'Engender the Confidence to Demand Better'
The Value of Architects in Community Asset Transfers

Mhairi McVicar is Reader at the Welsh School of Architecture in Cardiff and Academic Lead of Community Gateway, an organisation that seeks to link Cardiff academics and design professionals with residents and businesses in the city's Grangetown district through a spirit of strong, proactive support. One initiative has been the rejuvenation of the dilapidated Grange Bowls Pavilion and its asset transfer to the local community.
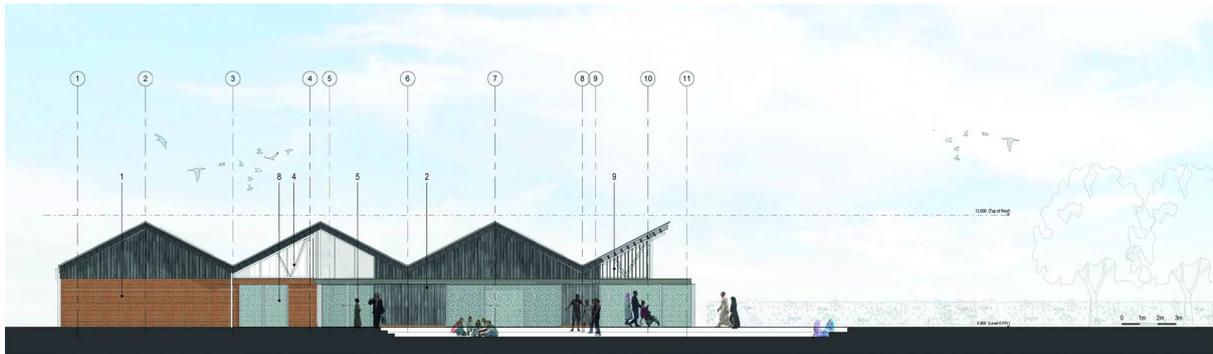
Image 1 - IBI Group and Dan Benham Architect, Grange Pavilion, Grangetown, Cardiff, Wales, 2019
A 2017 planning-stage proposal for the redevelopment of the Grange Pavilion project, identifying the brick and timber material palette.

In 2012, a group of residents in Grangetown, Cardiff, Wales, began meeting around kitchen tables to discuss what they could do about several deteriorating buildings around a popular neighbourhood park, including the 1960s Grange Bowls Pavilion, vacated following local authority cutbacks. 'The situation,' the local authority noted of austerity, 'demands a creative response.'[1] The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) similarly identified a need for creative responses to England's Localism Act 2011, writing that the formalisation of community consultation should serve as 'a signal to architects that their skills are valuable'.[2] 'Localism needs design professionals to succeed,' RIBA's *Guide to Localism* advised, 'but the quality of the places created by this process will be dependent on their ability to appropriately engage with local people and local issues right from the beginning, designing "with" rather than "for" communities.'[3]

Community asset transfer processes, whereby civic assets are devolved from central or local authorities to community organisations, pose challenges for client and architect alike. RIBA's coupling of quality to long-term engagement is tested by the difficulty fledgling community organisations face in accessing early-stage funding. 'You may,' a local authority advises community groups, 'be able to secure some "pro-bono" work (provided by professionals at no charge).'[4] In this context, how is the value of the architect, and of architecture created through long-term engagement, to be measured?

Image 2 - Co-producing a community asset: Grange Pavilion, Cardiff, Wales, 2013
Since 2013, workshops, ideas picnics, daily drop-ins and annual events between members of the numerous communities within Grangetown, the Welsh School of Architecture, and Cardiff University's Community Gateway have informed and defined the design brief and business case for the Grange Pavilion.

'We want,' residents leading the Grange Pavilion project affirmed, 'a relationship, and not an affair.'[5] A relationship between residents, organisations, architectural educators, architectural students, and a professional design team comprising Dan Benham Architect, IBI Group and BECT construction emerged through a seven-year evolution of the Grange Pavilion project.[6] Supported by Cardiff University's Community Gateway[7] and a RIBA Research Trust Award,[8] collective research and teaching is mapping the value of the architect in supporting the activation and long-term management of a social space. Taking up the expansion of architectural praxis outlined in Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till's 2011 book *Spatial Agency*,[9] architectural skills and ways of thinking are deployed to work with the project long before, during and after the architectural design of a building.

'It's not about the visions but about how they understand the "us" of us,'[10] a resident voiced of the group's expectations of architects. To begin understanding the 'us' of us, three years of architectural teaching and research supported the growth of a partnership through ideas picnics, walks, storytelling events, and open and invited workshops. Residents, academics and students paired up to train as appreciative inquiry researchers, employing asset-based approaches to identify existing physical and social assets rather than seeking problems to be fixed. 'Think carefully about how you portray our community,'[11] residents advised, as qualitative and quantitative analyses of interest, needs and resources offered

evidence for funding of one-off events, a two-year residency and, eventually, a 99-year lease under a community asset transfer.

Early architectural interventions through the construction of a storytelling booth and a first-phase renovation offered crucial space and time for individuals and organisations to activate what urban ethnographer Suzanne Hall references as the 'conviviality, and conflict' of a civic space.[12] The residency gathered a community for the site and physically tested a multitude of uses to incrementally inform an architectural brief and business case for redevelopment. '(Social) space is a (social) product,'[13] Henri Lefebvre declared in *The Production of Space*, writing of the 'coming-into-being' of spatial codes through the establishment of a common language, a consensus and a code. At the Grange Pavilion, a common code was defined through the social activation of a vacant space, supported, step by step, by architectural interventions.

In 2016, the Grange Pavilion Project, constituted as a partnership between residents and community, third-sector and public organisations, selected an architectural team. Expectations that architects should 'raise the quality of the question' sat alongside fears that architects would impose a 'big glass shiny box' and abandon the group to the long-term consequences. 'Who would we trust to come and sort out the mess afterwards, when it is a year down the line and it is not working?' the group questioned. 'Who is going to correct the correction that needs to be made?' The architects' value was conceived in terms of anticipating the long-term social consequences of the quality of a public space. 'Please describe,' the group's Quality Criterion for selection questioned, 'how your team's definitions of architectural quality will respond to the communities' needs.'
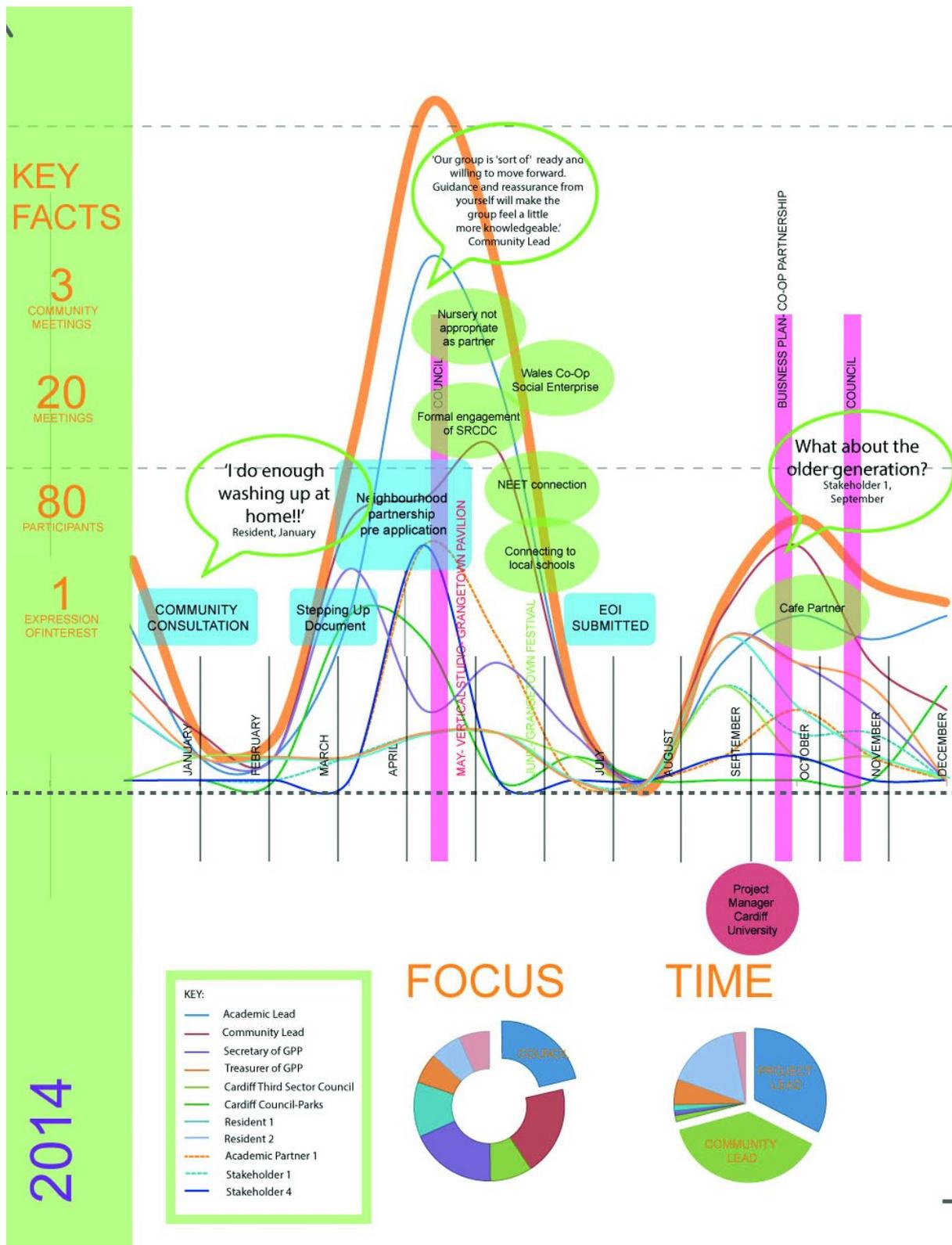
Image 3 - Sarah Ackland, Measuring one year of a community asset transfer, Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff, Wales, 2016

A 2015 RIBA Research Trust award supported a detailed mapping of the demands that a community asset transfer process places on time, skills and resources. An analysis of one year of email communications between key partners over 2014 identified the ebb and flow of momentum, barriers hit, and the catalytic effect of regular public events to grow a project partnership.

**Image 4 - Welsh asset mapping, BSc3 Grangetown Unit, Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff, Wales, 2017**
Architectural teaching and research in the Welsh School of Architecture has adopted an asset-based approach informed by 'appreciative inquiry' principles, locating existing physical, social and cultural assets rather than seeking 'problems' to be 'fixed'.
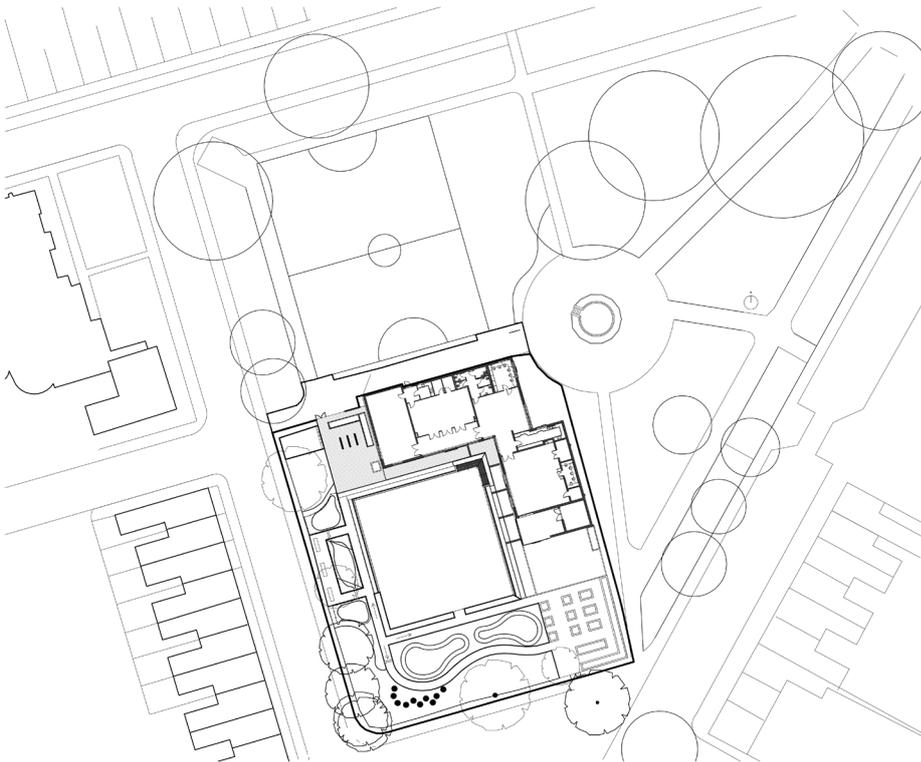
Image 5 - IBI Group and Dan Benham Architect, Grange Pavilion, Grangetown, Cardiff, Wales, 2019
The Grange Pavilion is located in a neighbourhood park in Grangetown and includes three multi-purpose spaces of varying sizes to support a social enterprise cafe run by a local business, and an outdoor classroom. Landscaping by the Cardiff-based urban design company
the Urbanists provides surface-drainage rain gardens throughout the site, and anticipates ongoing resident-led development of the landscape.
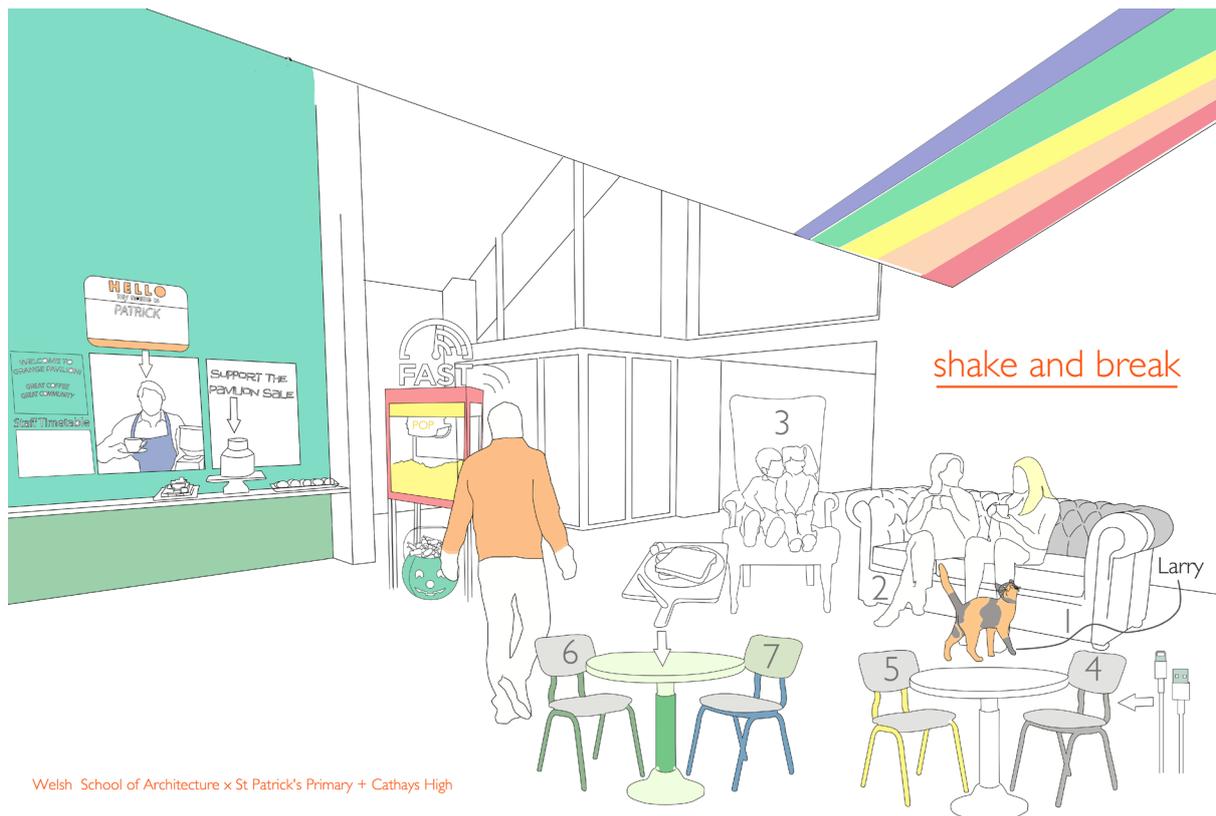
Image 6 - Isabella Open and Matthew Gaunt, My Grange Pavilion, MArch2 Value Unit, Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff, Wales, 2018–19
Welsh School of Architecture BSc and MArch students partnered annually with residents and organisations of the Grange Pavilion Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) to support each stage of design, construction and activation. In 2018–19, MArch2 students and BSc1 and 2 students developed detailed written specifications and drawings of each space as described in interviews with the groups and individuals who will inhabit them.

In a neighbourhood routinely defined by multiple deprivation index rankings, quality was central to residents' ambitions for the long-term social, physical and economic value of a public space which will serve 20,000 residents over a 99-year lease. Definitions of quality beyond cost-per-square-metre metrics is supported by economic theories and UK Government policies which advocate, at least on paper, fundamental shifts in value measurement. The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 requires public-sector organisations to look beyond financial cost to consider wider economic, social and environmental wellbeing.[14] The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires public bodies to demonstrate 'the importance of balancing short-term needs with the need to safeguard the ability to also meet long-term needs.'[15] Mariana Mazzucato's *The Value of Everything* (2017) proposes that we 'reconsider the stories we are telling about who the value creators are, and what that says to us about how we define activities as economically productive and unproductive.'[16]

As the Grange Pavilion progresses from concept to construction and inhabitation, the partnership between residents, organisations, architects, educators and students continues to pursue the measurement of the social value of a public space. Emerging from a context in which a *Spon's First Stage Estimating Handbook* published 'community centres' as costing between 62 and 55 per cent of the value of luxury flats,[17] in which RIBA explicitly aligns

architectural quality to early engagement but in which lack of resourcing anticipates pro-bono services, and in which community groups expect that architects should 'engender the confidence to demand better',[18] a reconsideration of the stories we tell about the social value of architecture is timely.

Image 7 - IBI Group and Dan Benham Architect, Grange Pavilion, Grangetown, Cardiff, Wales, 2019
The extended design team included BECT construction, who worked closely with the Grange Pavilion CIO, residents, the design team and students, supporting the presence of a resident artist and an architectural student research intern whose work mapped concepts of care throughout construction, as well as a series of site visits, including this one for architecture students as they began working with artist Chris Williams to prototype furnishings from resident-defined briefs.
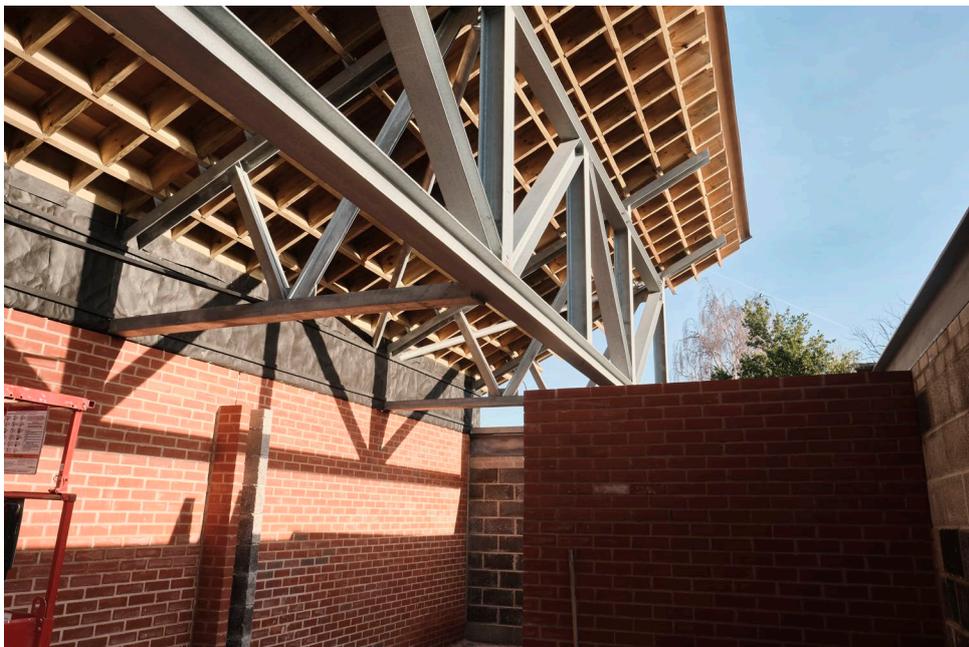
Image 8 - The outdoor classroom and landscape will be used by adjacent landlocked primary schools, with site biodiversity encouraged by bee, bird and bat bricks built into the facade, and swallow- and bat-friendly eaves. Biodiversity activities on site will be supported by Grange Pavilion CIO member organisation RSPB Cymru.

Notes

1. Cardiff Council, *STEPPING UP: A Toolkit for Developing and Managing Services and Asset*, 2014, p 4: https://www.cardiff.gov.uk/ENG/resident/Schools-and-learning/Services-for-young-people/Commissioning-Youth-Service/Documents/Stepping%20Up%20Toolkit.pdf2. Angela Brady, 'Foreword', *RIBA Guide to Localism Part 2: Getting Community Engagement Right*, RIBA (London), p 1.

3. 'Introduction', *RIBA Guide to Localism Part 2: Getting Community Engagement Right*, RIBA (London), p 2.

4. *STEPPING UP*, *op cit*, p 12.

5. Resident, 2012.

6. The Pavilion and landscape were funded by National Lottery, Welsh Government, Enabling Natural Resources Wales, Moondance Foundation, Garfield Weston, HEFCW, Cardiff Bay Rotary and area business and individual donations.

7. www.cardiff.ac.uk/community-gateway.

8. RIBA Research Trust Award 2015: 'The Value of the Architect in a Community Asset Transfer', Mhairi McVicar and Neil Turnbull.

9. Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*, Routledge (London and New York), 2011, pp 28–9.

10. Resident, 2016.

11. Resident, 2013.

12. Suzanne Hall, *City, Street and Citizen: The Measure of the Ordinary*, Routledge (London and New York), 2012, p 5.

13. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell (Oxford; Cambridge, MA), 1991, p 26.

14. Public Services (Social Value) Act 2011.

15. Welsh Government, *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015: The Essentials*, p 7: https://futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/

16. Mariana Mazzucato, *The Value of Everything: Making and Taking in the Global Economy*, Allen Lane (London), 2018, p 19.

17. Bryan JD Spain, *Spon's First Stage Estimating Handbook*, Spon Press (London), third edition, 2010, p 3.

18. Resident, 2016.