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M.Sc.
PROGRAM

DESIGN AS AN EPISTEMIC PRACTICE

PRACTICE-INTEGRATING KNOWLEDGE CONCEPTS
IN DESIGN DISCOURSE USING THE EXAMPLE OF TWO
RESEARCH PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

In science, theory holds a hegemonic position to practice. Even though the ideal of an objective and explicit body of knowledge slowly dissolves, epistemological approaches usually revolve around a precise determination of propositional knowledge. Thus, a dualism between theory and practice still steers the paradigm of scientific research. More recently, designers have come up against these prevailing orders with a practice-oriented research approach in which findings are generated by means of design practice and hands-on activities itself.

Insights emerging through practice have gained significant value in current design research. Concepts such as **tacit knowing or reflection-in-action** are more valid than ever in debates about the questions what knowledge in design means and how it can be accessed. They address those forms of knowing which are based on practical experiences and skills, that arise from the concrete handling of materials and through design practice and which can not necessarily be expressed in words. With the hypothesis that design is to be understood as an epistemic practice, the master thesis is contributing to present discussions about the relation between design and knowledge, as well as to current approaches on practice-based research through design.

Mainly, the thesis is divided into two parts. In the first literature-based part a look at the field of epistemology and different forms of knowledge is taken from a perspective of the philosophy of science in order to identify upon this a practice-based design research and to sharpen the thesis design as an epistemic practice. Subsequently, three practice-integrating knowledge concepts in the design discourse are presented, to which reference is made in recent debates: I. Ranulph Glanville (2014) about acting, learning and understanding, II. Donald A. Schön (1983) who wrote about a reflective practice and know-Design as an epistemic practice Practice-integrating knowledge concepts in design discourse using the example of two research projects how and III. Michael Polanyi (1966) with his concept of tacit (unspeakable, silent) knowing. The arguments presented with these positions serve to provide a profound alternative to traditional theory-practice hierarchies and to soften existing orders.

In the second part an analysis of two design research projects is carried out with the aim of investigating how a design practice and its concrete actions can be a source of gaining knowledge. Points of reference between the studied design practices and the presented knowledge concepts will be shown. Within the case study it will turn out that many of the practices used in the projects, for example collecting, touching, testing, filtering or visualizing, take on an epistemic role and that materials and tools have a supporting effect on these processes.

Research through design is to be understood as a practice in which knowledge is being generated and processed. It is an context-oriented, haptic and visual form of knowledge production through which insights are generated. Through this practice-led approach of doing research, a hegemonic position of theory versus practice is dissolved - if not even reversed.

Keywords

Knowledge and design, research through design, practice-based design research, case study