# A DEBATE about RE-SEARCH in ARCHITEC-TURAL DE-SIGN

# DE-SIGN-DRIVEN RESEARCH

Architectural research meets the general criteria of originality, significance, and rigour. It produces forms of output and discourse that are proper for disciplinary practice, making it discussable, communicable, and useful to relevant audiences. It is validated through panels of experts who collectively cover the range of disciplinary competencies addressed by the work.

# REFLECTING ON RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

# ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AND RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN RESEARCH

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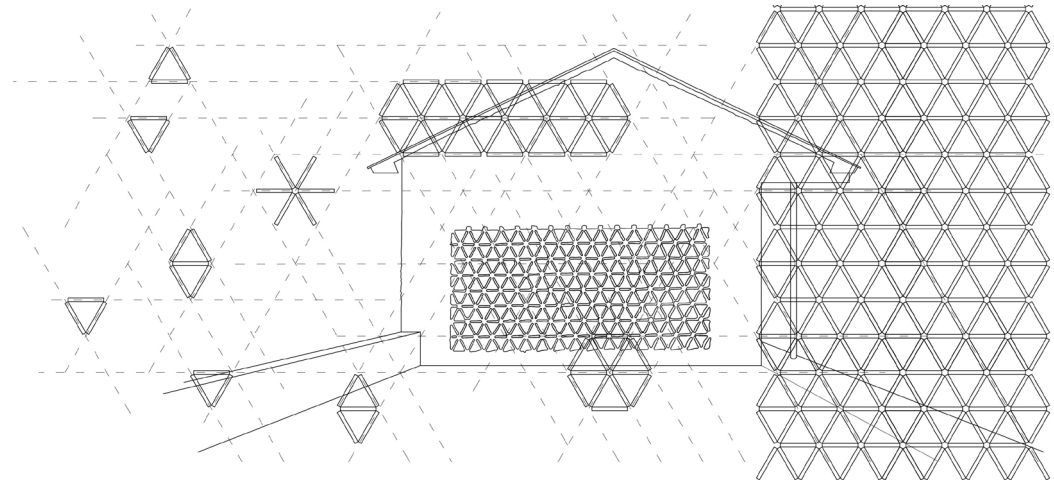
Manipulating tectonics. Images freely elaborated from the west façade of the restaurant of the
Xihe Cereals and Oils Museum and Village Activity Center, designed by 3andwich Design/He Wei
Studio.

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The question of where architectural design and research in architectural design research stand is a divisive issue among insiders and experts, whether they advocate for a professional-oriented approach or a theoretical, self-reflective one. The vast and diverse range of viewpoints makes it challenging to create complete and consistent taxonomies, akin to what Kurt Gödel demonstrated a century ago with his incompleteness theorems, applied initially to logical systems, which were later extended to other fields.

Nonetheless, it is possible to identify dialectical tenets that characterize the panorama of architectural design research.

For instance, the role of design within architectural research is a primary and crucial point of contention, leading to the formation of groups that see it as an essential component and others that believe architectural research encompasses everything but design. Interestingly, this division does not apply to research in professional practice. A professional might argue that the quality of their architecture stems solely from subjective sensitivity, resolved through intuitive decisions and the ability to master the construction process. Alternatively, one might rely on preliminary investigations to inform design choices; in any case, an activity of research – on previous experience, colleagues' works, contemporary trends, recent technologies, materials' features, to mention some basic items, remains embedded in the design process itself. This integration can manifest in various ways, rarely codified by scientific dogma, and often reflects the architect's unique position within a market system governed by specific rules and constraints.

Another point of contention involves the autonomy and heteronomy of architectural research, specifically the extent to which it is permeable to other disciplines. This permeability leads to the hybridisation of interests, methods, benchmarks, and performativity. The debate centres on whether architecture serves merely as a tool for other forces or stands as a self-sufficient field of application and speculation, revealing a wide spectrum of positioning. This issue should not be confused with the authoriality of architecture, which is commonly present in both cases. Also, in this case, the boundaries of architectural domains are continually renegotiated throughout the different phases of research—from the point of entry to the investigation method to the formulation of original results. This variability affects the assessment of the quality of architectural design research, an area where differing viewpoints and criteria are influenced by the academic systems and funding mechanisms of individual countries. Once again, designing can be viewed as an essential or complementary activity, opening a space for debate on the impacts of architectural design research. The discussion extends to whether research should address issues strictly within the discipline or broader societal issues, including those related to the discipline.

I found this condition epitomised in a question posed by John Lin in an article titled "The Paradox of Architecture",

published in "Domus". He questioned, "What can an architect do in a place with no need for architects?" referring to design practice in Chinese rural areas (2013, 56). As a founder of the collective Rural Urban Framework (RUF), Lin initiated an empirical process of rediscovering the ontology of architectural practice by working in places and with communities without defined commissions. This approach paved the way for a design and research strategy centred on incrementality, which basically entails a constant preparedness to deliver design solutions in ever-changing societal conditions, from clients to users, from budgets to programs, and from materials to labour. Instead of delivering abaci of design solutions, this means thinking of architecture as an act so rooted and essential that it is impossible to renounce it and, at the same time, to let it adapt to circumstantial changes. RUF's actions addressed localized challenges but eventually provided new insights into the discipline. Joshua

Bolchover, the other founding partner of RUF, conducted research ten years later on the urbanization of nomadic people in Mongolia. The transition from transient to permanent habitation offered an ideal opportunity to explore new forms of settlement from a typological perspective. This method embraced empiricism and accepted "productive failures" to test new living schemes realizable also by non-skilled people who possessed little more than their dismountable ger (2023, 83). Similarly to the evolutionary metaphor, the act of prototyping received direct validation or falsification through people's reactions, which in turn informed the design process and the related research project. The parallel with Elemental's approach to social housing design (Aravena and Iacobelli, 2016) is apparent and highlights a transversal characteristic. Although these architectural design research works began in contexts of social vulnerability—with architecture playing a key role in site transformation processes—they had all fruitfully explored the tenets of architectural design and contributed innovative elements to disciplinary debate and broader decision-making. Architecture's heteronomy became an element that nurtured disciplinary self-reflection, relying on a research path that leverages design tools.

This condition aligns with the EAAE (2022) Charter on Architectural Research, which encourages trans- and interdisciplinary endeavours and suggests that research in architecture includes knowledge production through design projects. Among the many supporting contributions, I want to mention two. John Verbeke, a council member of EAAE, argued that similar to how the artist-researcher must create art to develop new understandings, the architect-researcher must operate "in the medium of architecture (...) [which] means to investigate architecture through architecture and not through history, theory, social science or environmental science" (2013, 150). Alberto Campo Baeza, who has profoundly intertwined professional practice and theoretical reflection, compared the act of translating architecture to translating poetry. He stated that the construction of architecture, with its form, possesses a universality that requires no translation. For Campo Baeza, the constraints of architecture, contrasted with the freedom of poetic language, are compensated by the universality of its constructed language and forms, which need no translation beyond their presence (Campo Baeza 2012, 9).

These two viewpoints, stemming from complementary perspectives of theory and practice, converge on the

idea of using architectural design as an investigation tool. However, they diverge in their reliance on architecture as either a drawing, which is conditionally verifiable only in a virtual sense, or as a physical fact requiring execution. Whether represented architecture serves as a valid or illusory investigation tool remains—unsurprisingly—a divisive theme.

On this trajectory, ProArch, the National Scientific Society of Professors of Architectural Design, also seems to be moving. Since last year, ProArch has been launching calls for projects open to researchers working in architecture departments of Italian universities. These calls for projects, akin to calls for ideas competitions, address pragmatic urban problems through architectural design. They provide snapshots of the architectural design culture upheld by university architects, offering speculative panoramas of projects that epitomize ideas, positions, and frictions, thereby igniting disciplinary debate and mutual exchange. However, a controversial aspect also emerges: the tendency of manifesto-like projects to lose touch with the realism of the problems they aim to solve, often showing no intention of being executed. The feasibility of the architectural proposal is sometimes sacrificed on the altar of clarity and the power of ideas—expressed through

drawings—resulting in projects seemingly conceived to remain on paper or screens. To some extent, what emerges is an inversion of the goals and tools in the architectural design discipline, where the drawing, a virtual domain, replaces the execution, a real domain, in the final objective of the project.

This text raises a critical question: is this still within the domain of architectural design or architectural design research?

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