

BRIEF LONG HISTORY OF DESIGN RESEARCH

introduced into a culture of doing? Isn't it better to examine the applied arts from a distance, through the light provided by disciplines practiced at other universities?

WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE BEGINNING was awkward – a grapple to find routes, approaches and appropriate standards. But our stride has gained confidence ever since the beginning of the 1990s, when the first doctoral dissertations were produced and the steering and administration of research activities began to take a shape that promoted research with the determined support of the university's leaders. At the same time, this improved our ability to respond to changes affecting the entire field of research in Finland. The deep economic slump of the early 1990s led to a rapid rise in investments into research and the training of researchers. At the same time the providers of research funding, such as the Academy of Finland, opened their doors to applications from art and design universities. Soon after, the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation also realised that a wealth of possibilities could be discovered in the research and product development associated with the applied arts. Research, researcher training and its funding became much more favourable to initiatives emanating from the TaiK when the Academy of Finland and the State Art Councils decided to jointly fund an experimental research programme at art universities. They no longer just followed developments, but were instead actively shaping them. By the turn of

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the millennium, a substantial leap had been taken with respect to both the amount and the quality of established structures. And this did not apply only to the national standing of the TaiK's research, but also very much to its international visibility and significance.

RESEARCH IN THE APPLIED ARTS, industrial design especially, and the related training of researchers began to increase in prominence in different parts of the world during the 1990s. The TaiK in particular was an enthusiastic organiser of international conferences that spurred this development, helping us to establish an extensive network of cooperation partners. The maintenance and expansion of this network was facilitated by the concurrent development of various new IT tools. By the arrival of the 2000s, a global archipelago of units researching design, new media and other fields of applied arts was interconnected through information networks. These units were usually small in size, but together they formed a closely-knit community with rapid communications capabilities. The TaiK was among the leaders in this and our experiences enabled us to advise others – our history of research was brief, but long in comparison

with the others. Relative to the entire field, the TaiK research community had become significant in quantifiable terms as well. This applied also to the standard and effectiveness of research, the present status of which is addressed in more detail by Professor Ilpo Koskinen in his article.

THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH the early stages of our research efforts remain topical. New disciplines and subjects are constantly raised as answers to the question of "what to research?" On the one hand, research is ongoing in all of the TaiK's fields of activities. On the other hand, new areas of design, such as so-called new media, have established their own cultures of research. The expanding field of activities in design, its increasing significance to the industries and the rapid development of technology have opened new possibilities and pointed out the need for new research questions. Internal development and the formation of strong national and international networks will improve the ability to respond to the question "how?" But what of the core question "what for?"

THE DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES OF DESIGN NEED TO FIND answers to questions emanating from within their own areas as well as from the interfaces of multi-disciplinary cooperation. Research provides these with solutions that benefit not only design and the provision of related education, but also those numerous other fields of activity for which the applied arts can open up new possibilities. This is how TaiK researchers view their departure to join the research community of the new Aalto University. We are not being assimilated; instead, we are participating as active partners. We have much to gain in this new situation – but we have plenty to bring to the table, too.

OUT OF THE BOX

With the formation of Aalto University, TaiK becomes something new. It becomes the art and design school of the new university.

WHAT COMES TO ART its role is incontestable. With design, it faces certain ambiguity. The very term design is ambiguous, and cannot be owned by any particular group. However, even in design, TaiK forms the most important cluster of expertise in creating and implementing new ideas without bounds. Methods, mentalities, and processes taught at TaiK face far less restrictions in scope than in system design.

Thus, as far as I can see, the main mission of TaiK in new university is increasing the impact of design, bringing in the creative input necessary to get out of the box. Without this ability, there is little hope things change. At best, design becomes a catalyst that will shape the new university.

The real challenge is not the mission of TaiK research, but its size. TaiK takes in only about 6-7% of Aalto University's new students, and its faculty is small.

One of the main resources TaiK has to respond to this task

TEXT Ilpo Koskinen Professor

is its research. It is researchers who put knowledge into books into an easily shareable form. They do not always produce new knowledge; just as often, they codify tacit knowledge. What is truly important is that there is an easily accessible body of knowledge than can be browsed, learned from, criticized, and perused for understanding.

In blunt functionalist terms, this is what TaiK research will do in Aalto University.

FIRST: WHAT MAKES A DESIGN UNIVERSITY?

After reading the papers in this collection, my first observation was obvious, but still worth mentioning. TaiK is home to many strands of research, as I think it should be. Research has been done at several departments and schools, and it serves various purposes, ranging from professional and personal to purely scientific. Also, research at TaiK is done in many formats, ranging from international monographs to conference papers.

As my colleague, vice rector, Pekka Korvenmaa notes in his introduction, the significance of this research goes beyond a small place called Arabia, Helsinki. TaiK is one of the few design schools in the world that has an active research agenda. This agenda has developed over almost three decades. We can talk about traditions in research.

Few other art and design schools can match this tradition, and even fewer the numbers. A few figures show what I mean. By the



The paradox in the heading is only apparent – measured in years, the history of research conducted by design disciplines is relatively short, but the efforts of our university are among the longest-lasting in this field.

PRECURSOR the School of Applied Arts, was a university-level institution in 1973. In the following decade, we were granted first the right to confer graduate degrees and, soon after, doctoral degrees. Then, and still, the University of Art and Design Helsinki was the only university-level independent educational institution for this area of activities in all of the Nordic countries that had the opportunity – and obligation – to engage in independent research activities to train researchers to realise this end. But what of research, how to do it and for what reason? The beginning was a series of questions and other institutions of higher learning held doubts about us. Why should research be

TEXT Pekka Korvenmaa Vice-rector Professor

end of 2007, close to 70 doctoral thesis since 1991. The School of Design alone had published hundreds of conference papers. Between 2000-2008, its researchers had written about 25 papers in refereed international journals, and few hundred in refereed conferences. Although it is difficult to estimate the number of active doctoral students and senior researchers, the research community is vibrant; right at this moment, well over 200 doctoral students are working their way towards doctoral degree.

Thus, although it is an art and design school, TaiK functions as any other university in this regard. It may be an odd bird in the research university category, but it has gone beyond its traditional niche, art and design education. It is more than a professional academy. It is a university.

SECOND: INTELLECTUAL STREAMS AND NOVELTIES

If papers in this collection show something about

the ways in which research has been conducted at TaiK, it is the importance of practice for research.

However, the word "practice" needs to be taken cautiously. What I mean is that research at TaiK almost invariably builds on problems that have their origins in practical design world rather than some body of scientific knowledge. In solving problems, researchers at TaiK rely on methods and conceptual frameworks developed in many fields of research, but their understanding of what is important and worth studying builds on their knowledge of the worlds of art and design.

For an outsider, TaiK research opens a fascinating window to some aspects of professional practice. It does not open every door, God forbid; there are still many corners of design barely touched on by researchers. But, it opens many doors.

However, it is important not to exaggerate the importance of practice, for two reasons.

First, most sciences have their foundations in practice, as the examples of calculus or probability theory show. This is certainly the case in logistics or management too.

Second, even though research problems may usually have their origins in practice, the methods TaiK

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researchers rely on in solving their problems almost invariably have their origins in older, more established fields of science and learning. It does not make sense to reinvent statistics. As papers in this collection show, it does not make sense to reinvent interviewing techniques or participant observation either.

Even more importantly, this is true of conceptual frameworks. What comes to theoretical thinking, TaiK is not an island. Its researchers have borrowed from several schools of geography, cognitive science, sociology, philosophical thinking, physics, consumer research, and engineering, to name but a few influences. Mostly, work is clearly based on interpretive research traditions stemming from the humanities and the social sciences, rather than on attempts to explain things through causal laws.

Of course, researchers have developed these frameworks and shaped them to better describe what is taking place in design, but have not touched the continental crusts of phenomenology or pragmatism. In this regard, I see few signs of overblown confidence in the body of research at TaiK, and welcome this sanity.

More than anyone else in this collection, **Juha Varto's** text points out one important act of creativity, though.

Above, I said that research at TaiK almost invariably builds on problems that have their origins in practical design world rather than some body of scientific knowledge. The word "almost" was a deliberate choice, and I need to open it a bit.

Relying on British debates, artists and designers doing research have recently exaggerated the novelty aspects of their work by trying to claim that research through practice is something new. Personally, I doubt this claim and think it tells about lack of historical understanding more than describes what is happening, but there is a grain of truth in it. Name-

ly, in many pieces of work, we see artistic and design-based components.

The most obvious place to see these components is artistic research done in photography, art education, and film studies. However, designers have based their work on original art works as well.

But, the fingers of practice go far longer than to the actual artistic or design products. In particular, in some pieces of work, research methods have been reinterpreted through elements from professional practice. The best case, I think, is Tuuli Mattelmäki's doctoral thesis "Design Probes" that makes fascinating reading for anyone with a background outside TaiK. It is clearly a piece by a designer. Many things in the thesis require design skills, and its ethos is typical to designers. However, it is also methodologically sound, at least if one looks at it through the eyes of an interpretive social scientist.

MESSAGES TO AALTO UNIVERSITY

I think it is fair to say that in Aalto University, artistic

research conducted at TaiK becomes a valuable asset. As my colleague Pekka Korvenmaa notes in his introductory words to this volume, TaiK has been in the forefront of first introducing and then institutionalizing research into its agenda. Professionally speaking, nobody else in Aalto University cares about this research that informs art and definitely helps it to improve our society - though often through critique and sometimes by stretching the boundaries of our habits of thought and institutions.

The same applies to design research as well. When compared to the numbers of larger universities - I am thinking about Helsinki University of Technology here - the scale of research and education at TaiK may appear minuscule. However, as Korvenmaa also suggests, its research is internationally well known, and holds the promise of a global breakthrough. Impact may be an overly mechanistic word to describe something as complex as how research spreads, but TaiK research has already made a mark, and holds a promise of making even bigger, global mark.

What the School of Design has consistently done is perhaps even more important: its research has been integrated into education, and thus tested

in practice. In the context of building new, reliance on well-tryed methods is not a bad option, especially given the fact that design research has been consistently innovative and the TaiK community active in advancing international research agenda with the best people in the world.

The message for the new university is thus clear. Research at TaiK is a very, very valuable asset that needs nurturing. The problem as far as I can see it is that the first budget of the new university does not pay any attention to this fact. It completely ignores art and design research by integrating research into - least to say - mysterious structures like the new factories and research initiatives.

In fact, it may be that the baby is currently being thrown out with the bathwater. When my colleague Turkkka Keinonen recently analyzed scientific articles in design research by Aalto University between 2000-2008, he found 93 refereed scientific articles in international journals. Roughly 80% of these were published by researchers from the School of Design and international at TaiK, Department of Marketing at Helsinki School of Economics, and Helsinki Institute for Information Technology, a joint venture between Helsinki University of Technology and the University of Helsinki. Needless to say, there are many links between these units, both formal and informal.

However, the first budget of the new university completely misses this fact. Worse still, it probably places design research into opposing camps; we are placed into opposing camps. Which kind of game evolves between us will get clear in the future.

Coming from the research side, my humble hope is that in coming years, new structures are built on facts rather than ambitions and promises alone. ☰

MANY THINGS IN THE THESIS REQUIRE DESIGN SKILLS, AND ITS ETHOS IS TYPICAL TO DESIGNERS. HOWEVER, IT IS ALSO METHODOLOGICALLY SOUND, AT LEAST IF ONE LOOKS AT IT THROUGH THE EYES OF AN INTERPRETIVE SOCIAL SCIENTIST.