

## **Mapping Eco Social Assets**

Maps are not benign representations of the world; they can construct knowledge and even promote social change. Some qualities are easier to map than others; things that can be measured and counted are often privileged over intangible assets. In order to develop a more joined-up understanding of the built environment it seems clear that social value must have a role to play. Through mapmaking, the Newton-funded Mapping Eco Social Assets (MESA) project at the School of Architecture, University of Reading, has provided a framework for a collaborative inquiry into social value in context.

MESA began in 2018 with the aim of exploring some of the complex challenges around understanding and developing social assets in the built environment, teasing out the nuances underpinning a parallel industry-facing strand of MESA's work – the Social Value Toolkit for Architecture. A methodology for promoting, capturing and monetising the social impact of design,<sup>1</sup> the pilot study was initiated at Orts Road and Newtown in Reading, Berkshire, to develop practical methods for evidencing social value at the neighbourhood scale. Rather than placing emphasis solely on monetary proxies, MESA studied varying perceptions and definitions of social value and how these interact spatially across different publics and places. Across communities, one-size-fits-all approaches are not appropriate. Instead, there is a need for localised conversations, interpretations and variations.

### **The Social Value of Local Networks**

Local knowledge was key to the project, so the first aim was to find collaborators. After numerous attempts to make connections, ranging from contacting churches, charities and schools to staging street surveys, it was clear that those who had been approached had neither the time nor the inclination to get involved. The project seemed to be at an impasse. However, a phone call changed everything. Reading Borough Council's Neighbourhood Initiatives Officer had received an email regarding the project and wanted to hear more. The moment was serendipitous, since the council had recently completed a survey of its tenants at the Orts Road Estate to learn if cutbacks had affected the ways in which they perceived the area, and also to address concerns about wellbeing. If MESA could help to support conversations with residents about social value in the neighbourhood, then there were clear advantages to working together. Taking a holistic view, increased social value in the built environment could lead to reductions in antisocial behaviour, which costs the council in many different ways, ranging from the time of council officers, police and social services, to the broader impact for communities.

Across Europe, universities are under increasing scrutiny to justify their value and give back to society. In response to this, the 'Civic University' model, as described by John Goddard, aims 'to capture the mutually beneficial engagement between the community, region or wider world and the university'.<sup>2</sup> The approach suggests that novel ways of combining research, teaching and engagement must be developed and that these can lead to more responsive, evidence-based approaches to growth and development. In Reading, the Borough Council shared deep local knowledge, networks and practical experience of working in the town, and

MESA provided resources, expertise and research methods. A site-specific response to research and engagement has thus been developed that may set the scene for future collaborations.

## **Context**

Reading was shaped in no small way by biscuits. At its peak in the 1900s, the town's Huntley & Palmers biscuit factory was the largest in the world. Mass-produced biscuits were distributed along the Kennet and Avon Canal. Across the canal, workers' housing was built at Newtown.<sup>3</sup> The western side of Newtown was of poor stock and was replaced by the Orts Road Estate in the late 1980s. The red-brick estate has some playful postmodern flourishes, set amongst a warren of arches, pathways and blind corners. The remaining part of the original Newtown is typified by its terraced houses, a reminder of how the whole area used to look when the air smelt of biscuits.

Orts Road and Newtown share key amenities, such as two primary schools, shops and religious buildings, and enjoy close access to parks and waterways. They are, however, divided in economy and demographics. Orts Road has a mix of providers of social housing, ranging from the local authority to housing associations. In Newtown, housing is privately owned or rented. Newtown is home to a broader demographic, with younger families in their first homes and older owner-occupiers. To compound the divide, a political ward boundary runs down the middle of the site, separating the estate (Labour) from Newtown (Green Party). The result of this is that six councillors represent the small neighbourhood.

## **Locating Social Assets**

Part of the challenge of engaging with residents at Orts Road and Newtown was that there were no established community groups or organisations. This is where Reading Borough Council stepped in, by allowing MESA to tag a mapping workshop onto a council-run event. The event took place in the lounge of a sheltered-housing facility. Once the council had disseminated the results of its tenant survey and discussed responses such as recycling and maintenance, activities moved on to a large-format map of the neighbourhood.

A series of workshops were structured around prompts relating to the Social Value Toolkit and its initial themes of connection, active lifestyles, positive emotions, taking notice/mindfulness, and flexibility and freedom, and developed to encourage group discussions through the shared activity of locating assets on a map. Participants were asked, for example, to think about where they tended to stop and talk to people, where their local shops and services were, where they felt happiest, and also what they found beautiful in their surroundings. They were also encouraged to write notes onto the map and discuss their responses as a group. Towards the end of the mapping part of the workshops, group analysis of the map included collective reflections on why certain areas were of interest. The activities then led to broader discussions about practical measures that could be taken to improve social value locally over the next few years, and concluded with the writing of imagined headlines.

MESA mapping workshop, Weirside Court, Orts Road Estate, Reading, England, 2018

The workshop took place at a sheltered-housing facility where participants were asked to locate social assets on a map and mark them with stickers, which revealed that local places such as the pub and cafe were appreciated, along with the biodiversity along the canal. about what participants would like the area to be famous for in 10 years' time.

The structure of the workshops led to rich and varied discussions about the built environment. The positive nature of the questions turned conversations away from complaints about antisocial behaviour towards reflections on the places where a heron could be seen or the beauty of the canal. Neighbourhood consultations tend not to be focused on current assets and aimed towards building arguments for or against a specific change or development. The nature of MESA's engagement was therefore unusual, since there was no proposal, just a few questions. In total, around 200 people took part in mapmaking workshops, ranging from primary-school children to young adults, parents and pensioners.

In addition to the mapping workshops, MESA collaborated with Reading Borough Council in the planning of another outdoor community event on a small green on the Orts Road Estate. Ward councillors ran an outdoor surgery and consultations on a new proposed play area, with free ice cream, a bouncy castle and stalls. MESA used the event not only to run more mapmaking activities, but also to gather feedback on the earlier maps and project. An emerging theme raised by all age groups was a lack of local sports and recreation activities, so an outdoor table-tennis table was acquired from a charity and placed next to the MESA stall. It was subsequently donated to the community and is now housed in a local community centre – one simple and unexpected way in which research funds can be used to generate social impact.

### **Holistic Mapping for Decision-Making**

The workshop maps were redrawn for ease of comparison. The process followed a simple yet consistent set of rules and the result was a multilayer vector drawing, a composite map highlighting where intangible and tangible assets interacted and overlapped spatially. It was, however, a busy and confusing jumble of assets that lacked any real usefulness without further analysis. It was at this point in the project that there was a shift from community mapping towards considerations of urban systems and joined-up approaches to planning and development. The edges of a site are more than just a line on a map. One of the challenges of the Reading project has been the delineation of social site boundaries, which was done through a process of negotiation. Following group analysis, feedback from stakeholders, the local authority and networks such as Reading 2050, it became clear that the eco-social values at Orts Road and Newtown were not only linked to other parts of the town, but also to adjoining Wokingham Borough Council.

The MESA maps were structured in colour-coded layers representing not only different demographics, but also Social Value Toolkit themes, with each layer given a transparency. This supported visual analysis, since where assets were most often mentioned the hue was darkest, and where themes and assets overlapped, new colours were created. In turn, layers could be switched off and on to see how different types of values were distributed. Blue revealed the desire for more connectivity, both digital and social, in the spaces between buildings. Orange showed that recreation and leisure opportunities were typically too far away. Red and yellow combined in places since mindfulness and positive emotions were closely aligned, focusing on parks, recreational spaces and waterways, as well as religious and educational buildings. In turn, green demonstrated that the improvements that resonated most locally related to safety, autonomy, skills and aspiration.

In order to understand social value in a complex and rich environment, MESA took its starting point quite simply in asking people what they valued most about their local area. Conversations were structured around the planning and making of eco-social value maps of

the area, developed as a way of evidencing social value in the built environment, with an emphasis on positive, existing assets. With regards to the future, from the point of view of the Neighbourhood Initiatives Officer who helped to facilitate the process, when asked she stated that ideally she 'would like the project to genuinely affect planning decisions. There are more and more pressures on development, but people need more than just homes, they also need places to live with happy and rewarding connections to their community.'<sup>4</sup>

The maps spatially represent workshop data in a visual and accessible way. They have supported debate and discussions about social value among different council departments and also across political and ward divides. This has led to the development of local planning guidance that pinpoints appropriate sites for improvements and interventions with the maximum potential to enhance social value locally.

The planning system in the UK has long been criticised for being too reactive. In turn, public consultations often happen too late in the development process for meaningful engagement. MESA has demonstrated that collaboratively locating social assets and value amongst communities can not only help local authorities make informed choices based on social and environmental as well as economic value, but also provide new opportunities for them to better understand the communities they serve. The MESA team has since been presented with a range of opportunities for further projects and funding. The project is therefore also a call to architects to become more entrepreneurial and proactive in their approach to getting new work through the development of relevant social research with communities.

## Notes

1. 'RIBA Social Value Toolkit': <https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/resources-landing-page/social-value-toolkit>.
2. John Goddard, 'What Do We Mean By the "Civic University"? Why is it Important?', European Economic and Social Committee, 13 June 2014: [www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/what-do-we-mean-by-the-civic-university.pdf](http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/what-do-we-mean-by-the-civic-university.pdf).
3. 'Revealing Reading's Hidden History: Orts Road and Newtown': <http://happymuseumproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/RRH-Orts-leaflet-for-website-2.pdf>.
4. Ebony George, Neighbourhood Initiatives Officer, Reading Borough Council, interview with the author, Reading council offices, 11 November 2019.