

Adapting research activity

AHRC review of practice-led research

Town meetings

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In 2005 the Arts and Humanities Research Council initiated a review of practice-led research in art, design and architecture. The purpose of the review was to develop a 'comprehensive map of recent and current research activity in the area'. What quickly became obvious to the team that won the bid to run the review (led by the three authors) was that to map activity one first had to attempt to define it. The term 'practice-led research' means many different things to different people and so immediately raises debate. The positions range from those who believe that the act of making or designing alone constitutes research, to those who believe that research (as analytical activity) is incommensurable with design (as synthetic activity). For the former, the knowledge contained within the artefact is self-evident and beyond the need for additional explication; for the latter, knowledge resides outside the artefact and in the realm of its dissemination and interpretation. The importance of the AHRC review is not that it will settle these arguments, but that it will provide a much firmer context in which to place them.

These debates about the status and definition of practice-led research have in recent years raged in the architectural community, as has been well documented in the pages of *arq*. What became immediately apparent at the two 'town meetings' hosted in February 2006 was that the issues are by no means particular to architecture, but are shared across all fields that attempt to relate practice to research. In a series of breakout sessions, people from across all disciplines were invited to 'park'

ideas. Various common themes began to emerge across the session; some were directly related to issues of funding and the growth of PhD numbers in the field, but of most interest were those that addressed the core intellectual issues.

First of these was the relationship of research to practice, and more particularly the question as to how might practice-led research advance the knowledge used by, and held within, practice? In the fields of art, design and architecture it may be argued that knowledge often resides outside the processes of practice (through the interpretation of critics and other non-practitioners) or else is completely internalised to those processes because the practitioners are loath to communicate the knowledge base and methodology by which their processes are developed. The sense of these meetings was that practice-led research has an important role in overcoming this schism because of the inherent need for research to make transparent its method and explain its outcomes.

The second common theme was related to the first, namely that there is a difference between an academic and a practice setting. It is a difference that is too often denied, leading to the myth that building a building/painting a painting/designing a design is an act of research in its own right. There has been a tacit understanding among some academics/practitioners that just doing stuff is enough, an attitude that led to much of the confusion in the last RAE. What the AHRC, as

both primary research funder in our fields and now instigator of this review, makes clear is that practice must be described within a defined context if it is to be taken seriously as research. It is the question as to quite what this context might be that raised the temperature in the breakout sessions. There was a strong argument that much practice-led research is inherently risky, in so much as its outcomes may not (or cannot) be strictly defined, and that it often uses iterative rather than linear procedures. The notions of risk and iterative design do not always sit comfortably within normative research contexts, and there was a feeling that sometimes practice-led research was being corralled into a definition that may not fit it.

This leads to a third discussion raised at the meetings, namely that practice-led research is so different from other forms of research that it should not be policed by normal definitions. This is an approach that has done architecture no favours over the past thirty years, allowing a certain laziness to creep into some architectural research as it asserts its right to be different while eschewing normal (and we would say reasonable) expectations of research. What is clear is that practice-led research uses methods and has outputs that do not always match standard research types, but this does not mean that it can ignore a basic responsibility to explain, reflect on and disseminate those methods and outputs.

Finally, the meetings threw up multiple approaches to practice-

led research. Again, what was apparent is that approaches being developed in architecture are also being shared in the other fields. The review team is attempting to map these approaches against a series of pairs in order to gauge the range of practice-led research activity. The pairs are not meant to be seen as oppositional or dialectic, but as positing a band on which to set the research. Thus:

Analytical	Generative
Output is artefact	Output is process
Secure	Risky
Practice is central to the investigation	Practice supports the investigation
Investigation of the discipline	Investigation of something outside discipline
Practice is a site for reflection	Practice is a means of production
Linear	Iterative
Descriptive	Synthesising
Predictable outcomes	Open (contingent?) outcomes
Discrete body of theory/method	Wide range of theory/method

Our aim is not to make value judgements as to at which ends of the spectra 'good' research should be measured, but to suggest a set of definitions through which we might understand and so map the variety of practice-led research. Over the coming months we will be inviting people from across all three fields to submit case studies of their practice-led research in order that we can build up a picture of the activity. The sense from the two town meetings is that architects are somewhat more detached than are artists and designers in addressing the core issues of practice-led research. This is now therefore the opportunity to engage with a debate that is crucial not just for academics but to the very advancement of our disciplines through research-led knowledge.

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