

An interview with Mardelle Shepley, co-author of *A Practitioner's Guide to Evidence-Based Design*

Introduction: Before the turn of the century, the notion of design research was received with skepticism and confusion by many. Now, medical facility conferences feature sessions that focus on the use of research to inform design decisions. In the book, *A Practitioner's Guide to Evidence-Based Design*, released by The Center for Health Design, the authors discuss the importance of injecting more evidence into design decision-making. Mardelle Shepley joins us to explore the importance of post-occupancy evaluations. As Professor and Director of the Center for Health Systems & Design at Texas A&M University, Dr. Shepley is a registered architect with 25 years of experience in professional practice and has conducted research and published extensively on the topic of pediatric facility design.

Interviewer: ***Dr. Shepley, why are post-occupancy evaluations important?***

Shepley: Well, there are a variety of reasons why they're useful. And I think some of them sort of get at the very core of what we do because as designers we're trying to be accountable for what we bring into the world, accept responsibility for the modifications to the physical environment. So the broad picture is that the evaluations help us understand what we've created and what the implications are. Now there are a whole series of things that you can add on to that that enhance their importance. And when I refer to post-occupancy evaluations, I'm really thinking of both pre- and post-occupancy evaluations. In other words, evaluating a building before you go about trying to design the next in the sequence, it's nice to know what you did previously to compare it to what you've done next, so all my comments really address that.

But the other issues that I was referring to, in addition to serve wanting to know why we did what we did and whether we did what we thought we were doing, is to in general, provide feedback to design teams so that when other projects come up, you've learned from your previous experiences and you can build on what was good and you can avoid what wasn't working. There's also, a sort of pure approach to it that we are, as designers, also trying to contribute to an overall knowledge base so that the idea you're generating new knowledge that can be used, not just by your firm but by people out there in the world more generally. Sometimes evaluations can be used, especially if we're talking about pre-occupancy. They can be used to help inform various stages such as the programming process. So you have a question about whether to do something one way or the other, you go into the existing building and you do a little test to see which is the best option.

Another thing that comes up a lot is, there've been statements made in recent years, that the credibility of architects have eroded a little bit, and that a lot of what we contribute historically has now being handled by people in other professions. However, the other professions have not been trained into this world of evidence-based design the way we have and so it's just one more way to enhance our credibility.

One other thing that I might mention is this notion of doing an evaluation after the building is done. In a sense it can help build a relationship with a client who, you know you don't turn over the keys and walk away, you actually are a part of what the building is as it is occupied and as people are using it. So I think it builds your relationship. And there are a few other sub-categories, but those are the primary reasons that they're important.

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Interviewer: **Why is objectivity an issue when conducting pre- and post-occupancy evaluations?**

Shepley: There are a couple of reasons objectivity is important thing to look at. The primary reason is that one of the basic intentions of research is to answer problems from an objective perspective as possible. And that way you know that the outcomes that you're sharing with the rest of the world are based on fact as much as possible. There's very little that is completely free of influence and subjectivity, but many things you can measure will help you understand in a very, sort of, concrete way, not elaborated upon by any people's specific interests and you can produce that final project that lacks bias. But there are few ways that happens when a firm gets involved that you have to be very careful about. And one is that you can reduce your objectivity by deciding what you're going to study. For example, you know that a certain part of your project did very well, well it's very tempting to say, "Let's study that" and say see how well that worked out because you know the outcomes are going to be good and you're looking for that pat in the back. So just selecting a problem can be fraught with peril. And when you pick your tools to measure the response to the environment and then when you look at the results, both those stages can also be influenced by what people hope the outcomes are going to be. And even the most ethical people have difficulty; say constructing a questionnaire, that doesn't lead people in one direction or another. So the idea is to be objective about that, so that in the end, you have a true sense of how people are reacting to your design.

Interviewer: Thank you for listening. The *Practitioner's Guide to Evidence-Based Design* is available for purchase at The Center for Health Design's store for \$36. Visit www.healthdesign.org for more information.