

Creative Research in Architecture at UFS

Architecture is undoubtedly a practise, one that operates within the constraints and opportunities of a real world. It is perhaps surprising therefore, that practise-based research came slowly to architecture. The more traditional modes of doctoral study in architecture have tended to be in the domains of architectural history, theory and criticism, conservation and urbanism. These of course have remained firmly in place. Yet in recent years, new forms of creative, or practise-based research have entered the academy to supplement these established ways. In the mid 80's, the architecture program at RMIT in Australia, initiated one of the first design-based research programs for architects. In their so called 'Invitational Program', practising architects with an established body of good work, were invited back to the university with the opportunity of embarking on a journey of self-reflection. An invitation to consolidate and study their built work, and to write this up as a Masters or a PhD thesis. The program at RMIT has been tremendously successful, with a growing global network of associated schools. Creative research has spread rapidly in recent years, with art and design schools across Europe and America further developing this field.

Crossing various economies, technologies, environments, scenarios, role players and flows, architectural design creates new relations between things. Practise-based research allows for an inquiry into this intricate web of connections, with a view to extracting the complex modes of thought and action that are required for success in design – research that recognises the intelligence and ingenuity of design. The primary objective is to harvest and study the implicit orientations, operations and achievements of design, and to enlist creativity in the forming of new knowledge. It is a mode of study that facilitates analytical reflection, stimulates creative action and opens new insights into the unique logic of design.

Perhaps the simplest way to explain what creative research amounts too, is to distinguish the 'product' from that of conventional study. A traditional PhD might consist of a written document of some 80 000 words. The emphasis is placed upon verbal discussion and argument, and images are mostly included as forms of evidence. A creative PhD, however, might be split 50/50 between a written study of say 40 000 words, together with an equivalent in the form of creative work. In other words, the 'designed' aspect of the thesis is valued on its own terms as a creative form of inquiry, one that supplements the written or discursive component of the study.

The Architecture Department at the University of the Free State is pleased to have established a new practise-based research program, a first for South Africa (and possibly for the continent). The program is supported by two new degrees, a Masters and a PhD in Architecture with Specialisation in Design. The creative research program launched in 2018, with 14 PhD candidates, and 5 Masters who intend to progress onto doctoral study. The program is aimed at architects with a five year BArch degree and successful design experience, as well as younger MArch graduates who wish to explore creative research.

It is envisaged that PhD study might be 'practise-based' or 'design-led'. Practised-based study is suited to architects with some 5 to 10 years of

accomplished work experience. It is anticipated that such candidates will embark upon a process of self-discovery to capture and evaluate the inner workings of their design process and to imagine creative futures for their work – curating and writing this up as form of research. Design-led study, by contrast, is better suited to younger candidates who, as yet, lack a recognised body of work. Candidates who might wish to explore an entirely new design-led research project. For example, exploring poetic, technical, historic, social or ecological aspects of design. In either case the PhD aims to curate and explain a body of work in the form of a book, an exhibition and verbal presentation.

Some examples of current research at UFS, in the new program, are provided on the accompanying page, which hopefully provide some insight into the wide ranging opportunities that are afforded by this form of study. Jon Jacobs and Pieter Mathews are award-winning architects with a celebrated body of work. Each are currently completing the creative Masters as a stepping-stone toward an intended practise-based PhD on their respective built works. For his Masters, Jacobs is looking deep into the improvisational aspects of his design process (see drawings by Jacobs, Figure 4). Using the analogy of jazz, Jacobs intends to study his architectural sketch books, where multiple alternatives are explored. Momentary and serial improvisation with concepts, needs, forms and 'standards'. Mathews has had extensive experience as a curator of exhibitions and architectural installations (see exhibition by Mathews, Figure 3). His Masters will delve into the role of the architect as curator. Documenting and studying the uniquely spatial and conceptual architectures of display that have emerged from his practise.

Jan Smit and Marie Herbst, in their individual ways, are concerned with relationships that emerge between painting and design. Smit, an award winning-architect, is doing a practised-based PhD, hoping to study the particular qualities of his working process and architecture. Much of his work is inspired by landscape, and landscape painting often features as an entry point into his design process (see watercolour by Smit, Figure 2). The architectural mediation of landscape through painting is a leading theme that his PhD hopes to develop and study through further creative exploration. Trained as an architect Herbst has had scarce opportunity to develop her long term interest in abstract painting. Her creative Masters hopes to explore pathways between abstraction, painting and design. To study the work of well know painter-architects, and to make her own painterly explorations, as a path toward a design-led PhD within a similar vein (see painting by Herbst, Figure 5) Martie Bitzer is doing a design-led PhD on the theme of skin. Looking at how forms, processes and metaphors of skin might inform her design and art-based practise (see artistic exploration by Bitzer, Figure 1). She intends to make numerous creative explorations of skin, linked to inter-disciplinary study, structured by the themes of wrapping, layering and connecting.

And lastly, further noteworthy topics of inquiry include: African cosmopolitanism, architectural atmosphere, the anatomy of hospitals, organic structures, neuroscience, homelessness, economic housing and scenario planning.

BArch and MArch Applicants

Candidates with an MArch may enter directly into the new PhD program. For candidates with the former five year BArch degree, it should be noted that South African universities are bound by national qualification standards which rate a BArch differently to an MArch degree – and this, despite the fact that SACAP acknowledge professional equivalence. For which reason, candidates with the former five year BArch must complete a one year Masters before gaining admission to a PhD. A new creative research degree – ‘Masters of Architecture with Specialization in Design’ – has been introduced at UFS, to provide a dedicated gateway into the program. It is important to note that the new Masters with Specialization in Design is a design-oriented research degree, and not a professional Masters, which allows for a more open ended and enquiring freedom. The new research program at UFS, thus, is carefully structured to accommodate the ‘anomaly’ of the former five year BArch degree, and allows for an effective and seamless transition into PhD studies for candidates who enter with the former professional degree.

Duration of Study

The first year of study is crucial in that a candidate must establish a topic and define an intended research plan. The year is aided by four research symposia in January, April, June and August, which introduce the candidate to methods that are relevant to creative research, and allow for presentation, feedback and discussion with supervisors and fellow candidates. Subsequent years of study, however, require two symposia a year. The symposia provide an enabling framework that works to guide and prompt new avenues of creation and thought. The symposia of 2018 have proved to be tremendously successful, with a positive, generous and energising spirit. Our candidates have flown in from across SA, for the intensive week of discovery and critical review. And, good progress has been made by all. At the end of the first year of study, successful candidates who entered with a BArch have the option to either exit with a Masters, or to use this as a path toward a PhD. It is foreseeable, that candidates who enter with either a five year BArch or MArch, might exit with a PhD within 3 years of full-time study.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

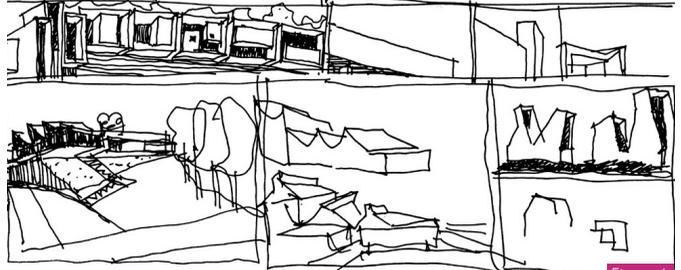


Figure 4



Figure 5