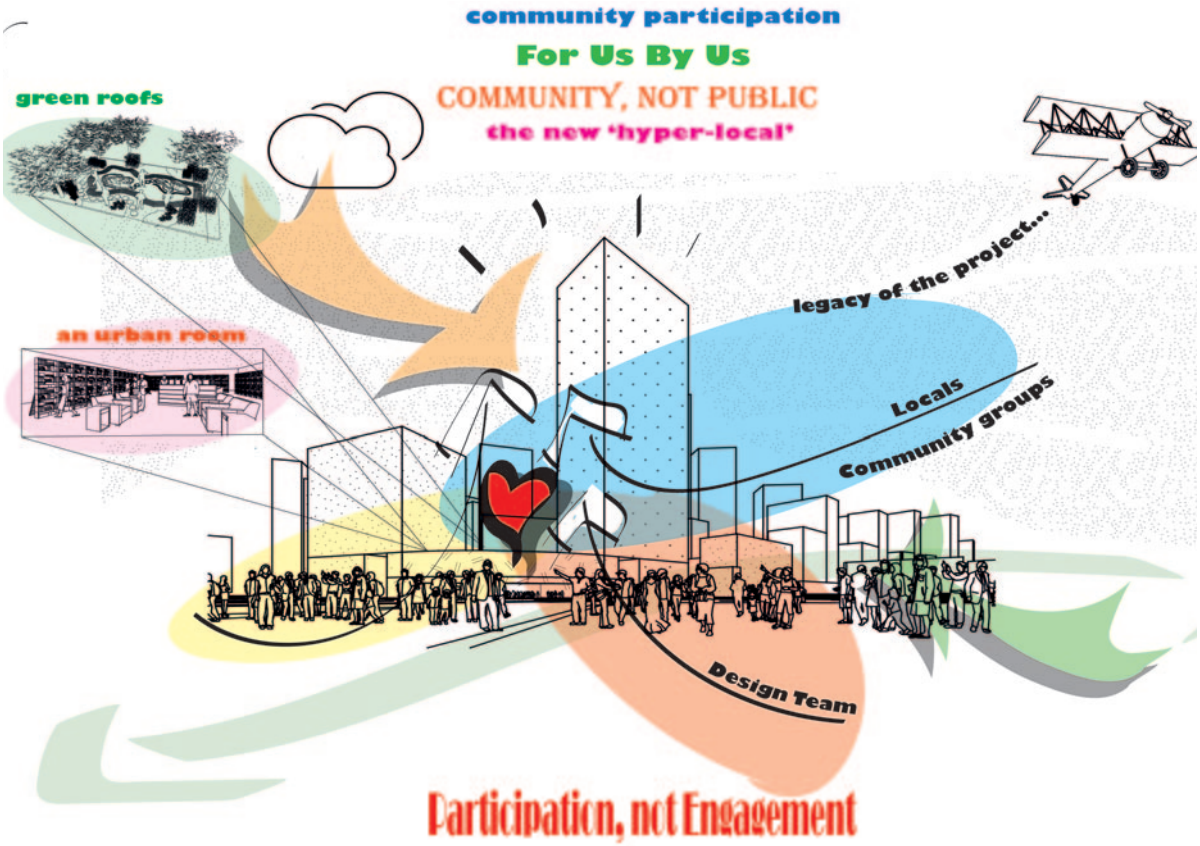
Five questions about social value

Social value should be defined at different levels, from the individual to the more corporate and societal engagement that our companies should embrace, says Giulia Robba



What is it?

As architects and urban designers, we hold the responsibility to ensure that our actions generate positive effects and contribution to the built environment and communities.

Over the past years, considering the wider economic, social and environmental effect of our actions – defined as Social Value – has become a key measure to enable real and tangible benefits of a project.

This is why a key driver in our design ethos and in our projects is the consideration of how to contribute to the long-term wellbeing and resilience of individuals, communities and society in general.

Social value should be defined at different levels. From the individual, everyday effort and participation that we all do in local communities and industry groups, to the more corporate and societal level engagement that our companies should embrace by involving local interest groups, education and employment opportunities, such as apprentices and placements.

Why is it important?

We should consider Social Value as an equal measurement to the Economic Value when looking at the viability and success of a project or place. Understanding what difference a proposal is making compared to another one or to a 'no project' should become a key factor within the procurement and delivery of the project, in order to ensure a sustainable and long-term future of our built environment and indeed our society.

At Farrells, we place social value at the heart of our practice by designing for people; by understanding who they are, what they want and then asking how we can deliver that and more in a way that works, and provides additional benefits, for our client, users and the wider community. Understanding social value benefit for a specific project influences every aspect of it, from wider urban strategies to the building and materials itself.

The importance of social value comes from empowering people and the place they live in and producing tangible and measurable benefits to the local communities, including existing residents, businesses and future citizens of the place. In our project in Southwark looking at creating design guidance in Ilderton Road for instance, we are looking at establishing and defining key design elements with locals and community groups very early in the process.

Empowering disadvantaged communities by the process of participation, co-design and collaboration from day one can greatly help to reduce the structural inequalities in our societies by making people believe from day one it is their project – by the people for the people.

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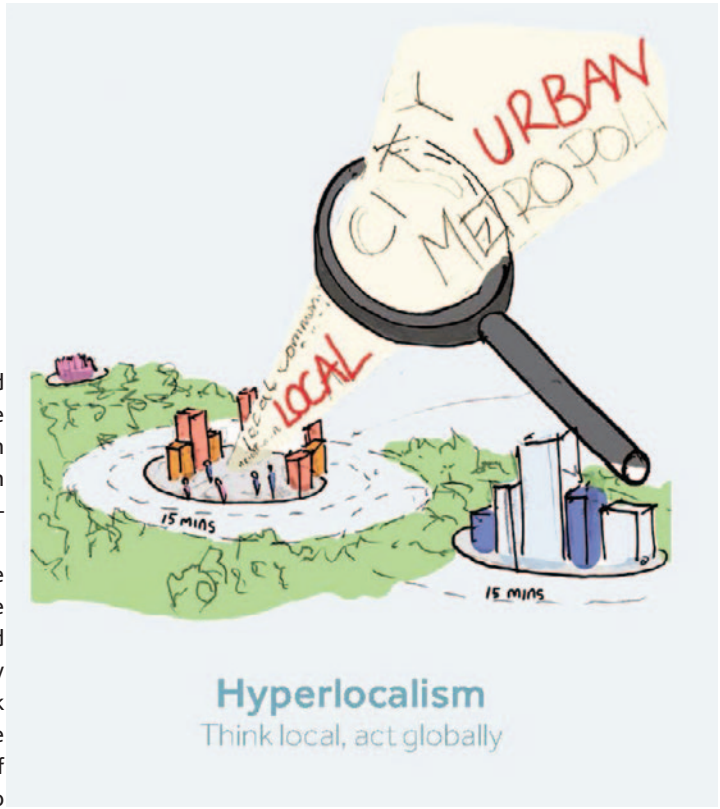
Giulia Robba is a senior architect and urban designer at Farrells

IMAGES – PREVIOUS PAGE: Concept diagram for procurement process showing approach to community participation informing the proposal - co-design and collaboration from day one can greatly help to reduce the structural inequalities.
RIGHT: Hyperlocal: Think local, consider the uniqueness of the place and act globally. Each area will lead to different needs and outcomes.
BELOW: Workshops engaging schools at the King Solomon Academy, local to Farrells office
OPPOSITE PAGE: City as a Public Forum: Cities and public spaces available to meet, share ideas and discuss successful evolution and transformation of the built environment. Community in Charge: Empowering people and the place they live in by putting communities in charge of defining the future of their area. Health is Wealth - Urban greening, outdoor, bigger spaces to ensure people safety and health. More public open space for walking, cycling and play.



How does it work?

Everything starts with research, analysis and community participation. Understanding the local context and its needs requires early research focussed on the local area, its history, evolution and specific economic and social background – each area will lead to different outcomes.

Public bodies are committed to ensure the amount of Social Value outcome very early in the process, in order to maximise the benefit and added value of each project. Supported by National Social Value Measurement Framework or National TOMs, during the bid stage we are required to predict and anticipate the level of positive contribution the project will make to society. Whilst ensuring and maximising the social value aspect is key to the success of the project, anticipating the benefit and outcomes can be challenging at the outset of the project or indeed during the bidding stage.

Good design projects can bring wider benefits to the community – in the form of jobs, businesses but also health, well-being and education. The successful evolution and transformation of the built environment relies on how communities feel and integrate with these changes. Ephemeral aspects such as wellbeing, safety and sense of belonging are hard to measure but have a critical and key impact on the success of a place.

Effective strategies & methodologies which maximise the benefit of social value should be measurable and able to be repeated in an adaptable way. These outcomes and opportunities are not exhaustive or definitive – as they are specific to the local context – and we need to find the right tool from the toolbox fitting local challenges, issues and opportunities.



How do we measure it?

Social value outcomes and benefits range from tangible benefits, such as increasing the numbers of jobs to the area, planting trees, funding and supporting local communities' groups, to intangible outcomes related to the quality of life and well-being.

Having a methodology to ensure and set the rules for a future development is key. The National TOM's provides a useful toolkit, collecting principles and strategies to support social value outcomes – a benchmark – with proposals tailored and supported by the framework. The framework allows the financial terms of the value added to be assessed and it has been used widely to score at procurement level.

However, the question is how to assess and predict what communities and locals need early in the process, and how to measure the intangible and ephemeral outcomes of the methodology used. It's one thing to set the standards, but the challenge always lies in monitoring, measuring and implementing the results of the process, learning from the information acquired, assessing what can be improved and working with setbacks and indeed failure.

Should there be a national database, a collection of National TOMs for each project, which can be updated on how projects are achieving their committed standards over time? This would ensure long-term commitment and continuity and provide benchmarking and transparency of the process – A new 'Magna Carta' mapping Social Value rather than land?

How do we ensure it?

Ensuring that social value is long-term and irreversible is of course a challenge. Every community should be aiming to be intergenerational and long-term where people spend years rather than months in the local community.

This is why it is key that community groups and local stakeholders are part of the core team from the very start of the project. They know the local context, its strengths and needs and would help establish high-level social value assessment looking at the wider benefits of the proposals on early stages. Working with local communities and local groups will ensure continuity during the stages of a project while facilitating conversation with those difficult to reach.

A 'Magna Carta of Social Value', collecting data and outcomes of different projects, would facilitate research in the initial stages, illustrate successful methods and strategies, measure tangible and intangible outcomes and ensure the long-term legacy of a project. This depth of local knowledge, committed and delivered social value, should be an open access source, collecting data provided by government and boroughs, to ensure transparency, accountability, and commitment from all parties to the community and the people. ■

