PROJECT MANAGING THE SOCIAL VALUE OF BUILT ASSETS: A CALL FOR A FOCUS ON VALUE MANIFESTATION

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Social value of built assets (during their operational phase) is a major topic within the wider debate on social value in construction. Extant research and practical guidance mainly suggest a define-measure-manage approach to project managing the social value of built assets. However, apparent in this literature is the challenge with the definition of social value, which depends on the perspective and timescale as well as on the social and material scales concerned. Arguments from the previous debate on developing a theory of the built environment, which struggled with a similar definitional issue, shed further light on the root causes of the challenge of defining the social value of built assets. Based on a review of these two bodies of literature, it is argued that shifting the focus from defining social value to capturing its manifestations can provide a better basis for developing project management insights and knowledge accumulation. It is concluded that a focus on manifestation would provide a richer understanding of the social value of built assets at the operational phase; thus, providing more comprehensive insights about how it can be project managed. It is also concluded that such a research agenda could enable a transformation that would put social value considerations at the core of professions and businesses in the built environment.

Keywords: definition, measurement, project management, social value, spatiality

INTRODUCTION

'Social value' is difficult to grasp and define. According to Social Value UK, the national network for social impact and social value, it is "the quantification of the relative importance that [the affected] people place on the changes they experience in their lives" (Social Value UK 2020). Evident in this definition, as well as in the recent debate on social value of built assets, is the multiplicity of the perspectives, timescales as well as of the social and material scales that can be associated with the term. Hence, there are significant challenges with grasping, defining and measuring social value of built assets (Watts *et al.,* 2019a). These challenges imply a major difficulty for construction project management, the role of which is to ensure that the desired outcomes, including the social ones, are delivered through the project. As stated by Farag *et al.,* (2016), the challenges related to defining social value mean that there is a lack of understanding in terms of how projects should be managed to ensure that the

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desired social outcomes are achieved at the operational phase (i.e. project managing the social value of built assets). As a result, in practice, the delivery of social outcomes has been excluded from core business objectives and approached as a philanthropic activity.

Despite the challenges of grasping and defining social value of built assets, most practical guidance on managing social value in construction projects suggest a define-measure-manage approach (e.g. Building Social Value 2017; UK Green Building Council 2018). The situation is similar in construction research where the debate seems to mainly revolve around developing categories, attributes and/or methodologies to develop definitions of social value to enable measurement and inform project management (Mulholland *et al.,* 2019). Importantly, more often than not, such publications provide little or no theoretical discussion about the limitations of their suggested approaches in capturing the multiplicity of the perspectives that can be associated with the social value of built assets - a common problem that also applies to wider research on social value (Mulgan 2010).

The way in which a problem is formulated (i.e. its problematization) determines the managerial approaches and methods that will be used to address it (Dery 2018). Therefore, in order to effectively project-manage social value of built assets, it is first necessary to find suitable ways of capturing it, justified by a reflection on its substance and nature. With this in mind, this position paper first reviews the construction management literature on social value in order to outline the challenge with defining and measuring social value of built assets, which also leads to problems with its project management. This is complemented with arguments from the previous debate on developing a theory of the built environment, which struggled with similar definitional issues. Overall, the literature review sheds some light on the root causes of the challenge with defining and measuring social value of built assets, and it reveals that there is much to be learned by embracing the emergent substance and multifaceted nature of social value in the context of built assets. From here, the paper makes the point that shifting the focus from defining to the realisation/manifestation of social value is required to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the term, which would enable better informed project management in return. In an attempt to exemplify this suggestion, frameworks developed by Agnew (1987) and Lefebvre (1991) are briefly introduced with a discussion of how analyses based on these frameworks could reveal new ways of evaluating the social value of built assets/environments; and thus, contribute to the knowledge on project managing social value. It is concluded that a focus on manifestation would provide a richer understanding of the social value of built assets at the operational phase; thus, providing more comprehensive insights about how it can be project managed. On a final reflection, the conclusion suggests that the kinds of knowledge derived from such a research agenda could inform the core practices of professions and businesses in the built environment; thus, enabling social value to be treated not as an additional function but rather as a transformational impulse to rethink the professions and businesses in the built environment.

The growing interest in 'social value' in construction research in the last decade mainly stems from a recognition that construction projects can have significant social impacts (Smyth and Vanclay 2017). This has led to the understanding that the economic arguments that underlie the decisions relating to construction should be balanced with social ones; hence creating additional (socially concerned) liabilities on the key decision-makers of construction projects such as planners, clients and contractors (UK

Public Services Social Value Act 2012). The influence of the 'balancing' rhetoric is apparent in earlier research relating to social value in construction which has mainly reflected on how new concepts can be incorporated into the existing construction industry practices and organisation in a top-down manner for a better balance; such as through the concepts of 'shared value' (Awale and Rowlinson 2014), 'social enterprise' (Loosemore and Higgon 2016) and 'corporate social responsibility' (Murray and Dainty 2009). The rhetoric of 'balancing', or in other words seeing social value as an addition to existing considerations, is an important point to highlight. This is because, arguably, it is this rhetoric that gave prominence to the above-mentioned top-down approaches to understanding and managing social value in construction which offer only a limited level of engagement with social issues through the logic of define-measure-manage. In other words, arguably, such top-down approaches to social value align with a define-measure-manage logic because of their quest for using social value as a balancing element rather than a core one.

However, there is a growing acknowledgement that (top-down) define-measure-manage approaches to social value have significant challenges with appropriately addressing issues relating to social value. This is mainly because of the challenge of defining and quantifying social value, which ultimately causes issues with effectively implementing/project managing it (e.g. Raidén *et al.,* 2019). The challenge with defining social value is partly due to the diversity in the language employed to discuss social value related issues (Raidén *et al.,* 2019), partly due to the variety of the theoretical and analytical foci adopted (e.g. social development perspective vs. social procurement perspective etc.) (Farag *et al.,* 2016), and partly because of the multiplicity of the different interpretations of social value (which are formed through complex social processes) by the different stakeholders (Watts *et al.,* 2019a). Managerial difficulty associated with the multi-facetedness of the term has led to a recognition that define-measure-manage approaches to social value needs to be evaluated critically. For example, Watts *et al.,* (2019b) show how corporate social responsibility reports of contractors may be used as a pure rhetorical device using ambiguous language in order to hide lack of consideration of the contrasting/different views of clients. Another example is Watson *et al.,* (2016), which argues that 'Social Return on Investment' (a quantitative methodology for measuring social impact) cannot effectively capture the value produced by the sociality of building users.

Overall, the major issue with define-measure-manage approaches is that when a comprehensive definition of social value is pursued, it becomes too broad and complex, and therefore, unmeasurable and unmanageable. Whereas, when a narrower definition is adopted, the concern arises that certain dimensions or aspects of social value are not reflected within the respective managerial approach. Acknowledging this conundrum, recent studies on social value in construction advocate for qualitative considerations to be given more emphasis in grasping, defining and measuring social value. For example, a define-measure-manage approach is proposed in Raidén *et al.,* (2019) but the authors suggest that a project-specific 'theory of change' needs to be developed for each project in order to effectively implement a project-specific definition of social value that would be developed together with key stakeholders of the project. Through interviews, meeting observations and document analysis, Mulholland *et al.,* (2019) show that the 'social value' of a megaproject is dynamic and the meaning of it changes with changing spatial and temporal factors. As a result, they critique approaches quantifying social value but do not argue for it to be abandoned. Instead, they conclude that qualitative approaches should be used next to

define-measure-manage approaches in order to 'sense check' the meaning-making process employed in developing definitions and metrics of social value.

Contributions to a previous debate about the possibility of a theory of the built environment provide further insight into the issue with devising managerial frameworks for social value based on a define-measure-manage logic. The struggle to define 'built environment' in this debate is similar to the challenge of defining 'social value' of built assets because the definition of each of these terms depends on the reason or the perspective of the inquiry. Contributions to this debate reveal the different ways in which the built environment can be thought about. These include, for example, the built environment as a social-ecological system that is integrated with the natural environment (Moffatt and Kohler 2008), as the locus of user experience (Vischer 2008) and as the material environment that enables particularistic activity (Hillier 2008).

However, as pointed out by Cairns (2008), all these different ways of conceiving the built environment indeed present a richness that needs to be embraced rather than circumvented. What is required for working with such a multiplicity of perspectives is an awareness of the role of power and politics within the process of negotiation of what a 'good' outcome is. This argument is supported by Boyd (2007), who argues that the delivery of buildings needs a view using multiple rationalities to account for the contradictions inherent in different conceptions of the built environment. According to Boyd (2007), contradictions and multiple rationalities occur in all industries, but they are more evident in the built environment because of its substantive interdependence with society. Hence, he suggests that the built environment does not exist theoretically but as a series of practices of negotiation of power using different rationalities. In line with Boyd (2007) and Cairns (2008), Rabeneck (2008) advocates for an instrumentalist methodological plurality in which multiple strands of theorisation are welcomed as long as they are informed by practical issues and are useful for practice.

Define-measure-manage approaches to social value of built assets suggest that for social value to be manageable it needs to be defined and measured, which leads to a reductionist understanding of social value. Previous literature on developing a theory of the built environment shows that such a reductionist stance is counterproductive. Hence, research on social value of built assets should embrace the multiplicity of perspectives that relate to social value of built assets but should do this with a focus on the issues in practice. It can be argued that this corresponds to shifting the inquiry from the question of 'what is social value?' to 'how does social value manifest itself?'. This means shifting the attention from what researchers/managers/selected stakeholders in the built environment 'think' social value is, towards the practices of those who are supposed to be realising the social value. In other words, it means developing insights into how built assets are valued in practice by those who engage with them, and then using such insights for managing social value during construction project delivery. Such a shift is not only promising in itself, but also in line with the previous literature on developing a theory of the built environment, in at least two senses. First, it prioritises empirical evidence; thus, eliminating ungrounded conceptual confusion and inflation about what social value is (and what it is not), as well as conceptual domination (i.e. whose definition of social value is better or more valid). Second, it liberates the empirical space of what can/should be seen or studied as 'social value'; which also opens up the conceptual space for multiple interpretations of, and perspectives on, what 'social value' is, in line with the multi-faceted nature of

the phenomenon. In other words, it can expose the inherent political and power issues amongst various perspectives relating to the social value of built assets.

In order to enquire into the manifestation of social value of built assets, we need social analyses that treat spatiality as a central concern. The role of spatiality in social phenomena has long been a topic of research with a renewed interest since the 1970s, with the so-called 'spatial turn' (Warf 2017). However, what has been missing is an interaction between these domains and construction research with a view to improving the social value of built assets. Research into construction management can make use of this extant work to develop extensive insights into how social value manifests itself at the operational phase of built assets and relate such insights to construction project delivery. This can enable the empirical richness required to adequately establish the complex phenomenon of social value of built assets. It can also enable a diversified knowledge base to drive the social agenda in construction based on the diverse needs of practice.

The extant literature on the role of spatiality in social phenomena is vast and it includes entire disciplines, such as urban studies and human geography, as well as other disciplines that have developed an increasing interest in spatiality such as political sociology, organisational studies and history. For this reason, in the next section, a very limited discussion of this work is provided with a focus on highlighting the variety of ways in which 'spatiality' could be conceived for studying the social value of built assets.

Since the 1970s, there has been an increasing number of studies in humanities and social sciences that consider space, or more specifically spatiality (term further explained below), as a key issue in their analyses of social phenomena. The so-called 'spatial turn' in social theory (Blank and Rosen-Zvi 2010) has (re)emphasised that space is not fixed, inert or given, but rather it is performative, transient and dynamic in the sense that it is a fundamental part of human experience, actions and interactions (i.e. social practices) (Warf 2017). Borrowing concepts from traditionally space-focused disciplines such as geography and physics, this "spatial turn" has "influenced the understanding of reality as constructed and determined by complex spatial relations" (Lähdesmäki 2018, p.1).

The increasing attention paid to 'spatiality' in various domains of social analysis has led to a variety of space-related concepts, metaphors and perspectives (see for example Crang and Thrift 2000; Sheller 2017). However, one of the biggest conceptual challenges that remained is what Agnew (2011) labelled as the space-place conundrum: the difficulty of making sense of the different ways spatiality can be understood for social analysis. According to Agnew (2011), the issue is that conceptualisations relating to spatiality for social analyses, particularly the most commonly used terms of 'space' and 'place', tend to emphasise either one or the other end of a continuum running from nomothetic (generalized) location at one end to idiographic (particularistic) place at the other. The challenge is, as Agnew (2011) puts it, to bring these meanings together as they both have something to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between spatiality and social phenomena. This argument highlights that research on the manifestation of social value of built assets should recognise i) the different ways in which spatiality could be considered for social analyses; and ii) the theoretical approaches that aim to jointly consider 'generalized location' and 'particularistic place' (i.e. the ends of the continuum mentioned above). It is only through such a recognition that construction

management researchers could develop adequate conceptions of built assets that can help deliver the intended social value at the operational phase. Due to the limited amount of space available in this paper, only Agnew's (1987) framework on 'place' and Lefebvre's (1991) triadic view of 'space' will be introduced here. These two works nicely expose the ontological and analytical complexity of spatiality in social analysis, thus providing insights into how built assets could be conceptualised when analysing the manifestation of social value at operational phase of built assets.

One of the studies that provides a framework of how 'spatiality' could be considered for social analysis is the seminal work of Agnew (1987). In his work on political sociology, Agnew (1987) suggests that 'spatiality' could be viewed as 'location', 'locale', and 'sense of place'. 'Location' refers to the absolute/objective position within a certain spatial framework, such as longitude and latitude. Hence, 'location' also allows situating ourselves in relation to other locations and provides the answer to the question of 'Where?' (Cresswell 2014). 'Locale' refers to the socio-material context within which social relations unfold. Therefore, 'locale' considers the physical environment (i.e. the morphometry of an environment - a set of buildings, parks, roads etc.) but importantly it does this in relation to the patterns of activity and interactions (e.g. organising institutions of work, education etc.) that take place within that physical environment. Hence, 'locale' is the unique assemblage of particular social practices taking place in a particular material setting. As stated by Creswell (2014), "we often know a place, in some sense, as a locale - a unique combination of things and practices within which life unfolds" (p. 5). According to Agnew (1987), 'locale' and 'location' are intimately connected: 'locale' is the setting for activity or social interaction, but "the reproduction and transformation of social relations must take place somewhere [i.e. must be 'located']" (p. 27). Finally, 'sense of place' refers to the subjective aspects of 'spatiality': "the meanings that are attached to it [i.e. a place] either individually or collectively" (Creswell 2014, p. 5). Hence, 'sense of place' embraces the affective attachment that people have to a place (Withers 2009).

Agnew's (1987) framework of place exposes several ways in which 'spatiality' could be considered for social analysis as well as exposing the interrelations between those different ways. Agnew (1987) develops this framework as a critical response to the extant literature that conceives spatiality from only one of these three different ways of seeing it. According to Agnew (1987), conceptions of place that do not acknowledge the different ways that place could be understood are ontologically too limited for an adequate social analysis considering spatiality. Hence, the main arguments of Agnew (1987) were almost entirely ontological, suggesting a structuration between the different ways spatiality has been so far dealt with (i.e. 'location', 'locale' and 'sense of place').

On the other hand, Henri Lefebvre's seminal 'The Production of Space' (1991) conceives of space as the outcome of an ongoing social (re)production process that appropriates the material context with which it is bound. Lefebvre (1991) suggests that space is produced through three dialectically interlinked dimensions, each defined through a pair of concepts (Schmid 2008). These are 'spatial practices / perceived space', 'representation of space / conceived space' and 'spaces of representation / lived space'. The concept of 'spatial practices' designates the material dimension of social activity and interaction; thus, the concept highlights that social and material patterns of particular practices are interlinked. This means that organisations of social practices and material spaces are mutually dependent and being part of a social practice requires a particular type of spatial competence to be able to undertake a

particular spatial performance (Shields 1999), hence the pairing concept of 'perceived space'. 'Representations of space' refers to the discourses and the imagery used to think and communicate about a space; thus, including definitions, descriptions, theories of space as well as maps and plans. Therefore, 'representations of space' determine our epistemological framework for abstract thinking, knowledge and truth claims, as well as our communication with others about a space, hence the pairing concept of 'conceived space'. Finally, 'spaces of representation' refers to space 'as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users"' (Lefebvre 1991, p.39). This aspect represents situatedness, individuality, diversity and deviation of experiences of space (Watkins 2005), hence the pairing concept of 'lived space'. Lefebvre (1991) suggests that the social production of space can be explained through the dialectical relationships between each pair of concepts. This means that 'spatial practices / perceived space', 'representations of space / conceived space' and 'spaces of representation / lived space' mutually shape each other on an ongoing basis; thus, continuously (re)producing what we consider as routine spatial experiences and socio-spatial orders while also enabling new ones to break through the routines and emerge anew.

The two frameworks presented above already provide some important insights in terms of how built assets could be conceptualised to analyse social value at the operational phase for the purposes of construction project management. For example, Agnew's (1987) framework suggests that 'spatiality' must be understood at various levels of organisation of social structures both locally (e.g. individual and group identities, historicity and traditions) and globally (e.g. planning institutions, national identities), but also that these different levels need to be interpreted as potentially conflicting and mutually shaping. Also, Agnew's (1987) framework suggests that knowledge domains relating to the built environment (e.g. economic and investment policy, interior design, architectural design, landscape design, city planning, regional development) are also interlinked and potentially in conflict with the local and individual understandings of 'spatiality'.

Hence, Agnew's (1987) framework, which was initially developed for political sociology, provides a sound theoretical foundation to capture the different (and potentially conflicting) views on the social value of a built asset at its operational phase. In a similar fashion, Lefebvre's (1991) framework, which explains space as socially produced, highlights three major themes that need to be considered together to understand the social value of built assets at the operational phase. While the concept of 'perceived space' highlights the importance of the unique socio-material context of actions and interactions involving a built asset (e.g. organising institutions and corresponding space morphology), 'conceived space' points to the importance of the ways in which space-related issues are represented, communicated, taught and researched as they define the horizons of our understanding of space and spatial practices.

On the other hand, the perspective of 'lived space' emphasises the situatedness of spatial experiences, thus directing the attention to the unfolding of events relating to a space as well as to individual circumstances of people involved in those events. Lefebvre's (1991) framework also implies that time and space are inseparably intertwined by suggesting that space is socially produced on an ongoing basis; thus, highlighting the importance of the history of spaces as well as the events during project delivery for understanding the social value of the built assets at the operational phase.

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CONCLUSION

In construction and elsewhere, social value is as much a political concern as it is a managerial one. For this reason, studies of social value of built assets need to consider the multiple ways in which different social entities perceive and realise value in their practices depending on their unique circumstances. In line with this argument, the present paper proposed the idea of understanding social value of built assets focusing on value manifestation/realisation, as opposed to focusing on definitions of social value, in order to liberate the empirical space. It is argued that this would establish a better understanding of social value and how it can be project-managed than those promised by current dominant define-measure-manage approaches. An initial review of the literature that treats spatiality as a central aspect of social phenomena suggests that a fruitful engagement is possible between the domains that engage in socio-spatial analyses and construction project management in order to realise this research agenda. It is argued that the insights that will be developed by pursuing the proposed research agenda can enable an empirically grounded knowledgebase on how to project-manage social value to effectively address the practical needs relating to a built asset. Hence, the approach proposed herein is important to create an alternative to the narrow definitions of social value and the corresponding top-down, define-measure-manage approaches which promise only a limited level of engagement with the diverse range of social issues in practice.

Following from the point above a further conclusion can be drawn. By embracing the diversity of perspectives on social value of built assets and their various connections to project delivery, professions and businesses in the built environment may start recognising their not-so-visible roles in various social value outcomes. Hence, this can act as the necessary trigger to shift the current dominant rhetoric of social value in construction, which sees social value considerations as a balancing element, to a new rhetoric where social value is a core concern for professionals and businesses in the built environment; thus, transforming them. Indeed, a shift like this is already happening in the discipline of architecture. According to Allweil (2010), architecture has reformed its understanding about its object of study as a result of the 'spatial turn' which enabled various new ways of understanding the connection between spatiality and social phenomena. The spatial turn has brought the multifaceted understanding of the intertwined nature of spatiality, social relations, power, and the built environment to the core of theoretical discussions on architecture (Lähdesmäki 2018). This means that, as a result of this reformation, architectural scholarship now rejects the exclusivity of 'form' as its object of study but rather considers 'form' as the locus of answers to a variety of social issues. Building upon the ideas from the spatial turn and domains that traditionally engage with socio-spatial analyses, other professions and businesses in the built environment could engage in a similar transformation.

The question that remains is how to include these ideas in future research. For engaging with the proposed research agenda, a practice-based theoretical lens (Stern 2003) can be promising to undertake project-management inquiries with a focus on various realisations of social value for two main reasons. First, a practice-based theoretical lens places a crucial role on unique contexts of practices to explain social value realisation; thus, it can embrace the vast diversity of meanings that can be assigned to social value from different points of view. Second, it provides a sound ontology and epistemology that allows us to relate the realisation of social value in practice to previous practices of project delivery as well as the wider context within which projects are delivered. Developing insights into such relationships is promising

in that they have the power to expose how wider contexts of, and specific events in, project delivery result in certain value outcomes for certain social groups; and what it would take to amend those outcomes.

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