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Sketching: A Process of Drawing

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SKETCHING: A PROCESS OF DRAWING

THE SKETCH IS ONE OF THE MOST PERSONAL CREATIONS WE MAKE AS STUDENTS OF ARCHITECTURE.

For the sake of clarity, we will focus on the educational aspect first. At Iowa State, you are not taught how to sketch. I remember as a young child being taught how to draw letters in what was deemed a proper fashion, and then spending the next 10 years taking notes and destroying those clean forms in the name of speed and efficiency. True, we take a general drawing class as freshman, however, this concentrates on general representational drawing and techniques, not creative sketching. This portion is glossed over as a component of our education. I am realizing now, the most instruction I ever received in sketching was from a book I grabbed on a whim – 101 Things I Learned in Architecture School. In 2 pages, it talked about line quality, overlap of corners, and clarity. This info, while useful and simple, refers to the aesthetic quality of sketches, which is like talking about the quality of craftsmanship on a massing model. On a 20-minute brainwave, there are those of us who utilize rulers, exact-o knives, and superglue, and others who will crumple some paper and foil together to figure out the same amount. This is not to forget those reviewers who will comment and judge...
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on the craftsmanship of process, engaging another
argument about whether process should be shown
during a presentation, how much, in what form,
etc. I will ignore that issue in favor of simply ask­
ing whether sketching should be taught more with
an aesthetic focus or as a freeform tool; one that may
take whatever style, form, or medium the artist is
comfortable with. This would seem to be the easiest
way of encouraging self-expression while still getting
the most out of our sketches.

Paul Klee described a sketch as “An active line
on a walk, moving freely, without goal. A walk for
a walk’s sake.” This methodology rings mostly true
for me. Despite whatever rational constraints and
logic tourniquets I apply to a design concept, it is still
inherently a creation of intuition and feeling. Ignor­
ing the philosophic challenges this might raise, we
shall press on to evaluate our options.

Our first option appears to fall in line with the
way other types of architectural drawing are taught.
Or not taught, for that matter. Our required cur­
riculum lacks anything resembling an architectural
drawing class, choosing instead to focus on teaching
software. This is obviously important in our line of
work, but I feel there is something lost by not receiv­
ing any instruction in architectural representation
with respect to hand-drawing. Nevertheless, sketching
seems logically to be too intuitive for a typical
drawing class, and would appear to require a more
challenge/critique based method of instruction.

Our second option is to teach a method of no
method, or at least not a predetermined one. For
instance, I have been using colored ink pens a great
deal this semester. Why? Pens require more attention
than pencils, read boldly, and I like color. If I have
learned anything in the last 4 years, it is that attain­
ing the desired effect can be achieved in numerous
different ways, and the difficulty lies in choosing one
method to do it. I was never told to use pens, or pen­
cils, or markers. Instead, I received only an encour­
gagement to “try something new, see how it fits.” One
would agree that stepping outside of one’s box can
always be of value, so this seems the better choice.

SO WE SEE THAT SKETCHING
SHOULDN’T BE SUBJECT TO A
PRESCRIBED TEACHING METHOD,
AND THAT ITS USE SHOULD ALWAYS
BE ENCOURAGED AND ASSISTED.

Should its method or benefits stagnate, than
we should be nudged in new directions. Now we
move on to the development of process sketching, or
sketching as process.

It seems that sketching is always what I return to
when I hit a wall, need to sort out an idea, or remem­
ber a place. It’s become a standard from my earliest
memories of studio to always have a sketchbook at
hand, throw something down and enter the mold­
able environment that is the sketch page. It becomes

1Paul Klee, Pedagogical Sketchbook, June 1968
a concrete record of your advancement through a project or place. Not asking early students to integrate sketching into their work robs them of a great method to advance their design ideas and concepts.

It seems almost cliché to make a point about the advantages of carrying a sketchbook; just read the brochure tucked inside every new Moleskine. Nevertheless, a sketchbook is truly a tactile personal record that cannot be matched by anything else, so long as you always have it with you. For the photojournalist, “f/8 and be there” is the mantra. For a design student, “have sketchbook, will go.”

I hold the opinion that Sketching is not something that should be taught in the same manner as tributary area calculations and duct sizing, but neither should it be ignored with the understanding that students will simply figure it out for themselves.

I have picked up pieces of advice from my studios to date, and from drawing class in Rome this year, but one should not have to wait for 3 years before finally being comfortable enough to trust their own hand. Our professors and fellow students can give a lot of help with a little advice, or provide a challenge to step out of the comfort zone. Our travel journals, trace paper remnants, and final drawings will all be the better because of it.