



Remnants of a cloister from a Romanesque cathedral formerly on the site where the late 13th century Cathedral Basilica of Saint Cecilia now stands at Albi, France. Known as 'Vestiges de l'Ancienne Cathédrale', these remnants are at the end of a thin rectangular pool redolent with allusions to the Alhambra and works by Carlo Scarpa (image by author, 2013).



Research, Janus, practice

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This rumination on the relation between research and practice in landscape architecture considers aspects of what genuinely engaging in landscape practice as a researcher would entail. Such engagement would contrast with approaches in which researchers simply claim to be research led or engaging in design research or doing some research to support practice.

Introduction

The ancient deity, Janus, provides a metaphoric bridge between research and practice. Two-headed Janus was understood to face forwards and backwards, usually represented at a door or gateway. On one side of the garden gate in this case is research; on the other, practice. To be clear, the terms are misleading abstractions that can only be labelled with nouns for convenience: one cannot point at research or place it in a box, any more than practice can be loaded onto a handcart. The outcomes of researching might be put in a box and the results brought about through practice may be walked in or photographed. Researching and practising are each carried out by researchers and practitioners and sometimes one of these people goes through the gate and becomes one of the others. Some even change their hats frequently, wander across the threshold or perhaps, to the delight of milliners, are garbed in simultaneous hats.

Research

Researching as it is typically conceptualised is a backward-facing pursuit. Any gathering of research data concerns the past in the sense that data represent some state or thing that existed at least long enough to be examined and the representation we term data to be made. This is so for fleeting occurrences in high-energy physics, for geology, and for behaviour of people in designed environments. By the time a whole research project entailing many acts of researching, data production and collection is designed, funded, conducted, captured in tables, words and images, published and available for use, this project is overtly reporting the past.

Researching aspects of landscape architecture history falls into the research categorisation above, just as conducting research about project management, hydrology or biochemistry, or about people and their behaviour in various environments does. Enumeration of all the areas of researching that might be conducted under the label of landscape research or imported from other disciplines, while illustrating the breadth of landscape issues and possibly provocative, does not challenge the way to think about researching. If all these areas pursue their normal paths and patterns of doing research and undertake it well, findings potentially useful to landscape practitioners will continue to be produced. Some of these findings will be in a form useful to someone who designs, makes and nurtures landscapes.

Most research is not undertaken to specifically assist landscape architects. When they do use ideas and research from further afield, they run the risk of being accused of misunderstanding and misusing it – although on those occasions when such misuse generates wonderful designing, complaint seems churlish. There may be a suite of agreed activities sensibly termed design research, or often design methodology, the latter having a chequered history of some 60 years since the first formal conference in London (Jones and Thornley, 1963). This activity has often been concerned with almost algorithmic ways of designing and is intended to avoid the art and whimsy that designers engage in. It must be fun for the designers of the (usually prescriptive) design methods.

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Let us conduct a thought experiment in which, as researchers, we decide to test paving materials for wear, slip and strength characteristics. This will involve mechanical testing, hoses, perhaps purpose-designed machinery, a supply of leaves, funding, facilities, comparative measurements, time, and recording and representation of findings. This is where there is a likely mismatch between research findings and the needs of practitioners. Someone making design decisions and wishing to select from a range of available materials requires the information to clearly provide comparable data on these materials and circumstances of use to make informed evaluations on whatever criteria they deem appropriate. The research project outlined would be fully conventional research; to be useful to the landscape practitioner, it must be conceived and reported in a manner that allows comparative and translatable findings that facilitate decisions. This is a requirement of any, and all, data of this ilk. Practitioners might advise researchers on the forms in which to produce data.

Practice

Practising is forward facing. Any design practice is concerned with making a new reality. To do so, practitioners must typically negotiate with clients, operators, various agents and authorities and manage, even perform, an intent-driven process to transform some piece of the world in such a way that the outcome is more or less intended and has a broadly conceptualised, expected future evolution.

Landscaping one's own garden might circumvent the need to deal with too many others. It can create a new reality and allow experimentation, but not much income. It offers the ability to constantly tinker, to shape and shepherd the evolving processes in a way not normally expected in a project for a client. Here, the practitioner can be characterised as a researcher – as conducting an experiment and finding out. This might be an ongoing inquiry.

Remodelling

What if all landscape practitioners saw themselves as behaving in this manner? It requires remodelling to consider oneself, and to present to a client, as a practitioner engaged in *inquiring through doing* rather than as a person with instrumental professional knowledge and a suite of considered propositions that will lead to a design for possible future implementation. The term 'inquiring through doing' is a reasonable descriptor for researching – it suitably abstracts the activities and approaches that we might think of as included when we conduct research. If a practitioner assumes the mantle of researcher, what changes? Simply claiming to be research-driven is insufficient and, although it might lead to some attitudinal differences, little reconceptualising or restructuring of modes and methods of practising necessarily results.

Two issues need to be thought through here. The most immediate is about the ways in which existing practitioners might learn to be researchers. The second, with a longer-term impact, concerns the education of landscape architects, which it would be necessary to reshape and rethink within the existing techno-rational framework of instrumental professional courses offered at tertiary level. Not that adopting researching as a mode of practising is to step outside this framework, but it both changes the emphasis on where knowledge is acquired and potentially harnesses knowledges produced through doing rather than through receiving from authoritative sources and could thus sneak into unmapped territories – especially if the knowings of assorted stakeholders are absorbed into the researcher's knowings.

First, consider individual practitioners, probably working in (small) offices: their daily activities need to begin to encompass critical reviewing of prior work. What can be learnt from it? On what grounds can it be evaluated, and the understandings gleaned from this evaluation formed into a path for actions immediately and in the future? Any evaluation is conducted against a set of views or beliefs of what is right or appropriate and this needs to be coherently expressed for a practitioner and an office or a group within a larger one. Easy to write here, fiendish to do in a real way that means something agreed to

everyone and avoids diagrams of low-thought circles connected by lines with arrow heads indicating everything is related to everything. At a meta level, perhaps, the set of views and beliefs will be drawn from a concept of the project of landscape architecture. A practitioner who holds that this project is restorative will employ different evaluative criteria to one who considers landscape architecture has an urgent role to play in avoiding planetary catastrophe, and be at odds with one who simply seeks to serve the needs of clients and key stakeholders well.

Initially, it is difficult to find time and money to return to prior work and conduct proper evaluations of it. Fairly informal assessments need to be made. When approaches, patterns of operation, materials and ways of doing things are used and repeated, ways of testing them and learning from them – producing knowledge for future use – need to be built into the process as an individual or a group of researching practitioners. This will also lead to evolution and refinement of a constantly scrutinised view of landscape architecture feeding back into an evaluation of actions. Fundamentally this is about building on prior activities, whether they are characterised as traditional practice or as practising through researching. The formal and established tools for this undertaking cluster around forms of post-occupancy evaluation – ranging from construction science through to behavioural science approaches. Prior work is categorised as a prior built experiment, the outcome of which provides new knowledge as the basis on which to conduct another experiment. The research findings are thus cumulative and hopefully provide negative feedback, establishing a form of cybernetic control for the next research experiment, rather than positively contributing to moving the system in which the researcher is embedded (at the same time as operating on it), away from a desirable path.

While the actions are those of a researcher, they also foreground the ethical questions of acting. Appropriate professional behaviour was once deemed to be acting in the interests of one's client; thereafter, various stakeholders were added, including anyone who might consider themselves affected, and subsequently other life forms and inorganic systems. There is an ethics of research and action thus raised. Should either researchers or others judge research, design and implementation actions by their outcomes or consequences, or are the rightness of the actions themselves of greater import? A balancing of these may be difficult in circumstances such as working for, or with, people who are suspicious of professional services. Predominantly, it appears that in designing in areas such as those of concern to landscape, it has been the realm of consequential ethics (where the outcomes receive evaluation, criticism or plaudits) that is foregrounded, not the realm of the debatable inherent rightness of decisions.

Both the outcomes of researching and the designs for intended landscapes have representational issues of scale and type. (This is similar to other disciplines: composers use scores to represent unheard music; physicists use equations to represent the outcomes of experiments; and aerodynamicists use computational fluid dynamics to represent the flow of gases over surfaces. Further, each of these is arguably more abstracted and distant than maps, plans and colours on paper or screens.) Deployed together, the two types of description offer a rich power lacking from either one: that of the researcher melded with that of the possibly more poetic designer offers a whole not available in either alone.

A key difference between researchers and practitioners currently is their acceptance of outcomes. The history and philosophy of science literature has numerous examples over centuries of researchers finding that the world does not behave as they expected when designing an experiment. Such revelations can be regarded as a valid scientific result. Practitioners, however, are expected to deliver an outcome for their client; potentially not the best outcome as it is delivered within a framework of time, budget, legislation, available materials, labour, talent – the constraints are myriad. It is judged on a value scale whereas researchers aspire to be searching for an explanation of the way some portion of the world functions. (It is tempting to claim they are searching for the truth, but sciences keep revising their models, and past and present history shows real scientists are not above fabricating their results.)

Maybe both researchers and design practitioners should be content with aiming to deliver the best they are able to with their personal knowings and disciplinary states of knowledge. Any practitioner self-remodelling as envisaged needs to consider the question of whether the potential unmooring from the comparative safety of prior practice behaviours and knowledges is personally desirable or promises a valuable future.

Formal education

Simple online scrutiny of the outlines of landscape architecture courses in Australia and New Zealand conducted in June 2023 shows a leaning toward design studios with technical, theoretical and cultural subjects at each level and a varying number of electives. Some courses are master level, only admitting students from selected backgrounds. Some mention research methods, and design research within studios is foregrounded in one. A rich reformulation of curricula and pedagogical approaches would be necessary to truly adopt a model of practitioner as researcher within tertiary education across a wide span of practitioners.

As these courses stand, they attest to the excitingly (in)coherent realm of knowledge around landscape architecture, drawing as it necessarily does from many areas (like most design activities) and operating across a diverse arena. No practitioner can be educated to conduct detailed research or display expertise across this wide territory; it is unlikely an accurate map of it could be assembled to cover all the possible byways landscape architects might travel in their search for useful knowledge. As researchers, this is confounding, although, because most designers are familiar with the idea of designing being held to be some manner of synthesising activity (given its long and challenging history as part of design methodologies), can we imagine research in this area operating similarly?

Conclusion?

It is difficult to prescribe what could be concluded from the above rumination because essentially an experiment is proposed. It is not possible to foretell how it would really be conducted, over what duration and with how much similarity by each researching group. Who is to evaluate the results? Can we know if everyone affected, and everything effected, would be 'happier' and 'better' than if practitioners continued along similar garden paths and avoided passing under the head of Janus? But perched up here atop the garden wall looking into the domains of researchers and practitioners, I think it would be valuable to try.

About the author



Emeritus Professor Peter Downton was previously Professor of Design Research at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. He researched the ways teenagers (for UNESCO) and then families (as a research fellow at the University of Melbourne) used their urban neighbourhoods, then moved to RMIT University in 1977 to teach design studios, giving lectures and seminars on the relation areas such as behavioural ecology, philosophy and assorted human sciences have to designing. He headed the Architecture Department from 1983 to 1986 (and finally submitted the PhD started prior to RMIT). He

was foundation Head, School of Architecture and Design 1997 to 2001, then Research Director until 2006. From 1990 he ran an ongoing postgraduate seminar on research methods – specifically emphasising practice-based researching – for a wide range of designers. He has been chief investigator with others on several Australian Research Council grants, written widely on design research and maintained enthusiastic photographic and model-making practices. (See peterdownton.com.) He started postgraduate supervision in 1975 and has continued to do so in his retirement. (Image with permission from Marion Pitt.)

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