

« 7 » There is a nice quote in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, a novel about King Henry VIII of England, where the protagonist Thomas Cromwell is asked by one of his advisors what the King of France will get out of a proposed treaty with the Pope. Cromwell responds that:

“the making of a treaty is the treaty [...] it is the processions that matter, the exchange of gifts, the royal game of bowls, the tilts, the jousts and masques: these are not preliminaries to the process, they are the process itself.” (Mantel 2009: 391)

That sentiment is reflected in the way that conferences sit in the academic landscape now: the making of the conference – in the relationships that are formed between organisers and presenters, the dialogues that take place around formats, the ability to put more, and more complex, material online prior to the conference, and amend and update following the conference – is progressively becoming what the conference is. There is, as the target article demonstrates, the need for a “conference object” to sit in the flow of academic discourse around practice-based design research (as well as design research more generally), to create eddies and to pull the flow one way or another. The need for that “object” to be well-considered is pressing and I think is demonstrated in the article.

« 8 » I do, however, take issue with the distinction between practice-based research and research more generally that the overview of §§6–13 presents. The distinction has been around for some time, as the authors correctly reference, but is becoming less useful as doctoral training for design researchers increases in quality, and researchers considered “practice-based” are equally able to articulate, in text and argument, what they are doing, how they are doing it, and the knowledge they are creating. All types of design researchers are increasingly seeing their research as a form of creative practice, so research through design should keep the idea of what an artefact is as open as possible; theses and papers are also objects too. What I have tried to show, by highlighting the practice of conference design, is that practices of research and organisation everywhere can

be considered as creative, reflective, and critique-able activities.

« 9 » In conclusion, I think this article opens (or perhaps contributes to – I have to confess ignorance here) an important reflective dialogue about the practice of conference design, and effectively illustrates what the purpose of a (design) research conference is, and can be, in the world today.

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Platform and Habit of Inquiry

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> **Upshot** • My comments should contribute to making the next RTD conference even more “successful.” If we are to advance design research, changing the format of conferencing is secondary to changing the culture of inquiry, although they surely intertwine.

« 1 » I must start with an apology and a declaration: I am not writing necessarily from a constructivist point of view, and there are more opinions than arguments in my short commentary. I have co-organised a 100-person conference, a 70-person one, and two small symposia in design research, and have followed the debates on research through design for the past 15 years. My commentary, based on my experiences, is meant to encourage and support not only the authors but also anyone who is

genuinely interested in advancing design research by organizing a conference or a similar event.

« 2 » In terms of design research (conferences) generally, if there is one thing to improve, then I will suggest it is the culture of inquiry. What I refer to is not epistemological positions or methodological rigour, but rather the practice of *collective* inquiry. The habit of knowing, correcting, and building on existing research/knowledge is at its weakest in the cultural practice of design research. (For instance: at the EAD'06 conference “Design System Evolution” in 2005, as a co-organiser, I noticed that there were different ideas on design presented; these ideas overlapped with or repeated other previous ones and yet the authors seldom examined these other similar ideas; see Chow 2005). Unless this is changed, the contribution made by changing the format of conferencing alone is very limited. I will use Abigail Durrant et al.'s target article as an example to clarify what I have in mind.

« 3 » The article is a very detailed, well written, careful description and reflection on experimenting with some new formats for a new conference series. The discussion covers pre-conference review and selection, on-site process and set up, and goes all the way to post-conference documentation and dissemination. One feels that one can take this article, follow it, and run a conference. Valuable as it is, changing or adding one thing would greatly enhance the article and the design of future conferences.

« 4 » The authors are aware of different understanding or meanings of “research through design”; however, I hope it is fair to say that they seem to focus mainly on “tacit knowledge” gained from practice, and physical or material artefacts as embodied knowledge. These are the main issues for and around which their alternative conference formats are designed. However, these issues are not new, nor is the discussion on alternative conference formats.

« 5 » I wish that, instead of writing a general account of the evolution of research through design, they had had gone into a much deeper critical review of other conference series focusing on “tacit knowledge” and “embodied knowledge.” Two come to my mind: the older “Research into Practice”

and the more current “EKSIG.”¹ I understand the authors are aware of these, but I would like to emphasize that the Research Through Design (RTD) conference series can benefit greatly from building on the success and correcting the inadequacies of these other endeavours. I believe that the authors might gain if they go beyond their own reflections and feedback to analyse carefully and critically, and not only refer and summarize, other similar design research conferences and projects that are aimed to serve research through design and the advancement of “design epistemology.” In other words, compare and contrast their own with others to identify knowledge gaps and new opportunities, that is to say, to go beyond individual toward collective inquiry.

« 6 » For instance, a question of which the authors are aware is whether non-material-based design research, such as service design, would be welcomed in their RTD conference. This question, I believe, hits a nerve in, if not the heart of, a conference series aimed to advance research through design. As the authors know, there are different meanings and practices attached to “research through design” (see also Chow 2010). The authors’ understanding leans toward the practice-based research discourse that has taken place predominantly in the UK, with its foci on material artefacts and embodied knowing. This is entirely legitimate; however, in order to include, for example, service design in the conference

and be consistent with their position, the authors need to re-examine their own basic assumption on “design” in general and “research through design” in particular.

« 7 » Fortunately, the authors are not alone and, I believe, whichever position they take, they will find others to walk with them. If they stay with the foci on material artefacts and embodied knowing, they will find allies with EKSIG and join the discourse on “experiential knowledge” and continue to refine the conference format favouring material- and experience-based presentation and discussion. If they expand their conception of design beyond material artefacts and experiential knowing, then they can examine and build on Jonas’ research through design and further rethink the conference format. Jonas’ model would imply a format that favours the discursive and the experiential.

« 8 » But at the end of the day, the format is secondary to the culture of inquiry. Organizing a conference is only worthwhile when it is or should be a moment of collective inquiry or learning. Exploring alternative formats to promote and realize this moment is a laudable ambition. Yes, I call this an ambition because academic conferences, like other academic activities, when not seriously reflected on and carried out, are mundane and sometimes boring routines. However, when thinking about creating conditions for facilitating collective inquiry, it is helpful and necessary to acknowledge and identify state-of-art understanding and practice, to improve them and to create a genuine alternative.

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Research Through Design Is More than Just a New Form of Disseminating Design Outcomes

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> Upshot • The question of more appropriate dissemination formats for research through design (RTD) is important, but secondary. Artefacts are just media in the knowledge-generating process. RTD is a much more powerful concept than presented here.

Introduction

« 1 » In their target article, Abigail Durrant et al. present “a descriptive, experience-centered account of composing a new international conference with an experimental format that aims to support the dissemination of ‘research through design’” (§73), and they conclude:

“[...] the epistemological challenge for understanding how ‘thinking’ may be embodied in artifacts, along with understanding how artifact knowledge may be contextualized within a research process and the presentation of its outputs, remains as ‘controversial’ as ever (Frayling 1993: 8). One conceptual – and pragmatic – move forward could be to use the RTD conference format as a platform or locus for establishing a *commonly understood language* to be drawn upon for disseminating research through design, one that may accommodate the juxtaposition of visual texts, prose and artifacts, for communication, for performance and situated dialogue, and in the use of resources (e.g., technical) for mediating forms of expression and configuring participation.” (§72)

« 2 » This concluding statement conveys the problem that I have with the text: there is a fundamental difference between the problem of disseminating RTD outcomes and the issue of developing a consistent concept of RTD. The article mixes both aspects in an inappropriate manner, concerning both content and strategy. In the end, there is no

1 | “Research into Practice,” as far as I know, was one of the earliest to explore collectively the themes of knowledge and knowing in performing and creative arts in the context of academic and doctoral research. Although the symposium seems to have been inactive since 2008, past proceedings are published online under the title “Working Papers in Art and Design Journal,” available at <http://www.herts.ac.uk/research/ssahri/research-areas/art-design/research-into-practice-group/production/working-papers-in-art-and-design-journal>. EKSIG (Design Research Society Special Interest Group on Experiential Knowledge) has been hosting bi-annual conferences since 2009 and seems to share the same agenda and interest as the RTD conference series. More information is available at <http://experientialknowledge.org.uk/conference.html>