

# Some Thoughts On Urban Sketching

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*The CRP department recognizes the importance of sketching as graphic thinking and a means to learn from what we see. Filipa Antunes, a renowned urban sketcher and artist who recently exhibited at the Louvre in Paris, presents some thoughts on how she approaches sketching as both a rational and an emotional process. All illustrations in this article are by the author. Follow Filipa's work at <https://www.facebook.com/DesenhoFilipaOliveiraAntunes/>*

Everything is clarified by sketching; I draw as I think! Sketching and drawing are part of an extensive process of understanding an object, place, person, or fact. The spontaneity of the drawing process is fundamentally about nullifying the superfluous and keeping only the essential. While this conscience must dominate, it requires courage. Courage to avoid the good codes of representation that our minds culturally assimilate.

Great works are born from the freedom of gestures and from rebuffing conventions. The geniuses of the art of drawing went far beyond the results: they discovered a sort of unique reality. They maneuvered their emotions through the graphic character a representative identity. The key to understanding a drawing is probably in the methodology organizing the sequence of stimuli producing it. The goals are to understand, clarify, and process an idea. But how can we get to our own identity, drawn and sketched in freedom of observation and conception?

Urban and architectural design feeds and is fed by drawing. Methodologies of graphic representation are essential tools for understanding and characterizing existing or idealized spaces. The graphic process is culturally touched by the emotions felt during the process of observing and representing these spaces. The sketch catalyzes the gestures that embody the idea of an object or space. In fact, one of the most essential working tools of the thinkers of space is drawing. How can we deal with a drawing, process and implement it?

“As soon as I understand the scale of the building and the relationship to the site and to the client, as it becomes more and more clear to me, I start doing sketches” (Gehry, 2000)

Drawings clarify and better explain, revealing an individualized perception in a manner that is universally understood. A sketch is more than a language because artistic freedoms are attached to the visual memory that arrives by abstraction of the (un)known –that which is no longer in front of us.

## We draw as we idealize! We draw as we dream!

Sketches are printed sensations allied to records outside the plastic adjectivity because what really matters is the individual understanding and clarification.

“A representative function and plastic qualities are different things that mix in practice but are not to be confused conceptually. Because plastic qualities are not representative and do not refer to anything but themselves, they are poetic. But the representative function itself has its own poetic power.” (Dias, 2010)

Sketches are more than three-dimensionality on two-dimensional support: they are exploratory processes based on methodologies derived from the contents as they are visualized but, above all, understood individually and culturally.

In Figure 1, the drawing of an alley in Lisbon's Alfama focuses on the ability to suggest a visual order among the elements, thus structuring the value of the whole. The representation of a three-dimensionality implies a previous awareness of the place's sensory and morphological features - only by knowing the place well we can represent it.

Being and feeling; thinking and materializing. Methodologically I suggest starting by observing and making a mental list of the physical aspects that are essential to the scene and the sketch. A conscious analysis of the fundamental elements that will be transposed as graphics simulating the linear and surface systems. A representation by simulation and not by mimicry implies a much longer time for the observation, interpretation and mental preparation of the drawing than in its execution.

Figure 2 shows the process I used to select a scene depicting a downhill plaza in historical Torres Vedras. The option consisted of using the stain to represent the strong presence of the corner building. The tracing of the lines and the details were

added later. I used an inverted process of how sketches usually are done, and leave the first stage in a position of insecurity but leading to results free of preconceptions.

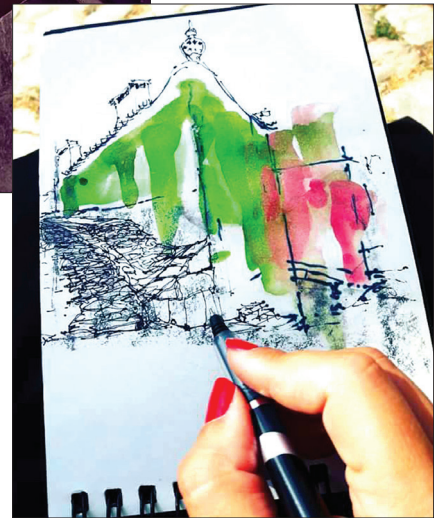
For this reason, getting to understand places, cities, public spaces, and buildings by sketching them is considered so important. Spatial notions are observed according to specific criteria that may pass through morphological, symbolic, environmental, emotional, or other issues.

Those who draw places acquire another level of understanding. A sketch expresses the essence of an interpretive thinking process, and incentivizes the fluidity of the drawing gestures, as platforms for conceptual thought. It is intended to dissociate the conceptual from the illustrative value and purify the essence of the drawing, its place in time, space and movement. The drafting process registers the reductive mechanisms but, at the same time reveals the catalysts of ideas.

The sketch in Figure 3 followed a process focused on defining the building silhouettes as scenarios positioned on the sheet according to the distance (near / far) of the observer, leaving in negative (white space) all the building elements. In structuring a methodology for sketching one raises the creative spirit



Figure 1: An alley in the historic Alfama, Lisbon. Watercolor and waterproof pen.



Figures 2 a & b: Sequence in creating a sketch at Torres Vedras historic center, Portugal. The watercolor brushes comes first, following the emotions, and the pen lining later.

Figure 3: Distant view of Torres Vedras historic center. Watercolor and waterproof pen.



contained in the three-dimensionality of a given or a projected reality. The proposal is to eliminate the observed scene as mere artifacts and impose the emotion on the intended message.

In urbanism sketching is a fundamental tool, based on the principle of adopting a methodic observational process in understanding the three-dimensionality of the scene: identifying the principal elements (formal and non-formal); in determining a hierarchy among these elements; in the selection of components to draw; in deciding on the figure and the background; in transposing your thoughts and emotions to the graphics domain (lines and surfaces); in the final synthesis stimulated by gestures.

When confronting a strategy for a sketch, our references will be of a high reflective spirit proportional to the value of the contemplation. The time invested in understanding will be directly comparable to the results, and we will retain the memory of that place. In an age of fast stimuli, approaching a space by sketching it implies in slowing down and restoring our natural ways to perceive the space and connect to it.

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### References

Gehry, F. (2000). *Calogue - Exhibit of Frank Gehry's Work*. New York: The New Guggenheim Museum.

Dias, L. G. (2010). *Design*. Vitoria, Brazil: Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo.

Figure 4: Largo de Santo Estevão, Lisbon.  
Watercolor and waterproof pen.



Figure 5: Rua do Capelão, Lisbon. Watercolor, waterproof pen and pencil.

Figure 6: Alfama, Lisbon. Watercolor and waterproof pen.

