

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



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Understanding Diversity through Biographical Landscapes

Diversity as expressed through differences in identities, values, and worldviews is embedded in the everyday environment, to be recognized, recollected, and understood. The everyday landscapes—places and spaces, inhabited and remembered—reflect a multitude of meanings and perspectives that constitute the various manifestations of diversity. This paper examines a beginning design exercise that uses landscapes and personal recollection as a medium for expressions and understanding of diversity in space and culture. In this short introductory studio exercise, students are asked to create a three-dimensional collage of landscape features that embody and represent the life experiences of three generations of their families. Based on observation of selected projects from a span of three studios, the paper examines the following characteristics and utilities of the design exercise: how the exercise draws from the students' own knowledge and reflection of everyday spatial experience to bridge cultural issues with understanding and making of space; how the lessons and understanding of diversity emerges in a collective examination of the projects; and how the exercise allows the concept of diversity to transcend the traditional categories of race and class and essentialist notion of culture, to embrace a broader and more nuanced understanding of social and spatial phenomena. Through a comparative and cross-generational framework, the paper also examines how the exercise allows one to recognize the dynamic and changing nature of diversity as manifest in the continuing spatial and social transformation in the everyday environment. It further looks at how landscapes can serve as vehicles for cultural expressions. Through these examinations, it addresses the pedagogical mechanisms and complexity in injecting the issue of diversity in beginning design.



abstract

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Introduction

In recent years, issues of diversity and multiculturalism have begun to receive broader attention in design and planning discourses. Sandercock and Qadeer both examine the implications of multiculturalism on the practice of urban planning.¹ Umemoto and de Souza Briggs further articulate the challenges facing practitioners and institutions in addressing cultural differences and nuances in participatory planning.² In the context of ethnic neighborhoods, Hou and Tanner argue that the manifestation and negotiation of the competing identities and interests in the multicultural ethnic neighborhoods presents a challenging task for designers, planners, activists and community leaders.³ In the field of architecture, the discussion of diversity has focused particularly on the demographic makeup of faculty and students and the differences in perspectives and perceptions among students of different gender and ethnicities toward experiences in architectural education.⁴ In addition, the discussion has also identified the inadequacy of design theories in addressing gender and ethnic issues. For example, Anthony and Grant argue that although interest in gender and multicultural issues is on the rise, architecture theories have traditionally been treated as “raceless” or “genderless.”⁵ The lack of diverse perspectives is reflected in the continued dominance of a Eurocentric emphasis in design education, as echoed by various authors in an edited volume, *Voices in Architectural Education*.⁶

Despite the growing attention on diversity in design education, relatively less has been reported on actual studio projects and assignments that address the issue of diversity.⁷ While the experiences of design studio has been a focus of attention, little was found in literature that reported on innovative studio design pedagogy especially in the context of beginning design as related to diversity. In addition, while the focus on traditional categories of gender and ethnicity is critical and imperative in addressing the inadequacy of design education and theories, the emphasis on gender and ethnicity tends to limit the discussion to the question of demographics and perceptions of different demographic groups. To examine beyond the traditional categories of gender and ethnicity, this paper looks at diversity as a wide range of differences in identities, values, and worldviews, and as embedded in the everyday environment. To explore the pedagogy of multicultural understanding in beginning design, this paper examines a beginning design exercise and its use of landscapes and personal recollection as a medium for expressions and understanding of diversity in space and culture. Based on observation of selected projects from a span of three studios, the paper examines the following characteristics and utilities of the design exercise: how the exercise draws from the students’ own knowledge and reflection of everyday spatial experience to bridge cultural issues with understanding and making of space; how the lessons and understanding of diversity emerges in a collective examination of the projects; and how the exercise allows the concept of diversity to transcend the traditional categories of race and class and essentialist notion of culture, to embrace a broader and more nuanced understanding of social and spatial phenomena. Through these examinations, the paper addresses the pedagogical mechanisms and complexity in injecting the issue of diversity in beginning design.



Figure 1 - Project by Tony Choi.



Figure 2 - Project by JoAnn Lee.

Biographical Landscapes

‘Biographical Landscapes’ is one of a series of studio exercises in the ‘Introduction to Landscape Architecture’ studio at University of Washington. The purpose of the studio is to introduce students to the foundational knowledge and process of landscape architecture design. The course is open to non-majors who are interested in entering the program, as well as students from Architecture and Urban Planning who take it as an elective. Based originally on the ‘Westward Moving House’ assignment in Introduction to Environmental Design at University of California, Berkeley, the assignment asks the students to create a three-dimensional collage of landscape features that embody and represent the life experiences of three generations of their families.⁸ The purpose of the assignment was for the students to connect their personal experiences and observations to an understanding of design and making of the built environment. It was designed to specifically connect understandings of changes in the physical environment to broader social, economic, and political transformation in the society. At the end of the weeklong exercise, students were required to make a verbal presentation. Each presentation was followed by questions and comments as well as discussion among the students and faculty.

The studio class has a typical enrollment of 25-35 students. In the last three years, it was co-taught first by two Asian-American male faculty members and then by an Asian

American male faculty and a Caucasian female faculty, both including the author. Offered in three consecutive studios thus far, the assignment has received positive feedbacks from the students based on anonymous course evaluations. Similar to the outcomes of the similar class assignment at Berkeley, the exercise has proven to be useful in addressing the multiplicity of values, experience, identities, and social and spatial understanding in design at the introductory level. In the following, the paper uses a series of selected student projects to illustrate the range of work and to examine the outcomes and utilities of the design exercise.

Behind Urbanization (See Figure 1.)

Throughout the three generations of my family, which mainly lived in Seoul, Korea, Korea has gone through very dramatic historical events which resulted in fundamental socioeconomic changes. It was hard not to broaden the scope of this project to a national level because the dramatic events of recent Korean history was so fundamental to the change of nearly every aspect of life in an urban Korean environment.

A common theme among many students' projects has been the magnitude of environmental change and urbanization. This project illustrated the process of urban development and transformation in South Korea where the student grew up as a child. Rather than simply depicting the physical change from a traditional city to modern metropolis, the student focused on the underlying historic events in which the process occurred. The model was divided into three segments. The first segment represents how traditional urban space was displaced by a westernized colonial architecture under Japanese occupation. The second segment represents the destruction of Seoul landscape during the Korean War and the ground for reconstruction. The last segment shows the verticality of contemporary urban landscape in Seoul where companies were competing to build the world's tallest building. The project served as a testimony of Korea's historic encounters with foreign forces, war, post-War development, and the influence of social and political forces on individual experiences and memories.

Memory Overlays (See Figure 2.)

My grandmother was born on the island of Taiwan. About two thirds of Taiwan is covered by mountains, and my grandmother grew up nestled in a mountainous region in Northern Taiwan. According to my mother, my grandmother's family had an orange grove and grew some other vegetables... My parents moved to America to study and I was born shortly after. My landscape included many of the same elements from the previous generations, mountains, water, and plenty of plants... While making this project, I realized that all three generations overlapped and that my grandmother experienced things from all three time periods and her lifestyle changed with the times.

Unlike the Korean American student who chose to focus on his home country, this Taiwanese American student chose to focus on the landscapes of different locations that are all part of the family's history. Instead of depicting a linear progression of events, the student chose layering, transparency, and juxtaposition as techniques to reflect on the overlapping of generational experiences. The model conveys how her family continues to carry memories from home and that the present is inseparable from the past. By juxtaposing and overlaying the images of rice field, orchard, and mountains with modern amenities and features of suburban American landscape, the project underscored the translocal experiences and multiple place identities of recent immigrants.

Suitcase/Shadow Box (See Figures 3 and 4.)

Three generations of my family span a century in time and 6000 miles in space. Each generation has emerged from a distinct setting and move 3000 miles west starting with my grandmother's flight from poverty in Ireland to the urban sprawl of New Jersey to my parent's flight from the congestion of the East coast to the wilds of Washington... The representation of the contrasting landscapes from which each generation of my family emerged is depicted by a shadow box. The exterior of the box was constructed to represent a suitcase as each generation of my family has moved from place to place.

Rather than focusing on the overlapping of generational experiences, this project

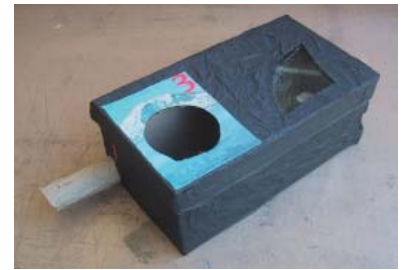


Figure 3 - Project by Virginia Coffman.



Figure 4 - Freeway landscape by Virginia Coffman.



Figure 5 - Project by Lisa Beyeler.



Figure 6 - Project by Lisa

emphasized the distinct characters of places in which each generation of the student's family has lived. Further, the student used the metaphor and form of a suitcase to highlight the constant migration of the family. The project relied on multiple ways of articulating the different stages of the family's migration and the distinct urban and environmental contexts. A pullout map of Irish farms represents the earlier life of the grandmother. A windshield view of freeway traffic symbolized the new mobility of the second generation and the context of industrialization and urbanization. Finally, an opening in the box that allowed one to reach in and touch the rocks inside symbolized the proximity of nature in the Northwest where the family currently lives. The tactile qualities of the model and its complex symbolism unfold the multiple dimensions of the family's migration and the transformation of individual lives in relation to landscapes.

Puzzle Garden (See Figure 5.)

When I was first presented with this assignment, I was doubtful that I would find any similarities between the landscapes of three very different generations of my family. First of all, my grandmother's garden was in Tokyo, Japan and my garden is in the United States... However, as I brainstormed the qualities of the three landscapes, I found that there were many interesting commonalities. For this reason, I chose to format my collage as one garden, with three separate parts because while the gardens are very different, they also have many similarities that link them together.

Instead of focusing only on the differences between generations and places, this student was compelled by a discovery of commonalities that connect the gardens of different generations. In the model, the gardens can be displayed independently or as a whole. The similarities and differences are found in the use of similar colors despite different plant palettes. Privacy is highlighted in all gardens through the use of high walls, fences, and hedges. All gardens are also highly controlled by design. Finally, all of the gardens were taken care by female members of the households that represented another common thread through the difference generations. The project highlighted both the continuity and transformation of culture through generations. It probed into the connections of cultural practice and everyday lives of families.

Garden of Threads (See Figure 6.)

...Vaneta needed only her family and a garden to call a room a home. She canned what she could, and always had berries sugared for after supper... Don moved as far away from the Midwest as the air force would take him...The stepping stones home were kept shiny with the travel-privileges a career with the airline afford... The path I have followed is my heart's—well lit by my parent's support, and my grandparent's example and continued struggle. I realize the opportunities my father's lifestyle has afforded me, but feel mine more reflects my grandparents' simplicity.

Similar to the previous project, this student also used garden as the physical and symbolic space of connection between different generations of her family. However, instead of individually representing the different gardens, the student chose to create one garden/object with elements that represent traces and reminders from each generation. Instead of clearly demarcating the different generations, the model allowed one to ponder and wander through a collection of objects to reconstruct memories and connections. The model does not highlight any particular storyline. Instead, it underscored the complexity of movement, struggles, differences, and affinity between the generations.

Windows on the Land (See Figure 7.)

From generation to generation, the landscapes, which have been home to my family, have varied in climate and population density. However, the landscapes themselves have changed only minutely in comparison to how the different generations have viewed and related to them. This piece suggests that, the landscape itself changes little between generation, but the way each generation see and relates to the landscape is what changes. Each generation views the world through it's own set of values, experiences, and preconceptions, or it's own pane of glass.

Unlike many others whose families have experienced dramatic environmental and physical changes through generations, this student responded with how different generations of his family have lived on similar agricultural and rural environment, but have viewed and interacted with the environment in different ways. The student chose various organic materials to represent the landscape, and an apparatus of lenses and glasses to represent the different views toward the landscape. The different tones of glass further underscored the differences in the constructs of and connections to the land. Though the concept is simple and direct, the different elements in the model form a complex dialogue between physical landscape and differences in human perceptions and cultural values. It underscored the diversity of values even within the same environment.

Discussion

The six selected projects represent a broad and diverse range of student responses to the studio assignment. As evident above, the assignment produces a multitude of outcomes that are strongly connected to the understanding of diversity in design and design education. The following is a discussion of the specific outcomes.

De-essentialization – First, the personal experiences and family histories allow the discussion of cultural and environmental differences to be grounded in actual experiences and encounters. The understanding of diversity and difference emerged from both a comparison between the students' projects and the students' own individual reflections. The grounded reflection and understanding helps to de-essentialize the traditional categories of race, gender, and ethnicity, and immigrants vs. non-immigrants. The process of de-essentialization exposed students to the complexity and richness of social and cultural experiences. It embraces a broader and

more nuanced understanding of diversity in the everyday environment.

Dynamic Diversity – The intergenerational framework of the assignment helps to highlight the dynamic nature of social and environmental changes that are integral to an understanding of diversity in society. Overlapping of generational experiences in particular reinforces an understanding of the processes of change and continuity. Projects including ‘Puzzle Garden’ and ‘Memory Overlays’ underscored the overlapping and hybridized conditions that are important in generating a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of diversity.

Space and Culture – The personal stories as presented in the projects provide grounds for understanding cultural difference, transformation, and particularly the relationship between social and spatial changes. Projects such as ‘Behind Urbanization’ and ‘Suitcase/Shadow Box’ provide useful examples to discuss the connection between social and environmental changes and to examine the broader forces and individual choices that influence the making of space and everyday environment.

Landscape – The selected projects have demonstrated the power of landscape as a medium for understanding social and environmental changes. Through narratives, memories, and physical changes, landscapes embody individuals’ relationships with the environment and the locality. The range of student projects helps to highlight diverse variations of such relationships.

Design with Diversity – In addition to generating greater understandings of diversity, the assignment provides an opportunity for the students to engage in experimentation in expression and interpretation of diversity through design. The selected projects show a wide range of strategies that address specific approaches to interpretations and expressions, and provide opportunities for discussion in the studio. They allow the issues of diversity to be addressed in the making of objects and space.

Differences and Commonalities – In de-essentializing traditional cultural and ethnic categories and boundaries, the projects also allow students to examine both commonalities and differences in their own experiences. In addition to identifying diversity and differences, it allowed them to identify common threads despite the apparent differences. Projects such as ‘Puzzle Garden’ and ‘Memory Overlays’ are exemplary in this respect. The collection of projects also allow for comparison across projects to recognize linkages and parallels among the different projects.

Questions of Pedagogy – The outcomes of the assignment raise important questions concerning the learning of diversity in design education. How do we teach diversity without necessarily imposing our values on the students? How do we ground our teaching in the everyday experience that students can understand and fully appreciate? The outcomes of the assignment show that rather than as knowledge to be imparted, understanding of diversity is negotiated and actively constructed in studios and classrooms by engaging the students through reflections of their own background and experiences.

Variables for Replication – Can the ‘Biographical Landscape’ assignment be replicated in other contexts? What are the variables for its effectiveness? Compared to the program at Berkeley where a similar assignment was first offered, the student body at University of Washington is less diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. However, the condition did not impede the effectiveness of the assignment in addressing awareness and understanding of diversity in design and the everyday environment. Nevertheless, the degree of ethnic diversity in the student body does influence the content of discussion as it has a direct influence on the substance of student projects. Besides the students’ background, the faculty and instructors’ input and facilitation in the class discussion can also become critical, particularly in linking individual experiences and stories to broader design and socio-political discourses and also in making appropriate comparisons across different projects.

Reflection: Diversity and Everyday Landscape

The everyday landscapes — places and spaces, inhabited and remembered — contain a wealth of meanings and perspectives that constitute the various manifestations of diversity. The diversity in the environment and everyday life are embedded in family histories and personal experiences to be recognized, recollected, and understood. As evident in the students’ projects shown here, landscapes provide a powerful medium to examine diversity as embedded in the everyday life and environment, including differences in identities, values, cultures, and worldviews. As the demographic makeup of the society and educational institutions



Figure 7 - Project by Benjamin Barrett.

continue to shift and become ever more diversified, the students' own background and experience can provide a wealth of materials for examination, comparison, and learning. As the society and culture continue to undergo changes, the collection of projects that reflects the students' own experiences and encounters provide a fertile ground from which reciprocal and dynamic understanding of diversity can begin to emerge. As a beginning design exercise, the outcomes of the assignment provide a foundation in which social issues, environmental processes, and design practice can be reconnected and re-examined. In an assignment such as the 'Biographical Landscape,' diversity can become both a starting point and an agenda for design education.

NOTES

1 Sandercock, Leonie. *Toward Cosmopolis: Planning for Multicultural Cities*. (Chichester, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1998); Qadeer, Mohammad A. "Pluralistic Planning for Multicultural Cities: the Canadian Practice." *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Autumn 1997, 63/4 (1997): 481-494.

2 Umemmoto, K. "Walking in Another's Shoes: Epistemological Challenges in Participatory Planning." *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 21 (2001): 17-31; de Souza Briggs, Xavier. "Doing Democracy Up-Close: Culture, Power, and Communication in Community Building." *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 18 (1998): 1-13.

3 Hou, Jeffrey and Amy Tanner. "Constructed Identities and Contested Space in Seattle's Chinatown-International District." CELA 2002 Conference Proceedings. Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture Conference. SUNY, Syracuse, New York. September 25-27, 2002

4 See Anthony, Kathryn H. "Designing for Diversity: Implications for Architectural Education in the Twenty-first Century." *Journal of Architectural Education*, 55/4 (2002): 257-267; Groat, Linda N. and Sherry Ahrentzen. "Reconceptualizing Architectural Education for a More Diverse Future: Perceptions and Visions of Architectural Students." *Journal of Architectural Education*, 49/3 (1996): 166-183.

5 Anthony, Kathryn H. and Bradford C. Grant. "Gender and Multiculturalism in Architectural Education." *Journal of Architectural Education*, 47/1 (1993): 2.

6 Dutton, Thomas A. (ed). *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and Pedagogy*. New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1991.

7 For examples of courses, see Feigenberg, 1991; Ward, 1991; Leavitt, 1991. For discussion of studio experiences, see Diaz, Buss, Tircuit, 1991; Willenbrock, 1991.

8 The author was once a Graduate Student Instructor for the class at Berkeley from 1999 to 2000. See Hou, Jeffrey. Learning from Cultural Space: Introducing Multiplicity of Space and Spatial Processes in Beginning Design. *The Predicament of Beginning: Proceedings of the 18th National Conference on the Beginning Design Students*. Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, p. 179-184, 2002.

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