

Translations from Drawing to Seeing

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Introduction

This paper discusses a methodological approach to bridging the gap between analytical and perceptual approaches in the understanding of site and context by 3rd-year undergraduate architectural design students, using the moment of the site visit as a hinge point between these two modes of thinking, documentation, and discovery. If abstraction is a challenge for beginning design students in matters of design composition, it is perhaps an even greater challenge for them when addressing analytical thinking applied to the understanding of concrete sites. For much of the students' first two years at the University of Florida this challenge is largely addressed in the studio curriculum by giving them conceptual, or rather unvisitable sites. The challenge often in the 3rd year is to balance the appreciation of the site visit as the opportunity to provide new understandings of site and context with the further development of their skills in analysis and abstraction, now applied to an urban context.

The approach to site analysis herein described and documented came about due to a change in the class schedule necessitating one project instead of two for the semester with a site visit in the third week. Given the delay of the site visit to the beginning of the project, the change presented an opportunity to rethink how students understand site and learn larger lessons of urban context, in this case a medium-scale Eastern US coastal city – Charleston, South Carolina – with a pre-industrial past and complex history and development. In previous years the site visit was made at the very initiation of the second project, and while a preliminary project gave them an introduction to the concepts and ideas of urban issues, students made the trip to visit the city and the site of intervention armed with their camera and sketchbook, but little conceptual framework to guide them in their understanding of the particular context.

"On Exactitude in Science," is a single paragraph parable by Jorge Luis Borges in which the conflation of a map with the territory it describes is taken to represent the hubris of the analytical mode of discovery over knowledge of the world gained through direct experience and perception:

...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

-J. A. Suárez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lérida, 1658¹

In a passage from his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard upends Jorge Luis Borges' tale: "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it" Baudrillard writes, "Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA – it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own."²

The studio pedagogy revisited this historical dialectic in reverse: students began by analyzing the urban context from their studio through research and documentation. The research led to a mapping construct of the various systems and structures of the urban fabric, heightening their abstraction in order to draw out patterns and interrelationships. Only after this process was completed did the students undertake a trip to visit the site itself. The direct observation and documentation gathered during this visit provided a counterpoint

to the previous larger scale analyses, provoking alternative mapping techniques that sought to represent qualities as directly perceived. Rather than becoming diametrically opposed, the two approaches became complimentary and interdependent: in visiting the site and returning to the studio students were able to better speculate on the effects of urban systems and the built environment as they related to perception; at the same time there was the opportunity to understand, document, and map direct observations as part of larger systems of experience rather than isolated moments.

Mappings / Two-Dimensional

To begin the process students were assigned to produce a first mapping at 1:800 scale or smaller. In introducing the assignment, space and edge were presented as underlying concepts around which students might frame various questions regarding the urban context. Beyond these two concepts various “strata” were presented as suggested entry points for investigation: scale, datum, module/ repetition, axes, apertures/thresholds, movement (mode, speed, trajectory, itinerary, path), views (orientation, proportion, distance), and public/private. Presented and discussed in parallel were a variety of graphic techniques: processes of abstraction, color, tone, line weight, transparency, contrast, gradation, framing, and spatial and physical realignment or juxtaposition (Fig. 1,2).

The term “diagram” was specifically eschewed in studio discussions due to both the tremendous baggage the word has accumulated over the past decades in architectural theory, and the tendency for beginning design students to view the diagram as something definitive, something that explains what is already known. Instead the drawing investigations were termed just that – “investigations” – or alternatively “analytical drawings”. The emphasis was important: students were asked not to prove a particular hypothesis about the city but rather to set in motion an investigative process by asking questions and developing a graphic vocabulary for recording observations. Through successive iterations interspersed with individual and group discussions students developed their own graphic analysis and language.



Fig. 1. Two-Dimensional Mapping: Spatial Porosity. Elizabeth Cronin.

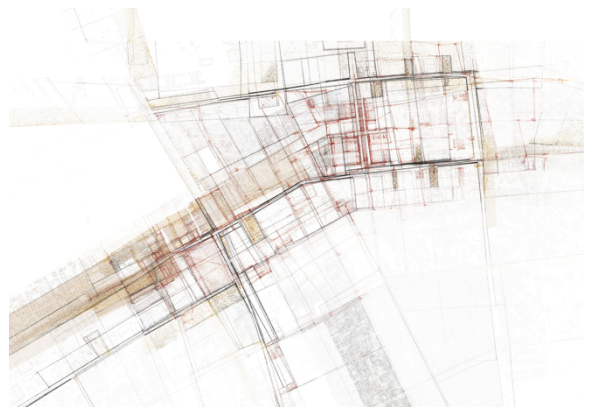


Fig. 2. Two-Dimensional Mapping: Car + Pedestrian. Dijana Milenov.

Mappings/Two+ Dimensional

With the first mapping complete students were asked to produce a second mapping at 1:500 or larger, and to move beyond two dimensions. In addition to the three-dimensional conventions of axonometric and perspective, alternatives of time, variables, and layered information were discussed as the possible added dimensional information. At this stage students were encouraged to be more speculative and proactive in their techniques of analysis and representation, recalling Delueze and Guattari's invocation of the power of the map:

Make a map, not a tracing... What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious... The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is

*detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation*³ (Fig. 3,4).

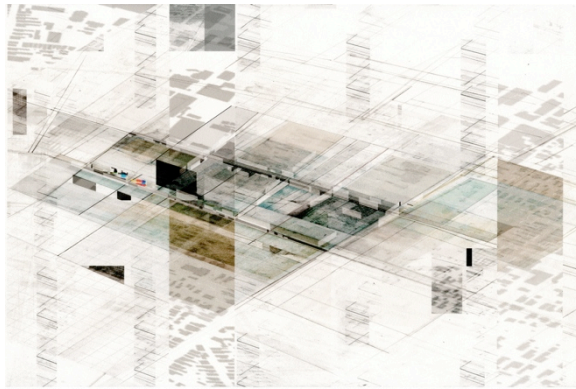


Fig. 3. 2+ Dimensional Mapping: Street Edges. Tessira Crawford.

History became an important question in the development of the analysis. Charleston is the second-oldest city in the southeastern United States. Because the students generally come from geographies – various parts of the state of Florida – with comparatively less history, the potential was for the students to become overwhelmed by specific historical facts at the expense of systemic observations. In light of this background, students were neither encouraged nor dissuaded from investigating history at the beginning of the analysis, but left to their own inclinations. A lecture was then given following two weeks of their initial analysis and closely before the site visit that provided an historical overview to the city and its development. The lecture provided confirmation for some students' analyses and new trajectories for others.

As students were asked to investigate at a larger scale and beyond the plan view they increasingly came to utilize online maps and the attendant perspectival street views offered through online databases to verify and make further inferences of planimetric data. Their reliance on this imaging construct became the most potent manifestation of the map preceding the territory, or rather not the map, but a simulated reality through the perspectival lens of the street view locked to the 16:9 aspect ratio of the computer screen. The map not only preceded the territory, but advanced it.

Furthermore, the reliance on this means of analysis at once extended an understanding of site remotely while furthering the scopic hegemony of the visual over other methods of experience.⁴

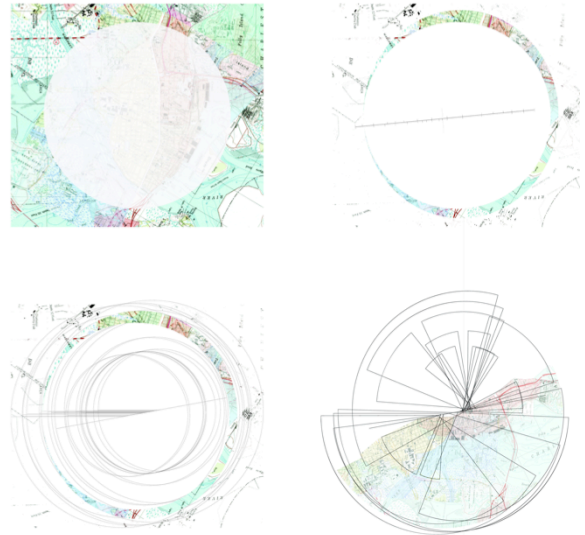


Fig. 4. 2+ Dimensional Mapping: Centripetal Space. Sasha Leon.

The Territory and Post-Site Visit Perceptual Mappings

After two weeks of analysis and several mappings produced, the trip to visit the site and urban context was highly anticipated. If, to continue the metaphor, the map preceded the territory, it made the direct experience of the territory even more highly anticipated. The site visit itself was interesting for the experience of the uncanny the students experienced: a dissonance was expressed by the students between what they thought they knew about the site and their actual experience of it. Two principle impressions resonated with the students based upon their (pre)conceptions: one, the dimensions and distances of the urban fabric were smaller; and two, space was more contiguous and less contained than what they had ascertained from their mediated interpretation.

Once arrived at the "territory" with a divergent understanding, some students sought alternative ways of documenting the city and its fabric. Interestingly, the work tended towards ever greater abstraction, but in ways that sought a more direct documentation of experience. Many of the students expressed dissatisfaction with

the spatial documentation of the photographic lens, finding the format suspect. Instead, a number sought documentation in sound, wanderings, or textures. Nevertheless, their documentation while at the site in some cases became highly mediated, relying not only on photographic recording but video, sound recording, and GPS mapping which they developed and analyzed further upon their return to studio. The work produced a third analysis, described this time as a perceptual map or construct (Fig. 5).

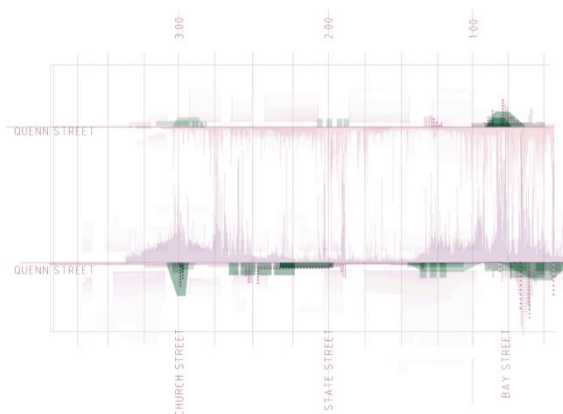


Fig. 5. Perceptual Map: Sound Transect. Adam Mahardy.

Prospective/Perspective Constructs

As a further extension of their observations and as a bridge between analytical and prospective modes of thinking and working, students were assigned to produce perspectival constructs for the specific site. As a transitional exercise, the mission of the design intervention was presented to the students – an arts institute – without the specifics of the program. The intention was for students to act upon their analytical and perceptual work before being bombarded by the specifics and minutia of program (Fig. 6,7).

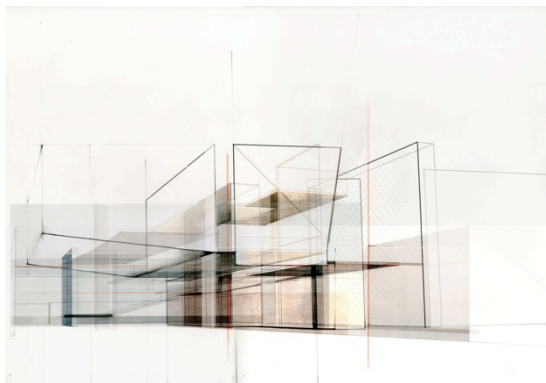


Fig. 6. Perspectival Construct: Street Edge Study. Colin Cobia.

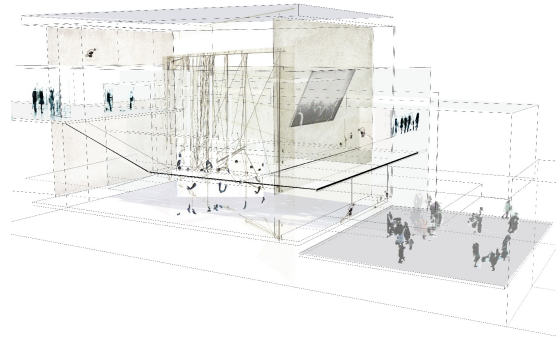


Fig. 7. Perspectival Construct: Urban Performance. Sasha Leon.

Conclusions

The practice of architecture involves the skill and development of vastly different modes of thinking and visual production. For the beginning design student and the instructor tasked with this pedagogical goal the breadth of this scope can be rather daunting. The preceding documentation has been an experiment and speculation on the breaking down and sequencing of such pedagogical goals as they relate to analytical and perceptual understandings and documentations of site and context into sequential frameworks for students to explore.

By preceding the site visit with extensive analysis through abstract yet directed graphic techniques, students achieved a much greater yet more nuanced understanding of the site and its' context. Nevertheless, no one-to-one relation between the analytical artifact – or map – and the phenomenon – or territory – occurred. Rather a slippage occurred between the map and the territory that became the basis for further constructs that in general sought to document the immediacy of the site and context.

The question arises as to whether an unmediated experience of site may be obtainable or even desirable in the current age of technology. Rather than an either/or proposition, recent technological developments suggest the dialectic may resolve itself in the further collapse of the map into the territory to the point that the two may soon no longer be distinguished. Borges and Baudrillard become simultaneous in how reality is perceived and documented.⁵

Notes

¹ Jorge Luis Borges. "On Exactitude in Science" in *Collected Fictions*. Viking Penguin: New York, NY. 1998. p. 325. Translated by Andrew Hurley.

² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, MI. 1995. p. 2. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser.

³ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN. 1987. p. 12.

⁴ See Jay, Martin "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" in *Vision and Visuality*. Dia Art Foundation: New York, NY. 1988. p 3-23.

⁵ See augmented reality projects such as Google Glass,