

SURPASSING RESEARCH: INFORMED PRACTICE

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Abstract

In recent years, a growing coterie of landscape architects has asserted that design constitutes a legitimate form of research. They might argue that practice should not only share equal validity with academic “research,” but in fact, that design is more comprehensive, more engaged with people and places, and more involved with real life than those studies left only in the laboratory or as publications. Realized designs bring research into the real world, take it further, and thus render it more viable. Not *all* design constitutes research, however. Common practice often repeats tried processes and produces conventional results. Thus, we need distinguish *habitual* from *involved* design practice: the latter contributes knowledge and to experience in a new way.

When does design represent research? Each *involved* design responds to a host of constraints normally left unaddressed, or addresses them in an innovative way; that is to say, because every design project is unique, the thinking and development behind it represent experimenting in a manner parallel to the normal sciences. The method or trajectory of designing is rarely as pure and precise as that of scientific inquiry, however. Unlike the laboratory, design must address an enormous number of factors that span those social, environmental, aesthetic, and material—quite unlike the laboratory where factors can be limited and controlled. When let out into the world, however, the bombardment of the hundreds or thousands of new issues left unaddressed in the laboratory may seriously modify or even nullify these findings.

The most significant contribution made by the landscape architect should be an overarching vision, an idea, a concept that enfolds many disciplines, at times rejecting the grand gesture, at times using it to shape a coherent work that surpasses functional criteria—and innovates. How to educate the involved designer, one might ask? With a curriculum that balances the qualitative and quantitative aspects of landscape architecture, and examines the life experience that results from both.

Key Words:

informed/humanistic practice; Georges Descombes; Robert Royston; Michel Corajoud; Sigurd Lewerentz; Gilles Clément