

**Perkins&Will**

# Research Journal

2021 — Volume 13.01



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**Journal Design & Layout:**

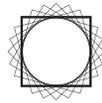
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**Acknowledgements:**

We would like to extend our appreciation to everyone who contributed to the research work and articles published within this journal.

## **Perkins&Will**

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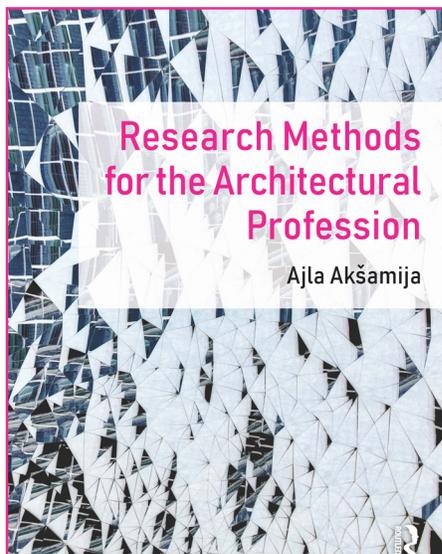
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## 05

### **Book Review:** Research Methods for the Architectural Profession, by Ajla Akšamija

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**First Published:** 2021

**By:** Routledge, New York

Research in the profession of Architecture has been an ill-defined endeavor for decades. During the 1980's, research was by and large under the purview of academic institutions, and it was primarily focused on issues that were perceived by professionals as having questionable relevance to their work. Through the end of the millennium firms, with few notable exceptions, were not interested in research beyond that which supported a particular project, and there was very little effort to track and evaluate project performance beyond project completion. This started to change in the early part of the new millennium, and today the discussion around research in the profession has increased significantly. However, research itself, how it is practiced in the profession, continues to be a very challenging effort on the part of both the academy and the profession. There is certainly an increase in aspiration but not necessarily a commensurate gain in actual research produced.

This is the point at which many people who are involved in research efforts in Architecture will point to a number of examples of significant and rigorous research projects as a counterpoint to these assertions. It is true that research has expanded, but it is not close to being as pervasive and fundamental to Architecture as it is to other professions that have similarly significant impacts on our environment, health and overall well-being. Architects, and designers in general, are taught to solve problems through nuanced and creative processes, and this can be in conflict with the seemingly rigid and structured protocols necessary in basic research based on scientific principles.

Aksamija, with her new book, 'Research Methods for the Architectural Profession', addresses these issues with clarity and directness. The book is structured and written with the precision of a well-executed research project, and it delivers a rich, easily understood narrative that outlines the issues surrounding research in the profession with objective dispassion, while also delivering an immanently readable book. I am reminded of the writings of Atul Gawande, particularly 'The Checklist Manifesto', his excellent investigation into reducing errors, originally in medical procedures, to reduce risk of infection. Aksamija does something similar in her book, addressing the difficulties in Architecture by clearly articulating what research is, how it relates to the design process, and why we should do it. In fact, this is the structure of the Introduction chapter of the book, which clearly lays out these issues and gives the reader a strong point of departure to move through the rest of the book, which addresses research processes, research methodologies and integration of research into the practice. It is supported by case studies throughout the book, with a strong series of studies comprising the final chapter.

Aksamija's facility with the topic of research is evident in her writing, however the key strength of the work is its dispassionate attitude towards the topic. She is not drawn into the broader, esoteric discussion about the relevance of research in the profession and the disconnect between the academy and the profession, rather she takes it as a given that research has value to the profession. This is exemplified by the first sentence of section 2 of chapter 1, where she simply states the obvious need to engage in research in Architecture. It is an axiomatic statement and should not be open to dispute. By addressing this issue in such a straightforward manner, she is able to focus the book on the 'what' and 'how' of research. This allows her to unravel complex issues, explaining them with lucidity to anyone interested in research in Architecture (which, of course, should be everyone associated with the design and construction of buildings, parks, streets, cities, etc.).

The discussion is supported with clear, simple diagrams that support the narrative and give critical roadmaps to successful research efforts. This is further reinforced by the structure of the book itself, moving from the broader overviews to more highly detailed descriptions

of process and methods. The value of this approach is that everyone can quickly glean the key elements that drive research, facilitating a more uniform platform for the broader discussions around the topic, while also providing a very specific roadmap for those involved in the research itself.

This last point, the clearly outlined chapters on process and methodology, is the core of the book. These chapters should be used as the framing device for all firms as they discuss how they will approach and engage in research. As each firm moves through this process, identifying what and how research is incorporated into their efforts, these chapters and sections also offer a very specific roadmap for executing the research projects themselves. From defining the scope and objectives of the research to the application of the results, Aksamija delivers the most cogent outline and comprehensive explanation of these issues that I have seen. If you are truly interested in expanding the value of the profession through rigorous research, then this book is the perfect orientation (or for some, re-orientation) to the endeavor.

This is not a book that one reads once and then moves on. It is a reference for research; a book that is used constantly to guide and focus the work of research in the profession. It will be invaluable to those in the trenches, as well as those driving policy and direction for firms, and for the overall profession. My copy only arrived a couple of weeks ago, but it is already dog-eared, filled with notes and comments, and sections highlighted that answer questions I have had for years. If we are truly interested in solving the challenges we are facing, then this book is essential to that aspiration.

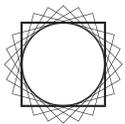
After years of broadly unfulfilled ambition, it is encouraging to see this book as the standard with which the profession can finally fulfill that long simmering ambition.



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