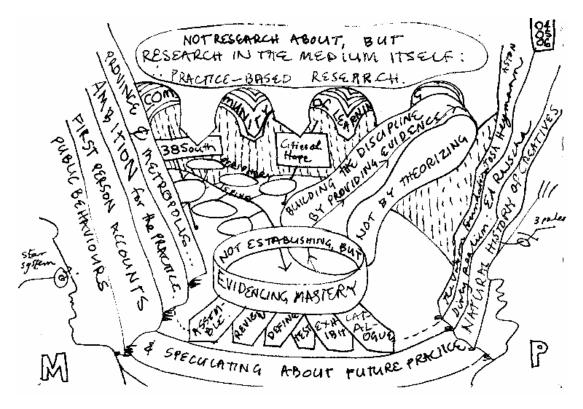The Graduate Research Conference (GRC)

What is the Graduate Research Conference, how did it come into being, and where is it heading?

WHAT?

Today the Graduate Research Conference (GRC) is a twice-yearly gathering of research candidates enrolled at RMIT in disciplines associated with Architecture and Design. The GRC's prime purpose is to be the tangible focus of a learning community – its home so to speak. As we all know, people learn more from each other than they do from abstract structures, and the GRC is first and foremost a gathering of peers. At breakfast, at tea and coffee breaks, over lunch, at pre-lecture drinks and, as RMIT is located in the heart of this vibrant city, at banquets, in restaurants and bars.

In addition to being a long weekend of informal peer review, the GRC brings together these candidates with visiting critics from around Australia and from all over the world. We aim to invite critics who are emerging onto the scene, and many names that are now very familiar in the fields of design have been critics here in the eighteen years since the first GRC. The weekend commences with public lectures by those visitors who are new to the GRCs, followed by a social occasion, a banquet or a barbecue, and it proceeds with two days of work-in-progress reviews. There are potentially almost two hundred people involved in any GRC, and reviews now run in up to ten parallel streams, including the foundational invitation to practitioners whose work has already been acclaimed for its mastery through exhibition publication and award to examine that mastery, provide evidence about its nature and speculate through ongoing practice about future directions for practice. (See 03. Research Streams).

The secondary purpose of the GRC is to structure the work of supervisors and their research candidates. Candidates are asked to present their work in progress to panels, and these presentations are organically related to everyone's research work plans. (Initially in 1988 there were three GRCs per annum, but this proved to be out of step with the work rhythms of candidates who are overwhelmingly established in practice, and conducting practice based research.) Typically the initial presentation scopes the candidates proposition, the second covers project and literature reviews, a series of intermediate reviews cover tranches of project work devised to address research gaps identified between proposition and review, and in a review penultimate to their viva, candidates present the outlines of their catalogues, exegeses, and 'durable visual records'

together with their design for their final presentation through exhibition, web, film or performance.

Candidates present to panels made up of supervisors and external critics, but sessions are open to all, and all present are invited to enter into the proceedings. Candidates present their work for up to half an hour, and in the remaining half hour chairs of panels construct around that work the best possible conversation, a conversation that aims to help the candidate further their work.

Examination is by viva, and the format is not dissimilar to that of the panels of the GRC. A chairperson, who is a research candidate supervisor, but not the candidate's supervisor, convenes a panel of three examiners selected by the supervisor and endorsed by the Head of School and RMIT's Higher Degrees Committee. The candidate presents to this panel in open public session, using an exhibition or equivalent to support that presentation. Video recordings are made to capture the exhibition, the presentation and questions, and they form part of the archived durable visual record for the use of future candidates, and for quality assurance purposes. These events take place either immediately before the weekend or immediately after, and the work remains on public view for a week.

Over a long weekend therefore, any candidate can experience every stage of the process from commencement to conclusion, and they can do so across a wide range of domains. The weekend concludes with a plenary session in which candidates, stream coordinators and visitors are invited to comment on proceedings and give advice on how to improve the event. This drives to the final aim of the GRCs – that they should embed, also organically, the memory of the community of learning and its growing

cultural capital. A range of publications describing the research outcomes of the streams supports this goal.

HOW?

When I arrived in Australia for the first time in 1986 as prospective Head of Architecture at RMIT, I was taken on drives around Melbourne to see the significant new work in the city, work I had been alerted to by Rory Spence's article in AR[1]. It took a day to visit three projects. Significant though this work was, it was clearly peripheral in Melbourne, at least in geographical sense. I soon became aware that it was peripheral in a cultural sense too, because while there already existed – as Spence wrote – important organs for building the local culture of architecture, notably Transition: Journal of Architectural Discourse and a forum for beginning practitioners, the Half-Time Club; the gala events around which the culture gyrated were visits by architectural stars from the northern hemisphere. Being peripheral to the city was one thing, but the being 'peripheral to the world' was an even more pervasive attitude. I discovered on my return to the north that the innovative work that I had seen was indeed patronisingly dismissed as a dim resonance of what was already happening elsewhere (probably on the West Coast of the USA, Europeans would say.) Perhaps because I am at core a southerner, I resented this, and determined to do something about it. In 1987 I called several meetings of practitioners who already had a notable body of work behind them, and challenged them to undertake a program that would do two things: surface the evidence about the origins of the mastery that their work displayed (revealing its local authenticity) and equip them to take part on equal terms within the discourses that nourished the 'stars' that

---

[1] Rory Spence, (1985) Australia Sydney/Melbourne, in The Architectural Review, Peter Davey (Ed.), The Architectural Press Ltd., London.

they so avidly sought out and brought south to worship in assemblies of a thousand people – a recipe for one way transmission if ever there was one!

I had another motive, and that was to inculcate an approach to research that was not 'about' design, but was in fact research in the medium of design itself. My work on Sir John Soane[2] had led me to this determination: in decades of scholarly work, everything about Soane, his beliefs, his family life and his office management, his sources – all had been revealed, but nothing had been written about the nature of his architectural invention as such. My ally in this from the outset was Peter Downton, who developed a Design Research Methods course that today supports the approach across all streams (Downton 2003).

So it was that the challenge issued to these architects was: come back into the academy and examine the nature of the mastery that you are acknowledged to have achieved, describe the architectural nature of that mastery, and speculate on the future of your practice in the light of this reflection, through the ongoing work of your practice. Present that evidence and your speculation in a form other than the work itself, and conclude with an exhibition no larger than three containers 500 by 1200 by 1500, and a twenty-four-page catalogue.

I knew that to have a chance of success the research work plan had to dovetail with the exigencies of practice. The review stage worked in with office archiving and advertising needs, the speculation took place through work ongoing, and the outcomes were tightly defined and related to a specified set of progress reports – made through a regular meeting of the candidates. It was very important at the pioneering stage to have well-known international critics at these sessions, and Michael Sorkin, Mario

---

[2] Leon van Schaik, (1985) Walls, toys and the ideal room, an analysis of the architecture of Sir John Soane, in Mary Wall (Ed.) AA Files # 9, Architectural Association, London, 45-53

Gandelsonas, Diane Agrest, Beatrice Colomina and Mark Wigley were amongst the earliest to oblige. Also at that stage my practice background combined with a doctorate about that practice qualified me alone to supervise the first candidates, but I knew that I needed a peer review process to accomplish this. And the early panels involved comments from all of the candidates. The GRC grew from this beginning, adding firstly an Urban Architecture stream to enable new practitioners to build up a body of work demonstrating mastery, a stream that is today the Urban Architecture Laboratory.

The GRC has since addressed the needs of candidates from many walks of life, artists, composers and filmmakers amongst them. It addresses a wide spread need. The overwhelming majority[3] of research candidates in Australia are mature age and in work. Their aim is to conduct research that furthers practice.

WHERE?

The next stage of the development of the GRC lies in the construction of a virtual concourse that mirrors but does not replace the real event. There is an organic limit to the number of candidates who can present over a weekend, and a further proliferation of streams will further erode the interconnectivity that people so value. It is not necessary for everyone to present in person at every GRC, but we do need ways in which those who do not present can make presentations not only to their supervisors, but also into a virtual forum where others can browse their work and engage with them about it.

We also need ways in which the proceedings can be electronically published, formalising the processes of peer review that take place so that

the researchers can build peer-reviewed track records as they proceed through their research, not only at its conclusion. Possibly also streams may be able to sustain an internal debate between GRCs when we have a virtual concourse with a robust operating system in place.

We are also embarking on the design of a new design research facility at RMIT, one that contains a Design Research Gallery and one that we hope will enable us to stage our GRCs, increasingly dependant on high quality equipment, in a single place uniting public lectures, presentations to panels, exhibition and social functions. We are outgrowing Building 8 Levels 11 and 12.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Ten photographs of the first GRC examination.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Peter Downton (2003) Design Research, RMIT University Press, Melbourne.

Leon van Schaik (2005) Mastering Architecture: Becoming a Creative Innovator in Practice, Wiley Academy, Chichester.

Leon van Schaik (2006) Design City Melbourne, Wiley Academy, Chichester.