ARCHITECTURE AND THE ACADEMY — THE RESEARCH IMPERATIVE

According to a position paper accepted by the Research Committee of the Royal Institute of British Architects and presented by Jeremy Till, several enduring myths about architecture and research perpetuate an ever-widening gap between architectural practice and the academy. Roger Fisher shares ten pointers towards bridging this schism.

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Having been unexpectedly thrust back into the maelstrom of academe, it surprises me to discover that there does not seem to have been much movement in the 15 years since the new curriculum structure was introduced for the teaching of architecture at SA universities.

My perception is that there is an even greater divide between the academy and the profession, greater mutual suspicion and diminishing synergy.

What seems to be a source of suspicion in the profession – and also in some academics of the 'old school' – is the current academic imperative for the promotion of advanced degrees by research.

Certain myths about architecture and research persist, which were articulated in a position paper accepted by the Research Committee of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA; date unknown, but it appears to be c2004) and presented by Jeremy Till, a member at the time.

Below is my presentation of each of these myths, with Till's riposte in précis:

MYTH ONE – ARCHITECTURE IS JUST ARCHITECTURE:
There are twin notions of autonomy and genius that mystify the discipline and so marginalise its importance. Architecture is neither inherently mysterious nor autonomous in its pursuits, however it does have its own identity and intellectual domain.

MYTH TWO – ARCHITECTURE IS NOT ARCHITECTURE:
The discipline has attempted to legitimise itself in academia by seeking authority elsewhere – either in the sciences or in post-structuralist theory. In turning to other disciplines, architecture unfortunately loses its identity and authority.

MYTH THREE: DESIGNING A BUILDING IS RESEARCH:
A building is mute. It says nothing of the processes of its thinking, production or making. If this is to be made accessible, it needs to be explicated and elucidated.

HOW ARE WE TO ESTABLISH A SYNERGY BETWEEN PRACTICE (PRAXIS) AND THE ACADEMY?

Below are my 10 suggested pointers:

1. Precisely articulate and define what the nature and ambit is of the discipline of architecture – its intellectual domain and area of knowledge and expertise, as well as the research methodologies appropriate to its inherent nature and field of knowledge production.
2. Demystify the discipline by presenting architectural thought and endeavour clearly and precisely, so that it is incisive and insightful. Much writing on architecture presented for public consumption reflects thinking that is woolly at best and hairy at worst.
3. Create open and clear channels of communication between practise and the academy. Both have expertise and needs. In making expertise known ❯

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and available, and in the sharing of resources, both will be enriched.

4. Exploit the orthography of architecture – its unique language – to engage, explicate and communicate architectural thought in research. Here, I am referring specifically to the universal language of visual communication through a vast array of graphic tools, from the ideogramme, through the working and assembly drawing, to analytical and explanatory graphics.

5. Ensure that the legitimacy of what has been achieved in the past is not eroded, devalued or lost. Here, my thoughts turn particularly to the recognition of the Academy in creative outputs. In the institution where I serve, namely the University of Pretoria, lecturers who practise and take part in the Creative Outputs programme are acknowledged by means of awards made through peer evaluation and recognition. This shows the Academy's recognition for the authority of practitioners, among others, in evaluating the worth and merit of the creative production of teachers in the real world of design and production.

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6. Harness the conservative nature of the discipline and the slow grind of architectural production to its full advantage. Reflective thought is a powerful research tool and the traditive (having a long history; transmitted by means of oral communication over the generations) and conservative (in the sense of preserving and building on past knowledge) nature of the discipline allows for retrospective research.

7. Return to examining the historiography and archive of the discipline. This offers opportunity to examine episodes of bifurcation – i.e. when some event or discovery has posed two paths but only one could be followed. 'What if …' research often allows for fruitful recovery of past endeavours to the benefit of current thought and practise.

8. Grasp opportunities offered by the discipline of architecture, for not only synthesis but for syncretic research. A tool of design is the process of iteration. In the two paradigms of research, namely the quantitative and qualitative, the process of iteration offers another research trope to which to subject each paradigm. While it is possible when designing to engage iterative processes for quantitative modelling (which can then be engaged through computer modelling, testing and refinement prior to production), architecture offers opportunity for an iteration of the qualitative aspects too, by revisiting past designs and asking real people real questions about real experiences in the real world. Hence engagement of users in post-occupancy is one such possibility, but another is the practitioner revisiting their designs critically and having this critical reflection recorded and assessed.

9. Generative design is a process used where the designer engages in both iteration, as mentioned above – a process of dissecting, then resolving discrete problems – and thereafter generation, a process of prioritising, synthesising and eventually simplifying the complexities of multiple resolutions into a single, integrated design solution. What is not often researched is how the discrete resolutions of multiple designers, who are engaging a complex building programme, might be optimally synthesised by teams. This seems to me an area where rich and fruitful research should take place, for which the Academy is ideally placed to engage and assist.

10. And lastly, critical engagement; the profession obviously values the critical input of academics, by invariably ensuring that they serve on the team of assessors of local awards programmes. There are also the annual laureate occasions hosted by the various universities – i.e. the Sophia Gray Memorial Lecture and Exhibition at Bloemfontein, and the Milde-McWilliams Memorial Lecture at Port Elizabeth, for instance. To date, there has been little critical residue of these occasions, although the Department of Architecture of the University of the Free State is currently making amends. Professional Master's programme graduates from each School of Architecture in the country are required to produce a supporting document, yet there strikes me as little academic rigour as to the intellectual residues these offer once candidates have moved on. Each student engages so-called precedent studies, and if each candidate also personally and critically engaged a contemporary local example with stated focus and appropriate intellectual tools, the archive of the discipline would be greatly enriched.

I have attempted to keep this reflection as pragmatic as possible and focused on opportunities offered in the discipline of architecture for research purposes, which showcase the enterprise of producing designs as its core and distinguishing nature. Yet all is open to debate. ∎

REFERENCE

Till, Jeremy (2004[?]) 'What is architectural research?' Position paper presented to the RIBA Research Committee. See https://www.architecture.com/files/ribaprofessionalservices/researchanddevelopment/whatisarchitecturalresearch.pdf