BUILDINGS & CITIES

SPECIAL COLLECTION: SOCIAL VALUE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

EDITORIAL

Social value of the built environment

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HIGHLIGHTS

The concept of social value has gained significant prominence in recent years in some countries, yet remains misunderstood. There is a recognised need for it to be better defined, interpreted and embedded in planning, design and operation. This will entail measurement and assessment. Social value is increasingly being considered alongside issues of quality of life and wellbeing, to both the individual and the community, but it remains challenging to reconcile social value in a meaningful way with the present value management approaches that dominate the construction and real estate industries. This special issue brings together a series of contributions to current thinking and critical discussion on social value, including empirical research from across the UK, Europe and Australia. It points to both new practices for the planning, design, construction and operation of projects. It identifies a series of gaps in the research, most notably a discussion of social value in the context of real estate, valuation and 'environmental, social and corporate governance' (ESG).

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1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the triple bottom line approach to sustainability (*i.e.* economic, social and environmental value) and the Environmental Social and Governance (ESG) agenda have led to an increased interest in social value. The definition of the term 'social value' is under construction and is often used interchangeably with 'wellbeing'. Despite a broad acknowledgement of the importance of social outcomes (*e.g.* a sense of belonging, pride, and cohesion to individuals and communities), social needs, challenges and opportunities continue to be misunderstood and deprioritised. There is a widely recognised need for social considerations to be better defined, interpreted, negotiated, measured, assessed, and designed into buildings and places.

Advocates of social value tend to be motivated by this desire to find a way to define, optimise, and measure impacts on quality of life and wellbeing. These outcomes have traditionally been considered hard to measure. However, definition and measurement are needed to ensure they are taken into account within the valuation exercises that characterise many societies' audit culture. Wellbeing is a dimension of 'intrinsic value' (Bunting 2008), an aspect of experience of the individual, community or society, that is 'best evaluated qualitatively, or with a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods' (Crossick & Kaszynska 2016: 8). Yet it is difficult to include intrinsic value in the spreadsheets that dominate the value management of our built environment, which is why it is so frequently omitted from these critical documents.

There is also a need to understand better the relative importance of different dimensions of social value. A consistently strong and well-understood theme within the literature of wellbeing, quality of life and social value is a connection with nature. Should it therefore be more heavily weighted in models of social value measurement? An absence of means to enumerate quality of life has led to its neglect as a field, a situation which is rapidly changing with the advance of the social value agenda as well as improvements in technology.

1.1 CONTEXT

As guest editors of this special issue, we span industry and academic expertise on social value with a particularly British outlook that has been expanded through the process of writing this editorial. In the UK, the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012[1] sets out a requirement for organisations being awarded public money to demonstrate social value delivery. It took a while for social value to catch on in procurement and bidding processes, with construction companies taking the lead with a highly professional approach to enumerating the social value of the construction phase, most notably through the creation of jobs and local supply chains, yet often governed by tick-box processes that are prone to exploitation.

It was out of a sense of frustration with the problematic and erratic way in which project bids are evaluated and won that a group of leaders on research in architectural practice (including us) began work on the Royal Institute of British Architects' (RIBA) *Social Value Toolkit for Architecture*. This set out a range of ways in which the design of housing could impact the wellbeing of people (Samuel *et al.* 2020). We started by reviewing the literature of 'wellbeing', defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'the state of being comfortable, healthy or happy'. We also examined measures relating to the value of green spaces such as 'natural capital' (Natural England 2011; GLA 2017) and 'ecosystem services', which also address the positive impacts of nature on people. The New Economics Foundation's *Five Ways to Wellbeing* (Aked *et al.* 2011) was a particularly useful resource, as was the Canal and River Trust's (2017) review of wellbeing literature, *Waterways and Wellbeing* (2017). Our conclusion was that although there was much agreement on the constituent attributes of wellbeing across a range of grey (industry and charity) literature reports, a wide variety of different wordings was being used for the same thing. At the same time there is a multitude of overlapping definitions of social value, social assets and social capital (Alesina & La Ferrara 2002). This lack of clarity on what constitutes wellbeing is typical of a private sector-driven field that lacks government leadership in developing an agreed shared framework for evaluation.

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Drawing together the findings of a literature review, Samuel *et al.* (2020) argued that the social value of housing is in: fostering positive emotions whether through connections with nature or offering opportunities for an active lifestyle, connecting people and the environment in appropriate ways and in providing freedom and flexibility to pursue different lifestyles (autonomy). Participation, supporting communities to help design and build their homes and neighbourhoods has social value too. These, we argued, could be used as headline outcomes for capturing the social value of housing. We offered a range of post-occupancy evaluation (POE) questions which could then be used to tease out aspects of each theme, *e.g.* 'my neighbourhood gives me opportunities to stop and communicate with other people'. The *Social Value Toolkit for Architecture* has since been enshrined within RIBA's Sustainable Outcomes Framework, and social value has been built into its (post-Brexit) educational requirements meaning that, at last, budding architects will learn how to take it into consideration.

During the process of writing the *Social Value Toolkit for Architecture* we became increasingly aware that social value is highly context and place specific. The spatialising of social value in maps was the focus of the Mapping Eco Social Assets project, which involved the making of layered maps using the measures set out in the *Social Value Toolkit for Architecture*. In 2019, focusing on a council-owned estate in Reading (UK), Samuel working with Eli Hatleskog led a series of workshops with residents of different ages and backgrounds, including school children, in which they co-created social value maps of their area based on Social Value Toolkit criteria. 'Asset mapping' with communities has become a common occurrence in the UK. What made this exercise innovative was the creation of layered value maps, with potential for quantification, revealing social value hotspots across the area. It also showed how important it is for social value to be spatialised, calling into question the recent UK tendency to monetise social value using social return on investment (Hatleskog & Samuel 2021).

Much debate exists about whether it is best to collect data from people by asking them questions (*active* data) or to use the census and other sources to infer what is needed (*passive* data). Stated preference research shows how little correlation there can be between what people say and what they do (revealed preferences) (Engstrom & Forsell 2018). In one interesting case, the citizens of Yarmouth (UK) complained of misrepresentation through the statistics about levels of social infrastructure (Thomas 2021). Their lived experience was at odds with the things that had been measured. There is a delicate balance to be achieved between active and passive data, the main thing being that communities must have the power to understand, and contest if necessary, the data being collected about them as well as the methodologies used to collect them. As Criado Perez (2019) has made clear, the way that data are collected is rarely objective.

1.2 VALUE AND AUDIT

Value, the worth of something, is a contradictory word. On the one hand, it is 'the capitalist category par excellence' (Phillips 2015) and a medium of control, and, on the other, it can be a tool for accountability, and inclusion (Groak 1992: 117). The way in which the built environment sector too often talks about 'value' has to change, not least because it designates as valueless all 'forms of economic activity that are informal, community based, and driven by collaboration and sharing' (Fioramonti *et al*. 2019: 207). That there is an inherent problem in the way economies are measured and audited is widely recognised (Raworth 2017; Mazzucato 2018).

In an audit culture, performance is measured against predetermined targets. Audit always begins with classification. Classifications are 'powerful technologies' that are both 'political and ethical' (Bowker & Leigh Star 2000). The basis for government decision-making in the UK is HM Treasury's *Green Book* (UK Government 2013), which weighs up costs against benefits. This process is performed in an increasingly evidence-based way (Donovan 2013: 4). Recent positive improvements to the *Green Book* point in the direction of a system based on environmental and social, as well as economic, value, *i.e.* the triple bottom line of sustainability. Whilst there is a long tradition of economic valuation, however flawed, and some solid measures for environmental value—carbon (embodied and operational), biodiversity, *etc.* However, social value (the focus of this special issue) is very much a work in progress. Housing must be valued against social, environmental and

economic indicators over long periods of time as the UK Green Building Council's (UKGBC) Social Value Framework makes clear. According to the UKGBC, social value 'encompasses environmental, economic and social wellbeing' (UKGBC 2021: 7). Notice the slippage here between 'value' and 'wellbeing'. It is also important to note the rise of 'cultural value', not as a subset of social value but as a category in its own right.

In the UK work continues apace on the development of valuation systems for procurement, most notably the very considerable investment that has gone into the creation of the Construction Innovation Hub Value tool, which is founded on a 'five capitals' approach. Here social value sits uneasily across categories of 'human' and 'produced' value. It also has an uneasy fit with the commonly used UN SDGs as can be seen from the *RIBA Sustainable Outcomes Guide* (Clark 2019).

1.3 DEFINING SOCIAL VALUE

Social value as a terminology originally emerged from early ideas of corporate responsibility, ethical economics, and the social enterprise and valuation literatures (Zadek 2004; Richmond *et al.* 2003). The need to measure and evidence the social value delivered by organisations led to the rise of increasingly sophisticated social auditing and accounting techniques (Zadek 2004), and a third-sector explosion in innovative impact reporting practices specifically (Nicholls 2009). In terms of the built environment, the concept of social value has been previously applied to consider the impact of design to wider society beyond the building, such as in built environment policy (Macmillan 2005), and has also been considered in terms of its applicability to people-focused post-occupancy research (Mulgan *et al.* 2006).

Social value has more recently achieved significant traction in UK public sector policy through the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, and it remains both an increasingly high-profile yet elusive concept. In the Act it is defined as the 'economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the relevant area', emphasising the triple bottom line of sustainability, alongside a geographical component that encourages the localising of benefit. Social Value UK, a recognised industry body for social value, takes a wellbeing measurement-focused definition that emphasises the need for a people-led perspective. More recently, the concept of 'quality of life' has further contributed to the agenda through the work of the Quality of Life Foundation and others (URBED 2021).

A key issue that still needs articulation is the question of social value for whom. The advent of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015[2] brings into relief the fact that social value extends beyond our own generation and into the future, a principle that has been adopted by wellbeing economy (WEGO) governments such as Iceland and New Zealand.

2. CONTRIBUTIONS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The call for papers attracted 33 abstracts. Twelve full papers were submitted and, of these, eight (plus this editorial) are published in this special issue (Table 1).

Table 1 Overview of the papers in this special issue.

AUTHORS	TITLE	DOI
F. Samuel & K. Watson	Social value of the built environment [Editorial]	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.399
D. Troje	Improving social value through facilities management: Swedish housing companies	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.327
A. Raiden & A. King	Added value and numerical measurement of social value: a critical enquiry	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.330
M. S. Çıdık	Politics of social value in the built environment	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.334

(Contd.)

AUTHORS	TITLE	DOI
J.-C. Dissart & L. Ricaurte	Assessing social value in housing design: contributions of the capability approach	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.328
A. Skoura & A. Madden	Assessing the social values of historic shopping arcades: building biographies	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.335
J. Croffi, D. Kroll, V. Soebarto, H. Barrie & K. McDougall	Wellbeing fostered by design: a framework for evaluating indoor environment performance	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.336
A. Legeby & C. Pech	Social values and social infrastructures: a multi-perspective approach to place	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.341
H. Barrie, K. McDougall, K. Miller & D. Faulkner	The social value of public spaces in mixed-use high-rise buildings	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.339

2.1 THE CONSTITUENTS OF SOCIAL VALUE

The constituent dimensions of social value are fluid. The creation of jobs reads strongly in construction sector definitions of social value. This tends to be limited to the ability to wrap mechanisms around the construction process to encourage more inclusive employment and skills opportunities during delivery of projects. Instead Troje describes a novel approach in which housing companies in Sweden build employment opportunities for tenants in the longer term, delivering a wider range of constituent outcomes relating to social value. This speaks to the changing role of housing companies and associations as the shapers and stewards of place, community and wellbeing. Their ability to do this depends very largely on the way in which they are funded and evaluated.

2.2 CONTEXTUALISING SOCIAL VALUE

Defensible Space on the Move (Lees & Warwick 2022) charts the history of the concept of defensible space as it has morphed over time. It feels a similar account of social value is very much needed, hence the value of Raiden & King's critical enquiry into the topic herein, which unpacks the tension that exists between universalist approaches to social value as opposed to those that recognise its contextual nature, uncovering the diversity of current social value practice and measurement. The impact of different types of subjectivity on understandings of social value is profound. This is a theme also explored by Çıdık on the politics of social value. Çıdık usefully introduces three types of politics of social value: analytical politics, participatory politics and lived politics, revealing the underlying negotiation, compromise and decision-making that occurs in efforts to create social value in the built environment, with implications for a deeper and more democratic understanding of what social value means.

2.3 METHODOLOGICAL SCHEMAS

Social value is often deployed as a metric that attempts to capture quality of life so that the 'social' can be seen alongside other kinds of valuation in national accounting. The capabilities approach resists the idea that important elements of quality of life 'can be reduced to a single metric without distortion' (Nussbaum 2011: 18), but offers a means to 'package comparative information in such a way as to reorient the development and policy debate' (17). That there is potential to use a capabilities approach as a foundation for measurement of wellbeing is an underexplored area (Robeyns 2016), particularly in the context of the built environment. There is work to be done in aligning social value with capabilities, the focus of Dissart & Ricaurte who provide a useful exploration of their relationship in the context of housing.

2.4 CONSERVATION AND SOCIAL VALUE

The heritage sector has its own distinct social evaluation categories such as Historic England's 'communal value' (Historic England 2021), and Historic Scotland's 'social interest'. Robson has

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developed a Social Value Toolkit for heritage professionals, an important first step in aligning social value with heritage value (Robson 2021), but considerably more work is needed in this area.

There is dislocation between discussion of 'heritage value' and construction industry definitions of intangible impacts. The process of assigning significance to buildings is increasingly being recognised as a socio-cultural activity, not just a technical one (De La Torre & Mason 2002). The case for intangible heritage was advanced through the Burra Charter (instigated by Australian ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) in 1979 and regularly updated), a groundbreaking moment in conservation debate (ICOMOS 1999). More recently, Madgin and others are developing more 'people centred' approaches to conservation practice (Madgin & Lesh 2021), but further work in this area is needed, hence the importance of Skoura & Madden's paper on the social value of historic shopping arcades, which conceptualises heritage as a varying process by which communities ascribe value in different ways to heritage places, and emphasises the need for more inclusive heritage narratives that recognise the many ways that value is derived from built heritage assets.

2.5 EVALUATING INFRASTRUCTURE AND PLACES

There is a lack of examples of social value-based evaluation of housing. Three papers in the special issue form an important body of work in this area. These papers help to demonstrate how wellbeing and empowerment can be included in design and development decision-making, and what more democratic planning processes might look like which take a more nuanced appreciation of stakeholders and the differing ways they place value on place.

Barrie *et al*.'s work on social value based in U City in Adelaide (Australia) makes an important contribution to understanding value in high-rise mixed-use housing. Croffi *et al*. offer a wellbeing-oriented framework for the evaluation of indoor environmental performance in an Australian context. In turn, Legeby & Pech offer a multi-perspective approach to evaluating the social infrastructures of places.

2.6 NEW KNOWLEDGE GAINED

The papers herein offer a transect of social value research across the globe in ageing industrialised societies often oriented around a neoliberal (economic) agenda. They give flesh to a currently very schematic understanding of the subject. It is notable that a large number of the submissions come from the field of architecture, a field that has much to gain from the advance of social value because of its ability to capture the intangible impacts of good design. Much of the knowledge gained pertains to POE at the scale of a building and the ways in which POE might be theorised and refined to address the 'social'.

3. CURRENT CHALLENGES FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

3.1 GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

It is notable that no authors from the disciplines of finance, asset management or real estate responded to the call for papers. This is a shame as the concept of social value is increasingly being considered within practitioner discussions about the genuine measurement and meaningful reporting of ESG and the discipline of social performance. This is just one example of the ways in which disciplinary and professional silos are impacting the development of the field. In the UK, the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is seeking to align the way data are collected across local authorities in order to facilitate the development of a more data-driven and automated planning system. The hope is that such initiatives will inspire greater cross-disciplinary collaboration in these areas.

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3.2 LEADERSHIP AND SILOS

Although it is increasingly broadly applied, the term 'social value' comes from the parlance of procurement. Whilst other disciplines, *e.g.* design (Design Council 2018), are interrogating the nature of their contribution to the world, they are not connecting meaningfully with debates on social value. There is a lack of leadership to develop frameworks of social value that are inclusive enough to embrace a wide range of fields while being baggy enough to encompass variety. Samuel (2023) is moving away from specific measuring schemas. Instead, she advocates the collection of data layers that can be reconfigured and clustered in relation to local outcomes framework. In the case of her most recent project, the Public Map Platform, a method will be developed to cluster data layers in order to report on progress towards the Future Generations (Wales) outcomes.

3.3 SPATIALISING AND DIGITISING SOCIAL VALUE

One regret is that the spatialising of social value receives little specific attention within this special issue despite current UK government interest in geospatial strategy, land-use 'Proptech' and 'levelling up', a current political agenda that focuses on rebalancing investment and growth across all regions in the UK. It is not possible to level up without showing spatially what is happening and where across the country. The social value of cities can be captured spatially through maps as the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) project Community Consultation for Quality of Life has shown.[3] This work continues with a further large AHRC project, the Public Map Platform,[4] which will create baseline maps to reveal the attainment of the Future Generations (Wales) outcomes spatially using geographic information system (GIS) technologies. It is interesting to speculate what the impact of the recently developed indoor GIS system, coming with an ability to pinpoint outcomes on the interior of buildings, will be. The Happy Homes Toolkit currently in development by the architectural practice Pollard Thomas and Edwards in collaboration with the University of Reading is developing a mechanism to map and predict social value through building information modelling (BIM).[5] Such projects anticipate the automation of social value capture and the development of a digital planning system built on data. There is much talk of digital twin-city models that anticipate the performance of places and buildings. That these are currently being developed with little consideration of wellbeing is alarming.

3.4 IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL VALUE FOR LESS ECONOMICALLY DEVELOPED NATIONS

The potential of social value for valorising buildings and places of high value to communities in less economically developed nations must be acknowledged. This is particularly important in circumstances of economic investment and gentrification. Expert-led post-occupancy and neighbourhood assessment frameworks such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) and the WELL Building Standard,[6] prevalent across the globe, claim to be holistic tools, but have traditionally put a strong emphasis on environmental performance and building amenities, perhaps because wider social outcomes are considered so hard to measure. More effort needs to be made to make them more sensitive to cultural and environmental context (Alabbasi 2023). The Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) has recently been reviewed to pay greater emphasis to 'health, wellbeing and social impact'.[7] This is particularly welcome if such tools are to be used in the context of less developed nations where professional claims to sustainability have powerful traction with planners, funders and governments. An example might be the building of a tower with an 'excellent' sustainability rating that displaces an established 'informal' settlement. It is highly questionable whether such a tower is truly 'holistically' sustainable in the long term. Social value provides a language to change the dominant narrative of economic development. Social, environmental and economic value need to be treated as equals in order to address long-term and interconnected challenges such as climate change. After all, climate change can be framed as a social justice issue.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Social value has an important role to play in the delivery of the SDGs. A rebalancing of value to include social and environmental value, as well as economic and commercial value, is needed to ensure the shaping of communities and places will have wellbeing outcomes. This requires the creation of new categorisations and definitions of value that recognise its contextual and contested nature. These categorisations must be regularly reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose, and are proactively engaged in issues of representation and democratic practice. Whilst there are reasonably robust existing indicators (largely quantitative) for economic and environmental value, there is considerable agreement on what constitutes social value, but little agreement on how it can be demonstrated as this *Buildings & Cities* special issue has shown. Getting agreement on terminology is fundamental to data-gathering and the modelling of outcomes. The industry was quick to organise itself with shared systems and internationally agreed standards (ISOs) for BIM worldwide, building in the UK on considerable government investment in this area. A similarly proactive stance is needed to develop the potential of social value as it integrates and drives change within digital design and planning, construction practices, and operation and management, as well as to drive awareness and upskill capabilities through associated education and professional development.

NOTES

1 See https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/3/enacted.

2 See https://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/.

3 See www.ccqol.org/.

4 See www.publicmap.org/.

5 See http://www.happyhomestoolkit.co.uk/.

6 See https://standard.wellcertified.com/well/.

7 See https://bregroup.com/products/breeam/breeam-solutions/breeam-health-and-social-impact/.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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