

Property Agents in the UK: Some Reflections on the Social Production of Desirable Space¹

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ABSTRACT

The design, construction and occupation of a sustainable built environment have been the focus of much research over recent years. Most notably the focus has been on the modelling and prediction of energy use and carbon production during the design process together with the monitoring of carbon emissions during occupation. A second focus has been on the complexity of human engagement in the built environment, highlighting that occupant behaviour can have a significant influence on carbon emissions. But this overlooks the complex social interactions which together produce the buildings we end up working, dying and going to the theatre in. There is room for seeking to unpack the social production of (un)sustainable buildings from design through construction to commissioning. These buildings significantly set the agenda for the behaviour of occupants whatever their level of carbon consciousness. In this paper we use the practices and role of property agents in the commercial property market as a window on the social production of (un)sustainable buildings.

Contexts

“Many commentators seem to assume that the language of the environment and the market are mutually opposed. However, green buildings can offer many potential commercial benefits ... Much depends upon how the ‘market’ is constructed by the changing priorities of real estate actors. Critically here, market assessment is often a retrospective affair...Real estate agents are central to this process of market reconstruction” (Guy 2002 p. 256-257).

This paper explores the role and practices of property agents in the commercial property market. We use agency as a window on a larger process which we refer to as the social production of (un)sustainable buildings, a phrase that is intended to capture the fact that a large number of different actors *together* produce the built environment and the CO₂ emissions associated with its use.

It might be argued that those of us who are interested in energy efficiency, energy conservation or indeed in climate change mitigation, have tended to be particularly occupied with two ideas one of which is ‘the building’, the other is ‘the model.’ While these concepts and their associated ways of seeing allow us to see and do certain things, they also constrain us. Thus for example a focus on the individual building tends to obscure ensembles of buildings and the processes through which they are produced together, a kind of methodological individualism for the built environment, perhaps. Exceptions include the work of Simon Guy, among others, who approaches the environmental impact of building use from the point of view of an interest in the

¹ Results presented here should be treated as emerging findings. They are based on preliminary interpretation of the data. A more thorough interpretation will be presented at the ACEEE Buildings Summer Study.

development process (e.g. Guy 2002, 2006)². Notwithstanding scholars such as Janda (1998) and Biggart and Lutzenhiser (2007), when we are interested in ‘behaviour’ we have tended to be interested in the behaviour of those who occupy buildings and less in the complex social interactions which together produce the buildings we end up with. These buildings, and the way they are commissioned and run, significantly set the agenda for the behaviour of occupants, whatever their level of carbon consciousness. In this paper we want to take a different approach by moving the focus to the social practices of which buildings, the built environment and indeed the carbon emissions associated with their use, are an artefact. We try hard to abandon ‘buildings’, ‘behaviour’, and ‘the model’, for a while at least, to investigate some of the social practices of which buildings are an artefact, and in particular we want to have a closer look at the social construction of desirable space. A transformation of the building stock to a low carbon stock, whether this refers to the efficiency on an ‘asset’ basis or an ‘operational’ basis, implies a transformation has to take place in what is valued in the property market. This suggests that it is worth investigating the way in which certain characteristics of space come to have value in the market. Or to put it in more flowery terms, it becomes interesting to investigate the social construction of desirable space. Low energy or low carbon can be seen as part of a bundle of characteristics of space, so far it has been rather far down the hierarchy, but with the increasing acceptance of the urgency of climate change mitigation and the role attributed to buildings in reaching mitigation targets, this may be about to change. Thus a speaker from NG Bailey, a founding member of the recently formed UK Green Building Council, told delegates at Ecobuild 2008 that we are at the beginning of the biggest change to the property market for the last 50 years.

Rationale for Being Interested in Property Agents

Guy (2002) draws attention to how different actors in the property market are informed by different ways of seeing rooted in different practices and how this in turn leads to different ways of acting.³ Following Allport (2007), we may distinguish between investors/suppliers, occupiers and developers of space. However, where do these actors get the knowledge from on the basis of which they form their strategies and act on and in the market? Evaluation of the EU directive on labelling on lights and appliances in the 1990s suggested the importance of training for retailers and indeed of enforcement that the label is displayed in full in retail outlets (Winward et al. 1998). While the role of property agents in the commercial property market is not identical to the role of retailers in the domestic lights and appliance market, there are nevertheless some parallels, in particular their role of mediator, or middlewo/men in the market, and their role as advisors to those of supply space on the one hand and those who demand space on the other. The hunch we are exploring in this paper is that property agents are crucial in informing the decision strategies of these different actors in terms of the kinds of existing property to invest in, the specifications to which new property should be built and existing property should (or should not) be refurbished, the kind of space that one, as an occupier, can have, and indeed should be seen to have, if space is also an important aspect of the performance of corporate identity and brand. The choice of property agents is not to suggest that they are the

² Others interested in the development process and the property market as the collective achievement of social actors include e.g. Guy and Henneberry 2000; Henneberry and Roberts 2008.

³ The wider social scientific debate about the relationship between ways of doing and ways of seeing need not detain us here.

most important actors in the social production of (un)sustainable buildings. We are, however, exploring the idea that they play a significant role. There are two dimensions to this. The first revolves around whether agents are barriers to (or indeed opportunities for) change.⁴ This in a way is *our* perspective, the perspective of how to best and most effectively facilitate a transformation of the property market towards valuing low carbon.

However, another perspective worth exploring is the perspective of the agents themselves. Firstly, we are interested in understanding more of their life world, about their practices and their role in the market as already mentioned above. However, we may also be interested in the way in which their practices may or may not be changing and the kinds of opportunities and challenges this poses for them. If their practices are changing, how they are negotiating such changes? Allport (2007) notes, for example, the lack so far of a suitable valuation methodology for integrating sustainability into conventional valuation practices. It may also be that new actors are coming on the scene, actors who may constitute a potential threat to agents.⁵ We can speculate that as technical knowledge around how to deliver low carbon space whether new, or through refurbishment, or through the enhanced management of existing space, new kinds of knowledge become relatively more important, and the valuation based knowledge may become less important, at least comparatively so.

Theoretical Perspectives

Giddens' (1984) structuration theory informs our emphasis on social practices and the way in which agents and other actors in the property industry may be negotiating a changing environment. Wenger's (1998) ideas about communities of practice inform our consideration of the way in which, in a changing environment, the relative importance of different knowledges and their associated practices may change. Moreover our social constructivist approach to thinking about value goes beyond the rationalistic abstractions of neo-classical economics, and takes into account that while a 'Red Book'⁶ which outlines formal procedures for valuing space exist, the practice of valuing space also involves an important element of judgment calls by professionals (Baum et al. 2000). Moreover, it is implicit, or perhaps even explicit, in the above, that a conception of markets which narrowly conceptualises them as made up only of the direct parties to the transaction is insufficient to explore the issues which we want to explore here. We need a way of thinking about the markets which can capture the broader social construction and re-production of markets, in this case the market for space, as the achievement of multiple actors. In this we are in sympathy with the cultural economy approach adopted in a recent article by John Henneberry and Clare Roberts (Henneberry and Roberts 2008).⁷ Underlying such a perspective we make three important assumptions: 1) economic actors play an active role in creating markets. At heart this is an argument about the relationship between structure and agency; 2) discourses such as economics also shape economic behaviour. This draws on

⁴ Are they failing to act as the gateway to information about the energy performance of buildings in the way that the government appears to assume that they will? Do they need better information? Could they be motivated to champion the energy performance of buildings? Could we make better strategic use of their position in the market from a carbon mitigation point of view? Should sustainability be integrated into valuation methodologies?

⁵ Thus it was suggested by one of the industry actors with which we have been exploring the scope of this research that primacy of agents as advisors maybe challenged by more engineering based sustainability experts, as the importance of this kind of knowledge to investors/suppliers, developers and occupiers, increases.

⁶ The Red Book is the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) guide to valuing property.

⁷ Although they do not mention structuration theory, their approach to markets seems infused with it.

Foucault's discourse theory, and indeed on Giddens' ideas about the circulation of knowledges in society; 3) the meanings that actors attribute to their interactional context are important. Or to put it more directly in symbolic interactionist terms (Mead 1934), that interaction is mediated by (symbolic) representations. This means that the way in which actors respond to a particular context depends on the representation that the actor makes of the context.

Methodology

The aim of the fieldwork was to explore in a fairly open way the practices of agents and their role in the market through talking with the agents themselves about their work. Like Guy (2002), who draws on Cuff (1991), Hajer (1995) and Jackson (1989), we were interested in exploring 'tales of practice' as a springboard for an analysis of the underlying pattern of practices. In particular we were interested in understanding agents' role in shaping what is valued in the market. On the basis of the exploration of their professional life world, we wanted consider the ways in which the work of agents connects up to the low carbon buildings agenda. To this end we wanted to carry out a number of semi-structured interviews with agents.

Social scientific research on the environmental impact of the property industry has been, according to Guy (2002, p.247-248), rather survey driven⁸. Guy (2002), and de Malgalhães (2002) in the same volume, make the case for a more interview based approach. An interview based approach, where the content of interviews could be relatively flexible, certainly seemed to be appropriate for what we were trying to do. We also wanted to carry out participant observation, but in practice we were only able to engage in very little of this due to time constraints. A weakness in the data is that it consists of respondents talking to the interviewer and trying to connect up to the interviewers concerns, rather than of respondents talking to their peers. If the study were to be developed, participant observation in locations where this takes place, would be very valuable for gaining further insight into the practices of agency and their role in the property market. Moreover, an interpretative study which focuses on understanding what the world looks like from the point of view of a particular group of actors, with little or no room for exploring the points of view of groups of actors they interact with, runs the risk of uncritically adopting the perspectives of the group under study. It was not possible within the context of the present study to interview individuals from the interaction context of agents such as M&E consultants or indeed the clients of agents. This would be an obvious development of the exploration commenced here.

A number of telephone conversations were had to develop the research during the early months of 2008. More concentrated fieldwork took place during April with 19 agents and 3 non-agents interviewed in 16 companies. These include some of the biggest names in the business (Table 1). Agents in many more companies were approached for interviews, and a significant amount of legwork had to be done to reach this number of respondents. Many interviews were secured through snowballing once the interviews were underway. We wanted above all to interview agents who represented 'normal' agency. And agents who were involved with the *existing* stock. Ideally it would have been good to recruit in a deliberate way on the basis of parameters such as size of firm, location (e.g. relative buoyancy of local market), client sector (e.g. retail, office, industrial), the type of service offered (e.g. letting, investment, development), length of professional experience (e.g. new recruits versus old hands). However, recruitment is

⁸ This seems to be changing though. Baum et al. (2000) was for example based on more qualitative interviews, as was also the case with the work of Henneberry and Roberts referred to above.

also the art of the possible given extant resources and knowledge. We had gained the impression from preliminary conversations that access could be a problem. It therefore seemed counter productive to set up a sampling frame that might further thin a small sample of willing respondents. Further more, to a certain extent, we learned about these different parameters as we went along. It is obvious that there was a certain amount of self selection – i.e. many of those who agreed to have an interview clearly felt that they had a story to tell regarding agency and sustainability. When we first went into the field we were working on the assumption that agents move back and forth between letting and investment agency, this turned out not to be the case, the direction of travel is from letting *to* investment agency. Agents rarely return to letting agency as the fees are so much greater in investment agency due to the larger scale, in financial terms, of transactions in investment agency. We therefore had to try and correct the overrepresentation of letting agents in the initial sample by recruiting more investment agents, which we mainly succeeded in so that the sample is fairly balanced in respect of the kind of agency experience represented.

For practical reasons we concentrated on interviewees in London. We hoped that most people would also have had experience of other geographical areas. This turned out to be the case only up to a point. The limited geographical mobility of respondents may be related to the importance of relationships and local knowledge of agents. In a way, an agent who moves could be considered to leaving behind him/her as considerable social capital. We did interview one senior investment agent from the regions. The guiding selection points therefore became to have a balance between letting and investment agents. To very summarily characterise respondents we may say that they were predominantly senior people, predominantly working in the office market, and predominantly in the City and West End areas of the London property market.

Table 1. Companies in Which Interviews Were Conducted

Company	
BH2	GVA Grimley
CB Richard Ellis	Ingleby Trice Kennard
Cushman and Wakefield	Jones Lang LaSalle
Cyril Sweett	King Sturge
Drivers Jonas	Knight Frank
DTZ	Nelson Bakewell
Egan Lawson	Savills
Gerald Eve	Strutt & Parker

The Practice of Agency and Its Role in the Property Market

A Taxonomy of Agents

In the course of the interviews we came across a number of different labels to talk about what agents do. Indeed, every new interview seemed bring with it a new label. The extent to which these different labels completely dissolve into each other in a coherent manner forming a neat and comprehensive order is beyond the scope of this paper.⁹ What they do do is to reflect

⁹ Nor are we going to provide a full-blown domain analysis of the data at this point (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

ways of talking about what agents do rooted in the kind of experience and current institutional context of the interviewee, and of course in the dynamics of the symbolic interaction during that particular interview (Holstein and Gubrium 2004) The overarching concept seems to be ‘transactions.’ This is the nuts and bolts of what agents are involved in whether we talk about rented/leased or an investment situation, and whether they are acting for the buyer or the seller of space. And so one way of representing the major distinctions within agency would be as we have done in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Main Distinctions Within Agency¹⁰

Transactions			
Letting/Leasing		Investment	
<i>Acting for buyer</i>	<i>Acting for seller</i>	<i>Acting for buyer</i>	<i>Acting for seller</i>

The major distinction between letting agents and investment agents is that letting agents are involved in letting transactions either on the landlord’s behalf (disposals) or on the tenant’s side (tenant representation). Investment agents are involved in the selling off (disposal) of properties on behalf of owners/investors and in acquisitions on behalf of investors. A second major distinction is therefore whether the agent is representing buyer or seller. There was a lot more mobility between roles here, so that often agents could find themselves representing the seller in one transaction and the buyer in another. The relationship between letting agency and investment agency was perceived to be crucial by respondents. Letting agency gives an insight into the concerns of the occupier, and in the British property market it is the rental value which is *the* source of income and capital value of property. Therefore, understanding the rental market is a crucial starting point both for the letting agent and for the investment agent.¹¹ A third distinction was between ‘disposals’ and ‘acquisitions.’ This appeared to cut across the letting and investment. As the label suggests, ‘disposals’ refers to selling off property rights. Interestingly this includes selling off unwanted buildings as well as letting the space, but it may also include disposing of a lease to another occupier for a tenant who wants to relocate. This may turn out to be important in the context of current discussions about ‘greening’ leases (Langley and Stevenson, 2007; London Climate Change Agency and the Environmental Change Institute, 2007) in particular in terms of the willingness of occupiers to adopt ‘greener’ leases.’ This could work both ways, making the lease more attractive, or less attractive, for a subsequent occupier. ‘Acquisitions’ as the label suggests, referred to agents acting on behalf of occupiers or investors, wishing to acquire space. There was a further distinction within agency: in terms of the different client sectors served (e.g. offices, retail and industrial). The structure of provision of agency services in the London market tends to be more specialised than in the regions. This may be a factor of scale. I.e. bigger companies (or bigger offices of the same companies) in London permits/encourages specialisation. In the regions there is less of a tendency to differentiate among client types. London based (West End and City) office experience was over-represented in the sample.

¹⁰ Table 2 ignores ‘development’ which interviewees would object should sit as a third category along side letting and investment. As mentioned above, the focus here is on existing buildings, as opposed to the development process.

¹¹ It would be interesting to consider whether rental income is of the same fundamental importance to the income in other property markets than that of the UK. If not, what are other sources of capital value for property markets in those areas? What does this mean for the practice of agency in those countries? Moreover, capital markets are international, and many large occupiers are international, and presumably have company wide property strategies.

Advice versus Brokerage

A more informal, but nevertheless important (fifth) distinction was between ‘brokerage’ and ‘advice.’ Brokerage was depicted as being simply about matching supply and demand, whereas advice involved a more extensive service. We tried to explore if there were any regularities in the way that brokerage and advice mapped on to agents and the companies they work for. It was not clear whether the distinction between brokerage and advice mapped on to differences between companies in terms of size. Indeed there were some accounts to the effect that a smaller company might be in a better position to offer advice, whereas with bigger companies specialisation and scale made an integrated service more difficult. So one interviewee offered the view that in a smaller practice, the person that the client deals with is the same, s/he is not passed on to someone else. There was however a discernible normative flavour to the way the distinction was being made, as ‘advice’ was somehow indicative of a better, fuller service than ‘brokerage.’ It seems that to the personage of the letting agent and the investment agent, we could add ‘the broker’ and the ‘advisor’ as (ideal) typical representations of agents.

Importance of Personal Relationships

Personal relationships are fundamental in agency. It may be that this is a feature of the property industry as a whole. One interviewee cited the length of development projects as a reason. An agent which is involved in advising a developer on a new development may end up being ‘retained’ on a development and responsible for disposing of the space for the developer. Thus an involvement with a particular project, and therefore with a set of people, can stretch over a decade or more. On the investment side an agent may be instructed to purchase a particular building, and then end up selling that building for the investor some time later. If this makes money for the investor, it will of course have a beneficial effect on the relationship between the investor and the agent. But personal relationships *between* agents are also fundamental. Everybody is interested in letting agents’ knowledge of the rental market, what space is letting for. The investment agent is interested because the rent is the income from the property, and because it influences the capital value of buildings. Agents advising developers are similarly interested because the likely rental income of the space once completed will influence the value of the land developed and the buildings constructed. Letting agents acting on behalf of clients looking for space are therefore perceived to be on the cutting edge in terms of knowledge of what is valued in the market and at how much. Part of what makes personal relationships between agents fundamental is the way those relationships function as a conduit of information. Information flow through the market has changed over the last twenty years. The technology has become more sophisticated and can handle greater volumes of information. At the same time companies offering agency services, now have research departments, in particular the larger ones. But in spite of the increasing sophistication of information handling technology, and the formalisation of the collection, treatment and dissemination of knowledge in the property market, personal relationships continue to be important conduits for information. It may be that there is a difference here between some organisations which are perhaps more technocratic, and others which have what might be described as a more traditional relational approach to agency work. Or that the two modes of information exchange co-exist in the same companies, and indeed sit side by side in the practices of individual agents.

Social Shaping of Desirable Space

We were interested in exploring the influence of agents on the social shaping of desirable space. There were contrasting accounts in terms of the extent to which agents felt they were influential. On the one hand it is possible to distinguish a storyline to do with the autonomy of client choice, on the other hand a storyline which, in various ways, attributes influence to the agent as advisor to the client. One respondent talked about how he would challenge the client's brief and how he saw this as part of his role. Another portrayed the agent as at the centre of a group of professionals (i.e. in the design team on a development or refurbishment), tying things together for the client to ensure commercial viability. The information asymmetry between client and agent was cited as a source of influence for the client, rooted in the fact that property deals are the bread and butter of the agent's working life, whereas a client looking for a new space may only move once or at least very infrequently. In other words, the agent's expertise on the property market becomes as source of authority *vis a vis* the relatively in-expert person he is advising. This is perhaps less likely to be the case when dealing with large multi-premise corporates which because of the scale of their business operations employ Heads of Estates and Heads of Property.¹² But even so one agent working in tenant representation offered the view that agents often had to deal with relatively junior people in as much as property was not exactly boardroom material.¹³ This may be about to change if property increasingly becomes seen as an essential part of good CSR.¹⁴ The idea of expert authority for the agent based on information asymmetry between the agent and his/her client fits well with the observation of another interviewee that developers and occupiers are both looking to agents to tell them what they can demand in sustainability terms, how far they can and should be going. In the view of that particular respondent, the agents as a profession were not ready for that task.

The 'broker' can influence the client by his/her function as information filter. But as this way of relating to clients emerges in respondent accounts, the broker is not really interested in influencing client choice over and above keeping the deal flow going and in maximising fees. For 'advisors', though, influencing client choice may be seen as the hallmark of good professional practice. One agent mentioned how he saw it as part of his role to *challenge* the brief he has been given by the client. Another explained the role of agency advice in the self-actualisation of organisations. The idea of the advisor goes to the heart of what we were interested in exploring when we first thought of this research. We might distinguish, slightly artificially, between the agent as a filter of information between buyer and seller, and the agent in a more active role seeking to provide advice to the client on the basis of his/her understanding of the client's needs on the one hand and the property market on the other. Thus as the conduit for information about property the agent is already important in terms of the kind of information the agent includes in the way s/he represents the property. In the context of the low carbon buildings' agenda this could be important in terms of when, how and the extent to which the EPC/DEC¹⁵ is brought to the attention of the potential purchaser of space, and indeed are presented as a routine parameter in the communication of property particulars. As noted in the

¹² Incidentally, it appears that agents sometimes end up joining client companies. Thus agents end up facing ex-agents in client-agent relationships.

¹³ The low status of "building" and "facilities" departments is also something picked up on by Biggart and Lutzenhiser (2007, 1079).

¹⁴ Corporate Social Responsibility.

¹⁵ Energy Performance Certificate/Display Energy Certificate

introduction, the importance of retailers in the transformation of the appliance market was highlighted by Winward et al. (1998), and agents have a parallel function in the property market. It would be interesting to know the extent to which the EPC is now on particulars of property, and at which point it is communicated to prospective purchasers of space. It is likely that they are not yet widely used neither in formal nor in informal communication. This will hopefully change over the next year.

The advice function can involve a much more profound involvement with the self-fulfilment of a business. We are familiar with the importance of the signal value of buildings to organisations. This has important implications for what is valued in the property market. It is about the identity of the organisation communicated to the outside world and to staff. But we do not have to go to actor network theory to see that the structure of a building sets an important agenda for the working practices which take place in an around that building. This means that in working with occupiers for example, ‘advice’ can extend quite far into the operation of business strategy to the implications for commercial self-actualisation of the embodiment of business operations in a particular space.

The Specification and the Lease

Particular expressions of what is valued by the property market are concretised in the spec of buildings and refurbishment and in the lease. The spec embodies the kinds of physical structures of the building which are valued. The lease also embodies physical aspects, but in addition it also expresses what is valued in terms of the relationship between the landlord and tenant, the tenant and the building and the landlord and the building. It may also institute other relationships such as facilities management. In other words it expresses and formalises a whole set of relationships. We should therefore pay particular attention, in further interpretation of the data, what is said about both the spec and about the lease. They constitute concrete expressions of what is valued in the property market. The analysis should therefore consider agents’ influence on these two artefacts of practice. They may, following Wenger (1998) be treated as boundary objects between different communities of practice.

Connection of Agency to the Low Carbon Buildings Agenda (LCBA)

What can we learn from the interviews about the extent to which agents feel that what they do connects to the LCBA (things green)? In headline terms, it is clear that the agents interviewed on the whole perceived their practices and role in the market to connect up with the LCBA. Low carbon buildings are indeed perceived to have something to do with ‘us.’ However, as pointed out in the context of recruitment of respondents, there is likely to have been some self-selection among interviewees, so that those who feel that they have a story to tell about the relevance of the LCBA to what they do are likely to be overrepresented. And more particularly, those who are already doing something about it, so have a *good* story to tell. It was very clear that the green agenda carried a very strong normative load for agents, as something they *should* be doing something about. Methodologically, this in a way was a bit of a barrier to exploring ‘normal’ practices. The interviewer was willy nilly cast in the role as the representative of the green agenda, someone from the land of ‘what we should be doing.’ It is possible to distinguish different positionings by respondents in terms of the extent they saw themselves as being on top of the sustainable buildings agenda. Three common ones can be paraphrased as 1) we are on top

of it, or at least on top of getting on top of it, we have the knowledge systems in place; 2) this is the way things are going, but we are not ready; 3) we are OK, but the rest of the profession is not ready.

LCBA was definitely the researchers' concept. In terms of the life worlds of respondents, low carbon buildings were bundled up with 'things green', not differentiated. They were more likely to use terms such as 'green' and 'sustainability.' So a broader set of environmental issues: embodied carbon, water, materials, waste, social aspects. Things green tended to be conceptualised as BREEAM¹⁶ and most often in the context of new buildings. Much less in terms of EPCs, not to mention DEC, leasing structures, or the CRC.¹⁷ The metric for measuring 'where we are' in terms of things green is BREEAM, to a lesser extent LEED.¹⁸ Comparing ourselves to others appears to be crucial. The default for new buildings appears to be 'BREEAM Excellent.' At the same time there was substantial scepticism about the meaningfulness of this sustainability metric, even cynicism. This is problematic because it undermines the basis for action of those who do want to make a difference. And it increases the risk of unintended perverse consequences. The metric must be meaningful, and seen to be meaningful by those who use it. The same applies to the EPC and DEC ratings.

The conversation during interviews would very often veer towards *new buildings*. This could be for a variety of reasons. One possibility is that the property market is naturally more interested the new and shiny. It is perhaps revealing that respondents would often refer to existing stock as 'second hand'. Perhaps they also tend to be higher in value, and so fees for agents would be higher. A third possibility is that the use agents make of sustainability benchmarking emphasises the importance at being at the top of the metric rather than the scale of the *improvement*. What is important is to achieve a high rating, not the magnitude of improvement made to an existing property. As it is easier to get a high rating on new buildings, this would also tend to push attention in that direction. This may also account the discomfort about EPCs on the existing stock, which by its very nature will mean that most existing stock will fall way short of the top of the range. This is significant because improvement to the existing commercial building stock is of crucial significance to achieving the potential for energy savings in the building stock.

Conclusions

Through interviews with nearly 20 agents we have begun to explore the participation of agents in the social shaping of desirable space. As Biggart and Lutzenhiser (2007, 1076) put it "more than simple exchange of goods and services is involved in these markets." Accounts vary as to the extent and nature of their influence and indeed its consequences for the low carbon buildings agenda. These issues will be explored in more depth in a more fine grained analysis of the data to be presented at the ACEEE Summer Study on Buildings and will also be the subject of a forthcoming journal article. What can we say in conclusion about the points raised in the beginning of the paper and which we have begun to address in the preliminary analysis of the data?

¹⁶ Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method.

¹⁷ Under consultation in the UK, the Carbon Reduction Commitment involves mandatory emissions trading to cut carbon emissions from large commercial and public sector organisations. It covers around 10% of the UK economy wide emissions.

¹⁸ Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

Agents do indeed appear to play a very important role in informing the decisions of buyers and sellers of space. However this role can be differentiated on a brokerage – advice continuum. The way in which agency articulates with the low carbon buildings agenda will differ along this continuum. This is for example the case in terms of the extent to which agents will require new knowledge. At the brokerage end of the spectrum, displaying the EPC of a building could just be integrated into the particulars of a building and to some extent all the broker will really want to know is that A is better than B. But at the advice end of the spectrum is likely that the agent will need to understand, or be able to draw on people who do, the technical aspects to do with for example the possibilities of upgrading a building to a higher rating. In principle this is not so different from BREEAM, but EPCs will apply to a much greater range of buildings. The general perception of respondents was that agents are just beginning to get their heads around the EPC and how this will integrate with their practice.

The decisions of buyers and sellers are concretised in the specification of buildings. In a more thorough analysis of the data we will therefore be exploring what agents said about their influence on the specification of buildings. And in particular what they said about the way EPCs may impact on this. It is clear that we are at a very open moment. We do not know what is going to happen over the next 18 months. But our impression from the preliminary analysis of the data is that agents expect that there will be an impact on the price of space. There was little awareness of ‘green leases.’ But, the landlord – tenant relationship, upon which greener leases seek to act, did come up, and in a parallel way to the specification of buildings, the lease institutionalizes a set of relationships which has importance for the CO₂ emissions associated with the use of those buildings. One of the interesting ideas raised was that landlords could integrate a greener lease into the business proposition they are offering to the market, so that what is being offered is essentially a location service which facilitates the company in doing its business in the most optimal way, while in the same way helping the company to do this with the least possible impact on the environment. Essentially taking as much of the building related CSR preoccupations off the shoulders of the occupier as possible.

We wanted to consider the extent to which agency constitutes barriers to (or indeed opportunities for) change towards more sustainable buildings. This is where Giddens’ structuration theory comes in handy allowing us to see reality as presently constituted, structure, as both constraining and enabling. It seems pretty clear from the interviews that as a profession agency is not yet in possession of the knowledge required for them to act as a group enabling more sustainable buildings. But there is certainly the possibility of the profession integrating this aspect of information and advice in the context of transactions. There is certainly the possibility of the profession embracing this aspect of practice more or less fully, and more or less as a hall mark of good practice. In this context the way in which EPCs are integrated into the property market will be very interesting to observe. More concerning from our point of view, at least one interviewee remarked that even agents who in principle possess the knowledge do not necessarily bring it to bear at important decision points about the specification of buildings. Agents are of course not alone in the world, and the aim of this research was not to set up agents as the most influential, nor to identify agency as *the* barrier. Closer examination of the data will allow a more nuanced depiction of the interaction contexts which agents have to negotiate and which therefore have a bearing on the kinds of choices that they make.

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