

Honest, in-depth learning

Post-occupancy evaluations are a valuable tool for finding out how well a building serves its users. One of our directors chats with the founder of research and advisory practice ZZA Responsive User Environments about the benefits of independent evaluations to clients, users and architects themselves.



KATY GHAHREMANI At your company you run post-occupancy evaluations (POEs) that explore user experience in buildings. As an architect, I appreciate there's a significant amount of research and social science that goes into determining how well a space is used and how it can be optimised.



ZIONA STRELITZ Yes, I'm actually a social anthropologist and town planner and interior designer – three separate sets of training. That gives me the toolkit and credentials to enter a building and have conversations about how space influences people in all spheres and at all spatial scales. One has to understand where people are coming from, how they're using a building, and how they experience it on different days of the week and year to make these evaluations properly useful. I think the key to an instructive POE is to offer an integrated understanding of physical opportunities and constraints in use.

In conversation
Ziona Strelitz and Katy Ghahremani



1. The Teaching and Learning Building has a variety of spaces for students to meet and study.

KG Working with you on our UBS headquarters at 5 Broadgate, and later on the Teaching and Learning Building at University of Nottingham, we were impressed by how you gather and impart information that’s incredibly nuanced. Just sending a survey by email will not get you the information you need. You need to be able to read both verbal language and body language. There’s a wealth of knowledge that goes hand in hand with that.

ZS Crucially, you also need to know what part of a building and what conditions a user is referencing. I think that’s the value of the kind of evaluation we offer. The key short-term benefit to the architect or operator is knowing how they can get more out of the building. The longer-term benefit is having the knowledge to take them forward when they do a building with similar features again.

I generally consider an email survey an inferior type of study. Exploring in person why a building user thinks what they think is crucial to understanding the future possibilities or alternatives for a space. With a questionnaire, you lose the opportunity to dig into why, for example, someone called a certain feature “fine” but shrugged while they said it – what are they really thinking? Or to appreciate the spatial constriction, excessive brightness or whatever other aspect they may be describing.

The data we collect is intricate, no matter the type of building. Our reports are comprehensive, and we take care to ensure the user chooses their coded responses. This is to reflect their accommodation and tolerance of given conditions, and helps to inform client action in a pragmatic way.

KG Another distinction is the independent nature of your reports. A designer doing a POE in-house might subconsciously frame the questions in a certain way to get the answers they want to hear. But if you actually want to learn from the data, it’s really important to have that independent evaluation; otherwise you’re kidding yourself.

ZS From my experience with Make, I feel that was your reason for inviting me in. I didn’t have a Make person coming with me when I went to 5 Broadgate



2. 5 Broadgate is home to more than 5,000 employees.

or the Teaching and Learning Building. That is amazingly brave and big-shouldered and open-minded of your practice. No one said, “Ensure you only find out good stuff” – there was none of that attempt to control. Although all our clients want similarly independent research, there’s only one other architectural practice that’s asked ZZA Responsive User Environments to do so.

As you said, you get out of it what you’re prepared to put in, and I was struck when we did our debriefs on those buildings together that the conversation was very open-minded. Ken and you wanted to know what you should learn from the evaluation.

KG Yes, if the feedback isn’t honest and in-depth, there’s no point. I would compare this to when we look at sustainability. You can do a BREEAM evaluation, which is just a box-ticking exercise, or you can look at it in much more depth and forge something that’s inherently sustainable. From Make’s point of view, we want to get the truth and the learning. That feedback session you mentioned – when you sit down with the team and the client to go through the report – is just as important as the report itself.

ZS I think it’s very rare that you read a report and something jumps off the page that transforms your practice, whereas discussing it with authority and empirical conviction alters insight. That’s where Make succeeds. You seek out the kind of learning that will give you the information and confidence to challenge a client constructively to their advantage when needed.

KG A specific example of this is 5 Broadgate, where we only have 30% glazing, but actually ZZA’s evaluation revealed that users find the space light and bright. That’s data we’ve been able to relay to other clients and say, “Here’s a large building with good light levels for its spaces.” If you say that without the data to back it up, people can dismiss it. This has reverberations beyond the design team. We need to be able to empower our clients to make the best-informed decisions within their own context.



3. The entrance ramp in Make’s London studio can be used for meetings, private working and curated displays.

ZS I’m glad you’ve cited the benefit of positive feedback. POEs are not just fault-finders. It’s important to learn what works well and why. And there’s a lot more crossover learning between sectors than we typically think. One of my proud achievements is getting clients to see that users’ experience of spatial quality in another type of organisation can be usefully applied in their space. The specificity that matters relates to the building, not the organisation.

KG We completely support that. As architects, we’re moving away from siloed typologies. People do really varied activities in all sorts of spaces now, and it’s about how those spaces support that.

ZS When a building form is optimal, much of the user experience is determined. Take what Make has done here in your London studio, creating an open-plan office space out of an old car park. I love coming here and seeing that transformative potential realised and in action. That’s possible when a practice focuses hard on understanding the impact of a building’s arrangement for its users. Our POEs shed light on the fundamentals as well as the looser-fit layers. That’s how they support structured improvement in architecture.