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

A vision for formalising the inclusion of social values in built environment work

SOCIAL LIFE

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 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, too often, new places fail to meet the everyday needs of their residents and people who use the area, damaging their wellbeing 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.

Social value requirements in the built environment have reached both public and private sectors, and come in many different forms ranging from social value commitments, to ESG contract requirements relating to a specific brief. The focus tends to be on the scheme, and what it can deliver through employment, rather than the impact on the place and how it can support less tangible factors like belonging and wellbeing. There is an established body of research on the relationship between the built environment, wellbeing and local social life. We need to move this research into action and apply this knowledge to make social value more meaningful.

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

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. 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.

To effectively embed social values in our built environments, both the design process and stakeholder relationships need to change. The focus of the design team must shift to the process rather than the outcome. 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.**

We are developing three offerings to start addressing these gaps.

1 Partnerships and pilots: expanding the design team

We seek to partner with architects on pilots to test some of these ideas and provide technical support to design teams on how to operationalise place-based social values. We will learn by participating in the design process, introducing key questions within it and refining what this new process and set of relationships can look like.

2 Training and placements: scaling practice

To scale what we have learnt, the expanded design team needs to be replicated on more sites. Two types of new experts are needed. Firstly, the social value expert who understands how to integrate place-based social values into built environment projects. Secondly, the community expert; a local community member trained to carry out community research and excavate community values.

3 Sharing knowledge: building a community of practice

The learnings, challenges, successes and failures of this practice need to be shared with other practitioners. Working collaboratively for a more equitable built environment is essential and silos can be diluted with a cross-sectoral knowledge sharing practice that can take place through regular events, a shared database, and supporting professional networks.

2 Our emerging thinking

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

Social Life now 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 ways to break apart social values 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 significant 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 Klinenberg[1]. 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 of community networks, Paul Bellair's work found

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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

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 departments[4]. 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 and embedded in the project itself.

In practice, social value goals in the built environment sector still often end up sidelined 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[5]. 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.

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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 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 decision are made across a large rural housing growth area.

• Collaborating with Fielden Clegg Bradley on their *IntenCity* project to explore quality of life in more dense, faster moving cities helped us think about change and how we use different techniques and frameworks 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.
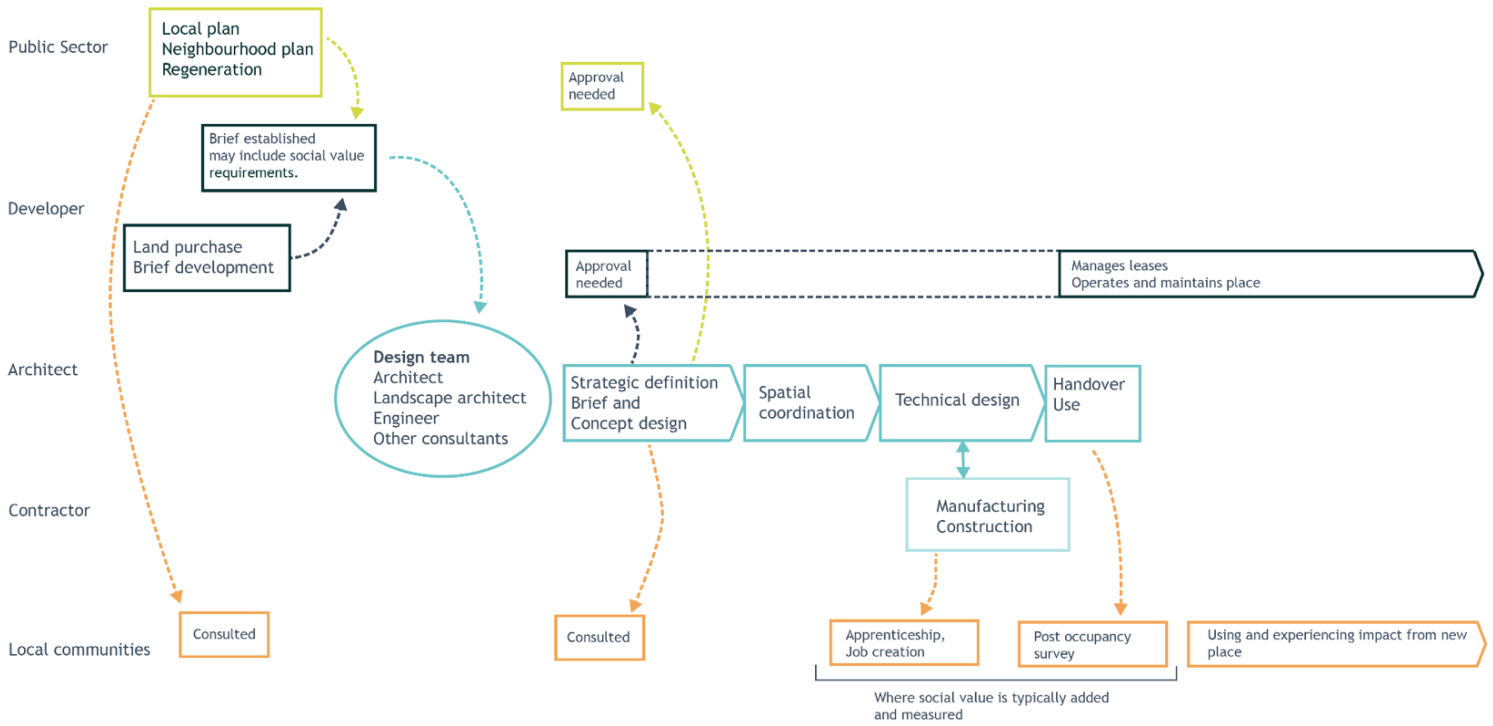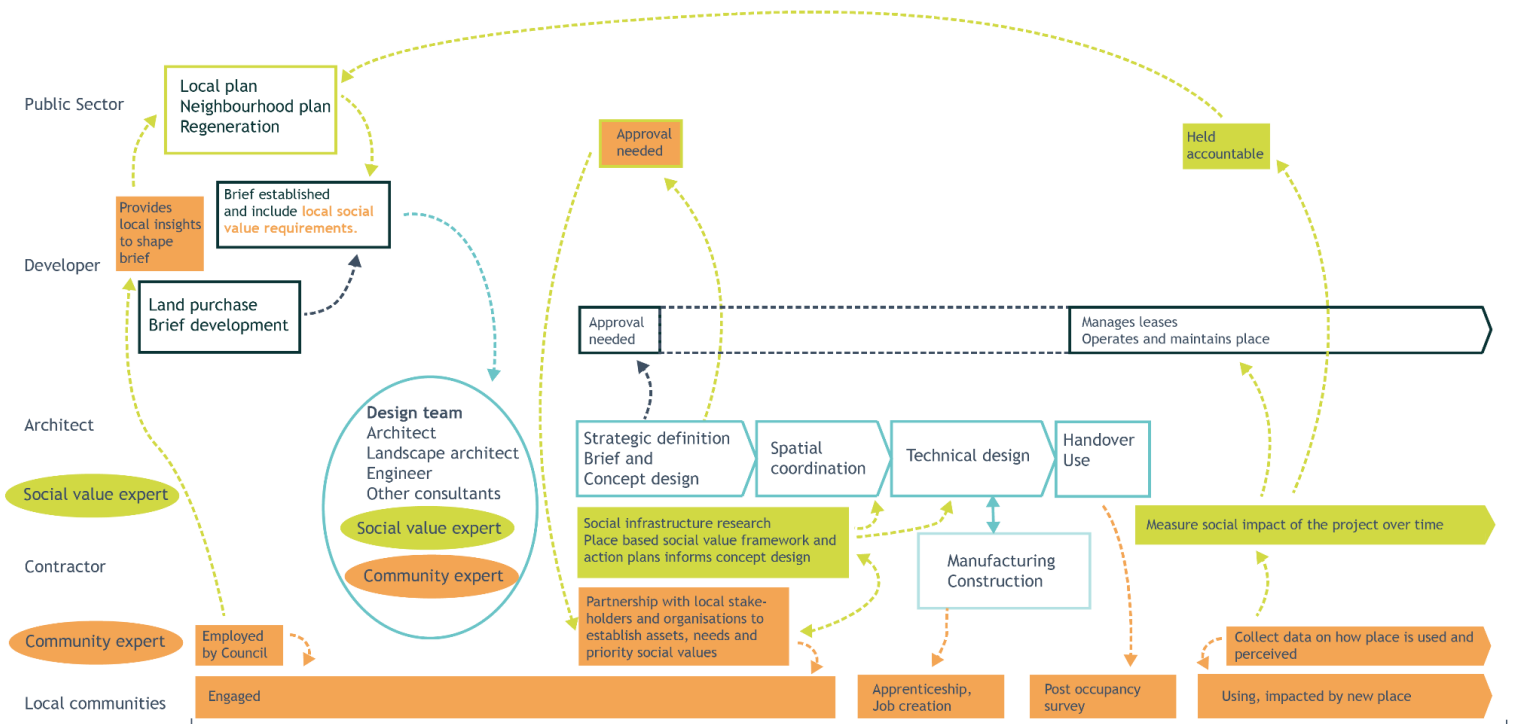
Diagram 1: Typical linear design process

Public Sector

Local plan
Neighbourhood plan
Regeneration

Approval needed

Developer

Brief established
may include social value
requirements.

Land purchase
Brief development

Approval needed

Manages leases
Operates and maintains place

Architect

Design team
Architect
Landscape architect
Engineer
Other consultants

Strategic definition
Brief and
Concept design

Spatial coordination

Technical design

Handover
Use

Contractor

Manufacturing
Construction

Local communities

Consulted

Consulted

Apprenticeship,
Job creation

Post occupancy
survey

Using and experiencing impact from new place

Where social value is typically added
and measured

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

Public Sector

Local plan
Neighbourhood plan
Regeneration

Approval needed

Held accountable

Developer

Provides local insights to shape brief

Brief established
and include local social
value requirements.

Land purchase
Brief development

Approval needed

Manages leases
Operates and maintains place

Architect

Design team
Architect
Landscape architect
Engineer
Other consultants

Social value expert

Community expert

Strategic definition
Brief and
Concept design

Spatial coordination

Technical design

Handover
Use

Social value expert

Social infrastructure research
Place based social value framework and
action plans informs concept design

Measure social impact of the project over time

Contractor

Manufacturing
Construction

Community expert

Employed by Council

Partnership with local stake-
holders and organisations to
establish assets, needs and
priority social values

Collect data on how place is used and perceived

Local communities

Engaged

Apprenticeship,
Job creation

Post occupancy
survey

Using, impacted by new place

Social values embedded throughout the process, the design team is expanded to be in direct partnership with a community expert, and therefore local communities are engaged throughout are more meaningfully, a place based social value framework guides the process and an evaluation of the metric holds decision-makers accountable.

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. To get there, we propose some tangible offerings.

1. **Partnerships and pilots: expanding the design team**
   Social Life envisions partnering with architects on pilots to test out some of these ideas and provide technical support to design teams on the operationalising of place based social values in their built environment projects. We will learn by participating in the design process and will be able to refine what this new process and set of relationships can look like. Initially, our value proposition includes:
   - In-depth community and social infrastructure research
   - Development of place specific social value framework and ways to operationalize these values at each stage of the design process
   - Moving beyond community consultation to establish partnerships with key community stakeholders/ institutions to the design team
   - Planning integrated social value impact and action plans for the delivery of projects and act as thought partners until completion of the project.
   - Providing the metrics and tools to measure social impact of the project over time.

2. **Training and placements: scaling practice**
   In order to scale up, the expanded design team needs to be replicated in more projects, thus the knowledge and expertise on including place-based social values in built environment work must be broadened. There are two types of new experts needed on the design team; the social value expert who understands how to integrate place-based social values into built environment projects and the community expert; a local community member trained to carry out community research and excavate community values. Social life has experience training both these new roles and below we propose different approaches that align with varying levels of commitment from architecture practice and local authorities.

- **Low commitment:** training architects to include place-based social values in their projects through a CPD programme
- **Medium commitment**: Organise placements of social value experts in architecture practises for a specific project. (funding tbd)
- **High commitment**: Working with local authorities to sponsor training community members to become active community researchers and contributors to local development plans and be required to participate in the design team of publicly funded built environment projects, in line with the creation of Resident advisory boards, this new role would play an active role in excavating community research to inform local projects.

3. **Sharing knowledge: building a community of practice**
   The learnings, challenges, successes and failures of this practice need to be shared with other practitioners. Working collaboratively for a more equitable built environment is essential and silos can be diluted with a cross-sectoral knowledge sharing practice that can take place through regular conferences, a shared database.

This is work in progress and it will surely evolve as we start working on some 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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