

DDR4 (Designing Design Research 4) Event Review and Reflections

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Introduction

Every once in a while, it is useful to take time out, away from the technicalities and intricacies of one's own research, and to reestablish a sense of perspective and purpose alongside the goals of the wider research community. Such has been the purpose of the "designing design research" (DDR) events in recent years, organized by Alec Robertson of De Montfort University, UK.¹ The fourth installment (DDR4), subtitled "reflecting, refreshing, reuniting, and renovating," largely took the form of a one-day question-and-answer session at the Royal College of Art, London, on March 20, 2004. A series of provocative questions were provided as a subtext: Where have we been? Where are we now? And where are we going?

As one would expect, the event proved a worthwhile opportunity for opinions to be heard, values to be aired, and for perspectives on the future role and shape of design research to be contrasted. Some familiar themes emerged during the event, which will be revisited shortly: the motivations for design research, the differences between design activity and research activity, and the need for a robust context for all research. Indeed, delegates could be forgiven for sensing *déjà vu* as the event unfolded. The fact that each of these themes continues to surface shows that, as a community, many of the fundamentals still need to be consolidated and communicated. At times, conversation headed towards the rather banal and unhelpful polarization of "research as academia" and "practice as commerce." This polarization—along with related issues—already has been discussed long and hard, and occupied much intellectual airtime (albeit through disparate channels).

What appeared to emerge most strongly from the day was a need for a concise summation of the state of play, particularly for novice researchers; and to follow, an illustrated and united front on the practical worth of design research and the benefits it can bring. An edited work with contributions from invited authors would be a timely and valuable resource. The danger, otherwise, is that insecurity will persist, meta-level discussions will turn cyclic, and to outsiders the design research community will appear to be perpetually concerned with introspection rather than action and results.

¹ See: www.dmu.ac.uk/ln/4dd.

Motivations for Design Research

The motivation for design research appeared unified among delegates. Within the sphere of the design professions, research should be directed at improving material culture to better human experiences. Approaches may be taken directly or indirectly. With direct approaches, researchers can redress shortfalls in products, systems, services, or plans, where such shortfalls are effectively attributable to poor specifications whether, for example, technical, aesthetic, social, or ethical in nature. With indirect approaches, researchers can provide designers with, for instance, improved tools, techniques, strategies, and information for going about their work, with the intention of demonstrating a link between “improved” design activity and “improved” design outcomes. In either case, it is unlikely to be meaningful or useful to separate the activity or process that is designing, from the outcomes or deliverables that are designed.

An ever-present undercurrent to design research, and detectable at the DDR4 event, is the extent to which designing is identifiable (a) as a generic expert activity (i.e., transferable to the design of many different things), and (b) as a fundamental human capacity, which is not the preserve of individuals with design training, or who would profess to be “designers.” For the latter, it has yet to be established that designing indeed is a fundamental human capacity, rather than, more modestly, a combination of elevated other human capacities including imagining, drawing, and making. These issues lie at the heart of research into design activity and design education.

The proposition that humans possess a fundamental capacity to design is certainly both engaging and liberating, and possibly one of the most “saleable” avenues open to the design research community. But how much of this capacity is attributable to nature, and how much to nurture? The idea of transferability of design expertise does not sit comfortably with the practical observation that, in the twenty-first century, the professional practice of design is highly segmented into specialist areas of application and learning (e.g., automotive, consumer products, Internet, printed matter, etc.). One suspects that it is through harnessing the phenomena that comprise design “intelligence” (e.g., cognitive modeling, designerly forms of knowledge, designerly ways of knowing, and the nature of design decision-making and synthesis) that the strongest case for a “capacity to design” can be made. As a community, we could do better in promoting the importance of both design intelligence and design expertise, especially to organizations that ordinarily would not turn to designers for assistance.

Differences between Design Activity and Research Activity

Tensions again surfaced between the activities of researching and designing. Both activities share a common goal to generate, communicate, and extend human ideas and experiences. Furthermore, both activities draw heavily upon investigative techniques. Designing and

Design Research—the matrix of inquiry

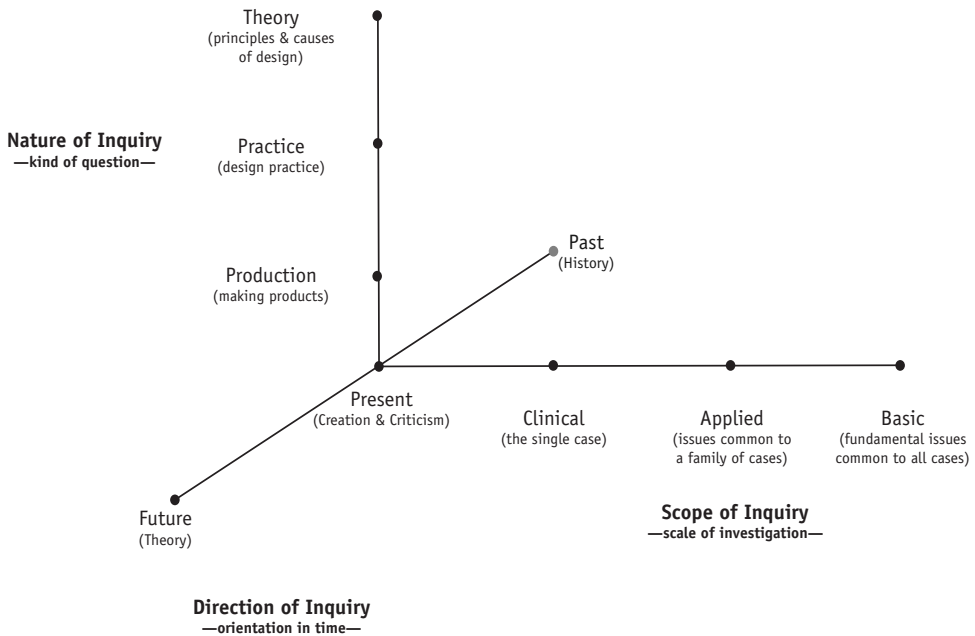


Figure 1
Buchanan’s matrix of inquiry for design research

researching indeed can be very similar endeavors. But research activity has conditions attached (e.g., systematic and intentional inquiry, documented and repeatable methods, evidence-based analysis, communicable results, contributions to identified communities and bodies of prior art, and significant findings) that need not be met through—nor be relevant to—design activity. For example, in the words of Bruce Archer (who attended the evening session of the event, and whose contribution to the design research field was acknowledged with a DRS award), design activity can be measured quite differently from research activity.

The legitimacy and efficacy of a design result resides in the demonstrability and appreciation of its appropriateness to purposes rather than in the clarity of understanding of the principles governing the production of the result.²

The conditions attached to research activity led to a dualist position being raised during the event: that designing and researching remain separate and distinct activities. This, however, is too simple a view, with theories and case studies of how designing and researching can coexist, or even combine as a discrete activity, now emerging. Yet it is worth reminding ourselves that if standards of endeavor associated with research are to be upheld, then the aforementioned conditions must be met. The conditions clearly differentiate research from non-research.

2 B. Archer and P. Roberts, “Design and Technological Awareness in Education” in *Studies in Design Education, Craft, and Technology* 12:1 (1979): 55–56.

A Robust Context for Research

The value of making available the results of previous “pioneering” research, often overlooked or inaccessible to contemporary researchers, was stressed during the event, particularly to remind researchers that “designing design research” has been a subject of debate for decades. One idea forwarded was to publish pioneering research electronically and at a single location—the DRS website was proposed as a suitable hub. However, in doing so, it might be beneficial to go beyond mere logistical consolidation. Such a collection would deserve proper assimilation and an informed running commentary—and, of course, an editorial consensus on what to include and what to leave out.

To conclude the event, delegates were invited to reflect upon the context of their own work in relation to a “matrix of inquiry for design research” (figure 1), developed by Richard Buchanan (2003). The ability to place one’s own work into a broader research context, and to envision ways of progressing from clinical and applied research (presently the majority of cases) through to basic, fundamental research of a non-transitory nature (presently, relatively few cases) was stressed. As a community, we certainly would benefit from a resource providing examples (say between 50 and 100) of completed work and work-in-progress that are variously positioned within the matrix. This would provide an excellent base on which to organize DDR5, an event that would benefit from much less introspection and much more reporting and celebration of achievements.