

letters

Can design be called research?

Sir: David Yeoman's recent article (*arq* vol 1: no 1) provides an excellent review of whether schools of architecture should be allowed to count design activity as research in the forthcoming Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). However, the distinction which he makes between building science and architectural science is somewhat confused by the suggestion that the latter would involve the study of designing, rather than the study of designs.

Building scientists have focused many detailed studies on building materials, building elements, and building-services systems, but have failed to notice that the whole is more than the sum of parts. Therefore, architectural science would surely be concerned more with the history, attributes and possibilities of buildings as systematic interactions of forms, fabric, services, environments and people, in order to inform the process of design, than with the process of design itself?

From the point of view of a combined architectural practice and research consultancy, it seems clear that if the architectural profession does not address itself to architectural science of this kind then it will not develop the much vaunted but so far unrealised knowledge base which is probably essential to its continued survival. Without architectural science, the profession's role in the building industry will continue to shrink towards that of the external decorator, while specialists from other disciplines take over yet more of the real business of designing the built environment.

The conclusion which we draw from this is simple: the profession

must bite the bullet of developing a respectable programme of research, and schools of architecture must not be allowed to duck the issue by pretending that design activity is an acceptable substitute.

Peter Rickaby
Milton Keynes

Peter Rickaby is an architect and partner in a firm of architects, architectural energy and research consultants

Australian answer

Sir: If I understand it correctly, David Yeoman's argument in 'Can design be called research' (*arq* vol1: no1) is that we should explore ways in which design could include research and thus become included in research-based assessment processes. Whilst this argument is appealing it seems to place unreasonable constraints on the design processes, and it seems more appropriate to question the research assessment processes that seek to exclude design-based activity.

This is precisely the problem we have in Australia. We do not have a national Research Assessment Exercise, but we do have links between university funding for a department and staff performance: in a similar way to RAE, research performance counts the most.

The problem is that these funding mechanisms are fairly 'blunt' instruments and often modelled on a 'typical' pattern of activity of the university. This can disadvantage disciplines that do not follow the norm in a university where a high priority is given to research.

As a consequence of this, a discipline such as architecture has to work extremely hard to obtain financial recognition for the excellence in its field of activity. To this end, we have

obtained recognition for design activity to be included in bibliographic records so that this can be counted for staff performance and thus for department funding. Also, a national design refereeing process is available to authenticate the standard of design projects by staff and give citations for work of excellence.

As yet we have not been able to equate design work and research work, although there clearly are parallels.

I would therefore argue that we should not attempt to classify design as research, but see each as a separate creative activity which should be equally recognised in funding mechanisms. This would mean that an exemplary architectural design could be recognised as equivalent to a nationally won research grant. The effect of this approach will require the establishment of a design refereeing process and 'sharpening' of funding mechanisms to equally reward design and research excellence.

Richard Hyde
Brisbane

Richard Hyde is an architect and lecturer at the University of Queensland

Architectural judgement

Sir: The subject of architectural research is my principal occupation at the Instituto Universitario Architettura di Venezia where, over the past three years, I have been responsible for reorganising architectural teaching, the principal focus of my involvement being the relationship between research and teaching. I very much appreciate *arq's* programme and its structure.

arq has been launched at a critical moment – one in which European universities are trying to find an

authoritative forum for the collection and exchange of research developed within various countries. *arq* could assist this architectural discourse by bringing together – for the first time – the publication of projects, research papers, historical essays and so on from many different sources.

Architectural judgement seems to me to be the implicit question underlying the themes which *arq* deals with, and it is a very central and difficult matter. Such judgement is pursued continuously by everyone, but its practice is very difficult to make explicit. The use of referees may be one method of assessing architectural research and thereby aiding the allocation of research funding, but there should surely be wider agreement on the criteria used and their application to architectural judgement.

Discussion on this topic could be really important when extended into the field of architectural competitions. Many European countries are increasing the number of public commissions granted through the competition system, and any improvement in building quality is conditional upon the practice of a systematic and transparent judgement. The present situation, in which choices are made between equally competent designs on the basis of the empiricism of a panel of judges, is unsatisfactory. A more explicit system of assessment could also be usefully applied in teaching – both in assessing students' work in a helpful and constructive manner and in the appointment of academic staff.

Architectural research, serious or not, is the subject of continuous exchange between architects. The media updates architects about each

new wave of projects, and this has a profound influence on much current design. The use of referees to test the validity of projects and other material for publication would make this kind of publication more reliable. Students and professionals are strongly influenced by published architecture – its control is crucial in establishing the seriousness of that influence. Yet many publications do not recognise their responsibility in diffusing this material. It is therefore important that *arq*, in adopting the refereeing method, has taken into account the 'user side' of architectural publishing in its approach.

Valeriano Pastor
Venice

Professor Valeriano Pastor is a former Director of IUAV and Chairman of the Architecture Faculty

Architectural knowledge

Sir: One of the objectives of the RIBA strategic study is to set out a new 'myth', to redefine the role of the architect in society. Central to the study is a redefinition of architectural knowledge, the subject not the person. Frank Duffy describes this unique body of knowledge as a 'combination in action of user understanding and design innovation, two special ways of thinking in all their myriad of infinitely complex applications'.

For those of us straddling these two ways of thinking, the problem is that each is composed of quite different sub-sets of knowledge. We are designers with a left and right brain, without a methodology for making that synthesis between them and innovating with the data. For this new myth to become reality, designers need the broadest working knowledge of both user needs, and the cultural

phenomena of design. If this revaluation of the duality of architectural knowledge is the overriding challenge of the day, *arq*'s arrival is timely and necessary.

Stephen Greenberg
London

Stephen Greenberg, is an architect and an associate director at DEGW

Explosive paradox

Sir: The article by Friedrich Mebes (*arq* vol 1: no 1) about Hans Scharoun's approach to design is most interesting, not least because it seems to be sheltering a rather explosive paradox. Mebes' strongest message is that Scharoun responded to the unique circumstances of each individual project, a process described in some detail for the unbuilt school in Darmstadt. 'Goodness of fit' between the design and the context (both physical and behavioural) seems to be the key.

Then we are told about a Scharoun school in Marl where the activity pattern changed radically, destroying this 'goodness of fit'. Yet – paradoxically – the occupants still liked the Scharoun building so much that they would not leave it for a new purpose-designed school.

What is happening? The Marl instance (assuming that the reluctance to move was not based on something prosaic like the location of the Scharoun school) suggests that the pay off for users of Scharoun's buildings derives from something other than goodness of fit – architectural qualities presumably?

Before we abandon goodness of fit and start looking for Scharoun's architectural vocabulary, Mebes warns us that Scharoun abhorred the idea of reusing a set of standard architectural

solutions over and over again in different projects. We seem to arrive at the following propositions:

- Scharoun's designs are uniquely generated on a case by case basis
- Scharoun's buildings have outstanding architectural qualities
- Scharoun did not have a repertoire of standard design solutions
- Scharoun's design process was triggered by specific features in the brief but resulted in architectural qualities that transcend these triggers.

I suggest that this points to one conclusion, that the key to Scharoun's work is some kind of generative design algorithm or grammar – defining his architectural elements and the rules of combination. This would account for the strong and distinctive characteristics that we recognise in his work, even though he never repeated a design. And the designs generated by the algorithm would embody the architectural qualities that make Scharoun an interesting architect.

A study of this algorithm will probably shed more useful light than analogies with Kant's philosophy: and I look forward to learning about it in a future issue of *arq*.

William Fawcett
Cambridge

William Fawcett is an architect and a director of Cambridge Architectural Research

Can arq keep it up?

Sir: It was refreshing to read the first issue of *arq*.

In particular, the paper entitled 'A tapestry on the landscape' seems to embody the very principles your new magazine is trying to promote and illustrate. The bringing together of two dependent but often separate ideas of concept and detail and realising them in built form has only to be admired.

That it is for a public housing project is even more surprising these days. The tenacity and strength of the initial conceptual idea and the patience and enthusiasm of the architects with the enlightenment of the residents' association is reassuring and encouraging.

All too often the personal predictions and stylistic preconceptions of both clients and architects remove any inherent

meaning within the building. My only concern is how many projects of this kind in this country you will be able to locate to publish?

John Southall
London

John Southall is an architect working for Bennetts Associates

An odd proposition

Sir: Congratulations on your wonderful new journal. As exemplified by the recent *Progressive Architecture* issue devoted to 'The failure of the schools', architectural education is in a state of ferment here in the United States just now, and justifiably so.

Entering architecture, students are arguably among the best and the brightest on any campus, and yet various economic laws relating to supply and demand, in conjunction with the average level of pecuniary reward to which architectural graduates are deemed entitled, seem to indicate that an act of slow but steady disempowerment takes place both prior and following graduation.

Sometimes I wonder if the requirement by statute that an architect must be secured for most substantial projects is the worst thing that ever happened to us in the US. Does it take away the necessity for us to be fighting, hungry, street smart and savvy entrepreneurs, bent on success without the law to back us up? An odd proposition I grant you, but perhaps one at least worth pondering, especially in the light of related discussions in Britain.

And the word from the world of practising architects in the US is that they have to run harder and faster, just to stay in place. Perhaps *arq* can provide some real help to practitioners and educators and, if the first issue is any indication, it will. For the above reasons, and more, it is desperately needed.

By accident, or intent, the timing of the inauguration of *arq* is propitious, for while massive but unpopulated structures are still rising from the cheque book of a bankrupt American government, this sort of thing can't go on for ever.

The day of reckoning for more than just the strapped architect, here and in most other places around the

globe, is surely on the way. It's just that lawyers and doctors may be better prepared to survive the crash back to some semblance of financial reality than we poor folk are.

William Voelker

Champaign, Illinois

William Voelker is an associate professor of architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Sleep talking

Sir: 'God needs thinking men to keep the others from falling asleep'. This quote by Ortega y Gasset from Friedrich Mebes' article on Scharoun amused me as I tried to sum up my feelings about the first issue of *arq*.

I (a sleeper from North Wales) should need thinking academics to jog me from my slumbers. The journal will succeed in this if it addresses research issues that are of use to those of us in practice, or point down avenues which might be explored by us (if we have the time). I find the varied papers interesting, especially the one on Scharoun and the article on Beigel's work at Bishopsfield (a beautiful and sensitive intervention – lovely for a single client, but I cannot help wondering how suitable it is for mass housing).

Gavin Hogben's waffle about his Wealden poolhouse is surely a good example of why design should *not* count as research, the matter raised in David Yeoman's article. Does this scheme really develop important issues? Hogben's description of his sub-Venturi pool is self-indulgent and pompous, and really does not address issues that matter. Or, if I have failed to see them, then perhaps his building fails. Frankly this one sent me back to sleep...

Adam Voelcker

Garndolbenmaen, Wales

Adam Voelcker is an architect in practice

Letters, should be typed double-spaced and sent to Peter Carolin, arq, C/o University of Cambridge Department of Architecture, 1 Scroope Terrace, Cambridge, CB2 1PX faxed to 00 44 (0)1223 332960 or e-mailed to pc207@cam.ac.uk. The editor reserves the right to shorten letters.

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Peter Carolin

arq (Architectural Research Quarterly)

c/o University of Cambridge Department of Architecture

1 Scroope Terrace

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