

Designing Reflections: Reflections on Design

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Abstract

RMIT University in Australia has developed a portfolio of Masters and Doctoral programmes in design and architecture. The particular programmes, developed over the past 16 years, of a Masters and Doctorate by project through practice are described in this paper, in which an account of the position argued as the basis of the programmes, and of their workings, are recounted. The basic premise lies in the use of reflection as an approach to research in design, and we refer to arguments supporting this as a means of bringing together the theoretical and the practical in research. We discuss the mechanisms and administration of the programmes, and end with some reflections on the programme itself.

Introduction

The doctoral programme by project through practice at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University in Melbourne, Australia grows out of the Masters programme initiated by one of the authors (van Schaik) in 1987, when he was Professor and Head of School of Architecture and Dean of the Faculty of the Constructed Environment—accepting its first candidates in 1990. The Masters has so far graduated approximately 50 students. The Doctoral programme, which commenced in 1996 has so far graduated 5 students with another 5 anticipated in the course of the next year. The other author (Glanville) joined the programme in a consulting role as an adjunct Professor in 1995, in response to the needs for more, advanced level supervisory experience, and a stronger theoretical stance developed appropriately within the programme.

In this paper we introduce the RMIT Doctoral programme in three main sections. The first concerns the position we take in the programme. The second concerns the mechanisms used to make the programme work. The third touches on administrative matters. We conclude with some reflections from some of those who have been involved in the Masters and Doctoral processes.

Where we refer to doctorate, programme or process in this paper, we are referring to the PhD by project through practice at RMIT University.

Position

At the heart of the RMIT doctoral process is the belief that practice needs to be studied through the practice of (i.e., doing) practice, rather than as some object to be studied “independently.” It is the insistence on practice as a medium of study (informed by and informing appropriate theory), that we believe distinguishes this doctorate. There are many post graduate programmes by project, but we are not aware of any that are so solidly based in the practice of considering practice and practising—or so well supported by a theory of the involved observer and of the recursions involved in this (van Schaik 2003a; Glanville 2003). Our programme is specifically devised to actively incorporate current practice as it takes place, rather than setting up projects outside or in parallel to the practice of candidates.

We are convinced that studies of practice as an object miss the point. Design is an activity, and designers, in order to study the activity, need less to study the outcome of the activity (the process, design-as-verb) and more to study the activity itself. Designers always knew this, but Donald Schön (1983) made the view respectable in the wider community. Nor does the activity need to be studied from outside: the point of studying, if you are a designer, is not to marvel at what goes on in designing, but to do it better. We are interested in assisting designers to study (their) practice in order to improve it, which we believe is achieved through growth in the type of knowledge appropriate to design, i.e. “design knowledge” This means the (research) question to be asked necessarily concerns “how?” more than the more traditional scientific question, “what?” and will be both found and founded in the designer’s practice. Furthermore, since each designer is caught (like every other learner) in the world of his/her experience and ways of understanding, the likelihood of finding a set of general strategies (of being able to delineate a programme, set of steps or indeed a course to be taught) is so slight that we are not inclined to pursue it. (e.g. Pask, Kallikourdis and Scott 1975). It is also our contention, and that of the candidates, that in their research they are informed by the research and experiences of their peers during the period of candidature (van Schaik

2003a).

Until relatively recently, there have been few approaches that sustain such insights as constituting legitimate research. We had to return to the Middle Ages, when the notion of science was more general than the post-Newtonian, post-Cartesian approach developed in the West's physical sciences. However, we do not wish to live in the Middle Ages, although we are convinced that the approach of contemporary science to knowing and knowledge is but one legitimate approach! We wish to join our European colleagues, who equate science with a more general vision of knowledge than is common in the Anglo-Saxon world.

New developments have, lately, made it easier to understand the value of reflective research (see Steier 1991 for a good collection of essays). In our case, these have come about through the insights, theory and practice of second order cybernetics (see Glanville 2002 for an introduction). These understandings leave us convinced that reflective research is indeed legitimate and effective (Glanville 2003; van Schaik 2000a, 2003a).

In the RMIT doctoral process, what is at its heart requires candidates to study through reflecting on their own practice. Through introspection made explicit and tested in the company of peers, and through inquisition of their own work, they can acquire a clarity of understanding both of how they work and of the essence of their concern that empowers an intensified ability (in the manner in which Ashby (1956) talks of intelligence amplification) (Glanville 2003). The process involves abstraction of themes, testing and re-abstracting—a distillation (van Schaik 2003a).

At doctoral level, this practice is carried out in the full context of theoretical and practical developments that surround the areas of the candidate's concern, with an intention of generating an explicit and demonstrable change in their work: a practice that is better informed both in terms of the appropriate design culture and context; and in the improvement in intensity, range and performance of their own practice. The review of mastery appropriate at the masters level becomes a review of other practices that address similar concerns – a form of literature survey of practices is undertaken. Candidates identify a research 'gap' and formulate or frame their project/s around this gap. They need to demonstrate that other projects addressing this gap have not satisfactorily filled it.

The pursuit of these ends means candidates become equipped with a way to improve and, perhaps even more importantly, regenerate their own work. This is not autistic or solipsistic, it is an act of renewal. Consideration of their work in the appropriate context allows them not only to connect sensitively into design culture, but also to demonstrate through their knowledge and awareness of that culture the nature of their individual contribution to design knowledge.

This work in practice is not carried out without regard for the essential support that can be provided by theory. We emphasise practice because it makes a difference, distinguishing this process from others. What is more effective still is that the practice is married to theory and exists within a developing theoretical framework based in the practice of design re-inforced by an awareness of current developments and the context; and also the theoretical exploration of circular causality,(second order) cybernetics (Glanville 2002; van Schaik 2002). We do not study practice exclusively. We study how, studying practice, we can develop theory that informs practice as

practice informs theory. This is in line with our analysis of the relationship between design and research (Glanville 1980, 1999).

We are asked what the difference is between the Masters and Doctoral programmes. Apart from obvious (and traditional) differences such as scale and time, and the conventional difference between mastering a subject and making a significant and new contribution (which is often a difficult criterion to handle in design projects where designers often claim everything they do is a significant and new contribution), there is one major difference. Put (perhaps over-) simply, in the RMIT Masters programme, mastery is shown through its explication in the designer's own work. It is in fact assumed that candidates already have mastery in their practice: what is needed is an arena and the discipline and rigour to demonstrate this in a sustainable and argued manner that will strengthen this practice. In the Doctorate they show, beyond the competence of Mastery, how their increasing understanding fits within and contributes to the field of design in a much more elaborate and precise manner, and at a larger scale and or in greater depth: they contextualise their work and include much more consideration of the critical positions and arguments.

In practice much of what is done is teamwork. Where candidates find it difficult to separate out individual contributions full acknowledgement of the team is required, as is usual with research assistants in other contexts.

Mechanisms

development

We recognised at the outset that this process had little or no precedent, and, being designers, felt it was appropriate to be involved in a continuous design of both programme and expectations. In this process we acknowledge the continuing assistance of Dr Paul Carter and Dr Nikos Papastergiadis, whose reflections on the nature of doctoral research in adjacent fields has been important. In developing the processes of this RMIT doctorate, we have chosen not to overly predetermine forms and standards. Rather than set explicit goals and standards, at the outset, we have preferred to accept that the design and development of the programme is in progress and the programme and its outcomes are developed through an informal negotiation between staff, critics, examiners and candidates, within the culture and regulations of the University.

We do not believe this approach is as unusual or outlandish as it may seem. In our experience courses and programmes gradually reach their appropriate level: early work sets a standard that is then exceeded until a more-or-less constant, recognisable level is achieved. We have preferred to accept this and build it into our approach, rather than pretending to be able to define the immutable, appropriate and the desirable at the outset.

culture

We understand that study can be a lonely process. Sometimes the loneliness is appropriate and even desirable, but when not it can be alleviated by punctuating the study with social events. A crucial factor in the RMIT process is the twice yearly Graduate Research Conference (GRC) weekend around which all events are arranged. The GRC can be seen as the hinge around which the programme revolves.

The hinge has two roles. The first is explicitly social. Candidates are expected to attend each GRC, which begins on Friday with lectures from visitors and a dinner, and runs over Saturday and Sunday, ending with a plenary feedback session. Examinations, where the candidates present their work in front of their exhibitions in open forum, usually take place at the weekend too, and these are both learning experiences for other candidates and celebratory events. Spaces are given over to both presentation and review, and informal meeting and discussion (the GRC is catered). The significance of space in learning is well understood. The GRC is the event that binds and gives coherence, reducing the sense of being alone and encouraging a collegiate atmosphere in which open and friendly debate based around the concerns of the candidates can flourish.

The second concerns the study process. Each presentation by a candidate (apart from the first and last—see below for an account of these) is understood to be a hinge. The presentation accounts for progress in and divergence from the work plan negotiated at the previous GRC, marking a new proposal for study over the next half year. This mechanism gives a dual role to formal presentation, while allowing modification and redesign of the overall research as it progresses.

The GRC is perhaps the most important supervisory and teaching device in the programme, manifesting a learning community.

Administration

starting and ending

Candidates participate in this doctoral programme by invitation, although they can also ask to be invited. Often, they will sample a GRC and make a preliminary presentation in which they test the waters. To commence official candidature they make a presentation in which they indicate the research question they pose, and how they will go about answering this question. At each GRC they will fill in another form allowing them to chart the change in question and the path of their research. In the appendix, we include an unfilled-out form. At the start they are expected to prepare a bibliography and list of other resources that they believe are central to their considerations, including exhibitions, visits to other designers etc. These will, of course, grow during the progression of the study. The end of the process requires that they present at a GRC with full plans for their final presentation for examination 6 months later (see below for more details). The written part of their submission must be approved by senior supervisory staff 3 months before this examination, and is immediately distributed to examiners.

This process requires a high degree of trust, for it is hard to pull candidates from examination when it turns out that they have not carried out what they promised. When examiners have been chosen with their work in mind, it is even harder. There have been problems and we do not minimise this difficulty. We have found that organising a pre-public presentation rehearsal for candidates obviates problems. And, as numbers increase (and other Masters and Doctoral streams mature) the difficulty decreases.

supervision

Supervision occurs, firstly, though the GRC. This involves the panels assessing progress in the work, peer and group discussion, etc. However, the main supervisory work is undertaken by the authors of

this paper, together with colleagues from the RMIT School of Architecture + Design, through individual meetings, often in practice offices.

Three years after candidates have passed through the process, we may bring them back both as reviewers and panelists/critics, and (where possible) as examiners. We take part in the development of an experience base from which supervisory competence may be developed, and provide supervision clinics for colleagues starting out as supervisors.

In addition, the majority of candidates who lack experience in research and methods attend a weekly seminar programme in these topics run by our colleague, Professor Peter Downton, for a semester.

examination

Examination is through a presentation in the presence of a public exhibition in a gallery. The exhibition documents the process the candidate has gone through as (s)he explored, modified and developed significant answers to the research question. It contains samples, but the synthesis of these samples into a whole is equally important. The exhibition culminates in a thesis project that both captures the processes of discovery and shows how these have become part of the design repertoire of the candidate. The candidate will talk to the examining panel (typically one local, one pan-Australian, and one international member), introducing them to the exhibition so they may interrogate the candidate. The exhibition and presentation are complemented by the pre-distributed written element, the Durable Visual Record (DVR) that contains the written element of the thesis and its contextualisation. For a PhD this would be between 30000 and 40000 words, plus illustrations. After the examination, a record of the exhibition is inserted into this document, which forms the permanent record of the candidate's work retained by the university.

The examination is videoed and a record kept in the University archives.

time span

The time given for students to complete their work from the GRC at which they officially start their candidature is 3 years full- and 6 years part-time. Recent Government rulings in Australia have made it essential that candidates finish within this time period, or heavy penalties are incurred. Extensions are not possible. However, some flexibility can be negotiated under special circumstances, through leaves of absence.

Reflections

Apart from the successes of individual students, the success of the programme can be seen in attempts to franchise the programme in other places. Students come from all over Australia and New Zealand. A small outpost runs in Singapore. There are candidates in the UK and the USA. Discussions are taking place elsewhere, including in the EU, where a proposal for major funding has been submitted.

There are, of course, difficulties. Some are overcome through the continuing development of the programme, as indicated above. Some are difficulties of the sort found with students studying for any degree of this sort (for instance in the UK's Open University). For a busy practitioner with a

reputation, often at that point in their career where they move from small to large scale projects and increase their office sizes (or where they move into positions of leadership and administration in the academic world—we do not exclude academics, holding that academe, and particularly teaching, are also forms of practice in the sense in which we understand it)—to find the time to seriously undertake this work is very difficult and tests their seriousness of involvement. The dovetailing of practice to research is the key to resolving this often only apparent conflict. Continuity of supervision of those who are not locally based is currently overcome by the authors visiting en route during international trips.

Those who have taken part affirm the value of their involvement, often insisting it was both a practice- and life-changing experience. We cannot affirm this so strongly in the Doctoral programme, because we still have only a small number of graduates. But those who have passed through the Masters, which is based in the same philosophy and from which the Doctoral programme has been developed, confirm this.

More telling than this verbal affirmation has been the willingness of each successful Masters candidate to take part in making a book that charts their involvement in the programme, preparing new material and reworking their DVR's. So far there have been 4 books (edited by van Schaik), the latest just published in May 2003 and entitled "The Practice of Practice," including articles by each of the current authors concerning different aspects of our involvements. These volumes are found in the references section (van Schaik 1993, 1995, 2000b, 2003b).

We end with an unsolicited testimonial from one candidate, a very successful architect. The authors and he were discussing this paper over lunch, and he reported the following:

As a result of his involvement, he said he felt had been able to rediscover himself and to disentangle himself from his corporate practice. Thus, he gained confidence, awareness, and learnt to value his work more highly. He found the process a form of spiritual regeneration. And his office is more charged, full of creativity and performing better. And he takes Fridays off to work by himself.

Feedback from our graduates suggests this is a typical response.

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