Drawing the City: Nostalgic Timelines

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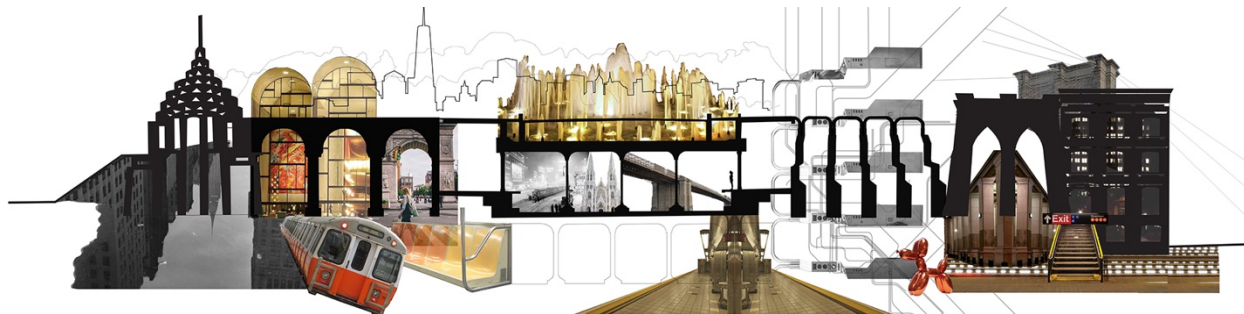*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

Figure 1. Student Madeline Berry's panoramic drawing of New York City

Representing the urban environment is a challenging but integral component of architecture and urban design education. As students become familiar with the process of site analysis, they must also learn to present their research through drawing conventions like perspective, plans, elevations and cross sections in conjunction with graphic diagrams and illustrations. The recent influx of digital technology and visual literacy is radically transforming these conventions, enabling designers to merge, morph and invent imaging techniques used both for analysis and communication.

In his compelling essay, Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes, James Corner asserts that designers and planners need to enhance their creative capacities through "eidetic operations," which he defines as "specific ideational techniques for construing (imagining) and constructing (projecting) new landscapes." (Corner, 247) Corner, a landscape architect, theorist and designer of NYC's Highline, argues that today's designers need to enhance their capacities for eidetic operations by merging interdisciplinary knowledge with hybrid imaging techniques and technologies. "How one generates and effectuates ideas," he writes, "is bound into a cunning fluency with imaging. Similarly, the future of landscape, as a culturally significant practice, is dependent on the capacity of its inventors to image the world in new ways and to body forth those images in richly phenomenal and efficacious terms." (Corner, 253) The concept of eidetic operations offers design students an inspiring alternative approach for representation. But while Corners ideas can be both profound and liberating, they can also be confusing and formidable to students, especially as they begin to apply it to site analysis in relation to a program.

Drawing the City, an advanced special topics seminar and studio at UMass Amherst, was designed to investigate the value and efficacy of eidetic operations for representing the urban landscape. Coursework emphasizes hybrid drawing methods– including hand drawing, collage, digital media and graphic illustration– as a way to merge, morph and invent new and original imaging techniques for both analysis and communication.

PROJECT 1: HYBRID COLLAGE

The first topic uses Holyoke, Massachusetts as a model for research and representation through collage techniques. The aim of the project was to re-imagine a future for this local "rust-belt" city through experimental imaging, using analog and digital collage hybrids. In order for students to understand the

concept (and apply the practice) of eidetic operations, the distinction between *imaging* and *picturing* must first be made clear. In this case *picturing* is defined as mechanical representation of the visible, which could include a photograph, a satellite map, a land survey, or a real estate plot. *Imaging*, on the other hand, includes the qualities of a place which are not necessarily visible, such as the historic, imaginary, or vicarious aspects of place. Eidetic mappings, according to Corner "lie at the core of shaping an invisible landscape, one that is more an unfolding spatiality than surface appearance, more poetic property than the delineation of immediate real estate." (Corner, 247) What's more, imaging is artistic in its interpretation, it includes a montage of logic, indexes, geometry, datascapes, and layers of subjective experience.

Visual Research

Initially students were asked to collect and create an archive of visual imagery– some from direct observation and some from other open access resources (libraries, online databases, etc.). On a field trip to Holyoke's canal district and downtown area, students took their own photographs, made drawings, and recorded their observations and impressions. They recorded the aging buildings, and crumbling asphalt, as well as the lively Puerto Rican culture, the colorfully expressive graffiti art, and the newly designed landscape along the historic canals.

Outside class, students researched the history of the city. They learned that Holyoke was one of the first "planned" industrial cities whose primary industry was paper; that the canals (built in 1847) provide hydroelectric power to the city; that the early settlers displaced native people; that it has a history of settlement by working-class immigrants, first Irish then Puerto Rican; that many of the warehouses are being gentrified now which has sparked controversy in the city. Because students research was primarily on visual imagery, students focused on historic maps, of which there were many beautiful examples.

Analysis & Synthesis

After a week of collecting images, students were told to identify and extract the salient parts of their pictures through tracing, isolating or cropping. Then they were asked to re-orchestrate these elements using collage, layering, trace drawing and digital manipulation. In these synthetic processes, the isolated parts became like puzzle pieces that needed to find integration through various arranging, rearranging and strategic methods for composition. This was the hardest part for the students requiring multiple iterations, many of which were unsuccessful. In the throes of frustration, students were encouraged to switch working methods– from analog to digital or vis versa. Weekly pinups of work in progress was essential, not only so that the students could receive feedback, but also so that they could see the different strategies other students were using and measure their success.

Figure 2. Students Michael Chauncey, Lara Makhlouf, and Noa Barak with pinups of their first project, Collage and Holyoke.

Fictional Narrative

Once their compositions began to take shape, students were challenged to create an alternative visual narrative that began to address issues related to their visual research. As they speculated about a story for their images, they were encouraged to be imaginative and inventive. Excerpts from Italo Calvino's book, Invisible Cities, provided inspiration.

One of the most unexpected outcomes of this assignment was that all the narratives that emerged emphasized the concept of nostalgia in relation to place-making. Whether the images involve maps, street views, detailed textures, or specific buildings, the idea of remembrance became an important link in defining future visions. One student (fig 3) created a mythological tale about sea monsters living in the Holyoke canals, symbolizing the mysterious and powerful force emerging from the dark water for the last 170 years. Another student wrote an allegory about Holyoke's beginnings represented as a visionary timeline that included a creation myth about the "paper city." Some of the projects were more surreal in nature and others were more poetic, but virtually all the projects expressed a peculiar longing for the past in conjunction with a hope for the future.
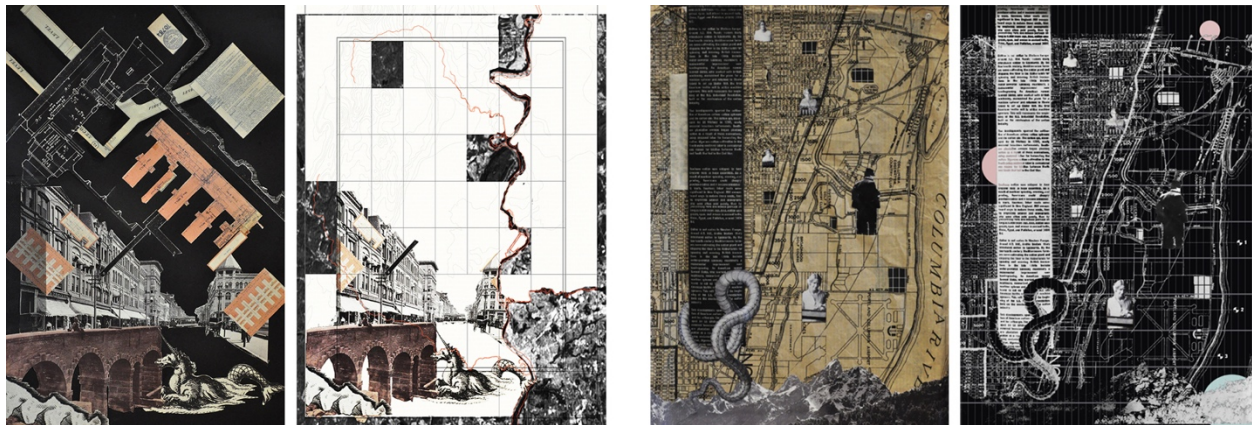

Figure 3: Student work of Elihu Ayres, showing development of his mythological tale of sea monsters in the Holyoke Canals, analog and digital renderings side by side.

Fertility in Decay

A man was walking through Holyoke, grimacing at the deteriorating, boarded up abandoned buildings, and the overgrowth of plant life which invaded every sidewalk, wall, and crevice he could see. Among the broken asphalt and litter, he looked down to find a shiny green pair of spectacles. He picked them up and peered through the lenses.

Suddenly he was immersed into a world of vivid color. The overgrown vines no longer seemed to trespass on, but instead climbed up the buildings gracefully towards the sky, inviting themselves inside through holes in the windows. He followed their lead and entered one of these buildings to find it densely inhabited by the wilderness. Animals roamed among the flora, finding safety in the shelter of this not-so-abandoned building. Entranced by the beauty, he floated through the building all the way to the top floor. He came to a window, and when he looked out, he saw a city decorated in the lush colors of blossoming, ever-changing wild life.

Figure 4. Student work of Michael Chauncey: on the left is a collage with graphite drawing on19x22" paper; on the right, a story that embraces the past (and the old) as a regenerative force for visionary futures.

Although the students were given agency to portray Holyoke's future in any way imaginable, they all chose to include its history as a defining sentiment in both their images and stories. "The city imagines its future by improvising on its past," writes Svetlana Boym in her book, The Future of Nostalgia. "The time of progress and modern efficiency embodied in the clock towers and the television towers is not the defining temporality of the contemporary city. Instead there is a pervasive longing for the visible and invisible cities of the past, cities of dreams and memories that influence both the new projects of urban reconstruction and the informal grassroots urban rituals that help us to imagine a more humane public sphere." (Boym p75) The projects that emerged from this case study exemplify this cultural shift away from 20th century values of newness towards an ideology that embraces the past (and the old) as a regenerative force.

PROJECT II: PANORAMIC FORMATS

For the second project, students were asked to apply a panoramic format (vertical or horizontal) to confront the dense complexity of New York City. To narrow the scope, they were asked first to tap into a specific memory of the city (all nine students had been to visit at least once). What could they remember about the light, the smells, the temperature and air quality? Was it the sleek air-conditioning of an interior or the wafting incense of combustion and outdoor refuse? How did the space make them feel in it; did it make them feel squeezed, invigorated, anxious, inspired? In this step they were extracting a phenomenological aspect of a specific place based on sensory perception, emotion, and cognition.

Taking a clue from precedents like Archigram, Cedrick Price, MVRDV, and Bureau Spectacular, the class was then asked to radically transform that site through representation using hybrid drawing and collage in a panoramic format. Following the path of the previous assignment, they did this by first, collecting images from online and the library, then extracting information by isolating the important parts of that image, and finally synthesizing the parts together using hybrid drawing and collage.

Uncertainty and Evolution

Many students struggled with the openness of this assignment, saying things like "I'm just not sure what I'm supposed to be making" or "I don't know which direction to take this." Rather than telling them what to do, however, my response was to ease their discomfort by telling them that NOT KNOWING is a normal state of mind for creative thinking. In order for more advanced students to begin trusting their own judgement and intuitive process, it's important that they become familiar with states of uncertainty. As a class, we discussed the nature of ambiguity in the design process. We also talked about the Surrealist's notion of automatism– a process that deliberately suspends intentionality in order to discover unforeseen associations. Evolution depends on random mutations to advance development, and so does the creative process. But for the happy accident to take place, the maker must proceed with tenacity, persistence and vigilance.

As the images began to take shape (usually 2-3 weeks in the studio,) students were again asked to create a fictional narrative for their image(s). The second time around, they started to understand the value of story-telling in relation to concept development. Each drawing was recognized as a stage where the fragments and pieces are the players that– through certain compositional arrangements– are capable of narrating a speculative past, present and future. One student (fig 1) wrote about a woman on her daily commute who gets lost in the city's complexity. She enters a subway, proceeds to the elevator, and is lifted up 55 floors into the air. In all directions she is surrounded, reminding her how interwoven and condensed her life has become. Another student, who had a visceral hatred for Times Square, came up with ways to transform it by drawing bridges between skyscrapers and filling billboards up with vertical gardens (fig 5). She eventually reworked the images together into a vertical

panorama depicting a zoological habitat for wildlife. In her story, imported exotic animals and greenery took over the urban landscape of New York.

Figure 5. Student Noa Barack's Times Square Zoo. The left showing developmental drawings (11x17" each) for the vertical panorama on right (45x20").

PROJECT III: AERIAL REPRESENTATION

The third and final project of the semester focused on aerial perspective of Boston. Most of the research involved maps, satellite images and city plans, but the class also got an introductory lesson on the history of urban planning in Boston. Dr. Mark Hammond, who is from Boston and teaches in the UMass Landscape Architecture and regional Planning Department, was invited to present a brief overview of Boston and its neighborhoods. Hammond gave students a taste of the arguments for and

against urban renewal in the 20th century, which was just enough for them to begin research on their own.

The final projects varied widely in their approach (Figure 6). By this time, students began to acquire a working methodology that was uniquely their own. Some began drawing or painting by hand and then worked the image digitally. Others began with digital images and then printed them, cut them out, and photographed them in diverse compositional arrangements. Regardless of their technique, it was clear by the end of the semester that all students had more confidence in their process.

Figure 6. Final project showing areal representations of Boston.

THE GIFT OF TIME AND SPACE

One of the most effective and valuable attributes of the class was that it gave students the time and space to invent new methods for eidetic operation to occur. Coursework was intentionally designed not to be fast-paced in order to provide room for trial and error. The expectation to work was still there– with weekly deadlines, readings and pinups– but because there were only three finished projects in the course, students had time to experiment, work through failures, and refine their images through iterative processes. The final projects revealed the multiple ways that students successfully traversed through states of confusion, frustration and unknowing towards resolution and proficiency.

Unlike most architecture studios, this class freed the students from the constraints of a program in order to allow for the greatest possible creative exploration. The benefits of this were evident in course evaluations where one student reported, "I learned so much about how to approach a project creatively and inventively and have already found this knowledge useful in other classes." Another wrote: "This course was incredibly beneficial to my education in design. It pushed an approach to design that moves between hand and digital work. This is something I have wanted to develop for some time, but with the rapidness of design studio, I never had time to play around with drawing styles."

Drawing the City offered students an opportunity to merge observation, research and memory with the eidetic imagination. As a result, students extended their capacity for visual thinking and representation, giving them a greater understanding of eidetic operations in the practice of design. As philosopher and art historian Edward Casey argues, "Representation is not a contingent matter, something merely secondary; it is integral to the perception of landscape itself– indeed, part of its being and essential to its manifestation." (Casey. p.xv) Many of the drawings that emerged from this studio are as rich, complex, and layered as the cities they represent. What's most important however, is that students come to realize how their conjured images can have implications not only for the viewer and the maker, but also for the place itself.

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