

Sketching in the CRP Department

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In this article, Vicente del Rio reflects on the importance of sketching for planners and urban designers, and reports on an elective offered in the CRP department in 2017. Sketching is understood as a skill and a tool to help observe, analyse, represent, and conceptualize spaces and places, as well as to communicate with other professionals, the clients, and the public.

Professional practice and the research literature both indicate that city planners, particularly those dedicated to physical planning and urban design, need basic sketching skills. For the purpose of this article, I will be using the words sketching (which generally means a quick, informal drawing) and drawing interchangeably. Although the use of technology and computers are now intrinsic to all professions and human endeavours, I believe that sketching skills remain fundamental for three major reasons directly related to place making. Consider also that, today, sketching and drawing by hand do not necessarily involve pencil and pen on paper (although it still does for me and most designers), as there is a growing number of such applications for tablets and other interfaces.

Firstly, sketching buildings and places help us observe them analytically, understand and remember their dynamics, aesthetics, and composition. Sketching a place or a building means that we have to learn to observe and think analytically in order to identify all their components (physical, social, cultural, and temporal) in their essence, and to choose what and how to represent. Throughout modern history, architects and designers kept sketchbooks during their travel for this purpose. A great example is Le Corbusier's legendary diary *Journey to the East*, filled with sketches, personal impressions and visual notations from his travels during his formative years (Le Corbusier, 2007). In his seminal book *The Architecture of the City*, famous Italian architect and urbanist Aldo Rossi noted that to understand a city as an artefact --its order, scale and structure-- one must first draw it (Rossi, 1982). For famous architect and educator Michael Graves, each drawing serves to remember or to study something; each drawing a part of a process, and not an end in itself (Graves, 2012). Drawing, in this sense, can be seen as an intellectual effort.

Secondly, sketching helps design through a process called graphic thinking, when "thinking and sketching work closely together as stimulants for developing ideas" (Laseau, 2001, p. 1). "Drawing by hand stimulates the imagination and allows us to speculate about ideas, a good sign that we are alive" (Graves, 2012). Juhani Pallasmaa

defends that "sketching and drawing are spatial and haptic exercises that fuse the external reality of space and matter and the internal reality of perception" (apud Sheer, 2014, p. 6). Drawing allows us a "visceral" understanding of things through the relationship between mind and hand. Sketching as a thought process is important in other professions too. Peter Smirniopulos, a business professor at George Mason University in Washington, makes his real estate finance students sketch their solutions because by making them think and form a "mental image and then translate it into the paper space" their brains work in ways they normally do not (Smirniopulos, 2016).

Thirdly, hand drawing is a fundamental skill that allows us to communicate with other professionals, the clients and the public in general. It allows us to think in representational terms and to represent ideas (Sheer, 2014, pp. 3-4). Sketches on translucent paper, for instance, expose the thought process clearly, help compare ideas, and include changes and suggestions on the go. Sketching for a solution as a creative and participatory process is similar to musicians jamming together: the process includes intonations, intentions, and speculations of all participants in the construction of a collective product (Graves, 2002). Participants stimulate one another along this ideation process. Nothing can substitute the physicality, the emotions, the sense of collective achievement, and the realization that the idea was rounded up, and that it can evolve, involved in sketching. Clients and the community appreciate hand-drawn sketches, particularly in the conceptual phase, because they look just what they are: ideas in development; not as the precise, finished aspects of hard line technical drawings.

Drawing can be pleasurable because it unifies eye, mind and body, bringing ideas and material together, lending coherence to our experience (Scheer, 2014, pp. 82-83). "Drawing gives imagination immediacy, engaging the full range of our faculties as perhaps no other medium can do" (Sheer, 2014, pp. 83). It is a medium that brings together the right and left sides of our brains into an expressive, physical product that will keep engaging your imagination and inviting changes. Renowned artist and illustrator Richard Scott writes that "sketching



CRP students sketching San Luis Obispo's Railroad Square and Station.

is much about the experience as it is about the sketch", and that he always emerges from sketching feeling pleased, centered, and rejuvenated for having engaged in a creative process (Scott, 2013, p. 4).

Perhaps that is why in the last years, parallel to the pervasiveness of computers in our everyday lives and in planning and design, there has been a world-wide renaissance of hand drawing with design programs re-emphasizing its importance, and an increasing number of people practicing it. A good example is the growth of ad-hoc on-line organizations such as the Urban Sketchers who currently has more than 185 regional chapters in the world including 41 in the US.¹ This year, the Urban Sketcher's 8th international symposium in Chicago had almost 600 attendees from all parts of the world, who spend four days involved in sketching events and workshops.

One way to practice these skills is by keeping sketchbooks as diaries. Having one always handy helps us acquiring the habit to write down thoughts, observations, diagrams, and ideas about places on the go, and develop our skills in graphic thinking. One can prefer to use "state-of-the-art" sketchbooks, tablets or Ipads, as long as you have a good digital pen to help you do the job. Sketchbooks, as record-keepers and visual diaries, help us to remember but also to think, and they become important means for intellectual and design development. They are more interactive, holistic, interpretative, fun, and humane than simply taking photographs of places you visit. Sketchbooks as diaries will also help you become an effective *flâneur* of cities as you discover, experience, annotate and learn from urban qualities in an orderly manner (del Rio, 2016). Nobody expects sketches to be art pieces (although they can be!): they are representations of what you observe (analytical) and what you imagine (idea). Above all, drawing and keeping a sketchbook should be pleasurable and fun!

In the design disciplines keeping a sketchbook comes from a long tradition, but unfortunately not so in planning programs. Although

since its foundation Cal Poly's CRP Department has been emphasizing the design studios and freehand and technical drawing skills, only last year we decided to encourage students to embrace the sketch book in the design studio series.² CRP 201 Basic Graphic Skills –offered in the sophomore year's first quarter– continues to teach free and technical hand drawing but now it requires students to keep a sketchbook and promotes a series of exercises and field sketching events when students develop their skills and understanding of places through observational sketches, diagrams, and impromptu sections and plans. This year we will be consolidating the sketchbook requirement throughout the rest of the sophomore years design studios. We observed that students go a long way –some more than others– and they all take pleasure in the learning process involved in the class, developing not only their representational skills but also their capacity to observe a place or a building and represent it on paper (3D, section, and plan views).

In the winter quarter of 2017, I offered a one-unit elective class on sketching that involved ten sessions, most of them on Saturdays. Eleven CRP students registered for the class plus one architectural student from Germany. In this class I did no formal teaching but recommended a couple of readings and Youtube videos, and provided hints to participants during the sessions. The class met in the field to sketch for one hour or so: Monterey Street at the Fremont, Railroad Square and Station, Belo Mundo Café, Poly Village, Mission Plaza, Campus Arboretum, and Monterey at Osos streets. Students that missed a section for a good reason had to submit a substitute sketch. The class was also offered the opportunity, which some of us took gladly, to participate in an excellent two-sessions watercolor workshop taught by Ricard Scott, landscape architect and illustrator.

This was the first time CRP offered an elective on sketching, and I believe the results were very positive. I was very happy with the interest raised among students, and it got me start a CRP Facebook page

¹ Created ten years ago, the Urban Sketchers is a global forum to foster the practice on-location drawing. See www.urbansketchers.org

² Besides this author, the instructors involved in this effort are Amir Hajrasouliha, Beate Von Bischofinck, and Woody Combrick.



Fremont Theatre, San Luis Obispo, by Eric Sindel (above) and Willow Urquidi (below).



dedicated to sketching and related issues. The next pages feature some representative sketches from this elective. They demonstrate that, once inherent inhibitions are overcome, planners can sketch and are able to use this means to help them think about places. And that they can also have fun in doing it too!

References

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Watercolors by Kirsten Anaya (two faces) and Ana Padilla (flower).





USC campus tower, Los Angeles, by Emily Huang.

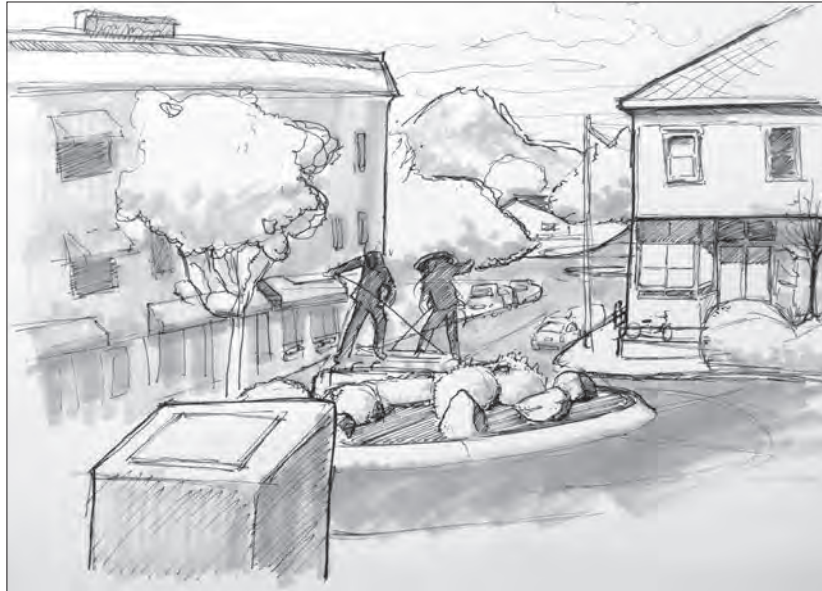
Court Street, San Luis Obispo, by Austin Forde.



San Luis Obispo rail station by Caroline Chen (above) and Nina Hofmann (below).



San Luis Obispo Rail Road Square by Kirsten Anaya.





Cal Poly's Arboretum. Pencil sketch and photoshop by Nina Hofmann.



Watercolor by Kristen Anaya at Cal Poly's Arboretum.



J. P. Andrews building, San Luis Obispo, by Caroline Chen.



Vista Grande student dorms, Cal Poly. Above, watercolor by Marissa Tietz. Below, sketch and photoshop by Justin Wong.





Monterey and Osos street corner, by Ana Padilla (above) and Austin Forde (below).



Court Street from Bello Mondo Cafe in Monterey Street, by Justin Wong.



San Luis Obispo Mission, by Nina Hofmann.



Monterey Street from Mission Plaza, by Caroline Chen.

"Cow" art instalation at Mission Plaza, by Emily Huang.

