

A photograph of a modern, multi-story building with a courtyard. The building has a facade of grey brick and large windows. The courtyard is filled with greenery, including trees and a large hedge. Several people are walking on the sidewalk in front of the building. The text is overlaid on the image.

The Snug Sessions

No.3 – The Social Value of a Building

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THE
POETS'
PARK

The Snug Sessions

Introduction

At Derwent London we believe that getting to the essence of places and buildings for people and business in a changing world is as much an art as a science.

The Snug Sessions exist to explore the art – as well as the science and humanities – of spaces and places now and in the future. The aim is to define new directions and forge positive pathways in an intelligent, cross-disciplinary and human-centred way.

‘Poetry is nearer the vital truth than history,’ wrote Plato (it is thought) in around 380 BC. So, to get the heart of the matter we asked modern-day poet Rhael LionHeart Cape to convene conversations with friends and collaborators.

In 2022, six sessions addressing different facets of our built environments were filmed at the Snug in DL/78 in Charlotte Street W1 – a convivial Derwent workplace setting designed for exploring ideas through dialogue.

Buildings and spaces don’t exist in a vacuum, they reflect people, feelings, cultures and expertise. Neither are they static – good buildings need to flex and adapt with the world as it changes. To borrow from the words of visionary thinker Stewart Brand, our buildings and spaces need to learn. Because what we do now ripples into the future.

Welcome to the Snug Sessions No.3:

The Social Impact of a Building

At a glance

- Social value is about the needs of people and the planet – now and in the future
- Cutting across finance, design, construction and use, social value in the built environment addresses diversity, inclusion, accessibility and sustainability in imaginative and holistic ways
- Social value starts with a shared vision and is realised through co-design and co-delivery
- Wellbeing is central to social value – from the individual level to the collective
- You can read more about our approach to social value in [Derwent London's 2021 Responsibility Report](#)

The Snug Sessions - The Social Value of a Building

When a contractor, a social value consultant and a sustainability manager get together in the DL/78 Snug to discuss the social impact of buildings with poet LionHeart, the conversation is wide ranging – and at times unexpected.

Beyond bricks and mortar, the buildings and places that surround us have a huge impact on quality of life, not all of them easy to pin down or measure. The first thing LionHeart wants to know is how each of the panellists defines the social impact – or value – of a building?

For Sam Carlsson, who is part of the team responsible for delivering Derwent London's net zero carbon ambitions, community and inclusion are key. "We're creating buildings and spaces for people," she



says, "And that's not just people who work in our buildings, but the communities around them".

Paul Lynchehaun, Project Director at Laing O'Rourke agrees: "Buildings contribute to society – so there's the legacy aspect but managing the impact of the construction process is also important. Ultimately, social value is about human relationships."

Envisioning social value

“We’re creating buildings and spaces for people, and that’s not just people who work in our buildings, but the communities around them”, says Sam Carlsson

Emerging from the conversation is a clear sense of social value as a cross-cutting concept, affecting all stakeholders in and around a building from inception to occupation and far into the future. Sam explains that Derwent’s approach stems in part from their role as dual landlord and developer: “It means we’re in a good position to build enduring relationships with tenants and, through initiatives like our Community Fund, with communities to really invest in what people need and want.”

Tom Storey of Storey Consulting says that happiness and wellbeing are integral to the mix. “I think it was Churchill who said ‘We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us’. It may sound idealistic but having clear intentions for social value at the outset of a project means that ‘ultimately’ everybody feels listened to and respected – from people working on a site to the wider community.”

Forester Court Care Home Garden Renovation with tenants from Brunel Building W2



Everyone agrees that in terms of creating social value, vision is paramount. “But it’s not pre-packaged,” clarifies Tom, “It’s about developing that vision through co-design with communities and occupiers. With the right approach at the start, it’s possible to design out challenges to diversity, equality and inclusion – because social value is hardwired in. A good example is accessibility. There is absolutely no reason why accessible buildings can’t be better solutions for everybody.”

“Alongside human wellbeing, environmental sustainability is absolutely fundamental to social value,” adds Sam – “The idea of the circular economy – of making things last, of recycling and reusing.”



On the money

Tom points out that the changing perspective of the investment community represents a massive opportunity for social value: “Ten years ago a lot of the progress in sustainability was driven by external legislation and regulation. Now, with Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) agendas coming to the fore, it’s the investors at the front end who are demanding environmental and social sustainability. There’s more focus on future proofing what we’re building, and occupiers’ expectations are higher too.”

“Seeing the financial sector getting on board with sustainability – and understanding that environmental and social impacts are linked – is hugely positive;” agrees Sam. “Getting the finance people, the sustainability people and the property people to talk the same language is crucial to delivering social value.”

“There’s more focus on future proofing what we’re building, and occupiers’ expectations are higher too”, says Tom Storey

From the ground up

Wellbeing is obviously a trending term and LionHeart wants to know exactly how it fits into the social value picture – on a building site for example. “Has health and safety now become health, wellness and safety?” he asks.

This rings true with Paul, who’s witnessed a sea change in the construction industry in recent years. “As leaders in the industry we have a clear moral responsibility for the people working in construction, as well as those impacted by it,” he says. “All the evidence was pointing to people’s states of mind at work having a massive impact on safety outcomes”.

“As leaders in the industry we have a clear moral responsibility for the people working in construction, as well as those impacted by it”, says Paul Lynchehaun



On site at 25 Baker St. W1

He explains that a shift from a rules-driven approach to a more holistic view involves linking health and safety with wellbeing. “Construction is necessarily safety-conscious, but the false premise was that you could invent the perfect set of rules. Actually, it’s people who prevent injuries – and now people are perceived as part of the solution rather than the problem.”

“This is something our Head of Health and Safety is really passionate about,” says Sam. “It’s about elevating awareness of mental fitness to the same level as physical fitness. There are some very scary stats about where the deaths occur on construction sites – sadly suicide is more of a risk than falling from height.”

“Traditionally there’s been a lot of stigma around mental health in construction,” agrees Tom. “It’s the industry with the biggest prevalence of mental ill health and suicide, with two suicides a day in the UK. Investing in mind fitness and communication is a very positive thing. There’s a groundswell across the industry and looking after your mental health is becoming a very normal thing to do.”



Rooftop yoga at Brunel Building W2



Communal roof terrace at 80 Charlotte Street W1

A toolkit approach

Lionheart is keen to hear more about how companies like Derwent London and Laing O'Rourke are working with social value consultants to embed the principles of wellbeing. Tom explains that on an individual level it's about supporting people to think differently about their own mind fitness, at a company level it's about introducing a shared language to talk about these things, and at the cultural level right across the industry it's about questioning the mantra of delivery first.

On long-term projects like Derwent's Soho Place transformation of the eastern end of Oxford Street, Tom describes running 'Toolbox Talks' programmes for workers to discuss positive and preventative mental health approaches. "The idea is that people aren't just going to work to build a building, they're going to work to build themselves, and the ripple effect of that goes beyond the workplace to friends, family and community."

“A lot of the measures are actually very simple,” observes Sam. “It’s about caring more, having those conversations and making sure people enjoy being at work.”

What about inclusion, asks LionHeart – how can we ensure that all youngsters can see a way into this new-generation construction industry?

“What we really need is role models from all demographics to demonstrate how the industry has moved on”, says Paul. “Construction is no longer 20–30 large men manhandling a concrete beam – that’s not how we do things anymore. The beam will take one or two people maybe 5 minutes to install with a crane. But behind that there’s a skills chain of 8–10 people doing CAD modelling, procurement, scheduling. There’s a lot of roles in construction where you can work part-time from home around childcare.”



On site at 25 Baker St. W1



Old Street Yard campus EC1

Best in show

At the end of the chat, the group discuss some of their favourite examples of socially inclusive design in the capital. While LionHeart nominates the Southbank Centre, the rest of the group decide that Argent's redevelopment at King's Cross ticks a lot of boxes. "The new concourse is simply a fantastic environment to be in," says Paul, with Tom and Sam praising the flow of spaces across the development, including Granary Square.

"Social value needs to be front and centre of design – it can't be an add-on," concludes Sam. "The true test of good design is how it embraces the experiences and needs of diverse groups of people."

Click here to checkout the [video](#) or [podcast](#).