

Practice-led research in Urban Design

Introduction

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The use of research - understood as the production of knowledge through a systematic and rigorous process - is not new in urban design practice. Indeed, research is often part of the design process (e.g. research on site-specific historical morphologies). But more elaborated forms of practice-led research, particularly in the UK, are burgeoning. A growing number of urban design practices enthusiastically adopts research as part of a (research-led) approach to design or undertake stand-alone pieces of commissioned research. The 2016 RIBA report 'Knowledge and Research in Practice' provides a good overview of how research permeates the work of 17 architectural and urban design firms.

Yet, little is known about this type of work. How is this knowledge created, used and shared by and in practice? What is the value of research for practitioners? And what value does research bring to design and our urban environments?

This issue examines this new scene and explores these questions through a combination of articles that critically reflect on practice-led research developed in the UK and abroad, and across private, public and educational settings. It aims to interrogate, understand, and expose how urban design practices do research and incorporate it in their work, exploring their motivations, innovative approaches, tools and methods, areas of enquiry and, ultimately, the challenges they face.

The topic opens with an overview of the motivations and distinct approaches to practice-led research by Kathryn Firth, drawing on examples from Europe and North America. She makes the case for more collaborative efforts between practitioners and academics to further applied research.

The following three articles report on examples of research done by leading practices in this type of work but with distinct sizes and approaches. Nicholas Goddard writes about the role of research in Arup's urban design work along three key lines of enquiry: development of practical tools, identification of major trends shaping the future of the built environment, and learning from practice. Dhruv Sookhoo provides an in-depth discussion of the project "A New Kind of Suburbia" by Metropolitan Workshop. He describes their approach and innovative research design, focusing on the Homestead concept to reflect on the role of research in uncovering and catalysing practice knowledge, and lessons for future practice-led research projects. The final article of this set, by Oliver Goodhall and Lili Lainé, looks at We Made That's research into industrial areas in London, showing the crucial role of research in revealing 'the back of house' of these places, and steering alternative approaches to urban economic development.

In a similar vein, Lucia Morato and Becky Mumford report on their award-winning Public Sector-led research into lives of residents in High Density schemes in Tower Hamlets. The article elaborates on the methodology used, how the research informed a design guide, and the advantages of in-house research.

This is followed by Neha Tayal's journey through emerging practice-led research in India, uncovering a range of innovative work across three main themes: engagement with communities, sustainability, and identity. She advocates scaling up these efforts to address the complex challenges facing this rapidly developing region.

The final article, by Louie Sieh, Alain Chiaradia, Stephen Jones, and Fiona Waters, reflects on a collaboration between practice and academia to develop a Value Gradient Map. They outline how this tool articulates values in urban design, and reflect on its benefits for design collaborations and teaching, and the role of this tool to enable research about urban design performance.

Rather than imposing a concept of research into practice, this issue sees practice-led research as research done "by practitioners in practice about practice" (RIBA, 2006, p. 3). The aim is thus to explore

what is considered research by practitioners and what forms it takes to contribute for a better understanding, even if partial, of what practice-led is, its diversity and value for urban design.