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Final Revisions: June 2012.

To cite, please see the final version, appearing as:

[The Rise Of the Darists](#), PLAT Journal: On the Bias, Issue 2.5, Fall/Winter 2012, Rice School of Architecture.

The rise of DAR: from crisis to possibilities

The 1990's will be a time of considerable panic, I suspect. I'll be in place. - Robert Fripp

About twenty years ago, a backlash flitted through the halls of architecture. In the now-familiar “post-critical” turn, students and practitioners were called out for “abusing” theory. Yes, there was some credence to the rebuke. Concept-soaked projects were prone to an open-ended use of theory, in a ventriloquism of theoretical statements devoid of context or fact. This trend has now been supplanted. Today, not theory, but “research” is the operative tool of the day, the new reference for mimesis.¹

Of course, the alternative to a theoretically and historically-informed architecture takes many forms. The field of architecture has become more hybridized than in the past. As anyone can attest, perhaps most adamantly Stan Allen, form derived from environmental, geological or other empirical referents abounds.² In addition, architects have found in the world's various contemporary networks and economic systems, a distinct and deliberate fascination. One also sees the resurgence of socially-committed construction, as well as a return to architecture's idealized autonomy, and not to mention the fixation, verging on fetishism, with so-called informal cities. These are only some of the most salient examples of recent architectural agendas.

In spite of the seeming heterogeneity, however, the evocation of research overwhelms. It has crept in as a foundation for overcoming the imagined limits to theory, specifically theory's more dire and less projective avenues. Long stewing, “Design as research” has now quietly cemented its place alongside the post-critical.³ The proliferation and resulting implications of the research nomenclature for architectural practice are due an exploration, especially as they intersect other design disciplines. The distinct terms of this political economy are used interchangeably, such that the popular “Design as research,” or simply “design research,” as well as “design thinking” or “design creativity” commonly lobbed by the design consulting service sector.

Of these, I borrow “Design as research” specifically to identify the broader penetration of the research imagination in architecture, both inside and outside the academy. I do so not only for the sake of clarity, but also taking after the same phrase used as a title for a special supplement edited by Lily H. Chi, published in the *Journal of Architectural Education* in 2001, as well as the name of a panel at the Annual Meeting of the Associate Collegiate Schools of Architecture in 2007.⁴ “Design as research” is employed in those discussions as a theme that pulls together many interpretations in order to have an academic debate. I want to emphasize that I owe a great debt

to those debates, but I use the phrase differently. Here, I mean a more or less accepted *belief* or shared *set of values*, especially one many times without complete knowledge or depth in that trajectory of “Design as research” as charted by architectural academics. In short, I appropriate the phrase to indicate the powerful *ideology* of “design as research” rather than the critical examination of it. “Design as research” can also be nicely shortened to a succinct, readable acronym, “Dar,” that I use in the rest of the essay.

Bounding Dar

Locating the boundaries of Dar is not simple, but we may approximate its major threads and limitations. Dar fuels the noticeable proclivity to fortify projects with large data sets and algorithm-fueled software. The translation of these data clouds into any number of scales and forms—from parametrically-derived undulating pavilions to urban farming master-plans—yields a popular impression of formal and rhetorical rigor underlying the project's gestation. Although intricately related to a history of research practices in architecture, Dar exceeds these.

One might think, for instance, of Reyner Banham and François Dallegret's “A Home is not a House,” which was a speculative design precedent performed in order to investigate and critique historical housing types and post-war American culture.⁵ Or one may alternately look to the visual and historical exploration typified by the work of Charles Moore, the Eames, the Smithsons, Venturi & Scott-Brown, or even early OMA.⁶ But DAR critically favors the identification of systems that are usually imperceptible to the naked eye, be they very small or very large. Such architectural work therefore exists in a forecasted time and place, imagined as part of a pattern which leads to a conveniently predictable future scenario. Paradoxically, the work is often tested through installations and full-scale mock-ups, but even as such, the experiments anticipate an abstract future yet to come.

Consider, also, the recent MoMA exhibit, *Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream*, featuring original work by MOS, Studio Gang, and WORKac, among others. The show is an exegesis of economic and geographic data turned into fully-formed “solutions” to the housing crisis. *Foreclosed* represents an antipode to MoMA's seminal 1988 exhibition, *Deconstructivist Architecture*. Though no less concerned than *Foreclosed* with buildings as the ultimate test of architecture, *Deconstructivist Architecture* stressed the latent capacities in design to frame “enigmas” rather than finished conditions.⁷ Its precedent remains a noteworthy contrast to the certainties of *Foreclosed*.

Dar claims a territory where its methods are not accessible to other strains of investigation, and pertain specifically to, and only to, design as its own self-enclosed mode of reasoning and action. Thus, the sole expertise that can address certain questions is not research writ large, nor is it design by itself, but something more esoteric: a fusion of both.

The refinement of craft, in turn, certainly involves research. This is evidenced by specialized graduate programs that emphasize computer scripting, automation, and the like. The Architectural Association's Design Research Lab is a good example. The stunning proliferation

over the last ten years of all sorts of aggregate skins, milled bas-reliefs, kit-of-part pavilions, and algorithmic surfaces are the outgrowths of such an investment in refashioning architecture's production capacities. But advanced craft is not all there is to Dar. While certainly not eschewing the refinement of craft, Dar comes to mean more than crafting itself. Dar is quite driven by its identity as a form of “applied design.”⁸

Dar, in this last such sense of applied design, becomes a tautological way of defining research, and can be problematic because it locks the putative researcher into a circular struggle where neither the object of study nor the method of investigation can be grounded. The term *applied* is key. *Applied* gets hitched onto *design*, a contested term in itself. The modifier is placed as a disclaimer, as if to imply that the work in question is *not* instinctual, crass, or otherwise autonomous from reason or knowledge. But if by applied design we are to understand this idea of non-autonomous design, then what would plain, unqualified design be? When one turns around to try to grasp what would constitute such a kind of un-applied design, one finds a howling void. After all, can we speak of *any* design that is *not* applied? Design, that is, already suggests the application of a pre-existing knowledge, even if in unconventional ways at times. In this sense, applied design comes to mean the application of an already-applied knowledge. Ironically, such a circularity evokes the very same red flags waved in the early-90s against “the uses and abuses of theory,” when Sylvia Lavin likened the use of critical theory in architecture to a “tiger biting its own tail.”⁹ We might presently speak, oddly enough, of the “uses and abuses of design as research” in the same vein. So how did it we end up in the same disciplinary conundrum, two decades later?

The encroachment of “research” into architecture

To answer, we must look to the broader context of stagnating Western economies and the neoliberal re-packaging of research throughout society as an instrument of accumulation.¹⁰ When we do, appropriating the term *research* to describe design is no impartial act. Take for example the curious contradiction that much of the research we can see, touch, and ingest is increasingly not affordable to a broad public, even in the case of life-saving medical treatment and green technology. Across wealth-creating research fields like agriculture, energy, computer sciences, biomedicine, geology, and climate, the outcomes of research come to be materialized as technopositivist commodities: engineered food products, cyber-surveillance, digital simulation, weapons, mining machinery, pharmaceuticals. The list could go on and on.

Architecture is not isolated, of course, from this broader infiltration, which adds new pressures and meanings to how we teach, think, and practice. In the restructuring of education since around the 1980s, practitioners who teach and design but do not produce new, marketable knowledge are less relevant within the parameters of corporate academic sponsorship. They are, for all intents and purposes, an economic leech.

Due to the very same economic forces, the monopoly schools hold over the reproduction of the discipline is now under threat. Schools of architecture still must work to meet the requirements of the accreditation boards.¹¹ However, it is still not clear if the boards grasp what recent architecture graduates have experienced outside. Schools are caught in a tripartite bind: meet the

broader expectations of neoliberal academe, the increasingly outdated guild process, and the needs of students.¹²

Within this political economy, architects can try to deploy the idea of research, but can hardly deliver the goods remunerated in this scheme, except by promising immaterial consulting or policy knowledge with, by the way, incomplete financial and advanced math tools that the market demands. Setting aside the deficiency in preparation for the consulting world, the elite realms of policy and consultancy were recently imbricated in the global economic collapse.¹³ We should ponder if that's where we want to expend our energy.

In the welter of such an economic climate, schools have at times attempted to recast their control of architecture and research by forcing both of these into a bottle of lightning: design. But for schools, angling to compete in the broader research market by staking a claim on the realm of design is slippery. As any architect intuitively knows, it is often difficult to precisely pin down the gestating ideas within any design process. These ideas can come about outside of normative forms of seeking or producing knowledge. Conflating design with research becomes the desperate reach for a life preserver, touting, as a sort of badge, what nobody else can offer in the knowledge economy.¹⁴

One by-product of education's transformation is the emergence, in fact, of design as a concept that increasingly takes the place of architecture. Cornell University, for instance, recently considered changing the title "School of Architecture" to "School of Design."¹⁵ Generic design, however, operates most comfortably as a label for a branch of business consulting, as shown by incipient master's programs, popular websites like Fast Company magazine's *Co.design*, and firms like Ideo that marry what is often referred to as "design creativity," or "design thinking," with corporate administration and the prized innovation to catch consumer attention. Design, in this corporatist mode of market thought and research, has been cynically branded as a potion to solve poverty, pollution, and the health crises associated with environmental change. Design has been posited literally as "the future of business," and could very well be, after all, the future of the architecture guild as well. But is that truly a desired future? And will the design salve take hold for long?

From research to politics

All being said, nothing should stop architects from adopting as much research as they may want into practice. But if research truly challenges existing knowledge and theoretical frameworks, one cannot expect architecture's foundations—and its traditional mores and methods—to remain stable, as DAR's premises would leave it. The very tautology of DAR prevents any truly challenging idea, or any shakeup of architecture's own rules: the conventions of drawing, the aggrandized figures, the obsequiousness to one's patrons and their property lines, and the unequal distribution of labor, to name a few.

These rules were destabilized during the ascent of identity politics and critical theory from roughly the 1970's to the early-90's. Architecture's reductionist abstractions and visual

representations were rejuvenated throughout a subsequent period of realignment in the latter part of the 90's. This is no revelation. In fact, it remains central to the post-critical agenda itself. Theories of landscape and environment in architecture throughout the period, especially as articulated by a loose group of diagram adherents, landscape urbanists, and digital sages, often stressed the application of the discipline's "internal tools" on what Hal Foster called the "expanded field of design;" a contradictory look inward in order to impact the world beyond architecture's disciplinary boundaries.¹⁶

The ascent—and folly—of the pragmatist research strain has taken many guises. But perhaps, for brevity's sake, it is best illustrated by one instance of an architecture firm's embarrassingly palatable appeal to European conservatism. In 2002, extreme-right wing politician Pim Fortuyn embraced MVRDV's apocalyptic and comically alarmist *Pig City* proposal of condos for robotic hog butchering. Though the scheme was purely hypothetical, a way to convey the sprawl of pork production in Holland, Fortuyn cited it as scientific proof of Western Europe's purported overpopulation by hungry, immigrant hordes.¹⁷

The story was punctuated by a macabre coincidence. Fortuyn was assassinated for his political and environmental rhetoric as he left the VPRO broadcast studios, a structure designed—oddly enough—by MVRDV, who also received death threats. The entire bizarre operetta sounds as if it burst out of the head of mockumentary filmmaker Christopher Guest. It serves, nonetheless, as an all-too-real reminder that design, even when denuded of critical thoughts, can hardly be untethered from politics. *Pig City* was a clumsy intervention into weighty and delicate problems of national concern. Yet there was, perhaps, a silver lining. By ignoring their own privilege, and the stored power in their images, MVRDV accidentally brought latent class and social warfare into full view. Ultimately, *Pig City's* poorly crafted research questions mistook complex political and environmental processes for a bare calculation of land use.¹⁸

And yet, theory, at least with the rarefied and esoteric inflections of yesteryear, is not coming back to any central role in architecture at this moment. Times have changed. The environmental scenario is worse. The economy looms larger in our nightmares. Culture has taken a more activist turn. In architecture, if the education system wasn't already a relatively privileged enclosure, is surely one now. As I write these words, Cooper Union's trustees are considering a plan to charge tuition for the first time in the school's famed history. The University of California, home to such respected architecture and planning programs as those at UCLA and Berkeley, is by certain measures, now effectively privatized. Altogether, the confluence of all these social, economic, and environmental conditions demand polyvalent theoretical approaches that inevitably must draw from diverse and versatile research methods. A shuttered territory where design appropriates a mode of research as its own, perhaps remunerating in the short term, will not do.

Conclusions

I do not call then, for a nostalgic return to an idealized, all-seeing theory as in the past, nor for its dispensation in favor of the theory from back in the days. But rather than invoking the merely cosmetic sheen of research, a truly research-informed architecture could dismantle what Adrian Parr calls the “normative criteria implied within the vocabulary of urbanist design and planning.”¹⁹ In contradistinction to its anticipated role in the pantheon of policy and market wonks, research can cleave through the appearances of objectivity and projective veracity so that architecture may take hold.

To be sure, I do not believe that design practices do not involve research, or that these practices do not produce new knowledge. Nothing could be further from the idea. All design draws upon knowledge, either produced by existing research or new research. But critically, design is not synonymous with research. Design cannot base its conclusions on design itself.

A more genuine approach, one with curiosity and with care to address the quotidian, hand-in-hand with testing theory, looks beyond the received data sets. This approach can challenge the assumptions embedded in knowledge gained from the past, instead of rushing to offer ready-made solutions. One might also ask how we gather raw data in our everyday lives, within our own subjective dispositions. Given the current economy, we must take stock of the resources we do have at our disposal and those that we do not. And to be certain, an architecture that is open to *both* design *and* research, as opposed to design *as* research, would be an architecture that can and should re-evaluate its own tools and conventions from time to time.

Darists facilitated, involuntarily or not, a controlled environment for the revanchist construction boom that ironically produced “almost no good buildings,” in the words of Kazys Varnelis.²⁰ Beyond the bad buildings, the appropriation of research across many disciplines has been tethered to more militarized and privatized iterations of development, urbanization, and colonization. Through a fog of surface conditions, material performance, diagrams, datascares, infographics, and cartographies, architecture’s imaginations of research have nearly drowned out the alternate spatial mappings and personal visions that do not automatically coincide with the inherited parameters of practice.

The changes wrought on architecture by labor destabilization, technological shifts, and educational restructuring are being met with calls from inside and outside the profession for new rights and liberties where subjects can re-take their own affairs and bodily needs of shelter, food, sexuality, play, and more. Current trajectories of the architectural discipline's own governing institutions work to appropriate these needs as the bounded domain of design. Subservient to the networks of authority, and desirous of their power, architects and other designers have acted against the efflorescence of resistance in the everyday and in collective forms. That is to say, practitioners have hardly tried to make sense of current social movements, even if only to question them, while architectural education becomes ever more privatized and the bulk of public services are being withdrawn. Clearly missing—and curiously elided—from the current formulations we have in mainstream architectural conversations are the people, bodies, identities, and communities that have burst onto the scene.

In the wake of 2011's many activist Springs, we have to admit that the cracks were obvious. The breakages of globalization and urbanization were only brought to global attention by disobedient, insurgent action, not by hegemonic forms of research. It becomes clearer and clearer that if we do not remove the internal barriers to radical research, the politics of space will be claimed elsewhere.

In a similar moment of economic crisis and uncertainty more than thirty years ago, the former King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp invented Frippertronics. A “layered tape loop” hooked up to Fripp's guitar, Frippertronics filled a space with tones usually produced by an entire ensemble. In reality, his performances were a stacking of sounds made with improvised guitar, recorded audio, and live playback, all modulated by Fripp's pedal alone. Though Frippertronics could be confused for a sterile outcome of some sort of sound research that Fripp could have embarked upon, it was most the best method he could imagine to amplify the role of the single guitar. As Spanish artist and *indignado* Kamen Nadev explained, Fripp was frustrated with the commercial culture of music in the 1970's, and the limits to creativity imposed by the industry's high threshold of capital investment.²¹ Against these monetized structures, he wanted to find “small, intelligent objects” that evaded the giant “dinosaurs” of the industry.²²

Greil Marcus, who will get the last word in this essay, described one of Fripp's performances in Berkeley. While Marcus's recounting happens to be vividly spatial, it also offers a blueprint for brave design, fueled by research, in the service of broadening the impact of the single act of architecture—a different Dar:

*Tones soared through the room in arcs; they hung in the air, rang like bells, and then retreated to their boxes. When Fripp raised a guitar and softly soloed against the tape he'd made, playing blues just a step past (or a step behind, I don't know) Jimi Hendrix, the question of whether or not this was rock 'n' roll was both answered and made irrelevant. What Fripp was insisting on was a glimpse of possibilities.*²³

- 1 Sylvia Lavin, "The Uses and Abuses of Theory," *Progressive Architecture*, August 1990; See also: George Baird, "Criticality and Its Discontents," *Harvard Design Magazine* 21 (2004): 16–21; For a survey, see also: Ole W. Fischer, "Atmospheres – Architectural Spaces Between Critical Reading and Immersive Presence," *Field* 1, no. 1 (September 2007): 24–41; Mark Jarzombek, "Critical or Post-Critical?," *Architectural Theory Review* 7, no. 1 (April 2002): 149–151; Mark Jarzombek, "The State of 'Theory'," in *Architektur & Theorie - Produktion Und Reflexion*, ed. Luise King (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2009), 262–273.
- 2 For Stan Allen, the "dominant working metaphor in advanced architecture has been biological," meaning to signify that which adapts to its immediate environment. Versus the biological, Allen counters with the "geological" as a different mode that better addresses, according to him, the varying spatial scales and longer temporal scales into which buildings are situated. Allen sees the geological as underpinning the now-widely embraced landscape and ecological urbanism rubrics, which he himself helped bring into being. Stan Allen, "From the Biological to the Geological," in *Landform Building: Architecture's New Terrain.*, ed. Stan Allen and Mark McQuade (Baden: Müller, Lars, 2011), 20–41.
- 3 Kazys Varnelis, "Is There Research in the Studio?," *Journal of Architectural Education* 61, no. 1 (September 2007): 11–14.
- 4 Lily Chi, "Introduction: Design as Research," *Journal of Architectural Education* 54, no. 4 (2001): 250; Lily Chi, "Translations Between Design Research and Scholarship," *Journal of Architectural Education* 61, no. 1 (2007): 7–10.
- 5 Reyner Banham, "A Home Is Not a House," *Art in America*, April 1965.
- 6 For a fuller overview see: Kazys Varnelis, "Is There Research in the Studio?."
- 7 K. Michael Hays, "Museum of Modern Art, New York: Deconstructivist Architecture," in *Architecture theory since 1968* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT, 2000), 676.
- 8 Lisa Iwamoto, *Digital fabrications: architectural and material techniques* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009).
- 9 Sylvia Lavin, "The Uses and Abuses of Theory," 179.
- 10 See for example: Graham Bowley, "The Academic-Industrial Complex," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/business/01prez.html>.
- 11 I report these lines having had personal experience with the accreditation requirements and meetings as a teacher myself.
- 12 Of course, schools *could* also produce fewer grads, but that seems entirely off the table—especially since some of the hopes are pinned on the production of architects who return to work in foreign countries. However, you can't argue with the fact that there is even an indie rock band called "The Unemployed Architects," and they potentially make a better living at touring than unlicensed junior architects do in offices. The new normal is defined by fewer staff working longer hours, who then must juggle more of the production process, and can do so in smaller numbers through the use of software.
- 13 Rem Koolhaas's research arm, AMO, would seem to be the model to emulate: crisp, intelligent, uncomplicated, and reduced down to slide vignettes that hold little resemblance to the world-at-large. AMO is rooted in its symbolic capital, derived from built and unbuilt architecture, as well as in the mythology of the individual architect genius (Koolhaas), all paradoxically spawned by forms of architectural discourse itself, not in established neoliberal research.
- 14 This was brutally proven when Cambridge University's architecture department was almost shuttered for lack of quantifiable research results. Luke Layfield, "Architecture Under Threat at Cambridge," *The Guardian*, October 29, 2004, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2004/oct/29/highereducation.cutsandclosures>.
- 15 Anyone remotely interested in this debate about "architecture versus design" in the corporatized world of the twentyfirst century education, should read Kleinman's letter to Eisenman. But most especially, see Eisenman's splendid refusal to capitulate to the fetish of design as architecture's life boat. Eisenman's lecture on "Architecture or Design? Whither the Discipline?" is reprinted in the same issue of the journal. Eisenman's preface says all that needs to be said: "This text is written as a resistance to not only the culture of commodification, but also the entrance of that culture into the university in a not too surreptitious manner." Peter Eisenman, "Architecture or Design: Wither the Discipline?," *Cornell Journal of Architecture* 8 (2011): 178–180.
- 16 On "internal tools," see for example: Stan Allen, "Villa VPRO," *Assemblage* 34 (December 1997): 92–109; See Hal Foster, "Bigness," *London Review of Books* 23, no. 23 (November 29, 2001), <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n23/hal-foster/bigness> on "expanded field of design."
- 17 Carson Chan, "On Statics and Statistics," *Monu.kultur*, no. 18 (n.d.), <http://mono-kultur.com/issues/18>.
- 18 See interview with Nathalie De Vries in John Jourden, "Double Dutch: Nathalie De Vries," *Architect*, October 19, 2004, <http://architect.com/features/article/8956/double-dutch-nathalie-de-vries>. De Vries states plainly, at one point, "It was an investigative research project," as if to dismiss objections to the projects based on the premise that it was purely speculative.
- 19 Adrian Parr, *Hijacking Sustainability* (MIT Press, 2009), 146.
- 20 Kazys Varnelis, "On Lebbeus Woods and Architecture," *Varnelis.net*, August 25, 2008, http://varnelis.net/on_lebbeus_woods_and_architecture.
- 21 Kamen Nedev, "Pequeñas Unidades Móviles Inteligentes", January 19, 2010.

- 22 Greil Marcus, *In the fascist bathroom: punk in pop music, 1977-1992*. (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 39–41.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 40.