

leader

Design is research: is it?

Romance is in the air. The debonair Edwardian ideal, the architect as scholar-gypsy, has come out as the 'reflective' or 'critical' practitioner, just as the architect as revolutionary has reappeared in our schools, claiming design's main role is to challenge assumptions, break moulds and generally 'confront issues' more global than the particularities of brief or site. Both trends explain the desire that design be accorded the dignity of 'research' – a formerly dull sound-sounding activity whose defining characteristics – innovation and publicity – have recently grown in esteem.

Esteem means much. Significantly, some of this issue's contributors use terms like 'respectable' and 'highly legitimate' to describe the kind of research they support. But at least in British universities, as our last issue made clear, a good 'research assessment' by the British Higher Education Funding Councils means not just esteem but points, and points mean prizes. Or rather, a department awarded a poor research assessment finds itself in the moral and financial dog-house, with its university's income – and the pariah department's – suffering severely.

This explains the urgency with which David Yeomans in our last issue proposed that design itself be classifiable as research. In this issue, he has been joined by Michael Brawne and Eric Parry, and by some (though by no means all) correspondents on this topic. These writers refer to different sets of designers – full-time architects, practising teachers, unit students – and use different arguments. But they all go beyond simply research-in-practice or research-through-design, in order to support the idea of design-as-research.

To test the market for this idea, one might speculate whether, if the design process is defined as the research process, the design product (the building or images of it) might logically be taken, by itself, as a sufficient product of that research. But would a design submission, entirely drawn and unaccompanied by text, be awarded a research degree in architecture? Or, closer to home, would *arq's* editor and referees accept it for publication? Probably not. Yet the form and presence of the Centre Pompidou, to take an obvious instance, fluently communicates a wealth of innovative and *tacit* knowledge about not only flexible compartmentation

and fire protection but, more important, about how we might reshape our view of culture, technology, urbanity and the State. Attempts to convey these messages in words risk reductivism and bathos.

Can the forthcoming (1996) research assessments entertain a more liberal view of research such as those proposed by our contributors? Possibly. A general guideline, issued last June, defined research so as to include 'the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances and artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights'.

The Art and Design panel repeated this phrase when the discipline-specific assessment briefs were issued last month, and undertook 'to read *and view*' [our italics] the submitted evidence. The Built Environment and Planning panel, which assesses architecture schools, did not repeat the inclusive definition, but clearly concentrated on written documentation, undertaking simply 'to read' the cited works. It did, however, permit the submission of 'design' (which it grimly classifies as 'industrial output') provided it has attracted documented peer approval in the form of public exhibitions and so on.

Seen from outside, of course, the debate on the research credentials of design seems as outdated, snobbish and fruitless as that over the boundaries of 'legitimate' theatre. The world does not stop changing while we trade definitions, but the need to keep abreast is constant. We should not reject models of making and sharing knowledge just because they seem, in the natural sciences say, to lack 'respectability' or 'legitimacy'. Let the goal posts shift. After all, this isn't a game.

Philip Tabor

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