leader

Building on experience

Let's face it: user research has a very low priority with the largest group of
arq's subscribers – practising architects. And yet, as William Fawcett
writes in his paper in this issue (pp.8-15), '... there can hardly be any
projects where designers would not understand user needs better through
a critical review of relevant research'. So why, at a time when architects
are generally short of work and low in client esteem, doesn't the
profession grasp the opportunity to demonstrate that it can design on the
basis of experience in a way that others cannot? In short, that it is truly a
knowledge based profession.

One reason is the legacy of a Modern Movement which deliberately
disregarded past experience and sought to develop new solutions,
formally, socially and technically. Another is the unpredictable nature of
architectural practice and employment: continuity in building type
commissions is rare, staff turnover often high. Yet others are low fees,
frequently disrupted design processes and the architect's belief in his or
her own assumptions.

There have always been exceptions to this state of affairs. In Britain
there was a time when government development groups published
excellent and affordable user research related to national construction
programmes in housing, health and education. More recently, innovative
developers such as Stanhope Securities commissioned exemplary studies
of user needs and alternative building forms. With these, designs were
developed, buildings constructed and post occupancy evaluations carried
out. But the results of such privately funded research are rarely made
available to others.

This widespread failure to use existing user research and to learn from
the lessons of the past has been known for many years. In the early 1980s
two research reports from the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies
at the University of York, *Design Decision Making in Architectural Practice*
and *Information and Experience in Architectural Design*, recorded the
haphazard and personal basis for much design. The problem has grown
worse since then. Practice has become more fraught, funding for new
user research is even scarcer and the journals rarely publish appraisals of

buildings which have been in use for some time. Even the explosion in architectural book publishing has included little user research: neither authors, publishers nor the market seem much interested in the subject.

As Fawcett's research on the appearance of buildings makes clear and as the York Institute's study of architects at work revealed, architects prefer to rely on their own perceptions, preferences and generalisations. It's a pattern which first becomes clear in some architecture schools where a reluctance to engage with user needs starts a process of disengagement from society which all too often continues into practice.

So where does the solution to this problem lie? How can architects be persuaded to take existing user research seriously? Are those few organisations which currently commission or undertake such work likely to make the results more generally available? Surely not: they have paid for it and it is commercially valuable to them. Are the journals likely to publish post occupancy evaluations? Unlikely: to do so would be to commit valuable pages to building projects of little immediate interest to the majority of readers. And, in any case, in a litigious age such appraisals are unlikely to be anything but anodyne.

Perhaps the answer and the opportunity lies with *arq*'s other large group of subscribers – academics. Some of these could undertake user research of both a generalised and a project specific nature with the latter related to particular building types, combined in suitably disguised form and published at modest cost to the advantage of their departmental research ratings and funding. In parallel with this, continuing professional development courses in user research could be provided for practitioners. Encouraged by the latter, more and more designers (and studio teachers) would learn to appreciate the creative impetus and economic benefits brought about by a true understanding of user needs.

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