

# letters

## Architecture is different

Sir: At the launch of such a brave venture as this, I hope it may not be tempting providence to ask why similar previous initiatives have failed to prosper.

Whatever happened to *The Journal of Architectural Research*?

Why is it that in architecture, unlike practically every other discipline in the UK, we have not been able to sustain a stable and long lasting journal devoted to our kind of research?

There may be good reasons for this, one being that architecture in the UK has been blessed with such exceptionally good technical journalism that some of the pressure has been taken off academic publication. Another is that much excellent research work related to architecture is being carried out in such allied disciplines as history, sociology and physics, and is efficiently recorded in the more specialised journals of these fields. Yet another excuse is that the special nature of architectural discourse fits so badly into the conventions of conventional academic research that it fails to be noticed. All these explanations are more or less correct. Unfortunately they are framed too defensively to get rid of the accusation that our academic rivals will surely make; that, despite our 38 schools, we architects have failed so far to produce the critical mass of research that justifies funding, let alone publication.

I think our academic competitors have got it wrong. They tend to have far too limited an idea of knowledge. They don't understand the nature of the architectural discipline. The complex problems that architectural researchers face are particularly acute and challenging. Their very complexity

makes them much more closely related to contemporary developments in epistemology than to the Gradgrind economics of conventional academic productivity. Architectural knowledge is different. The challenge facing you as editor of *Architectural Research Quarterly (arq)* is to invent and sustain an editorial policy that defines the idea that makes architectural research coherent and relevant. This policy should relate everything you publish to the special nature of architectural knowledge. It should make the journal a continuing exposition of the integrating, value-laden, holistic, design-related, user-responsive, inventive and entirely distinctive mode of thought that is so characteristic of architects and architecture. *Arq* should not be afraid to be as different to all other research publications as architectural research is to all other kinds of intellectual activity.

Francis Duffy  
London

*Francis Duffy is an RIBA past president and chairman of DEGW International*

## The challenges ahead

Sir: Architectural knowledge is equivalent to, yet distinct from, other forms of knowledge which underpin the sciences, the humanities and the other professions. These distinctive qualities include its open-endedness, its concern with action and what ought to be rather than what is, its value-laden nature, and its integrative rather than fragmentary possibilities. Yet for architectural research to establish itself as the equivalent of scientific, philosophical, literary or historical scholarship, it must reach accepted criteria for research activity – by sustained, methodical and rigorous enquiry, based on an understanding of

the state of the art, and capable of being captured and disseminated. Architectural research which aspires to these standards has been conducted across many topics. But, in the absence of a dedicated journal, much past work has had to be disseminated through journals in related disciplines. One effect of this has been to make it difficult to identify the discipline of architectural research, which has therefore remained largely invisible to the profession as well as to research funding bodies.

*Architectural Research Quarterly (arq)* is therefore to be welcomed greatly – not just as a route for researchers to disseminate the results of their work but, much more broadly, as a means to consolidate and strengthen the field, to establish common terminology, to indicate a general theoretical overview, to set out methods and indicate priorities, and to consider whether there are boundaries around the subject.

At least two main challenges face *arq*. The first is whether it can maintain traditional academic standards for a refereed journal, while at the same time involving and appealing to practitioners as both readers and authors of at least a percentage of the papers. A journal written only by, and read only by, researchers will do little to establish architecture as a knowledge-based profession.

The second challenge is whether it can be inclusive rather than exclusive in its coverage of research. The journal should include in its range of papers everything from fundamental research into abstract and theoretical issues, right through to the sort of action research which is often conducted by practitioners as part of the design process. *Arq's* coverage of

topics needs to be similarly broad. A journal which seeks to pursue and legitimate a narrow definition of the field will do a disservice to architecture and its research community.

If the journal can succeed in circumscribing the discipline of architectural research using an inclusive definition of the field, if it can stimulate both practitioners and researchers to contribute to our architectural knowledge base with papers that are inspirational, systematic and meticulous, and if – as a consequence – it can begin to document our architectural knowledge base comprehensively and rigorously, it will have made a substantial, perhaps a unique, contribution to architecture itself. I hope it succeeds.

**Sebastian Macmillan**  
Cambridge

*Sebastian Macmillan is a member of the RIBA research committee and sat on the Science & Engineering Research Council construction committee*

#### **An assessor's view**

Sir: The results of architectural research are all too often published as an architectural application of another discipline, such as acoustics or sociology, in a refereed journal of that discipline. While this form of peer review has its value, architectural research now needs a journal in which the main focus is architecture and its role in the built environment.

*Architectural Research Quarterly (arq)* should be immensely useful to research assessors both within the UK system and in individual universities, as a surety that the author's work has been assessed by his or her peers. The subject is one of considerable diversity and complexity, involving social and physical sciences as well

as aesthetics and design. The problems it poses call for a high degree of intellectual and creative ability if significant advances are to be made.

Research is also required to support architectural practice and is crucial at times like the present when the construction industry itself sees the need for innovation. In this, architectural skills clearly are central, and the need for enquiring and creative minds to produce a soundly based body of architectural knowledge to meet the challenges of the future has never been greater.

**Patricia Tindale**  
London

*Patricia Tindale was an assessor in the last UK Research Assessment Exercise*

#### **Remember the readers**

Sir: Suddenly we have a clutch of new and proposed architectural journals. As well as the one you are reading, there is *Urban Design International* due out soon, and *The Journal of Architecture* to be launched by the RIBA early next year.

What do these new journals have in common? The key characteristics seem to be that they are all edited by academics and they all describe themselves as refereed. In most magazines it is the editor that decides what is important to cover, what to investigate, what to commission, what to accept and what to reject. In a refereed journal, decisions of that kind are made by what is usually described as 'a distinguished international editorial board'. In other words, they are magazines designed by committees, so don't expect any clear editorial attitudes to the issues of the day, any fiercely fought campaigns, any quirkiness or individuality. Refereed journals are essentially

passive organs. They don't commission major articles, they 'call for papers'. And where will those papers come from? From academics (like me) of course, and from those architects who have been lucky enough to find a refuge from the recession in a school of architecture.

The truth is that the demand for these new journals comes not from the readers or advertisers (and there is a relationship between them) but from potential contributors anxious not to lose out on the money available from bodies like the Higher Education Funding Council. And what counts as research? Why, publication in a refereed journal. The main function of these new journals is to convert activities like designing buildings, entering architectural competitions and writing articles into the activity known as research. Readers are incidental to this process.

I wish this new venture well (no, really). The journal could perform a useful function as a forum for a particular kind of architectural debate. But please, Mr Editor, don't let the strange logic that governs your enterprise become a straitjacket. Above all, think of your readers.

**Colin Davies**  
London

*Colin Davies is a former editor of The Architects' Journal. He teaches at the University of North London*

**Letters, should be typed double-spaced and sent to Peter Carolin, Architectural Research Quarterly, c/o University of Cambridge Department of Architecture, 1 Scroope Terrace, Cambridge, CB2 1PX or faxed to +44 (0)1223 332960. The editor reserves the right to shorten letters.**

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