Modern Building Reuse: Documentation, Maintenance, Recovery and Renewal

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Design as research in architecture
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This paper proposes to rethink the role of architectural design project in academic research and, in particular, in the development of a doctoral thesis. Simultaneously, under the argument that "architecture is an art", it aims to contribute in the definition of the position of the architect-researcher in a university context increasingly conditioned by scientific production.

In the last two decades, the academic research in architecture, in Portugal, has increased substantially: on the one hand, due to the implementation of the Bologna Process (which forced the introduction of master's theses in the second cycle of the European courses); and, on the other hand, due to the increase of scholarships for doctoral theses promoted by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). Factors associated with the recent decline of public and private contracts presented academic research as an alternative to a professional practice "temporarily" postponed, or even considered in the expectancy of a teaching career in one of the many existing schools of architecture in the country. The doctoral research in architecture has rarely been seen as a complement of professional practice, where there is a tendency to opt for research in universities, delineating the distance between "academic work" and the "real work"; a dichotomy expressed by Jean-Paul Sartre in his brief passage through the Portuguese revolution.

This gap between theory and practice is, in our view, accentuated by the fact that academic research in architecture does not have as privileged instruments the "drawing/image" as well as the "architectural design" as objective.
This discrimination of design within the academic research, particularly in the doctoral theses, is due to some questionable reasons:

1. The first of which is that the teaching of architecture, with the admission to the university, adopted a model of canonical thesis (imported from the social sciences) that actually privileges the alleged objectivity of the “word” rather than the supposed subjectivity of the “image”. This legacy of Platonic origin is certainly based on the difficulty that many seem to find in the assessment of architectural designs, structured mainly by drawings and images, i.e. in supposedly subjective elements. However, we recall that since the Renaissance drawing and design became the mother tongue of architecture, i.e. architects have the same relationship with drawing as mathematicians with numbers, philosophers with words, or musicians with staves. Also, being the doctoral thesis a disciplinary specialisation, it should be common to adopt drawing and image as privileged instruments of research. Unfortunately, theses seldom mirror any sense of design, leading their authors to abdicate the essence of being an architect.

2. A second reason is that the canonical model favours the study of the “past” (albeit in a perspective of the present), in relation to any speculation about the “future”. The historian Manfredo Tafuri argued that the theses of architecture should not address past issues with less than twenty years. Perhaps this is why the vast majority of theses in architecture are on history or theory, but rarely aspire to be “architecture” in the sense of being “projective”, dignifying, on the one hand, the etymology of the word “project” (to thrust forward) but, on the other hand, the etymology of the word “architect”, which in its Greek origin refers to the sense of “master builder”.

Only by favouring the architectural design in research can one distinguish the role of the architect (as specialist of how to do) from an architectural historian (as specialist of how to interpret).

3. The third reason relates to the fact that the canonical model of the doctoral thesis is based on an essentially deductive reasoning model, rejecting with conviction a more inductive model and close to the creative processes and artistic practices. This perspective will only be legitimate if we are willing to also accept architecture as an art – the “poetic profession” which has always been claimed by Álvaro Siza. Also, by accepting architecture as an art we are simultaneously acknowledging its own speciality (what distinguishes it from other construction practices and architecture as a whole without architects); an awareness of the subjectivity understood as intimate space of the individual (the internal world of the architect as author) in its relationship (more or less confrontational) with the social world, where architecture, beyond everything else, is presented as cultural production.

On 14 September 2009, the Portuguese government enacted the possibility of “awarding the degree of Doctor to creators of works and achievements resulting from the practice of design in areas and forms hardly compatible with the dominant model of the doctoral thesis” (Decree-Law 230/2009). Although not specifically referring to architecture, this law sought to fight against the “remoteness and discouragement that the doctoral thesis arouses in the designers who develop, based on the practice of design, research methods typical of artistic activity.” If, on the one hand, this decree-law furthers the recognition of the importance of the design and artistic practices in
research (in which we integrate architecture), on the other hand, it does not validate the design as a research tool, since it just integrates it as a curriculum assumption in evaluating past work. In other words, the specific scope of this decree-law still does not stimulate the integration of the design in research while prescient, speculating and promoting instrument of experimentation.

Considering these arguments, it is argued that the doctoral thesis in architecture should include drawing and image as privileged instruments in academic research and consider design as a priority objective. However, we should like to safeguard that the architectural design in the academic context should distinguish from design of professional practice primarily on the following points: consider design in an intermediate place (not necessarily as a vehicle) between the immaterial of the idea and the material of the work, between theory and practice; be the privileged place of experimentation, the place of the master (the “master builder”), the lack of commitment or of doubt or uncertainty. The place, if you will, where it is still allowed to fail.