

Materials Translators: Observations from a Study of Sustainable Materials Information Provision and Design Behaviour in London, UK

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Designers, as generalists, access specific information about a range of design factors by engaging in dialogue with 'specialists'. These specialists can then translate the information into design language tailored to a particular project requirement which saves time and is more effective than using static information or tools. This was the finding of a preliminary survey which sought to understand how designers access materials information with the aim of improving awareness of sustainable alternatives. When synthesised with other findings from the same research project, some interesting and unexpected patterns emerged, namely the existence of an informal network of materials information in London which is dependent on a handful of passionate individuals who fulfil this role of 'specialist'.

Some common characteristics were identified. These people are:

- Based at, or with good access to, a physical materials collection/library;
- Specialists in materials characteristics and applications;
- Bilingual in the languages of materials and design, and therefore translators of materials information for design;
- Operating on the fringes of the materials, design and education sectors ('boundary-spanners');
- Active in consultancy, publication, teaching and research (translating & disseminating).

This paper will present the network of materials information that was observed in the study; its principal facilitators, distribution channels and physical resources before exploring the characteristics and concepts identified in more detail ('boundary-spanner', 'translator', 'disseminator').

The materials libraries or collections are the anchor-points for the network; valuable resources for the specialists who collect, manage, process and access the information. However, the research suggests that the value of the materials library to designers is not necessarily as a direct resource; rather it acts as a lure, the idea of 'an Aladdin's cave of materials', a showcase for the materials specialist who then provides a translation service for designers.

It is proposed that this specialist role of 'boundary-spanner' and 'translator', as well as the network and information exchange observed in the research, could be of great importance for the provision of sustainable materials information and for sustainable design practice more generally