

Book Review

Design Research in Architecture: An Overview

Fraser Murray (ed.). Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2013., 265 pp., ISBN: 9781409462170

The title on the spine of this book is likely to encourage readers of *Design Studies* to pull it down from the shelf. If so it might make for a surprising and probably frustrating read. As early as the first chapter readers are warned that the Design Research Society ‘offers too narrow a focus to be of much relevance to them’. Indeed those who publish in this journal will find virtually none of their work discussed here. One author (it is an edited volume), Philip Steadman, at least mentions ‘design methods’ and surely he must be well aware that things have moved on from Jones, Alexander and Simon but they remain his focus and become straw men easily blown over when viewed through the lens of current understanding.

For some in the field of architecture the phrase ‘design research’ has taken on a specific and restrictive meaning during the last decade. Here design research refers more to the notion that designing can be seen as a special way of conducting research. In many ways this can be seen as a response to the UK government Research Assessment Exercises (RAE) that began in the last decade of the twentieth century. These assessments continue to the present day and spread around the world like some virulent disease. In recent years I have been helping schools of architecture as far away as Hong Kong, Singapore and Australia to prepare for their own mutations. The RAE remains a potent force in framing the way research is conducted and published.

It is no surprise that this redefinition of design research has emanated from architecture. Many of the best UK schools of architecture are in

universities that expected, and indeed needed, to get high RAE ratings. By comparison industrial design in the UK had grown up mostly in the old art colleges, transformed into polytechnics and later into universities, and initially at least many were under less pressure to demonstrate they did research.

So design research in architecture has now been redefined as largely what architectural academics do. This book is presented as an overview to a whole series mostly written by members of the Bartlett School at University College, London. In fact the arguments about whether one can do research by designing are just as valid in the other design fields but readers will find this book is almost exclusively about architecture.

It is worth taking a step or two back to frame the argument as we might more normally find it in the pages of this journal. When the Design Research Society came into being back in 1966 it was founded for ‘the study of and research into the process of designing’. We have come a long way since then and the level of understanding of this most fascinating of human abilities, enabling us to imagine and engineer new worlds, is now infinitely richer than it was in the days of the pioneers. Much of the work of the sixties is now easily lampooned as having too limited a focus. Often good research proceeds first by narrowing down before relaxing on the luxury of a broader canvas. Anyone who has supervised a doctoral student will be all too familiar with this process.

Today there are, thankfully, many ways of seeing design. This journal allows us to contrast and compare and very often to find out we are saying similar things with different words, indeed sometimes with the different dialects that our respective design or research fields spawn. There are



now many widely shared fundamental features of designing often expressed in these pages. Among them are a couple I have often discussed and which are relevant to the argument here. We now view design as a process that is often solution-focussed and one in which problems and solutions emerge together. One of the most commonly used ideas here is that first proposed by Jane Darke when she was preparing her doctorate under my supervision. She brilliantly summed up a phenomenon with the term 'primary generator' (Darke, 1978). For those readers not familiar with her work, Jane showed that the architects she studied when designing large-scale public housing schemes often proposed some design form very early in the process. They explored this by designing and, through the discovered failures or successes of their ideas, not only began to change their design but also to understand more about the problems they addressed.

Some years later Nigel Cross and I became concerned that so much of our empirical work used students as subjects. We were fortunate by then to be in a position to study a number of outstanding designers. To this day my computer is littered with folders of material under the unfortunate heading of SODs (Studying Outstanding Designers) (Cross & Lawson, 2005). The designers from several fields that we studied showed many differences in their process but also many common features. One of the most striking of the latter was the way world-renowned architects had a programme of on-going work that transcended the individual design projects (Lawson, 1994). The content of these programmes varied enormously. For Santiago Calatrava it was a series of issues about structural form. For Herman Hertzberger it was a people-centred agenda with a focus on how users could take possession of space. For Bob Venturi it was much more about form and style. For Ken Yeang it was about how to build sustainably in tropical climates. I was lucky enough to

persuade Ken to act as a visiting professor at Sheffield and it was noticeable how each year his programme had moved forward. Every visiting lecture showed more understanding, became more specific and raised new problems to work on. One could really only describe these as research programmes, and they were largely developed through the act of designing. In fact Ken's lectures were exactly the kind of research-led teaching that the university sees as its mission to deliver. It is just that someone who would describe himself as a practitioner delivered this lecture.

I called these programmes 'guiding principles' and observed how often in individual design projects the 'primary generators' these architects used had grown out of their 'guiding principles'. In short we can see a two-way interaction here. The guiding principles help to frame the primary generators and the feedback from the project further informs the guiding principles. This could be called research through design. There is by now surely no argument that such a phenomenon exists. It is perhaps particularly prevalent in the work of well-known designers who are more often able to attract clients who are sympathetic to their programme. Many such designers, especially architects, also write about their work in a way that looks more like conventional research publishing.

Many of the chapters in this book plough this furrow in all but name. We are familiar with such a format that runs along these lines. 'This is what I am interested in and here are some pieces of architecture that can be seen as exploring those ideas.' While this is interesting in its own right the book lacks the sort of structure and organisation of themes that one might expect from 'an overview'. In truth the post-modern and post-critical world inhabited by much of the writing here suggests that the authors might see a lack of structure as inherently desirable. Certainly the editor explicitly takes such a position in his

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/261521>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/261521>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)