THE SKETCH WALK: EXPLORATION, DISCOVERY AND A DISCUSSION OF PLACE

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1 ABSTRACT
The growth and popularity of urban sketching (Campanario, 2012), sketch walks and sketch crawls, has brought the practice of sketching to the attention of landscape architecture programs and practitioners (Richards, 2013). Both CELA and the ASLA have hosted sketch walks as an academic and practical form for groups to explore, discover and discuss place. This has initiated a discussion on the role of sketching, recording direct observations, mapping and social media sharing in the teaching of design. This paper will describe how the sketch walk and its organizational components; Location; Movement and Record, are used to explore, discover and discuss place.

The Sketch Walk mimics the skills required to experience and document space and initiates the process of analysis and conceptualization. The Sketch Walk can engage instructor, student and practitioner in an operation that contributes to the design of urban spaces. The roots of sketch walking will be mentioned and discussed, from the socio-political infusion of Situationist thinking (Debord, 1958) to Cullen’s the process of Serial Vision (Cullen, 1961). A description of the planning and organization of a sketch walk and perspectives on the use of sketching, mapping and physical engagement in the landscape will be discussed.

1.1 Keywords
Sketching, Sketch Walk, Drawing, Mapping, Place
SKETCHING

The growth and popularity of sketching, has brought the practice of on-location sketching to the attention of landscape architecture programs and practitioners. Its popularity can be measured by the proliferation of books on Urban, On-Location and Landscape Sketching and the appearance of sketch organizations, like Urban Sketchers.

A decade ago, sketching had been relegated to studio drawing, and the analysis and representation of landscape designs was developed through digital photography, video, and two and three dimensional graphic programs. "Digital Drawing for Landscape Architecture" by Brad Cantrell and Wes Michaels replaced "Drawing the Landscape" by Chip Sullivan as the visual and representation text for landscape architects; a shift reflected across design disciplines as the speed and standardization available through digital formats made communication and collaboration among disciplines possible. A great deal can be argued on the digital-analog topic, but what is relevant to this discussion is the value of educational content and formats that integrate sketching in the analysis and design of landscapes.

Sketching and its relevance to academic practice and pedagogy was revisited in Caroline Lavoie’s “Sketching the Landscape: Exploring a Sense of Place” (Lavoie, 2005) followed by “Exploratory Physiocartographies of Place and Time” A sketch crawl and panel discussion at the 2013 Annual CELA meeting in Austin (CELA 2013). Between 2005 and 2013 there were a series of lectures and activities that formally discussed the practice and theory of sketching; ranging from the history and theory of drawing and architecture in the “Is Drawing Dead?” Symposium at the Yale School of Architecture (Yale, 2012) to the Urban Sketchers first International Symposium in Portland, Oregon (Urban Sketchers, 2009), to the publication of Freehand Drawing and Discovery: Urban Sketching and Concept Drawing for Designers (Richards, 2013). Since the 2013 CELA meeting, the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) has organized three sketch events (Sketch Walks) for their annual meetings and the Sketch Out/Loud public awareness event for the celebration of World Wide Landscape Architecture Month. Several Landscape Architecture programs have reintegrated sketching and sketch walks as part of their design studios.

SKETCH WALKS

The discussions, publications and activities on sketching have a common theme: The importance of the direct exploration and discovery of place through sketching. The basic argument for walking the city to explore, understand and mentally “remap” its conditions has been explored by Debord in his wandering Derives (Debord, 1958) then spatially formalized as a design tool for planners and designers in Gordon Cullen’s Serial Vision practice (Cullen, 1961). Debord’s open ended exploration and Cullen’s formalized approach bookend a vast practice of mapping, exploration and discovery across media by designers, artists and cartographers.

The Sketch Walk (Sketch Walk will be used to describe the process of walking through an area and drawing what you see or calls your attention) is a practice within those bookends. It provides a structure to organize sketching activities that can address the specific objectives of a design studio or public participation program. The format for Sketch Walks can vary from structured and directed to free and rambling; from day long events to gatherings of short duration. The walking can be on a planned course or a self-directed route. This flexibility allows participation at all levels of skill and purpose.

For the pedagogy of landscape architecture, specifically, sketching Place with Sketch Walks requires the formalization of a process that frames the walk within a specific need or desired outcome. The basic questions to answer, based on the experience of planning ASLA and Urban Sketcher Sketch Walks, are: “What aspects of place or design are to be stressed?” and “How will they be recorded or documented?” These broad questions allow for the exploration of design concepts through the practice of on-site discovery, and analysis. The method of recording and documenting of the walk strengthen the practice of drawing and mapping operations.

SKETCH WALK: METHODS AND OPERATIONS

Sketch Walks have been offered as field sessions at the last three ASLA conferences. Sketch Boston, Denver and Chicago (ASLA 2013, 2014, 2015) were guided walks that used sketching to document the unique urban character of the three cities. The walks were organized by a group of landscape architecture practitioners and educators who used sketching as an integral part of practice and studio education. The walks were structured to include the presentation of historic context, sketching
demonstrations, sketching exercises with one-on-one guidance and group discussions on sketching, place and representation. The structure of this specific method, structured for and by landscape architects, consolidates aspects of wandering (Derive), sequential documentation (Serial Vision) with drawing and mapping techniques familiar to the discipline. This way of planning, organizing and documenting a sketch walk is the result of the review of sketching and mapping exercises by mappers and artists as well as the experience of participating in dozens of Urban Sketcher sketch walks.

A description of the organization and planning of the sketch walks follow, as a way to discuss methods and techniques.

4.1 Organization

The first step in planning and organizing the Sketch Walk is to prepare an outline and discuss the physical, social and historic aspects that define the city. The discussion includes a review of existing and proposed architecture and open space, significant landmarks, food, people, historic events and personal experiences. Subsequently these spaces are located on a map and we coordinate the logistics of moving from one place to the other considering the amount of time for the session. It is also important to state that these Sketch Walks are not perceived as jumping from one point to the other, but rather moving from space to space. This is a significant consideration or approach to the walks since the process mimics how landscape architects conceive and design space, as the articulation of physical spatial movement and aligns with the sequential spatial experience and documentation methods described by Cullen. At the end of these discussions we have a series of notes, conceptual diagrams and maps that outline several ways of approaching the walk. (Figure 1.)

![Figure 1. Final and Draft Map from the ASLA Field Session: Sketch Denver (2014). Diagrams and notations by Author.](image)
4.2 Exploration

A field visit to the city connects the ideas and concepts about the walk with the physical reality of the space. The exploration phase of the development of the walk is phenomenological; as it considers discoveries that arise from walking the city, and cartographic (Cartesian) in its fixing of structures, streets and spaces on a map. The reconnaissance walk changes some perceptions about the spaces and allows for the inclusion of structures, spaces and views not remembered from previous visits, not apparent on maps and not seen on Google Street Views. These adjustments generate a map, path and a set of exercises that illustrated salient spatial, physical and historic components (Figure 2).

![Figure 2. On-site walk preparation sketches for the ASLA Field Session: Sketch Denver (2014). Sketches by Author.](image)

4.3 Discovery

The walks have two groups; the organizers and the participants. The organizers have, through a process of exploration and synthesis, directed the movement through a location and determined the salient aspects of the site. These aspects are explained and demonstrated through sketching and the walk itself. The participants follow the prescribed movements and exercises, first to grasp the organizer’s points, then to build their own experience. In the process there are discussions between the organizer (guide) and participant (discoverer); a conversation that develops and expands the visual, physical and historic understanding of the site and creates an experience of place (Figure 3).
5. THE SKETCH WALK AS AN OUTDOOR DESIGN STUDIO

On the surface sketch walks, and the many other on-location sketching activities available to the general public (Urban Sketchers, Sketch Meet Ups, Dr. Sketchy) seem like fun activities for sketching enthusiasts. In recent years, however, many landscape architecture practitioners, instructors and students have participated in sketch walks and have discovered that, they help hone sketching and drawing skills, have precedents in artistic and social movements, and can be used, along with the sketchbook, as an on-site analysis tool for design. The scholarly aspects of these points have been argued, in positive terms (Lavoie, 2005 and CELA 2013) and have been fixed within a historic, artistic and social framework. The sketch and the sketchbook for example, were used as a way to develop and compose a painting, as a sort of rehearsal to the final work (Petherbridge, 2010) and that sequential process, from idea to final work, is essentially the design process. The need to capture the “real world” in illustrative sketches of new found lands and its people, in explorer logs, artistic travelogues and cartographic representations used travel, discovery and sketching documentation as the way to show and relate the world to others. So the argument that walking and sketching can capture, depict and show place is clear. The use of sketches, text and maps as qualitative methods to document perception of place by designers and non-designers is tied to the planning oriented cognitive maps in Image of the City (Lynch, 1961) and mapping operations on the one hand and the socially subversive movements that questioned power, creating alternate ways to experience and depict the city, like the Situationist (Debord, 1995), and Psychogeographic movements on the other (Coverly, 2010).

It is the principal argument of this paper that the Sketch Walk, in its organization and execution, is an activity that mimics the skills required to experience and document space and initiate the process of analysis and conceptualization; that the Sketch Walk can engage instructor, student and practitioner in an operation, that contributes to the design of urban spaces. The Sketch Walk combines sketching and walking; the embodied and the cognitive, in a format that is flexible and simple to construct. Location (place to be studied), Movement (the ways to move through the space) and Record (the ways of sketching the experience) constitute the components of the walk that can be directed to focus on a specific aspect of
design or analysis. Defining the purpose of the three components, the organizer (instructor, landscape architect, community designer, or place maker) can structure an activity that produces information (quantitative or qualitative) that be part of design development or team building. In addition the organization of the activity as a Sketch Walk provides a “big tent” that can hold a variety of artistic, social and design intentions.

The hand drawn final rendering in landscape architecture has evolved into refined computer generated two and three dimensional images and models. The sketch as a fixed exercise with in a linear trajectory towards the production of a final piece, be it a design or in the case of the artist, an art piece, is used less and less. Still, sketching and drawing remain an importance practice. Observation, familiarity with drawing media, the development of speed and visual communication are embodied skills that initiate and mimic the design process. Walking through a space, using all senses to orient, perceive and remember is the process used to cognitively determine or fix place in our minds.

Academic programs, regardless of their focus or tradition, grapple with a broad charge; the formation and development of a professional Steward of the Land. Stewardship of the land is a global endeavor that has no borders physically or intellectually, which is to say that the very nature of landscape architecture; encompassing, a bit vague, phenomenological and cartographic, artistic and scientific, executes its work in a cognitive and physical framework, wrought with dilemmas, conflicts, debates and contradictions.

In conclusion, the components of the sketch walk; Location, Movement and Record, provide a flexible framework for the use of sketching as an outdoor activity to explore place. The primary activities described in this paper are 6 to 8 hour events for professional landscape architects, but the process of selecting a location (Place), determining movement (wandering or sequential) and a way of documenting (sketching) can be applied to more broad explorations for students and non-designers by including other ways of moving and documenting space. The flexibility and fluidity of choice within this framework can be adapted to explore and stimulate other forms of experiencing and documenting neighborhoods, streets, parks, landmarks and other urban spaces. Karen O’Rourke’s “Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographer” (O’Rourke, 2013), describes a variety of methods used by artists, cartographers and designers that can be helpful in structuring sketch walks that engage student and instructor. And the possibility of combining a series of sketch walks in one or many places, with multiple organizational structures over the course of a semester, with a review of literature on the many ways to experience, describe, document, discuss, intervene-in and design landscapes could lead students to multiple ways of understanding place as well as provide instructors with new forms of analysis, representation and engagement.

6 REFERENCES