
“Design research is how you bring intent and capability into context... The hypothesis that drives this book is that there is a direct relationship between the quality of design and the willingness of the designer to take on mindful explorations of what lies beneath a beautiful surface” (p. 316). These quotes from Brenda Laurel’s conclusions neatly summarize the aim of Design Research: to introduce designers to a variety of research tools that can be used to inform design, as well as to ideas about how and when to deploy them effectively.

In four sections—“People,” “Form,” “Design,” and “Action”—authors from research institutions and enterprises present their perspectives on the role of research in the design field and its possible contributions to design. The book offers illustrations of the application of known research methods, as well as examples of innovative and even speculative approaches to design. Qualitative approaches, such as ethnography and cultural studies, are particularly well represented, but a number of contributions present more formal practices or quantitative approaches. In packaging all these approaches together, the book seeks to demonstrate that there is a path from design theory to design practice—one that leads to more successful and reliable designs than those not based on research methods and results.

Design Research is an edited book, and it is extremely heterogeneous. It comprises 36 papers in total, with authors from a wide variety of backgrounds and subjects ranging from product design to experience-driven installations to interfaces for electronic games to organizational considerations. Most of the authors write about first-hand experiences, often presenting them as personal stories. This makes the book a pleasure to read, although some contributions are more direct than others.

With such diversity, it is important to provide the reader with some guidance for navigating and making sense of the varied contributions. Design Research offers two kinds of cross-references. The first is a matrix relating the articles to different content categories. This matrix alone should suffice for demonstrating the wide range of topics covered under the common denominator “design research.” One axis reproduces the linear organization of the book in four sections. The other is divided into four major categories—“Domains,” “Subjects,” “Contexts,” and “Research Methodologies”—each of which is split into several subcategories. Each article’s orientation and subject matter is thus easily locatable. I found this table invaluable for getting an overview and helping to select single papers. The other kind of cross-reference is coloured pointers to other contributions in the book within each text. These references remind one of hypertextual links and are very useful for non-linear reading.

With its 334 pages of rather small type, Design Research is not the kind of book one would expect to read from cover to cover. Despite the book’s good visual structure and the elaborate diagram of content categories, it took me several attempts to figure out how to connect to the book. I found the book’s title somewhat misleading. With my academic background, I expected a book on academic design research. However, the majority of contributions relate investigations as part of design practice. Nonetheless, once I overcame my initial disappointment and understood the focus, I was able to really enjoy the book.

As an anthology, Design Research allows the reader to sample the writings of many design professionals and researchers. It offers a good starting point from which to wander through the vast territory of design. The richness of the collection should provide something to satisfy everyone, regardless of their different tastes and content preferences. The book is probably best suited for serious browsing rather than in-depth study—a compendium of ideas that can enrich and inspire. It is likely to be most useful to practitioners or action researchers, less so for academic research on design processes.

In summary, then, Design Research contains many interesting, even fascinating, contributions, some of which will stand the test of time. It is a rich book that addresses
numerous issues from different perspectives. It is not an easy book to grasp, however, and it requires time and willingness to take each part and examine it in order to arrive at some synthesis. The organizing devices, particularly the matrix, help make it a meaningful collection, but—perhaps in keeping with underlying premises of design—the reader is left much latitude (and responsibility) in determining his or her experience with the book.

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