SHAKING HANDS WITH THE LANDSCAPE: INTEGRATING PERCEPTUALIST THEORY INTO A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE STUDIO CURRICULUM

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1 ABSTRACT
The paper introduces and provides a rationale for an interpretation of perceptualist, drawing-intensive methods of site engagement for a landscape architecture studio, and recounts some of the successes and the challenges of our approach. The studio drew on perceptualist theory as the means for understanding patterns, perceptions and processes on the Mt. Kessler Preserve in Fayetteville, Arkansas, a newly conserved 400 acre public resource. According to perceptualist theory, subsequent qualitative and quantitative data and knowledge enrich and frame phenomenological impressions. As is becoming more commonly recognized in landscape education, when a 'checklist' approach to site inventory and analysis is adopted there may be little thought to the sensorial responses a site elicits. However, the discrete elements that make up a checklist inventory are, in fact, overlays, interactions, or reinforcements that combine with aesthetic perceptions to define landscape character. This studio emphasized the importance of personal perceptions and reflections on what is 'special' about a landscape, with the objectives of developing a deeper understanding and demonstrating that objective knowledge will enrich and frame our perceptions. Since landscape architects are often solely responsible for communicating the aesthetic value of a landscape, the students were instructed in various methods of communicating poetics of place including site-sketching, temporary land-art installations, painting, composite analog/digital graphics, and character mapping. While the studio work itself was well-received by both art galleries and local land conservation organizations, and has catalyzed some important curricula changes within our unit, the approach was not without its challenges. The paper reports on some of the benefits and challenges of the shift in approach, while also suggesting possible areas for further modifications to practice to better incorporate perceptualism into landscape studios.

1.1 Keywords
perceptualist drawing, reflective interpretation, landscape architecture studio, phenomenology
2 INTRODUCTION

This paper presents work from a vertical landscape architecture studio conducted in fall 2014 at the Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design, University of Arkansas. The paper introduces and provides a rationale for our interpretation of a perceptualist method of site engagement and recounts some of the successes and challenges of adopting this phenomenological and drawing-intensive approach. The paper recounts no less than a sea-change in the approach and sensibility of a landscape faculty and reinforces the importance of, not only engagement with literature, but also with colleagues and peers in order to inform and develop design pedagogical practice. In a meta-sense, the paper—and the volume of which it is a part—makes a case for the importance of scholarly design communities, conferences and proceedings.

We were tasked with creating a pedagogy that could accommodate a range of design experience across three year levels of landscape architecture studios. The course needed to be accessible to the junior students but at the same time avoid redundancy and introduce hitherto unexplored skill-sets and sensibilities to their senior classmates. We alighted on the idea that we should task the students with a chiefly phenomenological exercise that utilized a common ability—the ability to experience your surroundings through the senses. Perception (use of the senses) as well as comprehension (understanding) has been posited as the key foundations for allowing a full aesthetic experience of a landscape (Bell, 2012). Perhaps the first, and most obvious benefit of taking a perceptual approach to site understanding, is that it utilizes, and is heavily grounded in, the sensory faculties common to most of us, rather than a rational comprehension that may require a good deal of technical expertise. The studio site was the Mount Kessler reserve some three miles from the campus and 1,500 acres in size. It is a rich, complex site; a mosaic of natural and cultural systems and phenomena, loaded with significance, meaning and memory—and potentially bewildering for students. How does one grapple with the complexity of a site like this? How does a student gain a toe-hold in understanding what this place is about; what makes it special; and what should the priorities for action be? Before moving on, it is worth pointing out that, as we move through the theoretical underpinnings of the work, sites that are local and easily accessible to a studio (either through proximity to the campus or through residential programs) may be the best candidates for this type of perceptual engagement. This is not a trivial matter, when considering the pressures for studios to address exotic, remote sites for high-profile, speculative competition exercises or similar.

2.1 Landscape architecture’s relationship with the perceptual

In Thomas Riedelsheimer’s 2001 documentary Rivers and Tides, Andy Goldsworthy Working with Time, the artist’s method is introduced—in his own words—as shaking hands with a landscape. That is, free of any a priori understanding of the natural or cultural processes at work, Goldsworthy responds to the patterns and perceptions he experiences that are then made manifest in his work: grounded in the nuances and specifics of that place. Often the sensory inputs that gives form to the works subsequently leads to a curiosity about what processes—be they hydrological, ecological, climatological or anthropomorphic—give rise to these patterns. The land-artists’ interest in giving proposals in the poetics or drama of place has, at different times, been shared with the profession of landscape architecture. The garden designers of the 18th-century English Landscape School are often considered in this light, as they daringly turned their back on the established, formal tastes of the day that relied heavily on imposed geometries and axial relationships. Of course, the beautiful, picturesque and sublime landscapes of the English School were, in themselves, carefully staged scenes of artifice. For example William Kent’s landscapes drew on a background in set design to create evocative painterly scenes, but they were built off of the visual possibilities of the pre-existing landscape. Later, Humphrey Repton’s “Red Books” of water-colored scenes demonstrated the before and after design conditions for client approval. Like Kent and Lancelot Brown’s great garden estates, Repton’s plans were at least cognizant of the aesthetic potential of the landscape as it was found by the designer, what Brown called its inherent ‘capability’, a term he used so often it became his sobriquet.

By the close of the 20th century, landscape architecture’s interest in the visual romance of the land, its poetry and sensory appeal, has been often supplanted by a more codified approach. In his 1969 book Design With Nature, Ian McHarg posited that landscape interventions have to be founded in a full understanding of the myriad and layered but quantifiable characteristics of the land, beginning with the fundamentals of geology and working up to cultural patterns such as economics and land-use—though not the more nuanced facets of the social sciences (Farr, 2008). Furthermore, for all the careful construction of these layers, and despite the calls of contemporaries such as Aldo Leopold (1949) and Rachel Carson (1962)
to consider the wonder and romance of the environment, and others to understand place (for example, see Hiss, 1990), there is little room in this McHargian model for aesthetics. This more rational mode of site understanding has proved pernicious to other approaches to the reading and subsequent shaping of the landscape and a more holistic ecological literacy (Orr, 1992; see also Steiner, 2008). As suggested by James Corner (1991):

“It is not unfair to say that contemporary theory and practice [of landscape architecture] have all but lost their metaphysical and mythopoetic dimensions, promoting a landscape architecture of primarily prosaic and technical construction.”

This inventorial or checklist approach to comprehending a landscape aligns with the ‘integrationist’ or ‘cognitive’ school of aesthetic thought: that the scientific and historical underpinnings of a landscape must be understood in order for the viewer to appreciate natural and cultural landscapes and form an aesthetic response (Bell, 2012; Carlson, 2002; Rose, 1976; and Willard, 1980). This view contrasts with ‘perceptualist’ aesthetic persuasion, which holds that one’s initial aesthetic response to a landscape, either positive or negative, is not reliant upon an intellectual understanding, but that subsequently accumulated knowledge of site’s history, ecology, or other factors may alter or enrich the initial aesthetic perception (Bell, 2012). As instructors preparing for this studio we made the self-realization that we had all been trained in a more McHargian, integrationist approach to understanding of site analysis, with initial aesthetic perceptions minimalized, at best, or even not permitted to form due to being immediately immersed into a site’s inner workings and program suitability at the beginning of a project. We also realized that we, in turn, had been placing a similar emphasis in our own studios, and that while we had found this method valuable in its ability to gather and sort large data sets, we also observed that a primary focus on the quantifiable led to joyless studios with little emotional resonance between the students and the place; and the dreaded “analysis paralysis,” that left students with little inspiration from which to transition from the large amount of information they had collected about a site into a design. At the same time, we were aware of the increasingly poetic and perceptual approaches being adopted elsewhere as reported by Meyer (2005), and through our first-hand attendance at conferences and guest lecturing at other landscape architecture and design institutions. We were especially influenced by the writings on the four trace elements of landscape architecture (Girot, 1999), and on creating knowledge as expounded by Seggeren et al. (2008) who suggest that:

“The ‘essence’, the character of a space must initially be approximated [by students] through intuitive analysis providing access to its complexity and a first overall expression”

As an educational experiment, we decided our vertical studio should emphasize the value of initial, uniformed aesthetic perceptions. We also wished to leverage and deepen our existing faculty expertise and interest in site-drawing which we recognized as a hugely important tool for cementing and communicating initial and developing understanding of place. Before moving on to a more detailed re-telling of our studio approach, it is worth summarizing the importance of site drawing, in particular its relationship with the understanding of place.

2.2 Place and place drawing

The traditional cartographic or spatial map—a typical product of the aforementioned McHargian approach to site evaluation and understanding—provides a great deal of objective and spatial (space) information. Understanding of place however, is quite different (Relph 1976). Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980) describes place as an amalgam of physical space, experienced phenomena and a perceived ‘spirit of place’. In describing the character of a landscape, Norberg-Schulz suggests a litmus test of language: can the landscape be described through nouns, prepositions and rich adjectives? If not, one is unlikely to have gained a full understanding of the landscape. In this context, McHargian layers of data and maps may be an inadequate starting point for site understanding, and Elizabeth Meyer (2005) notes a shift among environmental designers toward site readings and first-hand interpretations of place as a primary source for design inspiration. In particular, drawing in-situ allows the site reader to better commit what is being sensed and observed to memory, and access tacit emotions (Crowe & Laseau 1984; Graves 2012). When created
on-site, especially during the initial exposure to a place, drawings have the potential to capture an evocative spirit of place replete with deeply personal information on the spatial and characterful qualities of the land. In accordance with perceptualist theory, initial forays into a landscape can provoke uniquely insightful and impactful impressions on the reader, and this period can be especially powerful in stirring the reader's sense of creativity (Von Seggern et al. 2008) and curiosity (Bell 2012) in much the same way as reported in Riedelsheimer’s aforementioned documentary on Andy Goldsworthy. In service to encouraging spontaneous recording of impressions and feelings, and privileging observation and presence, rather than craft and accuracy, site drawings can (should) be impressionistic and abstract, rather than literal and representational (Graves 2012). Still, they are very much grounded in a direct, personal understanding of place based on the senses and being present in the landscape.

3 STUDIO APPROACH

Our studio used a series of scaffolded projects, introducing skills that built on each other through the semester. This included four projects focused on Mt. Kessler: 1) an initial perceptualist reading of the landscape, including a land art installation; 2) a project integrating perceptualist character readings with cultural, historical and natural features; 3) a group character mapping of the entire site; and 4) site designs for various areas of Mt. Kessler. Each of these projects integrated skills and helped build dispositions in students that embodied the value of their aesthetic readings of the landscape, including how these perceptual understandings ultimately strengthened their site design.

For the 2014 vertical studio we attempted to break from the more traditional, inventorial method of site inventory and analysis and instead charged our students with adopting an initial visceral, immersive approach to understanding the landscape. We reassured them that there is no shame in documenting one’s own impressions and feelings in a site; to shake hands with a landscape and recognize its inherent patterns of light, texture, color and mood as an entry to identifying which underlying processes might be paramount in shaping the place, and which need to be considered through design and management. For this reason, information about the project site was withheld from the students from the onset of the studio until the initial site visit was made; the aim was to help students focus purely on their personal perceptions and aesthetic responses to the Mt. Kessler landscape, free of possible biases created by a priori knowledge of the site’s ecology and history, or even the intentions of the studio with regard to program and outcomes. During the initial visit students hiked up the mountain and the first project was introduced. After camping that night on the mountain, students explored the following morning on their own, tasked with filling a 24” x 240” paper roll with drawings on site, causing them to have to literally sketch the land, imbuing their work with the qualities of their subject (see Figure 1). They were asked to communicate the patterns and moods they perceived, cognizant of what they sensed and imagined around them.
Figure 1. Students were tasked to communicate initial perceptions of patterns on Mt. Kessler through loose, abstract sketches on a large roll (left). Verbal explanation of these observations was then shared back in the classroom (right) (2014). Photos by authors.

The following week students returned repeatedly to the mountain as they sought suitable locations to create an ephemeral art installation, a la Goldsworthy, from found objects (see Figure 2). Rather than integrationist or cognitive, this approach again aligned with perceptualist aesthetic theory, which posits that a true and authentic initial appreciation of a landscape requires an exposure to ‘free beauty’ and an absence of ‘will’; and that a more prosaic understanding compromises our abilities to ‘lose ourselves’ and fully appreciate our surroundings (Bell, 2012). These initial forays onto site has been operationalized by French landscape architect and academic Christophe Girot as the acts of “landing and grounding”; arrival at a place and the formation of intuitive impressions, followed by discovery and understanding through study, immersion, orientation and rootedness (Girot, 1999).

Figure 2. Observed patterns were made explicit through temporary art installations on the mountain (2014). Photos by authors.

Following this initial reading, we immersed our students in more traditional site inventorial procedures, deeply studying the landscape character that is a result of cultural, historical and natural features, patterns, and phenomena that shaped the site (Hough, 1990). Efforts included class and on-site
meetings with residents, scientists, historians, advocacy groups, officials, and designers, coupled with data-gathering exercises that included additional site visits and topical reviews of literature and other available forms of documentation. For the subsequent project students were asked to identify areas of distinct character on the mountain, based on their personal aesthetic perception, and then learn all they could about the influences that contributed to that character. The primary product of this assignment was again an artwork; a painting on a 24” x 36” canvas that communicated the chosen character and its influences in an abstract way (see Figure 3). The goal of this painting (and the students’ accompanying sketches, writings and verbal presentations) was to convey the essence of the site’s character, which was a convergence of their perceptual/aesthetic, natural, and historical/cultural observations, determining which aspects contribute most strongly to its unique sense of place or genius loci (Norberg-Schulz 1980).

Figure 3. Site character was conveyed through abstract painting, such as the reverence of a grove (left), the expanse of a vista (center), and the fragility of a shale barren (right) (2014). Paintings by Hillary Ramsay, Hannah Moll and Cameron Bayles.

The layering of site knowledge with emotional response increased with the subsequent project, when the class was divided into groups and asked to create landscape character maps of the entire mountain, supplemented by mixed analog/digital artworks and a supporting report that explained the cultural and natural features that contributed to the character of zones (see Figure 4). We discussed with students how aesthetic character understanding varies from person to person, and how this variation has caused consternation in landscape architecture with regard to whether an aesthetically derived understanding of the landscape is as valuable and robust as the understanding offered through disciplines from the natural and social sciences. We argued that we, as landscape architects, can and should reclaim that territory and that our aesthetic sense is vitally important for understanding the character of the landscape. However, as this project continued to demonstrate, it is equally important to broaden these emotive readings with a deep knowledge of the natural processes and cultural history of a site. In order to gain such a comprehensive understanding of character, students literally went deep into the site. They hiked far off trail, spending many hours over multiple days trying to extract an aesthetic reading of character and a distinct sense of place for each zone. These earnest efforts resulted in a layered representations and mapping of Mt. Kessler’s character that had previously been unexplored and/or undocumented.
Finally, in the concluding Mt. Kessler project, we asked each student to explore a design intervention—in the form of trail heads, new trail alignments and nodal destination points—that would facilitate user needs without compromising site character or the physical and cultural conditions that contributed to it. In keeping with the pedagogical trajectory, both the design solutions and the analog and digital graphics used to convey them were expected to communicate the perceptual characteristics of the site (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. A sensitive design proposal that balances site character with user needs and physical and cultural data (2014). Drawings by Adel Vaughn.
4 FINDINGS

4.1 Landscape representation: from static scenery to emotional reading and palimpsest

The aforementioned disciplinary earnestness that has seen the rise of the inventorial approach to site understanding—the fear of being seen as, at best imprecise, and worst whimsical—might be said to have a corollary in the preciousness of hand-drawing used to record place: photo-real, literal, static and finite; digestible at a single glance. These drawings can require great craft and patience, but minimal reflection on what is being drawn and why and risks the over-emphasis of visual composition. In effect these drawings—especially if created off-site and from photographs—represent a compromised aesthetic reading of the landscape, where comprehension of space is privileged over perceptual engagement and communication. These types of drawings had, heretofore, been commonly used by students within the unit, along with photography to communicate studio project sites’ character.

With regard to photography, Rhode & Kendle (1994) have warned of its use in photography in the recording of aesthetic reactions; the over-reliance—and potential bias—of apparent visual composition as selected, cropped and framed by the photographer in lieu of a fuller perceptual or sensorial reading. In the intervening quarter of a century, the literature on landscape and site representation has broadened the understood potential of site-photography, to include more nuanced and reflective modes (see, for example Lickwar & Crawford, 2014 and Werner, 2008). Hand-drawing too, can evolve to be looser and more personal and, crucially, undertaken on site while immersed in the landscape and cognizant of non-visual patterns and perceptions. In the ‘Mt. Kessler Studio’ the drawings produced by our students were simply a means to an end, an artifact of reflection, contemplation and observation, an aide-memoir. As suggested by Carr (2016) and Graves (2012), some of the principal benefits of hand (as opposed to digital) drawing is the consolidation of memories of the where, the why and the how of the drawing, and access to tacit knowledge, experience and emotion. By charging our students with the task of producing drawings while immersed in the landscape, and especially while observant and cognizant of their internal moods and perceptions, the emotional and memorial qualities of their drawings were amplified still further.

What was being drawn by our students was so inherently complex and difficult to understand—a landscape formed over eons and an individual’s sensorial response to it—that it is fitting that the drawings were usually incomprehensible on first reading, and it is telling that they only became clear once accompanied by a verbal explanation; these are deeply personal drawings; messy, abstract, open-ended, layered (see Figure 1). Often-times the students mixed site materials—rain, grass, mud, and so on—into their drawings, rightly recognizing that nothing represents the physicality of the landscape better than the landscape itself. That is not to say that these initial impressions—conveyed by the in-situ drawings—was all that was required of the students. According to perceptualist theory, “our perception stops at the perceptual surface and this defines the limits of the initial aesthetic judgement” (Bell, 2012, p 68). What the students gained through their initial efforts however, was a curiosity—much like that demonstrated by the film on Andy Goldsworthy—that then fired their investigations into non-perceptual factors: ecology, history, etc., and then deepened their appreciation of the landscape. We encouraged the students to maintain the mode of communication through drawing, painting and flat-work, layering information about geology, ecology and culture with aesthetic impressions to create pieces that were highly evocative of the site (see Figure 3). These paintings act as metaphor for the landscape itself—a palimpsest rather than scenery.

The deeply personal nature of these works imbued them with a soulfulness and, inevitably, their evocative and poetic nature was appreciated not just by the instructors, but through exhibitions and display. The work particularly resonated with users of Mt. Kessler who found their personal experiences of the place better reflected in the abstract form. Additionally, the students’ deep character readings and mapping became a contribution to the study of Mt. Kessler not seen heretofore. The validity of our approach was also reinforced by the depth of understanding gained by the students. In their endeavor to recognize the complexity and layering of natural, cultural and perceptual patterns on the mountain, as a basis for subsequent design proposals, the class created robust character maps of sufficient quality to be adopted as advisory documentation by the National Park Service, who was assisting the city of Fayetteville and advocacy groups in planning efforts for the new Mt. Kessler Reserve (see Figure 4).

The final design proposals for the mountain were uncommonly sensitive and informed, with material and form choices imbued with a sense of place, ephemerality and even whimsy. One student was drawn to
a clearing at the top of the mountain, initially attracted by its perceived functions as a welcome gathering spot for hikers who had reached their destination and as a node for the network of trails that converged at the summit. The student’s aesthetic perceptions of the site were deepened and altered upon learning that the clearing was a naturally formed shale barren, an extremely fragile and rare ecosystem in the Ozark Mountains. His proposed design intervention was a large wooden platform that was suspended above the forested edge of shale barren, permitting the area to continue to function as a node and gathering space while reducing damaging foot-traffic. Another student proposed a new trailhead and visitor center embedded in a limestone bluff overlooking the new regional sports park that was being constructed at the base of the mountain, creating a new public gateway to Mt. Kessler. The principal inspiration for the physical form of the design was the flowing pattern created by the wild grape vines, an aesthetic that had captured the student’s interest during the early semester projects (see Figure 5). Although some of the upperclassmen, who were already inculcated into traditional modes of site investigation, were skeptical of the value of perceptual exercises and resistant to the newly adopted approach, the majority of student responses were favorable, especially with regards to scope for more personal investment and direction, and the balance of art with technology:

“This approach challenges and enhances the traditional methods of landscape architecture. Our drawings evoked a spirit of place that was then woven through our final designs. Without the foundational experimentation of charcoal sketching, the project would lose the roots from which the design arose. I truly believe that this training has helped me become a more sensitive designer.”

“This was Landscape Architecture, over and above the standard held in today’s technology driven era.”

“This approach re-grounded me in my passion for design, but first-and-foremost in my passion for art in nature...It reminded me that incorporating the ephemeral and mysterious qualities of art and nature into the realm of the design is possible.”

In turn, the studio products were very well received by interested stakeholders, particularly people with intimate knowledge of, affection for and experience with Mount. Kessler. Since this initial studio in 2014 we have integrated a perceptualist approach to design and graphics in subsequent studios. Though difficult to definitively prove, we feel that the recent increase in our award-winning student work is due at least in part to this new emphasis. Students employing a perceptualist approach since 2014 have been recognized with numerous awards from the state chapter of the ASLA and the ASLA Central States consortium—fora in which the department had previously seen little success. With regard to the types of perceptual drawings delivered through the studio approach outlined here, Professor Catherine Seavitt Nordenson, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture at City College of New York and faculty editor of the award-winning landscape architecture journal PLOT writes:

“The integration of conceptual yet analytic artistic impressions of the landscape as a method of site investigation is evident in the work of [the] students. I am thrilled to include the beautiful in our Spring 2016 issue. The drawings are astonishingly breathtaking, and this submission was unanimously supported by our full student editorial board. It is the first time in five years we have published the work of undergraduate landscape architecture students, and we are thrilled to have discovered this Arkansas talent.”

Importantly, as instructors who were able to contextualize the work with efforts from previous years in Arkansas, self-reflection on the studio process and product deemed it to be highly successful: it added a significant skillset to the students’ repertoire, and recognition of what constitutes a useful and truthful understanding of landscape. For example, the same group of students in a subsequent studio (also led by one of the authors) relished transforming maps created in ArcGIS into an ESRI Story Map, with text and images redolent of the place. This subsequent studio—a collaboration with Biological Engineering—saw the landscape students become unselfconscious, eloquent and informed supporters for poetic, place
4.2 Challenges of the approach and further work

As we continue to pursue this approach to creating knowledge in our students, there are a number of immediate, clear but exciting challenges. Firstly, we must overcome an ingrained presumption of what it means to successfully ‘draw a landscape.’ As students join our department there is a great deal of self-consciousness around drawing; that their hand is not sophisticated enough. The high technique often required in first year design curricula is indeed intimidating. Although our perceptualist model trades this mode of drawing for a looser, less literal approach it is, itself, fraught with challenges related to lack of confidence and maturation. These drawings are personal, subjective and exploratory, but nascent design students often define the limits of their efforts very tightly and strictly to the parameters of what the teacher wants—and that this needs to be unambiguous, prescriptive and what will win them a high grade. It is important that we dismantle students’ presumptions of what is successful in terms of drawing the landscape. What a landscape drawing is for, and how it contributes to the landscape architectural design process. We believe that this challenge can be overcome through investment and encouragement in each and every student, and at the very earliest stages of the landscape architecture curriculum. As discussed above, a parallel evolution in the potential of site-photography (a technique not explored on the Mount Kessler project) suggests scope to mix media, with photography and site-drawing combining to record a phenomenological reading of place, rather than neutrally document spatial information. In-house faculty expertise in photography and hybrid media suggests the department is well-placed to explore this next step.

Irrespective of media used, these more abstract modes of site communication inevitably place a good deal of emphasis on confident and articulate verbal or written presentation. As a key component of place understanding is perception which is, by its very nature, highly personal, the student is required to robustly explain their aesthetic experience. We have found that this can be more challenging for students than the presentation of more tangible information related to a site’s inventory. Again, this places responsibility on the shoulders of instructors to encourage and nurture students, and clearly articulate the value of the students’ instincts. As reported by Smith & Boyer (2015), traditional architectural studios and specifically the mode of instructor feedback, has been oft-criticized for undermining rather than encouraging student confidence and creativity. The authors would suggest that a successful perceptualist approach to landscape studio pedagogy must require an attendant shift in studio praxis to one which looks to nurture and encourage confidence and creativity. This can include modes of verbal feedback (Smith & Boyer 2015); management of collaborative and co-working among students; conceptualization of the design process itself; and even the physical arrangement of studio and critique spaces (Crawford et al. 2013, 2014). Again—there is much that can be learnt from peers in design instruction, as we seek to become better instructors overseeing more creative and joyful studios.

Finally, we must come to terms with an unforeseen but, in hindsight, inevitable and unhelpful side-effect of the perceptualist approach. Most of our students come to us from small rural towns or the suburbs of large cities. There is a tendency for our profession to be perceived (from within and without) as the provider of a ‘nature band-aid’ to salve the sometime imagined wounds of the urbanized landscape. Students often enter the major with a sensibility that manifests as an ‘anti-urban’ or ‘pro-nature’ disposition, with neither the experience nor the knowledge to understand that urban fabric and places can be culturally and environmentally rich, and that ‘green’ places can be antithetical to ecological capacity and positive human experience. The anti-urban, nature-romantic position of many of our students provides fertile ground for biased landscape readings. This raises an important challenge to the instructor: to guide the student to a fuller appreciation of the landscape without denigrating their personal and individual readings of a landscape.

5 CONCLUSION

This studio marked the beginning in an ongoing shift in our approach to design process and studio pedagogy. By foregrounding a perceptual appreciation of site, as communicated through abstract drawings, we believe we are helping students to bridge the significant leap between analysis and design, by offering a gateway into understanding the site and formulating priorities for action. Our approach has been aided through engagement with local, accessible sites that encompass a significant amount of objective scientific
and cultural information made available to the students. The drawings our students have produced since 2014 have provided evocative artifacts that have been exhibited and published, and have formed the basis of award-winning design work. Undoubtedly, such beautiful work can be a vehicle for increased departmental profile. As representations of landscapes, these drawings are a fuller and more honest way of communicating the milieu in which landscape architects work; ambiguous, open ending, changing, but comprehensible with time and investment. More importantly, our students have increasingly embraced their role as advocates for a place-based understanding of landscape, bringing a crucial skill-set and sensibility to partnerships with other disciplines and stakeholders. This transition in studio approach has reinforced the importance of reflective design instruction, both through exposure to literature and to peer approaches and technique. In this regard design pedagogy conferences and other community venues remain a crucial resource. As a community of design scholars and instructors, it is important to remain engaged and open to change and the authors are committed to improving our studio experiences still further, particularly with regard to use of other media, studio structure and modes of feedback and student interaction.

6 REFERENCES


