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Sitting on the Shrink Couch

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11 November 2026

A DEBATE about RE-SEARCH in ARCHITEC-TURAL DE-SIGN

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DE-SIGN-DRIVEN RESEARCH

Architectural research meets the general criteria of originality, significance, and rigour. It produces forms of output and discourse that are proper for disciplinary practice, making it discussable, communicable, and useful to relevant audiences. It is validated through panels of experts who collectively cover the range of disciplinary competencies addressed by the work.

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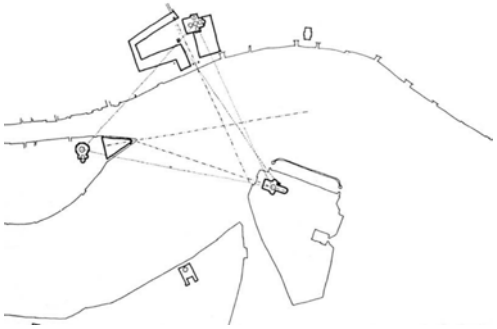
SITTING ON THE SHRINK COUCH

Giovanni Corbellini



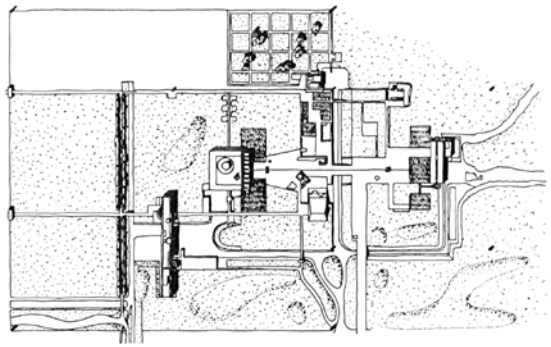
San Marco basin, Venice. Graphic interpretation by Giovanni Corbellini, 1989.

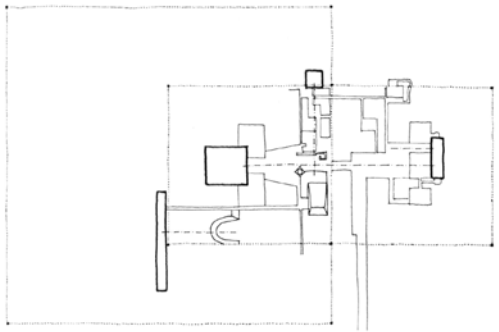
After being introduced in Italy lately, doctoral studies are slowly coming of age (schools are now selecting the candidates for the 40th PhD yearly cycle). For a discipline marked by a blurred identity like architectural design – between science, arts, and humanities and, especially, private and public interest – they provided a protected environment for self-reflection. As a candidate for the third cycle, I partook in this sort of ongoing and collective psychoanalytic session almost from the beginning, eventually getting on the other side of the desk.

It is a long and wide experience of hundreds of theses and research proposals I came across in various schools and different roles (candidate, faculty, adviser, invited critic, referee, juror in selection and final assessment committees), which offers me a sufficiently reliable overview on the evolution of our discipline's theoretical elaboration and how PhD studies interacted and interact with it.
A thorough analysis able to grasp the many facets, causes, and effects such a complex endeavour entails would ask, of course, many pages. I will, therefore, try to focus here on just one major trend that emerged over time. My impression is that by sitting, as it were, on the shrink couch, architectural design turned this self-consciousness investigation into the recognition of its basic helplessness. In other words, the cure contributed to shifting our personality disorder from narcissism (or disciplinary autonomy) to dissociation. Shreds of evidence of this trend are increasingly emerging among doctoral production: more and more 'architectural design' labelled papers barely report the terms 'architecture' or 'design', let alone their own objects, tools, scope and meaning, to the point that cases and bibliographies mostly list unknown references (at least to me). This unfortunate widespread phenomenon takes different forms, according to the candidates and their advisors' level of architectural disenchantment: either because of a critical judgment about the way the discipline is being practised nowadays – still implying the possibility to improve it –or a hopeless distrust about design's positive potential. The former attitude has been recently bolstered by the pressure of urgent political, social, ecological, and economic issues and further accelerated by targeted scholarships and research grants. The stakes set by these issues are so high and contradictory that the architectures so far produced (which could not help to compromise with reality) inevitably fail to give viable answers. According to this attitude, if and when state-of-the-art projects are investigated, they are eventually disapproved, making any focus on disciplinary results pointless. Its logical aim would be, therefore, to claim space for unprecedented design solutions: a quite ambitious goal if carried out according to an engineering problem-solving gaze that becomes practically unattainable for architects, especially within the school and the suspension of reality it provides (which makes designing within doctoral programs highly questionable). What these candidates usually get to are manifestos collecting poetic-ethical intentions that hardly translate into

consistent PhD dissertations.
When even this feeble confidence in the discipline's potential fades away, architectural design is considered dangerous, even vicious. The most politically engaged interpretations (currently very fashionable) consider it a socially exploitative and physically extractive activity. Any architectural contribution should, therefore, dissolve into collective, participatory, bottom-up practices, shifting our role from authors to editors, from 'writers', let's say, to 'readers'. A similar passage from the materiality of architecture to the reproducibility of processes is also claimed by an opposite, basically technocratic approach, according to which environmental transformation must be kept under strict vertical control, reducing the design's elbow room in order to obtain 'correct' results. Collections of best practices and elaborations of guidelines that extend the urban-planning normative gaze on architectural design are the blander, often unintended, manifestations of such an attitude, further probed by investigations specifically focussed on methodological issues. These latter, paradoxically rooted in the Enlightenment revival that nurtured the disciplinary autonomy debate, pretend to apply a 'scientific' – namely deterministic – gaze to design by outsourcing, for instance, typo-morphological surveys to software applications or modelling the socio-technic negotiations of design procedures. Overtly, the focus here is on building rather than architecture, on other actors rather than designers, and the same goes for the many kinds of research driven by problem-solving approaches. Whether these terms or fields precisely overlap or not is a matter any doctoral researcher in architectural design should be interested in. By recognising a gap, a parallax, or a deviation, and looking at it, the possibility of meaningful research opens up for us as architects. Needless to say, a step aside from the prevailing ontological narratives and a closer proximity with experimental projects would provide both a critical distance and a specific, disciplinary vantage point: if so many years on the PhD shrink couch have taught me anything, is that self-analysis is not meant to heal; at best, it helps scholars to live with their own disciplinary disorder, making it productive and rewarding, not only for them.

Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, Capitol, Chandigarh, 1950. Graphic interpretation by Giovanni Corbellini, 1989.





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Department of Architecture and Urban Studies

Alessandro Rocca (editor)
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