071

# Beyond Practice-Based Design

**Ilpo Koskinen**

**66—71**

#design phd

#research-led design

#design education

#design methods

#interdisciplinarity

## Design as a Research-Led Discipline

The call for papers raised a few important questions about the state of the PhD in design. I have worked in a few PhD programmes over the years, supervised well over a dozen students to completion and examined another 35 theses in perhaps seven countries. I have also run at least two programmes and have been on steering groups of, by now, three national and one European programmes. As the editors noted in their call, a PhD has become an entry criterion for academic teaching positions in design. The process has taken less than 20 years and is ongoing. It has had its hiccoughs, but the shift from a practice-based to a research-led occupation has been much faster than I expected 20 years ago. We are in good company with business and engineering schools – just 20 years behind.

## My Premise

Let me say this at the very beginning: the best design professors I have seen all have PhDs. Most had a design background, but not all of them. Most people of my generation, in fact, came from other fields. P.J. Stappers's background in physics and Johan Redström's background in music, philosophy and computer science have provided them with credibility, experience and skills that have given them a unique perspective on design. On the other hand, I have seen designers with PhDs who have been walking catastrophes. Design has its chauvinisms, but this should not hide the fact that people – not backgrounds – conduct research.

There are many design schools with PhD programmes that have barely made a mark. At least from what I have seen, weak supervisors with limited research skills and a background in design are the main explanations for these programmes. I shall come back to this later; I just want to point out that designers are seldom good researchers because their education very rarely has proper research components, and their context – design schools – can narrow their perspective. In contrast to people such as Stappers and Redström, who have seen research from the humanities to the sciences, those with design education lack the skills and tolerance needed for a thriving research culture.

One root cause is that design schools may have transformed too quickly. Many designers who earned PhDs early never really published more – getting funding was hard, the stories they told were too niche and so on – and worse, when they sat on research committees, they brought their learning into them. This learning was on narrow grounds. If you have studied geography or sociology, by the time you earn your PhD, you have seen hundreds of studies, learned dozens of methods and have become familiar with methodological debates. This depth is crucial for a healthy research community. In design schools, those few early PhDs had, in the worst case, been trained by 1 or 2 patrons, and when back on research committees, these PhDs created monocultures that had little value for most parts of the community. Industrial designers, for instance, were barely served by art historians, and even less by philosophers. They needed management, engineering, psychology and sociology.

Professors such as Turkka Keinonen and Tuuli Mattelmäki in Helsinki, Anna Meroni and Stefano Maffei in Milan, Jayne Wallace in Newcastle, Kristina Niedderer in Birmingham and Pieter Desmet in Delft were all trained as designers. Yet, they have become incredible researchers who have steered their departments to significant research achievements.

There was indeed a real need for these people. After the PhD started to become an important step on the road to professorships, we very soon had schools led by design doctorates who were neither good researchers nor good practitioners. Worse, they did not have time to mature. They secured tenure, became department heads and were buried in teaching and services. In response, programmes

complemented them by hiring practitioners to teach at lower levels – and then told them that a research portfolio was a precondition of tenure. Soon, we had practitioners teaching theory and researchers teaching practice.

## Practice-Based was a Nice Solution – A Long Time Ago

One route by which design schools responded to the need for PhDs who taught was to redefine research as practice. This approach has pros and cons, and although it was very useful two decades ago, I think it is time to move on.

The idea that design practice is a form of research, of course, sits deep in design schools. I have heard it from filmmakers, designers, architects and multimedia folk. It has taken somewhat more sophisticated forms in concepts such as practice-based (or led) research and research-through-design, and there are, of course, dozens of precedents in the sciences and the social sciences.

Many PhD programmes in design converged around this idea in the 1990s and 2000s. At first, as I saw it, this was a good move. In the 1990s, art schools cynically granted PhDs to famous artists whose portfolios were strong enough (this still happens; I have seen a recent programme in France doing just this). In contrast, practice-based programmes usually required at least new work. You enrolled; you had to submit new work to the programme; and you had to write about it. To me, this was a move that deserved support. At least designers were interested in it. However, there were also problems, most of which were strategic in nature.

In 2000, I once spoke to a very accomplished goldsmith. I encouraged her to explore novel concepts and theories through her work rather than keep doing what she was doing in her studio for her clients. After an hour, she told me she would not enrol because she could not push out research that would endanger her standing in jewellery design. I started to see this model as navel-gazing. I cannot imagine a field such as management studies working this way; in this field, the purpose of research is to learn to expand the abilities of management by going out to bring in knowledge that is useful for the discipline.

I have also wondered about the growth of practice-based research programmes. Good research programmes change quickly. Most of the practice-based programmes that I have seen have instead built a conservative internal dynamic. The first generation of students was fresh. The second generation built on their work. The third on theirs. And so on. Practice-based research created an ivory tower in 10 years, and unlike research in older fields, it started from scratch every time. How does a suite of theses contribute to knowledge in this way? Knowing 20 creative processes may be better than nothing, but what is the cost of this choice?

Some of the longer-term consequences of this process are now visible. While the first theses were wonderfully fresh, they had systemic implications when practice-based doctorates secured university jobs. They could teach practice, but seldom much else. I have seen professors who have gone through practice-based programmes but have no research skills. I have seen a well-known design professor shouting to his peers about how his students know everything about methods because they are top professionals. Having taken statistics at the department of mathematics at an old science university, I found it very hard to understand the level of ignorance behind a statement like this.

Does all the wisdom of the world reside in professional practice? Wouldn't it be better to learn marginal utility from an economist and geological processes from a geomorphologist?

## Learning from the Other Side of the Pond

Of course, practice-based approaches can avoid these problems, but this may require a new approach to doctoral education. There are stems, such as Milan's doctoral programme, that may provide elements for an alternative way to approach practice as a research tool.

Patchworking may help, at least to a degree. We can try to build research on the best research traditions in design and make, for once, serious connections with other disciplines. There are good books around, and many schools have improved their doctoral processes.

A better model is on the other side of the pond. Since the 1970s, solid American PhD programmes in the natural and social sciences typically have typically begun with about two years of coursework. Our American cousins are often less quirky than the rest of us, but they are better researchers. At least larger schools could build proper PhD programmes in the American fashion, perhaps following the usual progression of a master's degree from theory, methods and technique to application and thesis – plus, of course, the usual things, such as academic writing and ethics.

Today, the best-equipped schools are in Europe. Polimi, Aalto and perhaps Delft are strong multidisciplinary schools, and they are diverse enough internally to avoid the trap I described earlier. Perhaps they could provide leadership. London's RCA, I hope, will join the group after its new strategy starts working .

The thing is, we need multiple approaches to research. One implication of this is that schools need breadth, with theories, methods, methodological approaches, tools and empirical cases. Only the best-resourced design schools in Europe are able to get into the graduate school game today, and even they need to collaborate.

## Do as the Romans

Shifting to a model like this may be necessary, but it changes many features of design culture. Most notably, it provides organisation for student selection, teaching, supervision, examination and postdoc careers. For example, my worst experiences have always been with students whom I have to take because nobody else takes them. Basically, I have used heaps of time working on topics I do not know much about and usually care very little about. This is too heavy for professors in small schools; it is a luxury for established departments with 20–50 professors who can attract students based on their reputations.

It is – perhaps more significantly – also a shift away from traditional notions of talent. I have seen too many one-line PhD application reviews saying, 'Take him: he is talented.' It is not hard to do better than this.

It is much harder to organise teaching systematically because it requires a depth of knowledge from teachers at the PhD level. One strength of the design literature is that it builds on many different disciplinary backgrounds, but this diversity makes teaching design research a pain. I can claim very little experience with heat transfer, for instance. Again, the answer is probably only collaboration.

On our way to a graduate school culture lies another obstacle: the quality of supervisors and examiners.

Now, a PhD is basically just a driving licence. Design schools are full of PhDs who have never published anything significant since their examinations. We need more Stapperses and Redströms; they have proven their skills again and again at all levels.

While in Helsinki, I was in a department that pushed 6–10 doctorates onto the job market annually. This saturated the market, but also meant we had many PhDs around. My estimate in 2012 was

that out of the approximately 100 doctorates that the department produced between 2000 and 2010, I would have liked to have seen only 5–7 as professors. These five had the versatility, drive and skills needed for professorships.

My estimate was based on traditional academic reasoning, which states that a PhD does not mean much because it is a supervised piece of work. We don't know whether we should thank the supervisor or the student. An assistant professorship requires another independent body of work at the level of a PhD, an associate rank requires two such bodies of work and a full rank requires four. This guarantees breadth and ensures that people are suited to academic work environments. It matters little whether this portfolio consists of research pieces or practical pieces, I thought.

Nothing new under the sun. This builds on old Roman wisdom. Send talent to the provinces only after they have repeatedly proven themselves in the capital.

All too many design schools fall short of a standard like this. They keep promoting people to senior ranks only after a couple of publications. We keep reinventing the wheel because the bigger picture remains patchy.

## How to Keep Professors Fresh

The final thing to think about today is another community process. As I said earlier, the best design professors I have seen are designers, have a PhD and have spent a few years in business. But they age. As we all do.

Now, the best department I have worked in is back in Helsinki. Every professor was a former designer of the year. The quality of the design was fantastic. But war stories from industry get old very quickly. After a few years at the university, these professors started to lose their industrial touch.

The dynamic plays out slightly differently with researchers. Research keeps their thinking fresh, but just like their colleagues who have come from practice, researchers lose touch. How to keep researchers fresh is a question that the design research community needs to tackle soon.

The only thing that is clear to me is that both practitioners and researchers need practice to keep fresh. I hope COVID-19 does not kill the idea that universities exist to create novel ideas, not only to teach the next generation.

## Bio

**Ilpo Koskinen** has been professor in several design schools in Europe, Asia and Australia. His key publications have focused on design research in which design is a vehicle of knowledge creation. His most recent book was *Design, Empaty, Interpretation* by MIT Press in 2023.

DOI: 10.31182/cubic.2024.7.71

CUBIC JOURNAL 2024