



Drawing places: Practical strategies for teaching architects to sketch

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Figura 1. Delfina Ameijeiras, *Material study*, Venice Workshop (ETSALS)

Resumen / Abstract

This paper considers the connection between two essential facets of architecture: place and drawing. Through discussing the relationship between them, the article explores novel ways on which freehand in-situ drawing may be taught as an unparalleled vehicle for the design of architecture and place. The article presents the results of teaching experiences where in-situ sketching was used to help students engage with the specific nature of place, first outlining a set of basic challenges modern students face when learning to draw, and then proposing a set of practical teaching strategies to help students to overcome these. The paper contributes to the ongoing debate as to modern roles of freehand drawing in contemporary architecture, focusing on the opportunities it provides students, practitioners and researchers to critically understand, empathise and creatively intervene in the complex fabric of architecture and place.

Palabras clave / Key words

Sketching; architectural representation; teaching; architectural drawing; architectural education.

1. Introduction

In the field of architecture, the role of drawing in the analysis and creation of architecture has evolved over millenia, although its importance has ebbed and flowed (Robbins 1992; Alcayde 2016). In parallel to the general decline of “place-specific” architecture (Frampton 1981, 2011), the importance of freehand drawing in architectural creation and education has also given way to alternative techniques and methods (Burgaleta 2016). But despite the current dominance of alternative technological forms of representation, the human-centred, embodied, time-based and phenomenological nature of freehand drawing – and in particular, in-situ sketching – provide an exceptional opportunity for the architect, and especially the architecture student.

Sketching can help to understand place in both its physical and social dimensions through reflecting on those aspects which bear witness to the evolution of human activity and the interaction of people with their architectural and natural environment. Applying the ideas of Sennett (2008) in ‘The Craftsman’ and Pallasmaa (2009, 2012), this article considers how architecture students can actively learn about place and its two-way relationship with architecture through the practice of drawing. It contributes to the debate on teaching drawing in architectural education through focusing attention on the most fundamental aspects of architectural creation – place – and investigating how the unique characteristics of the process of drawing (by hand, in-situ) may be harnessed to provide an unparalleled opportunity for understanding and intervening in the architecture of place. Its contribution is to suggest a further revolution of drawing’s role in architectural thought, an innovation returning it to the centre of architectural investigation and design.

2. Discussion

Following several years experimenting with different ways of teaching drawing and reflecting on not only immediate results but equally on the overall and longer-term development of students throughout the architectural degree, a number of challenges appear of particular importance to the short and long-term learning outcomes of students.

These are contemporary issues which must be seen in the context of the student’s overall education and their reliance on technologies in all areas. These basic difficulties for contemporary students may be summarised in four points: *Apathy* – The general disinterest in drawing, lack of motivation and unwillingness to devote the necessary effort and perseverance required to develop a thoughtful drawing over a sustained period of time; *Preconceptions* – about what constitutes a good drawing, fixation on often pictorial concerns and ways of drawing and the self-confirming belief that one “cannot draw”; *Lack of technical proficiency* – the result of little prior guidance or practice, which leads to frustration at

perceived poor aesthetic results; *Perceived irrelevance* of hand drawing in contemporary education and practice when compared to technological alternatives due to a lack of clear explanation about the processes and unique objectives for architectural drawing by hand.

Although a wide range of individual concerns may compound these four points in particular students, experience from the various drawing courses mentioned below suggests that these form the basis of most student’s difficulty or resistance to learning to draw as architects. A variety of teaching approaches may be employed to answer or at least mitigate the effects of these four major challenges.

First of all, apathy towards freehand drawing can be reversed through fostering student motivation. Although students may be compelled to draw during a class, many complain that such experiences have alienated them from drawing of their own free will at other times.

Second, preconceptions about what to draw and how to draw it need to be systematically removed through concentrating on original observation from first hand experience (Calvino 1991). Teaching approaches should offer new ways to observe from one’s surroundings and develop original – or deliberately provocative – ways to represent them, be it through unfamiliar drawing methods, techniques or materials.

Third, a lack of technical proficiency - which nowadays appears inevitable for the majority of architecture students – must not form a barrier preventing them from the other benefits of drawing. Powers of observation and technical skill at representation may not correspond directly to draughting skill, or rather, technically imprecise drawings may sometimes be the most enlightening. Drawing instruction should therefore concentrate explicitly on the *process* of drawing, helping students to perceive what they are learning through the act of drawing rather than purely judging finished results.

Fourth, practical drawing tuition must be accompanied by some degree of explicit explanation about what happens while drawing. Students must be shown how this is both directly useful to architectural analysis and creation, and also how it relates to alternative technologies, outlining the differences and complementarities. Whilst much of the value of drawing remains implicit in the process of architectural creation, it is also essential to clearly explain the connection to the real and observable needs of contemporary design.

These approaches were applied to a set of drawing courses of different characteristics and the outcomes are discussed below. The courses included a 2nd year core architecture course in architectural representation (ETSALS) and two intensive project-based workshops, one with RCR Arquitectes (Olot) and another in conjunction with the Venice Architecture Biennale, 2018.

First, these involved concentrating on drawing exercises *in-situ*, where students were fully immersed in the place of study. These places and exercises were selected beforehand but students were then encouraged to explore

and find their own position and view, as well as experiment freely from the guidelines proposed.

Second, the subjects of the exercises were then carefully selected to focus on aspects of specific interest to the site in question – remarkable characteristics which tended to be overlooked, but which merited specific attention.

Third, the guidelines for each exercise were designed not only to focus attention on those qualities of particular interest, but also presented novel and disruptive approaches to observation and representation.

Fourth, throughout the courses, the instructors took part in each exercise alongside the students. The process of accompanying students in the drawing “challenge” helped to convey the objective of drawing in order to experiment and discover new ideas rather than simply repeat forms of representation already perfected.

Fifth, it proved particularly significant to engage students individually in discussion about their own observations, interpretations and choices while drawing, helping them to clarify and at times radicalise their graphic approaches.

Sixth, students were encouraged and helped to re-interpret their drawings later on, discussing and sharing their sketches with their companions.

Finally, in-situ sketching was extended into students’ design projects in a variety of ways - not only through representational techniques themselves, but in the sensitivity to real human experience as perceived on location, as well as through applying the same drawing methods and processes to design process.

The paper will provide examples of the learning outcomes of applying the following techniques involving change in students’ personal motivation, the development of the breadth and intensity of students’ capacity for observation, an improved selection of what to draw and what to leave out; a wider variety of subjects and ways of drawing; a more sensitive balance between figurative accuracy (naturalism) and perceptive realism (abstraction) which appeared to give greater potential for insights during subsequent design projects.

3. Conclusions

These observations taken from recent architectural drawing and design courses have highlighted some of the most significant obstacles students currently face when learning to draw. Through proposing teaching approaches aimed directly at overcoming these obstacles, these courses have aimed to make students aware of the specific opportunities sketching provides for contemporary architecture. As such the article contributes to the ongoing and evolving debate about how architects of the future may reconnect their architecture with the site-specific nature of place through the practice in-situ freehand drawing.

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Short CV: Sebastian Harris holds a PhD in architectural design from the UPC and an MA from the University of Cambridge. He is currently a lecturer at ETSALS, and has taught numerous workshops and lectures in collaboration with the Biennale di Venezia, RCR arquitectes, ETSAB-UPC, Oikonet, IED, and the City College of New York School of Architecture. His current research focuses on the intersection between in-situ sketching, architectural design and urbanism. Sebastian is an RIBA Chartered Architect and is the director of Harris Architects & Designers. His architectural work has been awarded several prizes such as the Mallorca Architectural Prize 2007-2010 for the best private house.