

Evolution: Art and Design Research and the PhD

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For me, there were two things that were significant about this conference.

The first was that it happened at all. A conference like this would have been impossible when I first came to Parsons in 2002, and it would have been difficult even five years ago. This alone testifies to the shifts that are underway in Parsons—and in the wider world of design thinking and practice.

But the second, and much more important, factor was the faculty presentations of their research. These, to me, were the highlight of the conference and were so for one very strong reason, and that was that, taken together, they nailed for me the death of the theory-practice divide in research.

In art and design, that division has been very sharp. And it has not been productive.

On one side the divide leads to over-academic, “piled higher and deeper,” often profoundly tedious and deadening theses in art and design history. This is the kind of thesis that ossifies its subject matter and transforms what was vital and alive into its unrecognizable shadow. In such theses there is the *appearance* of the production of “knowledge,” yet it is always knowledge “around” the real subject matter. The works themselves—the subject of the thesis and our real concern—remain unanalyzed.

At the other extreme there is the equal absurdity of the “pure practice” PhD where, especially but not only in fine art, doctorates are awarded for an exhibition (in practice often very little more and sometimes less than an MFA show) and a desultory accompanying essay. Such “doctorates” lead to no significant advance in understanding. (Design has a kind of inverse variant of this where “practice-led,” “research-based” doctorates draw on a caricature of “scientific method” to present banal [contextual] research findings in the guise of fact. Technocratic, instrumental, deeply anti-theoretical and anti-critical, they use the *idea* of research-through-design, but they do not advance to any depth of understanding or real articulation of design.)

Now these are, if you like, the “bad” models of the doctorate in art and design (and the “bad” models of art and design research in general). They seem opposed to one another, but in fact are not. The unifying factor is that all three accept the conventions of their disciplines and the givens of practice; they presuppose that art history, or fine art, or design is already “known.” Because things are “known,” then nothing really needs to be thought or explored. Because nothing needs to be thought, then practice and thought don’t challenge each other.

But this is why none of these models, it seems to me, can offer real contributions to knowledge. No real discovery can be made with these models, nothing “hitherto unforeseen” can be brought to light.

But what was exciting about the faculty presentations in the Parsons conference is that this is NOT what I saw, is NOT what I took away from listening to the presentations.

What I saw instead were eleven quite different ways of *thinking*, critically, analytically, and in depth about practice.

They were not the same ways.

Scarcely anyone's presentations overlapped.

They were as diverse in orientation and origin as one could wish for.

But what united them, I think, *and what pointed the way to a doctoral program that I think Parsons could very distinctively, perhaps almost uniquely offer*, is that almost all of them accepted that we do *not* understand design; that it is not simply "there" to be written about.

What each in their different ways offered was a demonstration that the object of thinking-about-practice (and of making practice in order to think through practice) is precisely to make discoveries concerning design, to bring to light hitherto unforeseen or hitherto unforeseeable aspects of design capability.

There was a nice sentence in a contribution to the *PhDesignlistserv* last week: "A culture," the writer said, "allows you to act transforming the world knowing what you are doing, a skill just allows you to do a thing." It seems to me that all the faculty presentations we had in the conference were pushing towards thinking the "skill" of design as "culture"; or better, they were making a translation of what is done into what is thought and understood.

There was no "pure" practice; there was no caricature of art history (on the contrary a *practice* of discovery—Laura in the archives); there was no instrumental use of practice but rather genuine exploration of practice as a (critical) mode of investigation (Timo, Katherine and others).

What does this suggest? That Parsons is maybe lucky in coming late to the PhD table.

That, building on what faculty have already done, and taking lessons from what we *don't* want from other models of the PhD, we could make a small but telling doctoral program in art and design—one that cuts across the theory-practice divide, that bridges the gaps that are supposed to exist between thinking and doing, the critical and the affirmative.

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