

The Practice of Architectural Research

*Perspectives on design
and its relation
to history and theory*

www.architecturalresearch.be

(launch 15 May 2020)

Symposium

*Thursday 8 – Saturday 10 October 2020**

*(*these dates will only be maintained if it is safe to meet. If this is not the case, new dates will be set in 2021)*

KU LEUVEN



Faculty/Department of Architecture, KU Leuven, Campus Sint-Lucas Ghent

In collaboration with University of Antwerp, Faculty of Design Sciences

Location:

St. Lucas Ghent / Roosenberg Abbey Waasmunster (architect Dom Hans van der Laan)

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Key note speakers:

Wilfried Wang

Professor, the University of Texas at Austin, School of Architecture

Helen Thomas

Editor, senior research fellow, Department of Architecture, ETH Zurich

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'Are architects who write a dying race?' asks Belgian architectural theorist and historian Hilde Heynen. This symposium takes up her challenge to reflect on the role of the practicing architect in academia. Building a critical platform for writing architect-scholars and scholars exploring the relation between architectural practice and culture, the intention is to create new and fecund relationships between the practice of theory and that of architectural production. During the 1960s, academia saw the rise of architectural theory as an autonomous discipline, from which emerged theoretical architectural practice: the discipline of critical architectural theory became ever more divorced from the sphere of production and the world of action, instead defining for itself an autonomous, self-referential intellectual realm. In the 1990s architects working in academia like Frampton, Pallasmaa, Ockman or Mallgrave began to bridge the hiatus between practice and theory, developing analytical research methods that combined ontological research with exemplary buildings. These approaches shared a focus on the classical canon of architecture, the authoritative voice of the architect, and the production of grand narratives. Today, it is valid to question whether this approach is still viable, when the current intellectual climate in which debates around decolonization, material and social agency debate and post-metoo feminist perspectives challenge this canonical approach. Inspired, for example, by the strategies of art history, we are looking for responses to such questions as: can we research architectural practice and theory through an inclusive perspective on its ontology? What could be architecture's contemporary theories, thought systems and methods? How can this knowledge be relevant for current architectural practice?

These questions can also be reversed. What can practicing architects bring to the table in an academic context, when they are researching, drawing and writing? To what extent can a discussion on the tools and methods of practicing architects deepen the academic debate and enter the fields of architectural history and theory? By re-visiting a building through the experience of designing architects, what new readings or versions can be uncovered? More specifically, how can the 'design knowledge' of the architect provide relevant interpretations of our built environment? This symposium aims to broaden the scope from research by design, which is usually focused on an architect's personal practice, towards building, drawing and writing as research activities that actively engage with architectural history and theory. Can 'design knowledge' find a more secure position within the academic field as an expertise to develop (critical) history and theory?

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Call for papers:

The symposium aims to re-define the field of architectural research and invites practicing architects and historians operating within academia to reflect on their lived expertise. Proposals aiming to bridge the gap between practice and theory, and which develop an architectural thinking, method or analysis combining ontological research with exemplary building practice, are welcomed. Papers can take a historical, theoretical or architectural perspective. The research can focus on the relationship between architectural culture and its themes – on a generation of architects throughout history, on the oeuvre of an architect through a specific drawing, building, space and/or detail – within its pivotal position in the design process, or within history. We are interested in narratives that emphasize the processes of making and their effects on structure and material culture. A possible historiography starts not only from buildings and texts, but equally from designs captured in different types of drawings, from sketches to technical plans and structural details.

Preference will be given to papers that evaluate research approaches and methods, and which take a position between historiography and autonomy. How do you study the object? In what ways do you capture or register the essential morphology? What were the tools of the designing architect, how do you describe and critically assess them?

Abstracts of 500 words should be sent to research.arch@kuleuven.be by 10 June 2020, accompanied by a CV of 75 words and a list of three peer-reviewed articles.

A publication with a selection of papers is planned.

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The papers will be organized according to four thematic sessions:

1. Discursive practice

This session explores the role of discursive practice as a bridge between architectural practice and academia, and in developing an architectural thinking, method or analysis that combines disciplinary research with research on exemplary building practice. The notion of 'discursive practice' addresses or frames the work of architects who believe that their experience and position as a practicing architect is integrally linked to architectural culture. Looking for a broader perspective, these architects examine architectural history and theory so as to position contemporary developments within history and to render these instrumental for their practice. Questions emerging from this concept include: Do practicing architects understand and use history in a different way to art historians? How do practitioners relate to conceptions of history? Are the methods of discursive practice inherently a-historical and intentional? This session re-positions the practicing architect within the academic field and critically assesses the position of the emergent field of the academic architect-researcher. It describes the exchange between reflection, architectural theory, writing, and designing and making. Is there any such thing as 'operative theory'?

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2. How is architecture made? The design process and buildings as agents of change

What if the research focus is not on the words of an architect, but on their buildings and drawings? Architects pass on their knowledge within their offices and through their teaching positions – by observing, sketching, testing, and making. Architectural design constantly evolves through specific methods and tools. Following dreams, aspirations and ideologies, the architect's ontological doubt and imagination are expressed through structural contingencies, in sketches and drawings that preclude building. The design sketch is the research field itself, an intense dialogue with the context, programme, social and cultural forces, technological conditions, the clients and all kinds of personal motivations. This session questions how architecture is conceptualized and made, and from this perspective frames its position in an urban condition, as part of a society, as part of a culture. Buildings are not only seen as representations of an architectural culture. Materiality, structure and space are agents of change. A building is a living instrument over time, where intention and experience are superimposed. What happens when we abrogate a genealogy that binds architectural production to the elusive derivations of architectonic themes in the history of architectural theory? What happens if we start from the perspective of the thing made, towards other frames as a-historical matrixes or networks? When is there a difference or a link between the critical analysis of drawings and buildings and the writing of architectural history and/or theory? How can they be superimposed, reinforce each other?

3. Research tools and techniques: re-reading, re-drawing, re-modelling

How can building analysis be a form of critical interpretation and knowledge building? Is there such a thing as creative knowledge that contributes to a study of history? This session aims to go beyond written research and proposes other ways to make the tools of the architect visible and up for debate and critical assessment. What is

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*the relation between research tools and design tools, structuring and building up a framework of knowledge?
A central agent within this research is the design sketch and the architectural drawing in relation to the actual building. How do you capture pivotal moments within the design process and relate them to its reflection, influences and effects in time? What is the appropriate language of the analysis? What is the relation between re-reading and re-writing, and re-looking and re-making? How do you re-draw? Can tools be borrowed from the field of research by design?*

4. The tools of the archives

Archives contain not only drawings but also art works, teaching notes and lectures, diaries and postcards, many of which have not been fully explored. This session addresses the role of the archive as a primary source of architectural production. Drawings, from the design sketch to technical details, reveal ideas on materiality, tectonics, structure and morphology. They represent the myriad forms an architectural practice can take. In addition to the practice of architecture – the management of a practice or the construction of a building, there is also the teaching, writing, artistic practice and personal life of the architect and their office.

What is the value of this varied material, and what tools do we have to study them? How can we read drawings in order to gain technical knowledge and design insights, and make them operational in research? Are there specific digital tools, and what is their relationship with hand-drawn material? How can we critically assess the role of the archive within the current academic debate?

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Timing:

Call for papers launched April 2020

Deadline for abstracts 10 June 2020

Selection of abstracts: 8 July 2020

Papers submission deadline: 21 September 2020

Symposium: Thursday 8 – Friday 9 October – Saturday 10 October 2020

Scientific Committee

Caroline Voet, Faculty/Department of Architecture, KU Leuven, conference chair

Fredie Floré, Faculty/Department of Architecture, KU Leuven

Hilde Heynen, Department of Architecture, KU Leuven

Rolf Hughes, Faculty/Department of Architecture, KU Leuven

Lara Schrijver, University of Antwerp, Faculty of Design Sciences

Helen Thomas, ETH Zurich / Kingston university

David Vanderburgh, UCLouvain, Faculté d'architecture

Paulo Providencia, Universidade di Coimbra, Departamento de Arquitectura

Andres Kurg, Estonian Academy of Arts

Sofie De Caigny, Flanders Architecture Institute

Organising Committee

Eireen Schreurs, Faculty of Architecture, KU Leuven / Universiteit Antwerp / TU Delft

Steven Schenk, Faculty/Department of Architecture, KU Leuven

Eva Storgaard, University of Antwerp, Faculty of Design Sciences

Marjan Michels, University of Antwerp, Faculty of Design Sciences

Drawing:

House, Wietse De Cooman, MA2 18-19, www.structuralcontingencies.be, Faculty of Architecture, KU Leuven.