Theorizing in the context of professional practice: the case for middle-range theories

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Abstract:

This commentary seeks to complement the contribution of the Building Research & Information special issue on 'Developing Theories for the Built Environment' (2008) by highlighting the important role of middle-range theories within the context of professional practice. Middle-range theories provide a form of theorizing that lies between abstract grand theorizing and a theoretical local descriptions. They are also characterized by the way in which they directly engage with the concerns of practitioners. In the context of professional practice, any commitment to theorizing should habitually be combined with an equivalent commitment to empirical research; rarely is it appropriate to neglect one in favour of the other. Any understanding of the role that theory plays in professional practice must further be informed by Schon's seminal ideas on reflective practice. Practitioners are seen to utilize theories as inputs to a process of continuous reflection, thereby guarding against complacency and routinization. The authors would challenge any assumption that academics alone are responsible for generating theories, thereby limiting the role of practitioners to their application. Such a dichotomized view is contrary to established ideas on Mode 2 knowledge production and current trends towards co-production research in the context of the built environment.

Keywords: built environment; co-production research; knowledge production; middle-range theory; reflective practice