

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE AS NORMATIVELY CONTESTED: CAN *CULTURAL VALUE* HELP?

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INTRODUCTION

Social infrastructure – defined by its promotion of “sociability” and support for “meaningful relationships” – has proliferated public policy discourse in the UK.¹ The underpinning aspiration is to attract investment to deliver on multiple policy agendas. When approached this way, social infrastructure becomes a policy-making tool valued for its effectiveness in achieving goals such as reducing regional disparities and strengthening communities. One issue with this, we argue, is the need to formalize and idealize the concept of social infrastructure. This often obscures that social infrastructures are normatively contested, with different user groups having different norms and agendas. In this paper we ask how the fragmentation reflecting the real state of most communities and the fact that the forms of sociability and relationality promoted are always selective in some sense - can be factored into the policymaking anchored in the idea of social infrastructure. We argue that Social Value approaches used in policymaking should be supplemented with cultural value interventions which can ensure that different normative orientations are represented in the relevant decision-making processes.

Why should decision-makers care?

Policymakers aiming to make decisions with and for communities, rather than just for the most visible or vocal sub-groups, must find ways to include those typically left out. This inclusion must happen without filtering their perspectives to the point of making them unrecognizable. Even more so, if local planners aspire to designing places that are public – some awareness is needed of who is included and who is out. The challenge lies in accounting for differences while still orchestrating a collective approach.

Methodological Contribution

To address this challenge, this paper offers a methodological contribution. It adapts an existing asset-based spatial approach to evidencing Social Value at the neighbourhood scale.² The paper tests whether considering cultural value³ in collaborative mapping practices can accommodate divergence and dissent while maintaining a collective objective. This approach can enable policymakers and decision-makers to view social infrastructures as normatively complex. This ensures that decision-making tools do not merely “paper over” the real differences characterizing most London communities, which social infrastructure should support.

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE: AS LIVED AND IDEALIZED

Urban infrastructure scholarship has traditionally focused on platforms connecting people through physical and virtual spaces. Key concerns include investments in transport, communication, sanitation, and energy systems by multi-level governments and the private sector.⁴ Infrastructure can reinforce urban inequalities through uneven resource distribution, the circulation of knowledge, and the mobility of people and goods. These inequalities stem from governance decisions, urban categorizations, and the design of technical objects.⁵ Infrastructure straddles the physical and intangible domains of urban space, unifying and dividing communities. It can solve but also create urban environmental problems, resulting in spatial disadvantage and inequity. Interdisciplinary scholarship views infrastructure not just as systems providing essential services but as part of everyday lived experiences. People become infrastructure when they collectively create possibilities outside formal planning and governance frameworks. Space becomes infrastructure when it supports collective activities.

Social infrastructure is now a significant concept in policy-making in which context it is linked to the development of social capital.⁶ Social capital can be here understood as “networks of relationships between individuals, built on mutual trust, understanding, and reciprocity”.⁷ Indeed, the notion of social connectedness seems central. The definitionally presupposed relationships are assumed positive, trust-reinforcing and meaningful – see, for instance, the Bennett Institute for Public Policy’s definition of social infrastructure as “those physical spaces in which regular interactions are facilitated between and within the diverse sections of a community, and where meaningful relationships, new forms of trust and feelings of reciprocity are inculcated among local people.”⁸ This is an idealised understanding – most social infrastructures at local scales are contested sites where relationships do not always align as policy suggests. This corresponds with urban environment literature showing that infrastructures, as practiced, are normatively contested.⁹

Social Infrastructure and Different “Orders of Worth”

Recent research shows that social infrastructures often involve conflicting interests and can be sites of exclusion,¹⁰ this, in particular, in *superdiverse societies*.¹¹ Social infrastructures reveal colliding individual needs, ambitions, notions of power, autonomy, dependence, and evolving visions of what constitutes collective and social norms. Experienced through contestation, social infrastructures can be characterized as “agonistic” – emphasizing the positive aspects of conflict and accepting its permanence.¹²

Convention theory’s “orders of worth” – elaborated in the writings of Boltanski and Thévenot and others – help characterize the lived reality of infrastructures.¹³ These are ways of sustaining social orders around different normative ideas and ideals. Higher order principles, such as price, technical efficiency, collective welfare, reputation, creativeness, fame, and environmental friendliness – are mutually incompatible but can justify individual positions within a community. Pursuing different goals by different individuals likely results in agonistic and contested social spaces. The challenge is building and supporting social infrastructure under these conditions.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL VALUE IN SUPPORT OF INFRASTRUCTURING

This paper aims to support decision-making and policymaking in relation to social infrastructures understood in more realistic terms, that is, as normatively contested. It adopts an asset-based spatial approach to evidencing Social Value and incorporates cultural value to challenge assumptions. This approach accommodates multiple perspectives within any social infrastructure without presupposing that all users will have equally meaningful interactions with each other, it thereby supports more inclusive decision-making.

Evidencing social value

In a British context, Social Value stands for a set of approaches developed to explore how to use limited resources for maximum collective benefit, beyond cost savings. The UK's Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 mandates local governments to consider economic, environmental, and social benefits when procuring services. These benefits should align with local needs, such as reducing anti-social behaviour, increasing local employment, or reducing congestion.¹⁴

Implementation challenges persist. Typically, the construction industry measures social value in terms of jobs and apprenticeships, with less focus on the social value of designed elements.

Organisations like the UK Green Building Council and the London Sustainability Commission are developing high-level measurement standards. The Royal Institute of British Architects publication of its recent Social Value Toolkit for Architects¹⁵ refers to the work outlined in this paper.

Despite the Social Value legislation and the various initiatives, barriers persist. While these are often said to include a lack of awareness and agreed measurements, we note that standardising social value through frameworks risks oversimplification and checkbox compliance. This is relatively unexplored terrain and complements current studies into place value.¹⁶

Experiencing cultural value

Historically, the discourses of urban planning, built environment and space practices have seen culture as a resource. Culture, we are told, “attracts, sells, brings people together, entertains, appeals, and impresses.”¹⁷ Within the urban planning corpus, culture has been primarily valued as a representational by-product of the social that can be used to serve other goals. Similar to social infrastructure in contemporary policy, culture is seen as a symbolic resource employed for urban political and economic agendas, sometimes masking issues like exclusion, surveillance, and displacement.¹⁸ However, culture can also support interpretation and collective agency in an open-ended manner.¹⁹

We define cultural value as a non-monetary expression of the value of culture, traditionally linked to symbolic representation and aesthetic appreciation.²⁰ Key dimensions include cognitive, aesthetic, and emotional resonance experienced in social contexts and the promotion of collective meaning-making.²¹ Cultural value is not inherent – it is constructed through interpretation and shaped by cultural norms and institutional expectations. It gains validity through *shared* subjective experiences.

We propose that cultural value can create spaces for interpretation where different agendas and assumptions can be presented and left to co-exist. This is of value in decision-making. As our case study illustrates, the contestation of whether something like a planter with children's art, a community event, or a playground decoration – is culturally significant and what meaning it has, can form the foundation for more inclusive understanding of social infrastructure.

CASE STUDY

In order to test and empirically develop the methodological proposal of this paper we conducted a mapping study, as described below. The activity drew on the skills and expertise of the authors in response to a site in North London, where emergent community initiatives had successfully secured funding to make local improvements to a play area.

About the site

Stanley Culross Open Space is located in Haringay, North London. The open space contains a fenced in primary school, children's nursery, and some public green space. The space is surrounded to the west by terraced housing built in the 1900s, and a newer housing estate to the east, constructed in the late 1970s. To the north of the space is a “paused” construction site, where housing will be built. As part of the planning permission for this new housing, funding was provided through a Section 106 agreement

to renovate a rundown children’s play area at Stanley Culross. This area was collaboratively designed by residents, including children at the two schools overlooking the park: St John Vianney Catholic Primary School and West Green Primary School. It had its successful opening on the 18th of March 2024 (Fig 1). The opening event was orchestrated by a handful of residents - Friends of Stanley Culross (some of whom participated in this mapping study). Beyond the play area, community-led improvement initiatives have also taken place across the open space over the past five years. These have included: litter picking; bulb planting; the installation and decoration of planters with children’s art.



Figure 1. Photograph of the opening party for the new community-led play area.



Figure 2. Photograph of the bench flanked with 2 (out of 5) planters decorated with children’s art

The area has a mixed demographic. This backdrop is important to understand the character of the place – with the bench depicted above (Fig 2) used by both, middleclass families with children as well as local drug dealers.

Research approach, data collection and mapping

Through a series of three mapping conversations with local community leaders and participants in community-led activities, and a public mapping stall set up at the opening party of the play area, which gathered 112 public responses (Fig 3) – we created maps that situated values locally. The mapping process allowed us to see where different points of view and interpretations overlapped and interacted spatially.



Figure 3. Photograph of the mapping stall at the opening party for the new community-led play area.

The approach taken in this study was an iteration of an existing method for Social Value (MESA).²² Through MESA, participants engaged with social value themes – such as connection, active lifestyles, positive emotions, taking notice, and flexibility and freedom – by placing stickers on a spatial representation of an area in response to prompts like “I feel happy here.” In addition to social value prompts, the activities described in this paper introduced two cultural value prompts: “This place is special to me” and “This place moves me.” This was done to test responses, anticipating that the method could be adapted to include cultural value registers, alongside social value. There was also potential overlap between social and cultural dimensions in prompts such as “I am proud of this place” and “It is beautiful here.” Therefore, the distinction between cultural and social was not emphasised at this time (Fig. 4).

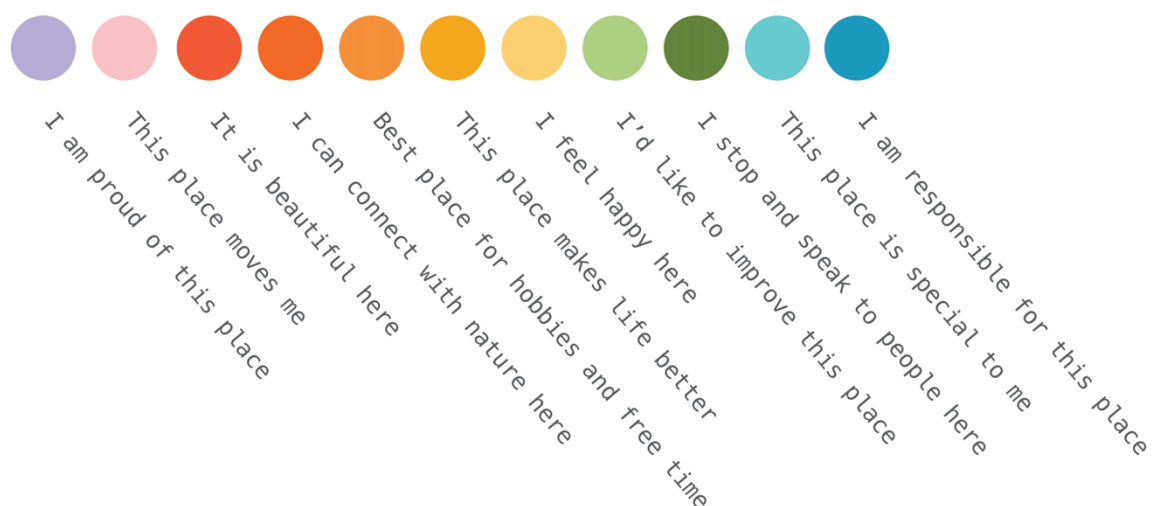


Figure 4. The combined spectrum of social and cultural value prompts.

MESA thematically colour-coded prompts (blue – connection, orange – active lifestyles, yellow – positive emotions, red – taking notice, and green – flexibility and freedom). The iteration of the method used for this paper deliberately removed thematic/categorical distinctions and placed all the prompts on a spectrum, aiming to support thinking of values as being interrelated and complementary, rather than in opposition (and/and/and rather than either/or).

Following the scoping activity at the public event and mapping conversations, multi-layered maps were created from each exchange and then combined into a single comprehensive map. This resulted in a composite heatmap of values across the case study site. The composite map (Fig 5) was subjected to further analysis and refinement. This process led to identifying specific locations of common concern and nodes of interacting values, highlighted on the map as overlapping colours and fuzzy spaces (Fig 6). Subsequently, a diagram was developed through abstracting nodes of interacting values, territories of aligned values, and pathways (Fig 7). The next phase of this research will involve using the diagram as a prompt in the conversation with the local community recognising that it is in itself an object of cultural significance (see the discussion of boundary objects below).

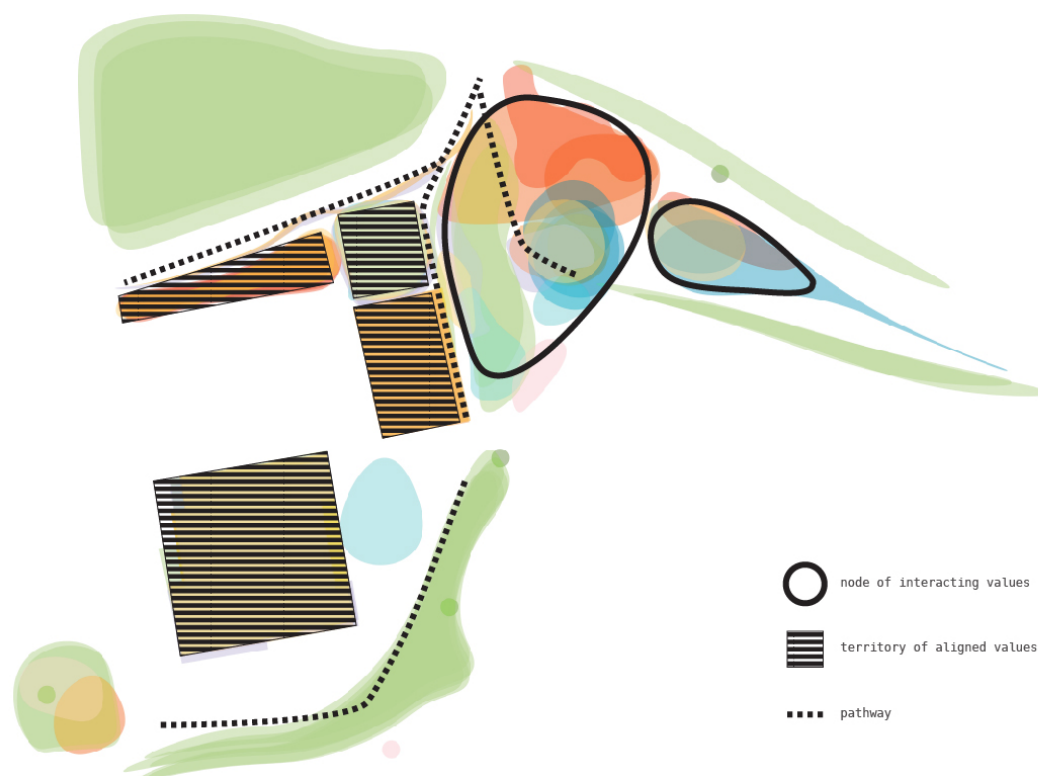


Figure 7. A spatial sociocultural infrastructure of value nodes, territories and pathways

RESULTS

Mapping values

The maps and diagrams showed values clustered in both agreement and discord at specific locations and scales. Social value was mapped at the everyday scale in places of interaction, while cultural value shaped the milieu of these moments.

Mapping activities revealed the difficulty in expressing cultural value. Social value, with its focus on outcomes, was easier to map. For instance, identifying spaces that “move” people was challenging, while preferred places for hobbies or meeting friends were easier to pinpoint.²³ The presence of cultural value, such as the cultural significance of the children’s art on the planters, enhanced the complexity of responses. The interpretative, open-ended space created literally through the placement of children’s art (Fig 6) — allowed us to capture the normatively contested character of the social infrastructure in formation. Through the mapping the following preliminary observations can be made:

Alignments of values

The mapping showed that in some areas value agendas aligned, these were: the wildflower meadow, play areas, and also areas for improvement, to the edges of the site and estate. However, the central space around the bench and patch of uneven grass was not characterised by value alignment. It was a congested territory that saw requests for mutual respect and to make space for everyone, implying that there was presently not enough respect and “shared” space.

Sharing territories

There was a clash between perceived anti-social behaviours, such as selling drugs and drinking, and more sociable ones, such as children playing. Who sets the rules for a shared bench? Is it a matter of

too few places to sit rather than a need for stricter regulations? Considering the map as a whole, the concentration of different colours around the bench is striking. The bench is under pressure due to the different types of use value it generates throughout the day.

Situations of value

Despite concerns over shared use, the bench and planters provided opportunities for communicative exchanges and, at times, confrontations. These planters demarcated an outdoor room, with a pathway linking the site's north and south, acting as a core site where different orders of worth co-existed. As expanded in the next section, cultural value – understood as occasioning collective meaning-making – can accommodate divergent and dissenting ‘user’ voices of social infrastructures.

DISCUSSION

The case study of Stanley Culross demonstrates that its social infrastructure fits the discourse of urban environment more than policy. Thus, it calls for approaches grounded in lived experiences and capable of reflecting the complex realities of contemporary “infrastructures”. One implication of this is that, if public policy is to be genuinely public, policymakers need to recognize that social infrastructures are normatively contested.

There are three important findings from our case study relevant to decision-making:

(1) Not preempting whose “values” are considered

In complex, pluralistic societies, decision-making aligns with deeper patterns and norms linked to policy accountability and values of the electorally active majority. These are reflected in dominant Social Value approaches. Values outside the norm can become noticeable through more open-ended registers. In order to register a range of values co-existing in any social infrastructure, Social Value approaches need to be enriched with cultural value registers.

(2) Objects of cultural significance as boundary objects

Objects with cultural value, such as the planters with children's drawings discussed in the paper but also, we would argue, visual representations such as maps and diagrams (Fig 7) – can serve as “boundary objects”.²⁴ These objects support communication, sense-making, and meaning-making without pre-empting disagreement. They allow different normative orientations to coexist, facilitating diverse interpretations. Boundary objects are coordinating mechanisms that sustain attention from various viewpoints, fostering temporary groups and supporting sense-making because they hold different meanings for those involved.

(3) “Injecting” cultural value into Social Value approaches

Social value approaches, even though initially designed to capture subjective perception of value in communities, have evolved to be metric (focused on measuring things that can be measured) and categorical/discrete (operating with specific thematic categories often established in terms of policymakers care about, rather than reflecting the interests of local communities). In this paper we argue that Social Value approaches should be supplemented with cultural value interventions where objects of cultural significance are used as boundary objects. This is because the latter, in contrast to the former, are interpretative and embrace fuzziness (fuzziness here understood as the quality of being indistinct and without sharp outlines); moreover, they allow for different normative positions to be included and contested.

Our methodology supports policymaking by highlighting diverse values and fostering inclusive discussions, ensuring that multiple perspectives are considered in the decision-making process. This approach can reveal new ways of understanding and demonstrating value which can and should inform decision-making and planning.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This paper addresses a number of issues arising in relation to social infrastructure, starting with the two central ones:

- a) the need to measure the value of social infrastructure in terms that are compatible with the approaches used in decision-making which carries the risks that the metrics adopted will not reflect the perspectives of the first-hand user;
- b) the tendency to conceptualize infrastructure in idealized terms rather as a social phenomenon that remains fundamentally contested (with different group of users having different agendas responding to different norms).

In addressing these two concerns, the paper also moves discussion forward on two other issues: the Social Value measurement when “perverted” into a box ticking exercise; and, secondly, what has become known as the instrumentalization of cultural value in the context of decision-making (reducing the value of culture to a set of economic and social indicators) that betrays a lack of understanding for how engaging with culture leads to change.²⁵

We suggest that cultural value can create an interpretative space – literally and metaphorically – allowing for agonism, leading to a more authentic representation of social networks and potentially more stable and better-grounded social infrastructures.

Collectively, the arguments presented make a case for improving the decision-making processes involved in the provision of social infrastructure. The methodology offered can support this transition.

NOTES

¹ Alan Latham and Jack Layton, "Social infrastructure and the public life of cities: Studying urban sociality and public spaces." *Geography Compass* 13, no. 7 (2019): e12444. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12444>; Tom Kesey and Michael Kenny. "Townscapes: the value of social infrastructure." *The Bennett Institute for Public Policy. University of Cambridge* (2021). <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/social-infrastructure/>; British Academy and Power to Change. "Space for Community. Strengthening our social infrastructure." British Academy (2023).

https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4536/Space_for_community_strengthening_our_social_infrastructure_vSUymqW.pdf

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² Eli Hatleskog, "Mapping Eco-social Assets" *Architectural Design*, 90(4), (2020), 52-59.

³ Patrycja Kaszynska, "Cultural Value as meaning-making." *Cultural Trends* (2024):1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2024.2381767>

⁴ Stephen Graham and Colin Macfarlane, *Infrastructural Lives: Urban infrastructure in context*. Routledge, 2015.

⁵ Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism*. Routledge, 2001.

⁶ Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the people: How social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarization, and the decline of civic life*. Crown, 2018.

⁷ Centre for Science and Policy, "Moving Forward with Social Infrastructure Policy," University of Cambridge (2021), accessed August 9, 2024, <https://www.csap.cam.ac.uk/news/article-moving-forward-social-infrastructure-policy/>

⁸ Tom Kesey and Michael Kenny. "Townscapes: the value of social infrastructure." *The Bennett Institute for Public Policy. University of Cambridge* (2021):11. <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/social-infrastructure/>.

⁹ Susan Leigh Star, "The ethnography of infrastructure." *American behavioral scientist* 43, no. 3 (1999): 377-391.

¹⁰ Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw. *In the nature of cities. Urban political ecology and the politics of urban metabolism*. Routledge, 2006.

¹¹ Leyla Kerlaff and Emmaleena Käkelä. "Understanding good places to meet: the role of 'common interest infrastructures' in promoting social cohesion in superdiverse societies." *Social and cultural infrastructure for people and policy: discussion papers*, The British Academy (2024):97. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/5384/Social-and-cultural-infrastructure-for-people-and-policy.pdf>

¹² Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism?." *Social research* (1999): 745.

¹³ Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot. *On justification: Economies of worth*. Princeton University Press, 2006; Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski. *The new spirit of capitalism*. Verso Books, 2018.

¹⁴ Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, 13. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/3>

¹⁵ Royal Institute of British Architects Social Value Toolkit for Architecture, (2020). <https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/resources-landing-page/social-value-toolkit-for-architecture>

¹⁶ Matthew Carmona, "Place Value: Place quality and its impact on health, social, economic and environmental outcomes", *Journal of Urban Design*, (2019) 24(1), 1-48

¹⁷ Lisa Findley, *Building Change: Architecture, Politics and Cultural Agency*. Routledge, 2005.

¹⁸ Sharon Zukin, *The Culture of Cities*. Routledge, 1995.

¹⁹ Graeme Evans, *Cultural Spaces, Production and Consumption*. Taylor & Francis, 2024.

²⁰ Patrycja Kaszynska, "Cultural Value as meaning-making." *Cultural Trends* (2024):1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2024.2381767>

²¹ Patrycja Kaszynska, "Whose cultural capital? Towards an interdisciplinary understanding of cultural capital through cultural value: Wessen Kapital? Auf dem Weg zu einem interdisziplinären Verständnis von kulturellem Kapital durch kulturellen Wert," *Journal of Cultural Management and Cultural Policy / Zeitschrift für Kulturmanagement und Kulturpolitik*, 10 (1), (2024), 211. <https://doi.org/10.14361/zkmm-2024-0110>

²² Eli Hatleskog and Flora Samuel, "Mapping as a strategic tool for evidencing social values and supporting joined-up decision making in Reading England". *Journal of Urban Design*. (2021) 26(5), 519-612.

²³ This can also be reflection on the character of the actual space and that there are not many locations that can be associated with the prompt "This place moves me".

²⁴ Susan Leigh Star, "This is Not a Boundary Object: Reflections on the Origin of a Concept". *Science, Technology, & Human Values*. 35 (5), (2010), 601. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0162243910377624>

²⁵ Eleonora Belfiore, "Art as a Means of Alleviating Social Exclusion: Does It Really Work? A Critique of Instrumental Cultural Policies and Social Impact Studies in the UK." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 8 (1), (2002): 91–106. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/102866302900324658>

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