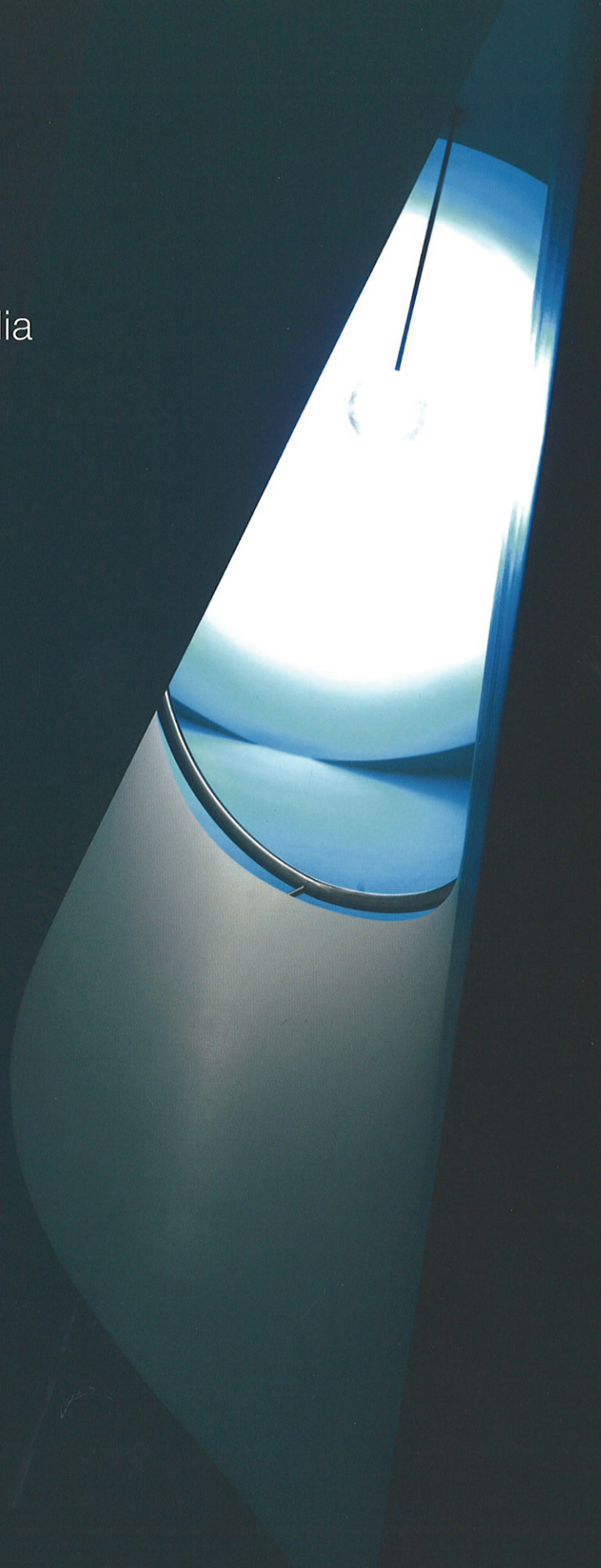


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NEW TRICKS: THE PRODUCTIVE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE

text

Richard Blythe

If university research in architecture were relevant the world's leading practitioners would be conspicuously engaged.

If research degrees offered by universities inducted research students into cultures of extending the body of knowledge, world-leading practitioners – those practitioners recognised by their peers as shifting the boundaries of their discipline – would have PhDs, and staff career paths would be significantly limited without one.

If governments and universities adequately recognised architecture research – work that is peer reviewed, systematic, contextualised and communicable, and that builds knowledge – staff profiles, across a spectrum from early career to senior leadership, would include a significant proportion of architects whose work was recognised through publication in professional journals, awards, exhibition and by other forms of peer review.

Australia doesn't have a relevant and robust PhD system for architecture because, on the one hand, the PhD system has been understood as a pathway for training academics, not architects, and on the other, systems for recognising research quality in architecture are inadequate. These two factors explain why the processes and methods of recognising research output for many PhDs are irrelevant for large sections of the discipline, including those innovative practices that produce discipline-changing works.

In my view, a traditional arts-based PhD involving the production of a written thesis that does not include designing as part of the process is an irrelevant model if you are interested in a design career, or indeed in design disciplines. Equally, science-based methods and processes


are not helpful for design research. This is because design belongs to the class of wicked problems in that it is indefinable, endless, not black and white, unique, non-repeatable, and lacks alternative sets of given solutions. What I am proposing is that we look very carefully at the processes and methods that our discipline already employs to develop, review and disseminate design work in the ongoing process of its growth. Many of these processes are longstanding and robust, but they require an explanation and articulation from which we can develop design research approaches at universities that are integral to the way the discipline operates, but which are recognised and understood by governments and our peers in other disciplines. In order to achieve these things it is imperative that the profession takes an expansive view.

At the 11 July Archivision symposium one head of school suggested that the scope of the profession is "this wide" (hands placed in small fish position), while that of the discipline is "this wide" (we're now seeing arms spread to indicate record breaking bluefin). The implication of this fishy and somewhat myopic comparison is that the profession is inward-looking, dealing specifically with issues related to the commercial practice of architecture and disinterested in the role the discipline plays in a wider cultural context. This view would align also with comments made by distinguished Australian vice-chancellor Professor John Hay about professions generally, which he described as narrowly focused, self-serving cabals. But while the profession does show a great deal of interest in technical, legal, commercial and managerial

issues, as well it should, it is worth considering for a moment the scope of activities that it also promotes through various bodies, in particular the Australian Institute of Architects. Even a cursory survey of Institute activities tells a rather different story about scope. The last three national conferences for example, each one different from the last, created forums for Australian architects (academic and practitioner) and students to present work and discuss architecture with a range of international peers, some of them very well-known, others with emerging careers.

Practitioners, innovative ones at least, engage in regular exchange intended to increase collective capacity, build knowledge and increase their own knowing (that's why universities use them as sessional teachers to develop content for and deliver key studio courses). Although I have met some architects I would not describe as gifted, I'm not sure I could say that I've met a single architect whose sole interest lies within the 'small fish' definition of 'profession'. There is a difference between the many architects who have an interest in the spectrum of the discipline, learning through participation in events as part of an ongoing professional development process, and those architects that are skilled exponents generating the content of those events. It is this second group of practitioners, those who generate new knowledge, that makes a substantial contribution to the development of both the profession and the discipline. Much of what these practitioners produce is design research, a research method that regrettably remains ill-defined and under-recognised.

The impact of the failure to develop adequate descriptions of architecture research has resulted



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in subtle but influential outcomes in the structure and operation of schools of architecture, and not just in Australia. Two tales were told at Archivision 08 that described how the absence of a PhD in the qualifications of practitioners who had produced substantial research outcomes (esteemed books and design awards) led to their eligibility for an advertised position within a university being questioned. One was deemed ineligible for a level B position despite the support of their academic colleges and a CV that included work published in professional journals and awarded by peers. Some universities act in ways that are more enlightened in this regard and apply the rule of equivalency rather than qualification. This has resulted in a number of positive appointments in Australian schools, usually at the professorial level. Professor Ian McDougall's appointment at the University of Adelaide and Professor Tom Heneghan's appointment at the University of Sydney are just two examples among a number.

These exceptions, however, in no way resolve the issue. The problem is that recognition of research output works at many levels within the higher education context including, for example, promotion criteria and in the assessment of staff performance. At my own school at RMIT I was presented with figures showing many staff as research inactive. Once those same people were reassessed using the then Research Quality Framework that had been influenced by the lobbying of a number of key groups (including the Association of Architecture Schools of Australasia and the Australian Institute of Architects) the performance of the group was

shown to be markedly higher because they included outcomes like awards, professional journal articles, competitions and exhibitions. These kinds of assessments determine the career paths and career opportunities of academics. They also determine university funding. Given the lack of recognition of these kinds of research outputs, it's little wonder that it is difficult to integrate practice and academia in a single career path.

I am not arguing here for an exclusion rule to apply to qualifications in architectural appointments. It is a problem that relevant PhD qualifications are rare. It is a problem that it is difficult to identify PhD structures that are relevant and attractive to our best and emergent practitioners. Unfortunately, that leads to pressure within universities to appoint those with qualifications that, while they may meet university expectations, may not be in the long-term best interests of the discipline. There are excellent architecture historians and theoreticians, and also those skilled in various areas of technology with PhD qualifications. These people make a substantial and highly valued contribution to the discipline. There is a gap, however, and we should be aiming to close it by describing in robust ways how research works in our discipline, by creating PhD programs and ongoing research projects that engage those in the profession who are discipline innovators.

It is difficult for an academic to work on design projects if they are not then counted toward research performance even if they end up exhibited, awarded and published alongside peer reviews in professional journals. The outcome is

career paths that don't encourage academics to get involved with actually designing things. Some universities have made clever strategic use of unpaid adjunct appointments to help guide and market schools. This is one way to bring intellectual capital back into universities, but one that is in the end limited. New models are emerging both within universities and within practice. Gehry Technologies, Fosters and Ove Arup are examples of large practices that have filled the gap by creating their own internal research groups. The future will probably see more of these kinds of industry-based research clusters and I hope it will see also universities creating environments that are equally generative. The most exciting option I believe is in a hybrid version, collaborations between innovative practice and the academy. But to achieve that we must first put in place methods and structures that have relevance in both contexts.

It is difficult to achieve these discipline-relevant outcomes within the higher education structures that have predominated both here in Australia and overseas during the past few decades. Difficult also within a discipline context that has not articulated its research methods well. The federal government's new Excellence in Research for Australia agenda promises much to assist in addressing these shortcomings and at least provides a window for further articulation and communication.

Why should the profession be interested in research? Research is the process of developing and communicating new knowledge. It is future oriented. If we as a profession are not interested in the future, then I'm with vice-chancellor John Hay. **ar**