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About the Design Research Society

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About the Design Research Society

Design Research Society (DRS) is commending time, effort and energy and having already been investing these over the past 40 years to give rise to the most astute and relevant research in design.

When asked on numerous occasions to comment on design and design research, I've always been very careful, if not harsh, with regards to certain research projects whose content and/or approach seemed to fall short on the front of the relevant things in design. My reaction hit even closer to home in France where design is absent from academic disciplines, and design research has yet to really take off. I have to admit, nonetheless, that the strides undertaken by several universities abroad and continued by DRS have swayed me into believing that there really is an area that craves further learning and discovery, and cultivates fresh, relevance-hungry skills and competencies. Conferences and DRS-published works reflect a tremendous proliferation of new ideas, new projects and new ways to breed knowledge.

In 2010, and after having sat in on a conference in Seoul organized by the International Association of Societies of Design Research, I wrote the following: "Taking advantage of design's coming out and its lack of visibility research-wise for the purposes of Sociology, Psychology, Education Science, or even hard science, and playing them off as "design research" can only prove beneficial to design in the end. Employing the design research notion loosely, when, in reality, its usage is clearly career-gearred, does not seem all that fitting to me either.

The scope of research needs to be clearly outlined in a category of its own, and based on a language that both captures and communicates the knowledge from all fields spanning social and hard science, not to mention the socio-economic challenges that riddle our everyday. Design is a language doubling as an interface that connects people, ideas and knowledge, and imagines them in a better tomorrow. We could come up with our own scientific version of it as long as we don't get carried away and throw everything together haphazardly merely because design is omnipresent, and it suffices to get the intellectual juices flowing every now and then."

Time may have elapsed since these thoughts first emerged, but the issue remains the same. This text reflected the questions that crossed my mind following the various presentations I had attended. One presentation, in particular, caught my attention. It was given by a doctoral student who claimed that the work he was doing on the design of a bicycle was research. Twenty years ago, designing a bike was considered design. Today, that same bicycle now aspires to fall under the category of "design research." Let's try and refrain from wanting to label any idea, even the most relevant, "research." Despite their efforts to make a hard science out of Marketing, business schools are

busy filling in the gaps left behind by research done in the Marketing field. Every business owner and retailer in the world will tell you that Marketing is not a science, and wanting it to be one is just as futile as deciphering the gender of angels.

Design research is alive and well, and several universities have incorporated it into their agendas. It means nurturing a different kind of knowledge and insight at a time when other research fields lack the necessary to go head-to-head with the problems facing Mankind. There within is the incredible opportunity to truly, once and for all, set the fields of social and hard science apart. Kudos to DRS for being vigilant in choosing projects that are apt to map out a new direction between the two.

Just as design, creation and innovation are being positioned as solutions to problems in a world whose paradigms are crumbling, it would be, without a doubt, counterproductive for design research to cut ties with design practice. From an academic standpoint, it would also be a shame for design research to appear more virtuous and prestigious than design itself. That said, the loss would be just as great to reduce design to nothing other than a technique or representation. What design can offer goes beyond practicality. Design research goes beyond the designer. Their interconnectedness does not impede their individuality.

Design research and design itself are complementary. While loyal to the fundamental principles specific to each, both strive to find common ground and engage in a healthy give-and-take relationship to ensure balance and difference. With Mankind and its uses at the center of these issues, design gives impetus to an ideal or a potential, and not only pushes the limits of creativity and optimism to new heights, but seeks to defy them. At a time when science and technology are encountering a wary public, and where wealth and welfare are hitting glass ceilings, design provides an alternative future, and enables us to imagine it through a new lens. One thing is sure: Design researchers have their work cut out for them!

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