Yale University
Mike Tower (MT) and Andrew Mazor (AM)

How do you define architectural research?

AM: I think it is certainly changing. I think it's something based on a cultural identity and something that's typical. It's something that's constantly changing. It is not static and I think the architecture research today probably is more focused on a cultural background, i.e., something that is not so dictated in a building type but more of a cultural lifestyle.

MT: Well, it's about architectural culture primarily. It's a very difficult definition to give because it really depends where you are in your education – at what school you’re at. I think everyone has a slightly different definition of what that is. It seems culturally, I guess, as a norm, it has less to do with what research traditionally has been considered and more to do with architectural production, you know, and a way of finding a certain voice and, you know, being in a profession which is architecture in a strange way. I think it has less to do with setting up a series of proofs and answering them. It has more to do with making a statement...

AM: ...finding your own voice and ways of authoring the documents so that it is in some respects new and at the same time personal.

MT: It's not that it invalidates calling it research but I think it is looked at a little bit.. I think it’s looked at differently than what any other educational or academic discipline would look at what research really is. I think, actually, that we should be held more accountable to defining it as you just asked.

Could you give an example in your own thesis where you looked outside the margins of architecture?

AM: In my own thesis, I’m continuing to look at the large manufacturing facility where there are really no architects present. These things are really based on something else. They’re based on global practices and ease of construction but also where an architect’s role is within that sort of environment, if there is an architect’s role and I think there should be. What is the role of the architect and how do you bring an aesthetic or design principle to what is predominantly an economically driven practice?

Cooper Union
Yael Erel (YE) and Tao Sule (TS)

How do you define architectural research?

YE: I see two kinds of research that I have done. One was book research and in my case the research of the ocean and movement. Basically I was to led into it...but basically phenomena that led to clarifying conditions within my site that I wanted to deal with that defined my site, so not only as a physical site but also as an understanding of...so these five conditions which are waves, tides, currents, color, and light, and each one of these got an investigation to themselves in the field of oceanography or, and then they got treated as if or through the language of architecture – plans, sections, analytical drawings and understandings of those feelings. That’s one thing that I call research.

The other research is an investigation of what exists and things that were attempted. In my case, I looked a lot at structural ideas that are implemented today. I looked a lot at oil rigs for structures so that I could actually base a theory of structure on this, so this is totally not fictional – so it could actually be built and structured. So I take these two investigations a little differently.
TS: First of all, I will have to assume a definition of architecture to define architectural research. For the sake of defining architectural research I will just assume the definition of architecture as a physical entity, as an object, and that is not the definition at all necessarily that I believe but I will just assume that. So in that sense architectural research...well, it depends on the project and for my project, my thesis project, the architectural research had to be with an investigation of physical geography – the surface geography, subsurface geography, strata of stone and an investigation of it. It had to do with an investigation of the physicality in one sense and the geography as a form in another sense. That was my architectural research.

YE: I can't really say what you did but, I think, in Tao's case architecture is a human thing so there was a largely political and social research which is the next layer in the architectural research.

TS: Yes, that's right.

University of Notre Dame
Tiffany Haile (TH)

Once your thesis proposal was accepted by the faculty and you had some idea of the issues you were going to explore, what did you do next? How did you begin the design thesis?

TH: One of my professors in Italy, I was talking to him about this. He worked at the firm who did the master plan for this brownfield site that I wanted to look at. I was asking him about sending me some of the maps that he used for information. At that point you’re looking for anything. It’s a process. If you have something that’s not so defined or it’s a competition where you have the material, that’s part of the process is searching the things you need to learn about – your site and your issue. He referred me to this firm in Pittsburgh that I know did a study and said they might have maps too and their name is Urban Design Associates (U.D.A.). I hadn’t talked to him in a while so I said, oh well, I worked for them last summer so I think I guess I could give them a call. Rob Robinson, one of the principles here was able to give me some resources where I could go and where I could get some more maps on the area. They gave me a lot of pointers throughout the summer just learning how they approach problems here and then just watching what other people were doing.

I went to the library a lot trying to find everything I could about Pittsburgh neighborhoods, old maps and things like that. So that was the beginning. The hard thing about living in South Bend, Indiana, and having it not be where your site is, which was probably 98% of the thesis projects, is that you either have to keep traveling back to get photographic data for street sections or whatever you’re doing. And that’s the hard thing because you’re not able to visit the site. A lot of people did thesis in or near their home town so that was conducive to being there during Christmas. So people were trying to continually gather data if something came up that they hadn’t thought of at first. But it’s a pretty daunting thing to be faced with at first, I think.

The Pennsylvania State University
Christopher Renn (CR) and Daniel Mayer (DM)

How do you define architectural research?

CR: That is the question I’ve been asking a lot lately because I think, you know, that drawings are architectural research just as much as anything you could do in a library, you know. And building models, investigating things physically, it may not be something that you can describe the results of your research as easily, but you are learning from it. I think that is almost the definition of research is the fact that you are learning something from what you are doing. I could almost start to describe research backwards.

DM: When I think of research I think of defining it more narrowly, you know, going to the library and whatnot. But I think it has a lot to do with context. It’s like when I go to research an idea, for me, research is tracing the sort of history of that idea and finding out who hinted at it, you know, one hundred years ago and what
someone else did with it and what people are doing with it now. Follow an idea or a theme and it can be in written works, it can be in architecture, or in art, or the criticism of all those genres. I think what that does is give you context, context in terms of having a historical...an understanding of the history in the ideas surrounding what you are commenting on. I think research is to understand the ongoing chemical reaction you are throwing your bit into.

CR: Don’t you think that even if you want to talk in really empirical terms the fact that you are talking about an idea that you are investigating through architecture is very easily definable as research?

DM: Yes.

CR: You are testing something to prove or disprove that it’s going to work. That sounds really dichotomous and it’s not at all. I’m just trying to take it to an extreme in order to show you what I am talking about.

Southern California Institute of Architecture
Liz Falletta (LF) and Jonathon Cantwell (JC)

How do you define architectural research?

JC: Well we’re going to talk a lot about this in our lecture. This is an indirect answer to your question. We defined it as indirect research and direct research – indirect research being that what you use as your background to get to your project but not necessarily the direct information that’s relevant to your project. And then direct research can be that which relates directly to your project with regards to the kinds of specifics you need to know in regard to your project.

Give me an example.

JC: One example from a theoretical precedent in my case was looking at, well the most obvious one was the Rem Koolhaas article on “bigness”. And some of the less obvious ones...there’s a very good book by Susan Stewart called, On Longing, that dealt with the issues of scale and the psychological impact of relativity and longing for a larger or smaller scale of something.

How would you define architectural research?

LF: For me, it’s helpful to categorize it or think about it in terms of pure research and applied research – pure research being just investigating a phenomena or set of interests, not really critiquing or judging them in a certain way. You’re just interested in figuring out how they operate. Applied research is when it is applied to architecture. I guess that is mediated by something I would call design research which is kind of a halfway point between the two – a kind of how you make that translation – how you critically access what you researched and see what’s useful about it in an architectural context or situation before you tackle the standard architectural issues – site, program, materials, all of those sorts of things.

I think the one thing and I think this is a very minor and obvious silly thing but when I was in first semester at Sci Arc, and I had an architectural education beforehand, but somehow I had not clued into the idea that, you know, how you represent things is the thing itself. It’s a full participant in the making, you know, of your project. And, you know, I guess all of first year was learning to see in a different way. The minor decisions you make about graphics, about what views you choose to draw, about the materials that you use, you know, like this whole green theme that I have going on in my thesis, are really important factors and they really shape both how you perceive your project and how everybody else does.

JC: One piece of advice I didn’t get and I figured out myself is that you have to really listen to yourself and do what is going to sustain you. And that piece of advice doesn’t work just for thesis. I mean it works very well for thesis because you have a yearlong project that you can’t get sick of and you have to keep having the passion for it. And so, what do you do that allows you to have that passion, that allows you to keep getting at the essence of what it is you want to do?