995, p. 108)

Therefore, as a research method, multi-sitedness allows us to understand how meanings about a concept might vary between actors and their roles within a planning system, and how it might transform materially. The three 'sites' I identify where planning promises are expressed are: 1) through the person, 2) at planning industry events, and 3) through websites and documents.

I was especially interested in comparing the large industry-wide promise with the personal interpretations and experiences of those behind these technologies. Tajbakhsh (2001) describes the personal interpretations and experiences as "the metaphoric and "imaginal" forms that are part of the symbolic "stuff" that form the experiential world of communities and individuals" (p. 28). That being said, my research exposes the possible tensions between what is represented in public-facing forums or material such as webinars and documents, and the 'behind the scenes' moments at one-to-one interviews or industry networking. Indeed, Marcus (1998) argues contradictions are emblematic of social and cultural phenomena. It would be misguided to expect that the promises of planning are uniform across people and sectors or even consistent within a person.

Therefore, I capture planning promises in three ways: 1) by interviewing the planning, participation, and technology professionals involved in digital engagement; 2) by participating in and observing industry events on planning, participation, or real estate and development; and 3) by analysing document artifacts (Riles, 2006) for common themes and rhetoric about digital engagement, including websites, policy papers, guidance, and reports. Table 3.1 below summarises the multi-sited methods rationale.

Table 3.1

Multi-Sited Methods for Finding the Promises

Sites where planning promises are expressed	Sites where planning promises can be captured empirically	Suitable method
Person	Interviewing the planning, participation, and technology professionals involved in digital engagement	Semi-structured interviews
Industry	Participating in and observing industry events on planning, participation, or real estate and development	Participant observations
Discourse	Analysing document artifacts for common themes and rhetoric about digital engagement, including websites, policy papers, guidance, and reports	Document analysis

Note: The research methods were designed to follow the planning promises.

Each method is defined and bounded by different limitations in expression. For example, documents and websites do not necessarily represent the values, beliefs, and ideas of professionals who wrote it represent it, the same for industry events where the professionals attending wore their 'work hats', and so, what they said could have been coloured by the interests of their organisations or sectors. However, each method presents a unique angle, and together, the resulting data tells a story about the planning promises made about digital engagement platforms. Table 3.2 provides a complete summary of the methods.

Table 3.2

Summary of Methods

Method	Description	Number	Purpose
Interviews	Conducted semi-structured interviews with planning, participation, and digital technology professionals who had experience in using or developing	26 in-depth interviews, each 1 hour long	• To understand the priorities, motivations, and beliefs of the professionals involved in digital engagement technologies

Method	Description	Number	Purpose
	digital engagement tools and platforms		• To understand their opinions and perspectives about digital engagement platform's impact on, possibilities for, and challenges to the planning system and urban democracy
Participant observations	Conducted participant-observations of planning industry events, including conferences, networking events, workshops, and online webinars	12 events, ranging from 1-2-hour workshops or online events to full-day conferences over multiple days	• To understand sector priorities, political agendas, and business logics set by dominant industry actors in professional settings
Discourse analysis	Conducted a discourse analysis of digital engagement platform websites, White Papers and policy reform proposals, and public engagement guidance documents	17 digital engagement platform websites, including 100+ webpages across the websites and 500+ pieces of individual data 11 industry reports (published between 2019-2024) 26 policy papers (published between 2001-2025) 16 legislation and regulation (until 2025)	• To understand the broader political and business rhetoric and priorities written by various planning bodies/organisations represented in their 'official' documentation

Note: The mixed qualitative methods used in the study, including the type of data gathered and purpose.

As a final note before moving onto the methods. In terms of the geographic location, my study is not an exact 'like-for-like' comparison between the English and NSW planning

contexts. Rather, these sites serve as contextual framing for digital engagement platforms. While they have different planning and property development politics, they also have similar planning processes, with public consultation as a statutory requirement for plans and certain development proposals and applications, as I mentioned in the Introduction (Chapter 1). In both places, digital engagement platforms were also commonly used, although the level of financial investment and, again, the politics around it differed slightly. Throughout the analysis, I avoid making comparative statements about the two countries because of the limits of my data and the ethnographic approach I outlined above. Instead, I draw upon the similarities of the planning governance structures and the Western liberal democratic values that both contexts widely exhibit and represent. In the next section, I shall walk through each of the methods I used to build this story.

Semi-structured interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with planning practitioners who were either directly working on digital engagement projects in their public consultation, had worked on them in the past, or were considered industry 'experts' on participation, planning, and digitalisation. These participants included Council planners, State (NSW) and Central Government (England), digital engagement platform companies, planning consultants, architects, developers, and community engagement officers (see Table 3.3 for the full list). The purpose of the interviews was to understand their subjective opinions and experiences using or developing digital engagement platforms, how they felt about the promises in the public and political discourse, how these might have differed with their own perspectives, and if they reconciled possible discrepancies between the promise and practice of digital engagement.

Table 3.3

Interview Participants

Name	Role/Job Title	Sector
PropTech 1A	Director	PropTech
PropTech 1B	Client services director	PropTech
PropTech 1C	Strategic planning and policy manager	PropTech
PropTech 1D	Head of community engagement	PropTech
PropTech 1E	CEO and co-founder	PropTech
PropTech 2A	Business development manager	PropTech
PropTech 2B	Software designer	PropTech
PropTech 2C	Founder	PropTech
PropTech 2D	Sales lead	PropTech
Planner 1A	Senior planning engagement officer	Public service
Planner 1B	Planning officer	Public service
Planner 1C	Principal planning officer	Public service
Planner 1D	Engagement officer	Public service
Government 1A	Head of digital engagement	Public service
Government 2A	Senior engagement manager	Public service
Developer 1A	Head of public affairs	Property development
Developer 1B	Head of engagement	Property development
Developer 1C	Business and partnerships lead	Property development
Developer 2A	Engagement specialist in strategic planning	Property development
Consultant 1A	Founder	Consulting
Consultant 1B	Founder	Consulting
Consultant 2A	Town planner	Consulting
Consultant 2B	Urban planner	Consulting
Consultant 2C	Director	Consulting
Consultant 2D	Head of engagement	Consulting
Housing Provider 2A	Communities manager	Social housing

Note: Participants are referred to by 'Name' in the thesis. 1=UK-based participants, 2=Australia-based participants.

Almost all the interviews were conducted via Zoom video-calling because the best time for my participants was usually during their work hours. One interview was conducted at a coffee shop in the participant's office building because they said they were "sick of online meetings". But, for the most part, the online interviews were done out of convenience

for my participants, who were familiar and most comfortable with video-calling platforms. In a way, I mimicked the communication channels they were already using in their regular work lives.

The interviews followed a list of prepared questions. However, each interview in practice varied slightly in its the wording, the order of questions, and the type of follow-up questions, hence the semi-structured nature of the method. Because the questions were set up to be open-ended, how the interviews proceeded depended on the answers given by the interviewees (Wengraf, 2001). The semi-structured interview method offers more flexibility for both researcher and interviewee (Ahlin, 2019) and was especially important for this research project on planning promises given the many possible stances and perspectives of the practitioners.

For example, while some clients of the platforms started off speaking positively about their digital engagement projects, introducing themselves and the type of work they did, when they reflected on their own projects or the digital platforms they used, several of them were critical, at times they were even frustrated with the technologies or the other sectors with whom they worked, despite actively working on these projects and promoting it at industry events. Getting to these more conflicted responses required flexibility during the interview to allow the interviewees time to ponder, process, and meander towards a thoughtful answer (Wengraf, 2001). Sometimes it meant letting the participants ‘go off on tangents’ from the initial question, which proved to be incredibly important because all the “tangential stuff” (i.e., context that they would provide) in between their ‘actual answer’ said much about their perspectives and feelings towards their projects, fellow industry partners, and the larger planning system. As a result, the questions were designed to be broad so that the interviewees could set their own narratives, and by using follow-up questions, I could ask for details when needed.

Doing this required being aware of body language and quickly interpreting whether participants wanted to divulge or needed more time to express themselves (Danelo, 2017). Despite being online, I could still look out for facial expressions, sighs, and pauses, and tried to take advantage of these moments to understand what they were thinking, as opposed to what they might have prepared to say. In fact, two of my interview participants asked me to send them the interview questions beforehand. So, it was important that the interviews offered some flexibility to avoid the professional participants simply regurgitating their company lines (see Beckmann & Hall, 2013). Although, documenting the 'company line' in and of itself was relevant to the study of promises, I wanted to keep the interview open for other possible stances.

In addition, I went into this project with the assumption that industry practitioners were more than their professional roles, that they had personal political affiliations and experiences that informed their work practices and choices and potentially these things had to be reconciled (Kaufman, 2017). In a sense, through these semi-structured interviews, I sought to create a 'focused' conversation, where they were free to answer in their own way and go 'off-topic' if they wanted. However, this did not always turn out positively, an example of which I will discuss later in the 'Performance and expert personas' section in this chapter.

The process of analysis I took was three-part, and a similar approach was applied to the other qualitative methods. First, I took notes during the interviews, noting the main points of their answers as well as any recurring themes, and how they responded to certain questions. These initial notes formed 'scratch-notes' (Sanjek, 1990), the thin descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of what they stated verbatim and how they reacted during the interview. After the meetings, I typed up descriptive, analytical, and methodological notes, also known as 'memos' (Glaser, 1978; Wengraf, 2001). These were thicker descriptions (Geertz, 1973)

about the context and what they might have meant in relation to other themes, any statements made by other interviewees, or events that I attended.

Participant observations

The next component of the mixed qualitative methods was participant observations of industry events, including conferences, networking events, workshops, seminars or panel sessions, and townhall meetings, with some of the shorter seminars held online. Table 3.4 on the next page is a complete list of the events I attended. The purpose of participant observations was to understand the more official messages that were made about public participation and digital technologies in these professional contexts; to understand their vision for digital engagement platforms and the type of democracy or planning system they envisioned. The events were carefully prepared, presented, and even scripted in some cases like the presentations or speeches, and so they revealed a great deal about the worldviews industry practitioners wanted to project to the world (Oberhuber & Krzyzanowski, 2009). I paid particular attention to the messages and narratives being presented, prioritised or even 'celebrated', as the potential (and eventual) promises made about digital engagement.

Participant-observation also allows the researcher to immerse themselves in the (professional) worlds in which they study (Ingold, 2014; Latour, 1987; Tedlock, 1991). In the case of this research, it was the world of planning, public participation, and housing. Importantly, I gained a view on the broader discourse and rhetoric around digital engagement in planning, including understanding what the 'conventional wisdom' was and the position that industry partners generally took. Following the news and social media (primarily LinkedIn and Twitter/X) also kept me up to date with any industry announcements; being a participant-observer also meant being informed and part of the professional planning sphere. However, this content was not used as part of data collection or analysis, but to supplement

participant observations by keeping track of events. In ethnographic methods, being informed about current affairs helps the researcher become immersed in the field (Lewis & Russell, 2011).

Table 3.4

Participant Observations

Name	Event Type	Duration	Participants
Event 1A	Webinar	2 hours	Council planners and engagement officers, central government, and PropTech
Event 1B	Webinar	2 hours	Council planners and engagement officers, property developers, and PropTech
Event 1C	Webinar	1.5 hours	Council planners and engagement officers, central government, and PropTech
Event 1D	Webinar	1 hour	Council planners and engagement officers, central government, and PropTech
Event 2A	Conference (industry)	1 day	Property developers, planning consultants, PropTech, Councils, and central government
Event 2B	Conference (industry)	3 days	Council planners, planning consultants, and developers
Event 2C	Conference (industry)	5 days	Council planners, State policymakers, property developers, consultants, urban designers, and academics
Event 2D	Conference (academic)	4 days	Academics and practitioners in planning, housing, urbanism, and design
Event 3A	Workshop	3 hours	Council planners, planning consultants, and developers
Event 3B	Workshop	2.5 hours	State government and Council planners, planning consultants, architects, and designers
Event 4A	Panel discussion	2 hours	Consultants, developers, community housing providers, Councils, and academics
Event 5A	Town hall event	2 hours	Open to the public; speakers included local politicians, non-profit company, academics, and property developers

Note: Numbers correspond to the event type, e.g., 1=webinar, 2=conference, and so on.

I followed a similar process of fieldnote taking in participant observations as my interviews where I wrote down any key information from the observations and then when I made it home, I wrote more extensive notes about recurring statements and themes, and reflections on positionality at the event. Slightly different from my interview scratch notes, though, this type of notetaking is called 'continuous narratives or description' which allows the researcher to digest and comprehend the events that happened (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015); whereas the initial notes were observations of the site itself, including how people generally behaved and moved around, the mood of the venue, and what was being said (especially in the presentations or speeches), capturing the "event in progress" (Sanjek, 2015, p. 138).

Discourse analysis

Finally, moving away from the human encounters in my fieldwork, I conducted a discourse analysis of websites, policy papers, plans, reports, and legislation and regulation. The definition of discourse analysis I follow is concerned with "the social meanings inhering in language forms and their relationship to social formations, identity, relations of power, beliefs, and ideologies" (Farnell & Graham, 2015, p. 474; also Fairclough, 2009; Lakoff & Johnson, 2011). In the analysis, I position documents and industry 'artifacts' as projections of the worldviews held by certain industry actors (Fairclough, 2009; Riles, 2006). This is not to say they are perfect projections or even "instruments of bureaucratic organizations, but rather are constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, and even the organizations themselves" (Hull, 2012, p. 253). The documents analysed in this study therefore shed light on the kind of promises made by sets of industry actors (Graham, 1993). Ideologies are "pressed into the service of hegemonic agendas" (Graham, 2011, p. 178), so industry documents served as key evidence of the promises set by

digital engagement companies. Table 3.5 below summarises the documents I examine and the role they each played in the research.

Table 3.5

Discourse Analysis

Type of Document	Purpose
Digital engagement platform websites	• To understand how digital engagement technology companies market themselves and therefore infer what they perceive is important for their business and to the public • To understand their broader vision of place and society • To understand the inherent political values around democracy and urban governance and digital technology's role in it, i.e., how it might improve and streamline planning democracy
Industry and government reports	• To understand the organisation's definition of 'community' and 'public' • To understand the role of digital technology and private sector in planning • To understand their definition of 'best-practice' public participation—what is their ideal planning democracy?
Policy papers	• To understand how governmental institutions frame perceived problems and their solutions for it. How do they justify potential solutions? What issues do they claim need solving in public participation and the planning system? What does this say about their political values or moral principles (e.g., emphasis on collectivism or individuality)?
Planning legislation, regulation, and guidance documents	• To understand the formal procedures and expectations for public participation in the planning system

Note: The research guidance and rationale I developed for the discourse analysis.

Websites became a rich source or 'site' from which to collect information and imagery on what digital engagement platforms promised to do. I selected the most prominent digital engagement platforms in the UK and Australia, the ones that were frequently used by the interview participants involved with the PropTech Engagement Fund or showed up in my search. I trawled through the websites, going through each of the tabs and webpages within the website and, in an Excel sheet, organized and indexed them by what I called 'cluster themes', which were broad topics such as 'scale and efficiency,' 'decision-making,' 'client

support,' 'community,' and more. In the write-up phase of the research, I found it was useful taking screenshots of the webpages as the text was sometimes accompanied by images or photographs or positioned within an infographic. The context of the text within a document or 'artifact' was equally important for documenting how the message was presented and how digital engagement platforms were 'sold' or advertised. Here, I analysed the language used to reference and represent digital engagement platforms, specifically how it was framed publicly for the planners, developers and other engagement practitioners delivering public participation targeted as potential clients. In essence, the methods were geared towards finding the 'powerful ideas' (Davy, 2020) being sold to planners and developers by PropTech companies, as well as the assumptions about planning governance driving planners and developers forward in their pursuit to digitalise public participation.

For the remaining documents—industry reports, policy papers, and legislation, regulation and guidance—I manually examined them and copied text excerpts into a Word document, where I annotated them using a similar memo note taking strategy as the other methods, highlighting recurring themes and how they related to other data (Bacchi, 2009). Much of these notes ended up becoming part of my analysis (Emerson et al., 2011). In fact, the content of all my memo notes—interviews, participation observations, discourse analysis—morphed into the analysis and write-up. As Jang (2020) notes, "description and analysis are heavily linked" (p. 62).

Collectively, the mixed qualitative methods described above formed a rich qualitative study of planning promises. Having laid out my theoretical framework and the methods used to research the promises of digital engagement platforms, I will now discuss the methodological implications of such a study to planning theory and research.

Performance and 'expert' personas

In this section, I reflect on performance and 'expert' personas of the built environment professionals involved in the study who were integral to understanding the promises of digital engagement platforms. The practitioners I interviewed and observed were relatively powerful people. They were industry thought leaders and 'decision-makers', with many carrying master's degrees, one interviewee had a PhD degree in planning, and were mostly mid to senior management level. Indeed, many of my participants were considered industry 'experts' in digital engagement themselves, speaking at conferences, panel discussions, and workshops themselves. This posed a challenge during interviews, to not take their opinions for granted and rather scrutinise their responses—which earlier I suggested was a strength of a cultural analysis of planning. The challenge was focusing on the promise of digital engagement platforms and not the technology itself, which is an important but subtle distinction. I wish to remind the reader, this research was not a design-led study about digital engagement platforms, but a critical analysis of them.

'Experts' are actors who have "developed skills in, semiotic-epistemic competence for, and attentional concern with, some sphere of practical activity" (Boyer, 2008, p. 39). But they are also cultural actors, who experience and shape the world as such and are just as susceptible to desire, doubt, anxiety, and conflict as any other civilian (Beckmann & Hall, 2013; Boyer, 2008). As I have reiterated throughout this chapter through the 'planning as culture' paradigm (Abram, 2016), 'expertise' is considered a reflection of the practitioners' experiences, worldviews, and broader structures or systems, or a combination of all these things.

But the purpose of the study was not to just recognise planning promises as an ideology or 'partial truth', rather it is to "situate and critique [it] in relation to other cultural models, histories, and voices" (Ho, 2009, p. 26); the purpose is to critically engage with

emerging planning and participation rhetoric. To reiterate, policies and bureaucracy such as public consultation are sites of cultural production as they standardise what makes good knowledge and practice through rituals like evidence building and documentation (Evans, 2016; Riles, 2006; Strathern, 2005). Planning promises and even 'expertise' are therefore performances; they are part of the planning ritual.

Another challenge, particularly in interviews, was discerning whether statements made by participants were genuine reflections about digital engagement platforms or 'professional' performances. For example, I experienced one difficult interview where it was not clear if the participant believed in some of the value principles of public participation (i.e., amplifying community voices), which she claimed was the reason she entered the sector. She contradicted herself several times and her general dismissiveness made her answers seem superficial. It was a very tough interview to get through as she came across as impatient, uninterested, and dismissive.

There were potentially a few reasons for this. One, given her 'high status' in the industry, she perhaps treated the interview as low-stakes or not important, and so was unmotivated or felt no urgency or obligation to cooperate in the interview with a potentially 'lower status' PhD student—indeed, I was "interviewing up" (Nader, 2018). She gave very brief answers and when I asked her to share some examples in a question about her digital engagement projects, she dismissed it, saying, "there are too many examples" (Consultant 2C, interview, October 20, 2023). So, it was tricky obtaining relevant or usable information for my research when she was unwilling to elaborate on her interview responses.

Second, the significance of planning value principles that underpins my research project might not have been held to the same degree by her. Or perhaps simply her long tenure in the industry meant she was less 'moved' or impacted by the political narratives created around it, such as themes of democracy, equity, justice, and so on. She had a very

matter-of-fact disposition and talked about digital engagement and participation from a strategic and project management perspective and appeared to be quite agnostic about participation and digital engagement tools. For example, she characterised digital engagement technologies as just another trend in public participation or device on the market. But this agnosticism came at odds with her opening statement about getting into public consultation because it "aligned with [her] values around empowering communities" (Consultant 2C, interview, October 20, 2023). Throughout the rest of the interview, this message was consistently contradicted, such as when I followed-up about what makes good engagement, she said it was about being able to "establish and meet participation objectives with clients" (Consultant 2C, interview, October 20, 2023). Her answer was very process-oriented: good engagement, for this participant, had nothing to do with community relations or improving public experience with the planning system.

Perhaps this reflects the consultancy sector, who are client oriented. Or it was possible this participant felt hesitant about expressing her opinions, values, political ideologies because she was uncomfortable—in fact, we had only met once at a conference before the interview, and it was quite brief. She might have been more comfortable with sharing her ideas with somebody else whom she knew better in the industry, or maybe had it been conducted in-person and over coffee, and not on Zoom, she might have been more open to my questions.

What this challenging interview demonstrated was that my research relies on the assumption that people have ideologies and value systems that inform how they approach their professional jobs. This is an example of what happens when the person being interviewed either does not have particularly strong ideological motivation or is unwilling to divulge them for whatever reason—indeed, the discrepancy between her answers demonstrated the professional performance was cracking. I will never know what this

participant truly thought and what her values and ideologies were; I cannot access her mind. In fact, I will never know completely what any of my participants truly believe besides understanding and contextualising the data they choose to give me. Of course, I could surmise if participants were comfortable, trusting, and candid, and therefore gather whether their accounts were good indicators for their beliefs and feelings. What makes qualitative research dynamic and *partial* is that one is constantly at the whims of how people choose to represent themselves to the researcher and to the world.

This prompts the question of whether the participants were genuine or not, and if they were reliable sources (Craig, 2020). Did the participants even believe in the words they said or even the promises they were making? Where it went slightly askew, this interview exposed the limits of this methodology, and generally of engaging with professionals as a research subject. But equally, in the context of my study, this did not matter so much, given I was analysing the promises and projected vision of planning and participation through digital engagement platforms. Did it matter whether participants believed in these promises, or was the fact these ideas existed prolifically in the planning world significant enough? The 'expert' personas that my participants portrayed were not empty shells, in fact, Haraway (1988) warns that you risk becoming a nihilistic researcher, where meaning is lost altogether, if people do not mean what they say. Rather, people can say and do things meaningfully and with the appropriate intention but *also* contradict themselves for whatever reason; you may not always know. This only adds to the complexity of planning as a subject of culture and the people who shape it.

Conclusion

To summarise, the theoretical framework behind this thesis places planning promises as a cultural phenomenon informed by political ideologies, value principles, social relations,

belief systems, and logics (Abram, 2016). By borrowing from the anthropological tradition of ethnography and its self-reflexive research sensibilities, the thesis hopes to make the familiar ideas of the planning promises 'strange' concepts (Clifford, 2023). The mixed multi-sited qualitative methods I apply helps us interrogate our assumptions about digital technology, public participation, and planning.

In the following chapters, digital engagement platforms are presented as a solution by industry practitioners to the political problem of public distrust in planning. But this argument and the need to regain the public trust must not be taken for granted, in fact critical planning academics have refuted the assumptions and logics behind this proposal who argue that focusing on digitalisation for the sake of 'streamlining' the planning system is a misguided attempt at addressing the housing crisis (Colenutt et al., 2021). In contrast to existing design-led research on digital engagement platforms that claim these technologies can improve democracy in planning (Anaafo & Appiah Takyi, 2021; Galassi et al., 2021; Oloonabadi & Baran, 2023; Wilson et al., 2019), this analysis aims to question the commonsense knowledge of planning and public participation and how it relates to liberal democratic values, or not. Industry expertise and professional systems bring worlds into being, and the sets of logics and processes they use to justify and legitimise their projects are tools for imagining and understanding the world (Ho, 2009).

Also, despite the shared external political message on, for example, increasing democracy through digital technology, the study investigates the experiences and reflections of practitioners on using engagement platforms compared to how it was imagined publicly. As I have reflected in this chapter, promises 'show up' as performances, and it prompts us to question, what was the real message here? In the following chapters, I investigate how planners and developers saw themselves in the broader planning context (through work obligations and a sense of responsibility in Chapter 4), how they reimagined planning

democracy (through scale models in Chapter 5), and how they envisioned a new value system that recognised the "value of" community voices as both an economic and social asset (Chapter 6). All these issues revolved around promises and conceptions of good and bad practice, being 'better' planning practitioners, and offering 'better' outcomes for communities.

Chapter 4 | "Do Good for Them": Care Ethics and Passive Reciprocity

Chapter abstract

In this chapter, I examine the promise of digital engagement platforms to improve public participation through an ethics of care. I begin by describing the sense of public distrust experienced by built environment practitioners in delivering public consultation, an industry-wide concern reflected in policy proposals and industry reports. To build public trust, practitioners developed an ethics of care centred on empathy, active listening, and demonstrating respect through more consistent communication. However, given the regulatory and institutional demands of delivering public participation, this offer to enhance the engagement experience, what I term a 'bureaucratic gift', was not entirely altruistic. Rather, it was motivated by the need to secure public consent or approval. Drawing on anthropological theories of gift exchange and moral economy (Graeber, 2001; Hann & Hart, 2011; Mauss, 2004; Sahlins, 2017), I describe this particular mode of care ethics as 'passive reciprocity', to highlight how the care extended intrinsically served the interests of practitioners.

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Introduction: Repairing public trust

> Public trust in the planning system and developers matters. It matters because great places improve quality of life in cities where population growth is bringing new pressures. It matters because great places—mixed urban neighbourhoods with new homes or commercial districts with new jobs—help attract and retain the talent our towns and cities need to thrive. And it matters because a lack of trust in the planning system is bad for democracy. (Grosvenor, 2019, p. 3)

The statement above appeared in an industry report by property development and investment firm, Grosvenor, entitled *Rebuilding Trust*. It was published in 2019 amidst several high-profile planning controversies in London, UK, some of which received global news coverage like the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017[1]. Other, more local controversies, such as the Brick Lane protests[2] and the redevelopment of Elephant and Castle shopping centre[3] raised concerns about the gentrification of long-term migrant communities and the erasure of their cultural heritage (Hancox, 2018; Sheridan, 2018; Wakeley, 2022). There were also lesser-known public campaigns against proposals like the Cockfosters housing development that was proposed to go on top of a carpark, to which neighbouring commuter residents objected[4].

Protests are usually a sign of a healthy and working democracy (Tarrow, 2011), integral to public participation, particularly conflict and consensus-building that inevitably

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[1] The final Inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire was published in September 2024, which found a complex 'web of blame' (Casciani, 2024). The issues related to these events ranged from austerity and government cuts in social housing, leading to things like the outsourcing of private firms (Hodkinson, 2019) and deregulation. These practices were based on the idea that 'red taping' was holding back necessary development (Casciani, 2024). It further inspired books on disaster capitalism (Preston, 2019) and planning negligence (Hodkinson, 2019).
[2] Campaigners lost the legal challenge in 2022 (Gregory, 2022) and again in July 2024 for an appeal about the way voting was conducted among Councillors at the Development Committee meeting, documented in the court case *The Spitalfields Historic Building Trust v London Borough of Tower Hamlets* (2023). Local planning regulations allowed for the decision of three Councillors to decide on the application outcome, in spite of the 7000+ community objections (Wakeley, 2022).
[3] The original proposals for the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre were rejected by the Council due to the lack of affordable housing, later described as a 'wrecking ball' on the local community and heritage (Sheridan, 2018). The amended proposals by the developer Delancey included 116 social rented units, which campaigners attempted to appeal at the High Court to reverse the development approval, but this time it was rejected. However, they did manage get Delancey to agree on providing affordable retail space, an established traders' panel, and trader reallocation funds of £634,700 and £200,000 (Elephant and Castle Town Centre, n.d.; Flynn, 2021).
[4] The development was eventually approved in September 2024 under a new Labour Government to meet housing targets (Taylor, 2024; Wright, 2024).

come from places of difference (Westwood & Williams, 2020), as examined in Chapter 2. Indeed, planning decisions should be a negotiation between different actors with different interests and stakes (Özdemir-Ulutaş & Tasan-Kok, 2019).

However, with increasing private rents, declining social housing development, and fewer people being able to get onto a ‘housing ladder’, researchers have documented a declining public trust towards the systems and authorities responsible for regulating and delivering housing as a service (Cowan & Morgan, 2009; Lehtonen & De Carlo, 2019; Tait, 2012), which, some argue has consequently delayed housing development further (Einstein et al., 2022) through the ‘power of delay’ (Einstein, 2020). As a result, political scrutiny has been targeted at the planning system and has raised questions on whether it supports housing development (Lund, 2016).

The publication of Grosvenor’s report was timely as planning and development practitioners were wrapping their heads around finding the best ways to deal with the distrust directed at them, not only through their planning and development proposals but also how to communicate them, which was phrased as ‘getting community buy-in’. Within the planning and development circles, public distrust was the number one concern, reflected in the statement below by a UK Council planner I interviewed:

> I think it's really important for us to tackle this [distrust] because it's—it's important to our cohesion, you know, as a nation, and the communities within it. It's really important to make sure as individuals and communities get what they need to [be] heard… but it's also fundamental to our whole society… We've got to be– we've got to be really careful [about the] lack of trust. (Planner 1B, interview, November 29, 2022)

In the report, Grosvenor conducted a survey with over 2,000 respondents from the public, where they found only 7% trusted local Councils acted in their best interest and 2% trusted developers acted in an honest way, both in relation to ‘large-scale development’ (Grosvenor, 2019, p. 4). One of the suggestions Grosvenor proposed was looking at how public consultations were conducted and whether current methods and channels were adequate (Grosvenor 2019, p. 14), mirroring MHCLG’s (2020) subsequent planning reform proposal. The report could be thought of as an industry ‘call to action’ and it became quite influential in the industry, as two of my interview participants directly referenced it when they talked about their own digital engagement work (PropTech 1D and Developer 1C). The PropTech manager who referenced the report set the context quite well for the sort of public distrust that shaped much of the discourse within public participation and digital engagement technology spheres. She said,

> There's significant lack of trust and transparency between the communities and local developers and planning departments of the council. It feels like the general consensus and what I take from these studies and reports is that communities almost think that developers and planning departments at Councils want to do things by stealth. It's almost like [the Councils]… don't want the community to contribute because they're not—they don't really want to know what they think… So it feels like that's the status. But that’s not what I experienced… I think the reality of it is—I think the developers and the councils do want to hear and they do want that early consultation. It's just that that’s really difficult to do and has been even more so the last couple of years [due to the COVID-19 pandemic]… But… the general consensus is that [public distrust] needs to be worked on. It’s a staggeringly high percentage; it's something like 92 per cent of the community do not have trust in their local planning. It's a terribly high statistic. (PropTech 1D, interview, March 3, 2022)

The state of planning politics meant that her job—a sentiment that was shared by other PropTech companies and practitioners, which I will elaborate further on in this chapter—was now to reverse this public perception, in this case through digital technologies. Targeted at "civic and industry leaders who want to restore public trust in placemaking and the planning system" (Grosvenor, 2019, p. 8), the Grosvenor report framed public distrust as an *opportunity* for planners, developers and other industry actors to adapt their practices to meet these new demands.

Interestingly, Grosvenor was probably the furthest away from your average 'public'. Grosvenor is named after the Grosvenor family, whose ancestry dates to Gilbert le Grosvenour who came to England with William the Conquerer (Grosvenor, 2025). The current Chair of the Trustees is the 7th Duke of Westminster, Hugh Grosvenor, who at the age of 25 years inherited £9 billion of the family fortune, avoiding an inheritance tax through a loophole in which assets were put into trusts and offshore funds (Garside, 2017). Since 1677, the Grosvenor family claim to have owned over 300 acres of property across London's wealthiest suburbs like Mayfair and Belgravia, which they manage under the Grosvenor Group (Grosvenor, 2024). So, their message about public interest and democracy in the report sits oddly against this background, one that is entrenched with classism, privilege, and inherited capital (Neate, 2023). Despite this, they advocate on their website for community needs and creating *thriving* places, funnily enough embracing some of the same core tenets of the caring ethos that has been advocated for in planning and infrastructure by scholars such as Power and Williams (2019). As I discussed in the previous chapter, how certain industry actors represent themselves outwardly through reports and other publicly accessible documents must be read critically.

As the vignette from the field above shows, promises made in planning should not be taken for granted. In this chapter, I dissect the definition of care in the digital engagement

context. I particularly focus on the planning practitioners’ motivations for digitalising public participation, whether they were Council planners or property developers in search of a digital engagement tool to assist them in their public participation. I explore care as the first political promise (the first out of the three promises in the thesis) of digital engagement platforms, the care promise being to improve the public participation experience and results by implementing an ethics of care.

Care ethics, the internalised rules around “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world” (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p. 40), helped practitioners tell narratives about the planning system and their roles in it, especially when it came to visions for improved urban democracy. Borrowing from the anthropological theory of gift exchange (Sahlins, 2017; Mauss, 2004) and reciprocity (Graeber, 2001, 2014; Sahlins, 2017), I describe their ethics of care as a form of ‘passive reciprocity’, because although care and restoring public trust was imperative to their mission, it was equally in their political and commercial interest to ‘improve’ public participation through these platforms. Framing their ethics of care as ‘passive reciprocity’ highlights the relationship breakdown between the public and decision-makers and the responsibility of practitioners to restore integrity and dignity the planning sector. Digital engagement platforms helped practitioners re-establish the social ties and obligations between industry and community actors. As a result, the practitioners’ ethics of care reinforced the planning governance structures between planning ‘authorities’ and community stakeholders.

Contributing to the literature of care infrastructures (Alam & Houston, 2020; Power et al., 2022; Power & Mee, 2020; Sanchez, 2023; Wiesel et al., 2025), which was reviewed in Chapter 2, I examine in detail how practitioners conceptualised and practiced care through the ‘infrastructure’ (see Power & Mee, 2020; Power et al. 2022) of public participation, and the sets of obligations, responsibilities and duty of care shaping their digital engagement

projects. I argue digital engagement platforms upheld and legitimised the care ethics that inform the value principles of public participation (IAP2, 2025), including 'doing good' for communities by communicating, listening, and showing them respect. To develop this argument, the next section in the analysis (The ethical practitioner) explicates what care ethics consisted of among the planners, developers, and PropTech companies involved in the study. Following that, I examine how practitioners viewed their professional roles and relations with the public with whom they consulted, often as a statutory requirement (Social ties and obligations). Finally, I make my theoretical contribution (The bureaucratic gift and passive reciprocity) in which I argue the community benefits created through digital engagement were ultimately self-serving to practitioners, in a passive but conditional 'gift' exchange.

The ethical practitioner

Drawing on data from interviews, participant observations and document analysis, this section will demonstrate that digital engagement platforms were a new medium for practitioners to exercise and demonstrate to the public their capacity to listen and act on public needs and demands and as a result reframe the narrative about themselves in the context of distrust, protest and crises. From the practitioner perspective (PropTech, Council planners, and developers), there were two ways they could care *better* through public participation using engagement platforms: first, by developing empathy and actively listening and second, showing respect to the public through clear communication of the decision-making process. These ethics were not particularly different from non-digital or more 'traditional' modes of engagement, which come from the same political planning framework that emphasise Western liberal democratic values (Dlabac et al., 2021; see Fainstein, 2011). However, situating the practitioner's ethics of care alongside the new digital medium gave

public participation a fresh light, a new slate. Digital engagement platforms represented a new solution to the trust and transparency issue. It distinguished itself from the “inefficient, opaque process” (MHCLG, 2020, p. 10) that was seemingly the cause of distrust and public protest. And it allowed planners and developers to paint themselves as ethical practitioners. The ethics that I will go through in this section are the expectations that practitioners put on themselves in their mission to improve planning democracy and repair public trust.

Empathy and active listening were concepts introduced to me by a civil servant who worked on the Development of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) PropTech Engagement Fund. DLUHC was responsible for planning for housing. In our interview, she talked about public distrust was the result of an industry failure to listen properly to citizens, echoing some of the development protests I mentioned earlier. In her experience, too few planners and developers recognised this; the assumption was the public opposed new development because they were either being difficult and refused to see change in their neighbourhood (NIMBYs), or they were ‘unknowledgeable’ and unaware of the benefits these new developments offered. Because of this distrust, a fissure between the public and planning practitioners formed, causing a collective apathy (at best) and trauma (at worst) amongst communities from the continuous frustration and disappointment with public engagement processes and outcomes. PropTech engagement company, Future Fox, who worked with a Council through this Fund, reinforced this message on their website: “Today, people feel locked out of planning decisions. Even if they engage in a planning consultation, they typically feel there was [sic] no point; they don’t feel heard” (The Future Fox, 2025).

The civil servant believed the planning sector needed a total cultural shift in the way planners and developers understood their own roles in the planning process, as more than just experts and decision-makers—which she rejected anyway, as she argued the public were equally decision-makers—but as regular people who could have a similar sense of attachment

to places as the communities whom they served. She said that if feeling pride and ownership over one's local area was generally acceptable, then why were planners and developers so frustrated with communities being protective over their neighbourhoods? She did not see a hierarchical or technical difference between the industry and the public here. A UK Council planner made a similar remark when he introduced himself to me: "I'm not a planner, I'm a human being" (Planner 1C, interview, March 22, 2023), indicating that as a planner, he was still living and navigating the world as a citizen, and his connection to place was the same regardless of which persona he was playing (planner or community member). But, for the civil servant, the goal of the PropTech Engagement Fund was to make a cultural and political impact on how practitioners treated the participation process and communities. They sought to develop an ethics of care through practice by partnering local planning authorities with PropTech suppliers, which I introduced in Chapter 1.

To back-track slightly, the PropTech Engagement Fund was launched in August 2021 by DLUHC, which set aside over £1 million in their first round to go towards 13 Council-led digital planning projects (DLUHC, 2021). The intended outcome was to establish a 'best practice' guidance for digital engagement and planning tools for Councils (DLUHC, 2021). Through this fund, the civil servant said they could address the public distrust issue effectively. She described this process as "changing the system":

> The system isn't designed for people to actually engage meaningfully. The system is designed to support one person's idea of what should be built… [The] developer goes, "I have an idea, I'm going to go and do it." [But] there's no real opportunity for real co-design as part of that process… So, we [need to] change the systems [so] people can engage. We then change the content of what they're engaging on, so they actually want to engage, and then we look at what engagement actually means. Engagement actually means empowering people to be part of the change process, and that's based

> on giving them the space and scope to actually have their feedback inform what's delivered. And more feedback leads to more transparency and giving them the space to own what's created… (Government 1A, interview, January 14, 2022)

In this quote, to change "the system" planners needed the right questions when engaging with the public. Her vision of a better planning democracy was geared around practitioners understanding what the public wanted, rather than just fulfilling their targets and design or project aspirations. While it was necessary for the planning sector to implement emerging digital tools, especially useful if it could appeal to "the other 95 percent of people" (Government 1A, interview, January 14, 2022), it needed to offer something different from traditional methods; people needed to feel they had tangible input in planning decisions in a way that they could never before, or at least to the same extent, using non-digital methods. Public distrust in the planning system arose because, she felt, practitioners were not listening to the public, so digital technologies needed to address this specifically:

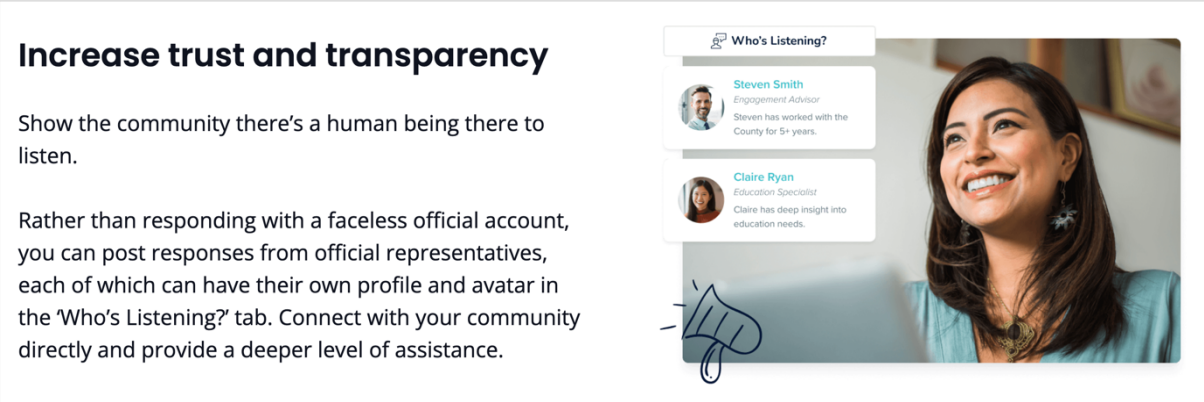
> [It's important] when someone's saying something I'm actually listening, rather than just wanting to say what I want to say. And when I hear what they're saying, I'm going to use empathy with my brain and emotional intelligence… to understand what their position and issues [are] when they say those things. I can really relate to them, and I can understand them. [By doing this] I think you're in a pretty good place. (Government 1A, interview, January 14, 2022)

Changing how participation was treated in the planning process through this Fund was part of the civil servant's vision for changing the broader organisational culture of planning. The aim was to get practitioners to rethink how they engaged with the public in a more empathetic way. This meant understanding how communities might have experienced the planning or housing systems, in order to then implement public engagement that better addressed the

public's needs and concerns. The sentiment is similarly reflected in the platform Social Pinpoint, where they state 'human beings' are behind the engagement who are ready to listen to the public (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1

Increase Trust and Transparency



Note: Digital engagement platforms 'humanised' the public participation experience by offering "real-time" or immediate responses to communities. On the Australian engagement platform, Social Pinpoint, planning authorities could create avatars to directly communicate with and better listen to the public, and thereby develop more 'trust and transparency' (Social Pinpoint, 2025a).

In the interview, the civil servant also suggested development opposition was reasonable considering the public's poor experience with the planning system. Planning professionals needed to get on board with this notion if they wanted to gain back the public's trust and move forward with their plans and proposals. She explained:

> If you have 20 years of abusive relationships, you're like, I have no trust because that's what I'm going to expect. So, it's—you know, it's quite an extreme example, you know what I mean? Like, we're all pre-conditioned to expect a negative

> experience so you have no trust. [But] if you give people really simple, tangible, easy wins so that we can just go, oh okay that's fine, [then] we'll get there. I think trust is all about authentic vulnerability and leadership. For a developer to turn up and say, "Hey we haven't got all the answers, but this is our business strategy. We've looked at everything. This is the only way to make this project work. We want to work with you. Will you work with us?" No one's prepared to say that yet. Maybe they are but they're saying it in the wrong way. (Government 1A, interview, January 14, 2022)

Several other interviewees, including Council planners and developers, observed practitioners would fall into the same defensive stance when faced with opposition; they would adopt this 'us versus them' mentality. Practitioners were aware there was a lack of respect towards the public and their opinions among their fellow industry professionals. In fact, it was very common for public participants who frequently attended public consultations to be dismissed as the "usual suspects" in the industry rhetoric (Planner 1B, interview, November 29, 2022), a concept that I will return to in Chapter 6 where I discuss the idea of recognising the 'value' of community voices through engagement platform. Instead, the new ethics of care asked planners and developers to find their "authentic vulnerability and leadership" as the civil servant phrased.

The UK Conservative government at the time (led by Boris Johnson) proposed in the White Paper that it would be through digital engagement that "communities will be able to trust the planning system again as their voice will be heard from the beginning of the process" (MHCLG, 2020, p. 24). More importantly, the "better use of digital technology will make it radically easier for people to understand what is being proposed in their neighbourhoods" (MHCLG, 2020, p. 24), forging mutual understanding and respect between civilian and practitioner stakeholders. In addition to empathy and active listening, there was

another rhetoric around developing respect and transparent communication and decision-making.

To reiterate, public distrust was a result of practitioners keeping communities out of the loop on planning and development proposals, sometimes even going ahead with the project without notifying them on the progress. Practitioners framed this as a lack of respect and regard for local communities, which again, pointed to an issue with the broader planning and organisational culture. It was important to the practitioners involved in digital engagement to create a more equal playing field between public and industry actors, which they believed could be achieved by improving communications and transparency.

To develop a better relationship with the public, CEO and founder of a prominent digital engagement platform said in our interview that planners and developers needed to engage often and early, so that when the official engagement process began, the community would recognise them and be more willing to collaborate, rather than say if they were contacted out of the blue. Building public trust required consistent communication and follow-up, which he argued digital engagement platforms could do given its multiple forms of engagement, including surveys, forums, and maps, as well as automation. Figure 4.2, for example, illustrates the many ways digital engagement platforms could build community trust, from connecting stories to gathering people together virtually to vote on something, highlighting “every interaction matters” (Social Pinpoint, 2025b).

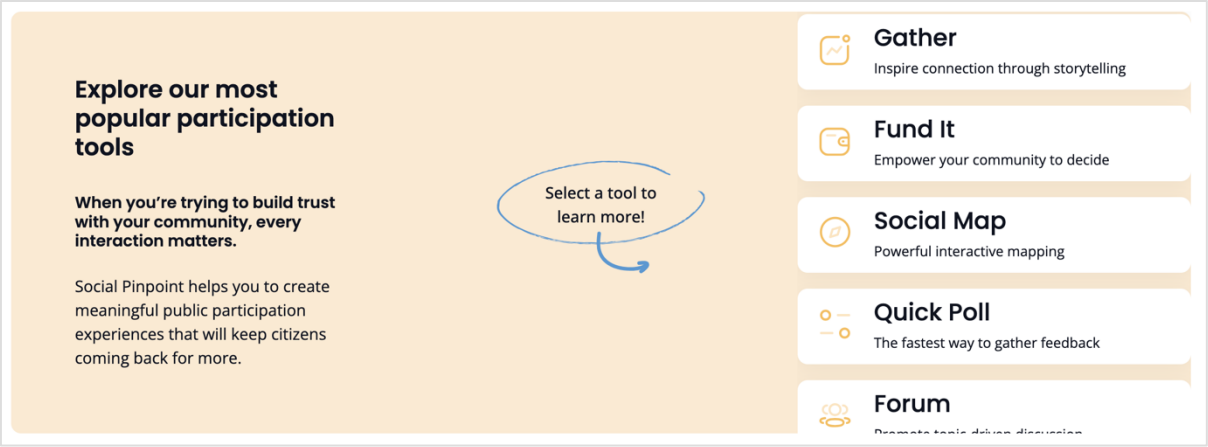
The same PropTech Founder further explained the logic behind this, in terms of developing consistency and trust:

> If you've done any public participation work or public engagement consultation, you will know that what tends to happen is you do a consultation, you say, “Great, now we'll just go and work on that”. You come back in a year, and you say, “Hey, look what we've done,” and people say, “[This is] the first time you've shown your face

here.” “No, no, we were a year ago, you don't remember?” Continuous engagement overcomes that. Because you keep drip feeding, saying, “Oh, you know what, you haven't seen this recently, but here's what we've been working on, and if you want to hear more, we're doing a Zoom meeting on such and such a date.”… So you maintain that cadence of engagement (PropTech 1E, interview, May 5, 2023)

Figure 4.2

Popular Participation Tools



Note: On their website, Social Pinpoint emphasises the importance of communication in maintaining public trust with the various tools they offer. This was part of the ethics around respect and consistent communication (Social Pinpoint, 2025b).

For him, having an online presence from various channels like social media, emails, and websites that were consistently updated demonstrated to the public that whoever was in charge of the development proposals or plans were an “active decision-maker” who cared about the community, or at least cared enough to tell them about what was happening in their local area. Communicating using different engagement tools allowed planners and developers, in the PropTech Founder’s words, to “drip-feed” the public with information (PropTech 1E, interview, May 5, 2023). He said that in any other industry where there is a

customer or audience, communication is crucial for business, whereas the planning sector seemed to overlook this notion. For instance,

> Your favourite brand would say, “Here's what's going on, we're doing a tasting of your favourite chocolate. Why didn't you come into the shop and try it? You know, we just got this new stock in.” So, people are very used to the fact that if somebody—if a brand cares for us, it contacts us and it does [so] in a fairly personalised way. Now, why wouldn't a local authority or property developer who is making huge changes to the world around me not accord me that respect that somebody who sells me patterned socks does? (PropTech 1E, interview, May 5, 2023)

Notable here was how he referred to communication as a form of respect. It was more than just a standard planning governance practice; it played a critical part in developing trust with the public and indicated there was a certain etiquette to public engagement, which seemed to be diminishing over time, hence the issue of public distrust. He also believed they were not only ‘doing good’ for his clients but contributing to a greater movement in planning where processes were performed with integrity. He stated digital engagement platforms could improve these standards and the institutional culture of public engagement by paying more respect to communities:

> … I think people don't articulate it [but] there's a recalibration of expectation and what good communication means. And we've built a platform that enables our customers to actually be up there with the best, and we're nudging them to do that. And we're looking at ways to do good for them. (PropTech 1E, interview, May 5, 2023)

A sales manager for a similar digital engagement platform based in Australia said respect was being open and transparent. As more than just consistent communication, public

participation had to produce a sense of transparency, which included sharing relevant updates and information about the site and importantly directly responding any public concerns. He argued that it was crucial that his clients, who were primarily public sector, shared as much information as possible with the public, otherwise, based on his own experience with managing projects that were politically contentious, it was easy for the public to fill the silence with their own speculation, or worse, assume the authorities were purposely keeping information from them, furthering their already fragile trust in the system and industry actors delivering these big projects. Especially for contentious sites, he advised his clients to try to be as ‘open’ and honest as possible. He said that contentious projects must include a simple feedback portal where the community are able to email or write in their concerns anonymously, from which planning practitioners sift through public feedback on the backend of the platform. Their platform, he argued, invited planning practitioners to improve their relations with the public:

> The hope is that digital engagement platforms can actually help facilitate better engagement early in the process, as opposed to being just an afterthought of the planning and procedures that go into this because everyone is, and this goes to be said about a lot of different projects around the world. But a lot of the time, the projects have the priority, and the engagement is, “Oh, that's something we have to do, so let's just get it done.” Whereas we want to see it thought about really early on and [something] they take care into thinking [about]. (PropTech 2D, interview, March 14, 2023)

The PropTech sales manager also said he encouraged clients to directly address any public scrutiny and misunderstanding or disinformation. If his clients had nothing to hide, if there was “nothing shady with the development” (PropTech 2D, interview, March 14, 2023),

then he said they should be able to face the public. To adequately demonstrate transparency, his clients had to accept and integrate public feedback in their decision-making, even when they were negative and might end up shaping the proposals in a different way from how they imagined—after all, was this not the purpose of public consultation? To develop trust with communities, he believed planning practitioners needed to show accountability and be direct in how they communicated their responses. Hiding away or avoiding public scrutiny exacerbated distrust. Mirroring some of the main concepts of agonistic politics (Mouffe, 2013), he understood that pushback and justification were part of the decision-making process. If community feedback was sometimes unfeasible, then it was important to communicate this.

UK Council planner, whose digital engagement work was funded by the PropTech Engagement Fund, similarly expressed this logic in the following:

> This is what we proposed, this is what you said, this is how we responded to what you said and adjusted the proposals, and this is the outcome. Or this is what you said, but we can't change it for these reasons, because we're bound by this rule or that rule. And so therefore, this bit [must] stay. (Planner 1A, interview, May 18, 2023)

For many of the interview participants like the Council planner and PropTech manager, respectful negotiation needed to become the norm again in public participation. Community engagement was viewed by many in the study as a "two-way, transparent conversation" (Citizen Lab, 2023), although it was not so much a debate as it was notifying or informing (see Federation of International Association for Public Participation, 2024). For them, public distrust was a communication problem and so, following this logic, if they 'opened up' the conversation and demonstrated through their actions (or in this case, communicating their actions) that they were 'true to their word' or 'honest' in their decision-making process, then

they could resolve the distrust issue. UK PropTech manager reiterated this point in our interview, stating that practitioners had a critical responsibility to the public, and without better communication with the public, the purpose of urban planning and design would falter. He said,

> I don't understand why keeping [the public] in the dark is in their best interest, when at the end of the day, they suffer if you design poorly. If you make poor decisions, they lose out. So, if you're a poor choice maker or you're a poor choice architect, your decisions that you've made—because of your interpretation of data—have a real-time impact on the people. (PropTech 1C, interview, January 26, 2022)

The examples above therefore demonstrate the strong urge among practitioners involved in digital engagement platforms to improve industry practice and norms around public participation, as well as begin to define expectations of behaviour and duties. Part of their job was to share their decision-making process with the public in a ‘transparent’ way. To be clear, though, ‘transparency’ and ‘improving conversation’ meant facing scrutiny, including knowing how to address public concerns, justify decisions, and maintain consistent communications with the public through various channels. As the PropTech manager alluded to above, built environment professionals had “real-time impact” on people’s lives. Decisions therefore had to be considered carefully. Later in our interview, he said a democratic planning system should allow people to have “the right to be happy in their area [and] they have a right to tell you that you [planners and developers] are wrong because they actually live there” (PropTech 1C, interview, January 26, 2022). In this framing, built environment professionals had a duty to provide people with opportunities to practice this democratic planning right.

The built environment professionals’ ethics of care was not a hard or official set of rules, but it was an understanding of how practitioners should treat the public, particularly as

a response to public distrust. It was an effort to foster better planning relations between the key actors by going back to some of the key factors that make good relationships: active listening skills, communication, and following words (promises) through with actions. The intended outcome was to create a built environment that worked for everybody, as in for the public and practitioners included, and to do so, the practitioners involved in this study believed the solution was listening better to communities and engaging with them as actors that had as much interest in and valid concerns about the built environment as themselves. This was the crux of their ethics of care. But, while they wanted to demonstrate they could meet the public's demands and needs through improved public participation, it was in their best interest to do so, anyway. This puts into question the very intentions and motivations behind the built environment professionals' ethics of care, which I shall now break down.

Social ties and obligations

As practitioners developed an ethics of care around listening better to the public and treating them with more respect, this was also understood as part of the role of working in planning or the built environment, more broadly. In this section, I explore how planners and developers felt motivated to improve public participation through digital engagement platforms for political and business reasons. An improved democratic participation was their "gift" to the public, of "doing good". It was their way of demonstrating care and commitment to local communities by facilitating ways of better listening, understanding, and communicating to local communities online. Yet, as I will shortly lay out, planners and developers were politically pressured to improve public participation and without doing so, many worried (or justified) that it would negatively impact the success of their planning or development projects, respectively.

Drawing upon the seminal work within the anthropological theory of gift exchange—such as Malinowski (2002), Mauss (2002), and Sahlins (2017)—I argue there was no such thing as a “free gift” with digital engagement and the promise of improving public participation. Instead, the relationship between practitioners and the public were defined by statutory requirements or planning governance norms around public consultation. In this section, I describe the statutory and ‘conditional’ nature of the obligations and relations between planning practitioners and the public to whom they were politically tied.

To contextualise the nature of these obligations, my first observation describes the relationship between practitioners and the public, which digital engagement platforms sought to ‘repair’, or in some cases ‘strengthen’. For example, Figure 4.3, a screenshot taken from the VU.CITY digital engagement platform website, highlights building stronger relationships through clear communication of planning “insights” and “rationale”.

In line with the previous ethics of care on respect and transparency, the desired outcome was the social ties between interested actors should became stronger using the ‘relationship-building’ capabilities of digital engagement platforms. Relationships were alluded to in many other ways, including as explicitly as “improv[ing] community relations” (Hello Lamp Post, 2023) and “cultivat[ing] deeper relationships” (Engagement Hub, 2023), or on other websites, it was mentioned in the form of “participant relationship management” (Granicus, 2023b) and a “relationship-building tool” (Social Pinpoint, 2025c). In essence, the health of the ‘relationship’ was integral to the ethics of care outlined in the previous section, and the problem that PropTech companies aimed to resolve through their technology offering was precisely the breakdown in this relationship. But, keeping in mind, these statements were largely made by PropTech companies. In my interviews with some of these PropTech companies, I was often provided with a sales pitch at the beginning of the interview, after

asking them to introduce themselves, the professional personas of which I explored in the methods chapter (Chapter 3).

Figure 4.3

Strengthen Relationships

Note: This screenshot is an example of how many of the digital engagement platforms promised to build and strengthen relationships between planning practitioners and the public. It emphasises “explain[ing] the rationale”, which suggests the relationship between planners and the public leans on these bureaucratic exchanges, of sharing and justifying decisions. (VU.CITY, 2025b)

Commonplace also decree the importance of these social ties on their website, describing how their platform can help with estate regeneration projects, to appeal to industry actors like Councils, planning consultants, and communications agencies. Chapter 6 discusses in more detail how these platforms were considered objective actors with certain authority; but here, not too dissimilarly, platforms were positioned as a moderator between practitioners

delivering the public engagement and the communities participating in it. On their website, Commonplace states:

> Our user-friendly SaaS platform empowers local authorities and developers working on estate regeneration projects to foster closer ties with residents and businesses. Commonplace's suite of Estate Regeneration tools facilitates transparent communication, allowing you to share project updates, gather feedback, and address concerns effectively. This collaborative approach builds trust and ensures that the final project reflects the community's needs, leading to a more successful and sustainable outcome for everyone. Let Commonplace help you navigate Stakeholder Engagement in the development sector. (Commonplace, 2025b)

On these websites, it became clear that the relationships between practitioners and the public with whom they conducted public consultations determined how well they could develop the sense of ‘trust and transparency’. The relationship was what many practitioners believed needed to change to truly reform planning. Some of the first steps of achieving this was reflecting on who they were as practitioners and their purpose in the system. In fact, in one interview, the participant said their digital company was “borne out of [the founders’] individual passion to democratise public-sector decision-making” and “all of this [digitalisation] is for the public good” (PropTech 1D, interview, March 3, 2022). As such, establishing the nature of their social tie to the public was fundamental to their ethics of care, that in fact, they were improving participation out of *passion*, and for the public good.

During my fieldwork, I attended an industry workshop in Sydney about ‘inclusive cities’, which was essentially a roundtable discussion, and at times it got very personal, about how different industry actors in the room defined their professional roles. The event started with a presentation by the host speakers about their recent work on diversity and inclusion

and then they opened the room up to a casual chat. I was one in 20 participants. Others came from the local and state government as well as private consultants, who travelled from all over NSW. So, it was quite a sizable group. In response to the first question asking the delegates to discuss how they practiced ‘inclusive design’ in their current or past work, a planning consultant raised her hand and described inclusive design for her required a complete mental shift in defining her purpose. She said she viewed herself as a public servant first and foremost, above her commercial targets, which she said, as a consultant, tends to define the work they accept or not. She wanted to transcend the professional or sectoral expectations towards a moral and political stance.

When she addressed the room, I saw many others nod in agreement with her. She said, “Everybody who works in the built environment is a public servant.” Others similarly spoke about the sense of responsibility as planning practitioners to act on their ‘power’. For instance, one person stated, “We need to learn how to use our influence as planners to make a difference,” while another chimed, “The people in this room are very influential.”

From these exchanges, it became clear the sense of responsibility towards the public was an accepted and celebrated obligation among these professionals; it defined their roles. Despite the economic structures that might influence how they conduct their practice, they expressed they had to remain steadfast in their mission to deliver more inclusive urban places. In fact, the discrepancy between idealistic visions of planning and the ‘on the ground’ experience of navigating conflicting pressures is a common story among practitioners (Marcuse, 2017; Wachs, 2017). Taşan-Kok & Oranje (2017) argue many young planners after finishing their degrees and formal training often face complex planning conditions that challenge and sometimes hinder them from doing what they believed was ethically ‘right’ (p. 4).

One of the UK Council planners I mentioned earlier similarly acknowledged planners have an obligation to serve the public. However, due to structural challenges of getting projects off the ground, or what she described as a “slow moving organisation” (Planner 1B, interview, November 29, 2022), it was hard for planners to deliver on these obligations. For the most part, she believed that local planning authorities “care deeply about the communities they work with” (Planner 1B, interview, November 29, 2022), but it varied greatly depending on

> who you're working with in the council, like there are teams that are fantastic and really get it and sort of very committed to, you know, diversity and like, actually will verbalise that some Council decisions are racist and that we need to do a lot better in some ways. And there are some who just won't get it at all and it sort of depends on who you are and who you're working with. Yeah, so I think lots of people do care, but they are the system. And the local authority as a whole has a lot of challenges and is a massive, quite slow-moving organisation. So, I think that not everyone makes good decisions, actually… (Planner 1B, interview, November 29, 2022)

The chain of command in Councils, in particular, made it difficult for a planner at her level, which was relatively lower in the hierarchy, to make decisions for planning communications and public engagement. She found this particularly frustrating when the people in charge of consultations tended to have “little understanding” of planning and the communities whom they served (Planner 1B, interview, November 29, 2022). Because of this disconnect between the planning and communications departments, she saw a lot of planners become complacent and ignore the bigger picture. She said many Council workers forgot they were *public servants*, that they worked for the public and in the public's interest. She implored their purpose as planners was to get the best outcomes as possible for their local

constituents, a moral decision and action that planners constantly made in everyday settings (Forester, 2017; Wachs, 2017). Despite the "slow and inefficient" system, she urged Council planners to recognise their power and share it with their communities:

> Sometimes the council will paint itself as quite powerless in the situation, or because they don't have a lot of money to do things, [so they think] they don't have power to do things. I think that's really fundamentally false… Local authorities have a lot of power. So, they need to acknowledge that, basically, and I think be honest with communities. (Planner 1B, interview, November 29, 2022)

In this section, I demonstrate that relationship-building was central to moral planning reform. Practitioners frequently invoked their role as public servants, emphasising their responsibility to act in the public interest. Many also described feeling a sense of power and moral duty in their role as decision-makers, and they often encouraged their peers to recognise this responsibility as well. Obligations materialise through cultural expectations, something that has been socialised and embodied over time (Sahlins, 2017), or are so inherent in our understanding of processes, etiquette, and how things should be done (Zigon & Throop, 2014). Alternatively, obligations are driven by an ideal of what makes a *good person* (Fassin, 2012a; Laidlaw, 2014). As demonstrated by the industry actors above, the ethics behind providing a public service or offering to repair and improve structural planning issues (Power & Mee, 2020) was tied to what people believed was *good* for themselves and for others (Laidlaw, 2000; Muehlebach, 2012). Yet this moral purpose was inseparable from statutory requirements, as well as from their professional mandate in which public interest is foundational. Public consultation is, after all, a legal obligation. As several noted, it was part of their job (and responsibility) as built environment professionals. So rather than a care ethics that was based on voluntary altruism, the practitioners' relationships with the public

were shaped by institutional value principles they assigned themselves to, alongside the obligatory nature of consultation.

While practitioners aspired to be ethical actors, they were thus operating within mandated frameworks that compelled them to attend to these relationships. And engagement platforms were marketed in ways that aligned with (and responded to) these obligations. These social ties were defined by political and procedural arrangements that ultimately set the conditions for a “non-free gift,” which I will expand on shortly. In this way, I argue the ethics of care that was used to legitimise digital engagement platforms earlier in this chapter was a form of ‘gift’ to the public that served a political function.

The bureaucratic gift and passive reciprocity

Gift exchange theory and the social ties it engenders (or not) depends on the sets of obligations that define it (as discussed in Chapter 2). Although care was presented as a gift to the public, hence the planning policy reform, it was relatively an expected deed given the political structure of planning. Planning scholar Yvonne Rydin (2003) argues that planning policy changes are made to improve the state of things, especially if they have not worked in the past; policy reforms are presented to the public as an offer, but mainly to convince the public of the merit of these planning proposals. In effect, I argue the ethics of care surrounding digital engagement platforms was an offer made to the public by practitioners in order to repair public distrust and improve existing relationships. Therefore, as a type of gift, or what I shall call a bureaucratic gift, the purpose of the practitioners’ ethics of care was to restore a social tie that had been neglected and severed, and one in which practitioners were already expected to honour through the statutory requirement and urban governance structure.

The utility of gift exchange theory is that it helps us understand intentionality: what exactly is being asked for when a gift is offered, and namely when a service or ‘good deed’ is

offered? What sort of obligations are being reinforced or promised, and what might it say about the actors delivering them? With this in mind, care, packaged up as a gift (as a public service) becomes something that is worth scrutiny in urban planning research. An understanding of digital engagement platforms through theories of gift exchange highlights the significance of social ties in care ethics and the sets of obligations undergirding planning practices.

Statutory public engagement establishes a political contract between the practitioners and public. As such, in this section I discuss gift exchange by delving into the particular reciprocal relation between practitioners and the public. Because an ethics of care was presented as a gift to the public in order to re-establish social ties and obligations, it was not offered to the public out of altruism, but from the obligatory nature of the practitioner-public relation. Indeed, democratising participation using digital engagement platforms worked in the practitioners' self-interest.

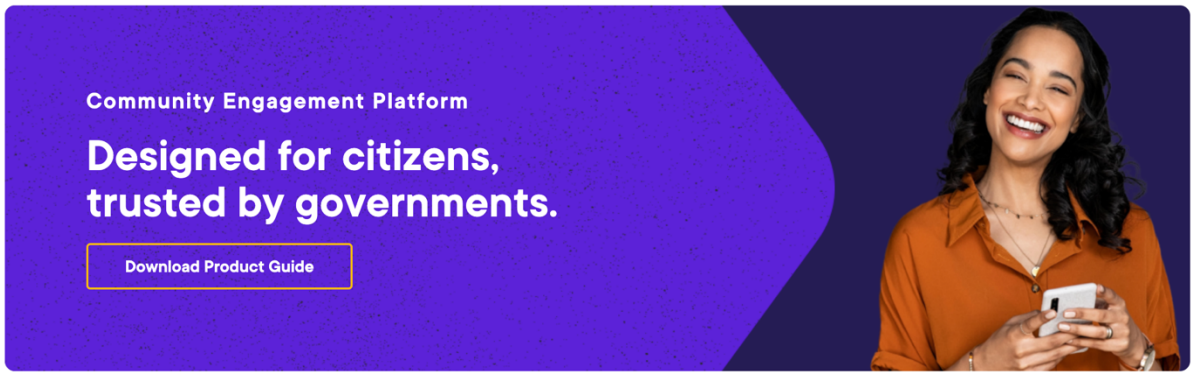
For example, digital engagement platforms were sometimes advertised as explicitly designed for the clients (planners and developers) to address public distrust, working primarily in the interests of planners and developers. Although much of the ethics of care was phrased as delivering better-informed places for communities, after examining the technology itself and interrogating what PropTech practitioners meant by improving public participation, care in this context was motivated by expectations of return. In Figure 4.4 digital engagement platform, District Engage, suggests the user experience is designed for 'citizens' but the platform itself is used by and benefits governments.

At the same time, there was a belief that improving the planning processes for practitioners would benefit the public in a trickle-down effect, but this was understood as a by-product of practitioners "doing good", not the immediate goal. As a result, by expanding on Sahlins' (2017) notion of *generalised reciprocity* in his theory of exchange, I develop the

idea of *passive reciprocity*, as a contribution to urban theories of care (Chapter 2), to capture the practitioners’ attempt at cultivating a participatory process in which fulfilling the needs of the public would benefit all actors, what was called a “win-win situation”.

Figure 4.4

Designed for Communities, Trusted by Governments



Note: Despite the overwhelming care rhetoric, digital engagement platforms would explicitly state their platforms were designed for the planners or developers (the clients). How it would benefit the local communities was often omitted or assumed to be a given by-product of practitioners improving their engagement practices (District Engage, 2025a).

It would be naïve to say that digital engagement platforms were not from the start designed for industry practitioners, despite claiming to benefit the public through improved democracy (see Chapter 5). The Australian PropTech companies I interviewed were all frank about this. Two of them said their companies primarily serviced public sector agencies, meeting specifically their public participation needs. For instance, software developer for an Australian digital engagement platform stated that focusing on one area or client was in fact a strategic decision and not uncommon in the tech start-up scene, where instead of investing in extensive research and development for a product, they would work closely with select clients to design the platform based on their needs. From the clients’ side, they received a

bespoke service and digital product, and on the PropTech’s side, they could test their product early and then go out with a degree of confidence that it would work for other government bodies with similar engagement and technological needs. This logic would later contradict the scale model of PropTech. Regarding her company’s mission, the software designer said, “We're trying to create other participation tools to make sure that basically when governments go out to the public… they have the tools available to kind of reach out to the different segments within their audience” (PropTech 2B, interview May 10, 2023). Segmenting community data is explored in more depth in Chapter 5.

Former community engagement manager for a different and more prominent Australian digital engagement platform (and current state government engagement officer) similarly described how their technology focused on streamlining the engagement process for government service users. However, she did note the public, in an after-effect sort of way, also benefitted from the technology because, as she argued, the government’s concern was precisely meeting public needs and satisfying the statutory participation process. Similar to the previous Australian digital engagement platform, Government 2A’s former company’s clientele was almost exclusively the state and local government. Much of their focus was optimising the reporting process, creating “really robust reporting systems to support government organisations [so that] once they collect the feedback, [they are] able to analyse, interpret, and use it in decision making” (Government 2A, interview, September 22, 2023). She said that while it was important to improve community feedback channels, if the government teams did not have sufficient tools to help them analyse, interpret, and report on the data, then it was “a wasted exercise” (Government 2A, interview, September 22, 2023).

An important motivation of digital engagement platforms was to improve the participation process for planning authorities or decision-makers, to help *them* provide better

built outcomes for communities. This was described as the ‘win-win situation’, or having “both sides met”, as illustrated below:

> It’s about creating a platform that really has both sides; the needs of both sides met. And when I say both sides, it's about the public being able to participate and having those opportunities to participate meaningfully. But it's also working with, you know, the staff internally to showcase what good participation looks like or what it needs to look like, based on public engagement principles. (Government 2A, interview, September 22, 2023)

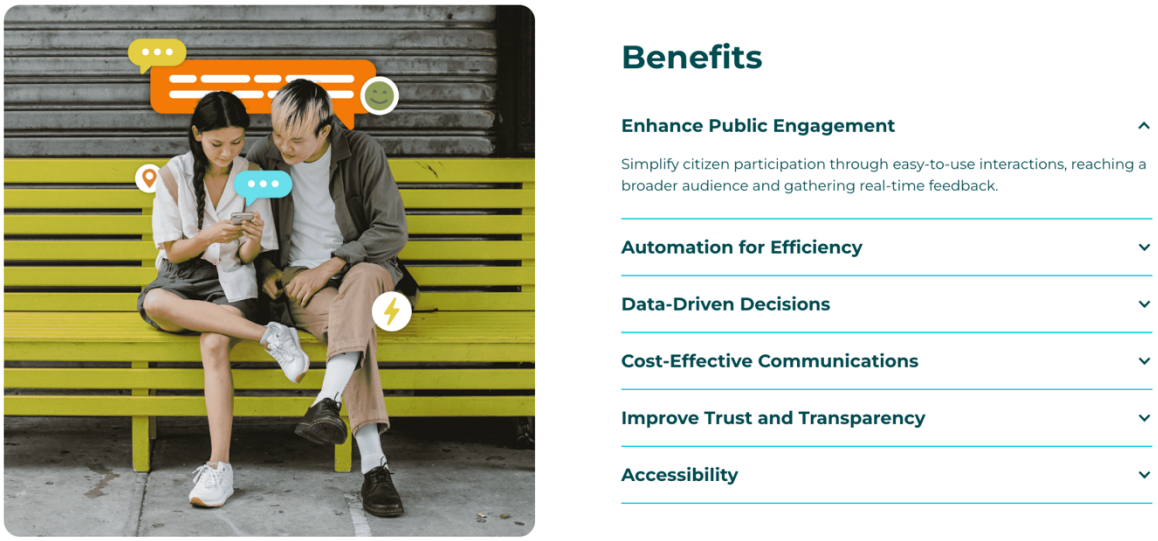
While most digital engagement platforms claimed they offered social impact to the community—but really only through their clients—there were other PropTech companies who said they actively encouraged their clients to change the way they communicated to the public and actioned solutions; in other words, not just adhering to their clients’ requests, but thinking about the public’s experience of using the platform, carefully considering the public’s needs. But again, this kind of consideration always returned to how it would benefit the clients.

Figure 4.5, for example, highlights that digital engagement platform improves the user experience, by using an image of a young couple engaging with a smart phone. They appear to be interested in what they are looking at, and the superimposed icons suggest a chat or conversation. Below the first line, ‘Enhance Public Engagement’, is a list of other benefits, including efficiency, data-driven decisions, and cost-effectiveness that are more relevant to the platform clients, yet still mixed in with other public benefits like trust and transparency and accessibility. This image also demonstrates the ethos around shared benefits, or both sides met.

UK-based PropTech manager similarly pushed his clients to simplify or shorten survey questions to make it more user friendly for the general public. He believed that by making the engagement experience more understandable, written in “layman’s terms” (PropTech 1B, interview, January 28, 2022), community engagement as a process and experience would be more appealing to the public, which would then strengthen their data and justification for the planning or development proposals (explored further in Chapter 6 on the “value of” public participation). In this way, engagement platforms served a practical need, which was to help planners and developers secure public support for their projects.

Figure 4.5

Benefits of Digital Engagement



Note: Digital engagement platform, Hello Lamp Post, highlights on their website their software will help Local Governments improve the public's user experience in engagement. However, improving public user experience also benefits planning practitioners. So, how much of this ethic is altruistic or transactional is murky. I suggest perhaps it is somewhere in between (Hello Lamp Post, 2025).

This exemplified the constant back and forth between serving the clients’ needs and improving participation process for the public, the latter of which was in their clients’ interest anyway for addressing public distrust. While much of the ethics of care was phrased as delivering better-informed places for communities, a closer look at the technologies, and at what PropTech companies meant by improving public participation, reveals something different. In this context, care was largely motivated by the need to produce supportive engagement data for documentation. As demonstrated, most platforms were marketed to planners and developers rather than to the public. They promised to enhance engagement so clients could gather more accurate feedback and make better informed decisions more efficiently and cost-effectively. The same UK PropTech manager explained his hope and logic for prioritising the clients’ mission on public engagement in the following:

> I guess, more directly, the client should benefit, in the sense that they can hear from more diverse voices, so they're being better informed before they make decisions… Then, hopefully, indirectly in a kind of circle of feedback is the community benefit because they have more chance to say what they thought, which will hopefully better inform those decisions and allow people to make better decisions that will—might change their landscape in five years' time, or maybe it's in a year's time, or it could even be in 50 years' time. (PropTech 1B, interview, January 28, 2022)

Although digital engagement platforms were designed for social impact, driven by community needs such as improving user experience, public benefits were seen as a positive byproduct, a secondary bonus, while the primary focus of the design and functionality of the platforms were for the planners and developers, the paying clients. The political expectations and the roles that planners and developers play demanded they should engage with the public “in good faith” (Consultant 2A, interview, September 17, 2023). However, how they

conducted public engagement was not always clearly stipulated in policy, in fact, public participation guidance varied across the different councils both in the UK and an Australian (NSW) planning context. While public participation was a statutory requirement, for most planning and development applications—besides state significant projects in NSW, which due to its urgency and ‘significance’ could be waived (see Legacy, 2017)—official contracts mainly served the interests of commercial and government actors (Stapper, 2022). Digital engagement in the UK especially, through the PropTech Engagement Fund, were business arrangements made between PropTech companies and Councils. As a result, the self-serving nature of digital engagement posed a challenge to its ethics of care. Therefore, who benefits? Everybody, but primarily and crucially, the practitioners who would go on to deploy these digital engagement platforms.

The ethics of care behind the development and use of digital engagement platforms were a specific kind of care that towed the line between altruism (generalised) and transaction (balanced) (Sahlins, 2017). It was not simply about doing good for its own sake. For PropTech companies, it was essential that their clients met their participation goals. Yet, it was not totally transactional either. As I mentioned earlier, gift exchange in planning bureaucracy was not only founded upon a legal and political obligation, but a notion of what made an ethical and ‘good’ built environment practitioner, which was one that served the public. In this conception of the planning system, practitioners therefore could not expect the public to side with them instantly; they understood they had to earn the public’s trust, and that implementing public engagement ‘in good faith’ would better guarantee public support. Ash such, while practitioners described their efforts to improve engagement as a kind of gift to the public, a demonstration of care that they hoped would strengthen planning democracy, this was a bureaucratised gift; care delivered within a constrained institutional environment and offered because failing to do so risked further eroding public trust in the planning system.

The ethics of care behind digital engagement platforms was therefore neither generalised nor balanced but sat somewhere in between. One of the main motivations for implementing digital engagement platforms was indeed improving planning democracy, however, the platforms were ultimately designed for planners and developers to do their jobs better (i.e., more efficiently and produce good results for their organisations). In this way, the care extended through digital engagement platforms primarily served the interests of practitioners. Even though, in their mind, communities would receive benefits in the form of better planning and development decisions and improved user experience, the hope was still in a "circle of feedback" (PropTech 1B, interview, January 28, 2022) way to advance the practitioners' projects.

Following Sahlin's typology of exchanges, which I explored in Chapter 2, I conceptualise this mode of care ethics as *passive reciprocity* (Table 4.1), describing the care practices that anticipate a positive return, such as improved relationships, smoother approvals, without requiring a direct or equal exchange from the public. It was believed that the good deed of caring about the needs of the public using digital technology would (passively) come back to benefit the practitioners.

Table 4.1

Passive Reciprocity

Type	Reciprocal Exchange	Obligations
Generalised	Altruistic	No obligations
Passive	**Conditional**	**Mutual obligations**
Balanced	Transactional	Mutual obligations
Negative	Exploitative	No obligations

Note: Drawing on (Sahlins, 2017) typology of exchanges, the text in bold indicates where the practitioners' ethics of care presided within the spectrum of exchange, between generalised and balance reciprocity. It was not exactly altruistic, nor was it a completely transactional

exchange, but there were mutual obligations and expectations for democratic conduct between practitioners and community actors in public participation and planning governance.

In addition, there was a condition that was tied to the legal obligations practitioners had in conducting public participation. Planners and developers had a statutory responsibility to deliver public participation, and they had a political incentive to improve it (tackling public distrust). I delved into the legal and governance structures in Chapter 1, which in this section, was embodied by practitioners through their obligations and duty of care. Because of the legal expectations, from the practitioner point of view, the public equally had the right to contest their proposals. They were in many ways at the behest of the public, although not always in the past, hence the public distrust (Grosvenor, 2019)—in fact, this was considered a violation of their contract. As a result, there was no way to "close" the exchange or relationship, as Graeber (2000) would say, or to 'balance' out the transactions because planning authorities and the public were indefinitely obliged to each other through planning regulation. Planning relations between the public and planning practitioners were a political relationship that was continually open.

The care ethics might have favourably aligned with the viewpoints of some individual practitioners; however, the planning governance and political context cannot be ignored. Public distrust as a political issue arose *because* of the legal obligations of planning practitioners in doing public engagement. The digital engagement movement was an attempt to reconcile the public distrust, opposition, and scrutiny by promising the public the planning industry would meet their obligations as *public servants* going forward. Improving planning democracy was indeed one of the stated motivations for implementing digital engagement platforms. Yet, as I have laid out in this chapter, the platforms themselves were ultimately designed for planners and developers to streamline the engagement process. This care was

offered under moral and legal pressures, shaped by institutional and democratic logics, and ultimately geared toward increasing public support and, as a result, the likelihood of project success.

Conclusion: The perks of care

This chapter explores how care ethics were considered, practiced, and represented in the development and implementation of digital engagement platforms. As a new technological device of public participation, the opportunities of care were compelling to the planners and developers who were experimenting with ways to streamline their public participation. While parts of the planning sector in the UK and Australia adopted care ethics, how much it could change the practice of public participation (i.e., making it more caring) was out of scope in this study. What was clear though was practitioners’ ethics of care existed within or worked alongside other business and political frameworks and logics (Muehlebach, 2010). Care ethics can sometimes be compromised as a result, almost always, they are negotiated. In this chapter, care was about managing the relationship between public and practitioners. Any relationship that involves negotiating power is political in nature, and this forces us to think about why care ethics were used and how they shaped political relations (and perceptions).

Care ethics are a response, perhaps even a subconscious strategy for mobilising people when harm is caused (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; McLean & Maalsen, 2021), but it can also be politically motivated, an active statement against neoliberal regimes (Tronto, 2013; Tsing, 2012, 2021). Much of the urban literature on care supports this ethos, which I outlined in Chapter 2, the idea of systematically integrating care ethics in planning decision-making (Bond & Barth, 2020; Held, 2006; Williams, 2017; Wiesel et al., 2020). Urban researchers argue there is a moral imperative to do this if we are to create better places and homes for

people and the environment (Alam & Houston, 2020; Power & Mee, 2020). Yet, how care ethics are operationalised in practice has been overlooked. The urban literature as it stands is missing accounts of how care might work and look differently across planning contexts. While Tronto (2013) argues care should be thought about and implemented as a separate governance framework from the existing and deeply embedded neoliberalism, this approach discounts the persistence of care in the very presence of these dominant structures (Koch & James, 2020; Wilde, 2020).

For most practitioners in the study, digital engagement was more than just a platform to engage with the public, but an opportunity to change the way democracy was being run, as well as the nature of the relationship between planning practitioners and communities. The issue was that public participation was a means to an end, which was to fulfil the statutory requirement—go out and engage for however long—and get the green light to proceed with the plans or development proposals. One of the biggest issues practitioners identified was that public participation was treated as simply a "tick-box exercise" and was the reason for growing public distrust in the planning system. Therefore, there was an effort to position digital engagement platforms as an embodiment of community voice, fairness, equity, the core planning virtues (outlined in Chapter 2). In this chapter, I position these technologies as solutions for built environment practitioners to reframe their thinking and strategies for public participation, that it should not be an extractive exercise (to get the necessary majority votes or engagement statistics), but a chance to get to know and care for their communities.

Distrust in public participation processes was constantly a challenge for planning authorities because of the power imbalance, also the practical difficulties of identifying and reaching everybody who might want to have a say on a development plan or project. Thompson and von Zadow (2009) argue that distrust in planning is a result of the discrepancies between the 'promise' of public participation and the practice. Usually in the

statutory engagement phase, communities are invited to learn about local development proposals but not affect any change to the details of the plan. As a result, frustration increases on both sides because of unmet expectations: 1) the public is misled into believing their participation in these engagement activities will influence the plan or proposal, and 2) planners and developers fail to gain the type of community responses they require for planning application. Informed by an ethics of care, practitioners used digital engagement platforms to improve these discrepancies.

However, this chapter demonstrates that their care ethics was not an altruistic act given that firstly, obligations behind digitalisation were legally and politically informed, and secondly, the platforms were designed specifically for the clients' needs (the planners and developers). Therefore, there is no such thing as pure altruism in urban planning politics because of the institutional and business frameworks that practitioners must work within[5]. In planning politics, projects and policies must be strategic as there are targets (or limits). So, even care-driven initiatives like the PropTech Engagement Fund that sought to improve public access to local decision-making were motivated by political incentives, of gaining public support and trust. When care exists within an institution or system, it is usually not implemented "freely" or without an expectation of a return.

Care is complicated. It is not always what it purports to be and how it plays out in practice is often very different to how it was intended. Especially in planning theory and practice, care has been proposed as a guiding tool by both academics and practitioners, including those involved in the digital engagement movement as evidenced in this chapter. I try to refrain from writing in the same essence, that is, making claim to how planning

[5] Emerging work on post-growth planning, however, argues cooperation and altruism will be central to this new economic model (Gabrieli, 2025).

practitioners *should* apply care principles in public participation and digital technology, and instead, examine how care ethics were implemented in this planning context and for what reason and vision in mind. Throughout the chapter, I explore what an ethics of care looked like to practitioners involved in delivering digital engagement, particularly on improving public trust in the planning system, alongside how it was represented on PropTech company websites. Understanding care in this context provides insight into the nature of the political relations between practitioners and the public, as one that was both imbued in moral obligations (maintaining the democratic virtue and respect for communities) and self-interest (the win-win situation) (Marcuse, 2017).

Due to its political nature, care ethics can be messy, ambiguous, and paradoxical (Cook & Trundle, 2020) and are shaped by the actors' motivations and the institutional structures through which they navigate. This formulates a complex politics of care, which is crucial for conceptualising a caring planning system or caring cities; to be aware of the contingencies of care. People move through life making ethical choices on "how to live, keeping in mind their own inclinations as well as social rules and their various obligations and duties to others" (Venkatesan, 2016, p. 40). Ethics are the practical ways in which a person's constellation of moral frameworks, relations with others, and experiences come together.

While in this chapter, I analyse the care ethics embodied and applied by actors within government, property development and PropTech, with particular focus on the expectations and obligations set by these individual planning actors and their organisations, next I shall examine how it all played out in practice and, to an extent, became sidelined by the scale and datafication model of PropTech.

Chapter 5 | Scale, Democracy, and the Abstraction of Community

Chapter abstract

In this chapter, I examine the scale logics that enabled the 'democratisation' of public participation through platform technology. I identify two kinds of scale promised by digital engagement platforms: one was the rhetoric of expanding and growing democracy; the other was the practice of abstracting community participants' data. Advancing Tsing's (2012) theory of non-scalability, I argue that scaling the participation process was impossible, as participation relies on the 'transformational relations' between different actors and the contingencies and layers of deliberation that characterise (liberal) democracies. Rather, it was community data—not the participation process—that became the object of technological scale. The chapter is structured somewhat unusually, based on how I came to understand what scale actually meant and how it worked in practice, but it narrates the logic of scale as it unfolded through my fieldwork and analysis.

. . .

Introduction: Democracy at stake!

As part of the launch of their PropTech Engagement Fund, the UK Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) announced that through new innovative engagement projects supported by this Fund, the "barriers to engagement with the planning system can be reduced and PropTech can act as a delivery vehicle for change and improved democracy" (Local Digital, 2022). In this message was a call for change and an overhaul of the decision-making process. It called for a fresh start for planning. There was a level of urgency, not least due to the housing crisis, but the sense that democracy was a stake! Indeed, the lack of public engagement was a "fundamental problem" in the planning system, the

concern for which I examined in the previous chapter with practitioners reviewing their methods of regaining the public's trust through an ethics of care. But what became clear in all this, was solutions to these problems required immediate attention and innovation, and ultimately a reform on the "outdated and ineffective planning system" (MHCLG, 2020, p. 6)[1].

As I introduced in Chapter 4, the issue of trust and transparency was connected to the perceived lack of democracy in planning. Planning decisions were being made without proper consultation or regard for the public. This was reflected in the UK Conservative Government's planning reform proposals, claiming that digital technologies could 'democratise' planning, make participation more accessible and efficient, and therefore "streamline the planning process and help enable faster housing and infrastructure development (Local Digital, 2022). The government's vision for the 'democratisation' of planning involved expanding the reach of planning decision-making and increasing the number of people involved.

While the previous chapter examined the ethics of care driving the digitalisation of participation, which aimed to repair public trust, in this chapter I focus on the scale logics that were integral to 'democratising' planning. Digital technologies promised to make public engagement more accessible to the public and more efficient for authorities to obtain the necessary evidence of public support for planning and development decisions.

[1] However, not everybody was initially satisfied with these proposals. Within the journalistic and academic communities, for instance, there was scepticism about what digital technologies could really do to resolve the housing crisis and if streamlining and fast-tracking planning processes would in fact worsen democratic engagement (Clifford et al., 2020; Colenutt et al., 2021; Jenkins, 2020). Indeed, urgency politics have been criticised by planning scholars as mechanisms of policy making and power (Dobson & Parker, 2025), particularly when it is used to accelerate decisions and development by overriding due assessment processes like public participation (Charney, 2017). In strategic planning especially, expediency contradicts the purpose of long-term planning (Legacy, 2017).

I begin the analysis by describing how these platforms intended to 'scale' planning participation, paying attention to the public-oriented claims. Here, I draw upon an analysis of platform websites and participant-observations of industry events. In the interviews, however, it became apparent that such a complex and contingent process like public participation was difficult to scale. Following this, I document the critical reflections made by industry practitioners involved in delivering digital engagement. Advancing Tsing's (2012) non-scalability theory in which some complex things cannot be scaled, I argue planning democracy was so entrenched within a contingent political system that it could not be simplified or boiled down to a unit (a precision-nested scale). While practitioners attempted to simplify the engagement survey process, they struggled to control any of the external contingencies like idiosyncratic Council planning regulation, government funding and grants, or even public opposition that were shaped by local history and politics. It was difficult to scale the contingencies that characterise (liberal) democracies.

Instead, digital engagement platforms succeeded in scaling the concept of community, which forms the second part of the chapter. Crucially, scale allowed the platform's clients (the planners and developers conducting statutory engagement) to manipulate data to help them construct evidence for planning documentation. Planners and developers could investigate in more detail the types of people engaging on their projects by demographic information like age, gender, location, salary, and so on. An important finding here was that while these platforms were advertised as democratising planning decision-making, scale was about abstracting information about and from people.

Before I delve into the empirical analysis, a note on why I chose to focus on scale—and not rentier capitalism, which has been central to critical platform urbanism (Srnicek, 2019; Sadowski, 2020; Fields & Rogers, 2021)—as the driving technological logic or

mentality is necessary. In the next section, I walk through the definition of scale that I adopt to investigate the promise of democratisation.

A note on rentier capitalism and scale

Tsing's (2012) interrogation of scale and non-scalability is a useful theoretical framework for understanding the motivation and promise of digitalising public participation. She defines scale as projects that expand without changing the core product or service (Tsing, 2012). As a strategy for cost-saving and maximising profits, scale grows a product or service by simplifying a process and copying it over and over again. In this study, scale was both a business logic for streamlining a planning process and a political logic that could increase democracy.

I interrogate scale, rather than rentier capitalism, because the promise of digital engagement platforms was primarily about streamlining bureaucratic processes and less about extracting rents. In Chapter 2, I discussed some of the ways that digital platform technologies have been critiqued and researched in urban studies, including a body of literature on rentier capitalism instigated by scholars such as Brett Christophers (2020) and Nick Srnicek (2019). Critical housing researchers argue digital real estate platforms (or property technology) exacerbate harms on people (Rogers et al., 2024). The concern with these platforms is its ability to advance inequality and consolidate wealth using rentier capitalism logics, which is central to the financialisation of housing (Fields & Rogers, 2021; Sadowski, 2020). Not only that, but rentier capitalism works at two levels in *platform real estate* (Shaw, 2020): firstly, through the existing rent practices of housing and property assets, and secondly through the control of data (Sadowski, 2019).

There were certainly rentier capitalism logics behind digital engagement platforms; they indeed operate as a Software-as-a-Service (SaaS), so they similarly collect data and

make revenue by selling access to it (Christophers, 2020; Srnicek, 2019). In fact, it was still relevant and, as I will deliberate at the end of the chapter, scale produced similar extractive outcomes. However, the goal of digital engagement platforms was really to make planning practitioners spend less time and money on bureaucratic procedures (Potts et al., 2024), as opposed to streamlining financial accumulation strategies that is so often found in real estate (Fields, 2019). For instance, critical debates on engagement platforms question whether they succeed in simplifying public participation or make governance relations between planning authorities and the public more complicated (Tseng et al., 2024; Boland et al., 2022; Potts et al., 2024). Therefore, scale was a more appropriate theoretical framework than rentier capitalism to approach digital engagement platforms, because these platforms aimed to streamline public participation, both in the political and business sense.

Now that I have clarified the difference between scale and rentier capitalism and why this chapter focuses on the former, I begin the analysis by describing the claims made by PropTech companies and practitioners about growing and expanding democracy through these platforms.

Growing and expanding democracy

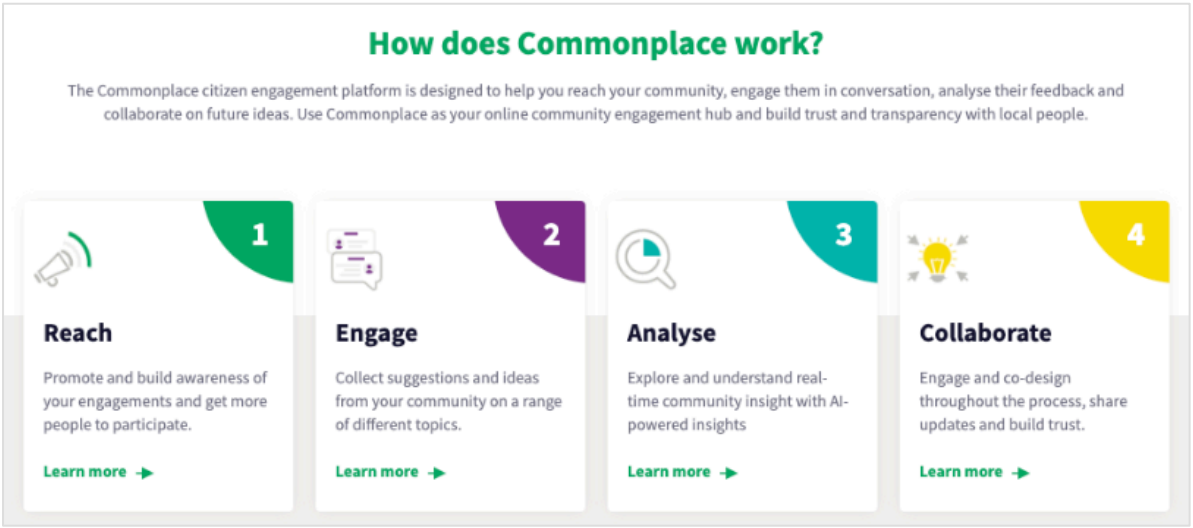
Digital engagement platforms promised to scale public participation in three ways; first was simplifying the decision-making process by standardising and automating it; second was removing the 'barriers of engagement' by reaching people in online places they already frequented, as well as making the user journey as 'seamless' as possible; and lastly, creating instant rewards to maintain people's attention and engagement. These logics were put in place to maximise the public's time on their digital engagement platforms. In this section, I walk through each of these scale functionalities.

First, to streamline decision-making, platforms offered ‘dashboards’ which are essentially the homepage from which clients access all the engagement tools they need, this ‘all-in-one-place’ concept (Figure 5.1). From this dashboard, engagement practitioners could create and implement consultations, analyse it easily—some platforms offered immediate or “real-time” data analytics—and then report back to the community as soon as possible. Digital engagement was designed to be a seamless phased out experience.

Many platforms also included different functionalities, from social media plug-ins to machine-learning analysis, automated emails, blogs, online surveys, and community mapping tools. Having several options of engagement meant that planners and developers could pick and choose the methods that were relevant to their projects. Clients did not have to create anything from scratch; it was a “flexible toolkit” that had “all your consultation needs covered” (The Future Fox, 2023). All clients needed to do was input their participation content and material and then submit ‘publish’ or ‘go live’.

Figure 5.1

All the Tools to Scale

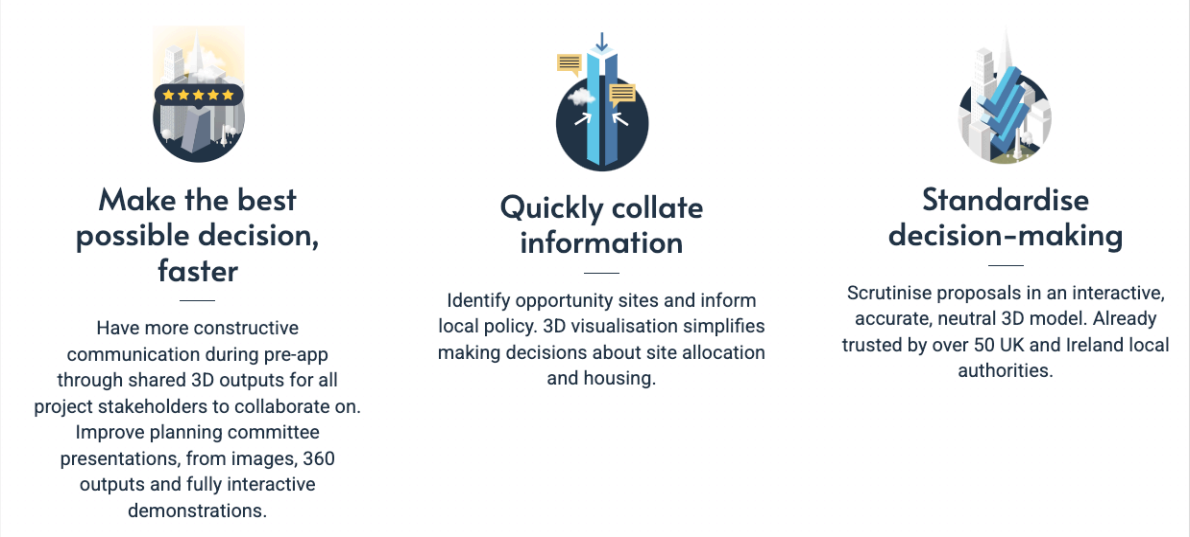


Note: Commonplace describes on their website all the tools planning practitioners to which they have access to scale and streamline their public consultations, all in one place (Commonplace, 2025a).

The logic was digital engagement platforms helped practitioners make decisions on planning and development that better reflected the community's voice, hence the UK government's statement on digital engagement as a "delivery vehicle for change and improved democracy", which I quoted earlier. It improved the representation of community insights through this "neutral" tool, which I explore in more detail in Chapter 6 where perceived neutrality became a *valuable* asset for planners and developers. Figure 5.2, for example, illustrates how efficient decision-making was promoted on digital engagement platform websites. VU.CITY, whose website the screenshot was taken, was a 3D visual modelling platform that allowed the public to comment directly on design proposals.

Figure 5.2

Efficient Decision-Making



Note: This was one of the ways platforms advertised on their websites about making the decision-making faster and easier for built environment practitioners (VU.CITY, 2025a).

As a result of this streamlined, almost pervasive engagement strategy, practitioners could *do more with less*. For instance, on just one platform, they could launch more engagement projects at a time, while also reaching more people per project, and therefore,

from this logic, expand and grow planning democracy, exemplifying Tsing's (2012) definition of scale.

Democratising participation, however, was not only about improving processes for the practitioners who created the engagement campaigns, but the promise was also to improve the public's user experience. The discourse on accessibility and diversity and inclusion was significant here. Engagement platforms promised to make it easier for communities to engage. They could reach more people, and from this angle, increase the number of people participating in planning decisions without putting much extra effort into it, characteristic of the scale model (Tsing, 2012). Digital engagement platforms claimed to reach communities through technological gimmicks and design logics, one being 'opening up' participation and removing potential barriers to engagement.

Platforms first claimed to remove barriers by reaching people in places they had already frequented, for example, on social media or by 'capturing' them as people are using their phones for other reasons. The public could participate from "the comforts of their sofa", as one PropTech manager described it (PropTech 1B, interview, January 28, 2022) (see Figure 5.3). Good digital engagement was "about user experience, [being able] to participate anywhere, anytime, on any device, on their [the user's] own terms" (Government 2A, interview, September 22, 2023).

The UK digital engagement company, Hello Lamp Post, applied this concept more literally in their product design, where the QR codes they posted around the relevant project sites would link to an AI chat bot. Essentially any passer-by, or local person could directly 'talk to the objects' (Hello Lamp Post, 2023) and learn on the spot what the site or development was about. They increased accessibility by making planning information and engagement instant. Other PropTech companies called serving information like this as "bite-sized bits" or "snackable" information (PropTech 1E, interview, May 5, 2023). The logic

behind this was the general public was “time-poor”, so in order to scale participation, digital engagement platforms had to be as easy and engaging as possible for people to participate.

Figure 5.3

From the Comforts of Their Sofa

Note: Taken from their website, Give My View illustrates the idea of reaching anybody from 'the comforts of their sofa', the idea that digital engagement is so convenient for people, they can contribute to local decision-making easily at home (Built-ID, 2024b).

Indeed, a PropTech manager described their engagement platform appealed to the average busy person because:

> [We are] essentially just a survey tool, but one that is a lot more visually engaging, simpler…not pushing people [clients] to use jargon, and not needing to scroll through loads of information. [We want] to gather thoughts quickly and concisely from people

> while they're waiting for the bus or while they're waiting for the kettle to boil because we can do it quickly. Because we're very, very conscious that people—well, they only have a few minutes of attention span. They're very busy. They might be just very busy with their job, or they've got family, they've got people to look after. They've got to dash to go and pick up their kids from school. (PropTech 1B, interview, January 28, 2022)

The short attention span issue concerning practitioners was further illustrated when I attended an industry event hosted by DLUHC in 2022, where PropTech companies were asked to pitch their products to Council planners and public engagement practitioners or consultants. There was a range of products, from 3D mapping to online surveys and virtual exhibitions. What all these platforms had in common was the sense of urgency to capture people's attention[1]. Several presentations mentioned the "short attention spans" of people; the public were "time precious", and in order to get the "layperson" to participate in planning matters, the user experience had to be snappy (i.e., without using planning 'jargon'), interesting and relevant, and rewarding.

The UK Government similarly proposed in the Planning White Paper that digital technologies would:

> [make it] easier for people to understand what is being proposed and its likely impact on them through visualisations and other digital approaches. We will make it much

[1] For an updated critique of attentional issues with platform technology, see Campo & Citton (2024), particularly Rogers' (2024) chapter on 'quick bites', the short form content on social media, which many digital engagement platforms attempted to emulate, though in this study for the "convenience" of the public. Rogers argues when these "quick bites" are experienced continuously enough, it creates a "sustained attentional state," colloquially known as "doom scrolling".

> easier for people to feed in their views into the system through social networks and via their phones. (MHCLG, 2020, p. 21)

In addition, many engagement platforms did not require public participants to create an account or provide any contact details before participating in the consultation. They were accessible via web browser (Google Chrome, Safari, Firefox, etc.), as opposed to downloading an application, another 'barrier of engagement'. PropTech practitioners believed even slight inconvenience such as waiting to download something would put people off altogether from participating. As a result, some digital engagement platforms created a rewards system for participation.

Digital engagement platform, Give My View, addressed the short attention span issue by designing gamified elements[2] to the survey user experience. Their survey questions were varied and required different forms of interactions, from the 'slide the emoji' for submitting a sentiment response or annotate an image using a 'drag and drop' function, rather than the standard multiple-choice questions or written feedback forms. They also included immediate survey results or feedback after answering a question, such as showing that *x percentage* of people who answered the survey agreed with a participant's answer. Sometimes it was as simple as automating the follow-up emails (if participants provided their contact details) after completing the online engagement, to confirm that the participant's feedback would be considered in the development or planning proposals.

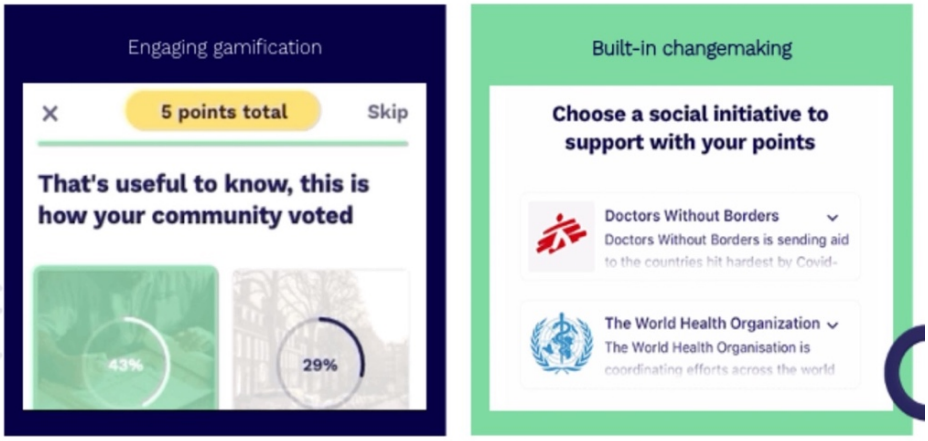
Community participants could also accrue points per answered question, and at the end of the survey, they could choose to donate these points towards a charity chosen by the

[2] Gamification in platform technology has been tested for many use functions, including in education (Zainuddin et al., 2024), healthcare (H. Yang & Li, 2021), business management (Alibakhshi et al., 2024; Mou et al., 2025), and the built environment (Iria et al., 2020).

clients. Figure 5.4 is a screenshot taken from the Built-ID website representing how this charity function worked. While there was no correct or wrong answer in the survey questions, community participants were 'rewarded' points for every question they answered. The purpose behind this was to cultivate a sense of reward and immediate feedback given that some of their development projects or local plans could take several months to a year (or more) to finalise and get approval or confirmation (Built-ID, 2023). These small and immediate wins represented more 'tangible' change, and even if their feedback did not make the majority's vote, as several of the PropTech interview participants justified, people would at least feel they contributed to something, which would encourage them to come back for more.

Figure 5.4

Built-In Changemaking



Note: An example of the gamification process of Built-ID's engagement platform, Give My View. Public participants accrue points as they answer engagement questions, which they can then use to 'donate' to a charity at the end of the survey (Built-ID, 2024a).

Methods for keeping users engaged were central to democratising public participation. It was framed by PropTech companies and practitioners as a concern for the

lack of awareness and knowledge about planning participation. To address this, public engagement had to capture people's attention. The main appeal of digital engagement platforms was it could boil the engagement experience down to a simplified version of it, asking the key questions required for application or proposals, but also made sure the experience was quick, easy, painless, and interesting in order to encourage the public to provide 'meaningful' (or relevant) feedback. However, this was the public-facing narrative told by the PropTech companies. A different story emerged from my one-on-one interviews with the planners and developers who used these platforms; a confrontation between the performance of democratising planning and the real and practical concerns of using digital engagement technologies began to unfold.

The non-scalability of public participation

So far, I have identified the promise of scaling democracy was about reaching more communities and streamlining the process of gathering, analysing, and making decisions from their feedback. However, in my interviews with practitioners, I noticed although democratising participation through scale was the goal, many planners and even PropTech practitioners found that public participation was not as *scalable* as it was promised. Scaling participation fell rather short in practice for a couple of reasons. First, public participation relied on different relations between public and the industry practitioners. Outcomes of participation were contingent upon the local history, local politics, and the types of communities who lived in the area or had interest in the plans and development. The UK's PropTech Engagement Fund also revealed how dependent Councils were on central government funding for their digital engagement projects, which meant there was a limit to these projects; it was not the endless growth machine that it was purported to be, given that it could not be sustainably financed. In this section, I walk through the hesitations made by

planners and developers about the capacity of these platforms to scale participation. While digital engagement platforms attempted to simplify the public participation process into a 'precision-nested scale' (Tsing, 2012), it ultimately faltered due to the contingent nature of planning politics and governance. I use Tsing's (2012) theory of non-scalability to argue that scaling the participation process was impossible, as it relied on the 'transformational relations' between different actors and the contingencies and layers of deliberation that characterise (liberal) democracies. I identify three distinct ways in which scale was limited: first was the lack of nuanced conversation, next was ad-hoc fixes required of the clients, and third, was the reliance on government funding for delivering digital engagement projects, particularly in the English context.

One of the common critiques of streamlining the user experience was that conversations from in-person consultations could not be replicated digitally, for example, the ability to pivot conversation in real time. A Council planner stated in an interview it was difficult to sustain 'meaningful' engagement solely online. Her team only used digital engagement platform to "hook people in" (Planner 1A, interview, May 18, 2023) and divert them to the project webpage for information. However, their 'real' consultation would still take place in-person using traditional methods, like workshops and townhall style meetings. Digital engagement technologies therefore merely increased communications, rather than improve ways of voting or contributing feedback. In fact, she and other Council planners I interviewed felt that digital technologies offered less dynamic engagement functionality because it was simplified (to scale).

In addition, the Council planner said it was especially challenging to scale engagement for a local plan because the content was quite intangible. For a local plan, for example, Councils were required to ask about the community's wishes for the future, including how they foresaw their homes and local places in the next 10-15 years. However,

public engagement had to be carefully worded to avoid making promises that had no guarantee of appearing in the final plans. They could not simply pick up a template survey from a platform, which indeed most of them offered. From her experience as a planner who had worked on different types of projects, it was impossible to have a 'one size fits all' model since every engagement project was unique, depending on local politics, history, and the types of people who lived in the area (see Gonçalves et al., 2024). Similar developments might have followed a general template, but it was always brought back to the initial drawing board to ensure the engagement strategy made sense to the specific planning or development project.

During our interview, PropTech founder acknowledged that digital engagement technologies were indeed 'lower quality' or reduced versions of comprehensive in-person public engagement because dynamic interaction models require significantly more bandwidth. Digital engagement platforms were simplified to allow for many people to use it at the same time, otherwise it would crash. He described the difference between digital and in-person methods as one being "boring" and the other "fun", respectively. On whether it was possible to create fun digital engagement, he said it could be done, but they were unable to reach as many people because it consumed a lot of data. "Fun" digital engagement was essentially unscalable, which to him defeated the point of digitalising public participation. If the application could not work for most people, despite being "fun" and dynamic, then what was the purpose of digitalising it, he asked rhetorically. Reduced nuance in public participation was a compromise that he was willing to take in the name of 'accessibility' and reach.

Several of the platforms tried to incorporate 'nuance' in their digital products. For example, Social Pinpoint emphasise on their website the importance of providing communities with immediate feedback or communicating directly and quickly with people.

They state that practitioners can "create a dynamic and ongoing conversation with real-time comments" (Social Pinpoint, n.d.). Hello Lamp Post's artificial intelligence (AI) chat box that was linked to the QR code had the same intent. It would introduce the public to the site and provide background information about the development project, as well as any other contact details or important upcoming events or dates. The community participants could also ask questions back to the bot, but it is not clear how advanced this functionality was and whether it could handle more nuanced questions (or questions it had not been trained to answer yet at the time of fieldwork).

In addition, every client and project were different: the relationship between planners, developers, and PropTech suppliers, as well as how they all addressed the set of historical and political concerns of the sites on which practitioners were consulting the public, were unique. There was indeed no "one size fits all" model in practice. For instance, a common complaint by both PropTech and their clients was platforms could not do everything the clients wanted because each project and clients' needs were different. So, technical issues, like getting specific engagement data or the data in a particular format or presentation, were often resolved on an ad-hoc basis. In one of the projects of a Council planner, the PropTech supplier could not manipulate the engagement data the way they required, so the platform product had to be developed specially for them. They said,

> The problem is, is that if their product just doesn't do the functionality in terms of getting the data [a certain way], that's a new bit of functionality [required in] the software... We can get [secure data]; we just can't get it as easily as we want to because the software is legacy software... and that means someone's got to spend some money and time and effort to make it happen. (Planner 1C, interview, March 22, 2023)

In fact, many of the projects involved in the PropTech Engagement Fund were unique collaborations between Councils (and their sets of concerns and needs) and the PropTech suppliers who worked specially with them to design a bespoke product.

In addition, digital platform technologies still required human effort in the form of account- or customer success managers. Although many of the digital engagement platforms which practitioners used were technically SaaS, they all offered client support as part of their software service or product packages, as mentioned earlier, which one PropTech manager said they tended to do by default anyway because of the lack of digital skills or internal capacity of their clients. One PropTech manager described his role as "hand holding" his clients through their projects, which contrasted the SaaS model in which clients managed the platforms themselves (PropTech 1B, interview, January 28, 2022).

Other technical and regulatory issues made it hard to scale. One Council was restricted from their own public engagement data because of internal firewall blockages restricting them from entering engagement platforms or downloading data onto their work laptops, while another could not share their engagement data with the technology companies due to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) restrictions. A PropTech manager agreed that there was a stark disconnect between what they could do with the technology and what was required in planning regulation, so oftentimes they worked with Council planners to design the specific engagement functions; for example, budget-allocation or mapping tools, or even specific ways to filter engagement data to align with their statutory needs. These digital functions were developed on an ad-hoc basis, which went against the scale logic, although an Australian PropTech software developer argued this helped them with their research and development (PropTech 2B, interview, May 10, 2023). Many of the functionalities gained from their partnership with the public sector were relevant to their future public sector clients, as I mentioned in the previous chapter. From their perspective, it

made sense to invest time in developing these ad-hoc services. Nevertheless, it still did not seem to pay off for many UK Councils who were wrapped up in local governance policies.

Some Councils struggled to get their communities to comment on local housing plans because they were required to direct people to the Council planning website to view the complete planning document, which could be over 300 pages long, before the public were even allowed to make comments and provide feedback. The PropTech manager lamented, "we can't just have something long and boring just because it's legal" (PropTech 1B, interview, January 28, 2022). In other Council boroughs, developers were required to obtain written letters of support from the community, which became a major pain point for one developer whose digital engagement attracted hundreds of people. Digital engagement was obsolete if individual public participants did not write to the Council.

Yet, the structural problems with digitalising public participation did not stop here; the heavy reliance of local Councils on government funding to deliver digital engagement meant these projects were almost impossible to scale without sustained funding. Once the funding round ended or was used up, unless the Councils continued to apply to the following rounds, it was very difficult for Councils to maintain their digital engagement. In fact, one Council decided to use the PropTech Engagement Fund to develop their engagement software in-house rather than purchase a subscription to a digital engagement platform. They were awarded £100,000, which in our interview, the project lead said she was grateful for, because otherwise they would not have been able to launch this project. But she was equally shocked when they ended up spending £30,000 just on the software developers for a couple of months of work. Unlike some of the other Councils who worked alongside PropTech companies from the Showcase event, this Council wanted to own and control their engagement data. The Council planner said she had seen other Councils fight for their data because they were not aware of their data agreements before signing the contracts, which other Council planners I

interviewed were also aware of. Taking heed from other Council's experiences, she managed to avoid the possible ramifications of not owning their engagement data. The only issue now was finding people to manage the engagement software.

When I asked her about what the future was for their digital engagement platform, she admitted she was unsure. Without the funding to continue these projects, the Council could not afford to hire anybody new and train them. As a team of two, she was still managing the day-to-day engagement when I interviewed her. But, at some point, she said she was going to have to leave, and she was afraid that all their hard work and the money that they had managed to win would slowly diminish and their digital engagement project would go to waste.

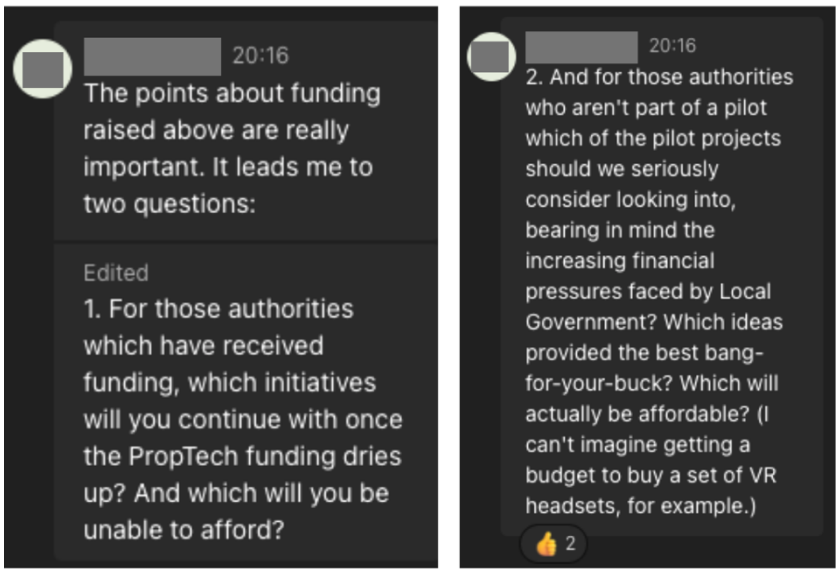
I observed an interesting behind the scenes look at digital engagement platforms that similarly demonstrated the tension between planners, PropTech and the funding sources—central government. DLUHC hosted another online public event, over a year after the first showcase I mentioned earlier. At this follow-up event, DLUHC asked Councils who received funding to present their digital engagement projects and outcomes. Many presentations talked about the successes of their campaigns as well as limitations and what they would do differently having trialled it. But, while the presentations were happening, there was an active chat on the Teams call where several Council planners debated whether digital engagement technologies could create any lasting change on improving public trust. They expressed concerns about long-term and equitable funding for these types of digital engagement projects if Councils were solely reliant on government funding (see Figure 5.5). The debate was initially sparked by one Council planner who wrote in the Teams chat:

> So, funding has been provided to various LPAs to do digital stuff. Fine. So when the rest of us are required to do more digital stuff, will there be new burdens funding?

> This all sounds great, but no one is talking about how much this costs and where the money is coming from. (Event 1B – Teams chat, June 14, 2023)

Figure 5.5

Teams Chat About Funding Concerns



Note: Questions raised by the Councils at the PropTech Showcase event were apprehensive about the scalability of these platforms, i.e., how "widespread" could digital engagement really be when funding was limited. This was a screenshot taken at the online event of the discussions on the chat function whilst presentations were happening at the same time. The "pilot projects" refer to the funded projects from the PropTech Engagement Fund.

The comment received two thumbs up emojis, and shortly after another Council planner responded saying, "Agree! These projects sound brilliant, but would the learning results and recommendations be possible to other LPAs [local planning authorities] without the funding?" There was a stark difference between the promises of digital engagement being projected in the presentations and the apprehension and caution displayed in the chat. Other Councils who had positive experience with their digital engagement projects through the

funding also chimed in to speak on what went well for them, also potentially to quell some of the common concerns. For instance, one of the Council planners who presented their digital engagement project replied to the initial comment, "It's a good point… For us some things would be easily achieved within existing budgets, some things went well, [for example, we] replaced existing and outdated corporate software [although] some things would only have been possible with the funding" (Event 1B – Teams chat, June 14, 2023).

Another Council planner similarly suggested other Councils look at alternative funding sources if they were worried about how to launch or continue these digital engagement projects. Recognising the funding issues, they stated:

> [I] completely agree with the funding issue. Whilst successful, our… pilot had to end with the project as we are a small council and have no funds to run a digital platform showing our major planning applications. Round 2 can continue as it can be funded by CIL [Council Infrastructure Levy] admin money. However, I learnt that a lot of digital bits can be done using what you have already access too [sic] e.g. we added QRs to all of our planning neighbour letters/site notices via our existing uniform system, we also learnt how powerful our existing GIS is and that it can do so much more than just mapping. (Event 1B – Teams chat, June 14, 2023)

Interestingly, as the presentations continued about how the Councils 'successfully' managed the DLUHC's PropTech Engagement Fund, Councils in the group chat discussed other funding sources, fully admitting its shortcomings. It was also completely viewable for all participants in the Teams call. Because of this visibility, as evidenced by the above statement, it allowed an exchange of advice between Council planners on the call about how to deal with funding problems. A spokesperson from the DLUHC team, however, did respond to the comments about funding by acknowledging, "funding and capacity are some of the key

barriers to adopting digital tools" (Event 1B – Teams chat, June 14, 2023). They further stated:

> Similar to other planning pilots [in] DLUHC, the intent of these digital projects is to identify how these lessons learned can be applied to a broad range of local authority contexts that suit a range of funding situations (some of which are about digital tools and others are about approaches to community engagement). (Event 1B – Teams chat, June 14, 2023 – Teams chat, June 14, 2023)

DLUHC emphasised these were "pilot" projects and a "learning exercise", and they were open to collaborate.

These moments revealed that promises were part of a broad industry message and not all practitioners who delivered digital engagement necessarily believed in it. The conversations I describe above contrast the dominant promises of scale that digital engagement platforms afforded, declared by PropTech companies and other industry leaders. It also highlighted that scaling democracy was difficult to achieve in these Council cases given they were reliant on other organisational bodies.

Scaling something like participation that was contingent upon what Tsing (2012) calls *transformative relationships* was difficult to achieve. These types of relationships consist of the various actors and situations that can alter the course of something. Scale requires uniformity, precision, and predictability; whereas the planning system, demonstrated by the multiple moving parts that practitioners had to deal with, was contingent on various industry actors, policies, and the public, and was sometimes (or most of the time) chaotic.

Potts et al. (2024) argues scaling public participation is challenging because the "professional planning practice is (human) behaviourally complex and the outcomes upon which we settle, in liberal democracies, are often compromises" (p. 2446). While planning

may be time-consuming to planners, efficiency may not be a good thing either (Legacy, 2017) as one loses nuance. Tsing (2012) argues some things are impossible to scale, things that are so difficult to be reduced into a precise unit. As I mentioned earlier, the object being scaled must be converted into a 'unit', a simplified object or activity, which can then be repeated. This was not possible in participation given that every engagement project was different, even if they started out from similar templates or basic guidance.

In Chapter 2, I examined the key driver of technological and business scale is that it is an extraction tool, to glean out an optimised, 'perfectly nested' form, of an object or process. When this happens, the process gets stripped out of its world and becomes a 'non-social element' (Tsing, 2012). By contrast, public participation could not be scaled in this way because, in doing so, even theoretically, it would strip away the very essence of what planning democracy was all about, which was deliberation, accountability, and responding to the diversity of the public's needs. It relied precisely on these social 'transformational' relationships. Scale indeed evoked the sense of expansion and growth, but it was only used rhetorically to promote digital engagement platforms, used superficially to describe planning democracy as simply "reaching" more people efficiently.

In addition, planning regulation and technical barriers made it difficult to scale public participation because engagement rules were not uniform across Council boroughs. This was clear when certain digital engagement functions were developed *in response to* client demands and needs on a case-by-case basis; the digital engagement technologies grew out of these ad-hoc developments. In effect, the PropTech and planning practitioners failed to figure out a way to "control" or convert the public participation process into scalable units because it was embedded within a complex planning system that was shaped in different ways by the public and industry stakeholders involved and the political and historical planning and development contexts.

While these platforms streamlined aspects of collecting community feedback, analysis, and communication, whether it simplified public participation or planning democracy was less convincing. While it was easier to gather and analyse survey results using digital engagement platforms, this did not necessarily mean the democratic process was improved. Instead, it achieved something more specific: it captured, filtered, and tracked people, to help practitioners collate robust data and compelling evidence and narrative for their planning documents. The next section will examine the possibilities of scale, away from the notion of increasing democracy, and towards targeting, tracking, and filtering communities, and then controlling the engagement narrative.

The possibilities of scale

One of the promises made by these platforms was being able to reach more and even target communities, to engage with people who were "relevant" to (or could have a "stake" in) the site. Practitioners described this as engaging with the "silent majority", as opposed to the "vocal minority", the NIMBYs, and to do this, they sought to capture as many people as possible through digital engagement tools, hence the scale logic that I have outlined and challenged already. However, in practice, 'capturing' communities did not only mean increasing the number of people engaging on the platforms but gathering as much data on them as possible. In this way, they could scale the process of gathering and analysing community data.

They did this by firstly turning aspects of what made a 'community' into measurable units, which practitioners could then use to filter the engagement feedback. By units, I mean demographic descriptors like age, gender, salary, job, interests, and so on. From here, they could effectively re-define community by turning the different filters on and off. This created an abstraction of community, zooming in (targeting certain demographics) and out

(examining who out of everybody voted for option A or B). This was important for documentation because practitioners could identify and compile data that was relevant to their projects. I argue the abstraction of community was the core function of digital engagement platforms, which was lost in the primary message of increasing planning democracy.

This section examines how scale in digital engagement technology worked successfully, not through the democratic process, due to the complex relations and structures of public participation; rather, it was through the data collection of public engagement and particularly in the concept of 'community' where scale was accomplished.

Targeting, tracking, and filtering communities

Firstly, who were the communities? In digital engagement, community can mean anybody who has an affiliation to the project site in question, "whether it [was] a community of people brought together by place and geographic boundaries; or a community of people who share[d] the same interest; or a community of people trying to bring about change" (Built-ID, 2023a). The definition of communities in this context was expanded to capture people who were unfamiliar with the planning process (hence the education and listening piece that I detail in Chapter 4 on care ethics). The idea was to make the participation pool more representative of the people and their needs in the local area. For projects receiving NIMBY opposition, a democratised public participation would 'drown out' the vocal minority protest by demonstrating an overwhelming broader public support.

The communities that planning practitioners were particularly interested in were the 'silent majority', as opposed to the 'vocal minority', or else the NIMBYs who tended to be portrayed as literate on the planning process and had time and financial or emotional stake to get involved in local planning decision-making. In an interview with the Head of Engagement

at a property development firm, the developer described the silent majority were those who "basically just shrug their shoulders and just think it's alright" (Developer 1B, interview, February 10, 2022). It resembles the earlier depiction of the targeted audience, who was "time-poor" and needed a quick and easy mode of digital engagement:

> If everyone just broadcasted loads of stuff, the only people that would be looking at it is the same people that would turn up to the meeting and chat with someone. It wouldn't be for the NHS worker who is getting back from their shift. They're not going to be like, now I'm going to go through all the council stuff on the website and work out that—they're going—they're knackered or whatever, and their life would be focused on something else. That means that they won't be a part of the discussion… Sometimes people's thoughts need to be focused so they can actually be constructive. (PropTech 1B, interview, January 28, 2022).

There was also the idea of mobilising the citizenry, from an existing voting population that had been underutilised in planning decision-making, and it is the planning practitioners' job to empower them, to 'amplify' their voices. This, in turn, switched the public's status from being inactive to active citizens (Inch, 2015). In this case, public engagement was the process of activating citizens or turning certain 'publics' on and off. Expansion, in this form, was therefore less about boundaries and more about identifying who the eligible participants and citizens were.

In fact, on the digital engagement platforms, communities were transformed from participants to datapoints. Practitioners used these units to measure how many people, say hypothetically, of the ages of 18-25 years wanted to see in the new public space, or the other way round, which kinds of people wanted new public spaces. Figures 5.6 and 5.7 illustrate how PropTech companies visualised tracking and filtering community (as) data.

Figure 5.6

Tracking and Improving Community Engagement

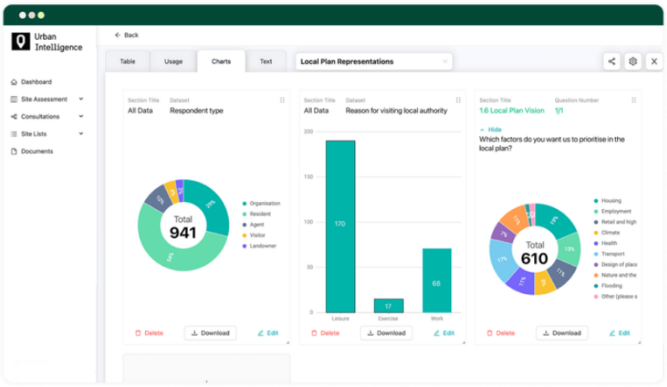
Track and improve community engagement

Gain a comprehensive view of what's happening on your platform with our built-in dashboards. Track essential metrics like visitor numbers, participant engagement, new ideas, email opens, and event attendance – and way more.

Note: Communities were abstracted into demographic identifiers (or units), such as age group, gender, location, and so on, and these units could be tracked against how they responded to surveys and interacted with the engagement platform (Go Vocal, 2025c).

Figure 5.7

Seeing Trends



See trends in your representations

With our analysis charts you can easily visualise answers and respondent demographics to get a sense how different parts of the community feel. We also provide table, usage and text analysis, so you can overview all responses. You can also see who's accessing your document and where they've come from.

Book demo

Note: The text next to the image of the platform's dashboard states that clients "can easily visualise answers and respondent demographics to get a sense how different parts of the community feel" and "see who's accessing your document and where they've come from" (Urban Intelligence, 2024b).

Practitioners could then compare this with other age groups or to other planning or development sites. Engagement platforms also targeted communities using social media marketing as part of their service package. With this, clients could run ads on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and so on, targeted at specific social media users, sometimes under granular demographic filters such as phone location and (perceived) interests, so long as users had these activated. The ad could direct public participants to the client's project webpage, which was common practice among the planners and developers I interviewed. Communities could also be targeted through email campaigns from the client's own database, or, for instance, on the Commonplace platform, practitioners could use the PropTech company's community database (people who signed up to Commonplaces marketing and email list) to inform their relevant audience. Some platforms offered "invite-only" engagement, selecting individuals to participate, which was mostly done on smaller development sites, although this was often discouraged, as I indicated in Chapter 4, because should public opposition occur and the community then realises public engagement was closed, it would cause negative political consequences to the client and project.

The platforms could then filter the engagement data by these different 'units' in the analysis stage. For example, many wanted to target more 'diverse' groups, including younger people, ethnic minority groups, or social housing tenants, or what the Give My View called the "disenfranchised groups of people" (Built-ID, 2023). For contentious projects that had local NIMBY protesters, practitioners could scale out by selecting more filters to emphasise what the larger community wanted. In essence, practitioners could select, target, and analyse certain members of the public.

The point of identifying the community and breaking them down into units, which could then be filtered, was to allow for customisation. This was the big 'selling point' of the platforms. It was what these platforms were essentially *scaling:* having access to public

participants. On the UK's Bang the Table website, clients have access to a "unified community database to identify, segment, and personalise communications for hard-to-reach voices" (Granicus, 2023c). By having access to this data, practitioners, according to PropTech companies, could offer a unique or customised engagement experience that was interesting and relevant to communities, again, keeping "people updated on the things that matter to them" (Social Pinpoint, 2025).

What was interesting about this process was that expansion, a key characteristic of scale, was not the main feature of digital engagement platform upon closer inspection. Rather, narrowing in on community was the priority because it could tell the practitioners specific information about their projects and groups of people with whom they engaged, which was useful for their documentation. Scale in this case was therefore not just about expansion and growth, but also going the opposite direction, providing smaller and detailed information. At the same time, these units or identifiers were essentialised forms of the communities; they were not used for depicting complexity of people, but to simplify them to tell a compelling story about the 'local community'. It was used as an argumentative and evidential tool for documentation. This leads me to my next point on the possibilities of scale: being able to control the narrative.

Controlling the narrative

While digital engagement platforms allowed practitioners to understand communities better in terms of demographics and engagement feedback, ultimately the selling point was what they could do with this information. One of the reasons many practitioners gravitated towards these platforms was issues with social media and the lack of control practitioners felt they had on Facebook and Twitter (now X), especially once a public opposition campaign started. Many practitioners like Council planners found digital engagement platforms

appealing because it was a place where they could closely monitor and address community concerns in a controlled setting. For example, some platforms asked public participants to provide contact details, some even used 'cookies' to track general user data (like location, device, etc.).

Digital engagement could be conducted at a hyper-localised level through targeted advertising, whereas social media was "too open", as one Council planner said (Planner 1D, interview, March 8, 2023). She noticed that the supposed "protests" or "objections" made on their social media pages did not reflect the planning applications. She said, "No one actually made planning comments against planning applications…They were just comments on social media" (Planner 1D, interview, March 8, 2023). For this reason, another Council planner said they restricted public comments by only allowing people to leave 'thumbs up', and if communities wanted to leave 'thumbs down' they had to submit it as a comment, which required their contact details (PropTech 2D, interview, March 14, 2023). Their website did not highlight this. In addition, PropTech companies justified the level of detail on community data was a way to limit opportunity for public "rage" and therefore accusations and 'misunderstandings' about the development that often came about as a result, which practitioners felt like had no control.

Another reason practitioners were compelled to use these platforms was they could create more convincing narratives about their project proposals. It was the "You Said, We Did" communication style that many engagement platforms advertised on their websites, part and parcel to 'building public trust' piece from Chapter 4. Practitioners could use the data gathered 'on the go' to communicate to the public their decision-making process. As such, scaling the production of community data allowed planners and developers a better sense of control over the project narrative as they could target their messaging to specific groups of

people or use data about their communities to support their planning and development proposals.

For example, Figure 5.8, showcases quite extensively platform District Engage's entire digital engagement functionality. On the left-hand side, they include a menu of the different tools they offer and as you click through them, more information pops up on the right. In this case, I looked at 'Custom Engagement Settings", which included a sub-section on registering participants. They state their clients "can choose what sort of data" they want to illicit from communities. Further on, they claim clients can tailor the engagement process to "collect demographic data to meet diversity goals." Offering a multitude of options for engagement, the platforms can "adapt" to practitioners'' planning needs.

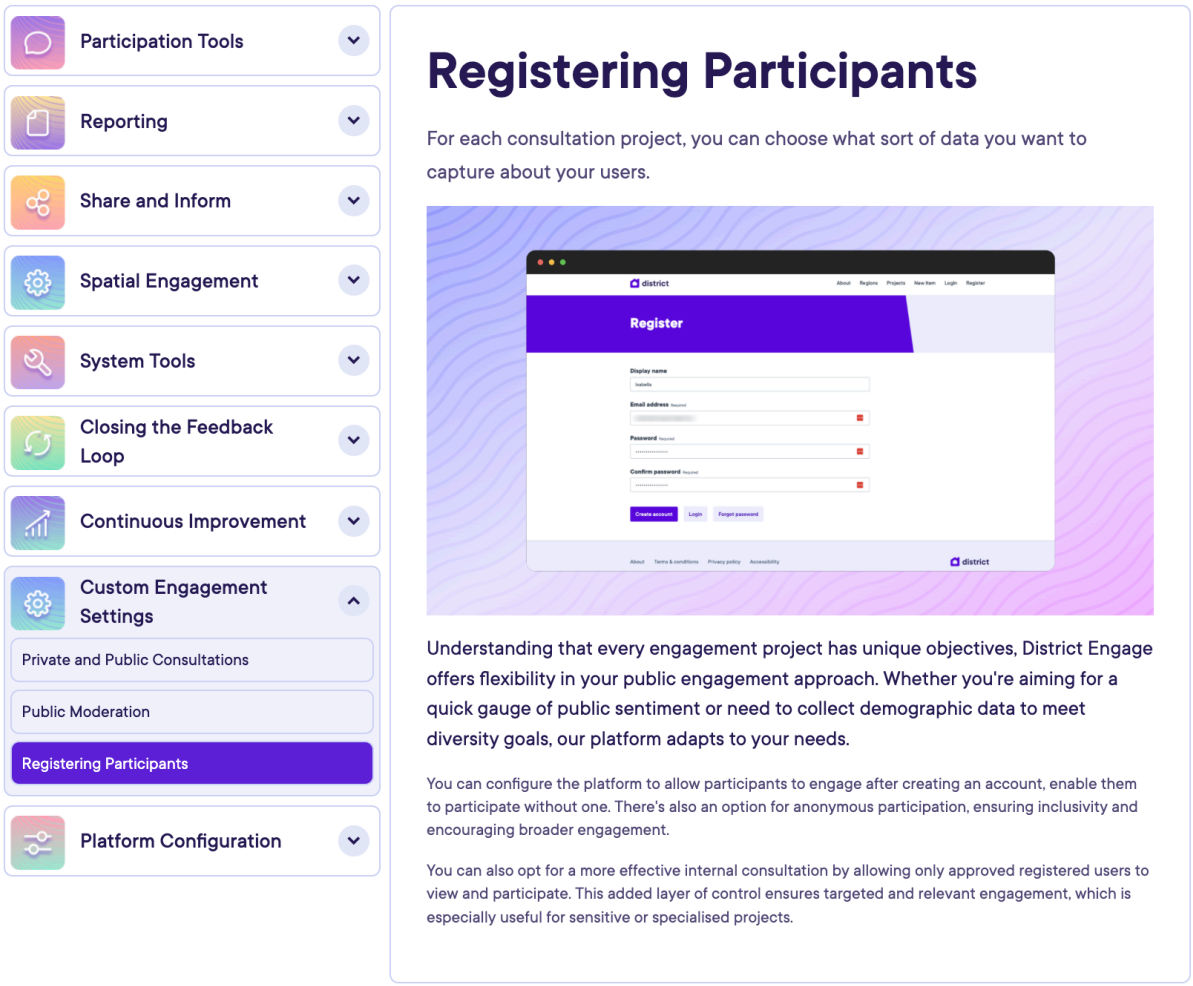
There were many ways that practitioners described the process of capturing community data, but the phrase that a London-based Property Developer coined was "taking the public on a journey" (Developer 1A, interview, April 21, 2023). This meant releasing engagement results consistently throughout the engagement phase to form a convincing argument or proposal. He believed that people fundamentally did not like change. He said, "However, that's always the challenge. And it's down to you, as the developer, to ease those concerns" (Developer 1A, interview, April 21, 2023). A PropTech Manager similarly stated the job of the planner or developer was to

> Go out, put [the plan or development proposal] into the world, and be like, I think I've got a really good idea. Be bold, be brave, and let everyone tell you that you're wrong. Prove them, *use data layers* [emphasis added]. Use whatever you have to do to try and convince people that you've got the right narrative" (PropTech 1C, interview, January 26, 2022)

Digital engagement platforms allowed practitioners to access specific community feedback data that could then be used to convince the communities on how and why decisions were made. The layers of data which PropTech 1C suggested here was the process of taking information from engagement results to formulate an argument *for* their proposals.

Figure 5.8

Registering Participants



Note: Screenshot taken from the District Engage webpage describing all their digital engagement tools and functions, including "choose[ing] what sort of data you want to capture about your users" (District Engage, 2025b).

Therefore, the strategies for controlling the narrative or data related to how community voices served as supporting evidence on plans and proposals; practitioners could use feedback data to validate the decisions made about their projects. If community voices were harnessed in the right ('structured') way, this would greatly increase the chances of planning approval or public support. Scale in digital engagement platforms were therefore about streamlining the process of compiling and sorting participation evidence, which in turn, made communities a technical feature of planning documentation that could be manipulated as such. This logic conceptualised communities as sources of information who could thus be *abstracted.*

The abstraction of community

When practitioners packaged up all these different datasets, they were in essence abstracting the community feedback. They could pick out a set of statistics about certain demographics of the local population use it to support aspects of a design proposal and therefore make a case for the community benefits which their planning and development proposals provided. While 'community' was broken down into these shards of ambiguous 'markers', which, isolated, could not really say much about a person, using the platform's data analysis functionality, these markers were connected to a thicker network of information. As a result, digital engagement platforms were able to create various mosaics on 'communities' in which certain information was privileged. Scale was not only able to expand the idea of community by being able to reach more people, but also by filtering and targeting certain people to create 'unique' or relevant engagement experience. In this way, community then became whatever practitioners wanted it to mean.

For example, a Council planner in the UK that I interviewed wanted to increase engagement among young people and Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups. So, they

applied for the PropTech Engagement Fund and won several funding rounds. However, they found early on in the initial phases of their digital engagement project, the two platform technologies they used did not make much difference to the demographic of people clicking onto their project webpage and interacting with the site. In fact, they were the same people who typically attended in-person events—older, white, middle-class, homeowners. Instead, the Council pivoted their goal towards making it easier for the general public to agree and disagree on plans through ballot style voting. In particular, they changed their goal towards understanding the user-journey and making it as intuitive as possible. By working with digital engagement platforms, they managed to reach over 1,500 people who expressed support for the planning proposals and changes.

What is important to this story, though, was the project lead, before joining the Council, was a planning consultant for 15 years and before that was a demographer, which she said in many ways influenced the way she approached public engagement. She was interested in getting participation levels that were representative of the local population; for this borough, she wanted to see more younger BAME representation. Their project from the PropTech Engagement Fund experimented with defining not only who their target community was, but which communities would be supportive of their plans. As they progressed in the digital engagement fund, they realised they struggled to get the results they wanted by targeting only BAME communities because not enough people were participating. As a result, they changed their approach to focus less on diversity and towards getting more people showing interest in the proposals. The concept of community therefore was about the number, not necessarily the types of people involved or any other key identifier, a homogenous notion of community, despite it starting out being specifically about getting younger and BAME people on board in the planning process. For her public participation project, specific demographic units were only useful if they could develop an engagement narrative from it,

but if they could not capture enough of those specific 'units' of community in their data, then it was considered useless.

This was a cautionary tale of thinking about communities purely as units that could be reassembled to fit a certain planning or development narrative. While the official or dominant goal of digital engagement platforms was to reach more people and therefore hear from the "silent majority", what ended up happening was practitioners selecting their communities for the sake of documentation and evidence building. In this case, when the outcomes did not quite fit the desired narrative, they expanded 'community' out again. Not only were communities selected based on their support for the project, but they were keenly alienated from their image or concept as peoples. Demographic characteristics became the isolated, repeatable unit of scale that Tsing (2012) describes in scale.

Given that digital engagement technology rose in tandem with public distrust issue in planning authorities and the planning system, as I discussed in Chapter 2, it would be remiss to ignore how such tools were used to appease the public, and how the hyper-focus on the "silent majority" was a strategy to dispel the power of the NIMBYs, and by virtue of this, ironically, silence the NIMBY perspective. Because the idea of community was segmented into units, these units could be 'patched up' to form a new image about the community and their priorities for the development designs or planning proposals. As a result, the notion of community lost its gravitas, it became a diffused version of it.

Digital engagement platforms deployed the scale logic, a discursive and political tool (Cody, 2011; Warner, 2010) to reimagine communities in planning (Anderson, 2006). The abstraction of community was indeed a strategy for creating new engagement narratives, in which 'communities' could be chopped and changed like a mosaic. The outcome was creating a coherent picture about community priorities and wishes for planning documentation (see Riles 2006; Biruk, 2018). This may explain why it was so easy for engagement to become a

"tick-box" exercise. Rather than embracing the messiness and conflicts that tend to arise in public consultation, the planning practitioners using digital engagement platforms were focused on completing their projects. Thus, gaining more information about communities through digital engagement platforms was not necessarily about understanding them better but strengthening the practitioners' case for planning and development.

Scale was therefore not only used to expand and grow engagement reach, but crucially, it was a filtering and abstraction tool. It had a 'scope' use-function, zooming in and out of 'communities', drawing out new information. Because 'community' was converted into "interchangeable and self-contained elements" (Tsing, 2012, p. 513), stripped from its social world, as I have laid out throughout the chapter, it could now be moved around for new product channels (in this case, for various evidence-building in statutory planning documentation). This was a new application of scale; it was more than just a relation between small and large (Jones, 1998) or even about growth and expansion, but a process of manipulating information to create infinitely new and specific narratives. Therefore, while much of PropTech automates the extraction of property asset (Fields & Rogers, 2021; Nethercote, 2020; Sadowski, 2019; Shaw, 2020b), engagement platforms rather translate participation data into legitimacy capital. This positions them at the governance edge of platform technology, where 'trust and transparency' becomes a desirable (sometimes necessary) product in planning and property development.

In addition, the concept of community which planning practitioners used in their political and commercial discourse was a powerful tool in planning politics because it could mean anything, so long as it is constructed compellingly (Cohen, 2013). The PropTech definition of community was a vague connection between people and place, not necessarily defined by boundaries (Calhoun, 1993). In digital engagement, community was anybody who inhabited a space. Even so, this definition could change depending on who the practitioners

wanted to consult. Digital engagement allowed practitioners to open and close communities and filter them. Democracy for them was not about *equal* access for everybody but emphasising certain voices. Scale was a method and tool for them to manipulate data on the public, as a way of cherry-picking the communities they felt were relevant to the site and project proposal or could strengthen their plans.

Conclusion: Conceptualising and (re)making worlds through scale

To summarise this chapter, the purpose of scale was not to increase democracy, as advertised, but to increase the chances of gaining public support and thereby planning approval through persuasive documentation. This was a very different message from the advertised one of 'democratising public participation', which was allowing more people access and opportunity to participate in local decision-making. Although capturing as many people as possible was certainly important to this mission, hence increasing access to planning decision-making, how this data could be spliced and abstracted was the real selling point of these platforms.

As a result, there were two types of scale 'in action': one was this rhetorical scale that sought to increase democracy, and another was the technological practice of scale, which focused on datafying community. What was interesting, and at times, confusing was that the two forms of scale were lumped in as one: that increasing community capture would improve democracy, when really, scaling democracy and scaling community had different functions and outcomes. In this chapter, I describe how planning practitioners lamented that digital engagement platforms did not, in fact, work to streamline the engagement process. Rather, the claims to scale in the digital engagement discourse were primarily ideological. In line with Tsing's (2012) theory of nonscalability, which posits there are certain nonscalable 'things' that can indeed refuse and overwrite scale projects, public participation was

impossible to scale because it could not exist without people's "transformative relations" with each other (Tsing, 2012, p. 515). Tsing's nonscalability embraces and traces heterogeneity, chaos, and contingency in 'scale' projects, which is a useful conceptual framework for teasing out how care ethics (Chapter 4) flowed through the planning system.

So, while scale intended to 'disrupt' planning democracy in response to political issues like planning reform and the housing crisis (Pham, 2024), after looking at the platforms and listening to the practitioners who used it, scale merely created a new product in planning: community data. As Tsing (2012) poignantly observes, scale is one way of conceptualising the world's resources in order to control and extract from it. It comes from a lineage of colonial and capitalistic understandings of world-making, one of progress, modernity, and growth (Tsing, 2012). The scale in digital engagement platforms was not too dissimilar to the kind that Tsing warns us about, despite its promises to *improve* democracy, which arguably was one notion of 'progress'. Its biggest impact was extracting as much data, information and knowledge out of community feedback, to benefit planners and developers, their customers. So, rather than democratising participation, platforms reinforced the "tick-box" culture of planning, while moralising their efficiency as democratic progress.

In this study, digital engagement platforms were an attempt to reflect and respond to a growing moral urgency in planning to create better and sustainable places for all. The political and business challenges facing practitioners required a solution that could provide immediate, efficient, and far-reaching results, so the scale logic was a compelling one politically because it promised to simplify the engagement process and reach a larger population. Through a critical examination of the nature of these worldviews, this chapter shines light on the worlds that practitioners hoped and promised to make and a glimpse into the worlds they ended up making.

Returning to my main thesis argument, which is planning issues are at its core about morality, the ways in which the practitioners addressed planning challenges like public distrust through digital engagement was imbued with moral concerns, such as how does one make planning democracy fairer and more just? This meant rethinking what democracy was about: for them, it was diversity and inclusion, getting as many people involved as possible, and they did this through the logic of scale. Scale as a concept helped illustrate the ability of digital engagement technology to increase democratic engagement in planning issues. It was used to make a moral argument about planning democracy. While digital engagement platforms deployed a technological logic, it projected a particular vision of planning democracy. The scale logic was a response to a moral urgency in planning, as a way of addressing the public distrust quickly and expansively.

In addition, understanding how planning practitioners and especially the PropTech companies envisioned 'community' in digital engagement provides us with insight into the datafication logics behind platform technology and its impact on planning democracy as we know it. Crucial to this was the extent to which the PropTech companies and their sets of logics influenced the definition of 'community', as well as what democracy was and should be. The scale logic in these engagement platforms allowed practitioners to manipulate data in order to tell a story and to gain public support either politically or officially through statutory requirements and therefore reconceptualise the participation and planning. How practitioners presented engagement data was incredibly important for the success of their development or planning projects. In the next chapter, I examine how digital engagement platforms took advantage of the legitimising role of engagement data and documentation in planning decisions, and how this, in effect, changed the way public participation was valued both in the politics and business of planning and property development.

Chapter 6 | The Enmeshment of Values

Chapter abstract

This chapter examines the promise of developing a new value system in planning through digital engagement platforms; a promise to create shared values and interest among industry and public stakeholders. This was made possible through a process of enmeshment where practitioners combined disparate, sometimes seemingly contradictory, values to form a new logic and justification for digitalising public participation. I first discuss the value propositions made about these platforms: 1) practitioners could recognise the "value of" community voices in decision-making and 2) better utilise community voices to "add value" to planning and development projects. Finally, I argue practitioners created a shared value system, in which the different values and motivations became mutually reinforcing. This analysis contributes to the urban theory of values by arguing values are a process of meaning making *within the planning practice.*

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Introduction: New planning values

During my fieldwork, I attended a renowned international academic conference for cities in the Oceania region, which connected a wide cohort of urban planners, urban social scientists, architects and urban designers. The theme was 'cities in transition', and as it usually goes for big conferences like this, it covered a wide range of issues from the COVID-19 pandemic to the housing and cost of living crisis, and new ways of designing, building, and managing cities more sustainably. Right from the start, there were discussions about the promises of cities and especially on urban governance and public participation.

The first panel session particularly caught my attention. From the programme, there did not seem to be a particular topic, but there was a recurring issue of *values*; it was a word that kept coming up. For instance, the panellists started off with a discussion about an indigenous territorial and historic rights over land in current urban planning and governance structures. The panel speakers were indigenous industry leaders in urban planning, and they debated about the planning system needing a drastic "paradigm shift" on what was "valued" in the development and management of cities. One of the panellists said business cases in property development are always about creating economic growth and opportunities, and less about "the value of community voices," he said. Instead, the speaker wanted to see cities as what he envisioned, "networks of villages" that optimised human and more-than-human health and created "thriving cities," mirroring very much a similar ethics of care I explored in Chapter 4.

When it came to the audience question time, one person, who appeared to be a built environment professional based on his tone of question, asked, "What can we do?" The same panellist responded, "Change has to be done through and within existing systems… through subtle changes." "Don't get fired, though," be beseeched. "Everybody has individual agency… [so] it's about convincing your colleagues about the value of community voices," he continued. As one of the first events, it certainly set the tone for the rest of the conference. There was a palpable political demand to change how planning was thought about and practiced. What was interesting in this case was industry professionals calling upon their own, as well as academics, to change planning values. While the conference was about cities 'in transition', it was really about values.

I open the chapter with this observation because it captured a desire for practitioners and academics across urban planning to change the status quo and the inherent logics that are assumed to be true about planning and governing cities. While it was specific to the Oceania

context, the discussion on values reflected the same call to action in England with improving 'trust and transparency' (Grosvenor, 2020). Of course, whether much change happened after this conference is a separate question. But what was clear was a change in values seemed to be critical to urbanists in improving cities, and that the values of the recent past and continuous present, primarily of the neoliberal kind that emphasised profit and economic growth over peoples' livelihoods, was not producing good enough places (see Tronto, 2017). Thus, after so long in this dominant value regime, practitioners felt motivated and a sense of responsibility (Chapter 4) to find new solutions for the impacts of such regime.

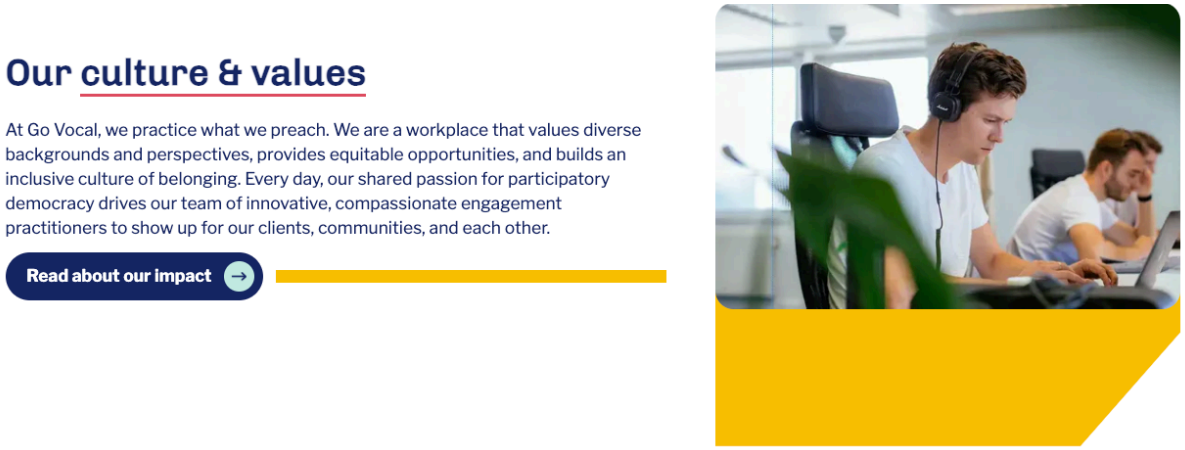
Echoing the conversations taking place at the conference, this chapter examines the promise of developing a new value system in planning through digital engagement platforms; it was a promise to create shared values and interest among industry and public stakeholders. While Chapters 4 and 5 examine the promises that digital engagement platforms offered, i.e., improving trust and relationships (Chapter 4) and increasing access to public participation (Chapter 5), in this chapter, digital engagement platforms were seen by practitioners as a catalyst for a whole new value system. For many of the practitioners, digital engagement platforms represented a move away from neoliberal planning principles (Gunder, 2010) and towards one that focused more on communities and democratic values like fairness and equity. However, financial considerations were still important, whether it was about working within budgets or maximising the 'return on investment'. Using digital engagement platforms as a medium to test a new value regime, practitioners developed one that brought to the forefront the benefits of community voices to the business, political, and social outcomes of planning and development, treating public participation as an economic *and* social 'asset'.

Key to this new value system was conceptualising planning in a different way, or rather, prioritising different issues, including thinking about the outcomes of digital engagement, the practitioners' roles in delivering this value change, and ultimately, the kind

of worlds they wanted to see for themselves and broader society. For example, in Figure 6.1, digital engagement technology company, Go Vocal, describe their corporate 'culture and values' as aligning with their products on promoting diversity, equity, and democracy.

Figure 6.1

PropTech Company Culture and Values



Note: Many digital engagement platforms declare their company 'values' on their websites, usually the company's mission and purpose. It can also describe how they wish to be perceived. In this case, Go Vocal is made up of "innovative, compassionate engagement practitioners", indicating to the audience (the clients) the type of digital product they provide is one that is genuinely interested in improving local democracy, hence "we practice what we preach" (Go Vocal, 2025b).

These technological changes in planning reform were therefore about *values*, the things that we carry with importance, which I will define in more detail shortly. The shift was leaning towards better utilising community voices in planning decision-making, seeing how they could be better 'valued' in the planning process. There was a logic among the planners, developers, and PropTech companies in this study in which valuing communities in the planning process would reduce project risk and optimise the chances of public and

application approval, while also making better planning and design decisions for people. This is what I call an enmeshed logic of democratic, social (or public) and economic values. In the next section (Thinking conceptually about values), I provide a full breakdown of these values. Because these values were mutually reinforcing, which caused the categories to become blurry, I structure the empirical analysis by the following:

1. Recognising the "value of" community voices using digital engagement platforms.
2. Digital engagement platforms "added value" to planning and property development.
3. Digital engagement platforms were an opportunity for different industry stakeholders to build "a common set of values".

The first two points describe what practitioners meant by values, which was, in effect, about assigning more importance to community voices through digital engagement platforms. The second part of the chapter covers the third point above, where I demonstrate value systems are the compounding of social or public and economic values, even when they appear to be contradictory. I further suggest moving away from a 'hierarchy' of planning values, and towards a framework of *enmeshment*. I approach values as a process of *meaning making,* by examining how digital engagement shaped new *value systems* (Appadurai, 1986) in planning, looking at what was considered important or a priority in planning and design proposals. The next section will elaborate on the theoretical discussions of value which form the analytical framework I use in the upcoming empirical sections.

Thinking conceptually about values

In the Literature Review (Chapter 2), housing scholars have argued that a multitude of values co-exist and compete against each other (McAuliffe & Rogers, 2019) and it is expected—or even healthy for democratic urban governance—that these incommensurable values conflict (Rogers & McAuliffe, 2023). Indeed politics, of any kind, but especially

planning politics, are defined by the debates on different values and the definition of these values (Graeber, 2013). To contribute to this body of literature, I investigate how values are considered in the digital engagement context and what I find is an attempt to *merge* them. Borrowing from anthropologist Tim Ingold's (2022) theory of creative entanglement, I call this the 'enmeshment of values', the process of enmeshing different kinds of values to create new meaning. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, enmeshment makes it possible for economic values to be dependent on creating social benefits and public interest, and for social and public value to bring economic benefit. Values are therefore a process of meaning making (Appadurai, 2009).

Graeber (2001) defines values as making actors and (their) actions *important,* which suggests they are not bounded by certain logics or disciplines. For example, economic values are deeply connected to other value systems, also known as "universes" (Scott, Archer, & Thaning, 2023; Graeber, 2013), such as personal and cultural or community values. Values also shape ethical and ontological presuppositions (Field, 2023; Rivers, 2023), which was explored in Chapter 4 in the ways practitioners viewed their professional and ethical roles in delivering *good* planning and property development outcomes. Values, in effect, influences the way practitioners understood the purpose of digital engagement platforms.

Anthropologist Terence Turner (2008) similarly recognises the role of people's "ideological representations of social reality" (p. 49), but in shaping economic value systems (or capitalistic production). In his re-reading of Marx's *Capital,* Turner suggests that economic values, as a kind of "material activity", are often considered objective feats, but really, are inextricably tied to the ideological experiences and motivations of those who write them. Value thus encompasses all aspects of social (and political) life that bring meaning into action (Graeber, 2001), and vice versa; value is both material and imagined (Simmel, 2011).

McAuliffe and Rogers take these discussions of value into urbanism, specifically to issues of urban development (McAuliffe & Rogers, 2019), public participation (McAuliffe & Rogers 2018), and housing (Rogers & McAuliffe, 2023), as I explored in Chapter 2. Following in their footsteps, I argue that by looking at emerging practices and technologies, like digital engagement platforms, through the study of values, we can get to grips with what exactly was the proposition behind these digital engagement platforms and dismantle the planning hegemony of creating 'social value' and 'public good'.

However, before I analyse values in the digitalisation of public participation, a brief note on what kind of values I refer to is necessary. The values in circulation here generally related to democratic values (which involved utilising the individual and subjective values of communities), social and environmental values, economic value, and briefly technocratic values[1]. In Table 6.1, each of these values bring forward different value statements and assumptions about the world.

Table 6.1

Values in Circulation

Value Type	Value Statements 'in Action'
Individual and subjective values	Communities have meaningful insight about their local areas
Democratic values	Practitioners should recognise and amplify community voices in public participation
Social and environmental value	Improved participation will bring positive outcomes to people and the planet
Technocratic values	Practitioners identify and translate topics that communities find important through public engagement methods
Economic values	Improved participation will reduce project risk and optimise decisions and built outcomes

[1] In PropTech and the longer term private rental market, Maalsen et al. (2024) similarly examine the different forms of value—economic, social, and techno-utopian—that circulate variably between tenant advocates, and real estate and property development actors.

Note: A list of value types in circulation, plus simplified example statements of how they are represented in the empirical analysis.

However, through my empirical analysis, all value types described above intersected and merged in different ways and to varying degrees. By laying out the different value groups, I aim to problematise these boundaries. The contribution of this chapter is redefining values in urban and planning theory more conceptually.

Instead, the definition of value that I have formulated is largely drawn from Graeber's (2001, 2012) theorisation of value. I further tease it out by dividing it into three areas: it is the process and outcome of making *things* (behaviours, actions, objects, events, attributes, etc.) 1) important, 2) worthwhile, and 3) meaningful.

Important infers an ordinal or ranking system. To differentiate between things that could be dismissed or put on hold and things that require urgent attention is an act of putting greater value on one thing over the next. Most of the moral value principles we talk about inherently have a level of importance to them. Similarly, for products that are expensive or considered 'good quality' they are described as *having* high value, or the value as *being* high. They might even be called *invaluable*, something that is so expensive or important, it cannot be quantified.

Worthwhile puts an action to the thing that is supposedly valuable (or not). Is it *worth* investing time and money into it? Based on level of importance, worthiness decides *how much effort* goes into the associated activities around the object of value.

Meaningful refers to the greater worldview or "universes" that hold certain values in place, perhaps in amongst or drawing upon aspects of other value systems (Graeber, 2011). For example, being a *good citizen* speaks to other sorts of value systems that make claims on gender, class or socio-economic status, and ethnicity and nationality.

While in the following sections I neatly organise the main expressions of values driving digital engagement platforms (i.e., the "value of" and "adding value"), I argue these values are not so different from each other and the boundaries between them are blurry as they are mutually reinforcing in their logic. As such, I use the above definition of values to investigate what was deemed *important, worthwhile,* and *meaningful* to the practitioners involved in developing and deploying these engagement platforms.

The first noticeable value proposition I will examine was the idea of understanding the "value of" community feedback in the planning process and delivering democratic engagement.

The "value of" community voices

One of the main concerns for practitioners was how community voices contributed to the quality of development proposals and design. Academics have called this creating 'public value' through participatory design and decision-making (Healey, 2018). As I explored in Chapter 2, public value is what "a community of citizens in some form, have come to 'care about' collectively and seek to produce and sustain as qualities and resources available to them" (Healey, 2018, p. 66). Participation is about providing the space for the public to express and debate their concerns with the planners and developers (Healey, 2018) and therefore create public value, which practitioners in this study sought to achieve through digital engagement platforms.

In the preceding chapters, I have demonstrated there was an argument being made throughout the industry about the system only benefitted those who had the time and knowledge (privilege) to participate, despite the statutory requirement to consult and engage with relevant communities. In other words, they were failing to capture the 'average person' (see Chapter 5). Better understanding broader community needs was central to the digital

engagement platform mission towards an improved planning democracy. The value of public participation in a way lay in capturing the multitude of individual and subjective values.

First, I will explore the idea of understanding community voices as an asset to development proposals; they were considered fundamental "decision-makers" in planning. Following this, I will examine how datafication, which digital engagement platforms afforded, helped legitimise community voices in the decision-making process. In both accounts, practitioners wanted to change the way communities were treated and implemented within the planning decision-making process.

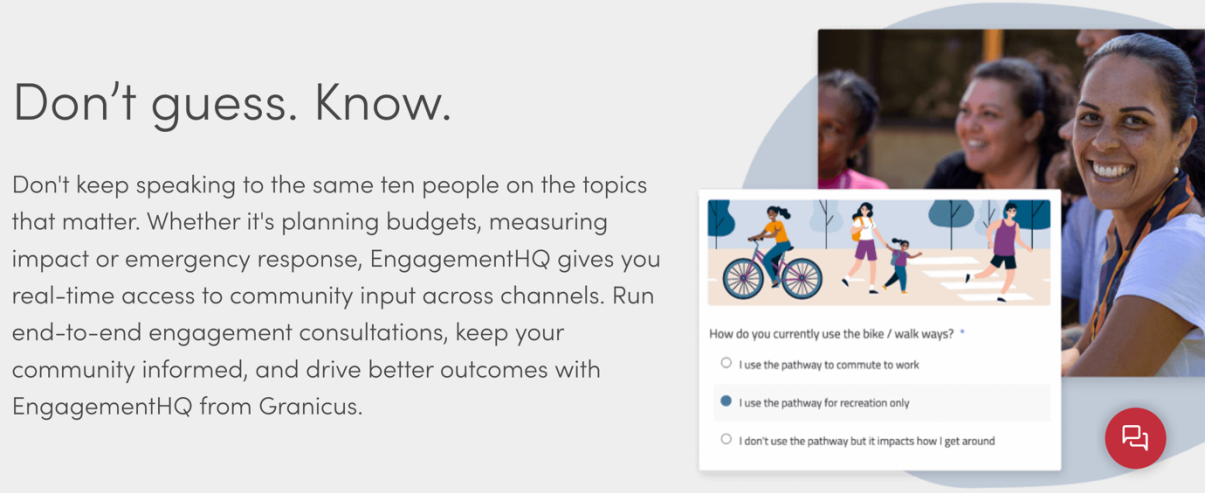
Practitioners considered the public as an important part of planning decision-making, not because it was a legal requirement, but their insights could improve planning outcomes, although there were some differences between the public and private sectors on whose 'expertise' was prioritised. While I explored this to an extent in Chapter 4, such as how the practitioners recognised the benefits of listening to the community in a self-interested way (i.e., it increased the chances of getting planning approval), here, practitioners debated and grappled with the kind of contribution they envisioned the public making. Figure 6.2, for example, shows how this concern was often promoted in digital engagement platforms. EngagementHQ, formerly Bang the Table and now owned by the U.S. information technology company Granicus, state on their website that by engaging with more people, authorities can better identify issues that matter to people.

The PropTech Engagement Fund, which I introduced in Chapter 4, similarly emphasised changing the way communities were involved in decision-making. At one of the showcase events that took place at the end of the project round, the lead convenor stated that better decision-making required "understand[ing] what people value and need". In fact, the PropTech Engagement Fund explicitly asked Council planners to develop or use digital engagement technology to improve how they captured and analysed community voices to

make better decisions. The vision behind the funding was for decisions to better reflect the public's needs, desires, and sentiment about places, which again, was their understanding of planning democracy, having diverse voices represented.

Figure 6.2

Don't Guess, Know



Note: EngagementHQ state on their website they help practitioners make informed decisions by collecting robust data, i.e., reaching more than "the same ten people" (Granicus, 2023a). Another recurring theme was the idea of engaging with people on issues they cared about, on things that "mattered" to them. The insinuation is that digital engagement platforms bring out what is most important to people, which will then inform the best decisions.

Several months before this event, I interviewed a Council planner who was one of the recipients of this PropTech engagement funding. We talked a lot about how communities were perceived among planners and developers and issues with the relationship between them. In her practice, she believed that all types of people, especially the vocal ones, or what she described as "incredibly passionate and really engaged", were a "gift" to them (Planner 1B, interview, November 29, 2022). But unfortunately, she noticed these community groups who had strong opinions or cared deeply about their local area tended to be sidelined by

practitioners, cast colloquially as “the usual suspects” because of their high engagement and knowledge in the planning system. “Too often those people are... not valued, [they’re] not recognised,” she said. She found this quite insulting as they played an important role in planning decision-making. For example,

> … no one else is in that room in the middle of the weekday, you know, fighting for the cause of their community group. So yeah, I think, obviously, it's important to hear from everyone, but I hadn't really considered how offensive that term [“the usual suspects”] could be to people [who] are really passionate and are really trying to understand the sort of maze that has been made for them. And they're not often—I don't think—their contribution is sometimes respected that much. But they are fulfilling a really important function. (Planner 1B, interview, November 29, 2022)

The issue was local authorities wanted more people to engage, but not so much that the communities would object to the plans. The irony was “if you're having your sort of voice heard as an engaged citizen, then you're sort of being a bit annoying…you're just a bit, you know, causing trouble” (Planner 1B, interview, November 29, 2022). She felt Council planners wanted people who would happily acquiesce and engage on their terms, but this was not good enough for her. The planning system needed to change how community voices were integrated in planning decisions. The reason she applied for funding from DLUHC’s PropTech Engagement Fund was she believed digital technology could help demonstrate the value of local community participation. While she knew there were certainly communities who were intentionally difficult (i.e., NIMBYism), most of the time people just wanted to get involved and they had valuable things to say. Digital engagement could help them embrace the “passionate” locals as well as those who did not usually engage. She elaborated,

> You can't ask, you know, [the] everyday person or…a young person or somebody…working full time to actually read a 400-page document and then go and sit in the town hall and, you know, debate that piece of policy in the middle of the day. So, I think…there's lots of different people that need to be involved in various ways at different stages. (Planner 1B, interview, November 29, 2022)

The head of engagement for Sydney-based property development firm, who was a big supporter of digital engagement platforms, agreed with the Council planner's statements. In fact, his company specialised in driving 'social value' through development and worked a lot with Councils. He said the "benefit" of digital engagement was that they could "hear different things from people". For instance,

> When you spoke to the residents who were—I don't know, if you spoke to the Friends of the Park [local community group], their main issue would be the park. If you spoke to a councillor who happened to be the school governor, his issue would be the school. If you spoke to another councillor who lived on a busy road or represented a ward with a busy road, it would be traffic and parking, things like that. (Developer 2A, interview, March 17, 2023)

Mirroring the Council planner's reflections earlier, the property developer here also recognised the value of different perspectives of the community. By documenting the different views and priorities expressed by a larger population, they could gain a better understanding of what was needed of the space and how they could design it so that it was relevant and appealed to many future occupants and users of the site, rather than just the few who regularly attended in-person consultations, for instance. Again, it fed into the notion of making 'informed decisions'. Before the digital technologies were made available specifically for public participation, he said,

> You [would] only hear the views that the vocal minority were advocating for; whereas once you spoke to the silent majority you began to find new things that didn't necessarily come to the fore in your conversations with people like local councillors or residents' associations. It might be a high amount of crime or the fact that they wanted more space for cycling or things like that, things that you didn't necessarily hear about from just having conversations with the usual people. (Developer 2A, interview, March 17, 2023)

The Council planner further said, a "mind shift" needed to happen to value communities properly as they were at the heart of decision-making. To complement this, a DLUHC civil servant articulated their big vision for the PropTech Engagement Fund as: "We are all decision makers—if we re-establish who has power and who can have power" (Government 1A, interview, January 14, 2022).

Not all developers agreed with this, though. In Sydney, I spoke to the head of engagement for a private property development firm who believed they (the built environment professionals) were the experts and saw public participation purely as supporting evidence for the proposals. Practitioners were the "true" experts in this due to their technical knowledge, the same for Councils for being "well attuned" with communities (Developer 2A, interview, March 17, 2023). For them, community engagement was effectively a method of cementing or sound boarding with the public which concepts or ideas were worthy of pursuing further. He said these ideas would usually be examined and qualified by the "experts" prior to public consultation. He justified this because in his experience, planners and developers had a "good idea" of what some of the key concerns were among the community, so his team rarely received any new feedback which they had not considered before. Of course, opposition happened, he said, but even when they did, the Councils were "reasonably responsive" and had good processes in place to adjust the plans

accordingly as it was in their political interest to do so, to avoid further delays (Developer 2A, interview, March 17, 2023).

The developer here reinforced planners carry the expertise in planning knowledge and were the ones who were best positioned to implement them given their 'specialised' training in public participation (Friedmann, 2000), whereas communities are treated as empirical evidence for plans or proposals. Because public perspectives were taken into consideration without necessarily any observations, they have an "a priori existence" in the planning process (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2022, p. 13). The "value" that they offer to planning is, in the crudest sense of the word, *extracted* from them, the information that they provided was processed by the 'experts' and finally packaged as a public consultation document or report (see Rydin & Natarajan, 2016).

On the one hand, developers and PropTech companies viewed the value of communities in terms of how well their feedback could support their expert decisions, whereas Council planners and other (more 'socially conscious') developers found value in community's opinions for providing different insight from the technocratic viewpoint. Yet, despite conflicting ideas about who was the expert and decision-maker and thus the kind of input the public were expected to make, community voices were key in at least *playing* democracy. Practitioners were impelled to make a strong case for their proposals, and conducting public participation was essential to this.

Thus, through "better informed decision-making" developed from 'objective' means of collecting and analysing community feedback, digital engagement platforms helped practitioners build legitimacy and authority. Datafication played a leading role in this. As I explored in Chapter 5, one of the Unique Selling Point (USP) of digital engagement platforms was planners and developers could not only now reach more people, but a more diverse group of people. This, to them, was a marker for better democratic planning, a more

representative public consultation. And it brought about a level of legitimacy, in which the public feedback gathered from these platforms was not a 'fluke' or a result of very focused engagement with select members of the public. Rather, it reflected a wider public, and importantly, of the many different perspectives in a community. The fact that platforms could engage with a lot more people than traditional methods (such as phone calling, flyers, postal letter, townhall meetings, etc.) itself gave community feedback a level of legitimacy in ways that practitioners argued had not been possible in the past, at least to the same extent.

This diversification of and increase in engagement feedback was phrased as "unlocking the potential of big data…to help [practitioners] understand [their] cities and communities" (Harvest Engagement, 2024). While in Chapter 5, more data meant more ways to interpret and manipulate information, from a values point of view, it meant they could make *more informed* decisions for both the public and the practitioners, leading to positive results like public support.

The digital engagement platform, Urban Intelligence, for example, offers ways to identify sites for development, using an algorithm that surveys multiple land use databases at a time. On their website, they claim their product, PlaceMaker, is a "revolutionary way of demonstrating that "no stone has been left unturned" in the search for suitable land for development" (Urban Intelligence, 2024a). Not only did these platforms advertise themselves as a more thorough consultation method than traditional forms of engagement since they could scan large amounts of data in a short time, but they were also considered an 'objective' source of knowledge as, at least theoretically, they were 'unselective' in what information they analysed, being able to scour *all of it.* These platforms were considered an objective and "neutral" actor between the public and industry stakeholders.

The idea of objectivity was also advanced by the fact these digital engagement platforms were third party suppliers, albeit hired by planners or developers to deliver their

public consultation obligations. PropTech CEO and founder of a popular digital engagement platforms in the UK, who I introduced in Chapter 5, said these platforms provide a neutral voice as it acts as a moderator between what he called the "enraged" or "emotional" public and the "defensive" planners. He said his platform sat somewhere between the "kind of nervous acceleration of conversation on social media and the bureaucratic administrative processes" (PropTech 1E, interview, May 5, 2023). All of this was wrapped up in creating more meaningful, relevant, qualified engagement, whether it was about producing "data that matters" (Engagement Hub, 2024b) or "quality, credible insights" (The Future Fox, 2023). These were value-laden statements about improving public participation using digital engagement platforms, a reliable and legitimate device that captured the 'real' voices of the people.

However, it was not all ideological. There was also an economic motivation behind it. Valuing the public's experience and opinions about the relevant site on which planning and development proposals were being made would ultimately reduce the chances of public opposition at the statutory engagement phase as well as ensure their proposals met public demand, previously examined through an ethical framework (Chapter 4). Better understanding the public's needs gave planning practitioners more assurance about the success of their development proposals. In the next section, I will examine the value that digital engagement platforms *added* to planning project, where we will begin to see the merging of democratic and social or public values with economic values.

"Adding value" and reducing risk

Digital engagement platforms commonly appealed to planners and developers as it made participation easier and more convenient to gather *important* data on communities. In other words, they could complete their public participation phase faster *and* get better results.

Here, I examine the ‘value’ that digital engagement platforms ‘added’ to the planning or development project, both in terms of value for money and long-term financial benefits. Whereas the previous section was about recognising and declaring (or making visible) the value of community insight, in this section there was also a very real economic benefit. Having robust, well documented and clear and consistent communication with the public reduced the risk of public objection. But, as I walk through the logic of ‘adding value’, the rhetoric was still closely tied to a democratic and social value message, that completing projects sooner required a genuine interest in providing benefits to the community.

Digital engagement platforms had the unique ability to gain “community buy-in”, according to VU.CITY (2025) on their main landing page. Many practitioners that I spoke to who worked on digital engagement similarly argued it was simply better for business for them to go out and do ‘proper’ or ‘good’ engagement because it reduced the risk of it going sour (such as when developers fail to listen to communities). Early public consultation, for instance, was one method of achieving this, which fit in with the strategy of respect and clear communication that I explored in Chapter 4. The benefit of digital engagement was, as a planning consultant told me, being able to “respond to community needs and desires” as well as “mitigate risk… If you can do something that gets the community on site early, it helps mitigate the risk of opposition later on” (Consultant 2D, interview, June 15, 2023). This planning consultant found that being responsive to public opposition and feedback, rather than dismissive, created better results; the greater the chance of getting planning approval or public support, the less costly the projects would be:

> I think if you—if you're successfully engaging with your community, they'll keep coming back. They'll keep participating, they'll keep, you know, involving themselves in decision making, and it's building that relationship between government and community. And if they keep coming back, it means not only have you built that

> relationship, but you've built a meaningful relationship that's trusted and respected as well… But from a project angle, it's eliminating risk. You know, having a good public engagement practice means that when you actually deliver or implement something, it's [a] reflection of all [the] stakeholders in the community. So, there's less chance of conflict or resistance or, you know, delays, or any of those sorts of things that you might find if you hadn't actually engaged with the community. So, it's a real way to manage and minimise risk. (Consultant 2D, interview, June 15, 2023)

Interesting here was the way the participant talked extensively about maintaining good relationships with communities and making sure they felt they were heard throughout the consultation process, but it was also, when it came to the crux of it, better business (Chapter 4). Addressing community needs and concerns was part of doing good business. PropTech companies shared a similar line of logic, for example, on the VU.CITY information page for developers, they state, "GOODBYE GUESSWORK And goodbye risks and prohibitive costs" (VU.CITY, 2025c, original capitalisation).

Private developers who were commercial and profit-driven were interested in digital engagement platforms because the community feedback data tested public demand for aspects of their development proposal, treating the public as future "customers". At least rhetorically, it contributed to the speculation of the proposed development site, given that using digital engagement data could help gauge the type of amenities or built features that might appeal to future users; thus, designing for future occupancy and use. This was reflected in the following statement by UK-based PropTech Manager,

> Nothing has been more important than knowing what people think about spaces… Consultation historically was a tick box exercise to show that you weren't a dick. Whereas now, it's actually really critical… If you can work out early on that you can

> sell 3000 apartments to first-time buyers by taking them on a virtual tour before you even get planning permission. That derisks the entire project. If you can present to an investor a very low-risk project, you can borrow money for less. You can borrow more money to do what you want, because people will be like, I've got all this approved. This is what's going to happen. (PropTech 1C, interview, January 26, 2022)

In our interview, the PropTech manager also explained some of the ways their technology helped developers and Councils identify new opportunity areas, such as women's perceived street safety. He said that understanding this better as built environment professionals not only improved women's experiences walking alone at night, but they could design and develop entire social and economic infrastructures around these safety concerns. Women's safety was an opportunity for development:

> There's a way you can design spaces—I remember doing at university things like lighting. So, if you light the public realm from the ground up, it creates less shadows. We're all scared of the dark. So, people are less likely to walk that way. Also, we're all more likely to walk past schools on our way home, because we all feel safer near schools. So, the way people navigate through space is designed like that. Now, there's a way you can make people feel safer. There's also a way you can monetise that. So, if you know that everyone is going to walk preferably by a school when you're designing a master plan, you can make that the main thoroughfare. But you can also then make that your main retail unit. You can get higher rent because you know that's where people are going to walk, because they feel safe and comfortable in your space. So, for me, there's a huge amount that we can do. (PropTech 1C, interview, January 26, 2022)

There was a lot at play in the above quote on the different values. The social or public value piece on women's safety was stated in the same breath as commercial opportunity, increasing rent and designating retail space along the "safe" walking streets! Values were beginning to merge in a deeply entangled way. Not too dissimilar to the planning consultant earlier, he addressed the economic value of reaching out to communities and understanding their demands.

The economic value of community voices was especially apparent in how practitioners talked about it as part of risk aversion in the planning or development 'project' framework. Their main concerns were, firstly, that public dismissal or protest would halt the progress of the project, causing financial constraints (i.e., more money being spent on designing, consulting, or developing the proposal again); and secondly, the risk of designing something that was not relevant or appealing to the "future customers" and occupants of the project or site, resulting in potential loss in revenue, profits or a wasted resourcing. Digital engagement was valuable to the practitioners as it safeguarded their work and, in their eyes, the benefits both to themselves and the communities whom they served. But what was interesting in these economic logics was that although it was of course self-serving (see Chapter 4), practitioners really did emphasise the value that digital engagement added to places for the public. Economic values were therefore just as important as social or public value. While I speak to them separately in this chapter, they were difficult to disentangle because it was part of an emerging planning narrative around creating 'shared interest', or else, a common set of values.

PropTech for good? A common set of values

The big promise of digital engagement platforms was that it would benefit all actors involved, from the public sector to private property developers, to the communities.

Practitioners wanted to challenge the existing status quo of planning and participation value principles, as well as how it was valued financially or in the business sense. They wanted to see a new way of doing public participation that engaged with more people and communicated better to the public. At the same conference that I opened this chapter with, one of the keynote speakers called upon the conference delegates to practice "epistemic disobedience," which was the idea of changing the hegemonic narrative, or what was previously hegemonic, namely technocratic 'expert' participation, and away from neoliberal planning and what that represented (inequality, deregulation, etc.) more broadly. The speaker proposed a value system that benefited all stakeholders, applying the social and public values (better representing the public's needs) with economic values (extending the build life and 'return on investment'). In fact, economic values were sometimes understood as being a social good.

Mirroring this call to action, this section illustrates how intertwined these values were and the ways in which they were absolved, almost melded together to create an entirely new logic in which social, political, and economic values were one and the same. I lay out the "common set of values" that practitioners created to acknowledge the shared interest among the different stakeholders. In particular, the public-private partnership that was set up between the digital engagement technology providers, planning consultants, Councils, and property developers, lent itself well to this cross-sectoral approach. I argue these were signs of an emerging value system in planning and participation, an attempt to align planning value principles of democracy, fairness, and equity with financial or investment value systems.

For the most part, public and private sector actors in this study wanted the same outcomes and were equally concerned about public feedback. While some Councils fixated on costs and budgeting, property developers prioritised community perspectives in their decision-making process and on developing long-term relationships with their tenants or

occupants. The new value system also recognised that the public and private sectors were equally private or publicly driven, but from different vantage points in the planning system. There was no separation between them all.

The planning consultant I spoke to earlier argued it was not useful understanding the stakeholders as either private or public sectors but rather as sets of logics, given there was much cross-over in motivations and ways of understanding planning and their roles in it (Consultant 2D, interview, June 15, 2023). From her understanding, Councils, developers, and even PropTech companies had similar ways of thinking about and measuring importance. When I asked her about the differences between public and private organisations and the way they treated public engagement in her experience, she said that private companies, although fiscally motivated, they worked in a public-centric way by advocating for the "public's interest" (Consultant 2D, interview, June 15, 2023).

She further stated that most of her clients were genuinely interested in utilising public involvement and hearing the public's opinions and responses. For instance, they would integrate engagement into the design process, as opposed to doing it after as a requirement once the designs had been decided upon. Private companies tended to do this as part of their social value offering, following Environment, Social, Governance (ESG) investment criteria, which I address later. And, certainly, they were product-driven, so private developers wanted to create something that interested communities. But while a significant motivator of this was risk management, private companies also sought to create sustainable community development. The planning consultant believed there was an ethical choice here, perhaps not all the time, in fact, she stated it was a rare occurrence. She said, "There aren't a lot of private clients who come in and say, 'We want to do engagement, and we want to do it because we think it's the right thing to do.'" But it did happen from time to time. They tended to be "the

most innovative and the most interesting types of engagement" (Consultant 2D, interview, June 15, 2023).

Being a public or private organisation was not so clearcut in terms of values and motivations for using digital engagement platforms. Both were equally interested in providing good outcomes for the public while also cost saving, only one was about staying within budget (Councils) while the other was maximizing profits (developers). Digital engagement platforms likewise engaged with the public-private binary. However, as a private sector and third-party entity who were *supplying* the digital engagement technology, they had a vested interest in doing what their clients wanted, such as reinforcing their clients' values, which included both public/private aspects.

In an extended statement, the UK civil servant observed that it was important for all industry partners involved in the PropTech Engagement Fund to embody both kinds of mentalities to deliver a better planning democracy:

> [The] private [sector is] all about profit—like you have to have profit to survive, to hire and create... [whereas] public is all around public good and not having profit… [although] you still have to have profit to survive but you can't be a profit-driven business. You have to be a public-driven business. But I think those worlds are starting to merge as those players recognise they have to work together… The private sector are driven by profit, but if they don't start serving the general public they're not going to be able to generate profit for five plus years. The public sector has to be driven by public benefit but if they don't start making money to survive, they're not going to be here in five years. So actually [thinking publicly and privately] are both super complementary—and there's a big question around who is prepared to take different types of risk. But I think yeah, it's a challenge but I think also it's the

> greatest opportunity because they both bring a different element to the table. (Government 1A, interview, January 14, 2022)

In this quote, economic and socially or politically oriented values were in a way flattened, at least in the sense that the distinction between public and private was not important since both sectors valued the same things. This shows an attempt by practitioners to move away from "competing values" and stakeholder or sectoral differences and rather focus on the similarities between them, and by doing the latter, they realised their values were not so different at all—perhaps different in their rhetorical expression or metric and practice, but ultimately, developers, Councils, consultants, and digital engagement platforms were all interested in getting public support on plans and proposals and building places that were relevant and desirable for people. As one planning consultant stated, "Some people just want to make money; some people just want to have a social impact; most people are somewhere in between" (Consultant 1A February 22, 2022).

There was some pushback on emphasising too much economic value, though. Government 1A, for instance, said that at its core digital engagement is about "social purpose and value" and economic values should not be the lead driver:

> If those companies are just taking the profits and reinvesting them back in their own bottom business line and are not sharing the financial benefit with their community or the real community, then we've just missed a huge, huge opportunity to rebuild trust. (Government 1A, interview, January 14, 2022)

'Shared interest' was in fact the main message behind the UK's PropTech Engagement Fund, which specifically sought to incentivise and stoke collaboration and partnerships between the different industry stakeholders. The Showcase events I mentioned earlier were referred to as a "matchmaking exercise" for the public sector and PropTech stakeholders. DLUHC wanted to

create an “ecosystem” of support through the Fund, in which each of the different sets of actors played a particular role but altogether provided mutual benefits. As a caveat, however, explored in Chapter 5, there were some grievances by Councils about these arrangements in practice who said they felt like most of the funding went towards purchasing access to these platforms.

Another council planner was worried that this new value system would be misappropriated by private companies and there needed to be a fundamental change in government funding and investment. In fact, she recommended Mazzucato’s book *The Value of Everything* to me in our interview as she wanted to emphasise the role of government in driving innovation and change, clearly inspired by Mazzucato's (2018) call for governments to define and deliver value. Mazzucato (2018) has talked about redefining what is important in people’s lives and using this to drive economic policy change. It brought home the impact of values in which, as Mazzucato argues, public value is “not created exclusively inside or outside a private-sector market, but rather by a whole society” (p. 265). This requires a societal (at least industry-wide planning) mental shift and rethinking of what is *important, worthwhile and meaningful*, and this, in turn, “shapes markets” (p. 265).[2] For Mazzucato (2018), the hope is that public and private sectors and “all the institutions in between, nourish and reinforce each other in pursuit of the common goal of economic value creation” (p. 268), mirroring the DLUHC’s ecosystem approach. This was especially apparent in how digital engagement platforms represent themselves on their websites as ‘social impact’ companies. This idea has been dubbed as ‘PropTech for Good’.

[2] Barnfield (2024) and Moisio & Rossi (2024) likewise argue States have an important role in creating economic values and by extension cultural and moral values.

As a product, PropTech companies embodied the new value system by claiming to be social impact companies. The rise in value metrics and criteria such as Social Value, ESG investment criteria, and B-Corp were important to practitioners. One website, describing their own platform, said they were a "BUSINESS AS A FORCE FOR GOOD" (Engagement Hub, 2024a, original capitalisation). Similarly, CitizenLab (later rebranded as Go Vocal) also became B-Corp certified, which they said on their old website they were now part of "community of changemakers who are working collectively to address society's most critical challenges" (CitizenLab, 2023).

'Social Value' or 'Social Impact' was about creating value for communities through collective decision-making. The aim was to develop, again, shared interest among the public and industry actors. In a slightly different way but still in semi-finance speak, Granicus (the same parent company of digital engagement platform Bang the Table) states their digital solutions will "enhance social capital" (Granicus, 2023). ESG guidance was another framework that combined all the different 'interests' by making it economically valuable. This was led by a mission to change what was considered 'valuable' by redefining what was important for future people and places to thrive more sustainably. The logic is as follows: by creating financial incentives around more equitable and just planning participation, for example, social and governance factors would in effect become more important throughout the corporate or management 'culture', changing the business metrics of success.

PropTech companies claimed to be different from the typical for-profit growth models and were instead "socially conscious" as a PropTech manager described them (PropTech 1A, interview, June 22, 2023). In the same way that planners and developers were aware of the public distrust towards them, technology companies were equally careful about how they represented themselves to their clients and the public, focusing on the discourse of democracy, community, and collaboration.

For example, Built-ID, now acquired by LandTech, stated on their old website, “As a social impact tech company we want to make the world better for communities and empower diverse voices to be at the centre of changemaking.” Figure 6.3 is a screenshot taken from their homepage of an illustration that imagines how the social and economic values might co-exist and as a result align with each other.

Figure 6.3

Profit for Good

Note: ESG and ‘profit for good’ companies claim to combine social and economic value and benefits (Built-ID, 2023c).

Built-ID continue, “Whilst profitability allows us to make a huge impact; to achieve our full potential, we must place as much priority on social & environmental impact” (Built-ID, 2023b). The company became B-Corp certified, which is a corporate accreditation that measures a company’s social and environmental impact and commitment to improving workplace ‘culture’ (for example, diversity and inclusion, work-life balance, etc.). When they did this, they announced on their website:

> We are a team of passionate individuals unified by our mission to build trust, more sustainable and inclusive places. Our aim is to empower community members to have an equal voice in decision-making; regardless of their social-economic background.

> Most importantly, we are a social impact company who put people at the heart of everything we do. We want to engage and empower diverse voices to be a core part of the change process. This is why becoming an accredited B Corporation was a no brainer. It validates our purpose and challenges us to not be complacent in our mission. (Built-ID, 2023b)

As this quote suggests, digital engagement platforms were a response to a new value system where democratic, social, and economic values were equally important. It was not even the fact that they were equally endowed with significance, but that they were mutually reinforcing, that without one or the other, these values would diminish. These PropTech companies embodied this rhetoric. The values in planning and participation were not separate logics or belief systems which different groups of actors held, and as a result, had fundamentally different objectives from each other. Rather, the values driving digital engagement platforms were shared and spread throughout the different corners of the planning and development systems. The common set of values, I argue, was derived from a 'meshwork' (Ingold, 2010) of social or public, democratic, and economic values, *enmeshed* with the same outcomes in mind: to create suitable and long-lasting places.

The enmeshment of values: Making meaningful engagement

The discussion on values in this chapter thus far has defined the *value of* community voices and how this *adds to* planning and development projects by legitimising them. I then demonstrated how these values were shared among different actors within the industry. Practitioners claimed that engaging better with people through these platforms produced both democratic legitimacy and market advantage. The new metric of success depended not simply on collecting community input, but on visibly demonstrating their input had shaped outcomes. In this final section, I discuss the implications of the common set of values, or

'enmeshed' value system on urban planning and participation, particularly on how new meaning is created. Digital engagement platforms inspired an ideal about public participation among the practitioners in which it was both an economic and social 'asset', and importantly, all sectors were interested in this.

To reiterate the value propositions that I have laid out in this chapter, by taking the communities more seriously in planning decision-making (using digital engagement platforms), better design decisions could be made for the public, meaning project risk would be reduced and the chances of planning and public approval was optimised. Practitioners combined different values to not only make sense of digital engagement platforms and the reasons for doing it, but to also resolve the public distrust issue running throughout the thesis. In effect, it merged elements of economic and social or political values, making the boundaries between them difficult to disentangle.

Here, I suggest moving away from a 'hierarchy' of planning values, explored in the Literature Review (Chapter 2) on values, and towards a framework of *enmeshment* to capture how permeable value concepts can become, to mean many things at the same time. Inspired by Ingold's (2022) theory of creative entanglements on knowledge and meaning making where instead of seeing webs of relationships, i.e. connections between points A and B like Bruno Latour (2005) has famously proposed in actor-network theory, things come into being through an overlapping *meshwork* of events, ideas, and objects. Enmeshment works similarly to Lévi-Strauss' (2004) theory of cultural 'bricolage', a term that he borrowed from the visual arts to describe the merging of disparate objects and imagery. Lévi-Strauss (2004), however applied it to meaning making (or what he termed cultural 'myths'). In cultural and knowledge production, he argues people create new meaning from existing signs and concepts (Lévi-Strauss, 2004). In a similar way, Ingold's meshwork metaphor explores how knowledge is a result of different ideas coming together. These theories allow for knowledge that might come

across as contradictory to fit quite seamlessly together because of the ability of different logics and values to absolve into each other.

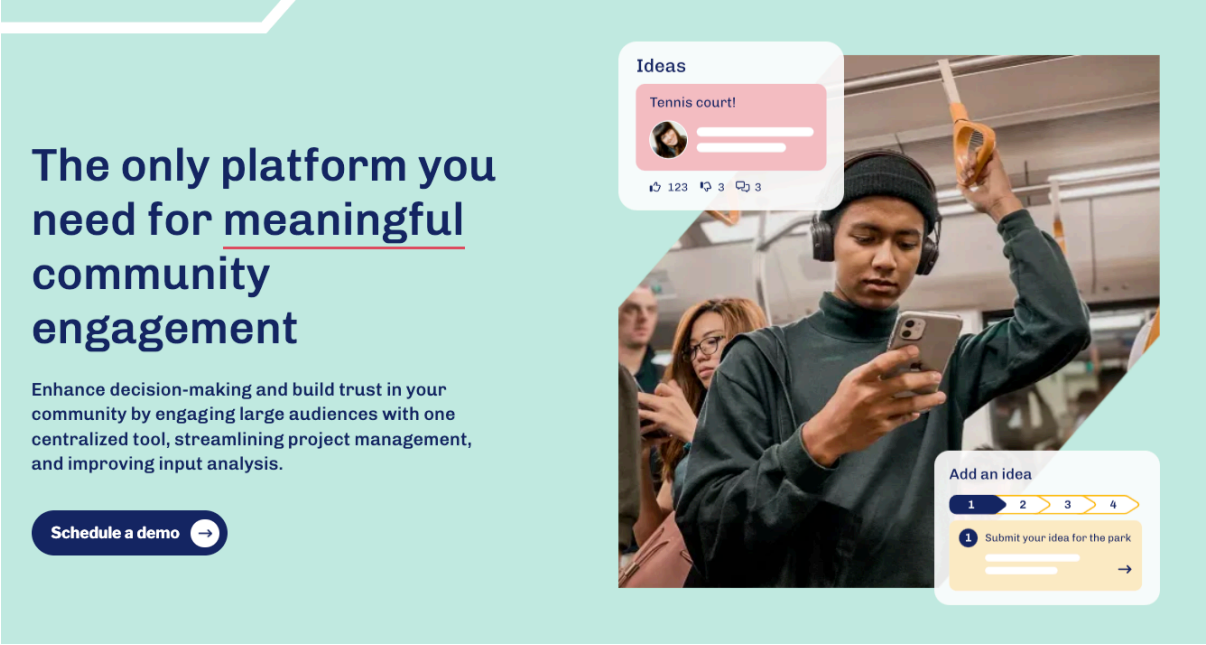
The empirical analysis above contributes to the issue of value regimes in urbanism (McAuliffe & Rogers, 2019; Troy et al., 2024) by exploring PropTech in public participation. In critical urbanism, value regimes have been positioned as being at odds with each other (Clua-Losada, 2024; McAuliffe & Rogers, 2019; Rogers & McAuliffe, 2023; Troy et al., 2024). Research in planning similarly reports on planning authorities' unsuccessful attempt at deploying a 'progressive' values-based framework, only to reinforce hegemonic neoliberal use values of land (Oulahen, 2023), although these values are not always incompatible (Clark, 2021). Yet, in the digitalisation of public participation, the values with which practitioners engaged prioritised both social and public "good", as well as reducing project risk, which in a circular way was understood as being in the public's interest. Ideas of creating democratic and social value are combined with business logics to make them mutually reinforcing, for example Figure 6.4.

Returning to my earlier definition, value is inherently an ordinal system of importance or priority, expressed as a level of worthiness, i.e., what is considered worthy of investment. Whatever falls under this definition can change according to the political situation, whether it is democratic, social and public value, or economic, or a combination of both as was the case in this chapter. Values are political in nature because they debate the meaning of things, why we do things and what is important (Graeber, 2001). However, instead of understanding value systems as discrete entities with distinct rationales and messages, I argue values and their larger systems can become absolved. People can merge different forms of value because it does not really matter whether they believe in these realities, or what Graeber (2013) calls *cosmologies*, rather it produces actions and outcomes, it "brings universes into being" (Graeber, 2013, p. 231). Politics is not necessarily a competition of values, but, as seen in the

digital engagement context, examining the *promises being made publicly,* values became enmeshed as different industry actors attempted to unite. As a political force, it aligned different sectors as each of their key priorities or interests were considered and integrated into the new value system.

Figure 6.4

Meaningful Community Engagement



Note: This image captures the enmeshment of values: digital engagement increases trust among communities, makes engagement more meaningful for them, on top of streamlining participation processes for practitioners, making it more cost-effective and better set up for success (i.e., project approval) (Go Vocal, 2025a).

Contrary to the critical housing research on PropTech, the enmeshed value system was not quite a result of economic values dominating the social values by consuming it and absolving it to create a new logic. While digital engagement platforms rely on private sector actors, it works differently from PropTech in the housing and real estate sectors because providing and demonstrating democratic and social value was integral to the participatory

process, it was embedded within the system through statutory public consultation (Chapter 1). While the goal of PropTech in housing and real estate is often to streamline the financialisation process (Fields, 2024; Rogers, 2017), in public participation, digital platforms gathered more and analysed faster public feedback and thus maximised the data and information the public offered them (Chapter 5). It still involved a level of self-interest among the practitioners, as I mentioned in Chapter 4, where improving public engagement through platform technology benefitted the practitioners; it was not an altruistic act. It would be naïve to say that planning is solely about creating social value because economic and political dimensions are equally important, and without which it would likely not be feasible to create social value. However, it is tricky to know whether social value was prioritised, where the positive outcomes of communicating and meeting the needs of the local communities resulted in successful application and eventual return of investment; or if the economic values were the driver all along. The line between them was blurry. Instead, they were mutually reinforcing through an enmeshment of democratic ideals with commercial pragmatism, to create a "common set of values." In this configuration, values become not just criteria for decision-making but active processes of meaning-making. These platforms thus became symbolic of a moralised planning democracy, a way of reconciling stakeholder interests while reframing what counts as legitimate participation.

Conclusion

As an alternative to neoliberal planning ideology (Gunder, 2010), digital engagement platforms reinforced a sense collectivism among the different stakeholders, towards a shared goal of creating places that satisfied the public needs and demands as well as made fiscal sense to planners and developers (whether it was about making a profit or saving costs). Thinking conceptually about values helps us better understand the politics of planning. In this

case, economic and social values were important for business and political relations. While housing politics is made up of competing value systems and is shaped by how they intersect (Rogers & McAuliffe, 2023), in digital engagement, the different values were not seen as contradictory, at all. Instead, industry professionals merged social and economic values through a process of enmeshment, creating, in effect, a new value system, in which economic and social values reinforced each other.

Digital engagement platforms were an attempt by planning practitioners to redefine the meaning of public participation to include the economic and financial benefits of doing good. They believed taking the public's concerns into consideration reduced project risk, and as a result, increased profitability (for property developers) and limited spending (for Councils). This 'new value system' was an effort to move away from the previous and, to an extent, ongoing neoliberal value regimes that were considered extractive, unsustainable, and unjust. It firstly brought importance to community voices in the planning process by legitimising it through data, particularly through the droves of data provided by the platform's ability to reach more people at scale, and that it was in the best interest of organisations to listen better to the communities whom they would impact through their developments. As explored in Chapter 5, by piecing together community data through documentation (data abstraction), community voices *added value to* planning and development projects in both social and economic ways.

The study is not concerned so much about how well these logics unfolded in practice, rather it is a deep dive into the logics and thinking behind such practices. It is a study of the idealistic, even *wishful* propositions about planning democracy and governance driving digital engagement platforms. If values tell us how we hope to see the world (Narotzky & Besnier, 2014; Simmel, 2011), what does the enmeshment of values reveal about the state of planning governance and democratic participation?

As I suggested in Chapter 2, value is often used as an analytical tool in planning research to make claims about where and how to develop (or not). While it is important especially for policy and design-led research to make value claims, understanding that value itself is politically wrought must not be overlooked. Rather, value should be "part of the object we study, as one of the ways in which the people observed make sense of their own practice" (Ortiz, 2013, p. 67). Political scientist Pierre (2011) posits,

> Whether in politics or markets, the institutional argument states that actors certainly have goals but the pursuit of those goals is embedded in, and constrained by, systems of rules, meanings and values…If political analysis can uncover those underlying norms and values about what politics should be all about we are well under way to a deeper understanding of political and social behaviour. (Pierre, 2011, p. 10)

I extend the invitation of this form of values analysis to go beyond political science, not only to empirical studies of digital engagement and platform technology, but also to urban planning and theory. Values are "political technologies" (Muniesa, 2023, p. 172) as they promote action or *affect*, which Graeber (2013), in his later works on value theory, pushed forward. Planning politics is therefore about how different values "dominate, encompass, or otherwise relate to one another" (Graeber, 2013, p. 228). I demonstrate in this chapter one way in which values relate to one another, which is becoming enmeshed with each other, which is not to deny other ways in which values work through other systems (Chapter 3). Understanding values through this lens helps us better understand "the large structures and big changes that seem to characterise our volatile present day, particularly in the context of the way different groups respond to these crises, the aspects of problems they emphasise, and the solutions they propose" (Souleles, Archer, & Thaning, 2023, p. 163).

These types of planning logics and proposals tend to be understood by social scientists “as an ordered system of cultural symbols rather than in the discrimination of its social and psychological contexts” (Geertz, 1973, p. 196). Especially in disciplines like urban planning, there is need for an analytical framework “capable of dealing more adroitly with meaning” (Geertz, 1973, p. 196); that is, understanding the values in planning requires an analytical framework that breaks down the meaning of these things. The empirical and theoretical implications of this chapter contribute to planning theory that queries the meaning and knowledge that public participation prompts about local places and the built environment, and the participatory practices that are deployed to get there (Legacy, 2017).

Returning to my main thesis argument, this final analysis chapter is an illustration of how the industry motivation to change the value systems in planning was at its core a *promissory statement*. Digital engagement platforms were a channel through which industry practitioners refashioned the meaning and purpose of their jobs and how they wanted to see the world. It was an effort to change the meaning of participation and planning democracy, part of the promise to ‘improve’ the planning industry to progress our shared futures, the wish and desire for something better. It was an effort to change what was considered ‘good’ planning and ‘best practice’.

The following concluding chapter ties together the three promises of digital engagement platforms as strategies for rationalising and justifying the moral principles of planning. In my final argument, I propose a theory of moral planning in critical urbanism.

Chapter 7 | Conclusion: Between Obligation and Optimisation

Chapter abstract

The concluding chapter summarises the three promises of digital engagement platforms as methods for rationalising moral planning principles. Digital engagement platforms created a logic in which improving the public participation experience and process would reduce risk and maximise project success and thus benefit all. I then provide an update on the state of digital engagement platforms and its normalisation within planning politics, far from its original 'disruption' status. However, there is still a strong moral imperative in the planning discourse; the "spirit of planning" may yet be revived through emerging technological channels. Therefore, I propose a critical urban (social) theory of morality that interrogates the virtues and guiding principles which help structure and drive forward planning frameworks and practices. I end the thesis with a cautionary note on the promises of efficiency especially targeting democracy and bureaucratic systems.

. . .

The rationality of "doing good"

Throughout the thesis, I have described how digital engagement platforms promised to help planning practitioners improve their public participation practices, not only because 'engaging better' was a good deed, but it served in the interest of all stakeholders. Specifically, datafication which digital engagement platforms afforded was used by practitioners to construct persuasive narratives to legitimise planning and development decisions. This, as a result, produced positive outcomes for the planners and developers who would obtain the necessary information and evidence of public support for their documentation, and well as for the public whose voices would influence the places that they

would end up occupying and enjoying. Moral propositions were continually made through promises of care, scale, and values: practitioners redefined their ethical roles (Chapter 4), reconceptualised democracy through digitalisation (Chapter 5), and reconfigured what was considered important in planning (Chapter 6). In this way, digital engagement platforms were not neutral tools as they were promised to be but served to reinforce planning values and confer legitimacy.

For example, in Chapter 4, although practitioners were committed to making better informed plans and developments based on community insight, they believed improving participatory approaches to communication would give them a better chance of gaining public approval. There were certainly efforts to make public participation a more caring (or care-full) process by implementing ideas of empathy, active listening, and respect. But this was not the key driver or the ends to their ethics of care. Rather, the key driver was that demonstrating care would increase 'community buy-in'. I describe this type of care ethics as *passive reciprocity*, which complicates the kind of institutional care that urban and planning researchers advance through interventions in planning policy and practice (outlined in Chapter 2).

The chapter on scale, democracy, and the abstraction of community (Chapter 5) presented different issues. While digital engagement platforms promised to increase planning democracy, it was not clear how it would scale planning democracy given the complex and contingent nature of the planning system and participatory process, aside from merely 'reaching' more people online than through traditional methods of engagement. Their assumption was that reaching and capturing more people would improve democracy. Yet, after a close interrogation of how these technology companies claimed to manipulate the public's data and how Council planners and property developers used these platforms, the outcome and goal of the technologies instead was improving the 'quality' of community

insight. There was a greater focus on understanding specific groups of people and building narratives around it that was relevant to their project site. I call this process the *abstraction of community*. The aim was less about improving engagement experience (despite promising this) and more to do with increasing datasets on the public. In either case, scale was integral to the telling of these narratives.

Finally, Chapter 6 looked at how values, both in the democratic and economic sense, could be better aligned across the sectors, so that each set of actors (public and private) could gain something out of this idealised alternative planning system. The new value system was made up of an enmeshment of several, perhaps contradictory, values to mean the same thing and reach the same goal, which was to improve public participation. I argue this process was an attempt to change the meaning of public participation and therefore the kind of politics and political relations between these sets of industry actors.

To reiterate my statement in Chapter 3, a 'like-for-like' comparison was not the aim of the analysis, although some comparison is inevitable given the multi-sited nature of the research study. As I outlined in Chapter 1, both England and NSW grapple with housing affordability and supply crisis, and in both cases, much political pressure is put on the planning system to resolve this. However, the main differences that I identified relate to how digital engagement platforms were framed as solutions. For instance, public distrust in the planning system was not a key driver in NSW for digital engagement platform messaging, as much as it was in England. Australian platform companies still emphasised strengthening community voice and input, but it was generally understood as part of the planning process – it was not marketed as a radical idea; whereas in England, democratising planning decisions through digital technology was viewed and represented on websites, planning documents, and at events as an industry disruptor that would 'shake up' the planning system.

In each of the analysis chapters, there was a constant negotiation between moral principles and the business and political practicalities necessary to progress planning and development projects (Marcuse, 2017). Digital engagement platforms rationalised the moral principles and planning virtues (i.e., the democratic ethos from Chapter 1) by putting forward the argument that "doing good" for the public was necessary for business, whether it was for Council planners concerned with keeping costs low or private developers seeking to maximise their revenue. The thesis provides evidence of how morality functions and manifests through planning systems as tools for building planning legitimacy and purpose. Since the start of this project, the role of digitalisation in planning politics however has changed, although ambitions for improved public participation and decision-making remain. Especially with the proliferation of AI technology, conversations about efficiency have taken a slightly new turn.

Digital planning going forward and new ambitions

After the PropTech Engagement Fund launched in 2021, the UK went through big governmental changes. Boris Johnson's Build Back Better political campaign, which propelled the Planning Reform White Paper, was rebranded, or rather subsumed into the Levelling Up Agenda. It was widely met with scepticism from planning academics who stated there was "no such seriousness or evidence-based policy [was] yet forthcoming from the 'Levelling Up' agenda pursued by [the Conservative] Government (Colenutt et al., 2021, p. 5). Colenutt et al. (2021) further state, "Levelling Up is a slogan not a policy—with careful planning nowhere to be seen" (Colenutt et al., 2021, p. 5). Much like its previous form as "Build Back, Better", Levelling Up was a criticised for its poor attempt at addressing England's inequality. For example,

> If 'Levelling Up' is to have substantial meaning it would have to tackle the roots and mechanisms of inequality. Most important of all would be to contribute to housing being valued less as a financial asset and more as space to live (Colenutt et al., 2021, p. 15)

Levelling Up was also called Boris Johnson's "glib promises" (Jenkins, 2020). Sceptical of 'quantifying' public participation through digital technology, *the Guardian* journalist states:

> A good planner—a near defunct profession in England—is charged with enacting Alexander Pope's maxim that we should "Consult the genius of the place in all". Democracy awards this consultation to the community, not to wealth. How communities shape and develop their neighbourhoods is the most sensitive of political decisions. It is also one of the few remaining areas of local democratic discretion in England. (Jenkins, 2020)

Despite all this*, Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023* was eventually passed, just in time for the new Labour Government who were sworn in in the 2024 election. The Labour Government has since had less to say about public participation, however, efficiency and growth are still significant themes in their planning reform proposals. They critiqued the changes that were made to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in December 2023 by the previous Conservative Government were "disruptive to the sector and detrimental to housing supply" (MHCLG, 2025). Interestingly, 'disruption' here was rather negative. Moving away from the Conservative's attempt to digitalise[1] and democratise

[1] However, just as I was finalising the thesis, the UK Labour Government announced a new AI tool, ironically called 'Extract', to "turbocharge" the planning system and "speed up housebuilding". Using the same language as the 2020 White Paper, *Planning for the Future* (MHCLG, 2020), PM Kier Starmer is quoted, "It's a bold step forward in our mission to build

planning, the Labour Government proposed a new standard method for assessing housing needs as, they argued, the datasets which the previous government had used to measure the baseline of household projections was about ten years out of date (MHCLC, 2025).

Based on stakeholder consultations about the new Labour planning reforms, LPAs wanted "clearer guidance, consistency and more practical tools to speed up plan-making" (The Digital Planning team, 2025). The barriers they identified included the lack of evidence to demonstrate a return on investment, lack of digital capacity and skills across LPAs (similarly expressed by interview participants in Chapter 5), lack of market awareness and product capabilities, and lack of market inoperability (The Digital Planning team, 2024). As a result, the government is currently developing a toolkit for LPAs adopting digital tools in their planning process (MHCLG, n.d.-b). This new planning strategy proposes to bring more "stability and certainty through the housing stock" (MHCLC, 2025), contrasting the Conservative discourse of disruption; instead, towards *complete organisation* as opposed to short cutting the planning system through digital technology, or what Maalsen (2022) describes as 'hacking'. As it stands at the time of writing this analysis, the Labour Government's planning reform proposals will focus on making planning 'faster' or more efficient, but by focusing on the Local Plans themselves, not solely through digitalisation.

The Digital Planning team within DLUHC wrapped up their work on the PropTech Innovation and Engagement Funds in February 2024, with a statement on having achieved "quicker planning decisions and improve[d] digital planning software" (The Digital Planning Team, 2023). The outcomes from this final round took place online at a Showcase event in November 2024 by the resumed department name *Ministry of Housing, Communities, and*

1.5 million more homes and deliver a planning system that's fit for the 21st century" (MHCLG, 2025a).

Local Government post 'Levelling Up'. At this event, they announced the next steps for the PropTech Innovation Fund would be a new digital planning programme, but in a slightly different capacity: the Planning Data Platform (Figure 7.1). This platform aims to be a land and housing data repository to create "better planning decisions, fewer uncertainties and delays in the housing system more new digital services for property and planning, better relationships between communities and developments" (MHCLG, n.d.). While still in beta-version, further updates on the open data platform will include "working with an advisory group to develop a set of open, reusable data specifications to underpin planning application" and ensuring datasets are robust and accurate (MHCLG, n.d.-b).

Figure 7.1

Planning Data Platform

Note: The new planning data platform developed by the MHCLG, using a similar 'trust' rhetoric as the PropTech Engagement Fund. Trust remains an important issue, even if it is not as hotly debated in the planning discourse, perhaps it has now been normalised as a 'planning virtue' (MHCLG, n.d.).

In addition, a digital taskforce for planning has been assigned to focus on general innovation in the planning system, a non-profit professional collective made up of Councils, property developers, digital platform companies, and central government (MHCLG, n.d.-b).

But this appears to function separately from the main planning reforms on delivering housing. What these changes suggest is a discernible shift in the way the digitalisation of planning is being represented in public and planning discourse. It has become almost part of the planning furniture, no longer so much the innovative, disruptive promise as it was at the beginning of this research, yet still very much present as a subject of planning.

At the final PropTech Showcase event, a MHCLG civil servant suggested, having set the parameters of what local planning authorities could do with digital engagement technology through the Fund, digital technologies will still be used to advance house building. The civil servant summed up their achievements in the following statement:

> Just to touch very briefly on Labour's ambitions, we have increasingly seen planning coming to the forefront of some of the ambitions for economic growth this government has and seeing [sic] planning, and particularly *housing, at the top of the agenda* [emphasis added] for how to progress and move forward with these ambitious targets that have been set through the manifesto and onwards. We're very excited to kind of have that mandate set and it really sets a brilliant precedent for our programme and for the PropTech innovation fund itself to continue *proving the value of how PropTech can accelerate outcomes in housing and planning* [emphasis added] and working with brilliant partners across local government, industry, academia and beyond to think about how we get other people on this bus with us and really continue to *scale the adoption of digital tools that can support the wider plan making process and get those homes built* [emphasis added]. (Event 1D – online, November 2024)

In this statement, there still seems to be appetite to progress the digitalisation of planning; scale still appears to be important as well as the link to house-building. Digital

planning is therefore still relevant, even if it is no longer central to political debate on housing delivery.

In contrast to the UK, the initial hype and then eventual normalisation of digital technology in planning and public participation had taken place over two decades ago during the planFIRST planning reform in 2002, although it did make a brief comeback in a more recent form of 'smart cities'[2]. While not specific to planning and housing, the *Smart Engagement* report by Committee for Sydney (2018), for example, called for better use of digital technology for broad city-making issues. Interestingly, in the foreword of the report by Kathy Jones, Executive Chair of KJA, a communications and engagement consultancy, warned innovation is not a "one size fits all" model (see Gonçalves et al., 2024), which digital engagement platforms in this study promised (Chapter 5), but requires careful selection based on the subject matter and engagement context:

> We believe innovation is about selecting the smartest tool for the job—not simply using technology for its own sake. Practitioners must deeply understand a project, identify measures of success, and then and only then select the appropriate tool for the job. (Committee for Sydney, 2018)

While the novelty of digitalisation has somewhat worn, it remains important to the way planning is done. This study examines how moralistic this digital engagement platforms as an object in planning can become, how they represented a version of democracy that could be scaled. So, while digitalisation may not be central to planning discourse, which had

[2] Critical urbanism contains a plethora of research on smart cities, from investigating the implications of smart cities on political and governance (Kitchin, 2014; Krivý, 2018; Vanolo, 2014), the built environment and localities (Odendaal, 2021; Shelton et al., 2015) to citizenship and belonging (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019; Vadiati, 2022).

defined previous governments in the UK and NSW, digital technology continues to be part of the solution, or problem, or both. The digital engagement platform landscape has not changed much since the start of this research project, however, advancements in AI will certainly be one to probe in the future (Burry, 2022; Peng et al., 2024). In terms of who the main players are, Bang the Table was bought out by U.S. data insights company Granicus; Commonplace was acquired by ZenCity, an AI-powered insights company; Built-ID was acquired by UK's LandTech, a digital land assessment and surveying company; meanwhile CitizenLab rebranded and changed their company name to Go Vocal. PropTech is an industry that is constantly changing, companies get acquired, some get so big they acquire smaller ones, and others adapt their business strategies to remain competitive.

This analysis documents a pivotal time in planning history marked by profound distrust in the planning system, which contributed to their rise in popularity, particularly in the UK where this growth was pronounced, before eventually becoming normalised by the end of the research project. Now that these platforms are considered one tool in a planner's arsenal, were digitalisation and platforms merely fads? Perhaps. But it also reflected a particular kind of politicking at the time, one that required fast, urgent, ubiquitous answers. The desire to innovate, therefore, is part of an ethical concern with how to best deliver housing and well-designed and sustainable places for people. Political solutions are usually about figuring out the best course of action, of creating narratives about what is the right thing to do, and to ultimately convince a public body to go ahead with it. It just so happened that digital engagement platforms were at the time the best course of action in the minds of industry practitioners. But what is the bigger picture? What has this study of digital engagement platforms revealed? Throughout the chapters, I have laid out the many ways in which the planning system is imbued in questions of morality.

The "Spirit of Planning": From moral economy to moral planning

Digital engagement platforms and the practitioners who used it advocated for a particular urban ideal. This urban ideal put forward a version of democracy for how decisions should be made and for whom they are made. Underlying this digital shift was a moral impetus, which was the belief that planning should lead to better outcomes for people and the environment. Indeed, the way clients of these platforms navigate competing objectives highlights what is prioritised or deemed non-negotiable in planning systems. I argue digital engagement platforms were therefore a moral project—its purpose was to rectify the *immoral* (wrong or bad) planning practice of the past that was anti-democratic, hence the rhetoric for change and regaining the public's trust. Disruption spoke to the power imbalance between planning decision-makers (planners and developers) and the public. The *promise* of digital engagement platforms was to correct this wrong. As I have demonstrated throughout the analysis of these promises, urban planning is thus a site for figuring out collectively what is important for a generalised notion of society, civilians, environment, and other non-human actors, and, in all cases, the future (Abram & Weszkalnys, 2022).

For example, in a statement to keep the PropTech momentum going, Dr Wei Yang, the CEO of Digital Task Force for Planning, wrote in a blog post titled, *Leveraging Digital Innovation to Rekindle the Spirit of Planning*, the following call to action:

> The fundamental driver of innovation lies in our ability to ask the right questions for the public good. By framing inquiries that challenge the status quo and encourage creative problem-solving, we unlock the potential to leverage innovation for the betterment of people, the environment, and society at large. *Embracing the moral responsibility of fostering Truth, Beauty, and Goodness* [emphasis added] will propel

> the planning profession forward, repositioning it as a recognised part of the solution in the eyes of the public. (Yang, 2024)

Interestingly, the bureaucratic gift that I explored in the context of care ethics in Chapter 4 continues in the form of general planning innovation. The essence or 'spirit of the thing given' (Mauss, 2004) is not the material object or favour and deed, but the sets of obligations and expectations inherited through the 'gift'. In this statement, much like the engagement platforms themselves, Dr Wei Yang suggests planning is more than just the processes and structures for organising cities; she makes a moral claim about planning as a form of public service for delivering 'public good'. In Dr Yang's post, planning is about doing what is 'right'. On top of the sense of political urgency in the state of housing and planning that requires immediacy (scale and efficiency), the world is also seen as being "desperate for humanistic solutions" (Yang, 2024). These two things—care and scale—should contradict each other (Tsing, 2012), yet they do not in the (digital) planning imaginary (see Seaver, 2021). Mirroring the care ethics of digital engagement platforms described in Chapter 4, Dr Yang encourages planning practitioners to be kinder, which she believes is crucial to resolving complex urban problems:

> The planning profession was founded with the spirit of compassion, selflessness, and creativity… *I believe that we need a revival of spirit to shape a reimagined planning profession* [emphasis added]—one that is confident, creative, and impactful, with the ability to think globally and act locally. (Yang, 2024)

In this research, morality shaped the practitioners' practice in a multitude of ways. Yet, no urban theory adequately addresses this (except for Wachs, 2017), which is where anthropological theory can contribute. Anthropologists have looked at other disciplines that have their own ontological stances on the world, for example, economics, international

development, or medical science, creating sub-disciplines like *the anthropology of economics,* and so on (Yang, 2024). In similar fashion, Abram and Weszkalnys (2022) introduce *the anthropology of planning* to examine planning as a social and cultural phenomenon, shaped by people's belief systems, worldviews, political context, and power dynamics, informing my own theoretical framework, as I explored in Chapter 3. Borrowing from anthropological perspectives on moral economy, I propose *moral planning* within urban studies and planning theory that engages with questions of morality and ethics, how they work through the planning system, their effects on the built environment, people, and other living things.

The notion of moral economy was a critical issue in the social sciences because it was the first time that economic logics were understood as a reflection and outcome of other social and cultural processes (Hann, 2018). Moral economy examines how morality shapes economic activity, as opposed to how morality is created by economic activity (Carrier, 2018), prompting the question of whether something is moral rhetoric or action (Fassin, 2012a). Rhetoric might come from a 'real' place or practice, but depending on the context, it might not be possible to perfectly put into action the moral rhetoric, which this thesis illustrates, such as the case of the unfulfilled promise of scaling democracy (Lee, 2015). However, Hann (2018) warns that too much emphasis on exploring the "moralising discourses" weakens the significance a very "real" material economy. Hann (2018) instead states there are moral dimensions to economic activity, which are inextricably tied to each other and are equally fundamental. Moral dimensions run throughout historical processes, systems, and social relations in varying ways and degrees.

The distinction between morality and ethics is firstly, morality looks at the "norms of society" (Fassin, 2015, p. 176) whereas ethics concerns the individual's reflections of it (Laidlaw, 2014). Morality is distinct from politics, instead many anthropologists argue it

informs politics (Fassin 2012; Mattingly & Throop, 2018; Scheper-Hughes, 1995; M. Ticktin, 2006). In political contexts and discourses, morality can "engage and reproduce a set of power relations", which then inform power inequality, marginalisation, and violence (Ticktin, 2011, p. 20). This understanding of morals and how it works through systems is important for research disciplines that interrogate capitalism (including urbanism, planning theory, and housing studies) where the 'economy' or 'market' are mostly represented as "totalising frames" in which people enact (Bear et al., 2015), as opposed to treating capitalism as divergent projects that are made up of "our varied pursuits of being and becoming particular kinds of people, families or communities" (Bear et al., 2015). Moral economy explores the "complex ways in which people attempt to make life worth living for themselves and for future generations" (Narotsky & Besnier, 2014). The thesis positions public engagement in planning (i.e., as regulation and practice) as particular institutional models that try to "control a messy reality through abstraction: control through knowledge production and epistemic dominance and control of human action through the performative force of not only the designs themselves but also the relations they privilege" (Narotsky & Besnier, 2014, p. S12).

In addition, morality invokes questions of agency (Mahmood, 2011) and the consideration of different industry and public actors who shape and make up cities. It opens urban planning to multiple forms, depending on whose perspective and framework through which the researcher examines cities. By thinking about morality in cities critically, urban planning can be understood under different terms and becomes more than just a two-dimensional debate about good and bad planning or right and wrong protocols, but perhaps, as it was the case in this study, how ideas and visions for 'better' planning processes fall through in practice, despite its good intentions and rigorous rationality. When planning promises fail to materialise, it is not as simple as deeming the sets of actors involved as 'bad' people or representing an aspect of the planning industry that is purely profit-driven, as

opposed to social and environmentally conscious. Rather, practitioners must navigate conflicting motivations and workplace demands, and if there is such thing as a 'failure' in delivering promises, rigid notions of right and wrong does not allow for these spaces of negotiation. Healey (2003) argues planning practices and outcomes unfold out of "complex struggles between multiple driving forces, interacting with the creative power of local agency" (p. 105) and not necessarily from a dominant political power. She further claims that changes in planning norms and practices are a result of creativity; "because structuring forces cannot precisely determine events, there is always some scope for innovation" (Healey, 2003, p. 105).

In summary, the thesis interrogates the dominant ideas and beliefs behind digital engagement platforms, like democracy, scale, and equity that is situated within a moral-laden planning system and worldview. It examines the connections between people's personal moral values and the broader moralities and economic considerations decided by companies and organisations in planning and participation. Anthropological frameworks allow us to examine planning and participation theory in a new light, by deconstructing the visions and narratives that hold together such large structures and attempting to locate where these worldviews come from and how and why they might diverge (Abram, 2016). I argue it is useful for urban studies to borrow from anthropological perspectives to better contextualise planning, take it out of itself, and demonstrate the planning system is not a constant or natural reality; rather, it requires hard work to be conceptualised and realised. The analysis therefore proposes a critical urban (social) theory of morality, offering a framework for understanding how technologies mediate civic participation not only administratively, but morally as well. It opens further inquiry into how morality is operationalised in planning discourse and how new platform logics reshape the democratic imagination of the city.

Towards a critical urban (social) theory of morality

A critical urban social theory of morality looks at how places are designed, developed, and decided upon based on moral principles and beliefs about how people, places, and resources should be allocated and organised. This involves understanding different knowledge systems about places, people, and more-than-human actors. Another way of thinking about moral planning is understanding the virtues or guiding principles that help structure and drive forward planning frameworks and practices.

A planning theory of ethics has been addressed before by planning scholars (Campbell & Marshall, 1999; Marcuse, 2017; Wachs, 2017) and is also used to teach ethical urban planning and design practice (Basta & Moroni, 2013; Mostafavi, 2017). Planners inevitably encounter ethical decisions and dilemmas in their 'everyday' practice, sometimes in conflicting ways (Angelo & Baiocchi, 2024; Kaufman, 2017), but they are also part of a broader project that exerts a moral message around good and bad practice, and good and bad design, as I previously outlined. Wachs (2017) identifies four distinct ways morality appears in planning: 1) the bureaucratic principles and rules of behaviour (including regulation and guidance documents), ethical judgements on behalf of public welfare (e.g., development application approvals), methods and the ethical content of criteria built into planning techniques and models (e.g., theoretical frameworks for design like care-full planning), and policy reform and changes (which are generally politically charged, like the digitalisation of planning) (p. xiii-xiv). Hendler (2018) contends the "moral work' of planners is about "recognis[ing] that every act of planning pursues certain human values and is a series of statements about what we take to be right or wrong and what we take to represent the highest priorities of the society" (p. xiv).

Lennon and Fox-Rogers (2017), though, highlight an ethical issue here for practitioners. Although as 'moral subjects', planners are expected to 'do good', the ways in

which planning officers justify their own work presents a series of ethical issues in practice, especially in terms of what decisions are made based on their personal (and subjective) understanding of 'rightness' or 'wrongness' (Lennon & Fox-Rogers, 2017). The purpose of an urban theory of morality and seeing planning through a moral lens opens space for self-reflection and dialogue. Planning theory tends to explore "what planning ought to do… on the basis of the 'common good'" (Lennon & Fox-Rogers, 2017, p. 365) and less to do with what these value principles might actually say about who we are and what we deem is important, that perhaps, planning might represent political ideologies and belief systems, as opposed to strictly objective and rational decision-making (Gunder, 2010; Murdoch & Abram, 2002; Shepherd et al., 2020).

As such, the meaning behind good and bad planning is fragile; it is open for change. Planning realities of public and private sector stakeholders are constantly being debated in the media; these realities are just as "tenuous as they are politically constituted" (Legacy et al., 2024, p. 16). New movements in planning politics and governance practices demonstrate it is possible to subvert dominant planning mentalities by implementing "logics of value and care" (Barrett & Safransky, 2024, p. 2137). Through bottom-up community organising, people can reshape what is considered right and wrong in the planning system, changing metrics of success and guidance or the definitions of 'best practice'. Morality in this sense legitimises planning and development decisions—it is "good" for the people and society. But the meaning and practice of "good" changes with the politics and the popular (and collective) values of the time (as I explored in Chapter 2).

Advancing Abram and Weszkalnys' (2022) notion of a culturally contested politics of planning, an urban theory of morality therefore positions planning as a social arena in which people imagine, define, negotiate, and materialise their understandings about the world and how it should function. Equally, much of the critical planning theory (usually to inform

planning policy and design) is imbued with moral assumptions about how places should be developed and organised (Wachs, 2017). It is important for both urban academics and built environment professionals to critically think about morality in planning and placemaking—to consider what moral assumptions they are making about places, especially political ideas like democracy or social cohesion that are so embedded within the democratic planning ethos.

In Chapter 3, for instance, implicit planning ideology and ideas for reform and change (such as the care agenda) about the organisation of people and places tends to take precedent in urban studies. While it is important to take ethical and moral stances in urban and planning research, especially when working with vulnerable groups of people or writing about injustice and inequality, too many planning scholars overlook their own moral and ideological projections in their pursuit of resolving planning 'conflict' (Abram, 2016). There appears to be a hegemonic understanding that academia, much like industry practice, must advance an ideological stance of how cities should look and function (Lennon & Fox-Rogers, 2017). There is great risk in believing in something so steadfastly. A critical urban theory of morality allows us to take a step back, to see the connections and analyse it from a degree of distance. This should not produce apathetic or nihilistic points of view, but the opposite in that it presents an opportunity for practitioners and planning academics to reassess their motivations and research purpose—what are the underlying values, messages, or vision are they telling through their planning interventions and studies?

I would like to end the thesis with a final note on the issue of efficiency which was important to the promise of digital engagement platforms, but increasingly, one that we are seeing being made broadly about government, bureaucracy, and democracy. I am wary of the efficiency discourse, especially when efficiency becomes a moral imperative. Despite the promises of increasing public participation, efficiency does not necessarily improve democratic processes or the decisions themselves; efficiency is about being able to make

decisions faster, which often means overriding public consultation (Charney, 2017). Additionally, the issue of housing affordability and supply crisis will not be resolved with faster decisions (Colenutt et al. 2021)—yes, it might streamline application processes resulting in shorter time frames between lodging application to getting approval, but will this create more affordable units? Will the building materials be safe and healthy? Will they last? Efficiency certainly plays a part in resolving the housing crisis, but it is not the panacea. Critical urban theory must be equipped to interrogate the moral and ethical assertions presented in efficiency arguments.

Therefore, understanding planning and urban governance as part of moral and political debates, prepares academics, practitioners, and students of urbanism (and adjacent fields) with a more critical perspective on popular planning discourse. Reform proposals such as the digitalisation of planning require critical interrogation before it claims to repair trust, transparency, and democracy. Political scientist Archon Fung (2004) argues when examining such 'innovative' solutions,

> Fuller exploration requires first locating other innovative institutions of such deeply democratic public action, and then scrutinizing their creations empirically and conceptually. Only through this pragmatic cycle of action and reflection can we hope to understand the institutions that populate this space where practical needs meet democratic aspirations. Only with such knowledge can we advance our *oft-professed but too seldom realized commitments* [emphasis added] to organize our public life together according to the principles of equality, respect, self-command, reason, and mutual understanding (Fung, 2004, p. 252).

Democracy is being challenged in many Western liberal democracies facing right-wing reformist agendas, where suggested solutions have been to streamline bureaucracy by

cutting costs (and people). There is a growing rhetoric that posits democracies as we know it as inefficient, and therefore, somehow wholly wrong or bad. My final bid is that a critical urban theory of morality can help address and challenge these political discourses and moral statements (mistaken for economic rationality) that are being made about planning, urban governance, and our cities.

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