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TEMA

Kunstnerisk udviklingsarbejde [Praksisbaseret forskning]

# DEVELOPING PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

in Architecture and Design (Sweden 2003)

In the Swedish government proposition 2000/01:3 (Research and innovation) research into the arts was pointed out as an important area to specifically develop.<sup>1</sup> The need for close collaborations between art departments and other university departments were furthermore stressed. Through targeted funding distributed through the National Research Council, seven 'academies' have since then been formed, and a number of research projects have been initiated. Over the next years continued funding may be expected to establish practice-based research as an independent academic practice. For architectural research this is a very interesting development in its acknowledgement of architectural design as an important path towards knowledge in our field. In this article we will discuss this current development in Sweden and present the academy that has been formed in collaboration between the architecture schools at KTH (Stockholm) and

LTH (Lund) for the development of "Practice-based Research in Architecture and Design". We will also attempt the drawing of a rough sketch of what practice-based research in architecture and design may be considered to be, and where the different sites in which it develops can be found. This sketch may be read as a specific reflection of, or reaction to, the general (and often generalising) discussions concerning the development of research into the arts that this latest government initiative has so far resulted in.<sup>2</sup>

## Terminology:

### 'Artistic' development projects and 'Artistic' research

The theme of this NA-issue is in Danish "Kunstnerisk udviklingsarbejde" (literally: 'artistic development projects'). In Sweden 'artistic development projects' have been pursued at art departments and academies since the 1970's, and have in some aspects been considered a parallel activity to the research projects being pursued at other university departments. These

projects have however not been considered as academic research, and have therefore not provided the artist with any possibility of gaining a post-graduate degree. The art faculties in Sweden do not yet have the right to pursue research education independently, but are forced to collaborate with other departments at the universities that may issue a PhD-degree. In the recent development in Sweden the National Research Council shifts the terminology away from 'artistic development projects' to rather discussing 'artistic research' ("konstnärlig forskning"). Even if the funding at this stage is not directed to PhD-projects, but rather to establishing collaborative networks, a development towards PhD-programs might be expected. The official shift in focus away from 'development project' towards 'research' may be interpreted as implying an inclusive view where research pursued with artistic methods should in the long run be considered as parallel (in all aspects) to research pursued with traditional scientific or scholarly methods.<sup>3</sup> The British term would be 'Practice-based research in the arts'. In architecture the Bartlett School of Architecture at UCL in London uses another term: 'Research by Architectural Design'.<sup>4</sup>

In this article we use 'practice-based research' in the English translation of 'Artistic research' for the name of our academy, not only in order to conform to international praxis, but more importantly because we find the term 'artistic research' somewhat problematic. What would an artistic research "method" be in architecture? Can anyone be artistic? Or is it only those trained as artists or architects that may be artistic? Or is it even only those that are acknowledged as 'big' artists or architects that may be artistic? Can a researcher be both artistic and scientific at once? These somewhat stupid questions are asked only to illustrate how loaded a term like 'artistic' is. It serves to push the debates into the traditional dichotomy between art and science; a questionable dichotomy which has its roots in the enlightenment, and which makes the combatants blind to the much more interesting specifics of the issue. In what way can an art- or design project contribute in our search for knowledge, knowledge of a multitude of phenomena and questions? The term 'practice-based research in the arts' is somehow less pretentious and

therefore possibly more useful. 'Research by Architectural Design' is also more straight forward in its approach, focused as it is on what the researcher 'does', not on what he/she 'is' (i.e. 'artistic').

## **The Academy for Practice-based Research in Architecture and Design**

The Academy for Practice-based Research in Architecture and Design was established in January this year and is supported by the National Research Council in Sweden. It forms a collaboration between the KTH School of Architecture in Stockholm, the LTH School of Architecture in Lund, and the Chalmers School of Architecture in Gothenburg.<sup>5</sup> The academy aims at building a platform for the development of practice-based research in architecture and design. We will host seminars to discuss ongoing research projects and give workshops and courses that focus on particular issues that are provoked by our entering the area in between artistic, scholarly and scientific modes of knowledge. We will also arrange exhibitions to be important concluding points for the research projects. The activities will be documented and critically discussed in the form of publications (electronic and paper). As practice-based research in architecture and design is a relatively unexplored field, the academy will start out from a very open position. We wish, however, to stress the essential role of the architectural design project as the generative factor in the research projects we present and discuss.

The workshops and courses will centre around issues such as: the role of writing in relation to, or as, the research project; the architectural representation (model, drawing, image etc) as a tool in articulating architectural criticism; the architectural design itself as a tool for the investigation of questions outside of architecture; and relationships between physical and virtual architectures. Exploring and experimenting with modes of writing might be one of the most crucial ingredients in the development of research by design. Firstly because, as with other modes of representation, our chosen mode of writing always affects what we may in fact both think and communicate. This is as important a factor for the theory/history PhD as for the research

by design PhD, as well as in fact for more scientifically oriented research projects. Secondly, in a PhD developed through a design project it will be crucial to find tools to develop critical counterpoints to your own work. You have to develop means of getting out of the universe of your own project. Developing a sensitivity and control over your own language will help you to jump between positions; that is, to take the role of the critic into your own project. This is also an essential requirement for research projects in contrast to other art or architecture projects: a research project must, in some way, open up to discursive encounters. By developing a critical perspective on her or his work, the author/architect behind a project invites others to participate, not in awe, but through critical discussion.

The Academy will in itself not constitute an MPhil or PhD-program. Every course, workshop and project seminar will also be open to participants who are not enrolled in the participating departments' PhD-programs, as long as they are working on projects that can be discussed within the framework of research by design. This means that artists working with architectural questions may participate, architects pursuing a critical practice outside of the academy may also participate, etc. In order to keep the definitions open longer than what may be necessary when evaluation and examination criteria are formalized, we wish to avoid the kind of institutionalisation that the formal development of PhD-programs would require. Direct supervision and examination of MPhil and PhD-projects thus remain the responsibility of each university. The 'academy' should then simply be the site where discourse builds up, for the benefit of all artists, architects, researchers involved in the process of developing and articulating this field.

### **Sites of practice-based research in architecture: A broad and rough sketch**

Is it possible, or meaningful, to discuss general criteria and methodologies for practice-based research in the arts? Or is it necessary to be specific and close in on 'architecture' directly? And when closing in on architecture may we have any hopes of defining general criteria and methodologies there? If a creative discourse is to

be formed that may develop criteria and methodologies for practice-based research in architecture, we would argue that the diversity of sites and objectives ought to be acknowledged from the start. As little as practice based research in architecture is exclusively about making the 'practitioner' 'reflective', is it exclusively about the development of innovative design solutions, or the establishment of avant-garde practices. In our work with developing a program for the academy's seminars, workshops and exhibitions, we drew a preliminary sketch to map the different sites where practice-based research in architecture may take place, and important aspects from which it should be considered.<sup>6</sup> In these sites, and from these aspects, different questions may be asked and different methods may be pursued. They are complementary, neither competing, nor mutually exclusive.

### **Architecture and art**

At the conferences and in general discussions concerning the development of 'artistic research' arranged by the National Research Council in Sweden in 2001 and 2002, a quite simplistic understanding of how the "artistic" aspects could be brought into a research project has surfaced.<sup>7</sup> It appears as if it would simply be enough to put a 'scientist' and an 'artist' in the same room to make an artistic research project take place. On these occasions it has been important to emphasise how architecture in itself is conceived as an art form and that the architect thus is an artist who through her or his practice may develop and perform 'artistic research' independently. For architects this may be self-evident as it is reflected in our professional and educational history. Architecture builds upon a complex integration of different fields of knowledge, from the natural, human and sociological sciences, to aesthetic and conceptualising practices. Architecture is, however, conceptualised as art in diverse ways. Architecture is often regarded as primarily producing aesthetic and functional solutions to practical problems. On the other hand it is also often considered a cultural form of expression in the same way as other art forms, that is, capable of shifting and shaking your very perception of the world.<sup>8</sup> While these two positions are not in

any way mutually exclusive, an emphasis of one over another may lead to different views concerning the aims and ambitions of 'artistic' research in architecture and design. While the 'optimizing' architect may hope to find the means to improve her or his design skills in order to produce more efficient solutions, the architect who emphasizes architecture as critical cultural practice may more than anything else seek a platform where it is possible to explore and sharpen this aspect of her or his practice.

The architectural design project – the studio tradition  
Practice-based research in architecture may be related both to more conventional 'professional' practices as well as to alternative and 'academic' practices in architecture. With 'academic' we here mean experimental practices based in academia and pursued through teaching, exhibitions and publications. As much as traditional scholarly or scientific research, practice-based research may of course be pursued in relation to a great variety of questions. For example, a specific architectural idea could be explored through a project, a particular design solution could be systematically tested out, a critical investigation of a wider political issue could be pursued in the form of an architectural project, etc. This form of research is not at all new. It is continually being explored in the architectural educations all over the world where studio projects are typically designed very consciously with these different objectives. In high-quality diploma projects this method is often driven to a high degree of precision. After the diploma-level, however, the PhD-student in architecture has turned to other research methods gathered from the disciplines of art history, sociology, environmental psychology, or hard science, to mention a few, and is not being encouraged to ask herself how and if the questions she is investigating could be explored through architectural experiments too. To encourage and support such initiatives by constructing sites for critical discussion and methodological development will be one of the most important tasks for our academy. The field of architectural research in general should welcome the architectural design project as a complimentary knowledge generating phenomena

and develop a discourse concerning its operations.

Architectural research and practice-based research  
In its modern phase architectural research has been torn between its dependency on methodologies and theories from other research disciplines, and its desire to create an independent identity based on its own specific modes of knowledge. In 1987 the Association for Architectural Research was formed (today Nordic Association for Architectural Research) with its journal *Nordisk Arkitekturforskning*, which even today is the only peer-reviewed journal in the field of architecture in Scandinavia. This journal has played an important role in generating a discourse concerning the specific identity of architectural research. The research presented in its articles has, however, continued to be based on more traditional scientific and scholarly fields. While borrowing ideas and methodologies widely when needed, it should in itself be regarded an almost necessary prerequisite for creative research that ought to be driven by curiosity and precision; this practice has in the case of architectural research often led to unhappy particularisations of the investigated field. That is, while generating many interesting results on a detailed level, methods for advanced synthesis of these results have been lacking. While substantial research programs based on practice-based research have not until the recent encouragement from the National Research Council been launched in architecture in Sweden, individual PhD-theses often include aspects of it. This is for example the case in our own dissertations (*Grillner, Ramble, linger and gaze 2000* and *Ståhl Forskjutningens estetik 1996*).<sup>9</sup> A discourse concerning practice based research in architecture, its epistemological base and its potential, has, however, been developed in the *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research* with significant contributions by Cecilia Häggström and Jerker Lundequist.<sup>10</sup>

Professional practice  
in architecture and practice-based research

The professional identity of the architect is to a large degree determined by his or her role as a consultant. The architectural commissions are defined by clients

in both public and private sectors, and are thus directly tied to a commercial context. In these architectural projects knowledge primarily builds up through experience – knowledge that pertains both to the project as such and to the individual participants in the process. From the realisation of a complex architectural project we may, for example, gather knowledge on how planning laws operate and affect architectural form and potential urban programs; what a certain new technology may imply for architectural form; how the design process may affect the outcome at different stages, and much more. An architectural project may also very efficiently put the light on emerging crucial issues for contemporary society which the academic researcher may typically have greater difficulties in identifying.<sup>11</sup>

While the architectural project may be argued to hold all these potentials, it appears very difficult to find the methods and means to make use of it. The professional architect in Sweden experiences high pressure from the client to 'simply' solve the problem fast, and have difficulties in arguing for the mutual benefits that would arise from a complementary researching and evaluating practice. There is, however, also a general lack of critical and academic culture among the Swedish architects. The schooling has traditionally been highly directed towards professional training in architectural practice, and been lacking in the development of a critical architectural and academic discourse. The average capacity to identify the research potential in many everyday architectural projects might thus not be so high among practicing architects.<sup>12</sup> When developing practice-based research of this kind inside professional practice, it should probably be most interesting to develop collaborations between the project team of architects and designers, and researchers from different disciplines (planning, sociology, economics and architecture). The project then becomes the site from which knowledge of many different kinds spring out.<sup>13</sup>

An additional important perspective on the role of practice-based research for professional practice is the potential it holds for the individual to make a temporary break from commercial practice to pursue, exhibit and discuss highly focused architectural explora-

tions. Today architectural competitions typically serve as this much needed 'free-zone' where many un-paid hours are put in to explore new concepts, and where one may afford to be daring and provocative.

#### Academic practice in architecture and practice-based research

In Sweden the notion of 'practice' in relation to architecture typically implies professional practice exclusively. The early development of architectural research and its close affiliation with the practices of other research disciplines such as sociology may have contributed to this highly simplistic discourse dividing the architectural community into 'practitioners' and 'researchers' who still, unfortunately, have difficulties in communicating. If architectural research is not proved to be useful for the practitioner, it is supposedly a waste of money. To speak of academic practices in architecture is therefore liable to cause many raised eyebrows in Swedish architectural culture. With the notion of academic practice we wish to point at the many explorative architectural practices that have been and are currently pursued in educational institutions.

From the Cooper Union School of Architecture John Hejduk produced some of the most important contributions to an architecture of poetic resistance, refusing the involvement in commercial practice. A pioneering site for such practices was in the 70's of course the Architectural Association in London, which together with the Bartlett School of Architecture still today play a crucial role as international platforms for avant-garde practices in architecture. While Hejduk's practice was highly critical in its resistance to commercial practice, some of today's practices developed in academia, such as for example Greg Lynn's, are not driven by a particularly clear critical agenda from a political perspective. It is rather the development of new forms of architecture through emerging technologies and materials that is made possible from an academic platform. Jonathan Hill, who currently directs the PhD by Architectural Design Programme at the Bartlett, articulates, however, the benefits of the critical distance from the profession that the academic practitioner may maintain.<sup>14</sup> One of Hill's own research projects,

The Illegal Architect, radically questions through the design of a house for the Association of Illegal Architects, the self-important characteristics of the architectural profession.<sup>15</sup>

#### Architecture and urbanity in contemporary art

Issues concerning architecture and its spatial, social and urban implications has developed into an important thematic in contemporary art over the last decades. Ranging from perceptual experimentations to activist art, from documentary photo- and film projects on particular buildings to games with utopian urban projects, these practices constitute important examples of critical research into architecture and urbanity; research that may shift and turn around our very definitions of our field. Thomas Ruff's portraits, for example, of both iconic and anonymous works of architecture, Rachel Whiteread's full-scale cast of the interior of a house, and Janet Cardiff's dream-and-reality-blurring sound walks, in different ways provide us with altered critical perceptions. In these cases the concepts of art and knowledge achieve an extended meaning in architecture that also transgress boundaries, and sometimes even develop subverted understandings of artistic experiences.<sup>16</sup>

#### What next?

After this very broad and rough sketch of the field in which practice-based research in architecture and

design may develop in Sweden, it is appropriate to ask what direction, in fact, among all these possibilities, practice-based research in architecture and design may take in Sweden. Among the Swedish schools of architecture the KTH School currently has the clearest international and experimental profile considering both its teachers' backgrounds and current practices and its very high rate of exchange students. At KTH the internationally most well-established experimental practices are the international design collaborative Servo, through landscape architect and researcher Ulrika Karlsson, and the A+URL studio established by architects and researchers Ana Betancour and Peter Hasdell. Established in 1999, Servo's experimentation with emergent design, fabrication, and information technologies focuses on the complex interface of new media and architectural practice. Servo has exhibited widely, most recently at the exhibition Latent Utopias in Graz and at the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York.<sup>17</sup> Ana Betancour and Peter Hasdell, based at KTH and the Bartlett, have over the last years developed A+URL, Architecture + Urbanism Research Laboratory, a studio and Masters program at the KTH, in which alternative strategies are developed for the generation of new forms and methods in architectural design and urbanism. In the exhibition 'interspace'– explorations into the mediated city' A+URL presented the results of last year's research on the emergence of new technologies of connectivity, network and communication, and its role in the contemporary city.<sup>18</sup>

The academy is developing three specific projects during 2003 under the direction of Elizabeth Hatz, Ulrika Karlsson and Lars-Henrik Ståhl, respectively. While

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all three may be positioned under the category of academic practices they ask different questions and pursue different investigative methods. The academy will also take steps to initiate a dialogue with professional architecture and design practices in order to promote the development of new forms of practice-based research there. Katja Grillner is the academic advisor of Katarina Bonnevier and Malin Zimm's PhD-projects (presented in articles in this issue) that both in different ways, through critical and creative research methods, explore the power of representation and media for the appearance of dreams and realities in society. At LTH Gunnar Sandin and Lars-Henrik Ståhl have contributed to the development of artistic research by making performance pieces and physical models critically exploring semiotic issues, which they have presented as 'papers' at several symposia (for example San Francisco; Guadalajara, Mexico; Dresden). In Guadalajara, as a comment to the practice of making models, they developed a concrete situation, itself a model, which could be described as a collection of concepts concerning transgression of borders.

Traditionally, scientific works and architecture also have a great deal in common in regard to their relation to the artefact. The scientific elaboration of artefacts, as well as a general dependence on given conditions, may be described in terms of a typical design process. Reciprocally, the development of architecture, real or virtual, is often fulfilled in a scientific or scientific like way. This slightly loose characterisation claims an area which can also be seen to describe the intersection between the field of science and the field of architecture. By definition, the centre of this area consists of an intimate and united relationship between these two concepts. What about the periphery of this intended area? What about artefacts that are founded in an extra – or weak – scientific context? In the future we also have to concentrate on these conditions in practice-based research.

Katja Grillner & Lars-Henrik Ståhl

## Notes

1. Website: [www.vr.se](http://www.vr.se), The National Research Council in Sweden (Vetenskapsrådet).
2. For a very interesting critical study of the politics and history of 'artistic research' and 'artistic development projects', in a Swedish, but related to, an international context see Henrik Karlsson *Handslag, famntag, klapp eller kyss? Konstnärlig forskning i Sverige en översikt*, SISTER, Stockholm 2002.
3. This follows in principle the recommendations of the British report by Chirstopher Frayling et al: *Practice-based doctorates in the Creative and the Performing Arts*, UK council for graduate education 1997. The authors points to the inadequacy of making a strict division between 'scientific' and 'artistic' research, seeing that current research practices already differ substantially among the various fields that are included within a general academicPhD-degree, thus it does not make sense to single out a practice-based degree as so very different from the rest.
4. The Bartlett School of Architecture at UCL, London offers a MPhil/PhD by Architectural Design Programme directed by Dr Jonathan Hill. (<http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/architecture/>).
5. The founding universities are KTH and LTH. Project management: Katja Grillner (head) och Lars-Henrik Ståhl. Board of the Academy: Katja Grillner, architect and researcher, KTH, Lars-Henrik Ståhl, architect and researcher, LTH, Elizabeth Hatz, architect and researcher, KTH, Gunnar Sandin, artist and researcher, LTH, Catharina Dyrssen, architect and researcher, Chalmers, Per Glembrandt, architect, Wingårdh arkitektkontor, Sven-Olov Wallenstein, philosopher and art critic. Adjunct member: Jerker Lundequist, architect and researcher, KTH.
6. This sketch is developed from an appendix to our research program submitted to the National Research Council in the Spring 2002. This appendix was written by Katja Grillner in collaboration with Gunnar Sandin, and Lars-Henrik Ståhl. Catharina Dyrssen, Elizabeth Hatz, and Per Glembrandt also contributed with important comments in the process.
7. Three larger conferences has been arranged: Gothenburg, Gothenburg University, September 2001, Malmö, Malmö Konsthögskola, December 2001, Stockholm, Färgfabriken, November 2002.
8. For a further discussion see Katja Grillner's essay "When Architecture is Architecture Architecture is Art" in Tomas Lauri (Ed) *Det transparenta huset*, Statens konstråd 2001.
9. Lars-Henrik Ståhl *Tre texter om förskjutningens estetik*, Dissertation, LTH 1996. Katja Grillner *Ramble, linger and gaze – Dialogues from the landscape garden*, Dissertation, KTH 2000.

10. Cecilia Häggström "Kejsarens nya kläder – om konstnärligt utvecklingsarbete del I-II" in *Tidskrift för Arkitekturforskning (Journal of Architectural Research)*, no 1–2, 1990, s 31–59, och no 3 1990, pp 69–83, and "Förhållandet mellan forskning och konstnärligt arbete" i *NA 1997:4*, pp7–18; Jerker Lundequist "Om det konstnärliga utvecklingsarbetet" in *Tidskrift för Arkitekturforskning (Journal of Architectural Research)* No 1–2, 1988, pp 83–94.
11. For a further discussion see Fredrik Nilsson's article "Att utforska verkligheten med arkitektur" in Katja Grillner (Ed.) *Just White – Handbok för framtidens arkitektur*, Ch 7, White arkitekter 2001.
12. This problem has been identified since long and attempts to initiate research and development projects within architectural practices has been pursued at a smaller scale in Sweden through foundations like Arkus, White architects's Research Foundation, and FFNS Research Foundation. For a brief history on Architectural Research in Sweden see Bobo Hjort's article in *NA 2002:4*.
13. At the Symposium "Landscapes of Architectural Research" presented in *NA 2002:4*, Fredric Benesch and Jonas Runberger, presented the practice of Foreign Office Architects, London, along these lines. FOA argues that each project is indeed such a new site and that it in their view is important to be 'foreign' to this site, i.e. that the 'project' should be developed in a direction as to be 'new' to its 'visitors'/'workers' (=project team). (Benesch and Runberger "Progressive Practice in Architecture" in *NA 2002:04*).
14. Jonathan Hill "Drawing an Building and Building a Drawing" in *NA 2002:4*.
15. Jonathan Hill *The Illegal Architect*, Black Dog Publishers 1998.
16. Lars-Henrik Ståhl develops this line of thought further in his article "Modified Knowledge in the Field of Architecture" in *NA 2002:04*.
17. Website: <http://www.s-e-r-v-o.com/>.
18. For this exhibition at the Culture house in Stockholm a catalogue was produced: "Interspace – explorations into the mediated city", Architecture + Urban Research Laboratory, Stockholm 2002. Website: <http://>