EMERGING TRENDS IN DESIGN RESEARCH
changes over time in the landscape of design research

This sequence of diagrams presents a map of the design research landscape in 2007. This space has been the focus of a tremendous amount of exploration and rapid growth over the last 5 years. It is currently a confusing mess of competing and complementary approaches that share common or related goals—to drive, inspire or inform the new product and/or service development process.

The map is an attempt to position all these approaches into one unifying, visual framework so that we can stop arguing over which is the best approach and begin a dialogue about where to play during all points along the design development process.

Approaches to design research have come from a research-led perspective and from a design-led perspective. The research-led perspective has the longest history and has been driven by applied ethnographers, social psychologists and engineers. It aims to bring more like science and less art.

The design-led perspective has only recently come to view. It does not aspire to conform to scientific ways of assessing value or relevance.

The map of design research is also characterized by an east/west dimension. The eastern and western parts of the landscape are vastly different cultures that are built upon radically different mindsets. In fact, many people are not able to cross from one culture to the other.

The western side of the map describes a culture characterized by an expert mindset. Design researchers here are involved with designing for people. These design researchers consider themselves to be the experts and see others as ‘users’: designers, ‘consumers’, etc.

The eastern side of the map describes a culture characterized by a participatory mindset. Design researchers on this side are designing WITH people. They see the people as the experts in the domains of their experience. They listen to the people and see them as co-creators in the design process.

The largest and most developed of the areas on the map is the user-centered design zone. Thousands of people in this zone do design research to help make new products and services better meet the needs of ‘users’. They use research-led approaches with an expert mindset to collect, analyze and interpret data in order to inform the design development of product and services. They also apply their tools and methods in the evaluation of concepts and prototypes.

The participatory design zone spreads across both research-led and design-led perspectives on the eastern side of the map. Participatory design is an approach to design that attempts to actively involve the people who are being served through design in the process to help ensure that the design professionals receive insight into the people’s needs. When designers are trained to work with people, appropriate people for the design-led practices of this zone, and the participants have an east/west dimension. The eastern and western parts of the landscape are vastly different cultures that are built upon radically different mindsets. In fact, many people are not able to cross from one culture to the other.

The critical design territory has emerged recently in the top left corner. It is design-led and fueled by a participatory mindset. Generative design research has been used and been found useful across all the design domains, although its rate of adoption varies greatly across the domains. Generative design research is the territory that is the use of physical artifacts as probes is a small bubble in the critical design territory. This bubble is seen as partners seen as partners in the creative process, a practice emanating from the critical design research space in the last few years as design research practices such as sensing and storyboarding have been added to the design process.

The areas are large because they represent a lot of activity. There are as many areas of research as there are people who see themselves as being quite different from the others. There is a lot of disagreement between these clusters of researchers.

A key characteristic of the participatory design territory is the use of physical artifacts as probes is a small bubble in the critical design territory. This bubble is seen as partners seen as partners in the creative process, a practice emanating from the critical design research space in the last few years as design research practices such as sensing and storyboarding have been added to the design process.