

## Research Paper

# Barriers to Public Interest in Urban Development Plans <sup>1</sup>

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**Received:** June 2023, **Revised:** December 2023, **Accepted:** December 2023, **Publish Online:** December 2023

### Abstract

*In spite of the extensive body of research focusing on the concept of "public interest" within the realm of urban planning, there exists a notable dearth in the discourse surrounding the challenges and impediments encountered in actualizing public interest within the context of urban planning and management. The primary objective of this paper is to systematically identify and elucidate the obstacles impeding the realization of public interest within the urban development plans of Iran, offering a theoretical framework to explicate the interrelations among these hindrances. To achieve this goal, an investigation and analysis are conducted on three megamalls situated in Tehran City, serving as representative cases. The principal method employed for data collection is a semi-structured interview, with subsequent analysis carried out through the utilization of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT). The outcomes of this inquiry reveal a categorization of barriers into five overarching domains: deficiencies within the urban planning system, conflicts of interest, the legalization of transgressions, a passive civil society, and challenges pertaining to public interest. Each of these categories is expounded upon comprehensively, delving into the nuances of their respective implications. Furthermore, a comparative discussion is presented, drawing parallels between our identified categories and analogous research findings on public interest conducted in various other countries.*

**Keywords:** Public interest, Urban planning, Megamall, Tehran city, Constructivist grounded theory (CGT).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous scholars and theorists underscore the pivotal role of "public interest" as a legitimizing mechanism for urban development plans and projects, as articulated by Campbell and Marshall (2002), Chettiparamb (2016), Grant (2005), Moroni (2004), and Murphy and Fox-Rogers (2015). Despite its prominence in urban planning theories, the concept of "public interest" has been critiqued for its lack of precise definition (Campbell & Marshall, 2000; Murphy & Fox-Rogers, 2015, p. 231; Tait, 2011, p. 157). Urban practitioners and planners, however, routinely invoke "public interest" as a normative criterion in their professional and moral evaluations of planning, positioning themselves as advocates of public or collective interests (Alexander, 2002b, p. 205). Moreover, professional and moral codes assert

that planners bear the primary responsibility of delivering public interest, deeming it a moral imperative (Alexander, 2002a; Grant, 2005; Howe, 1992; Howe & Kaufman, 2017; Nagy, 2015). The failure of numerous urban projects, both in developed and underdeveloped countries, is attributed to a deficient understanding of the concept of public interest. In light of this, our paper endeavors to delineate the challenges hindering the realization of public interest. We aim to elucidate the barriers impeding the achievement of public interest in urban projects and expound on the intricate relationships among these barriers. To accomplish this, we have conducted interviews to analyze the narratives, perceptions, and experiences of urban planners, experts, professionals, academics, and residents in proximity to major urban projects, such as megamalls.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is taken from a part of the Thesis of Nayereh Dayarian in her PH.D. in the field of Urban Planning with the guidance of the second author of the Faculty of Urban and Regional Planning, Fine Arts Collage of Tehran University.

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## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The notion of public interest is commonly construed as the enhancement of well-being and welfare within a planned area, as articulated by scholars such as Alexander (2002a), Heywood (1990), and Klosterman (1980). Alternatively, Agbola and Falola (2018), Alexander (2002b), Campbell and Marshall (2000, 2002), Chettiparamb (2016), Foroughifar et al. (2020), Moroni (2004), Nagy (2015), Puustinen et al. (2017), Tait (2011), Zargari Marandi and Soltani (2018), posit that public interest is fundamental to the roles and responsibilities of urban planners, constituting a primary objective of planning endeavors. Their investigations into the role of planners and planning objectives underscore planners acting as facilitators, mediators, or technicians who align with the interests delineated by political and economic elites (Agbola & Falola, 2018; Alexander, 2002b; Campbell & Marshall, 2000, 2002; Chettiparamb, 2016; Foroughifar et al., 2020; Howe, 1983, 1992; Moroni, 2004; Nagy, 2015; Puustinen et al., 2017; Tait, 2011; Zargari Marandi & Soltani, 2018).

In alternative perspectives presented in extant research, the attainment of public interest is posited as achievable through an open dialogue within a democratic milieu. Scholars such as Haywood (1990), Pearsons (1990), and Grant (2005) adopt a procedural stance toward the concept of public interest, asserting that it materializes through the interaction of stakeholders and involved actors in conditions where access to public information and education is readily available (Grant, 2005; Heywood, 1990; Persons, 1990). Within this framework, the notion of public interest is seen as amenable to resolution through professional experience and expertise within public and democratic deliberations, assuming that planners possess the capacity to analyze issues impartially and arrive at rational solutions.

Contrarily, scholars such as Sager (2012), Mattila (2016), Maidment (2016), and Tait (2016) propose an alternative viewpoint wherein public interest is construed as an outcome arising from a consensus on diverse interests in a communicative action, adopting a procedural manifestation of this concept (Maidment, 2016; Mattila, 2016; Sager, 2012; Tait, 2016). In a similar vein, Sandercock and Dovey (2002), Murphy and Fox-Rogers (2015), Boland and Bronte (2017), Čolić (2017), Lennon, Scott, and Russell (2018), Hossain and Hackenbroch (2019), and Searle and Legacy (2021) assert that public interest is the

product of negotiation and compromise within a communicative process. In this context, the aim is to establish equilibrium among competing interests and mitigate the adverse consequences of urban development (Boland et al., 2017; Čolić, 2017; Hossain, 2013; Lennon et al., 2018; Murphy & Fox-Rogers, 2015; Sandercock & Dovey, 2002). Accordingly, this perspective posits that realizing public interest is plausible through a consultative process that ensures equitable and just access to interests from planning policies for all segments of society, particularly those with limited influence. This perspective underscores the procedural dimension inherent in the realization of public interest.

Etzioni (2015) posits that the public interest is oriented towards benefiting all members of a particular society and its associated entities, emphasizing its opposition to private interests (Etzioni, 2015). In contrast, Purcell (2016) contends that the public interest can be effectively realized through democracy without necessitating an overarching role for the state, underscoring the active participation of citizens in this process (Purcell, 2016). The synthesis of studies exploring the concept of public interest, both in theoretical and practical domains, reveals that diverse planning perspectives have engendered distinct definitions of public interest. This divergence is attributed to the inherent variability in the roles and objectives of planning contingent upon the contextual nuances within which it operates (Figure 1).

The comprehensive review of the literature underscores the absence of a singular, universally accepted definition for "public interest." Notably, the interests of urban residents and stakeholders exhibit variability over time and across diverse contexts. The subsequent sections of this paper delve into a more extensive exploration of the inherent lack of a singular definition for this concept. Despite the divergent perspectives among planners, there is a unanimous consensus that addressing public interest is imperative for establishing and sustaining an acceptable standard of living within mixed economies (Heywood, 1990). Consequently, our perspective on the concept of "public interest" throughout this paper posits that, within the planning process and every urban project, city residents and involved actors must possess the capacity and opportunities to articulate their concerns for this concept in a participatory manner.

Focus on the Substantive dimension	Public interest denotes increasing welfare and well-being in the area under planning	Klosterman (1980), Haywood (1990), and Alexander (2002a)
Focus on the Substantive-procedural dimension	Public interest is one of the tasks and responsibilities of planners and one of the goals of planning	Howe, 1983, 1992; Marshall, 2000, 2002; Alexander, 2002b; Moroni, 2004; Tait, 2011; Nagy, 2015; Chettiparamb, 2016; Puustinen, Mäntysalo & Jarenko, 2017; Agbola & Falola, 2018; Foroughifar, Noorian & Jaber Moghadam, 2020; Zargari Marandi & Soltani, 2018
Focus on the procedural dimension	Public interest is the result of a free dialogue in a democratic environment	Haywood (1990), Pearsons (1990), and Grant (2005)
Focus on the procedural dimension	Public interest is the result of a consensus and agreed-upon interests in a communicative act	Sager (2012), Mattila (2016), Maidment (2016), and Tait (2016)
Focus on the procedural dimension	Public interest results from compromise in a communicative and bargaining process to balance competing interests.	Sandercock & Dovey (2002); Murphy & Fox-Rogers (2015); Boland & Bronte (2017); Čolić (2017); Lennon, Scott, and Russell (2018); Hossain & Hackenbroch (2019); Searle & Legacy (2021)
Focus on the Substantive dimension	Public interest, as opposed to the private interest, serves all members of a specific society and its entities	Etzioni (2015)
Focus on the procedural dimension	Materialization of public interest through democracy without the need for the government	Purcell (2016)

Fig 1. Classification of public interest definitions in previous research (Source: Authors)

### 3. METHODOLOGY

While there exists a considerable body of research on the subject of public interest, there has been a relative dearth in the exploration of barriers to its realization in urban projects, particularly from the perspectives of urban managers, planning professionals, academics, and residents. In addressing this gap, our paper employs an inductive methodology and embraces an interpretivist approach. This methodological choice is grounded in the utilization of narratives, experiences, and perceptions gleaned from experts, professionals, theorists, and citizens directly engaged with the complexities of public interest in the context of Iran's urban development planning, serving as a pertinent case study.

Interpretivism posits an examination of the social world as perceived and interpreted by its participants, emphasizing an insider's perspective (Blaikie, 2000). In parallel, the adoption of a case study is considered a viable strategy for theory development, particularly when there is limited existing knowledge about a specific phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989). Consequently, this paper employs a multiple case study design, specifically investigating three

megamalls, following the approach outlined by Yin (2009). The focal point of this study revolves around the intricate planning and design processes employed in securing construction permits for megamalls.

The Grounded Theory, particularly the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach (CGT) as outlined by Charmaz (2014) and Glaser & Strauss (2017), serves as the methodological framework for this study (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz & Bryant, 2010; Thornberg, 2012). The selection of this approach is predicated on its capacity to investigate and conceptualize individual, social, and organizational processes, elucidating the ways in which people construct meanings and measures within a specific situation (Charmaz, 2014). The ensuing sections detail the data collection and analysis methods employed, culminating in a discussion that draws comparisons and contrasts between our findings and the existing literature (refer to the discussion section of this paper).

Our primary method for data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews, totaling twenty-eight in number. The interviewees encompassed a diverse range of stakeholders, including: 1) the current and former mayors of the Tehran Municipality, 2) members of the Zoning Board

of Appeals responsible for reviewing issues conflicting with Tehran's Zoning Ordinance, such as variations from the zoning code, projects requiring compatibility assessments, and appeals of decisions by the Zoning Administrator,<sup>1</sup> 3) directors, managers, and deputies at the Ministry of Road and Urban Development, 4) members of Tehran's City Council, 5) academics, and 6) residents residing in close proximity to the megamalls. Following Morse's perspective (2010), three sampling approaches were utilized for participant selection: a) convenience sampling, b) purposive sampling aimed at selecting a diverse array of stakeholders and experts, and c) theoretical sampling, aiding the researcher in determining "what data to collect and how to collect it" (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Morse, 2007). The data collection process persisted until theoretical saturation was attained. The interviews, averaging 30-45 minutes each, resulted in the transcription of 252 pages of interview content.

As mentioned above, data analysis was performed based on constructivist grounded theory, which included coding (creation of codes and categories taken from data); constant comparison (comparing data with other data, data with codes, codes with codes and codes with categories); analytical memo-writing (registering various ideas on the relationship between codes and other theoretical ideas during coding and analysis) and theoretical sampling (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz & Bryant, 2010; Thornberg, 2012).

Following the methodology outlined by Charmaz (2014), our data coding process unfolded in two sequential phases: initial coding and focused coding. In the initial phase of our study, 236 preliminary codes were discerned. Subsequently, during the focused coding stage, we refined these into 34 distinct codes. A continuous comparative analysis of these codes was conducted, leading to the identification of categories and core categories, characterized by increased abstraction. This iterative process provided a more targeted trajectory for our investigation. Furthermore, to ensure fidelity to the interviewees' responses, these codes, categories, and core categories underwent rigorous comparison with the transcribed. This meticulous verification process was integral to confirming that the emerging categories accurately encapsulated the perspectives expressed by the interviewees. The development of the primary research categories and their relevant subcategories transpired through an iterative and reciprocal interplay between the dataset and the evolving theoretical framework.

## 4. FINDINGS

The interviews conducted brought to light a spectrum of challenges and impediments hindering the actualization of public interest, which we have systematically categorized into five overarching themes: 1) deficiencies within the urban planning system, 2) conflicts of interests, 3) the legitimization of violations, 4) the passive engagement of civil society, and 5) the predicament associated with public interest itself (termed as the problematic of public interest). The subsequent discussion delves into these primary categories and their respective subcategories. Additionally, to illustrate these points, select statements from the interviewees have been included as examples.

### 4.1. Core category one: Gaps in urban planning system

The initial impediment to realizing public interest is identified as deficiencies within the urban planning system. This obstacle encompasses four distinct categories: 1) absence of regulatory authorization, 2) inadequacy and volatility in financial resources allocated for urban management, 3) the influence of economic rent and corruption within state entities, and 4) non-participatory procedures inherent in the urban development system. Table 1 provides a concise overview of these categories, accompanied by focused codes delineating specific aspects within this core category.

The first category the "gaps in urban planning system" is "weak and unstable financial resources". In both developed and developing nations, municipalities bear the responsibility of overseeing developmental projects and delivering services to their constituents. The execution of these projects necessitates adequate funding. Notably, in Tehran, our research underscores that the financing of development projects often relies on arbitrary criteria and indices. Our findings reveal that in the absence of stable financial resources, municipalities resort to measures such as land use conversions and impact fees to augment their revenues and fulfill financial obligations, rather than prioritizing the advancement of public interest. This sentiment was elucidated in an interview where a participant stated, "Public interest has been compromised, as indicated by this contract (megamall constructions), with both investors and the municipality seeking profits from such ventures. Essentially, the municipality gains financially by selling construction

<sup>1</sup> The Zoning Board of Appeals in Iran is commonly known as the "Commission 5" because it is established based on Article 5 of

Law on the Establishment of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran.

permits to investors instead of championing public interest. The municipality covers its expenses through this process, resulting in the neglect of public interest altogether" (Interviewee, No. 15).

Hence, the instability of financial resources contributes to the deficiencies within Iran's urban planning system, wherein public interest is disregarded in the formulation of urban development interventions, policies, and plans.

The subsequent category pertains to the "lack of authorization" for the implementation of approved urban plans and programs. Our findings indicate instances where urban management has, at times, deviated from the original plans and neglected the commitments outlined in agreements, prioritizing financial and economic interests. This conduct often mirrors that of a private sector firm rather than a public service entity. One interviewee shed light on this issue when describing the construction process of megamalls: "Back in the 1990s, residents advocated for a cultural center. Interestingly, construction commenced for what was supposed to be a cultural center. However, the intended cultural center transformed into a [privately owned] recreation center. Residents were under the impression that a cultural center was being built. It wasn't until later, when the construction site boards were removed, that people realized a [private] recreation center was being built instead of the promised cultural center" (Interviewee, No. 9).

Consequently, as our analyses indicate, a significant impediment to the achievement of public interest in urban development plans stems from the lack of authorization, resulting from non-compliance with the initial plan and the failure to fulfill the agreements mandated for urban management.

The third deficiency in the urban planning system pertains to the infiltration of economic rent and corruption within state entities responsible for urban development affairs. Ambiguous and unclear codes,

rules, executive regulations, and guidelines create opportunities for subjective interpretations and personal interests, fostering an environment conducive to rent-seeking and corruption in the enforcement of these regulations. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in the issuance of construction permits, coupled with the privileged access of political and economic elites to information, has facilitated widespread corruption. A participant highlighted this issue in an interview, stating, "Those possessing political and economic influence pursue economic ambitions and emerge as the primary beneficiaries. Consequently, the private sector, which possesses less information and influence, is not positioned to succeed in this economic landscape. Success in this arena is often attributed to those with political rent-seeking behavior who are driven by self-interest and profit motives" (Interviewee, No. 28).

The final deficiency within the urban planning system lies in the non-participatory procedures. The prevailing approach for formulating, endorsing, and obtaining permits for urban projects and plans lacks provision for informing or involving citizens. A participant highlighted this issue, noting, "[When the megamall was under construction], the residents of the neighborhood were not consulted. They had no opportunity to voice their opinions on the project. The process did not incorporate any citizen participation, and the procedures did not consider incorporating people's ideas" (Interviewee, No. 23). The urban management is not legally bound to solicit public input on urban development plans, thereby not prioritizing the interests of the populace. Consequently, some of the obstacles to realizing public interest in Tehran encompass the disregard for public opinions in plan preparation, the absence of a legal framework for citizen participation, and a lack of attention to bottom-up procedures, all underpinned by a dominant elitist perspective in decision-making processes.

**Table 1.** Categories, descriptions, and focused codes (Source: Authors)

Core Category 1: Gaps in urban planning system		
Categories	Descriptions	Focused codes
Weak and unstable financial resources	Lack of available and persisting financial resources	, Problems with providing urban services financial need of urban management
Lack of authorization	Absence of procedures and rules which can authorize realize public interest	Failure to act by the obligations, non-comprise and disobedience toward the initial plans
Rent and corruption	Presence of procedures resulting in specifically-exclusive privilege or violation to achieve personal interests or interests of specific groups	Misusing and exercising personal views, presence of procedures supporting rent (corruption)
Non-participatory procedures	Absence of procedures and processes for involving actors and stakeholders in the plans and obtaining their views to achieve a collective goal	Lack of communication with Failure to raise awareness, stakeholders, elitist (Top-down) decision making

4.2. Core category two: Conflict of interest

The study's findings underscore that the second impediment to realizing public interest within the planning system is the presence of a "conflict of interest." As delineated in Table 2, three distinct categories encapsulate this phenomenon: 1) conflicts arising between the interests of state entities and public interest; 2) conflicts arising between the interests of private developers and public interests; and 3) the prioritization of economic interests within the financial management system.

It has been acknowledged that urban management in Tehran consistently grapples with challenges in securing stable financial resources. Consequently, the Municipality has resorted to addressing city expenditures by prioritizing economic gains within the urban management system. As a result, measures have been implemented, including the allowance of increased building density, alterations in land use, and the issuance of permits for large-scale constructions in exchange for financial contributions, serving as a revenue stream to fund municipal expenses. While these measures align with the Municipality's economic interests and necessities, certain actions conflict with the interests of the citizens.

Our findings brought to light the prevalence of monopolization and profit-seeking tendencies within state entities, leading to a conflict between their interests and the public interest. A participant articulated this issue, stating, "Our urban organizations are predominantly focused on economic profits. They either choose this path or are compelled to seek greater profits. Consequently, there is substantial pressure on them to engage in economic endeavors. In essence, financial returns have taken precedence over respecting the private rights of the public" (Interviewee, No.13). In summary, it is evident that urban management institutions have prioritized

their interests over public interest, driven by conflicts of interest, thereby seeking advantages for themselves and creating challenges for the broader public interest.

The second facet of the conflict of interest pertains to the clash between the interests of developers and the public interest. Respondents in the current study contended that national macro-economic protocols guide developers toward disregarding public interests entirely. An interviewee highlighted this sentiment, stating, "There is a landowner on Sattari Street who intends to construct a megamall in accordance with the current development plan and is willing to pay the associated fees. However, this megamall is not in the interest of the residents due to potential issues it may cause. On the other hand, the Municipality is unable to reject the landowner's project as it is legally justified" (Interviewee, No. 21). In such instances, stakeholders pursue their own interests, with the dominance of capital and the prevailing economic dynamics overshadowing the process.

The third facet of the conflict of interests, constituting a barrier to realizing public interest, involves the prioritization of economic benefits within the financial management system. In instances where urban management lacks sustained revenues, it resorts to financing expenditures through initiatives like the establishment of megamalls and revenue generation from permit issuances, to fund various urban projects such as highways and tunnels. This operational strategy was articulated in interviews, with one participant stating, "Because the approach was an economic one, measures such as the construction of megamalls were necessary to fund large-scale construction projects like Sadr bridge, Towhid Tunnel, and several other extensive projects that incurred substantial costs. The construction of megamalls was deemed a means to cover these costs" (Interviewee, No. 5).

**Table 2.** Categories, descriptions, and focused codes (Source: Authors)

Core Category 2: Conflict of interest		
Categories	Descriptions	Focused code
The conflict between the interests of state entities and the public	The conflict between the interests of state entities and the public interest and the difficulty of choosing between organizational interests and the public interest	Failure to prioritize the public interest, conflict between the public and urban priority of meeting some managers, specific groups' needs
The conflict between the interests of private developers and the public interests	Conflict between the interests of owners and or private developers on one hand, and the other the public interest, as well as the difficulty of choosing between the self-interests and public interest	Priority of the interests of the utilitarianism · developers
Priority of economic interests in the financial management system	Priority of economic interests in financial management and planning in urban management institutions	Financing the municipalities expenses similar to a private firm · municipality looking to earn revenues

The research findings indicate that the Municipality's increasing demand for financial resources, coupled with the economic motives of megamall developers, elucidates their disregard for the public interest in recent times. In this scenario, the Municipality functions akin to a private firm, prioritizing the economic returns associated with the establishment of megamalls in the most valuable plots of the city, at the expense of addressing public interest concerns.

#### *4.3. Core category three: Legalization of violations*

The research findings indicate that the third impediment to realizing public interest in Iran's urban development management and planning is the "legalization of violations." The apparent contradiction of rendering a violation legal raises questions. As illustrated in Table 3, this barrier is characterized as "providing a legal cover to violations," encompassing two distinct categories: 1) persistent plan revisions, and 2) the monopolization of decision-making by urban managers.

The inherent nature of urban environments encompasses dynamism and continual development. Owing to socio-economic and demographic shifts within urban areas, the ongoing necessity arises to meticulously monitor and adjust variables such as per capita metrics, land utilization, and city demarcations. However, when these adjustments are implemented without sound professional rationale, and in conjunction with external factors such as the imperative of capitalism to alter land usage and density, adherence to pre-established urban planning codes and regulations becomes challenging. This challenge is further compounded by the Municipality's financial exigencies. Consequently, specific factions exploit legal frameworks to assert their unprofessional and unethical perspectives on urban planning outcomes. Our research reveals a prevalent pattern of revisions in urban plans in Iran, primarily stemming from the misuse of authority within the urban management structure, encompassing entities such as the Municipality and the Zoning Board of Appeals. This misuse of authority culminates in the legalization of illicit procedures, particularly in the issuance of construction permits. Notably, one respondent articulated this issue, stating, "An institution aligned with the prevailing power structure can confer a legal facade upon an otherwise illegal permit" (Interviewee, No. 6).

The legitimization of transgressions in the context of megamall construction has precipitated a heightened inclination towards erecting such structures in areas designated as non-commercial or mixed zones. One interviewee articulated this trend, stating, "The land owner contends that no action is unlawful for them as they fulfill the impact fees for megamall construction, even when the land lacks commercial zoning" (Interviewee, No.18). Another interviewee underscored the pattern, noting, "Landowners and developers consistently resort to the Zoning Board of Appeals to validate their illegitimate requisitions" (Interviewee, No. 17).

A distinct challenge arises from the concentration of decision-making authority, constituting the second category of concern. Within Iran's urban development framework, laws and regulations are subject to the discretionary judgments of urban managers and officials, whose decisions are often influenced by personal perspectives. Consequently, the lack of legal transparency contributes to heightened interpretability of laws, resulting in the endorsement of transgressions devoid of professional endorsement. Some entities exploit legal ambiguities and gaps to legitimize urban development interventions that lack legal sanction. The centralization of decision-making processes reinforces a monopoly on decisions, wherein personal interests supersede public welfare. Consequently, requests for heightened density, alterations in land usage, and permit issuance are channeled through a legal procedure dictated by the monopoly of decisions exercised by the Zoning Board of Appeals and the Municipality, often disregarding potential adverse consequences. An interviewee expounded on this, stating, "Decisions pertaining to alterations in land use and density were deliberated within the Zoning Board of Appeals, leading to corresponding modifications in associated maps" (Interviewee, No.20). Consequently, the prevailing urban management structure operates in a manner that aligns legal frameworks against the public interest.

**Table 3.** Categories, descriptions, and focused codes (Source: Authors)

Core Category 3: Legalization of violations		
Categories	Definition	Focused code
Constant plan revision	Non-compliance with the codes and regulations in the initial plan and making various and Constant revision in the plans without regard for their ultimate goals	over Lack of effective oversight, flexibility in plan regulations ·legalization of issue in permit for illegal construction
The monopoly of decision-making by urban managers	Making decisions by a source of power, lack of participation by stakeholders in the decision-making process	Centralized decision-making, ·interpretability Centralized authority of guidelines

#### 4.4. Core Category four: The passive civil society

Our research outcomes indicate that a significant impediment to the attainment of public interest in urban development initiatives in Tehran is characterized by a "passive civil society." This phenomenon is manifested through two distinct categories: 1) an absence of public demand and 2) power imbalances (refer to Table 4).

The primary facet of this obstacle lies in the dearth of public demands. Our findings indicate that urban residents exhibit a passive approach toward articulating their requisites, displaying a disinterest in acquiring comprehensive knowledge about urban projects. At most, individual protests against specific plans are sporadic. A respondent underscored this issue, stating, "[In the field of urban planning], the foremost challenge emanates from the people themselves... They either express no demands or remain indifferent to the city's affairs" (Interviewee, No. 25). Conversely, civil entities such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and neighborhood councils often encounter limitations in intervening or participating in decision-making processes. In certain instances, these entities demonstrate a preference for accommodating developers' interests over prioritizing the public good.

In the absence of legislation governing citizens' participation in urban affairs, establishing a legal framework for citizen and civil entity involvement in decision-making proves arduous. Within our case study, despite residents possessing awareness of the adverse ramifications of megamall construction in residential areas, there is a notable absence of protests against such development.

The second facet of this hindrance pertains to power imbalances. Active participation in decision-making is fundamental for realizing public interest, as those abstaining from participation risk discrimination. In such circumstances, entities wielding power and investment influence social dynamics through various mechanisms. A respondent expounded on this, noting, "Both economic and political powers exhibit ambition and opportunism;

they possess the capacity to control and shape social power through persuasion, cooptation, bribery, or suppression" (Interviewee, No. 11). Consequently, our findings elucidate that the entry of influential entities, serving as investors in urban development projects with political influence, into Tehran's urban development planning system engenders power imbalances, suppression, and a weakening of social power. The collaboration between urban management, wielding political power and seeking financial support, and developers, possessing economic prowess, results in the exclusion of citizens - whether or not they wield social power - from decision-making and policy formulation. An interviewee highlighted this coalition, stating, "There is a coalition... we have an economic body pursuing profits... On the other hand, we have a public body in need of funds to finance its projects and services... Thus, one observes a coalition taking shape" (Interviewee, No. 3). Consequently, the public interest is marginalized in urban development plans, rendering it inconsequential to the authorities.

#### 4.5. Core category five: Problematic of public interest

An additional impediment to the realization of public interest emanates from the inherent nature of the concept and its treatment within Tehran's urban management and planning system. Our research findings delineate the predicament surrounding public interest into three distinct categories: the absence of a well-formulated strategy concerning public interest, the lack of legal recognition for public interest, and the intricate nature of the public interest concept (refer to Table 5).

The initial category concerns the inherent nature of the public interest as a concept and its intricate complexities. According to interviewees, the diversity of interests and demands within a pluralistic society introduces challenges in defining the public interest. Moreover, the complexity is exacerbated by the difficulty in gauging the extent to which public interest is addressed across various levels of urban management and diverse planning scales. An



interviewee articulated this challenge, stating, "There is ongoing debate suggesting that due to the lack of a clear and unambiguous definition of public interest, pursuing it becomes arduous. The elusive nature of public interest introduces characteristics that render it inherently challenging to work with" (Interviewee, No. 24). Thus, it is imperative to establish a definitive and comprehensive definition of the "public interest" concept aligned with established urban development standards.

In tandem with the intricate nature of the public interest, Tehran's urban planning system is marked by the absence of a well-formulated strategy to address public interest. Essentially, this study underscores the dearth of integrated and cohesive policy-making in this domain, resulting in inconsistencies between involved institutions and complicating efforts to serve the public interest. The lack of a developed strategy is closely associated with limited transparency, as expressed by an interviewee: "Our primary challenge is that the majority of public interest definitions are qualitative and defy quantitative measurement. Without a clear understanding of the problem, finding a solution remains elusive" (Interviewee, No. 1).

The absence of a well-developed strategy concerning public interest has contributed to a

weakened legal status for this concept within the urban planning framework. The regulations, processes, and procedures governing urban planning lack a specialized, comprehensive, and integrated system addressing the nuances of the public interest. Respondents in our study underscored that the deficiency in comprehensive urban planning legislation has proven to be a formidable obstacle in effectively serving the public interest. One interviewee elucidated this concern, stating, "It has been nearly two decades since comprehensive urban planning legislation was drafted but remains unsigned into law. To date, it is still pending approval ..." (Interviewee, No. 27). The lack of legal status has resulted in the absence of authorities empowered to identify the public interest and implement relevant procedures in urban planning. The research findings highlight that the ambiguous and multifaceted nature of the "public interest" concept has contributed to a nebulous urban planning system. Furthermore, beyond the intrinsic complexity of the public interest concept, there is a notable absence of concerted efforts to define the concept and formulate a strategy through legal frameworks, rules, and regulations.

**Table 4.** Categories, descriptions, and focused codes (Source: Authors)

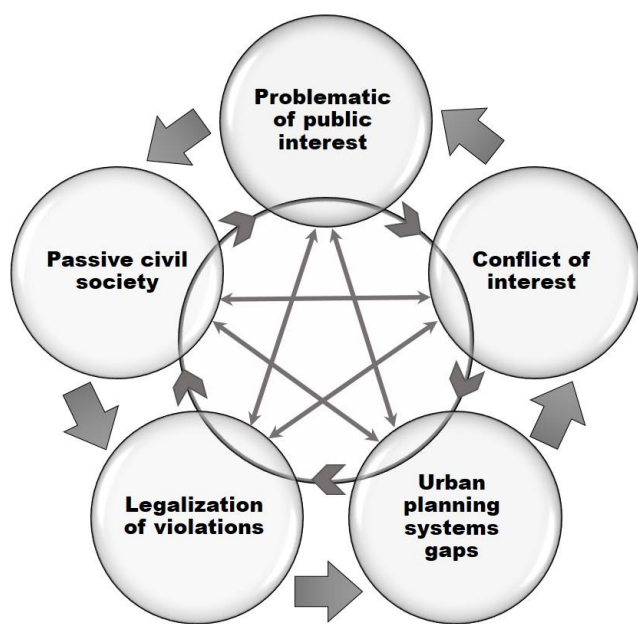
Core Category 4: Passive civil society		
Categories	Descriptions	Focused code
Lack of public demand	Citizens' inactive in affecting the changes caused by decisions on urban planning actions which lead to ignoring interests of all	Weaknesses of civil institutions, passive citizens
Power imbalance	The social, political, and economic power imbalance in urban planning and management	weakening of social power, ignoring citizens

**Table 5.** Categories, descriptions, and focused codes (source: authors)

Core Category 5: Problematic of public interest		
Categories	Descriptions	Focused code
Complexity of the concept	Various interpretations of the concept of public interest and the difficult assessment of some of its dimensions	different Ambiguity and complexity, interpretations
Lack of developed strategy	Inter-department of inconsistencies and lack of developed policies to meet the public interest	-Absence of common policy-making, inter sector inconsistency
Lack of a legal status	Absence of regulations among different departments of Municipality on the public interest and lack of institutions which guarantee the public interest	Absence of institutions and or authorities, ambiguous of lack of relevant laws, reference to the public interest in laws, conflict between regulations

## 5. DISCUSSION

As delineated, our research identifies five primary barriers to public interest: gaps in the urban planning system, conflicts of interest, legalization of violations, a passive civil society, and the predicament of public interest. The data analysis underscores the reciprocal and interactive nature of these categories. It is posited that these barriers operate within an intricate and interconnected framework, mutually influencing and complicating urban planning and management processes.



**Fig 2.** main barriers to meeting public interest

This section seeks to compare our research findings with existing literature on the concept of public interest in the urban realm. It is crucial to acknowledge that the use of theoretical literature is a matter of contention. Grounded theory methodology posits that the issue lies not in whether existing theoretical literature is utilized or not, but rather in how and when the texts are employed (Dunne, 2011, p. 113). From a constructivist grounded theory perspective, incorporating existing literature enriches the theoretical elucidation of the provided theories (Thornberg, 2012).

Concerning the first identified barrier, the literature indicates that gaps in the planning system, encompassing aspects such as weak financial resources, lack of authorization, economic rent, and non-participatory procedures, can impede the realization of public interest (Boland et al., 2017; Čolić, 2017; Searle & Legacy, 2021). The focus here is on economic issues in urban management, emphasizing the significance of sustainable economic

resources. Searle and Legacy (2021) assert that plans proposed for various projects often utilize cost-benefit analysis, an approach that may overlook essential aspects of public interest. Additionally, our findings align with literature that identifies weak and unstable financial resources as a hindrance to realizing public interest, highlighting that the pursuit of financial gains can lead to the neglect of public welfare.

Conversely, our research in Tehran's urban planning and management system reveals that interests are predominantly defined by those at the apex of the hierarchy in numerous urban development plans, thereby disregarding the concept of collective participation. This observation aligns with existing literature that highlights the detrimental impact of the absence of participatory procedures in formulating urban plans, leading to the neglect of public interest and diminishing stakeholder and actor support. Furthermore, this exclusionary approach marginalizes citizens from involvement in policy-making processes. To address this, it is argued that the realization of public interest in urban projects necessitates the establishment of a public counseling center to indirectly represent the interests of the populace as a whole. Within a comprehensive and rational planning model, public interest is upheld as the most desirable outcome through a top-down process. In contrast, the bottom-up method, emphasizing participation and consensus, serves the public interest (Čolić, 2017). This evolution in planning theory, transitioning from a comprehensive planning method to a reformist approach, signifies a shift from "objective" and "elitist" perspectives to an "inter-subjective" and "non-elitist" perspective (Murphy & Fox-Rogers, 2015). However, unlike the contemporary developments in urban planning theories, many urban development plans within Tehran's urban management and planning system continue to employ a top-down approach, effectively excluding the public from participation in the decision-making process.

Chettiparamb's work (2016) delves into the controversies and ambiguities surrounding the term 'public interest' in planning in the global North. The paper argues that planners, predominantly adhering to the rational comprehensive model in planning, often find themselves either ignored by wider politics or compelled into compromising positions (Chettiparamb, 2016, p. 1301). Our research findings align with this perspective, illustrating that a similar situation is prevalent in the urban planning and management practices in Iran.

The second barrier identified in our research, namely the conflict of interest, resonates with the observations made by Agbola and Falola (2018). They

posit that stakeholders' demands pose a significant challenge for planners and decision-makers in the planning process, as navigating and reaching consensus require a complex negotiation process (Agbola & Falola, 2018, p. 39). Our findings indicate that the conflict of interest within Tehran's urban planning and management system encompasses three categories: conflicts between the interests of state entities and public interest, conflicts between developers and public interest, and the prioritization of economic interests in the financial management system. This is consistent with other studies that unveil how politically and economically powerful stakeholders collaborate to enforce their preferred type of urban development plan, thereby compromising public interest (Hossain & Hackenbroch, 2019).

A review of existing literature corroborates that in situations characterized by intense conflicts of interest, those possessing wealth and capital tend to impose their interests over the public. Hossain and Hackenbroch (2019) investigate the implementation of a state housing project on the outskirts of Dhaka, illustrating the various resources and strategies employed by individuals in relatively powerful positions to significantly influence planning practices and the distribution of public resources. They argue that, in practice, the state, instead of achieving a socially welfare-oriented redistribution, ultimately allocates developed land to individuals in socioeconomically advantageous positions whom the city is willing to accept as permanent urban dwellers (Hossain & Hackenbroch, 2019, p. 11).

The identification of the legalization of violations as the third barrier to realizing public interest aligns with the findings of Murphy and Fox-Rogers (2015). Their study argues that planning generates unique demands from city residents, provided they do not challenge the market-led development framework. Essentially, interventions aligned with macro-economic measures, even if perceived as undesirable, may be defensible, opening the door to corruption and economic rent. Consequently, indifferent urban management to public interest utilizes various strategies, such as institutional reforms, bureaucratic measures, and the suppression of public protests, instead of confronting illegal actions, violations, and corruption within state entities. This approach establishes a mechanism within urban management to adapt to administrative and bureaucratic violations, undermining public interest, while transparency and responsiveness from state entities could serve the public. Such conditions pose a risk to democratic processes, neglecting the voice, interests, and

engagement of the public in decision-making (Hossain & Hackenbroch, 2019).

The passive civil society emerges as another barrier to the realization of public interest, a phenomenon extensively explored in the literature. The concept of public interest empowers individuals to question the legitimacy of the state and the private sector through discourse aligned with public interest. People can form pressure groups during the legislative stage to influence planning policy-making and advocate for their concerns in the planning procedures (Agbola & Falola, 2018, p. 48; Shibata, 2007, p. 26). Čolić argues that certain preconditions, such as transparency in political and institutional arrangements and an open public arena recognizing the pluralism of interests, are essential for fostering a strong civil society (Čolić, 2017, p. 16). Maidment (2016) contends that planning measures should address multiple public interests, emphasizing a consultative process that transforms diverse public interests into a unified discourse, distinct from representative-based democracy (Maidment, 2016).

Certainly, the influence of power imbalances on public decisions in urban development is acknowledged; however, it is argued that such imbalances could potentially disrupt the relationship between power holders and state support through maximum public participation. This shift could steer planning and public decision-making toward democracy, necessitating public presence and political empowerment to compete with other actors (Hackenbroch, 2012; Hossain, 2013; Hossain & Hackenbroch, 2019). Consequently, non-participation, power imbalances, and a passive civil society are considered additional barriers to the realization of public interest.

The final barrier, identified as the problematic nature of public interest, aligns with the literature emphasizing the intricate nature of this concept. The study's findings corroborate the perspectives of Hossain and Hackenbroch (2019), who contend that public interest, being inherently controversial, is susceptible to misuse, failing to establish a common ground for decision-making and the pursuit of the common good. Consequently, successive discourses manipulate the notion of "public interest," ultimately serving the interests of a select few powerful actors (Hossain & Hackenbroch, 2019).

Moreover, the research reveals that the lack of effective strategies, policies, and legal status for public interest constitutes another barrier. In this context, the study aligns with Murphy and Fox-Rogers, who observed in their research that while planners perceive the common good as a guiding principle, a significant portion of planners struggle to articulate a definition

of the common good in planning (Murphy & Fox-Rogers, 2015, p. 239).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Our research on public interest, employing Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), has been instrumental in providing a focused direction by forming main research categories through a repetitive and reciprocating process between data and emerging theory. The study centers around three megamalls, concentrating on the planning and design processes involved in obtaining construction permits for these developments. The observation reveals that the inherent complexity and inter-subjective nature of the concept of public interest, coupled with its lack of legal status in Iran's urban planning system and the absence of a codified strategy, pose significant challenges in achieving public interest in urban development endeavors. Furthermore, the laws and regulations related to public interest within Iran's urban planning lack effective sanctions. The pressing financial needs of municipalities exacerbate the situation. The monopoly of decision-making and non-participatory procedures create a power imbalance, rendering legal procedures ineffective in shaping decisions on urban planning measures and interventions. This, in turn, gives rise to conflicts of interest among capital owners, urban management, and citizens.

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#### **HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE**

Nourian, F., Dayarian, N. (2023). Barriers to Public Interest in Urban Development Plans. *Int. J. Architect. Eng. Urban Plan*, 33(4): 1-14, <https://dx.doi.org/ijaup.800>.

URL: <http://ijaup.iust.ac.ir>

