

## Design research debate continues

### Soane model: from arq to Academy

#### Research Assessment in the UK

The vexed question of research assessment in relation to architecture continues to attract both controversy and confusing misrepresentation. The fact is that, in the United Kingdom, we have a national system of research assessment that is unlikely to go away. Although a member of the last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) panel for Built Environment and Town Planning, I am not an advocate of the system, but simply someone trying to get the best out of what we have. Simon Pepper (arq 8 – Summer 1997, p. 6) complains about the balance of the last panel, but we must remember that the subject area it dealt with was much larger than architecture, and that I did successfully appeal to have the architectural membership increased.

The panel responded entirely appropriately in my view to representations made to it by both Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the Construction Industry Council about design work. The definition of research as used by Higher Education Funding Council for the last exercise as a whole deserves some study. “Research for the purposes of the RAE is to be understood as original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding”. Such a definition does not in my view give us a problem about design. We know that designs themselves contribute in just this way. This particularly fascinates me since my own, more conventional, research on the design process has shown exactly this! However the definition was even more explicit. “It (research) includes... the invention of ideas,

images, performances and artefacts including *design*, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights”. This seems to me to be a very workable and helpful definition for architects. All this in spite of David Yeoman’s paper published in arq 1 – Autumn 1995, p.12) arguing against treating design as able to contribute in this way!

However the guidance given by the Built Environment Panel went even further and suggested ways in which universities could provide evidence of the contribution through peer review. These included many of the ideas raised in William Mitchell’s interesting review of the US system (arq 8 – Summer 1997, p.7).

It would be inappropriate for me to comment on individual departments as Pepper is free to do, but I agree with his conclusion that “design-based research...will receive support from the panel”. I feel that continuation of this debate is itself confusing. The battle that some are still fighting over design has in many ways already been won. What would be more profitable would be to concentrate on the question of quality. High research ratings are associated with high quality research whether conventional or design based. That measurement of quality is heavily dependent on peer review mechanisms, and the burden of proof of peer review quality lies with the submitting university. Simply doing design is no more likely to achieve a top rating than is simply writing. To get the top rating there is a clear need to demonstrate that work has a reputation at national and international levels.

Finally, may I also remind your readers that the overall research ratings are not solely dependent on

output. The panel published guidance in advance that it would also consider the “extent of postgraduate activity... evidence of esteem by external funders... (and) ...evidence of the vitality of the department and prospects for continuing progress and development”. These other factors ask questions about the structure of architectural education which I have repeatedly encouraged the RIBA’s Stansfield Smith Review of Education to consider. I hope when its findings are published the debate will move on from these narrow concerns to the wider question of how we encourage and promote the development of knowledge about architecture. This is exactly what the RIBA’s charter requires it to do. A matter that the Institute seems to me repeatedly to lose sight of!

BRYAN LAWSON  
Sheffield

*Bryan Lawson is Professor of Architecture and Head of Department at the University of Sheffield*

#### Yale model for London

I felt you would like to know that Peter Mullan and Thomas Gluck have generously agreed to give us their marvellous model of Sir John Soane’s House and Museum which they made while studying at Yale and which you illustrated in your last issue (arq 8 – Summer, 1997, pp. 12–21). I went to see the model in New York last year and was intrigued by the way it was constructed to show all the intricate spaces that make up the complicated plan of this house. All these parts detach and can be fitted together or moved around.

The model will be shown at the Royal Academy exhibition on Soane in September 1999 and afterwards will be exhibited in the Museum at Loncoln's Inn Fields.

MARGARET RICHARDSON  
London

*Margaret Richardson is Curator of  
Sir John Soane's Museum*

Letters should be sent to Peter Carolin,  
arq, c/o University of Cambridge  
Department of Architecture, 1 Scroope  
Terrace, Cambridge CB2 1PX, UK  
F +44 (0)1223 332960 or Emailed to  
pc207@hermes.cam.ac.uk  
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