



Acting on Ethics in City Planning

Elizabeth Howe

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How do practicing planners understand the ethics of their profession? What do they do when confronted with ethical conflicts in their day-to-day work? How can the planning profession help planners make ethical decisions?

In this insightful, lively, and compassionate book, Elizabeth Howe explores how planners define ethical issues and make ethical choices. Howe is not concerned with a distant or abstract ethics but rather with the actual ethical dilemmas planners face in everyday practice. This book is about real people making difficult choices in real situations.

The cases Howe examines derive from nearly 150 hours of personal interviews with 96 professional planners, and responses to follow-up questionnaires. One planner, for example, realized that complete and accurate reporting of a technical analysis would have politically damaging consequences. Another found that her promise of confidentiality to a developer conflicted with her commitment to fairness and an open planning process. For a third, loyalty to elected officials was at odds with his deeply held belief that the public interest would be furthered through construction of affordable housing. To what extent did planners define these as ethical issues, what did they think about them, and how did they act?

Howe's answers to these questions are perceptive and revealing. In Part I, she probes the nature of ethical issues through a hierarchy of principles including lawfulness, justice, accountability, and serving the public interest. Part II reveals that planners' actions vary considerably depending on how they view the role of planners (from technician to activist) and on their approach to ethics. She explores the determinants of ethical action in Part III.

This book should be read by every practicing planner wondering how others deal with the workaday world. It is required reading for every student seeking a glimpse of the profession outside the classroom. And it will inform and reward all those concerned with the necessity of acting on ethics in an imperfect world.

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