

Valuing design and interdisciplinary research

Who feels the impact?

Letters published below continue discussions from the last two issues of *arq* about mechanisms for measuring the quality of research in universities, notably the UK's impending 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF) which revises the criteria of previous 'Research Assessment Exercises' (RAE).

REF: opportunities and questions

'I agree with Murray' (Fraser) who says that research in UK architecture schools is flourishing (*arq* 14.1, pp. 8–9). There is a genuine research culture developing across all staff and not just the usual subject specialists, such as historians, design theorists and technologists, with an increase in research based around the design process. Staff that previously would have mainly been teaching in studio are now becoming research active. This has brought more people into research, bringing with it tensions in allocating sufficient time to teaching and research. Architecture is an intensive teaching course but this has probably increased the status of the discipline in universities. Not only can it bring in large numbers of good students but they can also now 'tick the research box'. For example, at Cardiff, architecture consistently attracts highest entry qualified students in university, high levels of research income and strong engagement with government and industry.

No doubt this change in research culture, as it might be regarded, has been in response to the RAE. If RAE 2008 saw the arrival of architecture as an accepted research-based discipline, this happy event was probably conceived following RAE 2002 and what appeared to be a level of complacency in the returns of some schools. This was, in

particular, coupled with some confusion over what constituted a scholarly 'design based' output. As a result a number of schools were made to feel extremely uncomfortable within their institutions.

The general rise in status of architecture in RAE 2008 was accompanied by the discipline topping the league in its sub-panel, a position previously occupied by construction management. RAE 2008 also saw an increase in architecture panel members, from about 33% in RAE 2002 to 60% in RAE 2008. So was this increase in performance related to more architects on the panel, a higher quality of return, or a panel better able to recognise the quality of the return? I suspect in reality that it was a combination of all three, which is no bad thing – the fact that the subject area has the 'clout' to push itself to the front is a measure of its strength.

So, in 2008, architecture was finally punching its weight in a research world where the built environment was becoming increasingly of interest, with topics such as sustainability, zero carbon buildings and quality of life being very much in the public eye, although these more interdisciplinary subjects did not seem to do particularly well in the assessment exercise. In my view, there was a general lack of attention to interdisciplinary research and still some confusion over design research outputs, as well as how to deal with early career researchers and with the growing number of disparate subjects returned to the panel. As we prepare for the forthcoming REF and try to understand how it might be different, we should not lose sight of some of these more generic

issues which have caused uncertainty in the past, and will continue to challenge us in future.

This time architecture will likely be assessed as part of a larger sub-panel. With the number of panels being reduced from sixty-seven to maybe about thirty, architecture will share a sub-panel with planning, similar in subject but maybe very different in culture. Some schools will be bundled into a joint return with planning as the new sub-panels will not expect separate submissions from an institution to the same panel. Returns have, in the past, been shared with other related disciplines, for example, construction management and built environment related engineering subjects. In some cases it has been these specialist subjects that have dominated the metrics, especially relating to funding and Ph.D.s, and this is why schools of architecture have extended research into such subjects as building science (which goes back to the 1970s, when architecture was first confronted with the need to do funded research) and now sustainability.

Most of these more specialist subjects have been satisfactorily dealt with by the Built Environment (and more recently, the Architecture and Built Environment) sub-panel. However some of the more fringe subjects have previously needed cross-referral or outside specialist advice. The dominance of architects on the RAE 2008 panel did perhaps stretch its capacity to deal with these other subjects. This dual system of assessing outputs, either considered directly by the panel or through external means, brings with it potential problems, not least of moderation, which is

difficult enough across the subjects within the panels scope of expertise. With the forthcoming REF there will probably be fewer panel members per subject and external advisors will likely play a greater role. Some of the less built environment related subjects that find their way to sub-panel could be encouraged to submit elsewhere. Fire engineering springs to mind, which although relevant in application to buildings has little research overlap.

There has been much discussion in recent years concerning 'design research' and how it should be returned and subsequently assessed. In my view the criticism that design research was not taken seriously in the past (RAE 2002) was a reflection on the quality of the return and not the panel. Where there was quality this was recognised. However, in general design research is not always presented in a rigorous and scholarly way. There were significant improvements in RAE 2008 but I believe that there is still a need to clarify how it should be returned, especially as the REF sub-panel may be less architect friendly. Perhaps those who might represent this aspect of the subject area (for example, Schosa and the RIBA research committee) need to provide some guidance relating to 'design research' outputs.

There is much talk about recognising interdisciplinary research. This should favour architecture which, by its nature, is a multi-disciplinary subject. However this was not so apparent in the deliberations of the panel at the last RAE. Perhaps there should be more focus on how interdisciplinary research should be assessed in a way that gives it greater impact than in the previous RAE? As we are told, 'impact' is likely to be central to the REF. This should also be to architecture's advantage, as much of its research is end-user focused. At the moment it looks like a maximum of one impact 'case study' will be required for every five persons returned. But, as is the case with 'design research', clarification is needed about what impact is. For example, is a building a piece of design research or is it 'an impact' and if so what research has led to this impact? There is also some confusion over how 'impact' differs from 'engagement' in the Research Environment section of the return.

Another area that, in my view, has not been dealt with properly is the so-called early career researcher. These scholars are an important dimension of any



research group and need to be assessed in an appropriate way. It is important for their career development that they are returned, although some schools may regard them as 'tail end' and a liability, converting them to 'teaching only' staff, or playing some other game. In fact, their returns are not necessarily of lower quality than more experienced staff returned and in some way this makes their assessment more difficult. Allowing them a reduced number of returns is part, but perhaps not all, of the solution. Maybe there is a need to assess them separately within the return, and to positively encourage their return as part of evidence that the school has a sustainable research strategy.

My feeling is that architecture might have a more difficult time at this REF than in previous RAEs and where we should be building on the success of previous exercises and tackling some of these less resolved issues, we might be deflected into trying to foresee the changes in the

system and trying to understand its new semantics. On the other hand, maybe we should assume that there will be no big changes in the long run, because in the past things have remained more or less the same, despite early predictions of significant change. Research in schools of architecture is, for the most part, still relatively youthful and often has to respond quickly to current issues, so we have to be careful to develop it the way it needs to be developed rather than try to shape it to the ever-changing treadmill of assessments. Therefore we should probably carry on with our research as we see fit and, if the assessment system is a good one, it will recognise what we have done.

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Grey areas

I take the point made by Sebastian Macmillan in his perspective piece 'Architectural Research and its Enemies' (*arq* 14.1, pp.11–16) that it serves architectural academics, researchers and practitioners no good purpose to assert how different and special architecture is, as if the discipline of architecture should be treated differently in relation to research assessment. As a further indication of how un-different we are it is worth noting that the same claim to difference is often made from within other disciplines. Much of the discussion focuses on funding models, and the apparent lack of recognition by funders and institutions of the need to adequately support our various disciplines. Senior academic managers who represent those disciplines are cautious about claims for special treatment, especially in these times of stringency, fearing that if a discipline is so different, and so expensive, then it will be told that the university cannot afford to keep it.

Disciplines have to understand each other better. The format of the impending REF is forcing attention on increased understanding, as departments re-align themselves ready to present their case in 2013 (or whenever it will be). For example, in the 2008 RAE, Architecture and Built Environment disciplines were assessed independently from Town Planning, which was assessed by a different sub-panel. In the REF a single panel will probably inspect both. Any institution that covers these areas will already be thinking about whether to combine submissions, and even genuinely to pool resources and to work together on research projects leading up to the REF. Art and Design might think of combining with History of Art and Architecture for similar reasons. Drama and Music face similar choices. The creative arts are not the only ones moving towards new marriages. Theology and Philosophy face similar choices. A positive outcome of strategising for the REF is the need to think about pooling research activity and resources between disciplines and across institutions. The REF will also involve a closer inspection of how disciplines treat the auditing of creative outputs as research.

The issue of outputs other than texts to which Sebastian alludes is not unique to architecture, but is a hot issue in art and design, media

studies, music and performance, any of which may intersect with other disciplines in the humanities, and those outside. In fact the research funding councils have been encouraging such explorations, and the generation of outputs that are often most readily associated with the new research term, 'impact'. The recent HEFCE report on the REF consultation introduces a new confluence of terms, identifying the eligibility of "grey literature" and practice-based outputs' for inclusion in portfolios of evidence for assessment of research quality. 'Grey literature' here refers to working documents, pre-prints and other written material not generally available through publication outlets. In the age of the internet, the rules for what counts as research output are ever changing.

The funding councils emphasise diverse modes of research output, collaborations, cross-disciplinarity, and in harsher economic times there will have to be some banding together anyway. Hopefully the de-Balkanisation will be good for architecture, for research, and those for whom architectural research will be of consequence. The REF represents a call to unity, or at least new alliances, and new configurations.

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Errata

Errors in *arq* 13.3+4 have been brought to the editors' attention, for which we wish to apologise. In 'Admirably Perverse: Tectonic Expression and the Puzzles of Galerie Goetz' by Peter Blundell Jones, the caption to figure 7 (a model of the building) should have credited Harvard University Students, as is the case in the acknowledgements, rather than Herzog and de Meuron. In the 'The Tectonically Defining Space of Mies van der Rohe' (not 'The Tectonically Extroverted Space of Mies van de Rohe' as incorrectly listed on the contents page) by Ransoo Kim, figures 2 and 9 should have shown the images printed here, rather than those originally published, and the acknowledgement for figures 1, 2, 4, 6, 7 & 8 should have been to The Museum of Modern Art/Scala, rather than to The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

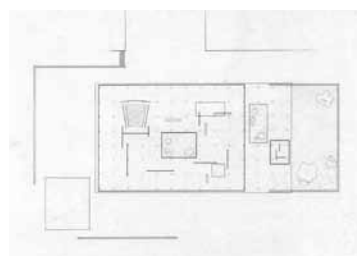


Figure 2: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Museum for a Small City (project), 1942–43. Plan. Pencil on illustration board, 30 x 40"



Figure 9: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Farnsworth House, Illinois, 1945–50. View of transparent interior space

We regret any confusion these errors may have caused.

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