

RESEARCH PRIORITIES

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As a practitioner, I am often approached by graduate students in search of thesis topics that will be of value to landscape architecture practice. I have found that, more often than not, their desire is to produce research that will have utility and value to the profession rather than simply meeting degree requirements. But the role of research in landscape architecture has always been weak relative to that of other professions such as medicine or engineering. Though practitioners investigate and gather information in their project work, most of them are not trained researchers. Education in research methods is seldom incorporated into undergraduate curricula. Many firm principals recognize the growing importance of research, especially given the move toward evidence-based design. Evidence-based design, now common in fields such as health care, is a design approach that emphasizes the importance of using credible data to influence the design process. But practitioners may balk at the idea of adding work in the midst of their constant need to get projects out on time and on budget. Even so, a well-grounded foundation of research is needed to ensure that evidence-based design does not fall into the realm of pseudoscience.

Evidence-based design offers a great opportunity for the profession—the chance to build a dynamic relationship between academia and practice by establishing a research agenda for landscape architecture at a national level. A national research agenda would not restrict or bias the research efforts of the academy. Rather, it would aggregate and give structure to the many issues of research important to the profession and identify a context for investigation. Although there is clearly a place for research within professional practice, it is the academy that must provide leadership. Some landscape architecture degree programs are emphasizing evidence-based design, and others have active research programs. But the profession needs a way to raise the visibility of these research efforts. Ideally, an organization such as the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA), perhaps in conjunction with the Landscape Architecture Foundation Performance Series, would conduct a periodic survey of the profession to identify topics of research interest and schools where they are a focus.

CELA has historically played an important role in fostering a research community, and ASLA's Professional Practice Networks have circulated and promoted research that is closely linked with practice. The new National Academy of Environ-

mental Design, a consortium of national design organizations including ASLA, will further advance research within the design professions.

A national research agenda could suggest areas ripe for theses and dissertations to help stimulate graduate-level research. It might propose projects of immediate relevance, but it should also include inquiries into topics that may apply more speculatively to the profession—the kind of exploration critical to bringing new ideas to the surface. Potential solutions identified by the academy can be tested by practice. In turn, new areas of interest to the academy will emerge from practice as well.

Providing a framework for the collaboration of academia and practice offers the potential for generating funding sources for academic research. Sophisticated clients are willing to pay for research that will help solve the challenges they face if they have confidence in the research and can see a reasonable return on their investment from the results. Some enlightened practitioners, who face common challenges across multiple projects, may also contribute to research that advances their practice areas.

There are two areas of concern, however. The first is that some academicians are suspicious of privately funded research and its whiff of potential bias. Rather than turn away private funding, we need clear standards to ensure objectivity. The second concern is that some academic programs are eliminating the requirement of a thesis for the graduate degree, substituting instead a final project that, in many cases, is not a framework for rigorous research. Graduate students are often poorly prepared to conduct thesis research because of a lack of training at an undergraduate level.

Design approaches without evidence are based on theory alone. Our obligation to maintain the health, safety, and well-being of society demands more. Evidence-based design suggests a need for research in multiple areas, such as sociology, community planning, and economics, as well as traditional design issues. Our efforts must be built upon the collaborative efforts of private practice and the academy guided by a national research agenda that gives focus to our work. ●

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