Evidence Based Design: Introduction
By Richard Saxon CBE

The term 'evidence-based design' implies that design can achieve required results or outcomes if it is based on evidence of prior success. This concept parallels the advance of medicine which seeks to develop treatments based on evidence of efficacy. But medicine is a science. Design is part science, part art form. Design has to work in the real world, employing engineering (scientific) principles to stand up and be habitable. Going further than that, to support the fitness for purpose of features of the design by referring to evidence of their performance in previous use, is relatively new territory. Can design affect human behaviour and emotional response in a measurable way? Can it support organisational effectiveness observably?

Good Design is undoubtedly seen as a Good Thing. Unfortunately, the great and good use this term in two different senses, yet they seem to agree not to raise that difference in public. I call the two usages Good Design 1 and Good Design 2. Good Design 1 is the Treasury concept of Best Value: a design which represents whole-life value-for-money and ticks all the sustainability and key-performance-indicator boxes. Good Design 2 is the CABE concept of 'Lifting the Spirit': inspirational, 'iconic', providing a positive emotional response to the aesthetic. This sense of goodness arises from reaction to beauty, innovation, spectacle, pride of possession, sense of place and all the 'soft', cultural and social values which design can embody. Regrettably, there are few examples of buildings which hit both GD1 and GD2 criteria together. We threaten to have an Olympic Games in 2012 which is GD1 only, because of inability to manage the creation of GD2.

We have a public building programme which is creating many GD1 achievements, worthy but dull. We have sustainability-hero buildings which are never going to win awards for beauty. We also have award winning GD2 buildings which are late, over budget, leak, are sustainability cheats and have dysfunctional layouts. Yet we love them. Surely the goal is to have both GD1

and 2. The design disciplines for GD1 can be relatively easily evidence-based. Those for GD2 are far less tangible. The challenge to the concept of Evidence Based Design is to put evidential legs under the functionality, build quality and impact aspects of design in equal measure, to make it possible for the Best Value fraternity to allocate funds based on achievement of measurable outcomes in both GD1 and GD2 terms..

There was a presumption that design determined behaviour back before the wheels came off modern architecture in the 1970s. It disappeared when post-modernism took hold. EBD can't just be determinism reappearing through another door. We are seeking a new balance between the intellect and the emotion, to set up a conversation between the box-tickers and the designers who wouldn't know evidence if it bit them. Otherwise we shall continue to see designers marginalised, powerless, frustrated, and not equipped with the arguments to deal with managerial culture. Architects need to return from the margins, to see that professionalism and art go together and that professionalism means being able to design from gathered evidence and to make the case for what you propose in objective terms.

There has been a long drift in architectural education during my career, away from the mantra that 'form follows function'. Those involved in EBD seek to retrieve and deepen understanding of the relationship between form and function. The creation of value for stakeholders, in exchange, use, image, environmental, social and cultural terms, is the new definition of the role of the designer in the built environment. This book provides evidence of progress on the road to Evidence Based Design.

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