

CLOSING FRAGMENTS

About practice and knowledge

In *The Matrix*, the movie of the Wachowski brothers, Neo exclaims «I know Kung Fu!» after the cerebral loading of the martial art. Kung Fu (Gong Fu in Mandarin), refers to any kind of practice, from writing to martial arts, and from carpentry to painting. The practice of architecture can be seen as Gong Fu.

Following Neo's exclamation, the ship's captain Morpheus proposes: «Show me». In the consequent practice fight in a virtual dojo, it becomes clear that theory and practice are not identical. Obviously, they overlap, but practice and theory both have their reserved domains.

Practice contains knowledge which seems not to be reducible to theory. This gap is probably related to the multiple ways in which theory can be put into practice. The modalities of the practice are the space in which its relevance and operability can be revealed.

The closing session of the “Practices in Research” conference of the 22nd of October 2020 was held online on the 17th of November.

After a brief summary of the contributions, the underlying modalities and challenges of practice-led research were debated as they were experienced during the seminar. Eventually, the conversation concluded with reflections towards future seminars and publications.

This text assembles a set of re-edited fragments focusing on epistemological and methodological considerations. These fragments do not necessarily form a linear argument. As happens in a dynamic conversation, the themes bounce forward and back, side tracks are explored and shortcuts are taken, contributing to a vivid debate.

The authors of the fragments are identified as follows:

PL – Pauline Lefebvre (chair session 1) - ULB;
RS – Robin Schaeverbeke (chair session 2) - KU Leuven;
BV – Benoît Vandenbulcke (organizer) - U Liège;
HF – Harold Fallon (organizer) - KU Leuven;
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1.

It is useful to reflect transversely on the initiative and on the contributions. What does this set of proposals mean all together? I was very curious about this and I wanted to discuss it with all of you. These questions are crucial. What is research, what is, in particular, academic research? What is research in architecture? What is architectural research? And maybe, more importantly, how can they relate to each other if they are different things? What is nice about an event like this is that we can reflect on a series of contributions. We have empirical material to work with to address these questions.

(PL)

2.

It is very clear that most presentations were established from the perspective of a professional architect who was discussing a project or several projects he or she or they had designed, themselves or their companies. That was a constant. Some contributions were embedded in an educational setting, which is important to mention. A few participants also came with the hat of a researcher as they were developing a PhD. If their doctoral research was not foreign to what they presented, they were also, just like the other contributors, trying to depict an attitude that architects take when they design.

(PL)

3.

I noted two elements in particular.

First, the presentations were about making design decisions in very different times along the process. There are decisions beforehand when the architects discover a site, during the design itself; there are decisions on the construction site, and also after the construction is completed.

Second, the contributions shared the idea that design is about the very choice of the things that are to be taken into account in the development of a project. They were investigating the intellectual tools, whether conceptual or concrete, but also about the media being used.

(PL)

4.

In most cases what was considered research was an effort to describe the operations by which architects (here the contributors themselves) design, build, situate and document their projects. The line is very thin between what constitutes research on the design process and what is more of an effort to document the project. So what's the difference between documenting the project and doing research on the design process?

That is the question that I'm left with: when is this line crossed? When does a reflection by practitioners on their modus operandi become research?

(PL)

5.

In his discussion* with Bart Decroos, Rolf Hughes highlighted some elements like the fact that it needs to be generalisable and shareable. To my students in a methodology course in the master thesis, I said recently :

”OK, you are in the university, you need to do a master’s thesis, whatever form it takes. It can be really very free. It can be whatever topic and it can actually have a lot of different forms. But if it is to be academic, which a master’s thesis at the university is supposed to be, then the process that leads to the conclusions needs to be explicit and transparent”. Science is the community of knowledge producers and the community needs to be able to understand the results. Also, the researcher’s task is basically to contribute to knowledge, to the mass of knowledge

that there is in the world. A researcher has the responsibility to position her/himself or herself within the field in which he or she wants to intervene.

*conversation between Rolf Hughes and Bart Decroos on the occasion of the presentation of the book Raamwerk In Practice : Lichtervelde Youth Centre on the 22nd of October 2020.

(RS)

6.

The question is what kind of research we are facing here. Actually, I came there with a question that I still don’t have an answer to. I would love to hear you about it.

This question is: “Why would architects – professional architects, I mean – who are doing such a beautiful, useful and important work, which is very specific and has its own tools etc., why would they want or need to do scientific or academic research?”

(PL)

7.

Now, why do architects have to engage in research? There are different answers to that. First, in order to maintain the academic position of practicing architects, they have to do it. It is also about the possibility of maintaining the position of being a practicing architect while engaging in academia. We need architectural faculties with diversity, including practicing architects. Second, practice-based research is an opportunity for the involved practices. This kind of research proposes to re-engage with a practice and to delve deeper into the things one is already working on, to know them better, to make them more performant, to situate them in theory and in practice and to expand or make them more precise. But also to understand

how these things you are doing question the world. Also, it is not about understanding the practice as a given, stable thing, but as an evolving and changing matter. How does a practice change and turn into something new? That is also an aspect of practice-based research. (RS)

8.

You are right to raise the question of the academic value of this kind of work. But often we limit this academic value to scientific academic value.

We need also
to consider
design-based
academic
value.

This value involves different modalities of knowledge. There are scientific methods and there are design-based methods. They coexist. They overlap and are complementary to each other.

(RS)

9.

Let's talk about the academic value of architecture and design. One big problem is that the material we work with is never there. Architecture is out there and we have to find ways to make it present. That is maybe why architectural exhibitions are most of the time complete rubbish. There are photographs and drawings, nobody understands what it is about - but architects. They often fail to reveal what the architecture is about in an effective way. Of course, there are exceptions, but it is a big challenge to find ways to convey architecture and to provide a rigorous and inspiring account. This can be an aspect of the academic value of such research.

(RS)

10.

The cultural relevance of architecture is underestimated today. Looking from an academic point of view to our practices as architects can also contribute to a collective understanding and appreciation of what architects are doing when they are designing and researching.

(RS)

11.

Research engages with “theories of” and “theories for”.

This is something Gerard De Zeeuw and Ranulph Glanville introduced. So, in the first idea, if you present “theories of”, then you present a reflection about something, which can be observed or verified. If you present “theories for”, which in their view design-based research should do, then you present a reflection that you can do something with.

(RS)

12.

Verifiability is a problem in design-based research. Different architects will always propose different alternatives to a single assignment, situation or context. There is no right or wrong answer in design. In this sense, the academic sense of verifiability is something you have to work around or to understand in the light of the nature of design-based research. A way to address this aspect of verifiability or reproducibility, could be the idea of internal value and external value, which is something overlooked sometimes in academics. The internal value of a research project means that it's very valuable to the context you are working in including yourself. The external value is that other people can pick something out of your research and start working

from there. Perhaps that is somehow comparable to the verifiability: the possibility to view the realised research in a new context. You need to acknowledge that you will never reach the same result, because that is the nature of design. However, you can use a method or an attitude or you can refer to precedents or preferences. It is not like a hypothesis theory in which you are able to prove that, for example, mosquitoes are always attracted to warmth or to sugary blood, to give a classical example, and replicate the results of your investigation. However, we can work with the ideas of generalisability, of shareability and of the usability .

(RS)

13.

It is possible to use architectural tools to explore and to make a shareable account of design practices. In my Ph.D. I had a long discussion with my supervisor about the reproducibility of my work. I studied the work of some architects and first I attempted to obtain the documents from their design processes, not only the publicly accessible material. I never received these documents. I could not go to their offices to open their archives to steal their drawings and sketches. So I started re-enacting the design process by myself with fragmentary documents I could find in the accessible publications. Being an architect myself, I could rebuild coherent accounts of a possible *modus operandi*, of what I called also design forces*. You can shed light on a design process, you

can explain these mechanisms to your students or to others or you can reuse them in new contexts. That was the goal of my research. It was first about specific design practices, and it became about how to extract sharable and usable knowledge from them through a design-based methodology. At the end, my supervisor told me: "OK, it is very interesting, but now, you have to go to them and confront your research to verify your hypotheses". Of course, that did not make sense, it was not the question. The question was: can we develop understandings that are usable and sharable, making use of the point of view and tools of a practicing architect and who is doing the research?

* in French a "ressort de projet". "Ressort" refers to the hidden forces that allow action.

(BV)

14.

It was not
that much
about truth
but rather
about opera-
tionality.

It was not that much about “what is it?” but rather “how can we interpret it in order to use it?”, which is also a way of understanding that which is researched.

(HF)

15.

A few weeks ago, I had a talk with a colleague. He said that he was doing research in his office, that his practice is research. However, to my opinion there is a differ-

ence between doing the research for your own practice and clients and looking for ways to share your material with a broader community, which is related to academic research. Making it verifiable, usable or applicable for others and confronting your work with others, you avoid staying like a mad professor in the attic doing what you always do. Staying in the attic does not devalue the work you are doing, but the idea of the academia is to exchange ideas, to make them debatable, usable, understandable and operable. I always liked the idea of an academia which is there to inspire you to be part of a community that shares new ideas and that you can perhaps pick up to try something different or to push it further. I think that’s why practitioners should enter in this arena of academic research.

(RS)

16.

I do not really want to engage in the debate of what is research and what should research in architecture be, because there are lots of models around, which we can use. You have artistic research, practice-based and practice-led research and research through design practice... There are many labels, nuances and focusses. There are lots of theories about the specificities of each model. So I'm not very convinced that it is very fruitful for the participants to question that here in general terms. I would rather suggest listen and observe what is at stake in the proposals and presentations, to try understand what they try to do and how we can help them to be better, sharper and stronger. We can look for the promising aspects

of these contributions and imagine how to push them forward in research in a rigorous and open way. (HF)

17.

In some conversations, it feels like an architecture practice in itself is not enough as a subject of inquiry, even when there are external markers of its relevance. It is as if you would need make use of a specific tool or lens in order to make it worth of being investigated and to be able to call it research. Or as if you would need to explain that your practice is related to a specific theoretic subject in order to convert it into a subject suitable for inquiry. It is as if understanding a practice is not worth of being a subject, as it needs to be excluded from the field of knowledge. By the way, the attitude of connect-

ing explicitly and a priori a practice to an external topic or to a tool is often quite wrong.

A practice is more than the illustration of a theory.

A practice is more than the result of the use of a tool. I wonder if it would not be less biased and more honest to acknowledge the reality and the complexity of an architectural practice. Simply starting by the observation of this practice and its context, its inspirations and motivations. Then reflecting on it, situating it, re-engaging the practice again,

and so on. One would also relate the practice to tools, theories, topics and so on, but it modifies the priorities and avoids to create dead angles in the research.
(HF)

18.

External concepts and tools can mean something at some point when researching a practice. But I would be very skeptical about the claim that a practice is essentially focused on the use of a tool, or that it results from the application of a concept from the humanities. There is much more happening in a practice and it's important to acknowledge that in order to understand what is really at stake in this practice.

which feel safer like the humanities or applied sciences, in order to confirm that they are doing research. Maybe because you have to explain all the time to fellow academics why and how this is research. But then, by doing that, people put themselves in a biased position that maybe is not the most fruitful to consider their practice in all its complexity and layeredness. (HF)

Curiosity and naivety are often lacking a little bit.

It is as if people need to refer to other fields

19.

I had a discussion with some students. They are writing their first research paper on drawing. Somebody asked: “can I really write from my own point of view? In academic writing it is not allowed to write in the first person”. This is a fallacy. It is a matter of making the point of view explicit. In this kind of events, it may be useful to establish a general framework explaining the point of view from which we are looking at research. As Rolf Hughes said, you have to make people listen from where you are talking. Otherwise, you will never resolve the discussion. There could always be people saying that it doesn’t fit into the scientific model, because they do not situate the complementarity of the practice-based model and of the scientific model.

(RS)

20.

People think that a lot of things should happen because of research, like the formal bibliography, the strange rule of the third person, the referring to humanities or other fields, etc. In this seminar, this is probably why many people have talked about their practices through the lens of problematisation and of the tools. It happens because people always ask: “what is your research about?”. Of course, the research will lead to understanding about the tools, the context, the inspirations of the practice and maybe other fields. But the real subject is originally to understand what happens in a particular practice, how to challenge it and to situate it, in order to make it better and more conscious, shareable and re-engageable.

(HF)

21.

These two strategies or lenses – the use of tools or concepts – aim at turning these practices into research or to do research about these practices. Maybe we should then rather observe if it changes something for these practitioners to look at their own practice through these filters.

The question is not if a practice is defined by some tools, but what difference they make.

(PL)

22.

There is one thing you said on which I really want to react. I don't agree that, because there is already a lot of theories and discussions about these different sorts of research, we would need to stop there. One of the reasons why I do research and why I stopped working in a firm was that I wanted to have space for reflection. I wanted to have space and time for that. And of course, there is reflection in practice. And actually, there is also a kind of hybrid way of doing both. But we cannot say that the question is closed. We cannot just wipe it from the table. It is interesting. It also adds to the knowledge base and to how we do the next event of this sort. The reason of being of this seminar is also to keep this question open.

(PL)

23.

At the same time, we need to avoid to get drowned in epistemological considerations because there is already a lot of literature about it. For example, Rolf Hughes who was mentioned a couple of times today is professor of epistemology of KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture.

Epistemology is a field of research in its own right.

It becomes a little bit complicated when researchers systematically have to develop epistemological models or justifications about what they are doing. Of course, at

some point of the doctorate it needs to be there: the position in the field needs to be clear. But in this kind of event, we can also expect the people attending to be aware of the field. It does not need to be specified each time and we can reflect in depth in the contributions we have.

(HF)

24.

People presented a fragment of what they are doing, one aspect under development, one specific interest. These bricks may come together in the PhD. At some point when they want to bundle everything in a PhD, they may be able to position it more sharply. It would be strange to apply the mortar before placing the bricks – it happens along the way. It is also what happened in your case, Benoît, right? It was at the end of the PhD

that you discovered how your work could be positioned. Of course, it could be useful to also consider the epistemological position of each contribution, but I would tend to look at this in a positive way. If it is not clear yet, it may become clear with time. Maybe someone would come to the conference and just pick out one project to unravel all the work documents to understand something about the process, or maybe make a transversal survey of a series of projects and references to identify genealogies, similarities and differences, without having to justify «and by the way, this is research because ...». Because then the debate goes about the epistemological considerations, and not about the work itself.

(HF)

25.

Then maybe the main issue is with the format. In this publication, the work included has been “peer reviewed”. As organizers, you chose the reviewers and they all share a common profile: a group of academics, a few of them sharing their time with practice. Then, of course, as members of the scientific committee, we feel that we are invited to make use of our academic filters. Is this the most suitable format for this kind of work? There are other formats, like monographic books or exhibitions... Maybe the peer review process and the seminar format are not adapted for the kind of proposition that you make?

(PL)

26.

The choice of peer reviewing has a double aim.

The first one is to create a network of people aware of what is happening here, and to be able to exchange, to confront arguments and to share understandings. With time, the aim is also to create a broader group of people interested in research in architecture practices.

The second one is that, unfortunately, publications that are not peer reviewed are worth nothing in the track records of our current academic system. So you need to make it peer reviewed. That's it. At KU Leuven, we are working on other kinds of output, like creations in the arts, but for the moment it is not solved and not appreciated in academic contexts.

(HF)

27.

Then you need to play the game of your reviewers and you need to agree that we are going to confront the research that is proposed to some of the criteria that we hold dear as academics, criteria we believe guarantee good research. And they are going to be more or less open to this kind of research.

(PL)

28.

I am not completely sure of this is a one way situation. You can organise the peer review to address topics and criteria in specific ways. This is related to the framework suggested by Robin. We need to make that more explicit and clear maybe, but then we could expect that the reviewers would look at things through the lens of the questions that are proposed to make a re-

view, rather than through supposedly universally valid lenses of which they would be the depositaries. By the way, it is not only an issue with the reviewers, but also with the contributors because the contributions are quite traditional in the end. And also with the editors, because the format that we proposed for the publication maybe suggests this type of contributions, even if we mentioned that contributors should experiment with combining visual and textual elements in their narratives. We are all full of this kind of reflexes. We could all together, try to play the game stronger, I think, and to give it an identity which is stronger, more recognizable and more coherent.

(HF)

29.

Yes, maybe we have to define more precisely what is expected from the contributors, but also from the reviewers. On the one hand it is quite interesting that people can present an extract of their work without needing to reframe all their research, or maybe this framework is not so clear but the reflection is ongoing anyway and needs to be formalized at some point. But also, it is useful to have more scientific profiles in the room, challenging views on academic research. So everybody would benefit from a clear framework.

(BV)

30.

What I notice here is that you are setting up a very clear dichotomy between the research and the design practice. In a way, you are approaching this from a similar point of view, with which I disagree to a certain extent. A practice should not be reduced to architects sitting in an office designing some building.

A practice covers a wide spectrum of activities. But it's very hard to define the boundaries of a practice. Maybe academic research is more scripted, more formalized in predefined expectations? In our practice we have been working and thinking for quite a while about the topic that I presented. The publication is not an opportunity to propose and define a topic, it is rather an opportunity to formalize it. (DR)

31.

Writing within this quite clear peer-reviewed framework gave us the possibility to take the time to pin down the subject that we read and discuss about on a daily basis in our practice. I appreciate that somebody with an academic background reviewed the article.

The perspective of the external reviewers invites us to be more precise.

The article focusses on one topic and does not represent the totality of the practice.

Academic research allows for a much clearer focus on singular topics, which is the opposite of the constant adapting plurality of a practice.

The format of the symposium gives the possibility to construct a clear train of thought that peers can follow, reflect and comment upon. But that doesn't mean that it reflects the entire practice and research as a whole. It is rather one thread within the whole.

(DR)

32.

What Robin said about internal and external value is important too. The contribution is there not only because of the reflection, but also because it matters and it can have consequences on future endeavors. It is not only about grounding the work in some things that have passed, it is also about projecting it towards other things to come.

(PL)

33.

Intentionality is an interesting notion. It is a driving force to develop the research and the work. On the other hand, many things happen which are not intentional. When you make a project, at some point maybe you put the model upside down. It's completely crazy, but then you see things differently and maybe it opens new ideas. In research in architecture practices, you cannot make a precise plan for four years, including literature review, field work, interpretation, and so on, because you don't know which kind of projects you will be working on, which kind of experiments you will do, what kind of drawings will happen. This is inherent to architecture practices. The academic expectation of intentionality is an issue because when you write

a research proposal, you are asked for a detailed research plan when this is contradictory with the nature of an architecture practice.
(HF)

34.

Writing a proposal aims at defining where you think the research will take you; it doesn't imply that you will actually end there. In experimental or laboratory science, you do indeed have to define which procedures and tools will be used, but there too accidents happen, something breaks or didn't happen the way you wanted it. Especially in the humanities, one reading can just shift your entire idea about what you're writing about. So there are diverse research contexts and models, even though they share some common traits. I appreciate the fact that the

way I do my research is not the way she or he does her or his research. So we can learn from each other. I believe a potential quality of what you propose with this kind of encounter between academic research and design practice resides precisely in the differences between these approaches. We need to acknowledge and appreciate how distinct they are, and work towards fruitful alliances based on the recognition of their specificity.

(PL)

35.

Some differentiate hypothese-led and discovery-led research*. Maybe we should take this into account and address the notion of intentionality differently in discovery-led research.

*Sarah Rubidge, "Artists in the academy: reflections on artistic practice as research", in "Dance rebooted: initializing the grid", 2004

The point is to create fruitful conditions for the emergence of discoveries.

In general, there are opportunities to be found in the encounter of practice as such and academic research, be it scientific or practice-based. These two models overlap because they strive for similar objectives and are based on similar premises. On the other hand, they extend and complement each other.

(HF)

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