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From Waste to Worth: Stakeholders' Interpretation of Value in Circular Construction Projects

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ABSTRACT

Circular construction has emerged as a sustainability paradigm aimed at reducing environmental impacts, improving resource efficiency, and generating economic benefits. Central to this paradigm is the concept of value, which can be interpreted differently by various groups of project actors. While previous research in circular construction has primarily explored value from business model and industrial ecology perspective, focusing on environmental and economic dimensions, limited attention has been given to how practitioners themselves make sense of the value of circularity in everyday project contexts. This subjective appraisal can significantly influence stakeholder involvement and decision-making processes in circular construction. Our study addresses this gap by drawing on data from 103 semi-structured interviews with project actors involved in three circular construction projects in the Netherlands, supplemented by a co-creation workshop. Using an inductive Gioia method, we investigate how circularity's value is interpreted and contested within these projects. Our analysis identifies six distinct value themes, which are aggregated into two overarching dimensions: *Values-as-Beliefs* (moral, personal, and symbolic), which relates project values to individuals' abstract beliefs about ideal modes of conduct and desirable end-states, and *Values-as-Outcomes* (instrumental, economic, and environmental), which defines project values in terms of the tangible outputs, benefits, or worth generated by a project.

In relation to Values-as-Beliefs, our findings show that project actors perceive circularity as a moral obligation, largely driven by climate concerns. Larger organizations and civil servants are regarded as bearing a particularly strong moral responsibility in this regard. Personal values, shaped by culture, experience, and education, are often endorsed in professional settings, fostering intrinsic motivation and dedicated engagement with the circular transition. Finally, symbolic values provide recognition and identity to individuals and organization but also pose a risk of *greenwashing* if not supported by concrete actions. Actors emphasized the need for positive framing of circularity to enhance its symbolic value.

With regards to Values-as-Outcomes, we found that project members interpret circularity as a practical instrument for innovation and resource efficiency. Furthermore, circularity is understood as a means of achieving economic benefits and as an environmental lever for reducing ecological footprints and generating broader social returns. However, several tensions were identified, including the challenge of balancing short-term economic pressures with long-term circularity goals, and the uneven distribution of value among stakeholders.

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This research offers valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers in the construction industry by highlighting how actors differently value circularity, and how these subjective evaluations shape the adoption of circular construction. It also contributes to the broader understanding of value in circularity transitions and projects, offering implications for future research and practice aimed at fostering circular construction.

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