Home Improvements: Housing Research in Practice

Methodology and Data
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.0</strong> Research Methods</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Results</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 What is Research?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Research Activity</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Grants for Research</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 The Benefits of Research</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Publication</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Assistance with Research</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 Housing Research</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This document provides supporting information for Home Improvements: Housing Research in Practice. The report was compiled as part of an AHRC funded knowledge exchange project, Home Improvements, coordinated by Prof. Flora Samuel at the University of Sheffield School of Architecture.

In this supporting document we present the research methods and data which underpin the report findings and recommendations.
1.0 Research Methods

*Home Improvements: Housing Research in Practice* draws on data from three interconnected sources:

- The RIBA Research Practice Survey;
- A limited sample of targeted interviews;
- Three research projects led by architectural practices in collaboration with architectural academia as part of the Home Improvements project.

Between February and May 2013, an online survey was issued to chartered architectural practices. The survey was distributed via the RIBA bulletin on three occasions. The survey was distributed to the RIBA’s network of 24,000 individual members. The RIBA’s typical response rate for similar studies is 50-100 responses. The Home Improvements survey sits at the upper end of this rate, accumulating 83 responses.

The survey comprised two sections. In the first section we asked practitioners their views on research, concentrating on how they valued research and what opportunities they thought it had for developing their business. One of the fundamental questions asked practitioners to describe their own understanding of what research is. In particular, we were also interested in gauging whether practices needed assistance in conducting research, and if so, what should this consist of? The second part of the survey was specifically aimed at practices working in the housing sector. With this our aim was to establish how, why and when practitioners were conducting research, thereby exposing which areas of housing they considered needed more attention. We were also interested in evaluating where practitioners looked for cutting edge knowledge in housing, and why these places were considered important.

Secondly, a sample of semi-structured interviews was conducted. In addition to following up the responses of survey participants, these interviews specifically targeted key housing design practices. Consequently, this included a range of practice sizes from solo practitioners to large practices, and from emerging practices to well-established ones. In these interviews practitioners were invited to uncover research conventions in practice, and to identify innovative approaches and cutting edge knowledge. Because practices were selected for one or more of these factors the semi-structured approach allowed a flexible thematic framework for all interviews.
The report also draws on knowledge developed in the course of the AHRC based Home Improvements project. Within the project, funding for three embedded research projects led by architectural practitioners in conjunction with architectural academia, with input from our industry partners, was provided. Following a call for expressions of interest in the professional press, nine practices were invited to Sheffield to participate in an Ideas Lab. This was a sandpit event for the incubation of a series of research projects with all the members of the team. Three practices were successful in securing funding. The knowledge exchange partnerships and research projects are as follows:

**Ash Sakula**, working with the University of Sheffield and Design for Homes examined the context of self-build. Their project, titled Collective Custom Build, resulted in an information rich advocacy website, which locates the opportunities inherent in future occupiers having more say in how housing is conceived and built in the UK.

**Satellite Architects**, working with Kingston University and Taylor Wimpey, explored the public realm in housing and produced a design handbook to assist industry in delivering detailed places.

**Urbed**, working with the University of Edinburgh and Design for Homes investigated issues of parking and housing. Titled Parking Space, the research set out to interrogate the prevailing assumption that less parking will discourage car ownership, make new neighbourhoods safer and allow better quality urban design.

In setting up, delivering and reflecting on the process of this project we learnt a great deal about how to facilitate practitioner research, which is reflected in the RIBA Research Practice Guide.
2.1 What is Research?

The data presented within this section is derived solely from the survey responses.

Definitions of research

As an open and qualitative question, there was a number of ways in which research was defined. It is noteworthy that not all descriptions were definitions of research per se; rather some are descriptions of different approaches to undertaking research through and for design. We identified five main responses to this question which suggested that research comprised the following characteristics:

- The activity of keeping up to date with current materials, approaches and legislation.
- Developing ideas through design
- A form of funded work which investigated a particular subject
- Engaging with academics in order to take part in research project
- Teaching within schools of architecture

![Pie chart showing the major characteristics of research]

- Clear methods: 20%
- Deep knowledge of the field: 19%
- Appropriate sample size: 23%
- Implications of sample size: 6%
- Thorough engagement with the subject: 10%
- Explicit evidence: 16%
- Other: 6%
2.2 Research Activity

Practices involved with research

- **Sole**: 20% Yes, 3% No, 8% Unanswered
- **Small**: 21% Yes, 4% No, 20% Unanswered
- **Medium**: 5% Yes, 1% No, 10% Unanswered
- **Large**: 4% Yes, 5% No

Reasons for not doing research in practice

- Lack of access to data/equipment: 11%
- Lack of access to relevant academic expertise: 17%
- No time: 28%
- Too costly: 28%
- Difficult to ascertain where research is needed: 6%
- Don’t know where to begin: 11%
- Not interested: 0%
2.2 Research Activity

Types of research in practice

- Research through and for design, and research into ways of working: 38%
- Research through and for design: 12%
- Research through design and research into ways of working: 5%
- Research for design and research into ways of working: 19%
- Research for design: 19%
- Research through design: 2%
- Research into ways of working: 5%

Research topics in practice

- Environmental performance: 14%
- User behaviour: 12%
- Digital technology and process: 6%
- Management and procurement process: 8%
- History and theory: 11%
- Performance and practice: 5%
- Construction (including process and detail): 18%
- Participation and consultation: 10%
- Urban planning and landscape: 12%
- Other: 6%
2.3 Grants for Research

Practices who had previously received grants for research

- Yes: 26%
- No: 74%
- Not sure: 0%

Awareness of how to obtain grants for research

- Yes: 15%
- No: 26%
- Not sure: 59%

Practices interested in pursing research

- Yes: 48%
- No: 15%
- Not sure: 37%
2.3 Grants for Research

Sources that practitioners would turn to in order to find research funding opportunities

- Architectural press: 11%
- Academic partners: 27%
- Industry partners: 8%
- Social media: 3%
- CPD: 4%
- RIBA: 24%
- Not sure: 23%

Actions that could help practices pursue research grants

- Partnering with other industry professionals/organisations: 17%
- Academic partnering: 22%
- RIBA support: 23%
- Publicity for research grant opportunities and success in professional journals: 25%
- Training: 13%
- Not sure: 3%
2.4 The Benefits of Research

The importance of research for developing a healthy business

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** Asked to provide five main benefits of research, practitioners suggested the following:

- **Improve the built environment**: 18%
- **Improved brand**: 3%
- **Generates further work**: 12%
- **Access to alternative funding streams**: 4%
- **Job satisfaction**: 10%
- **Demonstrate the value of architecture**: 13%
- **Publicity**: 2%
- **Demonstrate specific expertise**: 8%
- **Innovation**: 15%
- **Advancing sustainability**: 9%

In this section ‘non-researchers’ refers to practices who stated in the survey that they did not do research. ‘Researchers’ refers to practices who said their practice did do research.
2.5 Publication

Practices with published research: 33% Published, 67% Unpublished

Reasons for not publishing research:
- No time: 32%
- Publishing costs: 14%
- Accessing research grant funding for publication: 8%
- Didn’t know how to: 14%
- Not sure: 16%
- Other: 16%
Overall, Practices suggested that Clients were often interested in research and that it identified the practice as experts in a certain area. It was also suggested that clients were more convinced about design outcomes that were supported by a body of research.
2.5 Publication

Places that practices have had their research published

- Peer reviewed academic press and/or conference proceedings: 6%
- Non-peer reviewed academic press and/or conference proceedings: 6%
- Professional press: 64%
- Industry report: 11%
- Other: 14%

 Asked what would help practitioners publish, the following suggestions were made:

- Time: 33%
- Training on how to do research (counts towards CPD hours): 18%
- Better research training as part of professional education: 10%
- Advice from an academic partner: 20%
- Advice from an industry partner: 12%
- Not applicable: 4%
- Funding: 3%
2.6 Assistance with Research

**Types of assistance required**

Responses can be summarised in the following categories:

- Demonstrating the relevance and value of practice based research
- Disseminating research more effectively
- Better guidance re current research opportunities
- Better guidance re current topic areas
- Guidance regarding how to apply for funding

**Organisations Practitioners would seek assistance from:**

- Universities
- Schools of Architecture
- Funding Bodies
- Government & NGO’s
- RIBA
- Other Professional Bodies
- British Library
- Industry Organisations
- Suppliers and Manufacturers
- Charities
- Network organisations such as HUB and the Edge

**Type of assistance required from Universities and the RIBA**

- Research training in architectural schools: Universities 4%, RIBA 7%
- Quality of research in professional journals: Universities 6%, RIBA 4%
- Identifying universities to work with: Universities 6%, RIBA 4%
- Guidance on applying for grants: Universities 8%, RIBA 6%
- Guidance on publication: Universities 6%, RIBA 8%
- More research in professional journals: Universities 7%, RIBA 4%
- Networking: Universities 6%, RIBA 5%
- Joint projects: Universities 6%, RIBA 6%
- Higher profile for RIBA research awards: Universities 6%, RIBA 2%
2.7 Housing Research

Practices undertaking research in housing

- Yes: 38%
- No: 63%

Research needed in housing

Responses ranged from very specific research areas such as “the passage of moisture in highly insulated buildings”, to design and well being. Responses were grouped into the following overarching categories:

- Implications of low energy and environmental approaches for occupants
- Impact of space & size on occupants
- Models of procurement
- Multiple occupancy housing
- Housing for specific needs
- Land ownership and availability of land
- Retrofit for sustainability
- Low cost housing
- Prefabrication techniques
- The value of quality and design in housing
- User aspirations and contemporary requirements
- Technologies for improving environmental performance

Where is the most important housing research taking place?

- Practice: 38%
- Academia: 29%
- Private housing providers: 7%
- Housing association and social landlords: 18%
- Building contractors: 2%
- Others: 7%
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