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REPOSITORY 49 Methods and Assignments for Writing Urban Places

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edited by

Carlos Machado e Moura, Dalia Milián Bernal,
Esteban Restrepo Restrepo, Klaske Havik, Lorin Niculae

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writing urban places

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Drawing Collectively

Participatory work for depicting the urban environment

Rossella Salerno
Politecnico di Milano

We assume freehand drawing to be a kind of graphic intelligence, the ability to combine the use of the eye, mind, and hand to solve problems and create effective products, aimed at acquiring new knowledge.

The subject of drawing is understood as a transcription or production of thought, a graphic language belonging to the cognitive sphere, and, according to Howard Gardner (1993), as an expression of multiple intelligences, which includes both the experience of space as well as the sphere of visual abilities and manual skills. To draw a place, it is necessary to observe it carefully, almost immersing oneself in it, whereas the photograph, in capturing the scene as a whole, does not require one to have the same mental “attachment” to analyse what a place contains (Treib 2016). Drawing, instead, takes time, attention and knowledge focused on a specific place; drawing requires immersion in a situation, and allows us to verify our observations; drawing within the margins of a sketchpad pushes us to pay more attention, to learn from the page before and to improve on the one after.

Freehand drawing is a type of representation that does not necessarily have to be based on accuracy to convey the conditions of the built environment. Rather, it can be seen as a tool capable of revealing the relations between the qualities (dimensions, proportions, scale, construction, materials etc.) and lifestyles in urban spaces, so that the analysis of a site, when done well, requires on-site study *accompanied* by the drawing. Drawings can gather both objective information (hard data) – namely dimensions, qualities, geometries, orientation – as well as soft data (experience, use, activities). In general, sketches made on site regard preliminary dimensional analysis for the design or serve as travel notes. ‘Sketches in perspective’ and ‘serial vision’ bring together what they observe on route maps and perspective views, similar to how a film builds up sequences rather than capturing single images.

City drawing in this way becomes a series of sketches capable of capturing, in many aspects, the elements the city is made up of. The everyday encounter with the city determines individual differences in how to interpret the urban structure, the effect of use on its form and allows to observe the connection between memory and interpretability: all this falls outside accurate mapping, the main parameter of the urban survey. In short, it is an ‘explorative’ drawing that demands personal involvement through the visual, phenomenal and atypical aspects of cities, fostering a deeper understanding of the many, disordered but irreplaceable qualities of places.

The aim of collective freehand drawing is to intertwine experience, culture, and vision, realising drawings that transcend what the eye only captures in a single view. Drawing collectively on a scroll brings the participants in touch with the experience of the city. As they work, they start to play off each other, devising other ways of depicting, or better stated, looking and feeling. The stationary point of the drawing has shifts which invites participants to see different objects and relationships than they did in their first position (Dutoit, 2007).

To conduct freehand drawing as collective work, the participants first carry out an individual site visit. They sketch in their notebook the most relevant features in the urban environment and then, as a second step, they reassemble on a paper scroll all drawings they made, producing a collective graphic output. A planning stage is required to choose the most effective views of urban elements. In this way, the individual experiences of place become a shared result by a collective drawing.

References

- Dutoit, A., (2007) Looking, inquiring, drawing: the implied urban realm. *Architectural Research Quarterly* Vol. 11 n. 3-4, 311-320.
- Gardner, H., (1993). *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice*. New York: Basic Books.
- Treib M. (Eds), (2016). *Drawing/ thinking: confronting an electronic age*, London: Routledge, 192.

Assignment

Freehand drawing as collective work: Depicting and Interpreting the urban environment

1
Visit a site to carry out separate freehand drawings in a sketchbook (i.e. views, individual buildings, squares, paths, crossings, walkways etc. but also materials, colours, lights, details, uses etc.).

2
Re-assemble the single sketches on a paper scroll to depict the urban environment as collective work (maximum of 6 people in a group to draw on a paper scroll of 30x180 cm). Expected outcome: intertwined drawings (i.e. plan layout showing paths, visual notes, facades, 3d views etc.) with free compositions and techniques.

3
Depict the experience of urban environment not only by the point of view of a single student but by a shared series of drawings discussed and realised by the whole group. This approach and method allow multifaceted observations to be linked together and so enables the most relevant aspects in an urban place to be highlighted.



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**COST Action CA18126 Writing Urban Places:
New Narratives of the European city**

Writing Urban Places proposes an innovative investigation and implementation of a process for developing human understanding of communities, their society, and their situatedness. By recognising the value of local urban narratives – stories rich in information regarding citizens socio-spatial practices, perceptions and expectations – the Action aims to articulate a set of concrete literary devices within a host of spatial disciplines; bringing together scientific research in the fields of literary studies, urban planning and architecture; and positioning this knowledge vis-à-vis progressive redevelopment policies carried out in medium-sized cities in Europe.

Working Group 3, focusing on methodology, is lead by Carlos Machado e Moura and Dalia Milián Bernal. This working group is dedicated to the articulation of methods to unveil, study, and write urban narratives and to explore their potential for strategies of design, to generate new (and counter) narratives, and to reveal subjugated voices.

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(free to place an image and/or text on the front side)

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