

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



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PROCEEDINGS of the
20th National Conference on
the Beginning Design Student
Hampton University Department of Architecture

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Printed proceedings produced by Shannon Chance, Assistant Professor of Architecture, Hampton University.

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Published by:
Hampton University Urban Institute
Department of Architecture
Hampton University
Hampton, VA 23668
757-727-5440
fax 757-728-6680

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chance, Shannon
Not White: Diversity in Beginning Design Education
(Proceedings of the 20th National Conference on the Beginning Design Student)
compiled by Shannon Chance
1. Architecture - Diversity 2. Teaching - Architecture 3. Teaching - Diversity 4. Teaching - Design
5. Diversity - Design

ISBN 0-9785172-0-2

Using a Sensory Approach for Analyzing and Representing Sense of Place

This student/faculty co-presentation session describes the rationale and outcome of an innovative studio project from Fall 2003 at an Historically Black University's School of Architecture. The project entitled, "St. Mark's Trail: A Sense of Place Study," was a three-week long project in a landscape architecture studio. The project had 4 primary educational purposes. First, recognize and utilize student diversity in the studio project. Second, encourage sharing and collaboration throughout the studio. Third, teach students the tacit concept of "sense of place". Fourth, encourage a unique sensory-driven approach to analyzing and representing sense of place. The sensory-driven approach was unique because focus was shifted from using typical architectural skills such as drawing and model-making as a means of analysis and representation to integrating the senses (sight, smell, hearing, etc.) into a creative presentation format that included music, video, slides, smells, and other elements.

The studio participants were a small but very diverse group. Participants included 3 first year students with little formal design experience and 2 students in their final year of the professional program. Demographically, students ranged from white to black, urban backgrounds to rural upbringings, international students to American citizens. Students also ranged in age from 21 to 31. These differences posed several challenges. The instructional challenge was to find a way to validate each student's diverse prior experiences within the project's structure and goals. Another challenge was developing a project that was appropriate for the beginning design students as well as the more experienced students.

The project began with a brief statement outlining the goals, requirements, and evaluation of the project. The goal of the project was to employ alternative methods of representation to evoke and portray a sense of place in two different sites. The first site was St. Mark's Trail, a former railroad now serving as a popular rails-to-trails linear park. The second site was chosen by the students and had to be both comparable and contrastable to the St. Mark's Trail. The project required students to analyze and represent the two sites by using their senses – particularly sight, sound, touch, and smell. The final presentations were a particularly important part of the project because students were encouraged to use their imagination and creativity to engage the senses and represent the sites. Some examples from the project presentations include the use of video clips for visual effect and the use of cans of tuna and coastal plants to reflect the smells of the seashore. In one project, students created a carpet using fresh sod to demonstrate the softness of turf under foot.

The instructor, students, and outside faculty deemed the project a success for several reasons. First, by using the sensory-approach and requiring students to use their senses rather than a set of typical architectural skills beginning design students and more experienced students were able to equally contribute in the exploration and representation of the two sites. Second, the creative freedom inherent in the project presentation gave beginning design students direction without overwhelming them while the more experienced students were given the flexibility necessary for innovation. Finally, the project presentations demonstrated that cultural and ethnic differences could enrich the understanding and representation of sense of place.

Participants that attend this student/faculty co-presentation will: 1) learn about a new method for teaching the 'sense of place' concept, 2) understand the importance of using a non-typical approach to teaching less experienced students, and 3) hear, in the words of the students, the benefits of this project in terms of learning, diversity, and beginning design education.

abstract

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Editor's Note: This paper was submitted and accepted as a student paper, but subsequently authored by Matt Powers.

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Figure 1 - St. Mark's Trail and lighthouse.

Introduction

"...place varies with the intentions, personalities, and circumstances of those who are experiencing it" (Relph 1976, 57).

In the Fall of 2003, at the Florida A&M University School of Architecture four students in the Masters of Landscape Architecture program took part in a three-week long studio project entitled, St. Mark's Trail: A Sense of Place Study. This project, now known as *the place project*, required students to use their senses and prior experience to explore, compare, and represent their concept of place in two separate locations. This paper examines place and describes *the place project*, including its rationale, participants, and outcomes as they relate to diversity and beginning design education. In the spirit of collegiality, the paper is co-authored by the studio professor and two project participants.

To understand the phenomena of sense of place and *the place project* it is helpful to first develop an understanding of place and its defining features. The next three sections will discuss various concepts of place and the relationship between place and the senses, experience, and memory. (See Figure 1.)

Place

Walter (1980) says, "We call locations of experience 'place'" (162) explaining that, "Experience means perceiving, doing, thinking, and feeling." (162). Through our daily travels, our experiences shape our perceptions of place. Our experience-based place perceptions may cause us to love or hate a place for reasons we have difficulty articulating, leaving us to remark, "I like it just because." Anyone trying to explain the inherent qualities of a place is essentially explaining a set of qualities inherent to them. Thus, exploring a place and trying to describe its essence is a journey into our own identities, a representation of who we are. As Calvino (1985) says, "We can know nothing about what is outside us if we overlook ourselves. The universe is the mirror in which we can contemplate only what we have learned to know in ourselves" (119).

Noted geographer and writer, Yi-Fu Tuan (1975) calls place:

"... a center of meaning constructed by experience. Place is not only known through the eyes and mind but also through the more passive and direct modes of experience, which resist objectification. To know a place fully means both to understand it in an abstract way and to know it as one person knows another. At a high theoretical level, places are points in spatial system. At the opposite extreme, they are strong visceral feelings. Places are seldom known at either extreme: the one is too remote from sensory experience to be real, and the other presupposes rootedness in a locality and an emotional commitment to it that are increasingly rare. To most people in the modern world, places lie somewhere in the middle range of experience." (151)

Through Tuan's conception, we see that geographically, place is like a site - existing nowhere else in the world. For *the place project*, students chose a site that they could dramatically compare and contrast with a site given to them by their professor. As Tuan says, these specific sites symbolize both unique places and strong feelings. Most students found their site on a map easily enough, but characterizing a place would take a system more complex than that of a map - it would take an explicit examination of their own senses and experience.

Asking someone to explain the essence of place is not an easy assignment. Cultural geographer J.B. Jackson talks about reading establishment and the vernacular of a place in the 1988 video "J. B. Jackson & The Love of Everyday Places." Jackson was able to read place clearly and call attention to signs of history and human presence in a way that many others are unable. Jackson related the story of a place's past, as well as read into its potential path for the future. Not requiring this depth of insight, the students still gained an understanding of how to read a place for its sense of being.

The next two sections will look at place as the students did, in terms of human senses and human experience. The human senses were defined as an individual's intimate ability to smell, see, hear, taste, and touch. The knowledge an individual derives from his or her collective memories of experience includes observations and storytelling that affect sense of place.

Sensing Place

In an effort to ease the understanding of place, students isolated the human senses; ultimately helping in two ways, first, with the organization of their explorations by making their observations more deliberate and less tacit, and second, by making the representation of place easier to organize in their final presentations.

Porteous (1985) describes the use of the senses in understanding place as more than just visual. Porteous says that “‘intimate sensing’ or ‘the appraisal of land and life at the ground level’ involves not only visual sense but also sound, smell, taste and touch, body and soul as well as mind” (250).

The students’ system for examining place began with the basic senses, which were seen not just as a starting point for appraisal, but also as tools to relay perception. In the outcome of their presentations, students consciously employed their senses to convey their perception of their sites, for example, by simulating a smell or sound. When focusing just on the senses, the students were able to re-create specific characteristics of their sites. Expressing specific thoughts and feelings through this focus guided their expression of sense of place.

Experiencing Place

Relph (1976) says that “place varies with the intentions, personalities, and circumstances of those who are experiencing it” (57). Knowing the differences between the students participating in *the place project* makes it unfair to expect their experience to be the same. For example, a student’s fear of alligators prevented him from going down the same paths as other students. Undoubtedly, this affected his experience of the place while at the same time; it was his experience of the place. The awareness of diversity in experiencing place was built into the project. Regardless of the shared ability to sense, students still experienced the places uniquely for themselves. However, since students worked in teams, they did have to reconcile their differences, thus opening up a dialogue explaining why they see what they see.

“Humanistic geography defines place as a center of meaning constructed by experience” (Karjalainen 2003, 1). If meaning is a construction of experience, it stands that people having similar experiences will define a place similarly, and those with different experiences will conflict. *The place project* asked different students to experience a place and then represent it similarly. This is a hard task and one rarely asked of students. However, it is an important exercise because in the future as a landscape architect, these designers will need to convey their design for a place to someone that may be vastly different from them. In this way, experientially empathizing with a client will help to design an appropriate place for that person.

The Place Project

The purpose of *the place project* was to help beginning landscape architecture students learn about place and the role of place in the landscape. In terms of educational sequence, students study place in their first semester of the master’s program because often it takes a long time to grasp intellectually the concept of place and even more time to learn how to use the concept of place in design. Thus, in order to graduate landscape architects with the ability to design places, students need an early and thorough introduction to the subject of place.

Project Participants

The place project participants were a small but very diverse group including three first year students with little formal design experience and two students in their final year of the professional program. Demographically, students ranged from white to black, urban backgrounds to rural upbringings, international students to American citizens. Students also ranged in age from 21 to 31. These differences posed several challenges. The instructional challenge was to find a way to validate each student’s diverse prior experiences within the project’s structure and goals. Another challenge was developing a project that was appropriate for the beginning design students as well as the more experienced students. (See Figure 2.)



Figure 2 - A diverse group of students collaborating on the place project.

Educational Purposes

The place project had four primary educational purposes. First, recognize and utilize student diversity in the studio project. Because the ages and backgrounds of each student ranged dramatically, validating diversity was critical not just for this project but also for building a sense of community within the graduate program. Thus, the project became a community builder. Second, encourage sharing and collaboration throughout the studio. This purpose supports the notion of building a learning community among students. In addition, this was one way for students to capitalize upon their uniqueness while finding salient ways to contribute. Third, teach students the assumed concept of place. As future landscape architects, students need to become positive place-makers. Fourth, encourage a unique sensory-driven approach to analyzing and representing sense of place. The uniqueness of the sensory-driven approach is in the shift from using typical architectural skills such as drawing and model making as a means of analysis and representation to integrating human senses and experience.

Project Structure and Requirements

The project began with a brief written statement to students outlining the goals, requirements, and evaluation of the project. The goals of the project were to employ alternative methods of representation to evoke and portray a sense of place in two different sites. In teams of two or three, students were asked to reveal the sense of place of the St. Mark's Trail and another place of their team's choice. The second place had to be different from the St. Mark's Trail in some obvious way. The only restrictions regarding the student's site selection was that their second site had to be a local site and a linear landscape.

Equally important to having students experience and investigate place was the final presentation. After experiencing each site thoroughly, students presented their findings to the class through a combination of different media. The necessity for using mixed media, rather than typical architectural modes such as drawing or model making, arose out of the realization that the presentation was more of a re-presentation of place and as such, could not be brought to life with drawings and models. In representing the place with a high degree of accuracy, sounds, smells, feelings and memory would need to be involved. Thus, the presentations were open-ended and dependent upon the student's experiences with each place.

For students, the open-endedness of *the place project* was one of its most appealing aspects. The open-endedness let students build on their strengths and prior knowledge while exploring all the possibilities of representation. Appreciating the open-endedness did not eliminate the innumerable directions the students could move and the fact that these were beginning students, led to some confusion and overwhelming feelings. Thus, several requirements were assigned to help students effectively regulate their use of media as it related to their representation of place. Issued were the following requirements:

- The presentation should have a minimum of 10 images that visually represent the place.
- The presentation should have a soundtrack to be used as background music or as an element that will drive the presentation.
- The presentation should have a written narrative such as a brief essay, poem, keywords, song lyric, or other appropriate form.

Project Evaluation

Holistically evaluating each team's product- the presentation- was done due to the interrelated elements of *the place project*. The instructor, the students themselves, and several outside critics evaluated the presentations. Evaluation instruments were developed cooperatively between the teacher and the students. Providing evaluative feedback from a variety of people helped students clearly see how different people perceive the same place. Also "within one person the mixing of experience, emotion, memory, imagination, present situation, and intention can be so variable that he can see a particular place in several quite distinct ways" (Relph 1976, 57). Some of the questions used to evaluate the student's presentations were:

- Does the overall presentation capture the sense of place for both sites?
- Have the two places been compared or contrasted insightfully rather than obviously?
- How does this team's representation of place differ from your own?

Learning from *the place project*

There are many outcomes of *the place project* worth mentioning. However, it should be noted that since the project reported in this paper happened less than year ago, many of the expected outcomes couldn't be measured just yet. For example, answers to questions like could *the place project* help students become better at designing places or to what degree did the student build upon what they learned from *the place project* in later studios may not become evident until later.

What is clearly evident is the innovation, effort, and creativity that each student put into the project. Perhaps this is because of the high degree of ownership and responsibility each student was given in terms of selection and formatting of their project. Most educators agree that when students are given ownership of authentic projects, motivation and commitment will rise. Students seemed actively involved in the project and genuinely concerned with their own learning and performance.

In terms of diversity, the most obvious outcome is that diversity never became a negative issue or obstacle throughout the semester. In fact, the openness and respect students showed towards each other's differences were remarkable. As the semester progressed the students showed not only respect for each other's diversity but also a sincere desire to learn more about what makes each person who they are. Can this be contributed solely to *the place project*? Maybe not, because the students participating were certainly above average thinkers and kind humans. However, according to participating students, the project was unlike any other in that it encouraged the use of prior experiences and perspectives that were rooted in each student's own identity.

From a presentation standpoint, some examples included the use of video clips for visual effect and the use of tuna in cans to reflect the smell of garbage on a derelict site. In one project, students created a carpet using fresh sod to demonstrate the softness of turf under foot. Overall the project presentations were extremely effective because the viewer was never just a passive viewer, but instead a participant, actively experiencing the place using a range of their senses. Just as the student went to the site and smelled, looked, and touched, so did those who experienced the presentations. In fact, it would be unfair to call the presentations anything other than experiences of places. (See Figure 3.)

Student Reflection

As a student involved in *the place project* my understanding of sense of place has greatly improved, merely from having the concept better understood, due to our explorations of actual sites with the senses in mind. With a background in fine arts and no previous formal landscape architecture courses, I was eager to understand the idea of sense of place. I felt its relevance within landscape architecture, architecture and culture. Our challenge as a group was to reproduce the felt sense of place through various mediums (imagery, sound, smell, and touch).

The level of diversity within our groups was obvious. What became clear to me through the project was how my sense of place was affected by having previously visiting both sites chosen by my group. In many ways, my memories of these places were the same when revisited. An interesting side affect of traveling with this diverse group to the different sites was my ability to create a clearer sense of self. This was particularly due to the metaphorical mirror my classmates held up for me to gain a clearer reflection of my own identity as a Floridian and nature-lover. This understanding of self came out of recognizing our diversity. Gaining that knowledge came through the observed physical discomfort of my two classmates when visiting the coastal site. A *Do Not Feed the Alligators* sign caused one of my classmates to become very jumpy and the awareness of the small shoreline fiddler crabs caused my other classmate to refuse to walk out on to the oyster bar.

Discovering the Sense of Place for this particular site was a bit challenging due to the different experiences shared by my classmates and myself, but we understood for the sake of the project that an agreement would have to be met. Viewing the site from different perspectives allowed a decision to be made. A view close-up, with the insects, potential alligators, and crabs was overshadowed by the all-inclusive view of the open expanse of Gulf waters, sounds of the winds through the trees, and the migrating monarch butterflies fluttering about; thus helping us jointly concluding that the dominating sense of place for this particular site was one of serenity.

In conclusion, *the place project* was challenging on many levels. A fine-tuning of the senses, working with a diverse group, and utilizing various media for the final presentation



Figure 3 - Many factors, including fears, influence our sense of place.

contributed to the success of the project and understanding of sense of place.

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