



Moving research into practice: embedding social values in the design process

A vision for including place-based social values in built environment work

1 Our mission

Social Life seeks to support design teams to embed social values into the design process of the built environment. After ten years of doing place-based research, we still see a clear gap in the capacity of the architecture and urban design sector to integrate social value goals throughout the design, engagement, procurement, construction and management of making places. The consequence of this is that new places fail to meet the everyday needs of their residents and people who use the area, damaging their wellbeing, health and quality of life.

Social Life was set up in 2011 as a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. Our work is about understanding how peoples' day-to-day experience of local places is shaped by the built environment - housing, public spaces, parks and local high streets - and how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas. We have worked on many regeneration schemes in London and beyond, using our social sustainability framework as the starting point for our work on social impact. We welcome the increased interest in social value, but are frustrated by the limitations of current approaches and the difficulties applying what we have learnt to practice.

A social value agenda for built environment work has reached both public and private sectors. However, social value commitments comes in many different forms and are rarely place specific. The current tools used to support these, such as the national TOMs, ESG contract and others tend to focus on the scheme, and what it can deliver through employment or apprenticeships. There are no rigorous systems in place to support the process and delivery of social impacts as they relate to the new place and how it can support less tangible factors like belonging and wellbeing.

COVID-19 has highlighted that existing social fractures only get exacerbated in times of crisis. The built environment also took on a new level of importance bringing into question the quality of our homes and how we access public spaces and resources. There is a renewed push from all sectors

to address our environmental and social crisis with equal commitment. Social impact goals are more aligned than ever across sectors. Improving wellbeing and quality of life is at the core of finding solutions to the climate emergency, and to moving forward to a sustainable, ultimately regenerative, future.

We see a clear opportunity to support designers to create better places by making social value place-based and connected to the communities surrounding the project site.

To effectively embed social values in our built environments, both the design process and stakeholder relationships need to change. Preconceived notions of what 'works', what is 'beautiful', what 'brings people together', what is 'needed', what 'feels safe' must be challenged to reflect a local set of values, needs and cultures. Social values aren't universally prescriptive and need to be understood in context. Consequently, the design team needs to expand to include an array of other experts including community expertise. **The designing of places becomes a nonlinear process where new collaborative relationships can be created and over time power dynamics between developer, designer, community member, and public sector are able to shift.**

As an initial step towards this greater vision, we are **seeking partnerships with built environment professionals** and have developed a set of services we can provide as partners with the design team that align with RIBA stages and begin to address some of these gaps.

1 Vision setting workshop

In this initial workshop, we bring together the core design team, clients and consultants to discuss the central goals of the project in relation to secondary data presented (including community dynamics data). Using Social Life's social sustainability framework, we will define what values are important to maintain throughout and to always return to in decision making processes.

Output: Hosting a workshop and a list of co-defined goals

2 Community research and partnership building

This next phase deep dives into who are local stakeholders to bring on board, connect with, and engage with on the project. This may be individual community leaders, community organisation or networks. We will bring in service design engagement techniques to deeply engage and help the design team think differently about the project.

Output: Local stakeholder list and establishing relevant partnerships

3 Local social infrastructure research

This context research involves understanding what are community assets that are supporting the social life and networks of a place as well as community perception of the area as a place to live, work and visit. Evidence is collected through surveys, observations and long-form interviews. This social understanding of a place will form the basis of a place-based social value framework.

Output: social infrastructure map, survey design and responses and a list of emerging values of a place

4 Place based social value framework development

The social value framework is a tool that highlights local values to include in a project, for example, tackling specific issues of safety or health, inclusion of distinct groups, supporting social interaction amongst groups, specific cultural heritage to celebrate, supporting belonging, sense of agency and participation, etc. and ways to operationalise these values at each stage of the design process in relation to local challenges.

Output: a framework highlighting place-based values with ways to embed them in each phase of the design process

5 Evaluation metrics and tools

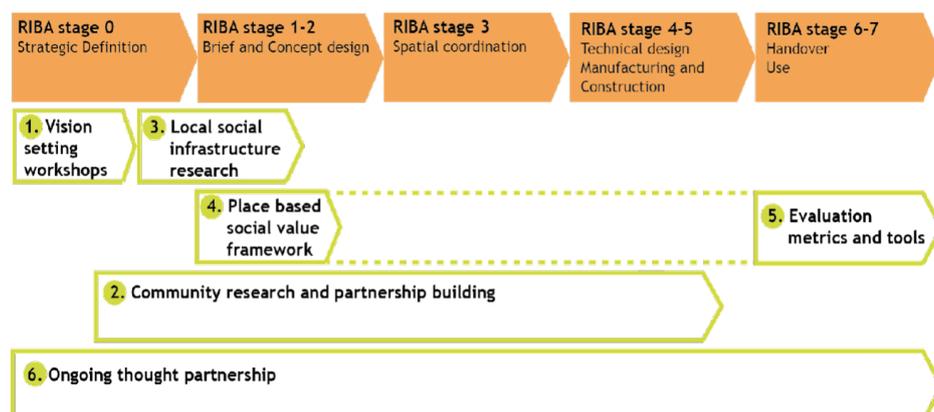
Towards the completion of the project, we develop research tools to measure the social impact of the project over time. These may be post occupancy surveys, project partner interviews and secondary sources as well as data collection methods for a short, mid and long-term impact evaluation.

Output: Data collection tools and methods for short-, mid- and long-term evaluation of the project.

6 Ongoing thought partnership

We remain as a thought partner until the completion of the project to continue supporting the design team. Monthly check-ins and project progress updates ensure social value goals are kept and met.

Output: Monthly check-ins and added support



2 Our emerging thinking

What have we learnt? It is time to turn research into practice.

Social Life has a decade of experience in carrying out research and practical projects, providing insights into the relationship between people and places. We have a deep understanding on how people are affected by the built environment and changes to their surroundings. Much of our work highlights the social impacts of built environment investments in specific areas. We specialise in understanding social infrastructures in places, our [Connective Social Infrastructure](#) report sets out the findings of Mayor of London's Good Growth by Design research inquiry into how social infrastructure is supporting social integration. Our latest [reports](#) on the impact of COVID-19 on Southwark communities highlights the importance of community and belonging as indicators of resilience in times of crisis.

Through our work, we have come to understand ways to make engagement processes more inclusive and representative and are able to identify social values as they relate to a built environment project and convert them into trackable and implementable indicators. Yet reflecting on our work 10 years on we have not seen enough changes in practice. Now, we seek to be more interventionist and ground this knowledge.

Social Life has worked extensively with councils, developers, housing associations and community organisations. We understand how decisions and processes about planning and shaping the built environment are made and many of the barriers to people-centred processes. We want to leverage this experience and our networks to find better ways of working together.

At this moment we are faced with an interlinked social and environmental crisis that is fundamentally impacted by the built environment. COVID-19 has highlighted existing social fractures and the importance of quality home and access to public spaces. The way we plan, design, construct, engage with, inhabit, experience, programme and access spaces has significant social consequences and can support greater equality (or perpetuate even entrench inequality). Practitioners must be empowered and have the capacity to design for the greater good of communities impacted by their work, and to commit to both social and environmental sustainability.

We are poised to make this research actionable. The benefits of social value have been demonstrated and have reached the public agenda. Social impact goals are more aligned than ever across sectors so supporting their implementation is vital for our future wellbeing.

What is the problem? Much is known, little is done.

There continues to be a gap between knowledge and design practice in the built environment sector. The relationship between the built environment and social impacts have been thoroughly researched. Health inequities driven by poor quality environments have been at the forefront of new public health policies.

Isolation and lack of social connections as a result of inadequate social infrastructure were in part reasons for numerous deaths in 1995 Chicago's heat wave as described by Eric Klinenberg¹. Research in seven locations in England for the RSA suggests that social connectedness correlates more strongly with wellbeing than social or economic characteristics such as long term illness, unemployment or being a single parent.² Perceptions of safety are affected by the presence

¹ Eric Klinenberg (2002) Heat Wave: a Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago, University of Chicago Press

² Matthew Parsfield et al (2014), Connected Capital: the value of connected communities, RSA

of community networks, Paul Bellair's work found that getting together once a year or more with neighbours has the most consistent and strongest effect on burglary, motor vehicle theft, and robbery.³ The presence of good quality parks can have an impact on trust in public sector institutions including police departments⁴. From having an impact on social connections and cohesion to sense of belonging, health, safety, civic engagement and even the capacity to mobilise and advocate, the process by which the built environment is designed, delivered and programmed plays a significant role in supporting and enhancing wellbeing.

Numerous guides including standards, frameworks, toolkits and processes on how to apply some of this knowledge are easily available. The [Social Value toolkit for architecture](#), co-published by RIBA and Reading University in 2020 highlights simple ways to demonstrate and evaluate the impact of design on people and communities through post-occupancy surveys. The [2018 Inclusive Healthy Places, A guide to inclusion and health in public spaces](#) by Gehl Institute or the [Quality of Life Framework](#) by the Quality of life Foundation both focus on providing indicators to support well-being and health equity in built environment work. Social Life's [Design for Social Sustainability](#) (2012) sets out a framework for planning and designing the services, spaces, housing and governance arrangements to help local communities to thrive and both [Social Value and Design of the Built Environment](#) by Supply Chain Sustainability School (2017) and the more recent [A Guide for Design Teams, Maximising Social Value in Design](#) by Social Value Portal outline a process on how to include social value at each stage of design.

There is increasing pressure on built environment practitioners to include, track and monitor social value in their projects. The Social Value Act in 2012, while not specifically targeting built environment practitioners, was influential in prescribing social values to procurement processes. In June 2019, after joining the global declaration of an environmental and climate emergency, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) released the [RIBA Sustainable Outcomes guide](#) which outlined 'sustainable communities and social

value' as one of the eight core topics. Following this, in January 2021, the UK government started requiring that all major procurements not only consider but evaluate social value in their projects. This was included within the 2020 [Construction Playbook](#) which is used by councils looking to embed social value into their planning processes. Other public sector funding allocations such as the Mayor of London's Good Growth Fund are tied to social impact values. However, It is not common for social value requirements to be directly connected to and embedded in the project itself and the place it will create.

In practice, social value goals in the built environment sector still often end up side-lined or superficial tag-ons, driven by external requirements. For example, post occupancy surveys, which are the most commonly used and standardised tool to evaluate social impact of built environment projects, only focus on the after effect of completed projects and not on the other stages of the design process. And as AJ housing survey highlighted, under half of architectural practice carry out post occupancy surveys and only four percent systematically administer them. While there are practices that centre their work on social value, and have built extensive expertise, we welcome the chance to learn from them but believe this work has yet to be mainstreamed, and that it could often go further.



3 Paul E. Bellair (1997) Social Interaction and Community Crime: Examining the Importance of Neighbor Networks, Criminology volume 35 issue 4
4 Centre for Active Design (2017) The Assembly Report

5 <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/archive/aj-housing-survey-post-occupancy-not-on-architects-radar>

Social Life has been working alongside architects and designers for the last decade. Some of our most astute insights come from the projects that have been most challenging.

- Our project with ZCD Architects and Brent Council on the codesign of [a new youth anchor](#) has helped us refine our youth engagement techniques and pilot the co-design process to establish core goals and a brief for the future operator and the space.
- Our work with Hawkins\Brown on social infrastructure and social integration for the Mayor of London's Good Growth by Design research inquiry - published in the report [Connective Social Infrastructure](#) - allowed us to think about the role of design alongside management and programming, and the importance of networks and local relationships.
- Assessing the quality of the built environment as part of our many [social sustainability assessments](#) helped us understand how local social life is shaped by the detail of design decision as well as by services and social infrastructure.
- We have learnt about the barriers to meaningful community engagement and codesign through our work on [regeneration schemes](#) across London.
- Our social sustainability toolkit for Barnwood Trust helped us understand how development decisions are made across a large rural housing growth area.
- Collaborating with Fielden Clegg Bradley on their [IntenCity](#) project to explore quality of life in denser, faster moving cities helped us think about how we use different techniques to help people think differently about places.
- The Social Life team have carried out CDPs, taught on architecture courses and been part of Design Review teams. Founder Nicola Bacon was a CABE Built Environment Expert and is now a Design Council Expert - Social Life itself is a Design Council Corporate Partner.
- We enjoyed working with Metropolitan Workshop on their [People Powered Places](#) project in 2021, here is our [podcast on social sustainability](#), part of this project.

What are we proposing? Process oriented design and collaborative relationships

To effectively embed social values in our built environments, both the design process and the unequal balance of power in stakeholder relationships need to radically change. Our built environment is the result of numerous decisions taken by public and private stakeholders at various stages of the process. The design phase is the materialisation of this process; it is what will be experienced and its consequences will impact people's everyday life. Urban design and architecture driven by social values isn't focussed on an outcome but rather on the process to ensure that what is created, how it is created, how it is maintained, programmed and operated is contextual and responds to a local set of values and needs. In this process, engagement doesn't aim to get community buy-in, but attempts to see how a given brief can work for, support and provide for local users. It may be that the brief needs to be revisited. Social values aren't prescriptive and need to be prioritised for a specific situation. In this nonlinear process, new relationships can be created and power dynamics are able to shift.

While this is a long-term vision to achieve a more democratic, collaborative, equitable landscape, it is necessary to revisit the process by which our built environment is made as well as the people who are part of that process.

This is work in progress and it will continue to evolve as we build our portfolio of pilots. we are always looking to connect with built environment professionals to discuss this further and continue building partnerships. so please if you are interested in the topic, looking to meaningfully embed social values in your work or have some follow up questions, don't hesitate to reach out!

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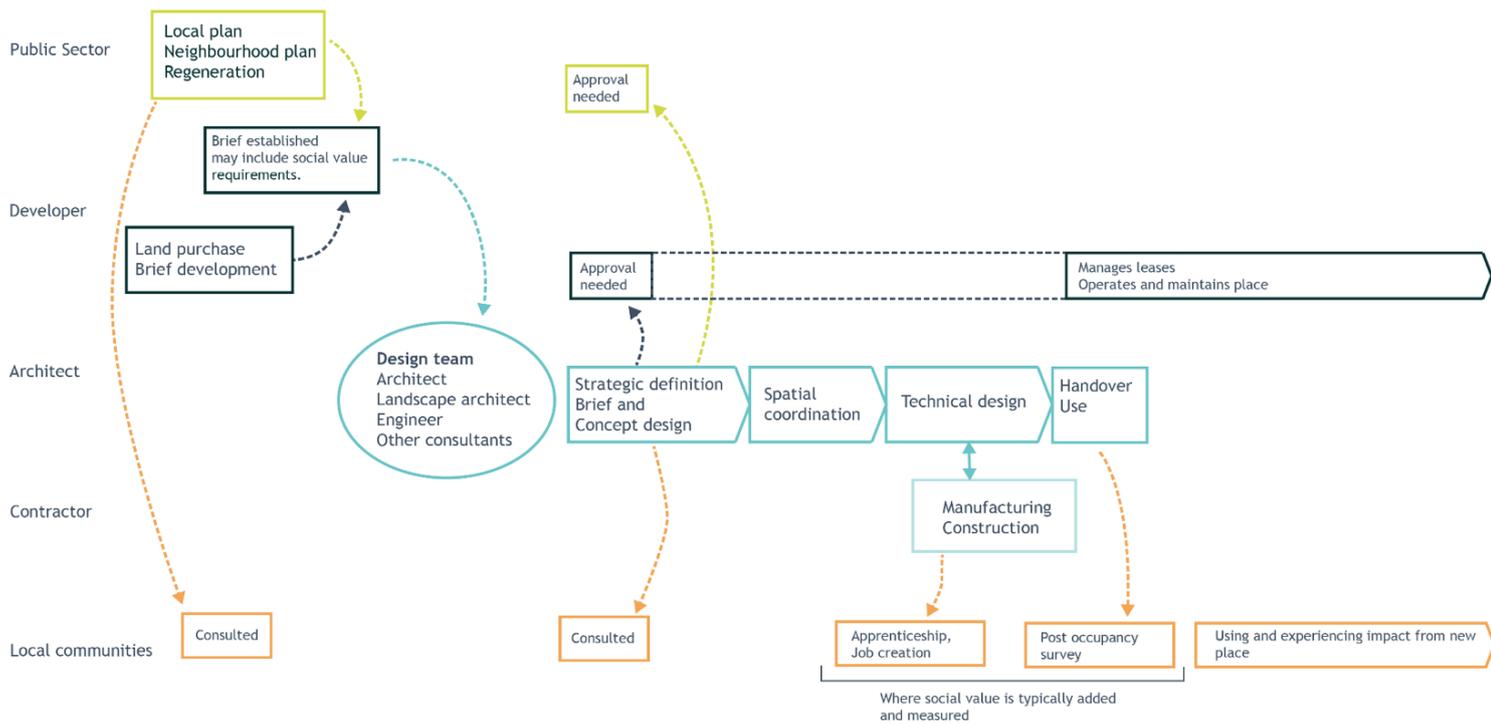


Diagram 1: Typical linear design process

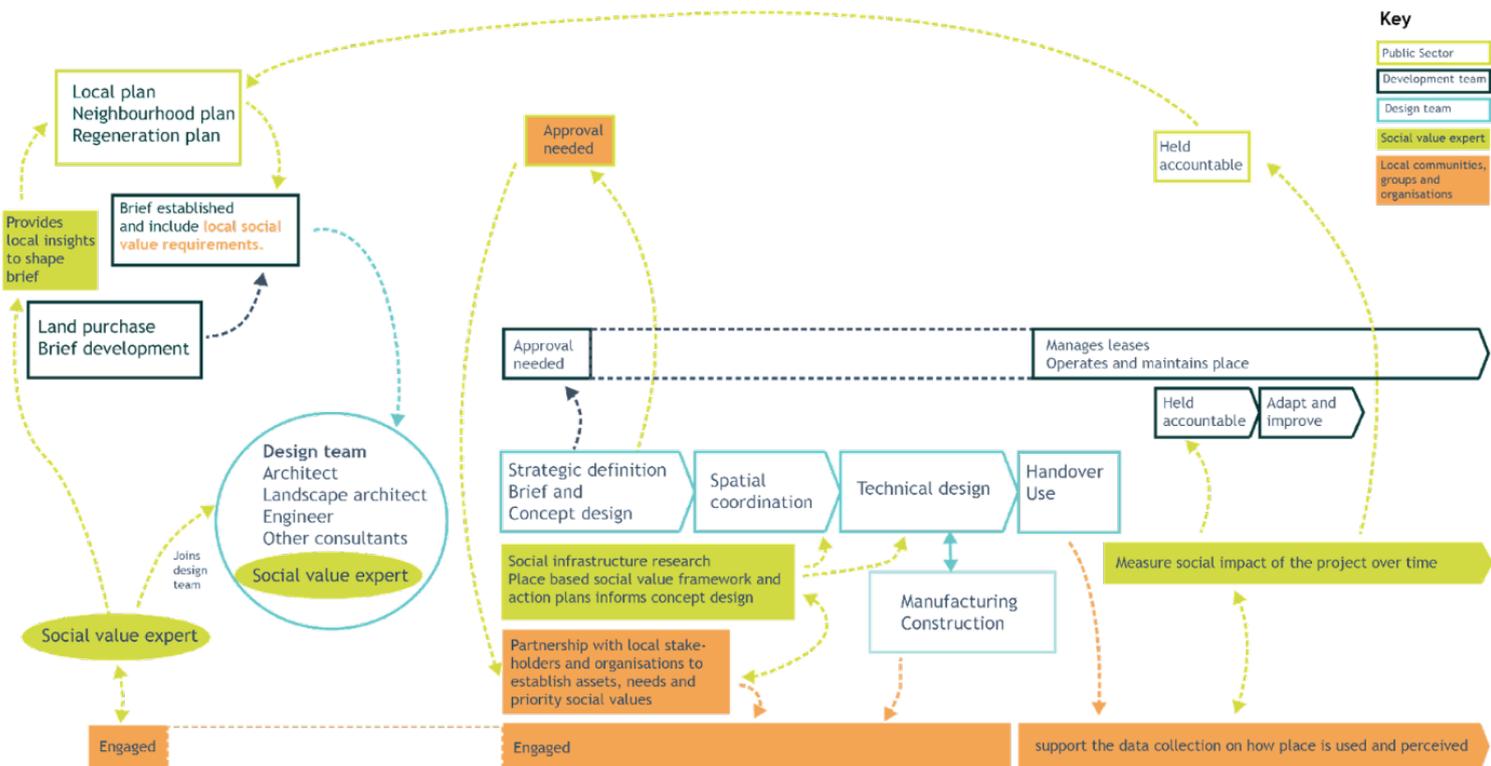


Diagram 2: Non-linear process with an expanded design team including community expert and social value expert creating new relationships