

The pursuit of place value

Matthew Carmona

Professor of Planning & Urban Design

The Bartlett, UCL

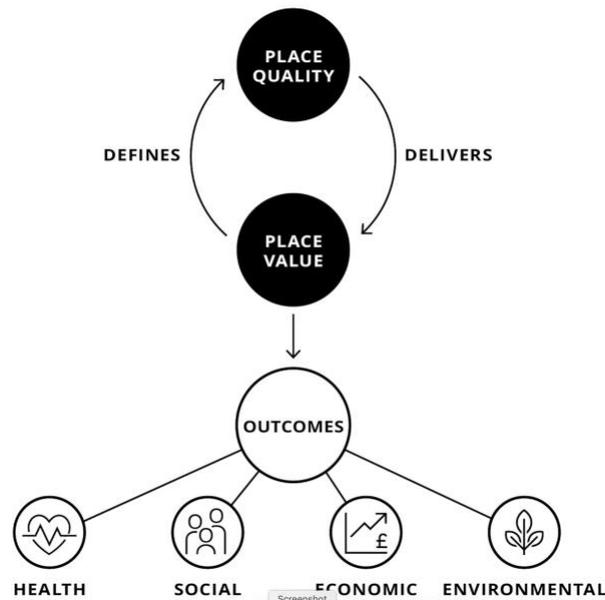
Concepts of value have been most comprehensively developed in the field of economics, but economic value is only one way of defining and measuring value. An entirely different way of thinking about value is the degree to which an intervention – in this case in the built environment – impacts, either positively or negatively, on different public policy goals. This notion, which might be called ‘Place value’, reflects the idea that a complex but inter-related basket of benefits (or harms) accompanies any development. Ultimately these flow to those with a stake in the place; that is the local residents, investors and developers, workers, business owners, public authorities, and so forth.

My own work gathered international empirical evidence together under four ‘big ticket’ policy arenas that governments (national and local) everywhere are typically concerned with: health, society, the economy and environment. These are the areas on which elections are won and lost as they impact so directly on the daily lives of citizens. Testing the extent to which these arenas are influenced by the quality of the local built environment is therefore a legitimate means to assess whether it is worth worrying about how places are designed. In other words, how can the qualities of place deliver value as regards enhanced health outcomes, greater societal well-being, economic success and environmental sustainability.

How can we define place quality?

There are many different views about what is or is not a high quality built environment. Cutting through this complexity, one way of answering the question – what is meant by place quality? – might simply be that a high quality place is one which returns the greatest value to its users. This means sustaining them in healthy, socially rich and economically productive lifestyles that touch lightly on the environment.

In this way place quality and place value are inherently inter-linked because, as the evidence gathered in www.place-value-wiki.net demonstrates: first, high quality places deliver greater value to their users in all these ways, and, second, there is a virtuous loop, with the degree to which environments deliver value (and facilitate key public policy goals) determining the qualities that we should seek in order to shape higher quality places in the future. Fortunately, the sorts of qualities that deliver value are neither complex to understand nor deliver. That said, we consistently fail to do so.



Place quality and place value are inter-linked in a virtuous loop in which quality dictates value and value defines quality

The technical bit

Systematic reviews are a standard approach used in the sciences, in particular in the medical sciences, to establish what is known and what is not known about a particular topic. Typically, systematic reviews begin with the identification of a key question or issue in order to focus the search. In this case the review focused on a broad range of place value dimensions as represented in the box.

Health

- A1. Greenness and physical health
- A2. Greenness and psychological well-being
- A3. Place quality and mental health
- A4. Walkability, active travel and related health
- A5. Place quality and physical health

Society

- B1. Street layout and crime
- B2. Environmental design and crime
- B3. Street design and safety from collisions
- B4. Place quality and liveability
- B5. Urban vitality
- B6. Inclusivity and social capital
- B7. Enabling environments
- B8. Place quality, play and learning

Economy

- C1. Property values and green space
- C2. Residential property values and urban design
- C3. Commercial property values and urban design
- C4. Streets, public realm and economic value
- C5. Economic development and regeneration
- C6. Public spending (and savings)

Environment

- D1. Urban form, density and energy use
- D2. Transport, technology and carbon reduction
- D3. Thermal comfort, cooling and pollution
- D4. Ecology and resilience

Place value dimensions covered in the review

Across these dimensions the systematic review revealed 13,700 records for possible inclusion in the review. From this long list, a series of inclusion and exclusion criteria eventually narrowed the final selection down to 271 studies that were considered worthy of inclusion in the review. These were classified against the four related public policy dimensions and the various sub-categories and their key findings were extracted and published in the *Journal of Urban Design*¹.

What value does place quality release?

On health outcomes

There is a large and rapidly growing body of evidence on the importance of place quality for health outcomes. Together the health evidence is overwhelming, demonstrating that the way places are designed can play a major role in delivering place value, care of the wide range of positive health benefits that can be released. Foremost amongst these are:

1. **Better physical health:** lower obesity, less type two diabetes, lower blood pressure, reduced heart disease, lower rates of asthma and respiratory disease, faster recovery from illness, and from fatigue
2. **Better mental health:** less stress and more psychological restfulness, reduced depression, anxiety and anger, reduced psychosis
3. **Better general fitness:** increased walking (for both travel and recreation), increased exercise, sport and recreation, and more cycling
4. **Greater daily comfort:** reduced air pollution, heat stress, traffic noise, and poor sanitation and, reduced exposure of lower socio-economic groups to the effects of debilitating neighbourhoods
5. **Enhanced quality of life:** increased sense of emotional well-being and satisfaction, greater happiness, reduced fear, and higher energy levels.

On social outcomes

The research relating to social outcomes was more diverse than that for health. The social evidence demonstrated that the way places are shaped has a major impact on delivering aspects of place value through social benefits that range from lower fearfulness to greater happiness. The manner in which places are designed has the potential to deliver:

1. **Fewer accidents:** reduced collisions and casualties on the road, and reduced fearfulness of accidents
2. **Social integration:** reduced stratification and greater integration of social groups and larger social networks locally, with stronger social support
3. **Lower rates of crime:** reduced burglary from homes, lower street crime, less fear of crime, and stronger perceptions of safety
4. **Better educational outcomes:** increased child independence and positive play behaviours, and enhanced learning and educational achievement,
5. **Enhanced street level vitality and sociability:** a richer public life, enhanced social interaction, and greater longevity of use in urban streets and spaces
6. **Stronger civic pride:** an increased sense of pride, local morale, social resilience, and community life, and enhanced social capital (social and political engagement) generally

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

7. **Greater inclusiveness:** enhanced use of the city by marginalised and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, and greater female empowerment and acceptance of cultural and social difference
8. **More enabling environments:** in older age and for those with disabilities.

On economic outcomes

Research in this rapidly growing field of study suggests strong private as well as public economic benefits from place quality, through a rich vein of evidence that is again overwhelming. In this area some caution is required when interpreting the evidence as certain outcomes – for example rising property values – may not always be desirable. Collectively the evidence suggests that how places are shaped can deliver:

1. **Property uplift in the residential sector:** influenced by access to views, trees, and open space, lower pollution, mixed use (up to a point and as long as homes are not too close to retail), walkability, neighbourhood character, access to public transport (if not too close to homes), external appearance, public realm quality, connectivity, and vitality
2. **Property uplift in the retail sector and reduced vacancy:** influenced by urban greenery, walkability, public realm quality, external appearance, street connectivity, and frontage continuity; all leading to increased retail viability
3. **Property uplift in the office sector, and reduced vacancy and depreciation:** influenced by walkability, external appearance, design innovation, and street connectivity
4. **More viable investments and extended regeneration benefits:** by making investment more attractive, enhancing competitiveness through differentiation, and strengthening community support for development
5. **Reduced public expenditure:** through reduced capital and maintenance costs for roads infrastructure, reduced public realm maintenance and management (including security) costs, support for the historic built environment and urban regeneration, lower crime and policing costs, and reduced health and social care expenditure (thanks to reduced levels of medication, prescriptions, and hospitalisation)
6. **Higher local tax take:** through attracting new development; and generating a greater willingness to pay for place services from businesses and communities alike
7. **Lower costs of living:** through lower car use and public transport costs (more viable / cost effective public transport), and lower costs for health insurance, and reduced energy consumption and smaller carbon footprints (from transport, infrastructure and buildings)
8. **Higher productivity:** more efficient property and workers, easier recruitment of employees, the enabling of higher density development and more efficient land use, greater adaptability of buildings and spaces over time, and avoiding the unnecessary costs associated with bad design.

On environmental outcomes

The final grouping of evidence was also the thinnest as regards the quantity of robust evidence uncovered. However, a remarkable consistency in what the evidence revealed helped to overcome its relative paucity, with many of the findings strongly reinforcing those associated with the other dimensions. Collectively the research pointed to multiple potential environmental benefits:

1. **Reduced energy use and associated carbon (greenhouse gas) emissions:** through the creation of urban forms that need less heating and cooling and require less private (vehicle) travel
2. **Adaptive reuse:** buildings, spaces and urban infrastructure that is adaptable over time and more able to support the changing needs of society within the existing built fabric (and its embodied energy)

3. **A viable local exchange network:** with local facilities, amenities and employment opportunities reducing the need to travel further afield and supporting local economic and social resilience
4. **Reduced heat stress and enhanced thermal comfort:** particularly for pedestrians through greater greening and shading in urban areas
5. **Reduced waste:** through a lower demand for construction materials and a reduction in construction waste
6. **Reduced pollution:** including atmospheric pollution and noise pollution (with knock-on health and wellbeing benefits)
7. **Greater resilience:** through accommodating and managing hydrological cycles and working with (rather than against) natural phenomena
8. **Ecological diversity:** Through supporting a greater diversity of species and a greener built environment.

A basic necessity of life

In recent years, the evidence base linking better place design with value (broadly defined) has grown strongly. The very large majority of evidence now points in the same broad direction, that better place quality adds value economically, socially and as regards health and environmental outcomes. The impacts of place are profound, contribute benefits to society over short, medium and long-term time horizons, and reverberate throughout the lives of citizens across all socio-economic strata and globally.



Place Quality delivers Place value

Whilst the different types of value may not be directly comparable (e.g. mental well-being versus return on a property investment), may flow differentially to different parties and over different time horizons (e.g. short-term profit to developers versus long-term health benefits to society), and perhaps not to those who paid for them at all (e.g. the impact of street trees may not be truly felt until they are fully grown); all are important and can be considered together as a varied and ever changing basket of place value.

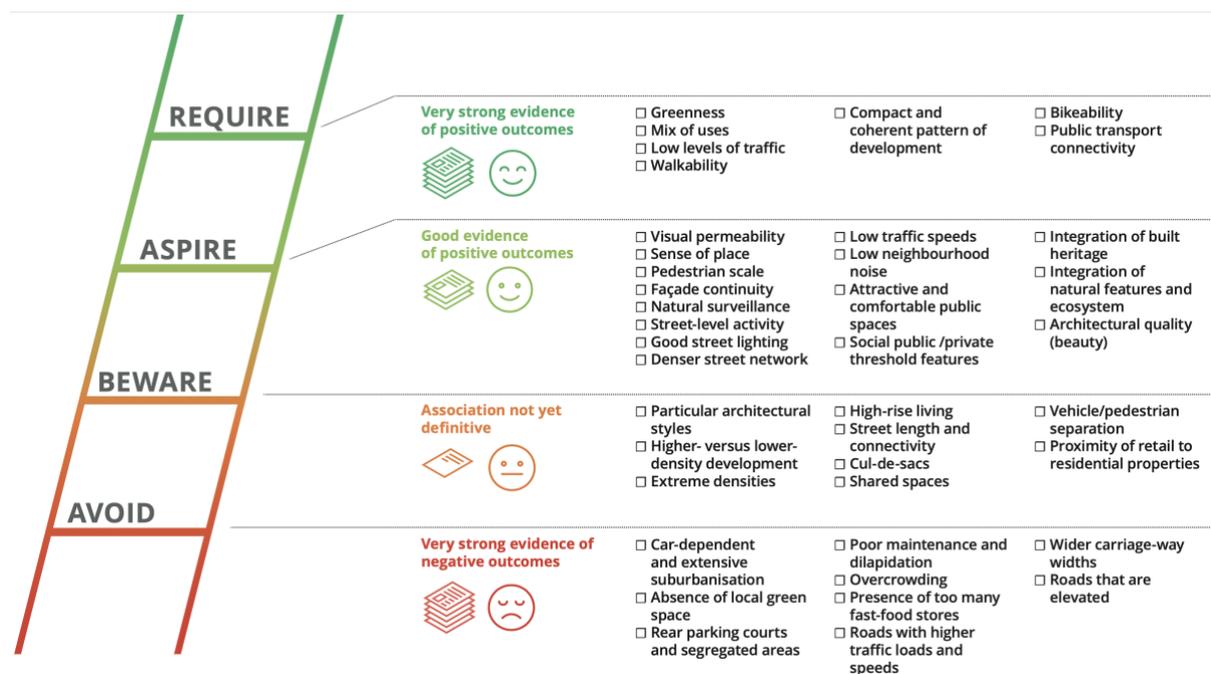
In a context where the governance of design (and place) is increasingly a shared endeavour encompassing critical inputs from public, private, third and community sectors, such a shared perspective on the importance of place quality is all the more important and (where it exists) powerful in its impact. Place quality is not a mysterious and luxurious aspiration only to be considered when things are good or only for the wealthy. Instead, as the evidence

gathered in www.place-value-wiki.net shows, it is a basic necessity of urban life with profound and far-reaching impacts on the lives of citizens today and tomorrow. It is so important to our basic well-being that it should be the expectation of all.

The ladder of place quality

For professionals engaged in the design of the built environment (whether as designers or policy-makers) this sort of evidence can be used as a powerful means to convince closed minds that high quality urbanism delivers a dividend for all and represents a sound investment. To help in this, it is possible to envisage different qualities of place as sitting on a ladder.

The ladder climbs from those place qualities that should be avoided at all costs when designing new development (because of their very likely negative health, social, economic and environmental impacts); to those about which the evidence is still inconclusive (and where we should be careful not to be too prescriptive in policy and guidance). Next come place qualities that are strongly associated with positive outcomes of all types (and which should be the aspiration of built environment policy and development-related decision-making). Finally we have a limited number of qualities that are fundamental and which should be required in new development as a means to maximise place value through good design. These are summarised in the Table.



The ladder of place quality

Final reflections

Given the strength of the evidence, policy makers, developers, and built environment professionals would be remiss if they failed to make the pursuit of a high quality built environment a top priority. They should take very seriously the sorts of qualities that are systematically shown to add place value.

Fortunately, this is a field of knowledge about which we know a good deal, including the essentials of what makes a good place, and how the way we shape places can add value.

None of the constituent qualities of successful places are particularly unique, innovative, or remarkable in any way, yet day to day and place to place they play a role in successfully influencing positive health, social, economic and environmental outcomes. They are easily achieved if we have the will to do so.

Ultimately we can use this knowledge to advance the case for quality when policy, project or investment decisions that affect the built environment are being made. Alternatively we can ignore it and suffer the consequences. It is that simple!