
RtD in Situ: Discussing the Domains and Impact of Design Research

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Abstract

This workshop aims to bring together Research through Design (RtD) practitioners in the DIS community, giving them a space to present, debate, and discuss issues emerging from their work. In particular, our goal is to catalyze a focused conversation on contexts and specific situations of research through design, discussing the ins-and-outs of working in a specific context and with particular issues of consequence. Building on the success of prior RtD and design research workshops at HCI conferences, this workshop will focus on how RtD artifacts operate in these contexts, with the goal of connecting diverse artefacts with broader methods in HCI and Design.

Author Keywords

Research through design; practice-based design; issues; context

Introduction

Within Design Research and HCI, Research through Design (RtD) has emerged as a key approach that involves practicing design and producing artifacts as a way of generating knowledge [1,6,7,17]. While RtD has a number of motivations, the kinds of knowledge that RtD produces is highly situated—it comes from a designerly engagement with a particular domain-level context and can articulate complex matters of concern

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[5]. By “context,” we mean that RtD often deals with real-world issues in real-world locations, using the distinctive methods and process of design to produce artifacts that are specific to and based in these settings. Critical engagement with the issues and concerns that matter to these contexts is essential to understanding and building future capacities for research through design practice, theory, and methods. How these contexts affect the process, products, and other outcomes of RtD is the focus of this workshop.

RtD has been used to explore, question, and speculate on critically important societal issues for years. Its process and artifact-driven knowledge construction has productively engaged with issues and contexts as diverse as aging in place in independent and unexpected ways [9]; how we understand meaning and value to be built into devices that last [14]; relationships between humans and non-humans; particularly within evolving ecological crises [13] and local ecological settings [8]; issues of labor, privacy, and agency in domestic technologies [4,16]; and, how communities can be constructed, supported, and maintained [10,15]. As a method, RtD offers a means of engaging richly with particular issues in a specific context. The set of situated engagements that characterize research through design are particularly well suited to developing strong research programs that engage with the world in all of its complexity. As *constructive* design research, Research through Design’s goal is that it goes farther than simply inquiring into research sites. Rather, it aims for the material processes and outcomes of RtD to articulate—in their form and interactive qualities—the sites and issues themselves.

Apart from these methodological and theoretical motivations, there is also a practical goal in bringing practitioners together to discuss how they engage with the sites and research communities that they work with. There is a danger at times for design research to be relevant only to other design researchers, and research through design to be only relevant and interesting to other practitioners of constructive design research. Doing design in a context means engaging earnestly, thoughtfully, and completely with that context. As a method that engages the world, RtD researchers can benefit from sharing among themselves how this engagement has been both successful and less-than successful with an eye toward best practices for producing stronger engagements with research partners in the future.

Theme and Goals

This one-day workshop will be held on site at the conference. The workshop will assemble RtD practitioners as well as the works that they have created for particular contexts. In the workshop, discussions will be focused on how RtD artifacts are meant to engage with serious issues, how the context of their intended use affects their design and materiality, how the knowledge that these design interventions is generated, how it develops, and subsequently can be made to travel, and the particular aims of situated design research inquiry.

As a way to discuss and reflect upon the various methods, forms, and processes employed in RtD and how they relate to the broader fields of HCI, Design, and Design Research, this workshop gathers researchers and practitioners whose work involves practicing design as a way of generating knowledge

about a specific context, condition, or issue. This research is structured around four concerns related to how RtD operates in the world:

- **RtD as a process of building engagement:** With whom do we engage and not engage? How do you arrive at the context, broker relationships, reciprocity, or buy-in? How do you set the confines or parameters of the nature of the design inquiry?
- **RtD as an ongoing process with a site:** Do you observe, make, and show, and go back to the studio? Do you use others to intervene, facilitate dialogue, etc. outside of the design team (i.e., filmmakers, other community members, etc.).
- **RtD afterlives:** If there is an after? Is there broader dissemination? What does impact look like if we are interested in RtD that's not just interesting to other RtD researchers?
- **RtD things as situated knowledge.** In what sense can RtD artifacts stand on their own as knowledge contributions? In what ways can we grasp them as non-human actors involved in knowledge production about a site or situation?

Background

Prior workshops based on RtD in HCI have successfully focused on artifacts themselves and their material qualities [12], the process of their creation and diversity of their forms [11], artistic and experimental approaches to RtD [3], and exploring the engagements and experiences that RtD can foster [2]. This workshop builds on the success and outcomes of these prior workshops in two ways. First, this workshop focuses on how RtD artifacts are used and engage, and by whom. Second, this workshop explicitly works to connect aspects of designing RtD artifacts more tightly to the

situations and consequences of the contexts that they operate within.

Motivation and Anticipated Outcomes

Although RtD has become a well-established set of methods in HCI conferences, the practitioners and researchers using these methods are distributed around the world. By bringing researchers of varying levels of experience together with practitioners and students in a workshop, we hope to do three things. First, there is an opportunity to build and strengthen an international community of research through design practitioners, and developing stronger networks. Second, this group can use this opportunity to reflect on how research through design can work as a methodological engagement with an issue—from this conversation we can learn more about what works and what doesn't work when doing RtD in serious contexts. Third, this conversation about methods can lead to theoretical knowledge about the capacities for Research through Design to engage in domains such as these.

We will aim to visually document the artifacts and discussion emerging in the workshop and disseminate it through the workshop website. At the conclusion of the workshop, we will explore the possibility of organizing a special issue for a journal (e.g., TOCHI). We will also explore other, more non-traditional publication venues to disseminate broader accounts of thing-based research through design in context.

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