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## THEORY-BASED OR PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH – WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

CARSTEN FRIBERG

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### Abstract

This paper debates what makes practice-based research sound research from the assumption that what qualifies research is how it is carried out in accordance with a code of conduct characterising work as research. This is indifferent to the field of research, whether it is in arts, humanities, or natural sciences as they are all subject to the same set of rules. Whether the practice can be acknowledged as research is a matter of exercising these rules. Hence, it is suggested to talk about virtues of doing research as a matter of demonstrating how one masters and respects rules in research shared by all members of a specific research community. The virtues relate to the necessity of following and displaying one's ability to work by them which is, in the case of a PhD, what one is expected to demonstrate explicitly. Talking about virtues in research, furthermore points to how the specific research community defines the specific character of research within this community. Architecture and design have a knowledge tradition of their own, and when this meets research the task is to unite the knowledge tradition with the rules of research rather than importing theories from other fields.

Keywords:  
research, philosophy of science,  
theory, PhD, virtue

## Introduction

My intention with the title is not to deny the difference between working from a theoretical perspective or doing practice-based research.<sup>1</sup> It is meant as an invitation to reflect on forms of research with a polemic comment as to what I believe to be a myth about the differences between practice-based research and classical forms of research, a myth created in the heat of debate about introducing research into architecture, design and art. The classical forms of research I name theory-based, an unfortunate name, exactly because it is based on a false myth of opposition between practice-based and theory-based work and a false idea of how the researcher works. In a Danish context a current (in 2014) example is found in the debate about research in the arts where a suggestion is to introduce a middle category between research and development (in Danish: *udviklingsvirksomhed*) due to banning the use of research (*forskning*) while speaking Danish, despite acknowledging it is the word one would use in English (Kulturministeriet, n.d., pp. 13, 17). The motivation for this is to keep a safe distance from the sciences which are seen to have their field of knowledge and their logic so different from the arts that they must be separated (ibid., pp. 7 f.).

I will not discuss the Danish research political agenda; the journal *Peripeti* brought up this particular question in an issue (19/2013). I want to approach this matter from a specific point of view, namely from questions brought up when practitioners enter research and ask about the expectations they are met with. This instigation appears to be a step from practice into theory and the expectation is thought to be answered by now basing the work done on theory rather than practice. Such a conclusion needs questioning (cf. Candlin, 2000). The approach from the Danish ministry of Culture is an attempt to avoid a certain theoretical tradition dominating the research in the arts. However, my point is, this is done based on demonising theory rather than seeing it much closer to practice. My own experience, coming from a philosophical background, presumably a field as far from practice as possible, is that I find the differences in working within practice and theory less significant than is often thought to be the case (cf. Friberg, 2010a). Research is practiced, but not only that, *how* the researcher practices research may bear many similarities to the practitioner's practice, and, what will be my main point, is qualified and evaluated as research as to *how* the researcher practices research more than by *what* it is about. Research led by practice and research based on theory differ in their subjects of research, but not in what qualifies them as research. The important step is the one taken from practice to research but that step does not imply that the practitioner has to exercise research in an entirely different way based on theoretical matters; it implies following general rules which qualify research, rules applicable to the practice itself.

- 1 I will use practice-based research as the name for an approach to research which is also known by names such as practice-led research, artistic research, research through or by design. The different names put emphasis on different interests where, for example, artistic research and research through design will both have different objects, methods and traditions to relate to. But as my focus here is on the process of doing research I see no differences in what qualifies them all as research. When using practice-based research one could argue it would be better to use practice-led as the former could include research in any field relating to practice such as medicine and engineering. This is an important point, but practice-based research is still more often used in a Nordic context and therefore I use this concept. For an elaborate characterization of different forms of research see Sevaldson (2010).

To emphasize this point, I will talk about what I call the virtue of doing research, meaning rules to be respected in research as they are shared by all members of the research community in general, despite the differences in the specific fields of research. What is meant by virtue is a code of conduct within research concerning the expectation of what is appropriate behaviour for someone asking to be called a researcher.

While elaborating on the virtue of doing research I hope to eliminate the myth of opposition between practice-based and theory-based work, a myth based on prejudices about what traditional research is. The opposition is intended for creating a space for doing practice-based research without the limits felt to be imposed on one from traditional research, limits coming from the idea of a need to legitimate research through the theoretical literature or theoretical models. But when research is legitimated by *how* it is carried out, this opposition disappears.

I will first elaborate on the idea of the virtue of doing research, secondly focus on the PhD as a special case of doing research, and end with reflecting on implications of the idea of virtue for the researcher in architecture and design.

## The virtue of doing research

The reason for talking about the virtue of doing research is based on the assumption that whether we do research in the arts and humanities or in natural sciences everyone will have to acknowledge the same set of rules and will be judged as a researcher on the ability to exercise these rules.

Virtue may be a word with problematic connotations related to ethics. Following the etymology virtue is about the ability to do what one is expected to do which, of course, relates to ethics but also more broadly to forms of conduct. Virtue, coming from Latin *vir*, man, relates to strength and manliness, to the obligation of the male citizen to exercise the duties expected of him. Being a virtuous person is one who acts in the most appropriate way within a community, according to the specific rules of it, one who is capable of choosing the most suitable set of actions in the specific context. I use virtue rather than ethics to emphasize the ability to exercise specific rules within a community, but I do agree with Peter Downton when he writes: "At its best research is an ethical endeavour dealing with matters of worth" (Downton, 2003, p. 5).

Emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the rules characterizing the research community and acting according to them relates to *how* the acts are done more than to *what* is done. Of course *what* matters; in any community it is important to ask what should be done, but any situation calling for our action is also a situation calling for our use of judgement as to exactly what kind of help we should offer someone in need. Similarly in research we can agree on what to do, but we can dispute about how



it should be done. We will agree to the need of an argumentation, but not on how it should be carried out. A verbal form is one way, but it may, in context, be more appropriate to use diagrams and drawings, and as long as they are explicit and not ambiguous, i.e. following the rules of what argumentation should be, they may serve the purpose best (cf. Dombos, 2006, pp. 23 f.; Lagerström, 2008, p. 10; O'Donoghue, 2009).

Research is about acquiring new knowledge, which in the context of academia is met with specific expectations as to what kind of knowledge we take to be new and relevant as well as to how the research is done. Research is to “search or investigate exhaustively” (Merriam-Webster, 1993, p. 995) in which observations, experiments, critical scrutinizing and questioning take place. Research is linked to search where the prefix *re* is not about searching over again but emphasizes how the searching is diligent, thorough and in depth (Friedman, 2003, p. 510). Research begins with asking for explanations for something where our knowledge is not sufficient. What kind of questions we ask can be manifold; it can concern some general patterns in phenomena, a new interpretation to specific events or works, or investigating ways of producing things. Again, the subject is not what qualifies something as research but the procedure with which the research is carried out does. Looking for answers implies a justification of the questions, whether they are properly posed, relevant, and interesting. One has to make sure not to repeat existing knowledge by placing the questions in context, and also to make sure the questions are of relevance for more people. Basically, the starting point of research includes a research question, motivation for it and a context (cf. Borgdorff, 2012, p. 160, and more elaborate Downton, 2003, pp. 4 ff.).

Such general descriptions of research should not cause any disagreement and are probably also considered trivial. They are indeed trivial but nonetheless worth much more attention as the triviality is not always so apparent when looking into the practice of research as found in dissertations and articles. One indication of this is how it is often made explicit for reviewers of research journals when criteria are laid out for evaluating the contribution. It should not be necessary, one thinks, when the reviewers are trained researchers and the authors supposed to be likewise. It indicates that the practice of a “creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge” as the definition of research found in the Frascati Manual, is more of a problem (OECD, 2002, p. 30). The point then is not to be able to identify and classify the research done, whether it is basic research, applied research or experimental development (*ibid.*, pp. 77 ff.) but to understand the form of it and how it contributes to giving us new knowledge.

Research in the academic context must relate to existing knowledge, otherwise we cannot judge whether it is really new and will add to our stock of knowledge. It must also make it possible to judge the systema-

tic basis of it through displaying every step of the work by making them accessible for the research community. Adding to our stock of knowledge is not for one's own interest, but a contribution to mutual shared knowledge – research is, no matter how lonely the work can be, not for personal ambitions and interests but for the common good.

Such rules are fundamental regardless of the discipline – natural, technical, social sciences and humanities. The virtue spoken of here, relates to them, to the necessity of following them and displaying how one works in order for them to be judged by the relevant research community. The relevant research community becomes crucial here as it is the one judging whether one's research respects the rules. When this community is in architecture and design, it will define a particular understanding of good research behaviour, an understanding that, apart from the general rules for all research, will have specific requests as to how research in architecture and design is conducted best for the benefit of the field. Before coming back to this, the general rules are still to be discussed on, and as the entrance into the research community is the PhD some comments on it should be made.

## Making a PhD

Within the field of research the PhD should be seen as a certain academic genre, as it is produced to demonstrate one's skills in research. The PhD is produced to demonstrate the acquisition of and ability to master the virtue that qualify as the membership of the research community; thus restraints are put on the format of the work by being even more explicit in demonstrating the ground rules of research. In the end it is read by an evaluating committee, which should not be left in doubt as to whether the performed actions are deliberately done or a result of some fortunate but accidental choices.

I think it would be difficult to accept a PhD that cannot explicitly state a research question, some motivation for it beyond personal interest, a relation to relevant context thus also demonstrating knowledge of state of the art of the research, an argumentation for the assumptions, the relations between the elements, the progression in thought, critical reflections on the work itself and a conclusion to it.

This does not say anything about the format of these elements, nor can it be a guideline for formulating the PhD by stating that one should begin with a research question and arrange everything strictly to arrive at a conclusion to the stated question(s). The process is no linear journey from the beginning to the end, which is something important to emphasize, as it seems to be included in the myth about classical, theory-based research. Such an idea of research being exercised in a linear process from the research questions via methods and theory to the end is “a reductionist inheritance of science” (Downton, 2003, p. 5). The question,

or more often questions, asked at the beginning may undergo several revisions during the work; they will most likely be restated, challenged, changed, opened up, narrowed, dismissed etc. several times. The legitimacy of the PhD is not dependent on one single and well defined research question, but on how questions are handled. One could even ask if we sometimes should begin with an answer and then work towards the best question (Dombois, 2006, p. 28).

The reason for this, false, idea about research being a linear process may easily arise from the presentation of research which often sounds like it has been the case. But the stories told in reports, papers and articles are stories told retrospectively at the end of the work done. I believe the story-telling of research is one of the serious obstacles experienced when moving from practice into research – an obstacle characterised as a shock (Hockey, 2003, p. 84) as this is both a matter of a different work process and of a format to learn that is new for many coming from practice. Though it is new in that research asks of the candidate to produce “a formal registration document” (ibid., p. 85) expected to be systematic and analytic, it is new in form but not in a familiarity with the documentation of one’s work process in notepads and sketchbooks (ibid.). Something similar is the case with the expectation of clarity and explicit steps in the process. The requirement for clarity of intention and process, the demands for reflection and elements to evaluate are, of course, also present in a design process; they are only subject to different expectations of form in the research process (Downton, 2003, p. 5).

My point is not to ignore or underestimate the differences; it may be felt to be both frightening and counterproductive to be asked to reveal what is usually made as personal notes, and to be asked to present them in a specific systematic format. However, it would be a false, romantic idea to think of architects, designers and artists as unsystematic and always private about these notes and researchers as systematic and prepared to share every step in their work. I believe, however, that how these notes are produced is at first a matter of individual character; the researcher’s desk, notebooks and work table may be anything from well-structured and ordered to a mess no outsider would be able to make much sense of. How the presentation of the finished work turns out is in the end a matter of training in how such presentations should look.

This training is the author’s training in the scientific story-telling which is a fundamental part of the PhD. Of course the PhD is not merely a matter of presentation but the presentation reveals the candidate’s ability to exercise research, i.e. to know what to do throughout the work and how this work should be presented for critical questions and evaluation. When someone is offered to make a PhD it is because others already have confidence in the candidate’s talent. What the candidate then is capable of is not established through the clearness and originality of the

research question and the research plan alone, but through exercising the complete task of making the PhD. The evaluation of it is dependent on whether one can give an account of the different steps in the work.

The restrictions on the possible formats of the PhD are related to the ability of the evaluating committee to follow (and approve) the steps taken. The evaluation of the PhD is based very much on the story told about the journey of the research. The story should be an invitation by the candidate to be looked over the shoulder during the work when an account is given of the choices made, directions taken, things omitted and included. Here research probably differs from most creative or artistic processes, where one cannot be expected to put forward openly everything done and many are very reluctant to do it. However, a small modification to the ideal of openness is needed. Telling the story about the work done also implies a certain amount of post-rationalizing. Not everything should be told; communicating the PhD is also learning how to communicate to an audience with specific expectations – to give them what they want to hear. This is very much where the impression of the linearity of the work appears.

Making a PhD as a matter of communication should make us turn to rhetoric for advice. I will, however, briefly turn to Plato, despite his reputation for being critical towards rhetoric represented by the Sophists of his time. An important criticism of his is that what they exercise is not a true art or skill, i.e. knowledge about how to translate an idea to a specific product. To be skilled is to know how something is produced; it is to know through a producing action. The craftsman knows how to produce, for instance, a chair *by* doing it, not by talking about the construction of chairs or writing an essay about chairs. The Sophists have no such skills, only a habitude because what they do is not to provide or transmit real insight and knowledge through their rhetorical performances but only to generate pleasure (Gorg. 462c).

We can draw a parallel by saying that the production of a PhD requires the skills of doing research which should not be confused with what only has a similarity to it. Similarity is when one performs something expected to be research because it looks similar to what can be found in the traditional academic field such as references to theoretical literature, names of theoreticians and a section about theory and method. This is parallel to the habitude of the Sophists. They produce pleasure and not knowledge among the audience when, for example, the political argumentation only pleases the audience because prejudices and pre-conceived opinions are confirmed but does not give any arguments for a political debate. Similarly, the student who lacks the skills of communicating the research can hope to please the research community and its evaluators but provides no true arguments. As Plato reminds us, the user is the judge to whether the product is well made or not (Rep. 601c); and

talking about the PhD the evaluating committee is a user, a user that is not taken in by a sophisticated performance.

The evaluating committee will have expectations on behalf of the research community in general as well as related to their background which constitutes a specific community where one must perform the research in relation to it. The different fields of research have different ways of performing their work and must expect material relevant to their context. Diagrams and models of different kinds, for example, can be seen as not only illustrations and overviews but also integrated elements in displaying something and arguing for it (cf. Gilbert, 1998). And this is not restricted to an architectural, designerly and artistic context. A delightful and elucidating example from chemistry touches upon how “...the chemists’ necessity to move simultaneously in macroscopic and microscopic worlds forces chemists to use a mixture of symbolic and iconic representation of compounds/molecules” (Hoffmann, 2002, p. 43).<sup>2</sup> In the context of architecture one would expect, then, to find drawings and models as an integrated part of the PhD to reason with. The drawing process is also very often an intellectual operation, an act of understanding (Kirsh, 2011; Simmons, 2011), and there is in principle no difference between the architectural drawing, the drawings for engineering, chemistry, physics or any other discipline. One has to move through the process to understand – to read the diagrams, drawings and texts. Of course, not everybody can understand the drawing simply by looking at it; it may require knowledge of the process in the drawing to understand. But this is no different from seeing the formulas in biochemistry or mathematics. One can be met with the expectation from the layman that drawing is something anyone can do – of course some people are not as good as others – thus it is not considered to be a language of its own like the mathematical or chemical formula. But this is a false assumption, just like when Hegel complains that anybody believe they can do philosophy without learning it because they possess the standard of doing so through natural reason; but they do not believe, given leather and needle and using their fingers, that they can produce a shoe though they likewise possess the standard for making shoe in their foot (Hegel, 1807/1988, p. 49).

The PhD is where one has to explicitly demonstrate the acquisition of the rules of research to satisfy the evaluating committee. What I hope to have made clear here is that introducing the virtue of research puts emphasis on how this is judged through focus on the general good behaviour of the research instead of on the loads of theory and methods that often obscure the intentions of the research. The research community of architecture and design determines what is appropriate for a PhD in these fields, i.e. *how* one presents the case, why it is of interest, what relation it has to relevant discussions, and how the argumentations and dissemination should be performed. The *how* may be through many

- 2 Hoffmann’s paper is a plaidoyer for a better style in academic writing. “I love this complex molecular science. I know that its richness was created by human beings. So I’m unhappy to see their humanity suppressed in the way they express themselves in print. ... One danger, specific to the scientific article, is that by dehumanizing our mode of communication, by removing emotion, motivation, the occasionally irrational, we may in fact have done much more than chase away the Naturphilosophen of the early nineteenth century. One hundred and fifty years down the line what we have created is a mechanical, ritualized product that  $5 \times 10^5$  times per year propagates the notion that scientists are dry and insensitive, that they respond only to wriggles in a spectrum.” (Hoffmann, 2002, p. 48)

forms of practices; as long as the committee find it done satisfying to the basic rules it will be acknowledged as research.

## A reflection on doing research in architecture and design

Putting emphasis on the research community as the authority as to how it is most appropriate to follow the rules of research opens up for questions of the possible different formats of the PhD and research in general in architecture and design. This is not settled by declaring one's membership to a specific theory or one's affection for a method. Very little is said by the declaration of, for example, doing research through or by design,<sup>3</sup> and one should never succumb to the temptation of using such references as "a safety net or alibi" (Lagerström, 2008, p. 13). The role of theories in research is to see how they are integrated into the research, how they inform the research and contextualize it, and how they are not a world apart from practice, but an approach to understanding practice brought about through reflections on the same practice (cf. Friberg, 2010b).

The integration of theory depends on the practices it is to be integrated into. It is the practice that forms the basis of what is acknowledged as relevant, in what form it takes and even what becomes recognizable as facts. We are usually thinking about facts as something that are, as a foundation that cannot be different, on which we build our knowledge. But apart from the wisdom of the etymological origin of facts, being related to *facio* meaning to make, to do, to bring about, it is also debatable within epistemology and the philosophy of science how something becomes a fact. It is problematic to insist on facts being simply there and speaking for themselves; how should we then ever be able to explain how facts have been ignored by previous generations of scientists unless we use the simplistic idea to consider the older generations as stubborn and ignorant. A model of interpretation will be capable of giving explanation to many phenomena including those that are presented as facts to disprove the model itself. If, for example, an omen taken from the intestines of animals show no significant affinity to actual events we, modern, will be convinced it proves that one cannot take omens, but the one adherent to omen taking will explain that the reason for the lack of success in the predictions is due to hidden forces or bad craftsmanship of the one taking the omens. Facts are not simply there, facts become facts in a context which recognizes them as facts: "The apparent objectivity of familiar 'facts' is a result of training combined with forgetfulness and supported by genetic dispositions; it is not the result of deepened insight" (Feyerabend, 1999, pp. 106 f.).

Important for what is considered research in architecture and design is how something becomes recognized as a fact in the line of reasoning and argumentation within the practices in architecture and design.

- 3 An important reference is Frayling (1993), who introduces the three forms of research by the names research into/through/for art and design (1993, p. 5). The paper is often thought to be obscure on these three categories, which may be due to the fact that Frayling's main focus is to address the stereotypes of what research is. Highly recommended is Archer (1995) who discusses, in his terminology, research about/for the purposes of/through practice, i.e. not identical to Frayling. See also Friedman (2008) and Sevaldson (2010, p.11 ff.).

When “the knowing used by a designer in designing and the knowing and knowledge he or she gains through the conduct of the design inquiry” is recorded by “[t]he increasingly resolved marks made on paper and/or the models or images produced as designing continues” (Downton, 2003, p. 104), it should be through such a language that the knowledge of architectural and design research is evolving, a desire similar to requests in artistic research (Borgdorff, 2012, p. 69). I believe it is of importance to put much emphasis on what Downton writes:

*The character of a design work as a repository for knowledge is not different to regarding a book as a source of knowledge. Particular kinds of knowledge can be embodied in each. The ways in which the knowledge is apprehended in each case differs, but they are each evidence of the knowing of their originators and this knowing has been recorded and stored and thus made available to others at other times. (Downton, 2003, p. 107)*

The point about virtue in research is to give authority to the research community in defining the specific character of research within this community. Architecture and design have a knowledge tradition of their own, and when this meets research the task is to unite them with the rules of research such as contextualising with relevant knowledge, being transparent about the process where motives, reasons and arguments are displayed for common debate, and disseminating the results to fellow researchers in forms appropriate for the field of interest. Thus, the form of research in architecture and design can only be expected to be different from, for example, disciplines in humanistic research, which again also differs from engineering or medical sciences.

Insofar as the foundation for sound research has to do with virtue, I see no problem in a PhD and research in general in architecture and design exercising this virtue in different media and formats. As long as the communication of the idea and the reasoning is acknowledged to be unambiguous (to the degree possible) by the community it addresses, and the communication, in principle, is open for anyone who learns the language in use nothing should obstruct the choice of formats different – and also very different – from the traditional written one.

I am aware that this may sound more easy and ideal than it really is. Reality is agendas created in a similar fashion as my opening example of the Danish debate about research in arts that are not allowed to name themselves research to keep the sciences at a safe distance. Such debates have been present all along as debates on research in art, architecture and design, but what should be brought to attention is how problematic such agendas are. The assumption that written language is a straightforward and clear form of communication is certainly to be met with questions, though such questions are often ignored or at least forgotten

because “the report writing is perceived as being so naturalised that it is not recognised as having a form” (Candlin, 2000, p. 99). A simple point to be aware of is what Fiona Candlin does when she mentions the many self-help books for academic writing helping one to learn the genre of academic writing (ibid.). It concerns the use of terminology, the specific style related to different academic fields, and the choice of words down to examples like whether one can use *I* in an academic text (ibid., p. 100), something I myself have experienced having critical comments on because the use of first person singular for some evaluators is seen as an illegitimate inclusion of a subjective element, without ever explaining what makes one able to speak for others by saying *we* instead.

Writing requires practice and not only in the style and wording but also concerning several strategies for producing and positioning the text (Latour, 2003, pp. 30 ff.). To see the writing of research as an unproblematic means of transmitting information is to insist on a particular idea of language as a neutral media for communication which ignores the critique of most 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy under the title of *The Linguistic Turn*, a point shared among philosophers in traditions usually having very little to agree on. Seen from some philosophical traditions, there is an important affinity between thinking and the language of thinking. One can make an experiment and look into different philosophical traditions such as a book by an English analytical philosopher and a French post-structuralist and ask if the differences are a matter of stylistic choices only or a result of different traditions of thinking. Or one can look into texts by the philosopher Martin Heidegger where what his critiques call the obscurity of his style is very often due to a struggling with the language to be able to say, what can be said.

Reading a philosopher like Heidegger is to have a little glimpse behind the elegant presentation of research in journals; it is to be invited into the sketch book of thinking and sense what the philosopher does with concepts and metaphors, and sometimes also with illustrations and diagrams. I believe it bears many similarities with the work in architecture and design, only the means are different; similarities concerning the investigative way of working include steps taken that both contribute to proceeding on an idea or moving backwards and away from it, stumbling upon something new and productive, sometimes making a false move or a move into a blind alley. Texts of a philosopher like Heidegger are exceptions; in most research we are not invited to follow such steps of searching but only the steps laid out for coming to the end that is the result. My assumption is that Heidegger is not so much of an exception in the process of working, only an exception in making the laboratory of thinking accessible, thus revealing the elements of doubts, questions, attempts, metaphors and other elements that constitute the work of the researcher – whether it is done with words, calculator, filming, prototypes or whatever form that is appropriate for the research. Thus, Heidegger is



not a theoretician to include in architectural or designerly research to make it research by adding a theoretical component, but only an example of the work done in research that appears very different in different fields, but at the same time bears many similarities in how it is exercised and bound to the same fundamental rules of research.

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### Biographical information

Carsten Friberg

Address:

Istedgade 61, 3.tv

1650 København V

Denmark

Phone: 0045 61718360

E-mail: carsten.friberg@gmail.com

Carsten Friberg, PhD in philosophy and independent researcher. Formerly affiliated to University of Copenhagen, Aarhus School of Architecture and Aalborg University, and chair for Nordic Summer University. Special research fields are ambiance and artistic research.