

Towards research-led dialogues between practice and academia

Juliana Martins is a Lecturer (Teaching) at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London

The set of articles brought together in this issue shows that practice-led research is alive and well in urban design firms. It has been used to address complex urban challenges such as multi-generation housing, the future, suburbia, urban industry, identity, density, or value. Not surprisingly, there is a diversity of approaches; from research that underpins the design process to discrete pieces of research undertaken to develop a more robust - and unique - approach to a design problem/debate. Methods employed are also diverse, including established qualitative data collection (e.g. observations), but also innovative methods such as practitioners' self-ethnographic accounts or exhibitions.

Four key points emerge from the issue's contributions:

- Research in practice is distinct from academic research in many ways. For instance, it has commercial constraints and must bring clear benefits to the firm. On the other hand, it is free from quite specific (and perhaps narrow) academic standards in terms of research approaches and methods;
- Practice-led research is tailored for design, seeking useful outputs such as tools and prototypes, or directly employed in projects;
- The value of practice-led research is undeniable and reaches wide with examples showing impact on the design process, project outputs, planning debates and policy, design control and development, and teaching;
- Collaborations with other public and private organisations are crucial in much of the work presented, and the need to further these collaborations is strongly emphasized.

Despite the wealth and quality of practice-led research, I would argue that engagement with academia is incipient. Cutting edge academic studies find it difficult to make their way into practice discourses (with exceptions such as Carmona's work). Yet, a closer collaboration between academia and practice in research would be beneficial to both. As Carmona (2020, p.7) summarized from a more conceptual perspective "theoretical work will be most powerful if, perhaps over time, it also informs practice. Equally, practice-related research will be more rigorous and incisive if it draws from, and feeds back into wider academic debates". Urban design firms could also benefit from additional knowledge, expertise and resources from academia to undertake research. For academia, engagement with practice would be an opportunity to deepen the understanding of 'designerly' ways of knowing (Cross, 2001) and construct a more robust understanding and conceptual / methodological basis for 'research by design', which are still limited.

There are several challenges in furthering this dialogue. Academic research needs to engage with gaps in the literature which are sometimes narrow, and may not be of relevance for practice. The timeframe of academic and professional work is very different as well as the key constraints and objectives; the former is driven by publication in peer-review journals and research metrics, the latter by commercial aims and reputation. Academic outputs are often inaccessible despite recent efforts to increase open access. Perhaps more importantly, practice tends to deal with design and wicked problems, and propose solutions; all aspects which are hardly addressed by conventional research approaches.

But academia could certainly do more. First, it should spearhead these collaborative efforts by creating spaces and forms of dialogue with practice, particularly on identifying common topics, developing concrete research projects, and sharing results. URBED+, a collaboration between Manchester School of Architecture and URBED, is an example of an attempt to develop such long-term collaborations. Second, it should strengthen the teaching of research skills in urban design education, particularly regarding 'research by design'. Finally, it should use more accessible language and more diverse forms of research dissemination (e.g. practice-related publications, websites, etc).

This issue explored some examples of practice-led research in urban design. But an immense body of work is being developed out there, by many other practitioners operating across multiple geographies.

This body of work is an invaluable resource to further knowledge in the field, both theoretically and practically, and should be properly scrutinized, disseminated and, above all, nurtured.

References

Carmona, Matthew. "To Truly 'Live', Urban Design Needs Accessible Interdisciplinary Research." *Journal of Urban Design* 25, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 5–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2019.1706319>.

Cross, Nigel. "Designerly Ways of Knowing: Design Discipline versus Design Science." *Design Issues* 17, no. 3 (2001): 49–55.