Sandra Felix

What modes of Design Research are transformative and venturous?

Abstract

Design although it generates a building is also a search for meaning, for a change in values and perceptions and even a change in power and politics, although in some instances it is a search to legitimise existing power dynamics and entrench them. Design is so much more than just the generative act. (Sullivan, 2010)

In the South African context where our built environment and cities are struggling more than twenty years into democracy to subvert their Apartheid segregationist beginnings, design research has the capacity to understand the historical connections between design, power and politics, and purposefully subvert them and even venture new modes of practice.

Where the transformation of academia and practice of architecture is imperative, the design research question is not so much the generic one asked by Fraser,

"What are the most effective modes or routes through which architectural design research can be pursued? " (Fraser, 2013)

but rather,

*What are the most effective modes or routes through which architectural design research can be pursued **which support and forward the transformation imperative of both academia and practice? Can the intellectual space and conditions be created that support a strong critical culture of architectural design research, with its' hopefully resultant transformation of our built environment?***

Through analysing various international Design Research modes and their applicability to the South African context, an understanding will be gained of how Design Research can be transformative and venturous both within practice and academia, but also within the larger socio-political context. As Teddy Cruz so aptly put it "new experimental practices of research and intervention will emerge from zones of conflict" (Cruz, 2013)

Paper

What is Design research? Fraser defines it as "processes and outcomes of inquiries and investigations in which architects use the creation of projects or broader contributions towards design thinking as the central constituent in a process which also involves the more generalised research activities of thinking, writing, testing, verifying, debating, disseminating, performing, validating and so on" (Fraser, 2013, pp. 1-2)

The question to be asked in a context of transformation of academia and practice of architecture within South Africa is not so much the generic one asked by Fraser,

"What are the most effective modes or routes through which architectural design research can be pursued? " (Fraser, 2013, p. 8)

But rather,

> "What are the most effective modes or routes through which architectural design research can be pursued" **which support and forward the transformation imperative** of both academia and practice? Can the intellectual space and conditions be created that support a strong critical culture of architectural design research, with its' hopefully resultant transformation of our built environment?

Lesley Lokko whilst a practicing academic in South Africa, noted that "the pervasive condition of African architectural education and practice is one of mimicry, in which students and architects are (sub-consciously) driven to copy 'solutions' posed by practitioners outside the continent, most typically European or American" (Lokko, 2014).

Should one then apply this "cut and paste" (Lokko, 2014) method and import an international mode of Design Research, from any of the global sites with strong established Design Research culture? This would, however, deny the African context. As expressed by the Arts Research Africa initiative at the Wits School of Arts, the separation of "theoretical and practical knowledge" in Western philosophy, runs counter to notions of "holism" in African philosophy, and that "this suggests particular potential for Artistic Research… within the contexts of African philosophy and thinking." (Arts Research Africa, 2019)

So perhaps the question is less "What are the most effective modes of design research?", but rather what can one learn from these modes that might be applicable in an African context.

Currently as per Fraser there are distinct geographic groupings which have created such a strong Design Research culture, namely UK, Australia and Europe (Norway; Sweden; Belgium; Netherlands). These groupings will be investigated through the lens of their Design Research models applicability to the South African context, and with an express intention to avoid the so-called pervasive condition of "cut and paste".

The initial RMIT Practice based design research programs in Melbourne, Australia were essentially local peer reviewers reviewing local practitioners work. The emphasis was on local implicit knowledge of context becoming explicit.

> "Mastery is not an international currency. What passes for mastery in one city can look suspiciously empty to the practitioners from another city even when they are at first impressed"   (van Schaik, Mastering Architecture, 2005)

At RMIT "invited architects with a body of work admired by their peers (are tasked through their Design Research with) surfacing the evidence about their already <u>established mastery</u> within a critical framework." (van Schaik, 2013, p. 56)

This model essentially reinforced existing networks of practitioners, and local reviewers, which in the South African context is inherently problematic as these established networks need to be interrogated and even subverted. Reinforcing these established networks would counter the need to be more reflexive and venturous within the South African context of transformation, and socio-economic scarcity.

This model has, however, been followed in the first South African PhD with Design program set up at the University of the Free State. To register for the Practice Based path, one is required to have at least ten years of "successful" design experience with a "celebrated" body of work. (Noble, 30 August 2018). The question of what is "successful" design experience is contentious and subject to perception, but one can interrogate the concept of a "celebrated" body of work, as this can be assumed in recipients of the SAIA Awards of Excellence. This serves to exclude practitioners on the basis that their work has not been celebrated – and yet the very mechanisms around which these awards are administered is questionable, both in terms of the make-up of the jury panels but also in terms of their historical context. Further, the student and staff cohort at UFS appears on the surface at least to be monocultural, although efforts have been made to diversify both. Until this diversity is achieved the outcomes will match the inputs, and potentially will serve to further entrench existing modes of practice.

These requirements are very similar to the requirement of "established mastery" of the RMIT programs. In the South African context questions need to be asked about "established mastery", within a context of professional practice and professional design juries which are largely un-transformed, in terms of gender, race and culture. Essentially, one needs to ask "what is mastery" in our current context. How does it differ from a previously accepted understanding of mastery that was established by existing networks of peers and practice awards juries?

In the South African context the professional jury panels are still largely untransformed and rely on old networks of peer reviewers. By analysing the Jury Panels for the SAIA Awards of Excellence, and the recipients in terms of race and gender, one can see that even as from the turn of the century when jury panels started transforming – there were noticeable anomalies – in 2016 and 2014 the sole females on the panel were not architects but laypeople. Since 2012 the overwhelming majority of award recipients were still white male architect practitioners, with no black females represented at all, and the few female award recipients were mostly associates in male dominated practices– with only 2x female practices winning awards for projects completed between 2011 and 2018.
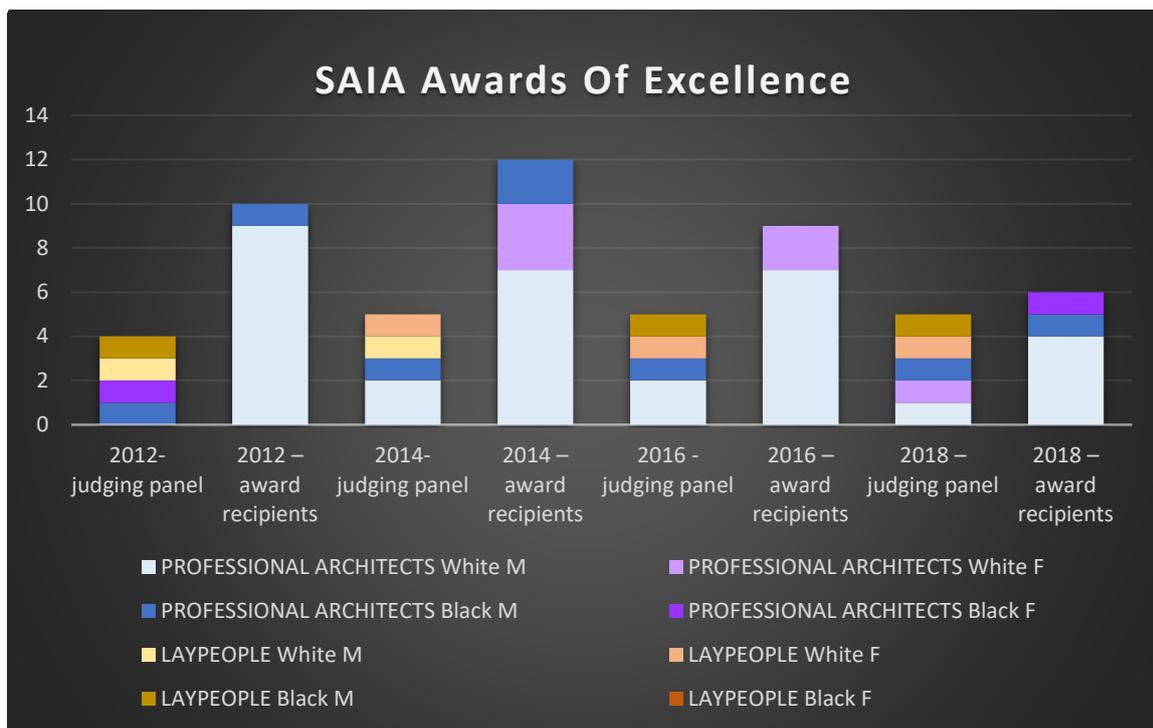
The knowledge that exists within communities, even within communities of reviewers is often tacit, subliminal and to a large part accepted and not contested. What kind of tacit knowledge is produced in a community which is restricted and not diverse, without even the acknowledgement of the limitations of its formation? It is therefore imperative that one "expand who counts . . . in broadening the community of review" (Ellison & Eatman, 2008) to networks of critically engaged

practitioners that can engage with current venturous practice and contribute to the forwarding of socio-economic sustainability and transformation.

What then are the lessons to be learned from the RMIT program? The RMIT was successful in the building of a strong local culture of architecture in Australia through its' programs in Practice based Design Research, and gave this culture international exposure and validity. Even though the goal is to also create a strong local culture of Architecture in South Africa which has validity in the face of international exposure, it needs to be much more political, in the sense that being political as an architect is to commit to "revealing the particular conditions of conflict inscribed in the territory and the institutional mechanisms that have perpetuated such conflicts… Experimental architecture involves specific re-organisation of the political and economic ground" (Cruz, 2013, p. 208).

Perhaps the South African context should not be seen as an impediment to Creative Design or Arts Research and rather as critical to it. As Fraser has noted when outlining the geographic areas with developed cultures of Design Research, that "the most relevant practices and projects forwarding socio-economic sustainability will not emerge from sites of economic abundance but sites of scarcity" (Fraser, 2013, p. 12)

Teddy Cruz agrees and notes that "new experimental practices of research and intervention will emerge from zones of conflict, it is in the periphery where conditions of social emergency are transforming our ways of thinking about urban matters" (Cruz, 2013, p. 206). He wants to revive the notion of the activist architect thereby reconciling artistic experimentation and social responsibility by imagining counter – spatial possibilities.

The Feminist Design Research model, is interesting in its intersections with Cruz's notions of societal impact and change. This model focuses on the "acute relevance of the research project in light of societal impact" and notes that the "direct link between research and actual transformation in the world is important." (Grillner, 2013, p. 71)

> "Research is after all nothing if we do not in some way change ourselves as well as our buildings. The best architectural research is that which asks us to consider not only what we understand and undertake by way of architecture and buildings but also who we think we are and how we want to reside, play and work together." (Borden 2008)

The Feminist Architectural pedagogy of Fatale, as well as the "Architecture in Effect" group formed by all four Swedish Architecture schools sees "architectural projects as producers of knowledge and instigators of change" asking "How will this project alter the conditions right here? Who might

benefit from this change and who might not?" (Grillner, 2013). In essence supporting the development of theories and methodologies for architectural engagement in societal concerns.

These two models of the activist architect together with an architecture of social transformation is perhaps more appropriate and apt in the South African context. A PhD in Design Research in the South African context could follow many routes, the research practitioner could commence with a Curatorial Practice Led approach (akin to RMIT), but with an emphasis on ensuring that the juries and supervisors are diverse, and multi-cultural and are pushing the understanding of the work in terms of the current South African context into a new realm with a focus on venturous, socially engaged or even activist practice akin to the Feminist or Teddy Cruz model, and perhaps most relevantly both a feminist and socially activist practice. Van Schaik talks about identifying the gap between where your practice is currently and the practice you are aspiring towards, how you might "reach a point at which you can show through shifts how being more conscious of the way you work helps you do it in a more controlled and better understood manner" (van Schaik, 2013, p. 57). In the South African context it would be interesting to take that a step further, and note how this enhanced knowledge of and control of individual practice needs to be seen through the lens of its contribution to society and context. In other words, design research as a search for meaning, for a change in values and perceptions and even a change in power and politics, rather than as it appears to have been in South Africa's history, a search to legitimise existing power dynamics and entrench them.

This model could support both the more experienced practitioner and the emerging practitioner or academic. The experienced practitioner's curation or self-ethnographic study of their own practice could lead to a greater understanding of the role that their practice has historically played in these power dynamics, and how it can be reimagined. The emerging practitioner or academic on the other hand would place a greater emphasis on a venturous or activist practice model possibly even involving speculative projects, if the opportunity for built works does not exist.

The model of the PhD by Design Research at Bartlett School of Architecture, in the UK, "combines a project and a text that share a research theme and a productive relationship… the relationship between drawing, text and building are multi-directional, drawing may lead to building but writing to drawing or building to drawing and writing." (Hill, 2013, p. 19). This is a much more speculative and venturous model of Design Research and would be suited to any level of practitioner or academic, in that an existing body of work is not required. This is also a model which Hill argues is not a new one, but follows an established tradition of research in practice. This established tradition has also been alive and well within the University of the Witwatersrand Architecture School with present and past lecturers actively engaged in teaching, researching and practicing, or as Fraser put it "thinking,

writing, testing, verifying, debating, disseminating, performing, validating and so on" (Fraser, 2013, pp. 1-2).

The Belgian example at the Sint-Lucas School of Architecture is noteworthy as the schools intention when developing a culture of practice based design research was "to develop experimental, practice-based concepts for this research, rather than to attempt to emulate the discipline-based research that is characteristic of the academic fields." (Nilsson & Dunin-Woyseth, 2011). Nilsson and Dunin-Woyseth founded Research Training Sessions (RTS) with the express purpose to train researchers in epistemological and scholarly foundations in contrast to RMIT's initial aim to "avoid verbal theorising or credential-seeking through reference to texts from other disciplines" (RMIT Architecture - Reflective Practice Postgraduate Program). The Research Training Program included sessions on Communication, Knowledge, Reflection and Design Cognition, and as per Verbeke the program was intentionally designed to foster a diversity of perspectives and opinions and not reflect the vision of a single person or methodology.

> "Frequent contact with teachers coming from various intellectual "schools" of research provided many opportunities for the participants to discuss their research interests from various angles." (Nilsson & Dunin-Woyseth, 2011).

The RTS were partially based on the Roskilde network cooperation model developed in the early 1990s at Roskilde University in Denmark, which combined intense literature studies, with periods of teaching and writing exercises, and was concluded by public discussions of the papers submitted. (Nilsson & Dunin-Woyseth, 2011). The openness of this model, its' express intention to be inclusive of diversity, and the knowledge creation that can arise from network cooperation is highly relevant in the South African context.

However, perhaps due to its history, in South Africa the connection of design to its socio-economic and political context is so much more apparent. Therefore by implication Design Research is so much more than the study of design as the generative act (Sullivan, 2010). Intellectual space in Design Research is required in order to create a critical distance from the current status quo and the traditional agendas that serve to reinforce current paradigms of practice. This critical distance provides the space to see differently and to understand the tacit and implicit generative threads that the socio-economic and political context weave into design.

In conclusion, in order for Design Research to be transformative and venturous once should first and foremost take an "**inclusive and facilitating stance"** (Verbeke, 2016) and "**expand who counts . . . in broadening the community of review**" (Ellison & Eatman, 2008). Focus on the generative capacity of

the socio-economic, cultural and political context, and how this has both grounded the practice of design, as well how it has constrained it. The emphasis should be on "critical spatial practice" which includes "**strategies or representations of space that aim to maintain and reinforce existing spatial orders and those tactics and spaces of representation that sought to critique and question them**" (Rendell, 2013). In the process understand that "**the relationship between drawing, text and building are multi-directional**," (Hill, 2013, p. 19), and that Design Research has a long history. Finally, create the intellectual space needed for experimentation as "**researchers face a period of intense explorations and investigation of not yet known ways and methods …, allowing good ground for unusual and unconventional ways of researching.**" (Verbeke, 2016)

In the South Africa, where our built environment and cities are struggling more than twenty years into democracy to subvert their Apartheid segregationist beginnings, design research that has the capacity to understand the historical connections between design, power and politics, and purposefully subvert and transform them and venture new modes of practice.

Sandra Felix

Works Cited

Arts Research Africa. (2019, August). Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/artsresearchafrica/posts/662939607555107?__tn__=K-R

Cruz, T. (2013). Returning Duchamp's Urinal to the Bathroom? On the Reconnection between artistic experimentation, social responsibility and institutional transformation. In M. Fraser (Ed.), *Design Research in Architecture : an overview* (pp. 205-216). UK: Ashgate.

Ellison, J., & Eatman, T. (2008). *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University.* New York: Imagining America.

Fraser, M. (2013). Introduction. In M. Fraser (Ed.), *Design Research in Architecture: an overview* (pp. 1-14). UK: Ashgate.

Grillner, K. (2013). Design Research and Critical Transformations: Situating Thought, Projecting Action. In M. Fraser (Ed.), *Design Research in Architecture: an overview* (pp. 71-94). Ashgate.

Hill, J. (2013). Design Research: The First 500 years. In M. Fraser (Ed.), *Design Research in Architecture: an overview* (pp. 15-34). UK: Ashgate.

Lokko, L. (2014). Cut and Paste. *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research, 12*(2&3), 2019-236.

Nilsson, F., & Dunin-Woyseth, H. (2011). Building a culture of doctoral scholarship in architecture and design. A Belgian-Scandinavian case. *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research, 23*(1), 14.

Noble, J. (30 August 2018). The Process. *Sophia Gray Mini-Conference -PhD with Design.* Bloemfontein.

Rendell, J. (2013). A Way with Words: Feminists Writing Architectural Design Research. In *Design Research in Architecture: an overview* (pp. 117-136). UK: Ashgate.

RMIT Architecture - Reflective Practice Postgraduate Program. (n.d.). Retrieved June 29, 2009, from http://architecture.rmit.edu.au/Research/Invited_Postgrad.php

Sullivan, G. (2010). *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts.* Thousand Oaks California: Sage.

van Schaik, L. (2005). *Mastering Architecture.*

van Schaik, L. (2013). What if Design Practice Matters? Part 1. In M. Fraser (Ed.), *Design Research in Architecture: an overview* (pp. 53-61). UK: Ashgate.

Verbeke, J. (2016). Research by Design, a paradigm shift? In J. De Walsche, & S. Komossa, *Prototypes and Paradigms.* TU Delft Open.