DESIGN RESEARCH IN PRACTICE: CAN IT BE SCIENTIFIC AS WELL AS RESPECTABLE?

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1.0 Introduction

Architects, especially those who do their own brief preparation or programming, often find themselves in direct communication with individuals, social groups, and organisations who use their design products. Such communication serves a number of purposes. The one which concerns us in this paper is that of generating theory about man-environment relations for application to immediate design problems and possible generalisations for future situations. We define this theory-generating involvement between designers and users as "design research".

The aim of this paper is to discuss the nature of design research in practice as we have experienced it, and to assess its value in comparison with other forms of research, with particular reference to the following criteria:

- effectiveness in producing theory which can be applied to the solution of design problems;
- respectability; that is, its ability to transcend purely commercial or proprietory objectives;
- science; whether and in what sense it may be regarded as scientific.

2.0 The nature of design research in practice

2.1 Choice of research setting

Although the design practitioner may be able to exercise some choice over the type of building and type of client he designs for, he may have much less choice in any particular case over variables affecting the nature of the research, such as the structure of the user organisation, the degree to which he will be admitted within it to conduct his research, and as a consequence of this, what research methods are feasible. This is a reverse of the situation idealised by academic social science, in which the objective of theory testing dictates a choice of research situations which are structured in particular ways and amenable to the application of particular methodology.

The researcher in practice does not generally have access to the 'pure' conditions of the research laboratory favoured by the academic social scientist. He is unable to abstract himself from the context of application of his research, even if he should want to, because he is either also the designer, or working alongside the designer, sharing his objectives and work-role.

2.2 Direct access to data

The design researcher's closeness to the applied problem does however give him certain advantages which may not be enjoyed by the academic researcher. The researcher has a wide range of reference to relevant data, and direct access to the decision-making process in which his research results will be applied. This places the research questions in sharp focus. Precise solutions must be found quickly, and a rapid turnover of projects disciplines the researcher to a quick processing of ideas.

2.3 Data-led research

Gergen (1979) contrasts Rationalist and Empiricist approaches to social science, and predicts a strong revival of Rationalism. A Rationalist approach stresses the subordination of empirical fact-gathering to cognitive theorising, and sees the function of empirical work as to illustrate and enrich theory, rather than to generate it. But the design researcher in practice has limited time for abstract theorising, and is apparently engaged in a distinctly empirical enterprise, in which theorising is led by large-scale data collection. Data which is not of immediate relevance to the short-term problem tends to be set aside, and time for further analysis and reflection is hard to find.

2.4 Theory testing

In contrast to the dictates of empirical science however, the design researcher in practice is usually unable to test a theory systematically across a variety of situations, using statistical sampling procedures. He is more likely to be involved in the intensive study of single cases - organisations or individuals for whom he is designing - and whatever confidence he may have in his theories must derive from the succession of cases with which in the course of his work he finds himself involved. In this he is similarly placed to other kinds of practitioner, e.g. the medical practitioner.

2.5 Research objectives

The design researcher may be faced with conflicting objectives. Once he becomes involved with an organisation, he often finds a plurality of factions within it, with varying objectives which are not primarily scientific. In addition the designer is likely to have his own objectives to pursue. In this kind of 'action research' situation the designer researcher in practice finds it difficult to take the neutral stance dictated by his scientific training. He is inevitably immersed in the negotiation and resolution of conflicting objectives.

3.0 Design research under scrutiny

3.1 Conjecture-test model

In spite of appearances, our own experience suggests that the design researcher is not merely engaged in a-theoretical data-gathering, but in a research enterprise that conforms to the conjecture-test model for design research proposed by Hillier et al. (1976).

This is a Rationalist model which asserts the importance of cognitive schemes as the essential subject matter of science. It does not question the fact that the empirical world is pre-structured, but focusses on the nature of that pre-structuring. The function of design research according to this model, is to provide information which can modify the designer's mental stock of design solutions to concord more closely with reality. The research process must test the designer's conjecture and feed back the results in a form which is useful for revising it.

Our own experience is that the design research process finds itself dealing not only with the conjectures of the designer, but with those of other parties to the design process as well. A plurality of research objectives is paralleled by a plurality of design conjectures which may be expressed at a variety of levels of discourse, and often in terms of physical design. This plurality of conjectures is an important part of the process of design research, and cannot be ignored. Even though the design researcher may think that his involvement with the designer and his client is a process of abstract data collection, our claim is that he is in reality involved in a process of communication and negotiation of pre-structured schemes of the world, and that if he recognises this he will both be better equippped to find a successful solution to the design problem and may regard himself as engaged in a recognisably worthwhile research endeavour. Design is not the prerogative of designers, but, as Lawrence (1980) points out, involves a transaction between different groups of people with different goals and values.

An example will be useful in clarifying these ideas. A recent project in which the authors were engaged consisted of the consultative design of the interior of a large new warehouse. The design process started

with consultation through small group discussions of a large sample of the future workforce. A number of important factors "pre-structured" these consultations, such as a knowledge of the existing buildings, design pre-conceptions for the new building held by the company management, and the designers' own pre-conceptions of what they wished to achieve. During the course of these meetings, discussion ranged freely over whatever issues the participants thought were relevant, and as is commonly found in such situations, many aspects of work besides the physical environment were raised.

One particular issue causing great concern and contention was the nature of provision in the new warehouse of recreational facilities for employees. A difference of view emerged on this issue between the management, and the work force. Managers desired a single centralised and formal recreation area where employees could sit and take refreshments during breaks from work, while shopfloor workers preferred the arrangement they were used to, consisting of several smaller, informal break areas scattered around the building.

Analysis of the discussions about this issue indicated that it was closely connected to questions about supervision, about control, and about differing views or conjectures, concerning the role of the production worker. At this level of discourse, it became clear that the designers, who were also the researchers, had pre-structured ideas of their own. Their stance was not that of neutral fact-gatherers, but advocates committed to a particular view of the world. Figure 1 illustrates the various conjectures held in this situation.

3.2 Consultative design process

The adoption of a conjecture-test model to explain this kind of design research process shifts the focus of the research back from empirical data collection to an emphasis on theory, and the projection of theories into situations where they can be illustrated, modified or enriched by empirical experience.

Hillier et al. in setting out their conjectural model, imply that design conjectures are resistant to change during the design process. Pre-structuring occurs remotely from actual design activity.

> "A complete account of the designer's operations during design would still not tell us where the solution came from".

But this assumes that the design process is itself remote from the pre-structured solutions of other parties to the design process, such as the user. Our own experience is that research methods which bring together the designer and the potential users of his design in discourse and negotiation as part of the design process are effective means of modifying or enriching the designer's conjecture. Equally, a consultative design process is the key to allowing the designer to fulfil his role as educator, and to change or develop the conjectures of the users.

FIGURE 1: CONJECTURES FOR DESIGN OF A NEW WAREHOUSE

LEVEL OF CONJECTURE	PLANT MANAGEMENT	SHOPFLOOR WORKERS	DESIGN RESEARCHERS
Attitudes to the Company	Shared pride in company		
The role of production worker	Theory of 'Scientific Management' • treat employees as isolated individuals; • assume sole motivation is money; • limit task variety and challenge; • strict disciplines	An efficient producer • concerned about quality of product; • motivated by social aspects of work.	'Human Resources theory • encourage job satisfaction through variety, autonomy and knowledge of results; • accept social nature of work; • worker as artisan.
The physical environment	Smart, clean, colourful warehouse		Beautiful surroundings
	Concentrate resources on work system design, ergonomic efficiency, high security.	Efficient work system; job variety and interest.	Use of building for symbolic communication.
	Formal, public recreation spaces.	Informal, semi-private recreation spaces	
	NEGOTIATION AND TRANSACTION		
THE NEW BUILDING	Smart, colourful environment. Formal public recreation spaces but localized not centralised.		
FIRST OCCUPANCY	Attempts to control workers' territoriality.	Territorial expression.	Monitoring. Design improvement.

Instrumentally, design consultations of the type described are an effective forum for the two-way exchange of expert knowledge; the designer's knowledge about design; the user's knowledge about potential patterns of use. Scientifically, conjectures at various levels of discourse are exposed to test. Politically, varying goals and interests may be negotiated. Figure 1 shows the various levels of discourse at which consultations over the new warehouse were conducted. While differences of interest emerged in discussion of employees' break areas, at the level of attitudes to the company, management and workers were united in a shared pride in the company's achievement which they felt deserved greater recognition by the world outside. At the physical design level of discourse, this common feeling found expression in a universally positive response to the designers' proposal to create a striking environment by using strong colours and large bold graphics. This yielded information of both short and long term value to the designers. In the short-term it provided support for a bold conjecture. But by showing that the response to colour was also a response to the particular situation the company was in, it suggested a more general theory for longer term use - namely, that environmental 'needs' are not fixed or determined, but owe a lot to organisational context.

3.3 Design research and social change

Negotiations and transactions which occurred in relation to the design of employees' break areas illustrate the political aspect of design research in practice. The designers came up with a solution which went beyond either the management's desire for a single formalised break area, or the workforce's inclination to create their own informal "nests". A number of specially designed break areas distributed at various points around the warehouse were proposed; this solution was accepted after negotitation. In subsequent monitoring of the occupied building it appeared to be tolerably satisfactory to all parties.

Design research in practice has sometimes been criticised for its unquestioning support of proprietory objectives, and an unwillingness or inability to challenge the status quo (Lipman et al. 1978). It is argued that "he who pays the piper calls the tune". But our experience on the warehouse and on other projects contradicts this rather static view of client organisations. Besides their plurality, organisations are permeable and in constant flux. Objectives change in process of negotiation in the same way that design conjectures change. Once the design researcher is involved in negotiation, he is inevitably bound up in a process of organisational change.

Knight and Campbell (1980) have identified three roles for the design researcher:

> "technician, giving service to a contracting decision-maker;
> facilitator, negotiating goals and criteria within existing social power relationships; and
> instigator, articulating and treating seriously perspectives,

social relationships, and goals not represented by decision-makers or by the outcomes of social negotiations."

They discuss the difficulties of achieving an instigator role, and their view of the technician role as "classic" is reflected in other critiques, for example Harris and Lipman's (1980) condemnation of environmental psychology as generally "utilitarian", concerned with finding out how things are. Our own view is that the potential of the design process, particularly if it is participative, for bringing about organisational change, is often underestimated, and that the designer is frequently able to bring a radical perspective to the design process and thereby instigate change.

The way in which power is exercised does not appear to accord with the Elitist theory of social power, implied by Lipman et al. (op. cit.) which postulates that power is exercised by an elite, whose interests inevitably conflict with those of the mass of users, and that this power structure can only be changed through major structural upheaval. Pluralism argues that power is distributed in more diffuse and complex ways than this, and is in a constant state of flux. Even minor interventions in the power structure, such as that which may be affected through design research, can have far-reaching effects. For example it is our conclusion that the experience of participating in the design process exerts a marked effect on the attitudes of the participants, raising their expectations of further involvement in the decision-making process.

Furthermore, physical design serves as a powerful 'trace' of social and political reality. Symbolically, the physical environment conveys much information about the distribution of power within the user organisation, and can be used as a powerful communications tool between one group and another. In the example of the warehouse, the physical form and distribution of employees' break areas say much about the power structure within the organisation, and about the company's attitudes towards its workforce. A consultative design process which is able to negotiate a design modification of the type described, will set up reverberations in the power structure of the organisation which may have lasting effects.

3.4 Post-positivist science

The usefulness of a theory to the design researcher in practice is in its power to explain the real world outcomes of the designer's conjectures, and to predict future outcomes. This emphasis on explanatory power highlights the importance of a theory's content, as opposed to its form. Conversely, the Positivist school of philosophy, which still exerts a strong influence in the world of design research (Harris and Lipman, op. cit.), emphasized form. The theorist should take an objective stance, from which he might observe the world of

of 'facts' in a value-free way. As we have seen, the design researcher is neither able nor willing to work in this way.

Positivism has however, now been largely rejected by philosophers of science, and replaced by a 'post-positivist' school which sets much greater store by theory content. No rigid distinction is made between 'facts' and 'values', and it is recognised that the theorist inevitably introduces his own values to the research process. The post-positivist stresses that the scientist should make his values explicit so that they may form part of the context in which his research results are interpreted (Israel 1972). Theories are to be judged on internal criteria of their explanatory power, rather than external criteria of research method (Lakatos 1970).

The discipline of psychology has been slow to recognise post-positivist criteria for science, but in Britain at least the ideas of Harré and others are now gaining some hold (Harré and Secord 1972; Harré 1980). In other disciplines like anthropology the importance of a theory's content rather than its form in determining scientific value has always been stressed. Social psychologists are now adopting research methods which anthropologists have used for a century, e.g. ethnographic involvement of the researcher with the culture being studied.

Similar criteria for science have also long been established in another area of social science, the socio-technical movement. Originating at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the 1940s, socio-technical theory views organisations as socio-technical systems, whose various components are in some kind of structural balance. Its clinical origins are evident in the analogy between an organisation and a biological organism, conceived in terms of health or pathology. The strength of this analogy has frequently been questioned, and this may be a weakness of the theory (Silverman 1972). But socio-technical research has always been strongly committed to "abstracted empiricism", which is similar to the commitment of the design researcher in practice to abstracting useful theory from the data which he gathers during the design process. Socio-technical research shares with anthropological fieldwork and design research in practice, a close involvement with the research situation, and a focus on ethnographic data collection.

Socio-technical theory is indeed very applicable to an understanding of relations between an organisation and its physical environment. In the example of the warehouse, useful theory for application to the design of employees' break areas had to take account not just of the physical and technical organisation, but of the power structure, management style, attitudes and values prevailing in the Company. The consultative methods used allowed exploration of all these factors, as well as being appropriate for the communication and negotiation of design conjectures.

3.5 The richness of verbal discourse

Such consultative methods rely on verbal discourse as primary data. In social psychology such data are generally termed 'accounts'. Their justification as valid data, in the face of their rejection by Positivist philosophy, has been argued by Harré (op.cit.) Critics of the use of accounts data stress the varying interpretations which can be placed on what people have to say, and the dangers of taking accounts at face value as valid indicators of other levels of social reality. Such dangers undoubtedly exist, and the development of techniques for the interpretation and refinement of accounts data must be a prime skill for the design researcher to develop.

Harré has coined the term 'ethogenics' to describe the science of developing social theory based on 'accounts'. Some progress has been made in developing this science by its proponents, and the value of 'accounts' data as an indicator of underlying social reality has been strongly asserted. The claim of ethogenics is that the social actors' own conscious interpretations of their situation should be the prime source of data for understanding and explaining what is socially and psychologically relevant in that situation. Harré strongly criticises the sub-discipline of 'hermeneutics' in this respect, which, in contrast to ethogenics, proposes to reveal deeper meanings which are hidden from the actors' consciousness.

Such meanings are consonant with the concept of 'false-consciousness' in sociology. A good example of hermeneutic design research is the office evaluation work of Lipman et al. (op. cit.) Office users' own accounts of their situation were interpreted as supporting an Elitist theory of the distribution of social power in organisations, even though at face value they appeared to support a more pluralist interpretation. Ethogenics asserts that such interpretations should be treated as rival accounts to those given by the actors themselves, which must survive or perish according to their usefulness; they should not be given priority over the actors' own accounts.

> "That which cannot be expressed in the most refined descriptive instrument we possess must be treated with suspicion until it can be satisfactorily defended as psychologically or socially real".
>
> (Harré, op. cit. p. 48)

Assuming that appropriate techniques can be found for analysing and interpreting accounts data, the ethogenic approach would seem to be particularly suitable for applying the theoretical orientation of structural anthropology to design research, as advocated by Lawrence (1982). The linguistic analogy drawn from Levi-Strauss (1968), suggests that the explanation of social behaviour should make reference to the deep structure of meaning which may be inferred from the surface structure of overt behaviour. Lawrence showed how the use patterns and meanings associated with domestic space in different cultures could be explained by reference to social and cultural history.

In a similar way some of our own design research projects, such as the one described, explore through the medium of accounts the various levels of deep structure which have power to explain surface patterns of organisational space use. In the warehouse study, behavioural reactions to the provision of employee break areas could not be understood without reference to the various viewpoints on the role of the production worker held by management, workforce, and designer. Such data are rich in theoretical value to the designer, and as such would seem to meet the scientific criteria established above. Perhaps we may be allowed to turn around the famous maxim of Kurt Lewin in order to do justice to their value:

"There is nothing so theoretical as good practice".

4.0 Conclusions

The connotations of "scientific" are eminently "respectable". Those of "practice" are less so. Design research has been crippled by a rejection of practice in order to achieve the responsibility of science.

What we are arguing is radically different. Working as we do in a world of action, seeing everyday design invention, user negotiation, and above all constant change, we have proposed an approach to design research which makes a virtue of what have long been considered the defects of design practice.

Design ideas, conjectures, are everyone's property. All of us, not just designers, trade in them, test them, negotiate with them, develop them. What we propose as the basis for an improved theory for design research is to reject the rigidity of the methods and ideals of positivist science. Facts cannot be set apart from values. Instead we argue that in common with developments in other parts of the social sciences a new kind of theory can be developed which acknowledges that designers and users have many perspectives, that these perspectives change, that change takes place as part of a process of exchange and negotiation, that design conjectures are part of a shared and developing language. Such a theory, not only breathes life in to design research but it confers a new significance on design.

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SOCIAL RESEARCH IN DESIGN PRACTICE: CAN IT BE SCIENTIFIC AS WELL AS RESPECTABLE?

Abstract

This paper addresses some of the issues relating to the conduct of social research of the built environment from the base of a commercial design practice. The authors have been engaged in such an enterprise for some years, and propose to discuss problems of theory and method in relation to a variety of case studies. Against the great advantages of action research e.g. superabundance of data, direct access to the process of decision making in design, rapid turnover of projects, and above all sharp focus of research enquiry, certain disadvantages must be balanced. Moreover, action research in the environment raises difficult theoretical questions.

1. A frequent feature of research in practice is the inability to choose wich research problems to study, or to set up artificial or experimental situations according to the psychological convention. Research is 'data-led', in the sense that data is continually being collected in the course of work, and to some extent determines the pattern of subsequent analysis. While data-led research is frequently condemned as over empiricist, we qrgue the case made by anthropologists like Margaret Mead, that good theory can emerge from any situation if appropiate research methods are used, and that the distinction between 'pure' and 'applied' research is neither valid nor relevant.
2. A second issue concerns research objectives. To what extent is the researcher in practice able to transcend commercial objectives and adopt an advocate's role in which the interests of all parties to a design transaction are represented? We argue that such research can bring about social and organisational change to a larger extent than is commonly supposed.
3. A further issue concerns the methods which are appropiate for research in practice. Studying the processes of design and use of building implies the need to consider problems whole and to focus on the social realities perceived by the participants. Certain research methods and techniques are more suitable than others in this respect.
4. Finally, there is the question of whether research in practice can be 'scientific'. What is meant by this term? The positivistic distinction between objective and subjective data is still the most common criterion for defining science, but some theorist have argued for different criteria for social science. We examine these and show how they apply to research in practice.

INVESTIGACIÓ SOCIAL EN LA PRACTICA DE DISSENY: ¿POT SER CIENTIFIC A MES DE RESPECTABLE?

Resum

Aquesta communicació tracta d'alguns dels temes relacionats amb la direcció

de la investigació social de l'entorn construit des de la base d'una pràctica de disseny comercial. Els autors han estat posats en aquest afany durant alguns anys i proposen de discutir problemes de teoria i mètode en relació a una varietat d'estudi de casos. Davant els grans avantatges de la investigació, per exemple superabundància de dades, accés directe a llocs de decisions de disseny, gran moviment de projectes i, sobretots una aguda orientació de la investigació, alguns desavantatges han d'ésser equilibrats. Per una altra banda, la investigació de l'entorn planteja algunes preguntes teòriques difícils.

1. Una característica de la investigació actual és la incapacitat d'escollir un problema d'investigació per a estudiar o establir situacions experimentals segons la convenció psicològica. La investigació està "dirigida per les dades", en el sentit que les dades són recollides ininterrompidament durant el treball, i fins a un cert punt determina el model subsegüent d'anàlisi. Mentre que la investigació dirigida per les dades és freqüentment condemnada per ser massa empírica, nosaltres defenem l'argument dels atropòlegs com Margaret Mead que la bona teoria pot sorgir de qualsevol situació si s'utilitzen els mètodes d'investigació adequats, i que la distinció entre la investigació "pura" i "aplicada" no és ni vàlida ni aplicable.
2. Un segon tema es refereix als objectius de la investigació. ¿Fins a quin punt els investigadors actuals poden trascendir els objectius comercials i adoptar el paper de defensors, en el qual l'interès de totes les parts en una transacció de disseny és representada? Defensem que aquesta investigació pot originar més canvis socials i d'organització dels que normalment ens imaginem.
3. Un altre tema es refereix als mètodes adequats a la investigació actual. Estudiar els processos de disseny i la utilització dels edificis implica la necessitat de considerar els problemes globalment i d'enfocar les realitats socials percebudes pels participants. En aquest sentit determinats mètodes i tècniques d'investigació són més adequades que altres.
4. Finalment tenim la questió de si la investigació actual pot ser "científica". Què es vol dir amb aquest terme? La distinció possibilista entre dades objectives i subjectives continua sent el criteri més comú per definir la ciència, però els teòrics han defensat un criteri distint per a les ciències socials. Això ho examinem i demostrem com s'aplica a la investigació actual.

INVESTIGACION SOCIAL EN LA PRACTICA DE DISEÑO: ¿PUEDE SER CIENTIFICA ADEMAS DE RESPETABLE?

Resumen
Esta comunicación trata algunos de los temas relacionados con la dirección de la investigación social del entorno construido desde la base de una

práctica de diseño comercial. Los autores han estado inmersos en este empeño durante algunos años y proponen discutir problemas de teoria y método en relación a una variedad de estudios de casos. Frente a las grandes ventajas de la investigación, por ejemplo superabundancia de datos, acceso directo a puestos de decisiones en diseño, gran movimiento de proyectos y sobre todo un agudo enfoque de la investigación, algunas desventajas deben ser equilibradas. Por otra parte, la investigación del entorno plantea algunas preguntas teóricas difíciles.

1. Una característica de la investigación actual es la incapacidad de escoger un problema de investigación para estudiar o establecer situaciones experimentales según la convención psicológica. La investigación está "dirigida por los datos", en el sentido de que los datos son recogidos ininterrumpidamente en el transcurso del trabajo, y hasta cierto punto determina el modelo subsiguiente de análisis. Mientras que la investigación dirigida por los datos es frecuentemente condenada por ser demasiado empírica, nosotros sostenemos el argumento de los atropólogos como Margaret Mead, que la buena teoría puede surgir de cualquier situación si se utilizan los métodos de investigación adecuados, y que la distinción entre la investigación "pura" y "aplicada" no es válida ni aplicable.
2. Un segundo tema se refiere a los objetivos de la investigación. ¿Hasta que punto los investigadores actuales pueden transcender los objetivos comerciales y adoptar el papel de defensores en el cual los intereses de todas las partes en una transacción de diseño es representada? Sostenemos que esta investigación puede originar más cambios sociales y de organización de los que normalmente nos imaginamos.
3. Otro tema se refiere a los métodos adecuados a la investigación actual. El estudiar los procesos de diseño y la utilización de los edificios implica la necesidad de considerar los problemas globalmente y enfocar las realidades sociales percibidas por los participantes. En este respecto determinados métodos y técnicas de investigación son más adecuadas que otras.
4. Finalmente, está la cuestión de si la investigación actual puede ser "científica". ¿Que se quiere decir con este término? La distinción positivista entre datos objetivos y subjetivos sigue siendo el criterio más común para definir a la ciencia, pero los teóricos han abogado un criterio distinto para las ciencias sociales. Esto lo examinamos y demostramos como se aplica en la investigación actual.