

‘Practice-led research underpinned by practice theory for new kinds of property development research’

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Property development is “a process that involves changing or intensifying the use of land to produce buildings for occupation. It is not the buying and selling of land for a profit; land is only one of the raw materials used. Others include the building materials, infrastructure, labour, finance and professional services” (Wilkinson and Reed, 2008, 3). Development activity revolves around the commercialisation of land and its buildings, and is distinguished in well-established urban areas such as major towns and cities by high levels of risk/return, complexity and uncertainty. Urban property development is more often profit-driven and undertaken by an entrepreneurial developers from the private-sector who direct the design and delivery of site-specific projects.

Urban development is an individual and collective creative process which relies on skilfulness and effectiveness of specialist consultants from divergent professional practice traditions. Those directly involved in design and delivery of urban built environments play a significant role in shaping urban outcomes. Urban development is a dynamic composition of individual practices set in political, economic, environmental and socio-cultural structural conditions. Here, practice refers to both individual and collective action set in structural conditions. The quality of urban

development processes and outcomes is largely contingent on performance of those directly involved in design and deliver decisions. The skilfulness of development practitioners is largely dependent on an ability to respond appropriately to dynamic and changing sets of circumstances.

A critical overview of existing property development research reveals a substantial body of literature underpinned by divergent theoretical and methodological assumptions. While models of the development process have been useful tools to represent conceptual (and aspiringly universal) dynamics, behavioural studies focused on key stakeholders such as planners, developers, landowners and investors have attended more so to the intricacies of practice in specific contexts. As a result, much of the more intricate and subtle territory of development practice is unexplored.

The works of those such as that Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens and Schatzki form a suite of practice theories and what has come to be known collectively as practice theory (Nicolini 2012). While there is no universal agreement on what constitutes practice theory, there is common appreciation that it stems from an interest in everyday human-environment dynamics as they are experienced in the flesh.

Practice-led research focuses on the nature of practice, that is 'how' people do what they do, and with improving practice (Candy, 2006) and is underpinned by divergent theoretical and methodological assumptions. The nature of urban development as complex and cross disciplinary makes practice-led research a constructive addition to prominent property development research methods.

This paper offers a critical review of existing property development literature and refers to a substantial body of research which leaves intricacies of practice largely unexplored. Practice-led research in the disciplines of business, planning and architectural design are used to illustrate how this kind of research design, underpinned by practice theory, can illuminate the 'how' of effective urban development practice.

Reference List

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