

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



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Hampton University Department of Architecture

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Site as Seeing – the Search for Identity and Meaning

*between black and white
what color?*

*between fear and courage
what dream?*

*belief and doubt
the age old dance
between what is hidden
and what is seen. . .*

*the world
a room
a crowd
a face*

the eternal struggle for meaning. . .

The use and exploration of the site as tool, storyteller, guide and dreaming:

tool:

In utilizing the site as a tool, the design student identifies the physical and contextual elements of the site (natural and man made)

storyteller:

In exploring the site as storyteller, the design student identifies the cultural and geographic elements of the site that give it its identity and fixes it in time (artifact and invention)

guide:

In approaching the site as a guide, the design student constructs a framework (actual and conceptual) that serves as a touchstone for his/her design

dreaming:

In allowing the site as dreaming, the design student creates a place that is a dialogue between the didactic and the possible (program and objective)

Through each step of the above process, Boundary, Gate, Path, Hearth and Line serve the dual purpose of assisting the student in identification of the diverse quantitative characteristics of a site as well as in the uncovering of the diverse qualitative possibilities of a design. In this way, the student begins to understand what physical and conceptual influences make a site unique and how application of that knowledge can root a “place” in its own history while giving it identity and meaning.

abstract

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On the first day of class in Design I, I ask my students to draw their ideal house and to site it in their ideal location. The majority return drawings that depict fancy suburban houses that have three car garages, a grand entry, an identifiable style such as Colonial, Mediterranean or Tudor and a swimming pool. At most, the shy presence of a tree or two in the background is the only indication as to where this house might exist. At this stage in the students' education, the "ideal" is informed by what they have seen and experienced in their immediate environment and through the media. In subsequent design studios, this challenging question of the "ideal", though disguised in a given building program and an assigned site, and the answer, wrapped up in the newly acquired accoutrements of graphic and model making skills, still lies at the heart of their design education. If one of the primary objectives of design studio is to have the student learn to design, based on architecturally informed criteria, an "ideal" solution to a problem, how may they be taught to define "ideal" and why is it important?

In the first year design studios, projects introduce students to two and three-dimensional spatial concepts, fundamental architectural principles and the tenets of intellectual and theoretical inquiry. These precepts of design are then reinforced and further explored in the second year design studios where emphasis is given to the concept that architecture, while being informed by program, precedent and function, must be a synthesis of both ideological and pragmatic concerns. To the design student, this world of academic endeavor seems disconnected from the reality of built architecture. For in the words of John Berger, "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak."¹ Surrounded by a visually oriented culture, in which the built landscape is identified by its homogeneity, given significance through repetition, and assigned meaning depending on its degree of predictability, it is natural for the student to be skeptical of, if not totally bewildered by, ideological concerns. Little of the built environment they have experienced to date appears to be imbued with theoretical and/or abstract ideas. It is not because built spaces do not possess them but because they have not been taught to see beyond the surface of the object to its essence. For "there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled."² Therefore, it is here, at the threshold between what is known and what is unknown, between what is seen and yet unseen, that the exploration of diversity in terms of what may be "ideal" plays an extremely important role in the students search for an architecture imbued with individual identity and meaning.

Site as Seeing

The site is the student's first introduction to the phenomenology of architecture. Anchored in space and time, it is a tangible entity that can be visually observed, experienced and documented in its realness. In addition, the less tangible elements of a site (physiological and psychological data) may be investigated and documented. A seemingly blank slate,

it harbors, for the student, a myriad of possible creative solutions. Through the use and exploration of the site as tool, storyteller, guide and dreaming, both quantitative and qualitative information is gathered:

tool:

In utilizing the site as a tool, the design student identifies the physical and contextual elements of the site (natural and man made). This gathering of information includes the traditional physical elements of analysis such as views, topography, wind direction, and sun orientation. It also encompasses the psychological and physiological contextual elements of: *boundary* as indicated by public/semipublic/semiprivate/private and hierarchical spatial characteristics; *gate* as indicated by existing pedestrian and vehicular entry/egress patterns as well as innate entry/egress patterns, *path* as influenced by boundary, anchored by gate and augmented by *hearth*; *hearth* as indicated by potential focal point/gathering locations; and line as indicated by and explored through physical movement as well as visual connection through the site.

storyteller:

In exploring the site as storyteller, the design student identifies the cultural and geographic elements of the site that give it its identity and fixes it in time (artifact and invention) through the use of cognitive mapping. This catalogued information includes the actual, existing conditions found on the site: *visible* boundary, gate, path, hearth and line as determined by the presence or lack thereof of existing structures, utilities, traffic patterns and landscape elements; and encompasses the *invisible*: boundary, gate, path, hearth and line as indicated through an investigation of the history of the site (what former buildings or building uses the site harbored in the past), as well as the history of the surrounding built context and future development. Moreover, the physiological and psychological aspects of the site are investigated through the engagement of the five senses and recorded via the media of poetry, photography, audio recordings, and small installation pieces. In this way, the quantifiable, physical attributes of the face of the site as well as the qualitative “fingerprints” of the character or personality of the site are revealed and assembled into a reading that is factual (artifact) but has the potential for fiction or myth (invention) depending on the individual’s interpretation.

guide:

In approaching the site as a guide, the design student constructs a framework (actual and conceptual) that serves as a touchstone for his/her design. With this newly acquired knowledge of the site, he or she is now in possession of information that has been gleaned from intuitive and associative knowledge as well as objective data pertaining to the site. This knowledge then serves to assist the student in constructing a vocabulary of form and function that is then articulated and developed through the language of spatial organization and construction. Thus, the accommodation of program is no longer seen as being an objective separate and different from concept but as a part of a process that is reciprocal in nature. Through a personalized assimilation of the gathered information, he or she may determine and implement a methodology that offers individualized identity and meaning to their designs. This methodology is made coherent in the solution through the discernable implementation of the physical, physiological and psychological tools of boundary, gate, path, hearth and line.

dreaming:

In allowing the site as dreaming, the design student creates a place that is a dialogue between the didactic and the possible (program and conceptual objective). This stage of the process serves the two fold purpose of addressing the constraints and realities of program while asking, through the posing of informed questions derived from research and exploration of a specific location, what the site, and by extension of its framework, the place might be. Through the acknowledgement and understanding of the latent power of past and present occupation and use, the student is given a means of interpreting and harnessing the inherent and potential determinates that may contribute to and/or dictate the future life of the site as a definitive marker of place and/or a contributing element of the built landscape. Influenced in

this way, the actual form of the building takes shape out of the perceptions of the student, its identity assigned through their internalized experience and personalized analysis of the site and its meaning revealed through the externalized product of the student's design solution.

Site as Seeing Diversity

Through each step of the above process, boundary, gate, path, hearth and line serve a dual purpose. First, these basic design ordering principles assist the student in the identification of the diverse quantitative characteristics of the site and in the uncovering of the diverse qualitative factors of a site in a familiar yet interpretative way. Second, these principles form the basic components of a design language that is universally recognized yet individually defined which allows the student to see not just the surface and exterior components of the built landscape but to recognize the features and characteristics that compose the identity and interiority of space making and place. In this way, the student begins to understand what physical and conceptual influences make a site unique and how application of that knowledge can determine and influence the "ideal" solution to a design problem by rooting a "place" in its own history while giving it a contemporary identity and meaning. This is crucial to the education of the architectural design student if he or she is to fully comprehend the potential of the existing environment in which their buildings will either possess and define their sites or be invisible and mute. The "ideal" embodied then, in a design that, in the words of Brian MacKay-Lyons, "reveals history of place through design celebration of history and the dreams of occupation on a particular site."³

NOTES

¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books, 1977)

² Ibid

³ B. MacKay-Lyons, B. Carter, Brian MacKay-Lyons (Tuns Press/Dalhousie University, 1998)