Blueprints: Constructing the Creative Writing PhD

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This article uses architectural analogies to explore the complexities of planning and executing a practice-led PhD project in contemporary Australian writing. Many scholars and creative practitioners have conceived of the writing process as a form of building, scaffolding or construction. A PhD always involves some aspect of planning – but to what extent can the creative practice be planned for? What happens when the project outpaces the planning, or when a writer finds herself in unscaffolded space? This article examines practice-led research methodologies drawn from the experiences and insights of three creative practitioners who are also current and recently-completed PhD candidates. Their perspectives reveal the multiplicity of approaches available in creative practice research and points to the opportunities to explore the complexities between structure, space and practice in discussions of the creative writing PhD.

Keywords: practice-led; practice as research; creative writing; creative practice; PhD; architecture

Introduction

This article uses architectural analogies to explore the complexities of planning and executing practice-led creative writing PhD projects. Louisa Hall argues that ‘from Chaucer to Heaney, the writing of a poetic line has been linked with the construction of a sure foundation, the use of a carpenter’s level, the solidity of physical enclosure’ (2012, 207). Is a creative-writing PhD like a bridge, built from either side of a river? What happens if or when the creative and critical components don’t connect? Or is it more like a renovation project, fixing up past ideas? A PhD always involves a great deal of planning – but to what extent can creative practice be planned for? What happens when the project outpaces the planning, or when a writer finds herself in unscaffolded space? In this article, three current and recently-completed PhD candidates discuss their academic and creative practice, and interrogate the strategies they have employed in constructing the creative writing thesis.
We consider those parts of our practice that have been fundamental to the development of our projects, and ask how the structure of the practice-led PhD has aided or complicated our creative and critical work. Kroll describes the doctoral process as a ‘practice-led research loop, where research and creative endeavour can alternate, but not according to a strict regime, dictated by the project’s needs’ (2018, 160). We are interested in architecture because we have each found ourselves, at one point or another during our candidature, attempting to articulate our experiences using terms that are unmistakeably architectural – we talk about the foundations of our projects, about scaffolding ideas for a chapter before beginning to write up the research. The final document itself is a structure that every student constructs and reconstructs, and for this reason we feel an exploration of these ideas is a useful addition to discussions around practice-led research in creative writing programmes.

Alex Philp, whose research explores the doubleness of sisters in literature, discusses the complexities of negotiating large-scale changes to her project’s current scope. Ella Jeffery, whose recently-completed thesis examined contemporary poetics and home improvement culture, discusses the problem of attempting to align the creative and critical aspects of her work, and the problems of engaging with a non-linear form of creative practice. Emily O’Grady, whose practice-led research into subverting serial killer narratives resulted in her Vogel Award-winning novel *The Yellow House*, looks at how the carefully-structured process of the PhD complicates the construction of future projects. Without the blueprint of academic structure, she asks, how does a writer begin her next project?

Graeme Harper’s wide-ranging interviews with a variety of people about their doctoral studies in ‘The Creative Writing Doctorate Across the World’ (2012) is just one example of how varied experiences of the PhD project can be. In this article, we
examine some key issues each of us has experienced while attempting to plan and execute our research projects. This approach is not a survey, and does not present a definitive account of the process of completing a practice-led PhD. The contributors examine recent events or events still in motion. In this way, we offer new ideas about the process from different perspectives, informed by our shared understanding of the PhD as a distinctively structural endeavour.

Andrew McNamara describes practice-led research as a ‘compelling, though sometimes precarious, mode of research’ (2012, 2) and current scholarship is rich in accounts by students exploring the roles of the exegesis in practice-led enquiry (Bacon 2017), innovation in practice-led methodologies (Williams 2016; Sempert et al 2017) and how the PhD framework can influence the creative practice of established authors (Masson 2016). This article adds to this field of accounts, but considers the contributors’ experiences with the PhD as a structure. What can we learn about navigating the space of the PhD by reflecting on the blueprints we each devised for ourselves (which sits alongside the blueprints of milestones and deadlines supplied by academic structures), and examining where we stuck to the plan and where we started working in empty space? This is an article about structure and space: what it does to us and what we can do to it.

**Dimensions: The Illusion of Space**

As I am in the third year of my candidature, I am the closest of the three of us to the official beginning of the practice-led PhD. I say the ‘official’ beginning—that is, the beginning defined as the enrolment in the research programme—as through constructing my thesis I have come to understand that practice-led research begins much earlier.
A writer spends years learning craft and discovering voice. In practice, one project does not end cleanly and neither does another begin without baggage. In fact, when considering a writer’s oeuvre, it could be argued that each project is a reconstruction or renovation of (very often) the same core artistic preoccupations. My practice-led PhD centres around the construction of a gothic novel that explores a complex relationship between two sisters. The gothic is a genre I consistently write in, and the relationship is one I consistently write about. As such, by the time I began a practice-led PhD the project had already begun—in the sense that I have been exploring the complexities of the relationship and the genre—for some time. Even writers that are approaching their research in a new genre or subject matter, I argue, have been discovering their interest in specific stylistics that will inform the creative practice before the PhD. In a practice-led PhD, often the candidate has been designing the dream house before they have even bought the block of land for on which to build it.

In my experience, this meant that throughout my candidature I have been attempting to build something much bigger than the space of the PhD allows. If we accept Gaston Bachelard’s assertion that a ‘house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability’ ([1958] 1994, 17), then the practice-led PhD must surely be seen to give the illusion of space.

However, the question of scope does not exclusively occur before the PhD’s official commencement. Throughout the PhD, the inevitable nature of practice occurs. A writer often drafts without knowing exactly where to go, and sometimes it is only by writing that the writer discovers the next step at all. Unpredictability is one of the greatest strengths of practice-led research: it forces innovative thinking beyond what we have been taught or have come to accept (McNamara 2012). By necessity, then, the practice-led PhD is structurally an inductive process: each small exploration is
examined to construct the larger original contribution to knowledge. However, this process of building from the PhD from the inside out is not without difficulty. The candidate may emerge from inside the house to discover that they have built a construction that has overgrown the block or one that had never fit within the block at all.

The illusion that there is more space than there is alongside the timely competition of PhDs being a strong priority of Australian universities in order for them to achieve a share of the Joint Research Engagement (JRE) funds (Department of Education and Training 2018) can create a complex situation to navigate. The unpredictable nature of practice-led research has meant that my research findings are vastly different than expected. As such, in this final year I will have to make a decision about the direction of my research and remove that which does not fit into the scope. To return to the dream house metaphor, I have emerged to find that I have painted one room blue and one orange. Given the space of the PhD, the focus of my project will have to shift so that the research question is now why are these two rooms different. If I stand by my original research focus, that has years of a literature and contextual review behind it, then the discovery of the orange room may have to be removed as if it never had existed. In this way, in the end my PhD may become a display home: a construction that is functional, but not lived in.

This is not to say that a ‘display home’ is a necessarily negative outcome. Nor does it suggest that sticking to my original focus is the best outcome; contrarily, McNamara argues that ‘research innovations are most likely to be found in the discrepancy or chasm between the needs of the practice and the research question’ (2012, 12). My claims are, however, that there has been much discussion in our discipline of the need for synthesis between the creative and exegetical components of
practice-led research (Milech and Schilo 2004; Batty and Brien 2017; Finlayson, Kroll, and Murphy 2017). With this desire for the practice-led PhD to be a symbiotic, ‘complete’ document, as candidates we do need to discuss that the complete picture of our research can not be included and that the PhD is at times an artificial construction.

In his *New Writing* editorial, Graeme Harper discusses the danger of losing unpredictability in teaching creative writing. He argues: ‘Unpredictability stands between us and our goals, our progress is impeded…because of impending unpredictability we narrow our vision…and focus firmly on the graspable’ (2017, 2). The same might be said for the creative writing PhD. Because we fear that our work will not fit into institutional conventions—that our house will not sell—we have the risk of losing the innovation that is the great strength of practice-led research in the first place.

**Open Plan: Renovating the Practice-led Approach**

My recently-awarded thesis explores the poetics of home renovation – what does the national obsession with renovation mean, and what can narratives about renovation tell us about contemporary Australia? Most importantly, what can poetry do to disrupt these narratives? My collection of poems was accompanied by an exegesis that explored how renovation has been represented in narrative and non-narrative forms in contemporary Australia. In writing a thesis so overtly concerned with domestic architecture, the inherently structural concerns of my PhD were always mapped onto the domestic architecture I explored in my research. Lisa Kay describes her development as a researcher as a form of *bricolage* – a French term that articulates a do-it-yourself approach in which ‘a maker … uses available materials and resources to create or complete a task’ (2016, 26). In researching home renovation, this framework helps
make sense of my wide-ranging approach to both my creative and critical practice, which drew on a variety of texts from television, literature, philosophy and architecture. The critical and creative components of my thesis, however, were unstable, shifting, sometimes incompatible. I could not align the idea of practice-led research with my process: I worked, as many students do, on the critical and creative elements of my thesis in tandem. I could not reconcile the idea of the practice-led project with what felt like haphazard renovations to a plan developed by somebody much more experienced than myself.

Like many renovation projects, this thesis called for a number of difficult large-scale decisions to be made at an early stage in order to clarify the work to come. The most significant of these was selecting lyric poetry as the form of my creative practice, a decision I made with the understanding that I was necessarily excluding my work from some of the clearer structural orders that would have been available to me in a narrative work. De Certeau argues that ‘Through stories about places, they become habitable … Stirring up or restoring this narrativising, is among the tasks of any renovation’ (1984, 142). In my exegesis I argued that representing renovation using narrative forms is flawed and problematic, but in choosing to explore renovation via the lyric poem I left myself without a blueprint for how to proceed: the form immediately complicated my ability to speak to the subject I had set out when framing my project via a research question. Poetry as a form felt resistant—at times it felt incompatible—with the objective of using practice to answer my particular research question. The choice of poetry over prose prevented me from using renovation activity as a central plot line and from being able to clearly and frequently describe a developing renovation project through the perspectives of one or many characters. I declined to offer the reader of my creative work a structure that supplies linearity or logic, and in doing so I entered into
what John Kinsella describes in his reflection on his own practice as the ‘volatile linguistic space’ of poetry (2007, 143).

Volatile space is a useful starting point for thinking about so many of the structures I have encountered in renovated houses, in poems, and in practice-led research. Poetry was simultaneously an ideal and an impossible form to work with. I discovered that it was impossible for me to sit down and write the poem I wanted to write about renovation. In my mind, that poem was long and specific, and I produced many unpromising drafts. For me, the most significant challenge of my practice-led PhD is captured in this one small experience, which I came back to again and again for nearly two years of my candidature: the construction and reconstruction of this plan for a poem, which in the end could never stand on its own. A renovation metaphor can be applied here: I had to reconstruct my project by dismantling my previous understandings of how a collection of poems is constructed, and in what ways I, the poet, am able to exert control over form and content.

When reflecting on my doctorate, architectural metaphors have always offered me the clearest analogy. The two pieces of writing, which I think of as two separate pieces in conversation with each other, came together part by part. I first thought that it was like building an arch bridge: you begin on either side of a river and move toward the centre. Bacon also uses this metaphor in her descriptions of the role of journaling in her practice-led research: the reflexivity produced by the journal ‘becomes the bridge, the element that invites the practitioner’s crossing between the creative artefact and the exegesis’ (2017, 392). For me, this metaphor was complicated by my non-linear practice; there was no centre I was moving towards, no fixed point where the two would join up, and neither was there a stable place on either side – getting from here to there was impossible, because the departure and destination points constantly shifted and
disappeared. It was not a bridge, then. It was like renovating a house with no fixed plan in mind. Claire Nashar argues that:

> What we have written only becomes fully intelligible to us after we have put down the pen. The moment we look at our work as it lies on the page, we become severed from our sense of authorship by an overflow of semantic possibilities, far exceeding what we intended. (2013, 157)

That overflow was unsettling, like walking into a storage shed full of your belongings, and trying to figure out where to put everything. In my exegesis I tried to make sense of this overflow, while still unsure of which ideas would remain in the creative work and which would be cleared out.

The exegesis was a site in which I was able to examine what surrounded and supported the creative work. I found the term practice-led disorienting, as many researchers have. I felt my research aligned with what Bolt describes as ‘the double articulation between theory and practice, whereby theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time that practice is informed by theory’ (2014, 29). I could not reconcile the idea of doing the practice first any more than I could make the poetry respond to my research question.

McNamara notes that practice-led research has a number of complications while acknowledging that ‘PLR can provide a method for confronting the tension between research uncertainty and concrete research measures’ (2012, 4). In the exegesis I tried to impose all the order that I could not impose on my creative practice. I tried to plan and structure. I found that poetry was in some ways incompatible with the structure of the thesis: in order for the research to accomplish its goals, I needed to revise my understanding of what a thesis might look like – I required a new blueprint. The writing
of the thesis itself gave rise to new ideas about renovation. A renovation does not dismantle the structure entirely. It might make large or small scale changes to the ways in which an existing structure works, or the way it can be used. Renovation, then, might be a useful tool through which to reflect on and understand the process of writing a creative writing thesis. It could be applied to many creative writers, and other practitioners, who seek to modify the existing structure of researching, writing up and delivering new knowledge in the academy. We are still required to present evidence, to structure our argument, to contextualise our knowledge, but the renovator-writer makes changes where and how they need to. They may recognise something incomplete at the core of the project and attempt a series of alterations to it, which may or may not work.

Graham Badley argues that academic writing is not ‘a passive procedure of “writing-up” but instead … a more active set of activities and approaches. This set includes de-constructing and re-constructing, as well as shaping and re-shaping’ (2009, 209). Part of my research had creative value and informed the way I wrote the poems themselves. Part of it had methodological value, in that it provided a new tool for how to approach a necessarily unstable structure that might or might not support the questions we want to pursue or the contributions we believe we can make. Part of it is also about learning how to do research. De Certeau argues that ‘…renovation does not, ultimately, know what it is bringing back – or what it is destroying – when it restores the references or fragments of elusive memories’ (1984, 143). The practice-led PhD was as volatile and unstable as a renovation project or a poem, and my attempts to negotiate its frequent uncertainties were what gave me the answers to my questions. When I lodged it for examination it felt unfinished, but perhaps this is the restlessness that all renovators get – the need for a new project, to find a new room to work on.
Removing the Scaffold: Creative Writing after the PhD

I completed my practice-led thesis in mid-2018, and was fortunate enough to have the creative output, my novel *The Yellow House*, published before I submitted my doctorate for examination. Now that the PhD is complete, the house furnished and sold, I find myself reflecting on how the act of undertaking a creative writing PhD puts emerging writers in a potentially uneasy position as they develop their careers. The act of writing a thesis is ‘messy space in which many things – ideas, practices, reflections – become entangled’ (Berry and Barry 2015, 249). Though my research was at times chaotic and unpredictable, the space, time, and support to interrogate my research question was ultimately fruitful, not only in the sense that my PhD was awarded, but in that I set out what I had hoped to achieve. My research was compelled by questions that emerged in my creative practice; namely, how can generic conventions of the serial killer narrative be disrupted to illuminate unexplored narratives surrounding the aftermath of abject violence? Throughout my candidature I grappled with the challenge of producing an innovative fictionalisation of serial crime ultimately untangling this problem through the writing of the novel itself.

However, what is becoming more persistent to me at this early stage of my career is how my creative practice has been formed by the experience of writing my first novel within the boundaries of formal education. As I begin work on my next book, I find myself continuing to interrogate my creative process, discovering that the process of writing a novel post-candidature to be an equally challenging proposition. Across two articles, Sophie Masson poses the questions:

What happens when a professional, established author, used to working within their own process, undertakes the writing of a creative work within the framework of a PhD?
What impact might it be expected to have on the final work, and the author’s continuing creative practice, even beyond the period of study? (2017, 32)

Through interviewing a range of established writers, Masson suggests the outcome of the writing project is ‘contingent on the writer-student’s willingness to adapt their creative practice’ (2016). This article raised questions for me about the inverse proposition – what happens when you enter a research project as an emerging writer? What is the impact on the emerging writer’s continuing practice beyond the period of study?

In self-conscious moments, I am struck with the anxious thought that I don’t know how to write a book. This is only half true. I knew how to write *The Yellow House*. Or rather, I didn’t know how to write it, but I had every possible tool available to help me teach myself how to write it. To extend Kroll’s idea that the PhD supervisor adopts a number of roles, including ‘academic, artist, mentor, disciplinarian, cheerleader [ ... and] creative scholar’ (2009, 3) and Krauth’s idea of the supervisor as editor (2009) I came to see my supervisor as a project manager; an overseer who knew—and cared about—the work as I did. I had support for when the thesis went from being private—a house only I and my supervisor inhabited—to entering the public space, where it became a fixed piece of public architecture. Beyond this practical support, the act of writing the exegesis shaped the novel in ways I did not anticipate. Though some creative practitioners see the creative practice as research model as a space of confinement (Krauth 2008, 16), where the milestones and time constraints means the exegesis and the creative work don’t always sync up coherently, having these structures in place fuelled my practice. The space I inhabited while completing my doctorate exemplified Bachelard’s claim that ‘the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects
the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace’ ([1958] 1994, 6). Rather than feeling oppressed by the PhD, the scaffolding it provided was ultimately freeing.

Writing the critical component of the thesis fundamentally shaped my novel. Situating my creative practice within a theoretical framework challenged me to be curious about the intellectual threads within the work, as is common with the experience of many students (Brien 2004; Dodd 2016). Examining similar texts not only helped me contextualise the creative and cultural landscape these novels were published into, but also how they deviated from my own work. Though James Elkin, in his study of the creative process in practice-based research writes that ‘many artists have made compelling work even though they had no idea of the critical matrix to which their work belongs, and despite the fact that they were only minimally reflective about their own practice’ (2009, 110), this degree of self-reflexivity was stimulating. The novel would have been far shallower had I not been challenged to consider the novel-writing process, how my novel came to be, and why it was important.

This brings me back to the question of what comes next. Having constructed my first novel in such a scaffolded and self-reflexive space, it is impossible to follow this model as I begin work on my second book. Of course, the act of writing is introspective and volatile, whether or not it is performed within the confines of a doctorate programme. But as I move beyond student apprenticeship and grapple with the task of building a new house with no blueprint, no project manager, I, and other emerging writer-academics, are forced to formulate new ways of considering their practice. The practice led-thesis, like novels and houses ‘furnish a dwelling place—a spatial construct—that invites the exploration and expression,’ (Mezei and Briganti 2002, 839), are dismantled once the thesis is submitted. The question of how to carve out a new ‘spatial construct’ which similarly invites ‘exploration and expression’ as we develop a
creative practice away from the scaffolding of candidature, is perhaps the final, and unconsidered milestone on the PhD journey.

Conclusions: Beyond Blueprints

Our interest in this article is exploring some aspects of ‘the craft of being a researcher’ (Hawkins and Wilson 2017, 83 emphasis in original), and this exploration of the practice-led PhD informs our ongoing development as early career researchers. These experiences demonstrate not only the importance of reflective approaches during and after the PhD, but also indicate some of the complications captured in the term ‘practice-led’. As Emily O’Grady’s experiences show, it is a significantly less scaffolded space that we find ourselves stepping into once the structure of the PhD, however unstable it might be, is removed. Kroll notes that

the creative doctorate does not necessarily have a definitive or ‘terminal’ end. Normally in any event it has two: a penultimate stage when a supervisor agrees that a thesis is suitable for submission and then another at uploading of the authoritative thesis copy (followed by award of the degree). (2017, 157)

As well as the drawn-out process of lodging the thesis, the completion of a doctorate involves the removal of the university’s support systems and resources. This article is not intended to prescribe alterations to the current processes and terminology used in creative writing doctorates; it presents three individual experiences concerned with how and why the structure and nature of the practice-led creative writing PhD has impacted on the research conducted in three very different projects. Gandolfo notes that one of the ‘challenges for creative arts researchers is finding ways of articulating creative arts research so that it can be understood by researchers from other fields where research
methodology is more established, more systemic and transparent’ (2012, 64). These difficulties in articulating the creative process are given form through recourse to architecture.

In reflecting on our experiences, we draw our own conclusions about how and why we altered, diverged from or dismantled the PhD structure, and we note that an ability to manipulate that structure is one of the key strategies each of us have developed throughout our candidature. Architectural analogies or metaphors, then, help make sense of how candidates negotiate tensions between their creative and critical work, their ability to redefine the scope of their project, and how one project might lead to, or complicate, the next project. Thinking through the process in this way gestures towards a range of approaches to the PhD structure, and allows us to identify key overlaps and divergences in the experience of creative writing candidates. Like a house, the PhD project is simultaneously public and private – supported by the university but entirely singular and inflected with personal decisions. In thinking through spatial metaphors, candidates may find ways to articulate in public spheres the private experiences of constructing the PhD. The ability to reflect on these issues is vital in informing how, after the doctorate, a writer might approach new critical and creative work. This article of three student-based reflections is one such articulation, and points to the opportunities to explore the complex resonances between structure, space, and practice in discussions of the creative writing PhD.
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