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The Hybrid Practitioner

Building, Teaching, Researching Architecture

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Edited by
Caroline Voet,
Eireen Schreurs and
Helen Thomas

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Roles and Challenges of the Hybrid Practitioner

Eireen Schreurs, Eva Storgaard, Marjan Michels

The chapters in this book developed out of an online symposium called The Practice of Architectural Research (8–10 October 2020), which examined a research field that operates between design practice and the formation of theory and history. As a consequence, it also explored – though largely implicitly – the character and legitimacy of the linking figure: the hybrid practitioner, who combines one or more academic or creative roles and activities. The special condition of hybridity as it came to the fore in the symposium dialogues is addressed in this text. While the many abstract submissions demonstrated a general interest in the theme, the symposium itself revealed a diversity in types of researchers. Even though most of the participants shared an education in an architecture school, individual career paths had subsequently diverged significantly. These range from academics with full time university careers, and architects writing and teaching while running an architectural office, to the majority operating somewhere in between. Together their variegated papers and presentations constituted a rich and divergent range of stances within, and reflections on, the field of “the hybrid practice.”

The profile of this writing architect is compound and individual and far from fully established, either among academics or between writing and practising architects themselves.¹ If we look for the communalities among the symposium participants, we can confirm the definition of the “species” of the hybrid practitioner, as formulated in the introduction to the volume. First, there is a research relationship to the object that is operative, in the sense that the architect is using history and theory to reflect on and develop their own creative practice. This may directly influence their own work or function as a parallel narrative, but either way, it is embraced as a subjective teleology. Second, the hybrid practitioner has an empirical understanding of how things are made, which means that architectural objects are more readily perceived in their spatial and geographical context than their historical and temporal one, which is augmented by the preponderance of visual intelligence. Last, the hybrid practitioner

takes on roles other than those in professional practice in order to write and communicate culturally – as teachers, lecturers, writers, publishers, and curators. To do this, the architectural practitioner draws from and interprets the skills of the academic in their awareness of a wider, deeper context and debate, a methodological approach to evidence and interpretation, the importance of the distant perspective, and an ambition to be scholarly.

What follows are three synthetic conversations, constructed out of fragments taken from the presentations and discussions at the symposium.² Revolving around the characteristics of the hybrid practitioner described above, the conversations focus on the different roles that emerge from their strategic positioning between practice and academia. They confront each of these hybrid practitioners with a number of critical questions and responsibilities that surfaced in the closing debate with Rolf Hughes and Hilde Heynen, which we have used here to set a preliminary agenda for the hybrid practitioner.

1. The Operative

The hybrid practitioner's attitude is operative: it is geared towards making history and theory productive by transferring knowledge from the confinement of the academic library to the reality of the office. Academic expertise can inform the actual production of architecture: by providing continuity and background to a personal oeuvre, while also allowing for the testing of theories and (re)introduction of design knowledge so that, ideally, academic knowledge develops and innovates practice. Having established that the work of the hybrid professional extends beyond the office, the knowledge thus generated can then enter the debate in lectures and discussions, it can serve as inspiration for exhibitions, and it can act as critical touchstone in themed journals and magazines.

However, a striking aspect of the symposium was the way participants ascribed the field of operation for their personal knowledge most commonly not in practice but in, one could say, the intermediate step of teaching – also those researchers with active practices. Several of the presentations recognised the relevance of the studio over the office, as a place where research results are shared: Wouter van Acker analysed John Hejduk's nine-square grid exercise as a way to develop and propagate design thinking. In his study on Álvaro Siza, Paulo Providência discussed the value of Siza's method of reiteration or tracing, acknowledging its value as a teaching tool. Knowledge transfer in the studio can surpass didactic relevance and can even become political, as Fatma Tanis demonstrates in her study of Turkish architect Sedad Hakki Eldem's teaching programme, which focused on the tacit knowledge embedded in Turkish vernacular architecture that was at risk of being lost.

The last example reveals that the work field of the hybrid practitioner also embodies the tension between the supposed scientific neutrality of academia

and the various conflicts of interest that challenge practice. In one of the symposium discussions around the creation of knowledge, Wilfried Wang critically remarked: “Research is a process of abstraction, categorisation, and of ordering, asking of researchers – also the historians – a position: is all knowledge equally valuable?” Wang recognised a tendency in academia towards relativisation and a dissolving of categories, which raises the question of the position of the researcher and the use of research: What is being distilled and for what purpose? The reverse question is also relevant: Can the “subjective teleology” of the hybrid practitioner operate within the academic standards of the scholar? Several participants showed their concern: practitioner Simon Henley described an architectural culture that is at risk of becoming autonomous and invisible without common ground, while in his keynote lecture, Wang defined the responsibility of academia to help find a shared narrative for practice by defining good design. The criteria for this are much needed, Wang stressed in a point reiterated by Tony Fretton, in order to convince, among others, politicians, because practice today is under much political and economic pressure.

Hybrid practitioners certainly occupy a strategic position and embody an interest and concern for the future of practice, and their knowledge gained from academic research might have the authority to extend beyond the scale of the studio or their own design work. In the closing discussion of the symposium, after having counted the limited number of practising architects in the symposium proceedings, Hilde Heynen posed the critical question: “Would the next anthology on architectural theory include writing architects?” The answer would have to be a question to the hybrid practitioner: Why, or why not? As Caroline Voet formulated in the opening statement of the symposium: “Can ‘design knowledge’ find a more secure position within the academic field as an expertise to develop (critical) history and theory?” Of the participants, Wang was the only one who explicitly formulated this ambition.

2. Empirical Understanding

Knowledge also flows in the opposite direction: expertise and insights acquired in building practice can enter academia. The hybrid practitioner’s embodied understanding of the practice of design supports the study of buildings as objects and places as opposed to the lens of the historian that centres the temporal. One of Caroline Voet’s opening questions for the symposium was whether the classical canon, the authoritative voice of the architect, and the production of grand narratives can still offer relevant insights. This can be answered affirmatively, but the introduction of new lenses creates different depths of field. Jana Culek disclosed the utopian world of Ludwig Hilbersheimer not from the classical urban point of view, but from a comparison with literary utopias, using speculative drawing techniques. Cathelijne

Nuijsink bypassed Rem Koolhaas's built and written oeuvre to study a housing competition of which he was the single jury member. There is also a shift towards other projects, as demonstrated by Sepideh Karami's material and political dissection of a British colonial institute somewhere in Iran, or to objects such as the mysterious iron column resisting interpretation in Helen Thomas's keynote lecture.

Another discerning feature of hybrid practitioners, that of their visual intelligence, was omnipresent at the symposium. A number of participants used drawing as a tool, for the obvious reason that it is the central mode of communication in architectural practice. It contains a specific form of knowledge, as an irreplaceable primary source for the study of design, and it makes research accessible for exploration in the design studio: Rosamund Diamond detected activities and modes of inhabitation with her students, Tom Mayes recorded experiences, and Thomas Coward registered the inhabitation of space. During the discussions, it became apparent that while both the "reading" and production of drawings is second nature for those with a past in practice, it is not so for theorists and art historians, who often lack the skills to recognise and interpret drawings as tacit demonstrations of design knowledge. Here lies an opportunity for further exploration, to counterbalance the prevailing historical reading of plans, to advance alternative approaches, and to develop disciplinary knowledge.

Other methods available to unlock knowledge from the field of practice came to the fore in the discussion led by David Vanderburgh. Speech, the act of speaking, emerged as an underestimated tool in design communication, as it is a more direct alternative to writing, it is easier to share, and it can transmit both information and embodied expressions. Speech is directed to laypeople, to clients; it adapts itself to its political and social context and therefore its choices of vocabulary are influential and telling. Van Acker agreed that the academic focus on writing as the prevailing means of communication should be challenged, but remarked that other ways of communicating, such as poetry, fieldwork, writing as a visual act, and drawing, are less accessible. Via a different route, Pauline Lefebvre reached a similar conclusion in her research on a New York practice, which she observed and analysed through their development of a written position statement. The office discovered that words were more simply shared and also accessible for people, such as clients, who are not accustomed to reading plans. Lefebvre also identified specific vocabularies for different audiences.

In the concluding session, Hilde Heynen expressed her slight disappointment stemming from a lack of criticality that she perceived in the symposium. In many papers she detected a strong inward focus:

It was about drawing, sketching, tracing, arranging, configuring, materializing, constructing – the poetical, the making, but for me that also meant

that the social and the political were slightly pushed to the background. Why all this introspection, what can the knowledge from inside offer the academic field beyond its own discipline? [...] One could possibly think of aiming for doing both: a critical analysis of the forms and the tools, on how we do architecture and at the same time really tease out the social content, the political meaning.

Heynen ended with a plea for academic interdisciplinarity so that architectural knowledge can become productive and relevant for other fields, in order to concern itself more explicitly with social and political issues.

3. The Ambition to Be Scholarly

In her keynote lecture, Thomas posed the question how hybrid practitioners with ambitions to be scholarly could position themselves in the reality of academia. This realm can seem like an internalised world or a self-sustaining reality, with its own separate rules, expectations, and hierarchies. The symposium contained several lively debates on the expanse of reality and how it relates to the standards of academic research. Lara Schrijver stated that academic reality does not pertain to a single centre, but rather engages and commits itself to an agreed framework of knowledge, which appeared to be a position shared by many of the participants. Patrick Lynch referred to the Aristotelian notion of friendship, reiterated by Rolf Hughes in the closing discussion: in friendship, a conversation establishes a mode of intersubjectivity while at the same time it opens up the discussion to enclose the social and political. Perhaps, Lynch proposed, this works in the production of architecture too, where shared concerns have shaped the city.

Hybrid practitioners enrich and sometimes even challenge academic epistemology, thanks to their accurate instinct for contemporaneity and their independent and entrepreneurial attitude. Much harder to resist is the dominant communication tool in academia, which remains writing. Its conventions, in the words of Hughes, “are geared towards serving an explanatory function with its codes of precision and justification and legitimacy.” But, Hughes added, there are other forms of writing that explore artistic and tacit forms of knowledge, those that offer “immersive experiences, with degrees of opacity, density or complexity.” Both types of writing require specific training, and for those initiated, the academic discourses open up, while for others, they remain closed. According to Birgitte Hansen, practitioners write and speak all the time, but she asked whether their kind of writing, their kind of language, counted in the academic arena. Additionally, she claimed that even some highly positioned practitioners in academia shy away from writing because they doubt their academic writing skills.³

Discursive modes of research need new platforms where exchange and discussion can take place unconditionally. Carlo Menon brings the little magazines to the table as the place for such interchange. He argues that these magazines embrace and gather together various practices – designing, teaching, writing, protesting, collecting, publishing – to produce hybrid kinds of architectural knowledge and, in doing so, offer an alternative platform for exchanging ideas in architecture. Menon continued: “They contribute to re-defining the practice of criticism in a non-prescriptive way: an intellectual position which can be considered as healthy in times when academic standards threaten to overrun and subsume other forms of practice, especially in the design studios.” Other media, such as Instagram, also create new platforms. They have generated what Joseph Bedford describes as a “hyperawareness” in the discipline, and he pointed out the missed opportunity inherent in the broad tacit base that these media command but with little ambition to make this knowledge explicit.

4. To Conclude

When Heynen raised the question whether architects who write are a dying race, she also questioned whether it is possible to embrace and fulfil the multiple roles of this hybrid figure who simultaneously practises architecture, carries out research, and educates the next generation. Hybrid practices shift back and forth between worlds: between the problem-solving mode enforced by the conditions of practice and the questioning mode necessary for good academic research. Points of discussion in the symposium were the means of accomplishing this state, including the compartmentalisation of different interests, and whether it is indeed beneficial or necessary. In this volume, Christoph Grafe proposes that rather than problematising the division between practice and academia, it can be used productively as a place to monitor the discipline and to explore new *modi operandi*.⁴

There are voices within academia maintaining that the position of the writer is that of the historian and the theoretician, echoing the advocacy of Manfredo Tafuri of keeping an academic, critical distance. Others, like Heynen, prioritise a more active political and social role, stating that these aspects pose the essential “why” question for architecture: Why do we build? Architects have a civil role in decision-making about public space. Admitting to her modernist stance, Heynen defines one of the researcher’s goals to acquire the knowledge that can attribute to a better future. There are yet other academics, such as Hughes, who regard the writing architect as implicitly critical, socially and politically engaged, prioritising the study of the tools, the materials, the poesis – the act of making: several of them were represented at The Practice of Architectural Research symposium. For them, the social and political is not central, but also not absent.

The symposium did not explicitly problematise the idea of the hybrid practitioner, which means not all its challenges have been addressed here. The discussions did reveal that the practice of architectural research is multifaceted and discursive. Even if they are often not aware of it, hybrid practitioners bring perspectives to the table that can refresh academic debate and challenge existing norms; they have knowledge and skills that deserve recognition. But with recognition comes responsibility. We can start from here, Voet concluded. “If we let go of the objective idea of overlooking everything, like drawing without preconceptions, and start not from one direction, but from the mess,” then we can begin to discern the many identities of hybrid practitioners and their roles in and outside of academia.

Notes

1. An international symposium *When Architects and Designers Write, Draw, Build?*, held at the Aarhus School of Architecture in Denmark, May 2011, explored similar themes as *The Practice of Architectural Research*, but then focused on the education of the PhD students. Jørgen Dehs, Martin Weihe Esbensen, and Claus Peder Pedersen, *When Architects and Designers Write, Draw, Build? Essays on Architecture and Design Research* (Aarhus: Arkitektskolens Forlag, 2013)
2. All discussions of the symposium have been transcribed and serve as underpinnings for the article.
3. Hansen raised her concern in an email to the editorial team after the symposium.
4. Christoph Grafe in this volume, 31.

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