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RESEARCH DESIGN: THE EXPLORATIVE POTENTIAL OF RESEARCH-PLANNING PROCESSES IN VISUAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE

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Research design: The explorative potential of research-planning processes in visual and material culture

The first session of the Creative Emergence of a Research Method series was dedicated to thinking about research processes and their design. The non-planned potential knowledge, emerging during those processes (also while reflecting on the research design process itself) became a central topic. It was a provocative session in which we took the abstract notion of ‘design’ as the ‘rituals of creativity’ and compared research design to object- or service-design processes.

To help facilitate that comparison, we turned to the work of the anthropologist [Adam Drazin](#). In his chapter on the social life of concepts in design anthropology,¹ the author reflects on the design activities that take place in commercial and governmental organizations. He addresses the people who are involved in those processes, along with the material and conceptual dimensions of design. Our group took those descriptions of the notions of ‘idea-to-concept transition,’ ‘prototyping,’ and ‘testing’ as components of the design process that could become the means of comparison. We deliberated whether statements presented in the article held true for the activities that graduate students are undertaking in our Centre.

While describing the material framework of design processes, Adam Drazin (who also took part in the discussion via Skype) drew our attention to the crucial starting phase of design processes. He elaborated that in this phase, a spatial, physical, and informative void was consciously created. Any evidence of previous work from other projects was cleared away and with that, space for new design work was established. Then, ideas were gathered and written down on Post-It notes. At this time, creative, rather than judgmental, contributions were expected from the participants to get the design work started.

Doctoral candidates in our meeting reflected on the lack of that starting/brainstorming phase in the university context, where a more competitive spirit is promoted, given the individualistic career paths people take. Some possibilities for generating such creative spaces were considered. The major challenges that were voiced were: long-term investment in research by the candidate, potential inability of otherwise individual researchers to appreciate brainstorming *with* others, more protective attitudes towards the

project that one had to defend on so many occasions, and inability of the researchers to find a productive degree of vulnerability concerning project ownership.

Many aspects of the design process, such as the notions of ‘prototype’ and ‘testing’ presented by Adam Drazin, were perceived as familiar and could be well related to. He presented the notion of ‘prototype’ as embedded in sketching ideas, observation, interpretation, and the thematic grouping of thoughts. According to his explanations, when first ideas about research design concepts took the form of prototypes, they were taken to the field to test them out. Repetitive acts of testing of concepts to find their ‘fitness’² was also familiar to doctoral candidates, who reflected on their experiences of putting ‘method prototypes’ ‘under stress’ of anything from rational expertise to subconscious impulses in the test-field.

There was a consensus about the fine balance a researcher has to maintain between prescribed and improvised research frameworks. Being prompt with the institutional/disciplinary expectations of what the design of research should be like, it is still up to the researcher to embrace chaotic improvisation in the field, while being confronted with material, on the one hand, and the possibilities of the theory, on the other. Seconding the findings of Drazin, participants articulated the vital role of the designer, where personal choices need to be constantly reflected on, while striving for productive experimental research design. Such processes and paths of decision taking also have to find their expression in the methodology section in doctorate dissertations.

Moreover, the group agreed that research design concepts are culturally specific constructs, and that they have particular material and temporal properties. Hence, the types of adaptation and improvisation that take place during research could be embraced as social manifestations of the relationships in that particular field. The complexity of such negotiation brought us around to thinking about design work as a site of cultural production.

Finally, reflecting on research design work was considered helpful in negotiating and contesting not only our factual knowledge, but also how this knowledge is produced. The group voiced an invitation for researchers to more intensively reflect on methodology in their work, given that research design, its adaptation, and negotiation is a vital part of the process of production of knowledge, manifested in the PhD dissertation.

Endnote

- ¹ Adam Drazin, “The social life of concepts in design anthropology,” in *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, ed. W. Gunn et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 33–50.
- ² *Ibid.*, 40.