Architecture Culture and the Question of Knowledge: Doctoral Research Today

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Over the past ten to 15 years most advanced education programmes within Schools of Architecture have been questioning the parameters and requirements of doctoral research both in terms of content and form. This issue of *Footprint* was motivated by the question of where the field stands today. The criteria for submission included not only PhD candidates currently involved in dissertation writing, but was also open to individuals who had recently completed dissertations and been awarded their PhD. Of course, the submissions received were highly diverse in terms of content, or perhaps more accurately we might say, in terms of the problematic the various researchers posed. Nevertheless, we believe that the papers herein do provide an informative, if partial, view of the state of doctoral research in architecture today; at least, that is, within the geographic regions and educational dispositions indicated by the affiliations of the contributions both submitted and those accepted.

It is arguable that in recent years there has been an increasing professionalization of research in architecture. Additionally, there has also been an increase in the questions put to the discipline as a whole: What kind of research constitutes 'proper' research in architecture and urban disciplines; and is such work to be situated within the domains and criteria of natural sciences, humanities, history, philosophy or the social sciences?[1] Alternatively, how can architecture research contribute to transdisciplinary practices, so important in the current state of sociocultural, political and economic complexity? Should architecture retreat from the academy to maintain its freedom of practice, should it reflect on practice-bound disciplines such as medicine and law, or instead remain allied to the art schools? Should it hope that by being positioned in the technical schools and the traditions of engineering – common in European Schools of Architecture – it will gain the scientific credibility that seems to be currently desired?

Moreover, there are shifts in the institutional landscape at large. For instance, in the Netherlands, the Dutch scientific council has now grouped architecture into the so-called 'creative industries', along with computer programming and gaming, fashion, and graphic design.[2] What this will mean in the coming years for funding proposals remains to be seen. Furthermore, there is an ongoing economic crisis that has unparalleled effects in the building industry, causing the closure of firms and people to step out of this particular 'creative industry'. Consequently, there has been an increase in the numbers of individuals seeking advanced degrees coupled with a decrease in funding possibilities with which to support the monetary requirements of extended educational programmes, not to mention the funds needed to provide for paid research positions as well.

All this together does raise the question: What is the goal, and the *raison d'etre* of doctoral research in architecture today? Should research remain sealed tight in the academy, disregarding issues of prac-

tice? Or, alternatively, should it engage with these professional battlefields, taking the position of what Michel Foucault has referred to as the 'universal (or public) intellectual' against that of the 'specific intellectual'?[3] In architecture theory the debate around 'critical' versus 'projective' practice – initiated as it was around the turn of the millennium and accompanying the manifold speculations at that time that we were entering an era decried as the 'end of theory' (an erroneous claim much like the previous provocations in the 1960s regarding the 'end of philosophy') – has yet to be resolved in any convincing manner.[4] At least not in a manner that can adequately respond to the debate in which it was lodged – that is the relation, or lack thereof, between theories in and practices of architecture.

With such questions in mind, we have elected to include a paper provided by Andrew Leach that we believe provides an overview of the general state of contemporary architecture research. Leach makes an appeal to refrain from making all research operational. At a time when the application of research and its economic value seem to form the primary criteria for judging value, this appeal should not be taken lightly.

Following Leach's initial inventory, we have selected a spectrum of contributions that range within the poles of intellectual autonomy and applied operationality. However, it is worth noting that within this overarching trajectory there is a striking cluster of literature-oriented research. Whereas in the traditional studies the writing itself fades into the background, being utilized as a medium for conveying specific ideas about the object of research, there is a cluster of papers that focuses precisely on this medium in order to gain alternative insights on architecture.[5] From Klaske Havik, who positions architecture as an activity of bridging various types of inquiry and literature as a mode of exploring this essential quality, to Sotirios Varsamis, who explores the peculiar phenomenon of the palin-

drome as an exemplar of spatial qualities of writing, to the fictocriticism of the research group led by Hélène Frichot, these essays all take a look at the very issue of putting things into words that are made (and apprehended) in other registers, from drawing to building to film. While the substantial number of papers in this issue that explore literary methods and metaphors in order to seek out new insights in architecture may seem disproportionate; it might also indicate that this is a prominent tendency in current research. Perhaps that should not surprise us, given the insights of Adrian Forty on the slippage between linguistic and visual understanding so precisely deconstructed in his book *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*. This area of research has become a field in its own right, departing from the more poetic gestures of fictional presentation in the 1980s to move towards a combination of analysis and creative tool in architectural design. However, while the literary researches appear to dominate in this issue, we have maintained our intuition that something is yet to be said through the media and within the domain of the visual and the spatial: an appeal for non-discursive practices that do not rely on representational analysis (transcendental or symbolic). The contribution by Andrej Radman can be seen as a clear example of this latter position. Perhaps this is a challenge yet to be met, but certainly a number of articles in this issue are suggestive of the specificity of architecture research as a full-fledged science of the artificial (to borrow Herbert Simon's phrase).

While the PhD itself is a long and lonely trajectory, most are driven by a belief in the general value of what they are doing. In many cases there is indeed an appeal to the importance in light of contemporary developments (appeals to the sheer accumulation of knowledge have, perhaps ironically, diminished as more knowledge becomes available through digital technologies). With this in mind, we close the issue with an article by Willem de Bruijn that is a personal

engagement with the very process of writing a PhD. It takes the reader along a path of wonderment and frustration, all the while positioning the efforts of research in the magical world of personal discipline and discovery. There may be public benefit at the end of this path, but it is subjugated to the pure experience of learning, exploration, intuitive leaps and unexpected discoveries. This article offers a counterpoint to Leach's appeal at the beginning of the issue to remember the value of non-instrumental knowledge. This type of value is not to be quantified, nor can it be directly applied. But altogether, it does contribute to that very human sense of accomplishment, and the pride that we, as a human race, take in constructing edifices – material or intellectual – that are larger than life, and indeed outlast our individual lives.

As a whole, this issue thus offers a perhaps somewhat idiosyncratic selection of research topics in the general domain of architecture and urbanism, yet the various papers share certain approaches or interests that point in a direction of the multiplicity of design thinking. They show lines that correlate with new directions in architecture, from the sustainability issue to the solid focus on design objects, exploring techniques and buildings, appealing to ideas. The constant interweaving, in many of the contributions, of literary, visual and material references requires the reader to engage on multiple levels of reception.

What does remain apparent in this state of the field is the continuing lack of shared vocabulary, or an agreement on what may be regarded as pressing issues. Furthermore, much of this research, however interesting it may be, seems to have difficulty identifying its key sources. The historical research finds its *raison d'etre* in uncovering new historic insights; the critical approach continues along the lines of uncovering existing habits and unseen tendencies; while other research approaches contribute to defining knowledge as yet undiscovered. Individually, each research is easily legitimated by virtue of the search

for knowledge, or uncovering new approaches. Yet, while various papers do identify problems of the unique qualities of architecture, there is not yet the evident bridge to immediate, pressing questions raised by the current state of affairs affecting our societies (whether globally or locally conceived). Thus, the impatience one might have with a collection such as this may well lay in the inadequacy of both the questions posed and the answers provided within this cross section of contributions.

If architecture and the design fields can indeed lay claim to a unique form of academic knowledge, they continue to find it difficult to identify and describe this specificity in terms of either vocabulary or approaches. Academia has for some time now been interested in so-called 'research by design' but has not yet succeeded in constructing a broadly shared discourse.[6] There is a remaining tension inherent in this field, construed not only by the academic habitus of its theoretical proponents, but also by the historical, the practical and perhaps even the merely dilettantish. It is our contention that there is indeed something to be explored in the modes of knowledge specific to architecture, whether that concerns an openly political agenda or the more restrained spatial dimensions of the public piazza, a directly applicable research question on structural shear, or rather a meta-theoretical study of the discourse. As such, we see this issue of *Footprint* as setting an agenda to look forward more than back, to offer possibilities for future research, and more than anything, to show which gaps remain in our hope to understand the field as a steadily maturing domain of disciplinary and tacit knowledge, configured both by the state of the art and current scientific insights, and the continuing practices of its collective of practitioners, critics, public and academics.

Notes

1. Jane Rendell, 'Architectural Research and Disciplinarity', *ARQ*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2004), pp. 141-47; Jean Louis Cohen, 'The Emergence of Architectural Research in France', *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 40, no. 2, Jubilee Issue (winter 1987), pp. 10-11; Barend van der Meulen, Floortje Daemen, Leonie van Drooge, Stefan de Jong, Jack Spaapen, Frank Wamelink and Peter van den Besselaar, *Pilot Study at the Faculty of Architecture TU Delft, Final Report – confidential.* Project 'Evaluating Research in Context' (The Hague, Rathenau Institute, 2010), online at <http://repository.tudelft.nl/view/ir/uuid%3Af0a713f1-1564-4b79-be66-4f5299ebba2c/> [accessed 17 December 2012], pp.19-24.

2. Report on the Creative Industry, available online in Dutch at: <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/ondernemersklimaat-en-innovatie/documenten-en-publicaties/rapporten/2011/06/17/creatieve-industrie-in-topvorm.html> [accessed 17 December 2012]

3. Michel Foucault, 'Truth And Power', in Gordon, Colin, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977: Michel Foucault* (Sussex: The Harvester Press / Essex: Longman edition, 1980), pp. 109-33.

4. For issues on the 'critical' and 'projective', see also Lara Schrijver, 'Whatever Happened to Projective Architecture? Rethinking the Expertise of the Architect', *Footprint* 4 (spring 2009), pp.123-27.

5. Christof Thoenes makes note of the early ties between architecture and literature in the introduction to: Bernd Evers and Christof Thoenes, *Architectural Theory: From the Renaissance to the Present* (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), pp. 8-9.

6. There have been numerous events on 'research by design' over the past 20 years. Two such conferences are the recent 'Theory by Design' in Antwerp <www.theorybydesign.eu> of October 2012, and the forthcoming 'Knowing (by) Designing' in Brussels, May 2013 <www.bydesigning.net>. In addition, David Salomon makes note of the increasing importance of the research studio in his article 'Experimental Cultures: On the ''End'' of the Design Thesis and the Rise of the Research Studio', *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 65, no. 1 (winter 2012), pp. 33-44.