Achieve Your Sustainability Goals —

How One Firm is Making It Easier for Clients to Justify Green Building Costs

Architecture companies often face a knowledge gap when it comes to forecasting the full value of projects and calculating the financial returns of their designs. This is especially true for how a particular design would affect occupants and the surrounding environment.

Sean Quinn and his colleagues at HOK had always been really good at facilitating those conversations, however convincing project stakeholders to make the investment required to achieve a project's sustainability goals was a different story.

"Autocase has helped our role as advocates, it's enhancing the service that we give, by enabling our clients a full understanding of their investment."

Quantifying the value in dollars of adding on-site solar, optimized lighting, or next-generation mechanical systems are huge value drivers — especially for owner-occupied spaces.

"A decision can be based on those layers, not some sort of vague, blurry idea. It becomes very clear. Working with Autocase, we can get the qualitative benefits quantified."

Who is Sean Quinn? Sean is the sustainable design leader in HOK's San Francisco office, and he knows a thing or two about complicated, multi-stakeholder projects. He coordinates performance design practice across the firm, has worked on more than 300 projects across North America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

He knows how a successful project should unfold and exactly what information he needs to be an advocate for good design.

"Our hope is to be involved as early on as possible, to start doing goal setting, set foundational principles and establish guidelines for a project."

For a typical project, HOK might highlight how certain design options would mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and promote better employee health. However, they can't easily explain precisely how, or precisely how much, a gap in the information available for client decision making.

That wasn't just a challenge for HOK's clients in their decision-making process. It was also a frustration for Sean and his team.

"We're essentially saying [to the client] that we're creating a higher quality of life in that space. What we're not saying is: what's that worth?"

That's the big missing piece. Traditionally, to fill this information gap, HOK used qualitative techniques to help tell a compelling story for its design recommendations. But without robust data, they were only able to paint a partial picture.

"If I'm working in a cleaner air environment versus a worse air environment — what's the likelihood that I'm going to show up to work or get sick?"

Sean and his team started working on a new airport building during the planning phase in Summer 2018.

From the onset, the project was ambitious, with no shortage of challenges. The timing — "extraordinarily fast-paced" — was a big one. The HOK team had one year to finalize the concept and design, and then another 12 to 18 months to execute those plans.

Another challenge was the sheer number of different parties in the mix. The airport team alone is a complex web of space planners, project managers, and administrators. They certainly weren't the only stakeholder, either.
Sean's job involves "getting all these people to work together happily" — no easy feat with a group that size.

With everything on his plate, Sean normally doesn't have the bandwidth to do the detailed valuation modeling that would help clients make critical decisions.

For this project, Sean and his colleagues used Autocase data to show how energy and water savings would generate financial, social, and environmental value — the triple bottom line. This information supported decisions that would help realize the goal of creating net-zero energy buildings.

Plus, Sean and his team get to focus on what they're good at and what they enjoy doing — creating innovative, new buildings — rather than modeling financial costs and benefits.

"We advocate for solutions that improve the built environment. Having a partner that's doing the research enables us to educate clients through good design. We're more likely to be able to implement our recommendations moving forward."

The way Sean sees it, Autocase fills the financial data hole by streamlining three layers of budget analysis: upfront costs (what a certain technology will cost), qualitative or lifestyle benefits (such as, how natural light would affect employee productivity), and the long-term operational budget considerations.

Autocase®

Autocase is a design valuation software that translates your designs into dollar values, metrics, and data visualizations to add to your building design story. Outputs include occupant health, productivity and environmental impacts presented in dollar values, Excel and Word report outputs, and a graphical dashboard to aid in design decision making, and client communication.

Autocase only uses the highest quality data sources from government provided data, academic published and peer-reviewed research. Our team of experienced economists rely on the valuation technique called Triple Bottom Line Cost Benefit Analysis (TBL-CBA), which is founded on industry and government best-practice valuation methods.