

## 2. Methodology and Methods



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### *introduction*

In this chapter I set out the methodology of action research, which has similarities with the theoretical context of my study<sup>1</sup> and with the way I work as a designer, as a basis for this project. I show how I have understood and adapted this methodology to my study and discuss the methods I use within its context.

### *basis of methodology*

This study is based on the methodology of action research which combines research and action in the context of real situations. Developed through anthropology and the social sciences (Stringer p9) it favours qualitative rather than quantitative research and implies that the researcher is actively engaged in the study. Action research looks at the effects of intervention, and is often used in social settings where both the process and the outcome are of direct benefit to the community.

The theatre of action research is often complex and interdependent situations and it is opposed to scientific research which requires the observer to be neutral and objective and endeavours to eliminate variables. This research favours a qualitative rather than quantitative approach and within it lies the assumption that thought, feelings and opinion, the tacit knowledge inherent in

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<sup>1</sup> The theoretical basis of action research is consistent with the context of this study. Based on Kuhn's ideas that knowledge is social a construction (Chalmers p108) it resembles Levevre's social production of space and the social model of disability portrayed by Oliver and Imrie. Its call for engaged 'democratic, participatory and life-enhancing' (Stringer p193) research has much in common with the social model of disability which was put forward by and for disabled people. Indeed, as Stringer says, action research 'gives voice to the marginalised' (p209) and like the social model of disability rejects the authoritarian nature of imposed solutions and is critical of those who presume to speak for others.

In its rejection of experts, use of consultation, democratic (bottom-up) structure and favouring of diversity, action research has similar aims to the models of practice I discuss in chapter 3.3. The questioning of standardisation and *one solution fits all* and the desire to produce useful and relevant solutions can be likened to the context specific findings of action research. The Disability Discrimination Act itself has, in its attempt to deal with complex and interdependent situations and by its potential to empower the individual, much in common with this type of research. The act's concept of 'reasonable provision' implies both research in establishing reasonableness and action in making provision which in turn suggests a modification of the definition of reasonableness.

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peoples everyday lives, 'has as much validity and utility as knowledge linked to academic research (Stringer p191). Gleaning knowledge from peoples lives raises ethical issues about the right of researchers to acquire knowledge and use it for their own purposes but by allowing people to participate constructively in the process action research shares not only in the results of the research but in its doing. Rather than imposing a set of values on the study or conducting it out of its context the equal status of the researcher as participant genuinely reflects cultural views and needs<sup>2</sup>. Such enquiry seeks to improve the quality of peoples lives by a 'dialogic and hermeneutic approach' (Stringer p9) – the understanding that shared meaning arises from shared conversations.

Heuristic research is concerned with exploration and finding things out rather than trying to prove or disprove a certain hypothesis. Its interpretivist results are thus illuminative, in that they throw light on the problem, rather than the positive findings of scientific research. Relevant to its context and location it is not necessarily concerned with what is universally true or can be generalised to another context but with exploring particular questions and gathering data specific to the study. Action research does not seek to provide causal explanations because the environment within which it is working is often too complicated. However it can suggest 'causal understanding' (Dick) of the connections between action and outcome or the understanding that by doing x you might often expect result y.

### *research and design*

As a designer this model of research is easily recognisable for it deals with real activities, is engaged by the real world and acted upon by it. The process of action research has much in common with the process of design for both are iterative and non-linear subject to

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<sup>2</sup> As a non-disabled person it is questionable whether I can do research into disability because of my lack of shared experience and meaning. It is certainly not possible, I believe, without the contextual understanding gained through my research in chapter 3.2.

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amendment, review, adaptation and refinement. Unlike scientific research which looks for solutions by analysing evidence design proposes solutions to find the best fit for what is often a seemingly irreconcilable set of circumstances. Adopting an holistic approach it searches for 'a coherent and often elegant solution that embodies all or most of the rag-bag of bits' (Swann p54). Similarly action research proposes and tests proposals in a real-life setting and like design, although it often makes use of quantitative findings, favours a qualitative approach recognising the usefulness of 'insight, intuition, inspired guess work and holistic thinking' (Swann p51)<sup>3</sup>.

### *action research and my project*

This study is intended to develop both a methodology through which I can understand my practice and to look at ways of improving access to public seating. These aims are dependant on each other for it is through looking at access that I hope to understand my practice and through my practice that I hope to improve access to public seating. In action research I have a model that is consistent with the context of my study and a process that can be adapted to my purposes. I can use the model to give validity to my work: it allows me to investigate my own work which would be problematic in traditional research; it uses the qualitative research observations, thoughts, feelings and tacit knowledge that I have gathered in my study; it is useful in studying complex situations with many variables which are unique and unrepeatable as is the built environment; it is based on interventions and allows me to make furniture and be proactive in a discussion with my interviewees.

### *structure*

The structure of action research is a spiral of cycles of plan, act, observe and reflect (Swann p55) which although loosely applied do imply a methodological approach. This fits well into my research for the *plan* is to

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<sup>3</sup> Till takes this solution focused concept further holding the view that it is the end product that is all important 'not the research itself but what you find' (p22). In producing an artefact design produces new knowledge 'research-by-design' (p21), rather research into design or research for design, thus allowing research to be projective and dynamic rather than tied to the correctness of its methods.

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do the research, the *action* to make and place objects in a social setting, the *observations* those of my observations and interviews informed by my contextual reading and the *reflections* my look at the implications on and of my work. The cyclical, and spiral, nature of the structure implies, as is the case in my work, that the process is non-linear and thus the reflections can inform the action just as the action informs the reflections. Continuous iterations that inform and modify are not just an overall structure but part of every aspect. Often, as in the case of a design idea which is turned over in ones head and doesn't even merit a sketch, these iterations are useful to recognise but too small to report.

The reality of my research has been that it is difficult to gather the type of data I was hoping for – or at least that it doesn't come in large and revealing chunks. Disabled people do not line up to use my seats and even when I try to set up a situation for them to do so access prevents it from happening. The process is slow and the cycle of testing through work I have designed may take years even supposing that an opportunity to design a particular element arises. What has become clear, as I make a post hoc rationalisation of my research and methodology, is that I have embarked on a long term project for which this study may be considered to be the plan<sup>4</sup>.

### ***observations***

Over the period of the study I have taken a number of photographs (supported by notes) of seating and wherever possible of people using seating. Dependant on their setting these are, in Zeisel's terms' observations of 'environmental behaviour' (pxi) showing how the 'physical environment supports or interferes with physical behaviour (p111). These observations have enabled me to become 'sensitive to the structure of the environment, the importance of the processes taking place within it and the people with whom [I work]' (Sommer p166).

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<sup>4</sup> Wallace's simple definition of action research for teachers as the cycle of reflection on professional practice leading to professional development (p13) is an overview that broadly sums up my aims.

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The analysis of my observations (chapter 4) has suggested ideas that I have explored through my practice, has informed or suggested contextual reading and has framed interview questions as well as simply suggesting more photographs or identifying what seem, at present, to be unique instances.

### *interviews*

I conducted a group interview with the Access Liaison Group (ALG) which was based upon a set of predefined questions and two personal interviews<sup>5</sup>. I have used the interviews to find out in-depth what particular disabled people think and feel about the area of my research although as members of the ALG they have experience in considering a broad range of disability. Rather than being confined by a set of fixed questions the interviews<sup>6</sup> took the form of a discussion around and prompted by public seating and due largely to the difficulty of access did not all look specifically at the projects I review in chapter 5.

The interviews were recorded with a small digital tape recorder and relevant discussion transcribed later. They were treated as what they were, friendly interactions between people sharing common interests, and as each was very different I was not particularly able to analysis or modify my technique. I photographed wherever possible during the interview but analysis shows that, especially in my interview with Brian Watchorn, I am often the missing part of the photograph.

### *conclusion*

The approach of action research is consistent with the context of my research and its structure is useful both as a way of formulating my research and as a *post hoc* rationalisation of the processes to which I am intuitively drawn.

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<sup>5</sup> The 'Focused Interview' with both groups and individuals is discussed in Zeisel (p 137-156) and I have adopted some of the techniques he identifies including pre-analysis of the situation and the use of probes and prompts to direct the interview.

<sup>6</sup> These interviews covering a wide range of topics have similarities with the initial stages of design work and, as Potter suggests, 'diagnosis has a creative component and asking the right questions and the way the questions are asked is already design not a preliminary to it' (p81).