# The So-Called Creative PhD: Is There Another Type – or Not?

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This paper constitutes a short reflection on architectural research and knowledge production in the tertiary education sector, with particular reference to the establishment of a 'creative' PhD degree in South Africa. It arises from the growing interest in and pressure for the establishment of a practice-led (architecture) PhD. This interest has emerged predominantly from within performance-based disciplines whose application takes the form of practice-based and professionally produced work.

In reflecting on the nature of PhDs and on various 'alternative' approaches, I conclude that the conventional PhD implicitly infers creativity and is entirely capable of sponsoring any performance-based PhD enquiry – particularly within practice-based disciplines in which theory and method have been critically identified to support appropriate investigations. Concern is therefore raised regarding the emerging predominance of an author's self-evaluation of their own 'creative' production at the level of a PhD enquiry. On the one hand, knowledge remains largely embedded within the performance/production, and on the other hand, the subjectivity intrinsic to autoethnographic studies is noted for its privileging of the self over the other, and its method often follows what may be termed a self-fulfilling prophesy.

#architecture

#critical thinking

#knowledge production

 #phd vs other doctorate

#south africa

Whereas forms of practice-based enquiry as 'alternatives' to a PhD, such as doctorates in design – and perhaps more significantly, an advanced research master's in architecture qualification – already exist, those that are rigorously delivered present as intermediary steps towards conventional PhD enquiry. This is apparent in related performance-based disciplines, such as medicine.

The relationship between creativity and scholarship in academia has been a topical issue in South Africa for some years. It has emerged from the general dearth of research publications attributed to performance-based professional disciplines whose work outputs rely on non-text-based representations and are generally represented by music, dance, theatre, fine art, architecture, film and video work, inter alia.

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), under whose authority tertiary-level education institutions fall, has for some time been grappling with the recognition of creative work produced by academics for the award of research subsidies.

The DHET conclusion to these debates has been to introduce creative research subsidy awards. The onus is on applicants to demonstrate critical research content/process, not dissimilar to the established National Research Foundation's (NRF) approach for scientific research awards. Significant debate and contestation has emerged from participants representing creative disciplines across all South African tertiary institutions.

In South Africa, the model of the modern university has come under scrutiny,. The advent of the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements (2015–2018) marked affective periods of demand for radical change. These movements represent Black student–led initiatives whose genesis aligned with the failure of the state to address the legacy of apartheid across multiple registers of racialised segregatory practices.

Primary to these protests has been the issue of decoloniality (Mignolo, 2018) within a colonial model of teaching, learning and researching, which has promoted rational scientific thought as the predominant  measure for procedures and conclusions. By marginalising most other forms of knowledge production, this approach has historically dispossessed local Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and privileged a narrow Western perspective. Not unlike the remainder of the so-called Western world, this reductive approach has been further diluted by neoliberalism to render tertiary education institutions 'degree-producing businesses'!

Economic utilitarianism – in the form of numbers and profiteering – has become foregrounded, and it is reflected in the simple acquisition of (practical) skills without necessarily engaging through critical enquiry. Problem solving has come to replace 'the asking of thoughtful questions and deep knowledge production'. An over emphasis on practical skill development and the mechanics of degree throughputs. have come to sideline knowledge production. Lecturers have come to replace readers, and learners have replaced students. In the same vein, many lecturers now simply teach, while learners now respond through formulation.

Much of this is evident within practice-led disciplines in which practical/professional skillsets are prioritised over those of critical thinking. The professional market anticipates practice-ready graduates and is less willing and prepared to offer internships or mentoring. From the outset of their careers, many architectural graduates become locked into production roles – functions in design work that may easily become replaceable by programable technologies.

Nevertheless, the twin pressures to publish and acquire a PhD continue to predominate within the academic arena, and the early acquisition of a PhD has now become non-negotiable for most lecturing posts. While this might support a healthy contribu-

tion towards knowledge production, in the absence of a research basis for examining architectural design, responses through the formulation of PhDs in the architectural discipline appear to avoid this[1].

The conventional structure of a PhD originates from rational scientific reasoning and infers certain preconditions deemed necessary to effectively engage in knowledge production at the tertiary level.

Has this model now 'outgrown' its 'usefulness' for contemporary university projects? Do we require a differentiated accommodation of non-scientific disciplines, or should there be an interrogation of the procedures that guide and support knowledge production, particularly in a context where the tension between knowledge production and skill acquisition has been predetermined by the financialisation of education.

The qualification framework of the European Higher Education Area's third cycle (PhD) identifies a series of specific competencies to be demonstrated in the process of thesis development[2]. The achievement of these necessary outcomes implies the prior award of an honours/master's degree in preparation for the focus and academic rigour required for PhD-level research enquiry.

The nature of architectural design and other performance-based professional degrees that rely on practice-based production have tended to avoid these forms of engagement. The claim is that their creative design work 'approximates' scientific research so that design outcomes can be recognised as research products, although the knowledge produced remains embedded within a work or a project.

Currently, PhD research in an academic setting is assisted by a series of 'prequalifications'. First, this form of undertaking is predominantly propositional and speculates that a new or critically different (design) outcome is a possibility when examined under a particular set of circumstances. Second, one should consciously embark on the task with the intention of undertaking research from an informed position that locates one intellectually and situates one within a body of work. Third, one would need to establish a relevant path of enquiry that is appropriate to the line of enquiry being undertaken, to the extent that another individual following the same enquiry should achieve a similar outcome.

Fourth, one should uncover something original, which may be new knowledge or an extension of an existing phenomenon within one's disciplinary field.

And finally, it is accepted that the research work and the process of discovery should be articulated in the public domain in a format accessible to others. In other terms, it would be required that knowledge be disembodied from the enquiry process and articulated in 'archival' terms.

## Ways Forward – A Creative PhD?

From the previous discussion, the actioning of a conventional PhD procedure implies adherence to recognised practices in order for reliable new contributions to be surfaced. What equivalents might then be necessarily established for so-called creative PhD's to participate within a collective research culture – that of knowledge production?

The critical issues at stake, which must be understood and examined, appear to be whether practice-led and performance-based disciplines require a special PhD, or the development of an alternative doctoral qualification and whether an alternative creative PhD provides both an acceptable and a compatible format for pursuing new knowledge sets.

A larger issue, not discussed here, concerns how the PhD qualification within tertiary-level education continues to be the most prominent research format for knowledge production, and its concom-

itant appropriateness within the general trope of decoloniality - and its particular locality within post-colonial (South) Africa.

A primary issue to consider is the fact that creative work is reliant predominantly on self-generated work, and is then the subject of critical self-examination. Therefore, this raises the issue of ethical processes and objectivity in the research environment. Historically, critical self-reflection within an environment that relies on a form of 'autobiography' has raised concerns regarding the disembodiment of knowledge from the work under examination. While some have argued for the recognition of embodied knowledge as inherent within such work, this implies a potential re-enactment of its performance for the work to be understood in its active state. The possibility of critical pluriversality surfacing is a credible argument, although this already happens when a work, as an open representation, is engaged and 'modified' through active inhabitation. Effectively, this could constitute a particular form of post-occupancy evaluation or lived-in architecture, as articulated in Philippe Boudon's (1979) critique of Le Corbusier's Pessac project.

In the absence of an external measure to monitor research registers, it becomes complicated for reliable knowledge sets to surface. The deployment of an agreed-upon approach within a theoretical frame that is empathetic to this approach seems necessary; however, this would seem to translate as an issue case study method whereby a particular trope or tendency is examined through mixed methods with the intention of unpacking a creative design process (Flyvbjerg,, 2001). A creative-led, practice-based PhD may then be structured within the norms of a regular PhD. In adhering to the case study method, the intersectionality of competing ecologies that must be constituted within the design process requires dissection and subsequent reflective analysis, in order that the author/researcher might critically surface their knowledge set.

Notwithstanding, the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein has already initiated such a PhD programme. However, it is in its infancy and only graduated a handful of 'PhD's'. Furthermore the program requires older graduates, often lacking a master's qualification, yet however having both practice and teaching experience. The prerequisite is then acquiring a disciplinary Masters degree first or undertaking an MPhil. Whether this approach will prepare applicants for PhD-level enquiry is contestable, particularly in the declining and limited context of the South African architectural academic setting. In the absence of rigour, auto-ethonography has presented itself through personal narrative, comprising the contribution of knowledge.

## An 'Equivalent' PhD – Doctorate in Design

Certain academic institutions have established early recognition of the difference in design – as opposed to philosophical – enquiry. The Doctorate in Design (DDes) introduced at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design (GSD), in addition to an advanced master's degree, serves to show a prelude or shape alternative to the established PhD.

Intended for individuals who have already mastered professional skills and yet seek to make original research contributions to their design fields, the areas of study have become increasingly diverse and interdisciplinary – an orientation represented by the diverse backgrounds of the students who choose to select this route.

With a DDes recognised as an other route to an academic post, its alumni currently demonstrate that the value of doctoral education extends beyond the academy. DDes graduates have come to occupy leadership positions predominantly in the private sector, government and the academy. In the absence of a philosophical proposition, a DDes's equivalence to a PhD remains as contentious.

# PhD Study in Other Related Disciplines – Architecture vs. Medicine?

## Point

I was invited as an examiner at the Graduate Research Conference (GRC) at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) during May/June of 2009. Located in the School of Architecture, the GRC represents the evaluation of a vigorous programme of Master's and PhD degrees in design. Initiated by ex-South African architect Leon van Schaik (van Schaik, 2005) to create a thinking space for design practitioners to reflect on their making. With time the conference had matured into a robust interdisciplinary event in which 'researchers' embark on a process of self-examination and reflective practice in relation to an oeuvre of already created work, in the case of established and recognised practitioners, or on an investigative process in the course of constructing and producing an original body of work. In both cases, these investigations are characterised by their reliance on and recognition of 'design' as the mode of research.

The disciplines represented in the examination range from architecture through landscape and industrial design to fine art and drama. The basis for collective assessment is located in the shared representation domains of performance and interpretative visualisation of the respective disciplines. This affords a 'meta-language' of connectivity between candidates and examiners from a range of disciplines, providing the means for interdisciplinary juries to operate effectively.

This GRC examination comprises three interdependent components: a graduate record or written document, an exhibition of produced material design evidence and an oral examination. For me, the examination afforded a compelling experience. It was exceptionally well structured and organised. Generous space and time were provided for the presentation and cross-examination of RMIT master's and PhD candidates. Structured group discussions both preceded and followed the examination, for which the chair facilitated and recorded an advance indication of the examiners' initial impressions – establishing an early measure of the respective examiners' assessments.

The production and visualisation of the work, together with the students' presentations, were of an exceptionally high standard, and the representations and designs were compelling. However, more emphasis appeared to have been placed on the work, as opposed to the work and its location within the field of critical discourse. In the final roundtable discussion that completed the review process, it seemed that I alone presented a somewhat dissenting voice; I could not say with conviction that the work reviewed for the doctoral degree was the equivalent of what I believed constituted a PhD. What precisely was the knowledge contribution and/or how had an advancement been concluded in relation to architectural design as a discreet mode of research? This view remained uncontested within the examination forum.

The conundrum of validating design research is an itinerant problem. In a conventional PhD programme, knowledge production is validated through clear and predefined adherence to a research procedure. The 'scientific' process is rational and relatively transparent, particularly when an accepted and therefore shared method of enquiry has been adopted. Prefigured by a set of common actions, the outcomes are relatively easily replicable and measurable. However, in the humanities, the performing and visual arts subscribe to methods that are immersive and therefore more subjective and consequently appear opaque, relying on intuition and other 'immeasurables' that reside firmly outside traditionally accepted norms[3].

Each discipline that comprises the performing arts[4] endures[5] a difficult relationship with the academy.

On the one hand, these disciplines are located within the conventional strictures represented by the academy; however, on the other hand, they are practice-based disciplines[6] and prescribe a predominantly qualitative basis for the measure of performance. The outcomes of these disciplines are commonly described as 'creative works'. These lack an equivalent to the scientific rational methodologies of other disciplines, effecting a discourse that is often internally subjectified, somewhat private and predominantly opaque. Autoethnography perhaps comes closest to the procedures undertaken in practice-led design research. However, the failure to establish counter-equivalence infers that, in its absence, this 'discourse' is predominantly exiled from 'conventional' research.

It is therefore not surprising that the inherent and abiding contention with this form of research work resides in a perceived 'abuse' of theory and the concomitant questions regarding research methods, rigour and what might constitute new knowledge production within design or performance-based disciplines. While these precepts are criteria drawn from conventional enquiry in PhD and master's research, their sustained dominance affords certain disciplines a 'higher' status within the research community, to the detriment of those who 'work differently'. Nevertheless, it is also a condition sustained by the reluctance of visual, performance and other design disciplines to 'write themselves into the world' in an unequivocal manner. By this, I mean that the onus is on design disciplines to rescue themselves by owning research and evolving their equivalence of 'scientific' methods. Not only would this initiative assist in establishing a basis for oneself and others to access the discourse but, in all likelihood, it would also increase knowledge production and improve design performativity – something we are yet to substantially experience, despite the number of practice-led creative design PhDs awarded.

## Counterpoint

From a different yet related perspective, it is useful to compare architecture to a potentially equivalent field of knowledge: that of medicine. In South Africa the medical degree commences with a 5-/6-year MBChB. This is considered a foundational qualification and prepares graduates for a 24-month internship within a rigorous and sequentially managed system, encompassing close experiential encounters with the various specialisation divisions within medicine. A period of residency follows during which one may choose to practice as a general practitioner[7] or follow on to specialise as a registrar in a recognised field. This occurs predominantly within provincial state hospitals, which are considered 'teaching hospitals'. An intimate relationship is therefore maintained with academia and with the state whereby certain posts are co-financed through provincial health departments.

Finally, despite being a practice-based discipline, medicine, and the Health Sciences in general, have advanced their knowledge sets predominantly through the contribution of numerous conventional PhDs and have been recognised through a significant number of A-rated researchers and, globally, through Nobel laureates – all the time while also performing in theatres! Medicine would not have advanced in the way it has without its performers articulating their knowledge production by disembodying it from the theatre of its production – in textual based form,, thereby making it accessible within the public domain.

From my perspective, reading for a conventional PhD implies the assumption of a philosophically grounded position to inform a propositional enquiry within a particular (disciplinary) field/phenomenon with the specific intention of surfacing new knowledge sets. There is nothing to exclude this procedure from focusing on creative performance-based knowledge production. The prerequisite for a researcher is to situate their discourse[8]

in such a way that it transparently locates their position so that others can engage with what might be termed a discursive argument trajectory or, in the case of a creative work oeuvre, to unpack and expose one's own thinking process in an objectively replicable manner.

Consequently, where creative work becomes the site of enquiry, the imperative is to devise an approach that is capable of dissecting what is subjectively opaque so as to comprehend sites of innovation through apparently disconnected lines of enquiry. Considering the intangible basis of the creative thought process, autoethnography presents an approach whereby 'truths or facts' are often presented without critical interrogation having been foregrounded as an appropriate route for examining the imaginative thoughtfulness that underpins creative processes in the pursuit of ideas in performance- and material-based cultural practices.

So perhaps the real value of the idea of a 'creative' PhD lies in a contestation of the status quo, with its reductive monopolisation of knowledge production. However, in the absence of an alternative articulation of the conventional theory/ method approach to research-based enquiry, it seems possible only to scope modifications to the model. Decoloniality according to (Mignolo 2018) commences with the mind and the value base that informs our respective relational interrelations, beyond the human. Whereas a doctorate in design comes closer to setting out an alternative framing for enquiry, neither type of doctorate insists on prefiguring the design process in loco as the basis for examining the (creative) design process.

This implies that innovation suffers. The horizon of interconnective existence among first peoples promoted strong connectivity between all living things, thereby establishing grounds for co-innovation supported by their necessity for survival. The measure of 'progress' lies in radical change or collective contributions rather than in the predom-

inant exchange of hegemonies that characterises societies of surplus.

So what might all of this mean for human existence at the end of civilisation? The notion of research within profession-based, creative-led disciplines is significantly dependent on the discriminatory configuration of materially based cultural practice.

The space for innovation lies between thinking and making as a fluid and iteratively reflective process. Here creativity requires interrogation in situ – that is, within the act of making. In this sense, it is ultimately laboratory based. The primary problem with this form of research is the absence of a laboratory – or rather, the means of conducting real-time (1:1) experimentation outside the actual site of production. Would it be unreasonable to claim that architectural design research requires a research infrastructure commensurate with that of the medical profession? If the Earth is the body upon which we must work, then we surely require similar amenities and research support. Can we not relink education with practice through the equivalent in public works or state-sponsored transformative investigative projects?

In a seminar on the changing idea of Africa and the future of African studies, Achille Mbembe recognised the current 'moment' in decoloniality as a time to rethink Africa in all its multiple dimensions with the intention of reconfiguring a future informed by other sensibilities, including those from the deep past. This proposition presupposes a conscious separation of work from the present imperfect, including the decolonisation of all participants' minds[9]. While any work of reassemblage should be generative, it also necessarily comes with enormous investment.

Seeing from the South – a popular trope among policy and planning professionals and academics – represents another hegemony of the West's neo-

liberal trajectory. In the South, 'Indigenous' communities are defined not through the ocular-centric but rather through what might be termed 'a state of becoming', whereby the experiential knowledge of the oral inevitably enables the factual.

The measure of a PhD should be gauged by the effects of its contribution within the state of world knowledge evolution. Post-occupation evaluation with respect to architecture infers a recentring of the body, its individual and collective relational experiences and latent agency - and not simply of the building as the site of meaning making. The self-reflection of autoethnography[10] becomes validated only when ethically engaged with other bodies in an embedded space of everyday and celebratory coaction. Becoming, as fundamental to knowledge production, demands a horizon of interconnectivity whereby hierarchy becomes diluted in the service of authenticity.

Radical inclusion in the form of participatory praxis is now a fundamental route towards decoloniality – notably in design research and production. Individual authorship has passed its sell by date! Collaboration is endemic to design, and representing people as primary – before space – represents a primary radical turn for architecture and performance-based, design-led disciplines. The predominance of 'I say, therefore it is' should rest with the wordsmiths of politics and not with academia. The future of the so-called creative PhD resides not in an alternative addition but through our ability to critically rethink a future reality by creating critically together. Now the imperative of the global crisis demands that we re-engage with knowledge production by Other means through an ability to engage across previously excluded ecologies to  construct critical ethical local practice

# Notes

1. A growing tendency to undertake PhD enquiry in the education of a discipline represents a concern for the production of the knowledge sets necessary to move intellectual thought forward.

2. http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php?title=Framework_for_Qualifications_of_the_European_Higher_Education_Area#Third_cycle_-_PhD
   - Demonstrate a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field.
   - Demonstrate the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity.
   - Contribute through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication.
   - Be capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas.
   - Be able to communicate with peers, the larger scholarly community and society in general about areas of expertise.
   - Be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society.

3. PhDs in design (architecture) are now offered at a growing number of institutions, including RMIT and the University College London Bartlett School of Architecture. However, the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University differentiates between a PhD and design-based enquiry. In acknowledging the difference between design-based enquiry and a conventional PhD, Harvard instituted the doctorate of design (architecture) prior to the emergence of any PhD in design (architecture). The MBChB is a 'doctorate' degree awarded to medical students after approximately 6 years of study. Not dissimilar to architecture, medicine is a professional discipline that emphasises practice-based applications of the knowledge acquired. Again, not dissimilar to architecture, graduates undergo practical training as interns before practicing as general practitioners. For detailed background see: Harvard GSD https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/doctoral-programs/doctor-of-design/program-history/

4. Architecture, drama/theatre, film and video, fine art, ballet and music.

5. In South Africa, it seems to be a difficulty that permits those working within these disciplines to 'get away with' not producing scientifically measurable research, thereby affording the 'production of research' as 'creative' as opposed to scholarly work.

6. Quite often, they lead to a professional qualification that is subject to the rigours of external regulation.

7. General practitioners essentially step sideways and are unable to undertake specialist work.

8. Discourse as intellectually positioning the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of their creative work.

9. Contemporary practices of hegemonic change require excision from a new 'canon of becoming'.

10. Wikipedia - Auto-Ethnography. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autoethnography. Accessed 2 April 2022.

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# Bio

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