Practice, research, education and arq

Australian and Scottish parallels

Where is the research on big issues?
In case there was any doubt, the discussions in recent issues of arq, which holds that architecture is a ‘practical art’, and the aspirations set out on arq’s back cover sound straightforward enough. The nature of too much of the content of arq seems to us, however, to exemplify the difficulties outlined above. Put simply: where is the research engaging with the big issues that ought to be concerning the profession? For example: if the government claims that it is committed to improving on the ‘default’ products of volume housebuilders, and at the same time wants to increase the density of new housing and to push for an increased level of housing output supported by prefabrication and volumetric building, might architectural research contribute to understanding how or whether all this can be done at once? As major new building typologies emerge as a consequence of public policy - huge city centre retail developments purporting (unlike those of the ‘60s and ‘70s) to be based on sound urban design principles, for example, or the government’s LIFT programme which will change the face of primary healthcare and possibly regeneration – couldn’t architectural research contribute to the debate? And across a broader canvas, what are the consequences for design practice of the ‘integrated supply chain’ and more multidisciplinary working? If it would be a good idea for the academic world and the world of practice to engage and support each other more closely, the exploration of issues of this kind would be a constructive way of getting people together in a common cause; and perhaps more importantly, of demonstrating the architectural profession’s usefulness – not always taken as read – to those outside it.

Couldn’t the level of architectural thinking and analysis applied to exquisite garden sheds in the pages of arq be applied to such bigger things that are affecting the lives of millions of people (not instead of, but as well as)? And if such work is already being done let everyone hear about it; because the quality of discussion is bound to be richer than that which today informs the making of our built environment.

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Does practice understand the universities?
arq’s interview with Jack Pringle (6/3, pp104–106) puts a strong case for why the profession needs to engage with education and research, if it is to sustain a robust body of knowledge relevant to its clients’ continuously changing demands.

Jack Pringle, in his capacity as RIBA Vice President for Education, sees the importance of education, recognizing that compared with other professions, such as Law or Medicine, Architecture has been weak in engaging with its academic
base and investing in research. He rightly identifies the fact that, ‘... the RIBA has not perhaps understood the importance of research for schools’. Pringle shows a new willingness to recognize that architecture must collaborate with other disciplines, by recognizing that, ‘... a powerful professor of architecture heading up his or her school is almost an anachronism’. An architecture is part of, and a contributor to, a range of disciplines that make up the built environment.

This willingness to accept the huge changes that have occurred in both practice and academia over the last fifteen years is heartening, but how far are these changes accepted in the architectural profession at large and how far is it now recognized that the universities also have to be run like businesses? Academia is faced with the increasing tensions of looking in two directions: towards the profession, to which it hopes for validation to provide its students with a passport to a professional career, and to its peers in academia, who expect every member of staff to contribute to the intellectual debate and the institute’s positioning as a leader in research. While the Architects Registration Board, as the arbiter of competence, is putting ever greater demands on the academic curriculum, Vice Chancellors are questioning the value of architectural departments with high overheads and low research income in supporting a viable university business model.

Meanwhile, the profession as a whole has shown very little inclination to invest either its time or money in supporting research projects, or continuing education courses. This is not a unique UK phenomenon. I have experienced the same tensions to different degrees in Sweden, the Netherlands and Australia. In the dominant, post-Thatcher economy, both architecture and academia have become businesses. If the architectural profession wishes to develop and own its unique body of knowledge, then it should be prepared to pay for it, and realize that the universities have their own agenda and business logic. University architectural departments serve both the profession of architects and the discipline of architecture. Within schools there is an inherent constituency of students who recognize the value of architecture as a discipline, without going on to be a registered architect. The challenge is for the ARB, the RIBA and the universities to recognize each other’s expectations, realize the differences, and craft a structure for collaboration and returns.

Jack Pringle points out that good collaborative research is already happening. In addition to the research in practice that Pringle Branden have initiated, one could also cite the influential work of Sunand Prasad on Design Quality Indicators (DQIs) with David Gann (Imperial College, London) supported by the CIC and CABE; BDP’s continuing work on procurement and briefing, with Bryan Lawson, at Sheffield University; DEGW’s SANE (Sustainable Accommodation for the New Economy) study with a number of European academic institutes and corporate partners (published in The Distributed Workplace, Spon 2004) and academics such as Alan Short (Cambridge), Brian Ford (Nottingham) and Sarah Wigglesworth (Sheffield) who manage to combine practice, research, and teaching.

In addition to Architectural history, theory and criticism, there is also a body of research into urban morphology and building typologies. Building on the work of academics such as Norberg-Schultz and Nicholas Habraken, there continues to be an excellent body of research work in our schools, which provides the foundations for reflective design in practice. Jeremy Myerson’s programme of industry based research at the Helen Hamlyn Foundation (Royal College of Art) is an exemplary example of research closely aligned to practice and supported by industry.

Though examples of the overlap between academia and practice occur, they are, I’m afraid, still too often seen to be pursuing differing goals. Academia is focused on recording (publishing) reflection, and criticism, with a progression through levels of degrees (bachelor, masters, doctorate) becoming more research orientated at each stage. Practice measures its success through outcomes. Both search for peer acceptance, but through very different avenues. By more sympathetically understanding what are the drivers for each, there is an opportunity for us to overcome the dilemma of practice versus academia, and for both to support each other.

I would argue that, for departments of architecture, university administrations will be concerned with three issues: First, a focus on research standings: departments awarded a 5 in the UK Research Assessment Exercises attract substantial additional funding, which makes a significant contribution to their income. Within the Built Environment unit of research assessment (in which Architecture is placed), the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council funded centres of research excellence are all within departments of construction and engineering, who are associated with construction, property, or facilities management companies.

These centres of excellence recognize their analytical strengths and appreciate what they are missing by not having the skills of problem solving and synthesis provided by architects. Architectural schools and the profession cannot afford to stand aloof from these other disciplines. For practice, these other disciplines increasingly the architect’s client and, for university departments, collaboration provides potential access to major tranches of research funding, from both research bodies and the industry.

Second, the university is concerned to create a research culture linked to teaching. There is a clear, globally recognized line of progression through levels of academic degrees. Architectural education with its Bachelor (three years) and B.Arch (Diploma) structure has become out of step, largely cutting aspiring architects out of the research path. In Continental Europe, most schools of architecture are moving to the awarding of Bachelor and Masters degrees following the Bologna Agreement. For universities striving for research excellence, eg Cambridge, it seems a logical route to close the professional diploma course and focus on higher research degrees. The challenge for the RIBA and ARB is to work with this route of academic progression and find ways that researchers can also become practitioners. We need more members of practice versed in research, as well as more practices willing to contribute.

Third, university administrations recognize that with the uncertainties of state funding they will need to generate a greater diversity of income streams. Practice, with resources from the income it generates and that it can, in addition, leverage from clients, could contribute to a dynamic research programme. At the same time an active practice research
culture could enhance the profession’s knowledge base, so raising the perceived value of the profession’s advice and attracting higher hourly fee rates. Jack Pringle, in his interview, reflects a desire to look outside the confines of the architectural profession, to the concerns of the universities and the demands of the user client. With greater understanding between the profession of architecture and the administration of higher education, both sides could gain. With a willingness of architects and academics to be open-minded and reappraise perceptions, there is the opportunity to re-establish architectural education as a linchpin of architectural endeavour, in a way that would be acceptable to the university and enhance the standing of the architectural profession. However, the architectural profession must be prepared to ‘pay the piper, if it wishes to call the tune’.

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Scotland leads the way (as usual)
The interview with Jack Pringle (7/2, pp104–106) provides both an interesting account of how we got here and some useful pointers towards a more integrated future which, hopefully, the RIBA can be at the heart of. The background to this situation is, of course, more fully documented in previous issues of arq including my own paper (6/4, pp297–299).

Recognizing a similar chasm between practice and academia in architecture, but in the knowledge that both groups are involved in research, either by analysis or by design, the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland has had operating for the last nine months, a Research and Development Board. This is comprised of members of our Education and Practice Boards, academic research representatives from the six architecture schools in Scotland (more often than not including the Heads of School), together with a number of practitioners interested in the promotion and documentation of research. Indeed, the group is chaired by two members of Nord – the Northern Office for Research and Design, a practice committed to advancing this cause. Even within practice ‘design’ is not the only research. A mass of post-occupancy evaluation exists, even if anecdotal. There is also much strategic thinking on construction methodology.

Along with Jack Pringle we too are interested in leverage and co-ordination. This is finding support from many bodies including Government. An example of this is the award of seed-corn funding from the Scottish Executive/Architecture Policy Unit for disseminating current research strategies on architecture in Scotland to a wider audience, in the hope of feedback which will initiate further dialogue.

In parallel with this work, a research programme headed by Dr Paul Jenkins, a Research Fellow at Edinburgh College of Art, is co-ordinating and documenting architecture institutional research in a UK context. The RIAS is represented on the Steering Group for this study which also includes Departments of Architecture, specifically Edinburgh University. It is hoped that this work will provide a focus for architectural research in Scotland.

A knowledge-based profession is not only a requisite for identity, it is essential for our future and is at the heart of what we do.

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Canberra and Edinburgh: an intriguing comparison
Paolo Tombesi’s intriguing article (7/2, pp140–154) on the genesis of Australia’s Parliament House inevitably raises the question of possible comparisons with Scotland’s Parliamentary saga. The differences, of course, are as striking as the similarities. Tombesi’s position is that the

Australian Parliament House completed. Architects Mitchell/Giurgola and John Thorp

Scottish Parliament model. Architects Enric Miralles with RMJM
Canberra building’s design, which he dislikes, is explicable by the commissioning process, and the desire of the Australians to have reliability and delivery on time. Apart from the obvious formality of plan and pomposity of approach (although we are not altogether exempt from recent exemplars of either in twenty-first-century Britain), he takes it for granted that the architecture is entirely mediocre. Yet I would have been intrigued to know whether the spaces between the curved walls of the gathering spaces building and the Chambers and offices on either side, had any qualities.

However, he implies that a better building would be one that faces up to history, makes reference to the national past and present, and has three-dimensional spaces that are crafted for the purpose. The Scottish Parliament building is certainly highly crafted: it is virtually one of the largest non-repetitive components that a culture has ever decided to fund. Perhaps it represents the other extreme rather than a balance. Judging whether it reflects Scottish culture, Scottish diversity and Scottish internal conflict – as Tombesi implies it should – will probably have to await its completion. The only two influences Miralles admitted were either contextual from the immediate site, or Northumbrian – namely the overturned boats on the Lindisfarne beach.

The most obvious contrast is between a building project with a tight brief, subject to ferocious control – in reaction to the perceived loss of control that occurred over the Opera House; and the Scottish project which, by any analysis of cost or time overrun, is out of control. It is likely that a significant part of the Scottish problem was an inadequate brief and an accelerated building process, with the result that the brief was still being altered when the building was well on site before the user client had had the opportunity to contribute to it. The brief displayed at the time of the selection process for the Scottish Parliament was the subject of an enormous international competition, in which the Scottish Office was kept at arm’s length. The Parliament was subject of a narrow selection process run by the Scottish Office. The Museum of Scotland brief was prepared by a special committee of Trustees who travelled worldwide to examine comparators, working in tandem with the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland. The Parliament’s brief was held within the Civil Service. The organization of the Museum was two-stage international competition was by the RIAS, whereas the Parliament’s selection of designer was through a mechanism devised by the Scottish Office. There are many other telling comparisons, which all add up to one conclusion: namely that the Scottish Parliament selection process was also framed in reaction to a predecessor. The Scottish Office had been marginalized in the hugely successful Museum of Scotland project, and disliked it. So, when the Parliament project emerged, perhaps it hoped to avoid the Museum’s admittedly difficult gestation by taking more control into its own hands. The consequences are now the subject of the Fraser Inquiry.

We should be grateful to Paolo Tombesi for stimulating such a reconsideration.

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Canberra and Edinburgh: speed kills – good briefing is important

Paulo Tombesi’s investigation of Australia’s Parliament House, Canberra (arq 7/2, pp140–154) shows how the ambitions of Public Sector clients are influenced by the political context. The review by John Sergeant of Weston’s excellent biography of Utzon in the same issue (pp183–196), provides some insight into his tragedy and triumph at Sydney: the Opera House.

The political clients for Canberra clearly sought to ensure that Sydney’s problems did not manifest themselves, by preparing an exhausting brief for the international design competition, which tackled many of the aspirational and cultural aspects of the project. However, in their drive to ‘design out’ constructional uncertainty, they devised a brief which was so specific on construction and flexibility, that the prescription became the medicine. Tombesi argues coherently that, as a result, Romaldo Giurgola’s design never achieved the same level of critical acclaim as the Sydney project. Moreover, the fundamental procurement lessons that it had been planned to transfer to Australia’s building industry, never really materialized. Could we see the same happen in Scotland?

In one sense, the two scenarios had been running concurrently, if one equates Miralles’ sketches to those of Utzon, and the Canberra project to, say, the large Private Finance Initiative/Public Private Partnership (PFI/PPP) projects under way.

The early stages of the site selection process for the Scottish Parliament building used a Building User Brief that focused strongly on the interrelationships of function to be incorporated into the project with, for some areas, substantial detail equivalent to room data sheets. Yet there was little or no discussion about the symbolic or aspirational element and, because there was very little time between the selection of the site in January 1998 and the process to select an architect, there was little briefing on contextual matters, despite the fact that the location was in a World Heritage Site and adjacent to Holyrood Palace. The overriding character of the Scottish Parliament programme was one of speed. Even the delay in a decision on the site by the Secretary of State (to undertake feasibility studies) was welcomed as a chance to introduce a more measured approach. But thereafter the selection method for the architect and construction procurement were both driven by a desire – from the top – for a relentless programme of progress. The concerns of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS) about such matters were later to be subordinated ‘jeremiad’ during the Fraser Inquiry into the project.

But more prescriptive methods
of procurement had not been written out at the start. Options for PFI or Design and Build had certainly been in the air, and the RIAS had argued strongly for a design-led approach. There was both relief and enthusiasm among the profession when an international architectural competition was announced. Most architects had understood that to mean a design competition – when in fact it turned out to be a competitive interview, with sketch approaches introduced at the end.

The 1996 Department of the Environment/Department of National Heritage booklet on design competitions was the methodology employed, a document in which the RIBA had had strong input. Competitive interviews were introduced to combat crude fee competition which had become rife at the time, and put the emphasis back on the client and design team. Such a dynamic relationship between client and design team. Such a

The architectural profession remains nervous, all the same. Will the building genuinely be regarded as a work of genius? Will it work well at all levels? Will it prove to be good value for money? We all hope so. But perhaps our calls to invest more at the early stages of feasibility and design development may be heeded. That call, however, has not yet been heard in the PPP corridors where the billions are currently flowing. And it may yet be that value for money worries may be more serious in health and education estates for future politicians, than the Holyrood Parliament building.

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however, it also offered the chance to take the project forward at a greater speed and it was this rather than the other benefits that took priority. There was, moreover, an ingredient which made the exercise potentially flawed: the absence of the key end user, with a knowledge of the purposes to which the building would be put. Proceeding at such a pace with only a proto-client was certainly raising the risk element considerably.

Nonetheless, apart from one or two voices urging caution, the majority of architectural commentators were encouraging a bold new building. The lack of public debate about aspects of its briefing – such as the environmental agenda, urban design, access and above all cultural aspiration – did cause a wide range of shared concerns in the early part of 1998, prompting RIAS to hold a seminar on the topic. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the event was ambushed by strong moves to have the site selection process set aside: many at that stage still believing that the south side of Scotland’s Valhalla, Calton Hill, should house the new institution on Regent Road in a campus comprising Waterloo Place, St Andrew’s House and the Old Royal High School.

It will be for Lord Fraser to summarize the causes of the Holyrood project’s overruns on time and cost. It seems clear, however, that Donald Dewar MP wished to see a new building, and the primary procurement and contractual decisions made prior to the Parliamentarians being elected. These were the bold autocratic steps of a man who saw devolution as the achievement of a dream and the commencement of a new kind of politics. It is perhaps ironic that the character of these political arrangements with proportional representation, a unicameral parliament and strong committees was described as open, transparent and accountable: the very things that his decisions on the new building were not. But perhaps he was wise as well as wily – knowing that decisions by fractious committees were unlikely to be as bold and brave as those he felt it important to take. And even more ironic that it was committees that have seen it through to its iconic conclusion.

And the future? Will we see prescriptive briefs, more management controls, more contractor-led procurements? If the present is anything to go by, the answer is perhaps not – as much of