Research in UK architecture schools:
clarification and case studies

Expert clarification
Your leader (arq 6/1, p3) correctly concluded that the latest round of the UK Government’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) results are the best yet overall for those departments in universities that include the subject of architecture. But we are in danger of misinterpreting this complex set of results as a result of some other more emotive and unclear arguments. Let me take the process apart slightly in order to clarify.

In the RAE, universities choose to report their research to a number of panels which deal with large subject areas. One of those panels is the Built Environment, which includes architecture along with landscape, building, construction and a number of other related subjects. Most of the universities who submitted architectural research did so to this panel, though a significant number chose to submit to the panel for Art and Design. Of course all the panels work together and refer work to each other for advice. A submitting university may also require a panel to cross refer to another panel.

However, many of the submissions included work in other aspects of the Built Environment or of Town and Country Planning (an associated panel). The grades awarded then are not for ‘architecture’ but for the submission made. In fact universities group their submissions in research clusters some of which might be architectural and some not.

It is difficult to discuss this in detail without breaking the confidence that members of the panel are rightly expected to keep. In her letter (arq 6/1, p5) referred to in the leader, Christine Hawley talks about the ‘demise’ of the architecture schools’ as if they were discrete entities in RAE terms. She infers that the results relate specifically to architecture. Just because a university has an architecture department we should not assume that the largest research cluster in their submission was an architectural one! So far only members of the panels know what work was submitted by any one university.

Christine Hawley only knows for sure what was submitted by her own university in addition to work which was ‘architectural’. She goes on to argue that any disappointment that might be felt in schools of architecture about the results is then also either entirely or largely due to a lack of appreciation of any design work submitted. By inference we are led to believe that good results were never due to a contribution from design-based research. I do not know on what evidence this argument is constructed.

A further confusion arises because Universities are allowed to choose how many staff to submit in the RAE. Again although a letter attached to the grade indicates (eg 5A or 3B) the proportion who were submitted, this is incomplete information. Further confusions arise because the grades are not awarded to individuals no matter how distinguished they may be, but for the submission as a whole which may include some rather less distinguished individuals. Again the grades are not awarded for lifetime achievements but can only relate to the work submitted which was conducted within the review period. For all these reasons grades may not always match expectations.

However some evidence is available. That evidence shows that from 1996 to 2001 the submissions which included architecture showed two universities losing a grade and ten gaining a grade with two universities gaining two grades. This does not look like a ‘demise’. This set of results is in fact even better than the average for the Built Environment as a whole. This suggests that although there is understandably some localized disappointment, the schools of architecture have made considerable progress in research terms. Some of that research is in the form of design and some is not. Some of that research was published in refereed journals, some in professional journals and some in books. Some was in the form of exhibitions and some in websites. Some was presented at conferences and so on.

I write here not as an apologist for the RAE but in order to explain that the results may not represent quite what they are sometimes painted to. I have my own views on the strengths and weaknesses of the RAE system as it is currently operated, but it is not appropriate to express those here. I wholeheartedly agree with both the leader and Christine Hawley that a more thorough and informed debate should be held about the role, organization and support of research in our field. I look forward to contributing to that debate. Frank Duffy was clear during his presidency of the RIBA that the knowledge base of the architectural profession must be nurtured. Sadly, I am not sure his ideas have been followed by actions in Portland Place.

arq is itself a significant step forward and its Editor warmly congratulated for his staunch efforts. Meanwhile readers may be amused to know that, between the
The decision not to publish Bryan Lawson’s paper was an editorial one and no reflection on its erudition. It had already published two papers – by Eric Parry and Michael Brawne (arq 1/2, pp15-16 and 16-21) – in response to David Yeomans and it was not felt necessary to extend the debate. Now, seven years later, we are pleased to publish an updated version of Lawson’s paper (pp109-114 in this issue). Editor

Case study 1: top of the class

Inevitably, restructuring and the influx of new staff has caused internal stress and strain, and the ideal balance between research and teaching has been difficult to achieve: nonetheless, we believe we deserve our current position as one of the top three UK schools. The university overall is now rated 4th in the Times Good University Guide and it has been made clear to us that every Department will need to improve its current teaching and research quality if that position is to be maintained. Complacency is not an option, nor will we be seeking to change the rules for assessment next time around – we want to continue building on firm foundations not shifting sands. Teaching and research are natural partners in universities, and architectural education and the status of the profession ought to be able to thrive by achieving excellence in both. It is not change that the generally poor showing by architecture schools in the Research Assessment Exercise has repercussions beyond the universities. It helps reinforce the lowly position of the profession in the eyes of the government – that we are a second order service provider within the construction industry. RAE Unit of Assessment 33 (Built Environment) does not seem able to treat the full range of research appropriate to architecture in an even-handed way. It reinforces the split between what could loosely be called the scientific as against the artistic and undervalues practice. It seems very hard in our discipline to assemble a usable raft of scholarship with anything approaching coherence and the RAE in its current form simply does not help. Indeed, it encourages the isolation of reflective and creative practice-based research. This split leaves much creative research out on a limb, perhaps producing confusion and obscurity, reinforcing the impression that architectural education is, as stated in Sir John Fairclough’s report, ‘too arty farty/design theory led’.

For the record, the Mackintosh School of Architecture at the University of Glasgow (arq 2001) in Unit of Assessment 64 (Art & Design) as part of a joint submission with the other departments that comprise the Mackintosh School of Art. This is part of a strategic view of research across the different disciplines of architecture, fine art and design. At base level our assessment of the situation was simple – that we are a design-based school that, like most other such schools, gained a 3 in Unit of Assessment 33 in 1996. We reckoned that in this latest round the best we could achieve in Unit of Assessment 33 would be a 3B. Therefore we decided to submit with our colleagues from Fine Art, Design and Digital Design who had been awarded a 3B in 1996. We included our science-based research and it paid off. An integrated approach led to a rating of 4.

Our conclusion is that Unit of Assessment 64 (Art & Design) is fit for its purpose. It can encompass a range of submissions appropriate to its subject area. It can include science-based research on its merits alongside creative and reflective practice. As an architecture school within a school of art we were already exploring collaborations between disciplines and were developing a research strategy that could hold for all of the school’s disciplines. It was a logical step for
us and we were happy that the outcome of the RAE supported the school’s strategy.

David Porter
Glasgow

David Porter is Professor of Architecture and head of the Mackintosh School of Architecture

Case study: storm clouds

In their leader to arq 6/1, the editors quite justifiably express a fear that ‘the gap between lecture theatre and studio will grow ever wider and the schools ever more divorced from practice’. They also acknowledge that ‘of course, it doesn’t have to be like that’. In the University of North London architecture school, for example, a research culture of design as research has emerged over the past decade or so. This has been supported by the past Head of School, Helen Mallinson, and continues to be supported by the new Head, Robert Mull, as well as the Vice Chancellor (Research) of the University, Chris Topley. This culture of critical practice affects the studio in a number of direct ways.

The Architecture Research Unit (aru) is currently exploring the potential of architectural landscape infrastructures at the urban scale and at the building scale through design. Landscape infrastructure is a structure of site-specific territories, designed through edited readings of traces of time in the land, for example from geological time to post-industrial time. It is a matrix of landscape ‘rooms’ providing landscape orders to inhabitations and architectural colonization patterns. Some of these colonization designs could be called topographical buildings. The unit has developed this concept in two winning entries in international competitions: one for the design of a city landscape of 3000 dwellings at the south edge of Berlin along the former wall (arq 3/3, pp202-219) and the other a design of a post coal-mining lake landscape in the South Region of Leipzig, linking the suburban system of the city to the new lake.

Further afield, in South Korea, the unit has designed a landscape infrastructure as an urban wetland on reclaimed land of the Han River outside Seoul for a large publishing estate called Paju Book City. aru is responsible in these projects for the ‘rooms’ and not necessarily the entire architectural ‘picnic’. In the Korean case, aru is now designing a publishing house within the Han River landscape infrastructure and other buildings are being undertaken by well-known international architects. In a year or two we will find out if the communality of landscape has modified the architectural branding and customizing of the new building ensembles.

Our partner in Korea, Jong Kyu Kim, is a former aru research fellow. He is becoming internationally well known for building architecture as landscapes and is Professor of Architecture at the Korean National University of the Arts. Other former colleagues in aru include Peter St John and Adam Caruso: both taught at North London, bringing to the design studio their research into landscape feelings that materiality can evoke.

Design studio teaching is directly related to the topics of design research in which we are engaged at the Research Unit. For example, after we had worked on the final competition stage of the Berlin city landscape project, we devised a related student design brief entitled ‘the landscape, the road, and the apartment’. Almost a third of the year was given to learning how to study the site by carefully drawing, photographing and becoming responsive to specific aspects of the landscape. The site or ‘landscape’ was a gravel quarry on a steeply sloping site on the north coast of the Island of Tenerife. We tried to introduce ‘the road’ as a landscape element – a unifying element, something that is communally shared, like the paths that Dimitri Pikionis designed in the vicinity of the Acropolis in Athens which could be seen as the remains of a previous city, or the seeds for a future one. ‘The apartment’ was a way of testing the territorial, topographical proposal and inhabiting it with some site specific exemplary raw ‘shells’ to provoke ideas for presently unknown programmes. In a nutshell, these programmes address issues of specific indeterminacy of architectural space (arq 2/2, pp18-38). We use the term ‘emptiness’, meaning the space between. The Smithsons call this ‘the charged void’.

The emphasis of our research is beginning to shift from the large scale of the vague territories in the urban landscape to the smaller scale of the building ensemble and the building – to the relationships between the large and the small. The premises of architectural space remain: the interest in the infrastructural, the incomplete and the anticipatory; architecture as landscape; materiality as found (and from the shell); the matrix of the connected rooms without corridors, characterized by different proximities and so on. These are exciting ideas. It is wonderful to meet people who share them and who would like to try them in some way.

Both the last two Research Assessment Exercises have supported the idea of design as research. Members of the RAE panel have described aru as a design laboratory. This has given tremendous encouragement and confidence to the University and this year’s outcome – a 3A – was very satisfactory for both aru and for the University as a whole.

What did however come as an unexpected shock was the resulting cut of research funding from the government’s Higher Education Funding Council! The butter is being spread more thinly. It is quite draconian. Whatever else do we need to do?

Florian Beigel and Philip Christou
London

Florian Beigel is Professor of Architecture and Director of the University of North London’s Architecture Research Unit in which Philip Christou also works

Use design as a research yardstick!

Christine Hawley writes (arq 6/1, p5) that true architectural research, particularly that of a highly theoretical kind, is not acknowledged by the government bodies responsible for evaluating an architecture school’s research output – and thereby, its funding.

Pursuing the purely venal objective of securing official approval and government funding, it would surely be irresponsible for any school of architecture to lower itself by appointing staff who can be relied on to carry out the types of activity officially recognized as ‘research’ – ticking all the requisite boxes. That is not research at all; and yet it is what many schools already appear to be doing. Most will agree this is intolerable and dangerous.

Architectural design research constitutes the core activity of any school, and the bulk of its production. What needs to be added to Hawley’s remarks, therefore, and to your accompanying editorial, is that we already have mechanisms in place that function well, and are very accurate in forming a rounded picture of a school’s worth –
primarily on the basis of its design output.

The periodic RIBA validation inspections of schools of architecture, and the annual visits by External Examiners, already provide us with the means for determining the quality of a school's architectural research (by which I mean primarily design) and how much funding should therefore be allocated to it. These organisms can be reformed as necessary, and empowered to determine funding allocations directly, and without reference to other bodies, which never visit schools, and never see their research on design-related issues.

As to the publication and evaluation of this research, most schools already produce at least one publication per year of their most significant work; these publications can be reconfigured and upgraded to meet a general standard, and would thereby become important new vehicles for the diffusion of ideas and information about the progress of architectural design.

Which is to say that we should be optimistic; we already possess, ‘in nuce’, a range of excellent means by which to assess, much more accurately than at present, the true research outputs of UK architecture schools. The other research assessment bodies you mention in your editorial are superfluous to requirements and – as you write – so inaccurate in their evaluations that government ought to be warned about them.

Thomas Muirhead
London

Thomas Muirhead is an architect, writer and academic

Research and the realities of the industry

As a former student of Leslie Martin I well understand that in the UK, architecture’s standing as a research-led University discipline remains as low as ever (arq 5/4, p294). But then I share my own generation’s disbelief about the current state of the Profession and the failure of any architecture school to be awarded the highest rating (5*) in the latest Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The internece misunderstandings between practice and schools of architecture are hardly helpful to the cause: the Profession’s refusal to understand the current plight of schools with regard to resources and the low esteem and status of academic staff and – in the reverse perspective – academia seems oblivious to the cowed posture of large sections of the Profession in a world driven by the imperatives of the government’s Private Finance Initiative (PFI). This more or less symbolizes in a general sense the current client/architect relationship or lack of it in the public realm.

Trying to find a balance between teaching, practice and research is very difficult and those schools that do are very fortunate because it puts them in a position of ascendency. This indicates the awesome differential between the extremes in both practice and academia of those that have and those that have not. A practice like Foster and Partners defines its own thresholds of research at an international level. But which university does Foster use for some of his research needs?

Beyond the technical and scientific so much research in schools of architecture is by its nature imprecise and of little value to the practical world of building – itself undergoing radical change as a result of the Egan report. Large sections of this industry criticize architectural research for its lack of relevance. Is it therefore surprising that the results of the RAE were so lamentable for Architecture when the assessment panel itself was dominated by sectors of the construction industry other than Architecture?

Yet even in the areas of large escalating public sector programmes there is a serious and growing research need which is not identified or is frustrated by the difficulty of matching expertise, talent and promotional interest. Much of this research need lies ‘in between’ Architecture and other disciplines. The Profession does not explicitly encompass the large range of specialisms of a multidisciplinary culture but by the same token schools of architecture do not always take advantage of the multidisciplinary overlaps in their own universities either because of cultural prejudice or the inequalities of shared aspirations. This reveals some of the problems of a competitive environment when so much could be achieved by a more generously shared culture in which the matter in hand should be more important than the credit rating of who does what.

More and more the parameters for research in the industry are determined by a surveyor’s world. The tendency to accept that all things are measurable encroaches even on issues previously regarded as the architect’s prerogative. The endeavours of CABE under Stuart Lipton and Jon Rouse’s leadership have for most architects been seminal but they have also given credence to the notion that design quality can be measured. Such a powerful voice promoting credible assessment criteria for quality in design has an influence that goes beyond a single profession.

Perhaps it was inevitable in this pluralist world that the Profession would marginalize itself within its own industry. Schools must accept a measure of responsibility for this because of their insistence, rightly or wrongly, on remaining in an esoteric cultural context that is beyond the comprehension and the interest of the industry and society of which it is a part. But it tends to be forgotten that the big message in the RIBA’s Review of Education that I chaired was that Architecture is now acknowledged as an academic subject in its own right and 60% of students entering a course in Architecture do not become architects.

Sir Colin Stansfield Smith is a former Royal Gold Medallist and Professor of Architecture at the University of Portsmouth

Look outwards – or slip lower

Your leader (arq 6/1, p3) raised the critical issue of the nature of architectural research and where the responsibility and leadership should rest. You rightly point out that the dilemma for schools of architecture is how to integrate design thinking and research, and whether to see research as arts and design-based or part of the tradition of the physical sciences. Building Futures, which I have recently been asked to chair, is a joint RIBA/Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) initiative focused on looking ahead and understanding the implications of possible future scenarios on strategic policy decisions for architecture and its allied professions. CABE’s recent partnership has given the group additional funding and resources, a greater focus on externalizing its
message and the opportunity to engage with a more diverse group of interests. Building Futures is not an RIBA committee, but a programme of study where my role as chair is to span the interests of the Built Environment with two vice chairmen, one representing the RIBA and the other CABE. One of the four strands of study is professional futures under the direction of Simon Foxell (RIBA), which aims to consider education and professional knowledge. Building Futures has no remit to engage in current policy making.

As a previous member of the 1996 RAE Built Environment Panel, I would offer the following thoughts on Christine Hawley’s letter (arq 6/1, pg). Christine refers to the RAE as a flawed exercise for Architecture. Perhaps it might be viewed as further evidence of the uncomfortable position Architecture finds itself in, having to fit within traditional academic disciplines and research structures. Architecture being a heterogeneous collection of disciplines has never sat comfortably in the world of academic research. The five-year funded course leading from a first degree to a masters degree, does not fit easily with the traditional academic research route, progressing from a first degree to a masters degree, often research based, and then on to postgraduate research. In addition the spectrum of architectural research spans from engineering and the physical sciences (represented by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council) to sociology and economics (Economic and Social Research Council) and the arts and humanities (British Academy). For funding purposes Architecture has fallen within the General Engineering programme of the EPSRC. Christine is right that the leadership for research in the Built Environment has come from departments of construction (one of which was awarded the only 5’s in the Built Environment unit of assessment). This may, however, be as much the fault of poor leadership by architects on the issues facing the wider construction industry as a Machiavellian plot by our construction professionals. Rather than isolating Architecture further, I would suggest the challenge for architecture is to look outwards. The opportunity is to:

- reappraise the career path for researchers in architecture;
- redefine and communicate our very particular understanding of design led research;
- champion a holistic, integrative research approach which uses design to think and reflect;
- argue the case for research across disciplines among the wider research community supported through Construction Industry Council by all the Built Environment professions.

Unless the architectural profession and schools of architecture are prepared to look outwards, our standing in research could slip ever lower. The CABE/RIBA Building Futures initiative can help change our expectations for our professions, their education and the quality and the content of the knowledge base by looking ahead to inform the current debate.  

JOHN Worthington  
London

The RIBA: action at last?  
I received a copy of your letter inviting a response to the issues regarding research and its relationship with practising and teaching architecture. I have resurrected the issue of research within the RIBA through meetings with Vice Presidents, the President and Director General. Yesterday the education committee agreed the setting up of a task force on how research can be addressed – as a way of connecting previous work within the RIBA (eg Future Studies) to practice and architectural education. This group will meet over the summer with the view to reporting back late September.

Unfortunately I will not be Vice President (Education) next year and the Vice President (Practice) will also be changing – so it will incumbent on the two new vice presidents and their departments to progress the matter – which I hope they do, as I see research as a great opportunity for the RIBA to support stronger links between practice and education, leading the profession into the future in a way which could be more informed, more professional and more innovative.

ALAN JONES  
Randalstown, Co Antrim

Stirling’s variability  
Thomas Muirhead’s letter (arq 6/1, pp5-6) raises interesting points concerning Stirling’s ‘variability’ – a quality I for one do not dispute: in my article (arq 5/4, pp333–353) I had chosen to focus on schemes which...
for one reason or another have been less fully revisited than more celebrated icons.

However, the view I expressed over the 'office's' runner-up in the Museum of Scotland competition recognized that, as with the Wallraf Richartz Museum proposal (Cologne 1975, with Ulrich Schaad, Werner Kreiss et al) 'serious intent to rework urban form, more urgent than mere considerations of style and décor … when carried through with erudition and boldness a pursuance of a modern image of the city can be not only believable but highly auspicable'.

I quote from Muirhead's excellent text (Complete Works Vol II) on the St Andrew's Art Centre project (1971). The Edinburgh project fulfils similar aspirations but with much greater civility to the existing museum than the winner ever achieved. It is an interesting footnote that Wilke and Schaad also worked together on the Sackler at Harvard (1986). As Colin Rowe concluded, 'Who, but Stirling?'

All due homage too to Leon Krier whose superb perspective of Olivetti Milton Keynes just had to be on the cover of the issue: who, but Krier? But where is he?

Michael Spens
Crail, Fife

We apologise for the fact that the square format of our cover image meant that the bust of Leon Krier was omitted. The Editors

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