

Impact of Architecture(s)

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Impact of Architecture(s)

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The word impact in research highlights the evidence, the results or consequences of a study on some specific contextual factors [1]. There are many other definitions of impact, such as the one used by the University of Scotland to highlight its contribution to the areas of “Innovation, Architecture and Design” [2]. The report presents the impact as benefits to people as architecture and design stakeholders. On the other hand, the AIA (The American Institute of Architects) asserts that research related to the built environment is underfunded, considering its impact on the economy, human condition, and society at large [3].

This contribution analyses different points of view about the impact of architectural studies, frames a specific approach and highlights the importance of open questions to go beyond a strict definition of impact.

Over a decade ago, assessing the impact of research has become an important vehicle for funded studies [4].

Due to the shrinking of public funding for higher education, the allocation of resources needs to be based on solid data; consequently, monitoring and giving a specific measure unit to allocate the budget to specific institutions and schools [5]. As a significant funding institution, the European community, to monitor its assets, decided to define the impact of research. The Commission’s proposal for Horizon Europe describes an innovative approach for considering and disseminating impact, “the Key Impact Pathways” [6]. The impact has been evaluated by defining three fields: scientific, societal, technological, and economic [6].

Defining the impact as a factor has, as a consequence, the need to quantify them to allocate funding. The increase in data availability and its quantifiable feature has led to the definition of various metrics and indicators in research that are easy to obtain from numbers (citation counts, h-index, and journal impact factor). However, many metrics must capture the full range of different research activities and are often narrowly focused on what can be measured, forgetting other parts of the research. One among all, citation data provides a limited and incomplete view of research quality, especially in the Art and Architecture discipline [5].

As a starting point for discussion, the EAAE (European Association of Architectural Education) defines the research impact on architecture as a concern of individuals, groups and institutions in its report. It affects all scales in different research areas and timeframes. Its nature and the ways of measuring it depend on the audiences, areas and contexts in which it occurs. With the definition of impact, the EAAE supports and highlights the need to expand the range of impact assessment indicators, including curation, community

engagement, public presentations, practice recognition by peers, awards, funding and publications [7]. This promotes the deficiency of a singular definition of impact in architectural research, opening it up to different research types and encouraging them to exist. From this starting point, several questions arise, leading to the construction of a PhD Workshop in the EAAE 2023 “School of Architecture (s)” framework stimulating a reflection on these multiple perspectives.

The PhD Workshop was dedicated to investigating how and if the impact of research in the architectural field could be defined. With a challenging impact definition of PhD research in architecture in mind and a current debate within the research community on the use of AI, an attempt was made to ask an AI chat (ChatGPT) to “define or describe the impact of a PhD research in architecture studies”. The reply given by the ChatGPT listed several possible impacts of a PhD research in architecture studies as rather abstract and generic answers, with impact definition or description still lacking in clarity. While vaguely focusing on the advancement of knowledge, development of new methods and techniques, influence on practice, contribution to public discourse and inspiration for future research—the AI clearly demonstrates a lack of relevant knowledge or perspective when omitting to mention the nature of impact on/in different research audiences, areas, and timeframes—let alone its assessment in the context and field of architecture studies.

The EAAE23 PhD Workshop encouraged a discussion around these subtopics while relying on the knowledge of previous and available EAAE research, especially the experience of the EAAE’s Research Academy Workshop that took place in Zagreb in 2019. Its result, framed as a Research Impact Diagram, plainly shows the Workshop’s conclusions as visually comprehensible relations between the various aspects of impact definition, nature and evidence. Laying out and opening the questions of potential impact on/in relevant areas defined by scale (local, regional, national and global), or audiences addressed (individuals, groups, institutions), timeframes in mind, as well as the nature of impact relevance (accessibility, engagement and effectiveness) and appropriate evidencing, further resulted in upgrading the EAAE’s definition of impact in 2022, especially in terms of impact assessment [7].

In order to offer perspectives and also give potential relevance to the impact in terms of less conventional referential bodies of evidence, some experiments have been conducted in terms of ‘design/artistic practice-driven research’ to dissect, cut through, and explore the nature of the complex conceptual landscape of PhD by Design (PbD) [8].

Through its experiential learning-through-evaluation model, the recent CA2RE project and conference example focuses on artistic and architectural design-driven doctoral research and its impact. Here and at the same time, developing a collective learning environment through presentations, performances, exhibitions, and critical discussions means (re)building evaluation criteria for the research, as well as building a platform as a ‘design/artistic practice-driven research’ community [9].

The reflection on impact doesn’t aim to archive any new definition of the word. Moreover, it gives another dowel in the discussion.

Frayling’s [10] famous tripartite model for practice-related research “into”, “for” and “Through” practice classification is upgraded by scholars such as Fraser [11], distinguishing research types by stressing differences in “processes”, “outcomes”, and

“impact”. This tripartite classification highlights the presence of the impact definition in the frame of design research [4]. Consequently, other specifications emerged from the EAAE discussions, reframing the evidence of the impact in and on research. However, a big step has already been made in finding different synonyms and interpretations of impact in architectural research; another needs to be taken stressing the importance of opening the research to validate different evidence or body of knowledge (as mentioned in the Research Impact Diagram developed during EAAE Research Academy in Zagreb RA Workshop 2019) enlarging even more the range of action of architecture. Furthermore, the discussion is enriched by the perspective of doctoral students who raise the issues from below, from a different position than the many starting points.

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