

Research Conducted by Designers

We asked 315 working designers spanning all disciplines to describe the research they engaged in this year. Though the responses varied, they fell roughly into eight categories: experimental research driven by new technologies and innovation; research centered on meeting client and business needs; user-driven research focusing on cultural, anthropological, and ethnographic conditions and trends; research embedded in the process of making; the act of gathering information from a variety of sources; project-specific research, such as a site visit; product-driven research centered around sustainability; and research that focuses on the analysis of historical precedents.

Some practitioners admitted that research is not of primary importance to them, offering answers such as, “We do not engage in meaningful research” and “No formal scientific methods are employed.” Others seemed to think that research takes a variety of forms and is sometimes ad hoc in nature: “A little bit of everything. We do not have a method yet.” When it comes to running a design business, however, it is clear that research does not always fit into the equation. “I cannot afford to be theoretical,” says one survey taker. “In my experience, only designers care about design research. Clients want to see it work before they care to support it.”

Following are more of the designers’ comments about the types of research in which they engage and why.

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1. Research driven by innovation

“Experimenting with new technologies, fabrication, and materials”

“Trial-and-error in developing new ways to use computer technologies”

“New applications of materials and spatial considerations, which may include engineering space to mathematical relationships”

2. Client- and business-driven research

“Our research methods are based on current and past client input”

“We research our client, context, and program to facilitate our understanding of the problem”

“Our research focuses on value engineering and cost optimization”

3. Sources of information

“Our methods of research include searching the Internet, reading periodicals and books, attending conferences and lectures, and networking”

4. Research through making

“Working on experimental design proposals”

“Constructing deep diagrammatic research models”

“Research happens through iterative design studies”

“Some forms of research include: model-making, prototyping, observation, case studies, documentation review, interviews, and charrettes.”

5. Project-Specific Research

“Mainly field work”

“Post-occupancy and post-construction evaluations”

“Site visits and community meetings”

6. User-driven research

“User observations”

“One-on-one user interviews and focus groups”

“Market research--often a beauty pageant to see what the target market ‘thinks’ of a design. It’s generally unscientific, gives bad data, and I really hate it. Trend research--tracking specific areas to target new designs and testing things that have been manufactured already for usability and durability”

“Cultural/anthropological issues regarding consumerism and meaning”

“Ethnography, surveys, ergonomic user testing. This is all primary research guided by an anthropologist, a psychologist, and an ergonomist”

“Immersion into whatever social and scientific categories are deemed relevant to a project”

“Travel, discussion, interviews, comparative studies”

7. Product driven research and sustainability

“Life-cycle analysis”

“Finding sustainable alternatives to materials”

“Studying the qualitative aspects of daylighting in architectural design”

8. Research focused on the analysis of precedents

“We test some materials that interest us by exposing them to our climate and noting their weathering patterns. We observe installations over a period of years and note the performance, stability, and different methods employed.”

We examine legal precedents and existing codes to determine the best building practices.”

“Historic site visits”