



Capturing the social value of buildings: The promise of Social Return on Investment (SROI)



Kelly J. Watson ^{a,*}, James Evans ^a, Andrew Karvonen ^a, Tim Whitley ^b

^a School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK

^b NWY Building Engineering, Arup, 6th Floor, 3 Piccadilly Place, Manchester, M1 3BN, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 January 2016

Received in revised form

7 April 2016

Accepted 8 April 2016

Available online 11 April 2016

Keywords:

Building user community

Post-occupancy evaluation

Social Return on Investment

Social value

User-centred design

ABSTRACT

Existing post-occupancy research rarely considers the importance of the sociality of the building user community and its building user group dynamics. A social value agenda is proposed to promote user-centred design within the built environment, by looking beyond physical design to consider the dynamic interactions that exist between people and their built environment within the social context that mediates them. A social impact valuation methodology, Social Return on Investment (SROI), is trialled in three nonclinical case buildings of varying levels of user-centred design and different build types, representing applied social value research. A qualitative comparison of the “social value” of the case buildings considers the physical design, as well as their varying briefing and design processes, organisational set-ups and building management, and the experiences of the building users. However, the financial SROI data is inconsistent with the qualitative narratives, leading to concern over the effectiveness of SROI at capturing the implications of the sociality of the building user community.

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1. Introduction

The delivery of the built environment is rarely influenced by user needs and preferences; rather conventional business drivers, technical regulations and environmental imperatives are prioritised [1]. As Macmillan [2] notes, there is a general reluctance to invest beyond the minimum standards expected in commercial builds, whilst decision-making to increase short term costs for long term gain is problematic for elected leaders in the public sector. A significant factor in the disregard of user requirements is their qualitative nature which makes measurement and transferability problematic. Whilst a range of evaluation methods and tools currently exist (e.g. the PROBE methodology, Design Quality Indicators, Value in Design) they do not have far-reaching influence on professional design decisions. This is related to the relatively short timeframe of the professional design process in comparison to the longer timeframe required for effective evaluation, a disparity which currently undermines user-centred building design in practice. Furthermore, the qualitative findings of existing

evaluation methods lack transferability and have limited applicability to built environment decisions which are necessarily commercial, whilst their objective is consistently about measuring building performance, rather than user experience. A shift in evaluative focus is required to understand the impact of design for building users.

The newly emerging concept of “social value” in the UK has significant potential to overcome the issue of evaluative impact in building design research. The concept has recently achieved traction at policy level being written into the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 [3], which came into effect in England and Wales in February 2013. The Act requires that public service contracts take into account the wider value of a project over its entire lifetime, rather than traditional procurement based on cost. The application of the concept of social value to the built environment emphasises the significance of value beyond profit-driven motivations. It is proposed that applied social value research in buildings could facilitate the dissemination of post-occupancy findings in professional learning loops to realise building design that is optimised for users, as well as economic and environmental performance.

This paper draws on existing post-occupancy research on building design and users to develop a perspective relating to the emerging concept of social value. This is fundamentally tied to the triple bottom line of sustainable building design, which emphasises

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Kelly.Watson@manchester.ac.uk (K.J. Watson), James.Evans@manchester.ac.uk (J. Evans), Andrew.Karvonen@manchester.ac.uk (A. Karvonen), Tim.Whitley@arup.com (T. Whitley).

the social element alongside economic and environmental imperatives. It implies a focus on wider society beyond the building, as seen in the use of “social value” by Macmillan ([4]; p.X) and in a recent report on built environment research avenues by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [5]. It also relates to recent calls to widen out from a focus on individual building performance to the role of the built environment at the neighbourhood scale in adaptive processes over time [6,7]. However, in this paper the concept of social value is applied specifically to the internal building user community, rather than society beyond the building, to promote understanding about the value of user-centred design. This represents an original contribution as little published research exists which explicitly tackles the social value of building design from the perspective of building users, being only indirectly addressed through work on the wider value of design [2,4].

This paper begins by presenting a social value agenda for buildings, representing a unique application of the concept, followed by the presentation of applied social value research to investigate its effective measurement. An overview of the applicability of the concept of social value to buildings is followed by a thematic review of existing post-occupancy work on building design and users. Three main points are covered in relation to the social value of buildings: differing conceptualisations of building users; looking beyond a homogenous, individual user to user groups and nested user units; and the moderating variable of building user group dynamics in occupied buildings. The sociality of building users as a dynamic and contextual community has generally not been a point of interest in previous post-occupancy work, but for social value research in buildings it represents a fundamental element. The results of applying a social valuation methodology called Social Return on Investment (SROI¹) to three cancer support centres are presented, representing a mixed methods comparison of three case buildings with varying levels of user-centred design. The paper aim is to investigate whether SROI, as an emerging social value methodology in the built environment, can capture the implications of the collective building user community and its social relations, not currently possible through existing post-occupancy methods. A range of qualitative and quantitative financial data provides an account of the social value of each building. The discussion considers the effectiveness of SROI at capturing and measuring the social value of the case buildings, and critiques the ability of SROI to consider the complex relationship between building design, building users of multiple types and units, and building user group dynamics, an empirical agenda for social value research in buildings.

2. Social value and buildings

The concept of “social value” has recently emerged in the public policy sphere in the UK, due to the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 [3] coming into force in England and Wales in February 2013. The Act has been heralded as a shake-up in public service provision, requiring the wider value of a project be taken into account during requests for tender. In relation, Scotland is currently developing the Procurement Reform Bill with similar intentions and government-commissioned research in Northern Ireland is set to evaluate the success of the Social Value Act and assess the impact if a similar bill was introduced [8].

A growing body of independent research has focused on the decision-making behind public service investment in the UK. Think-tanks like the New Economics Foundation (nef) have

identified a long term neglect to measure what matters and promote decision-making based on social outcomes rather than financial considerations [9]. Increasingly, the concept of social value has been understood as something actionable. For example, the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action website asserts social value to be about “maximising the impact of public expenditure” [10]. Its appointment as a legal requirement in public service contracts in England and Wales represents a major accomplishment for this movement. However, some argue that the Act does not support social value aggressively enough [11] due to a lack of regulatory teeth combined with a caveat for Local Authorities to opt out if they cannot meet its requirements for practical reasons.

The concept of social value grew out of early ideas of corporate responsibility, ethical economics, and the social enterprise and valuation literature [12–14]. Its conceptual ambiguity is made tangible as the products and services generated by organisational enterprise that are of value to wider society [15], giving rise to ideas like “value-based organisations” [16, p.63]. The necessity of measuring and evidencing the elusive social value of these organisations has become a common goal, leading to the rise of increasingly sophisticated social auditing and accounting techniques [14]. In relation, social enterprise is being encouraged to evidence the social value it produces in order to enhance competitiveness [17] and this growing awareness has caused its rapid materialisation in a host of new organisations like the North West Social Value Foundation in England and the Social Value Lab in Scotland. In addition, novel consultancies, like Social Value in the UK, have emerged which work directly with the third sector to help them navigate the recent proliferation of competitive social entrepreneurs and impact reporting practices [18].

This paper capitalises on the timeliness of the social value discourse and its increasingly practical application to public service expenditure and social enterprise impact. It aims to establish a conceptual basis for the association of social value with research on building design and building users. As evidenced by the shake-up in public service procurement in the UK, there is considerable potential to overcome the widespread apathy towards user requirements present in the design of buildings through an engagement with social value. However, some key conceptual considerations are required. Understanding occupied buildings through the social value lens assumes that the building user can fill the role of the “social”, which is typically played by wider society in the public sector and social enterprise literatures. The internal community of the occupied building has not been drawn out in post-occupancy research, which tends to pragmatically address static user outcomes or user interaction with design on an individualised basis. The sociality of building users as a dynamic and contextual community has generally not been a priority, but for social value research in buildings it represents a fundamental feature. The following section reviews existing post-occupancy research on building design and users from a social value perspective to develop a framework for a social value agenda in buildings.

3. Literature review

A significant proportion of post-occupancy building research focuses explicitly on the building user as the unit of study. The various approaches found in academic work on building design and users are discussed below in relation to a unified agenda for social value research in buildings. Three key themes are addressed: differences in how building users are conceptualised, looking beyond a homogenous, individual user to user groups and nested user units, and the significance of building user group dynamics as a

¹ SROI refers to Social Return on Investment, a social impact valuation methodology.

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