

MANUSCRIPT of a book chapter published in:

Active landscape photography : diverse practices [ISBN: 9780367541316] / edited by Anne C. Godfrey (Routledge, 2023).

Chapter 12

Ways of Seeing: Documenting Landscape

Hannah Durham

Today, world-wide architecture is recognised mainly for its visual qualities,ⁱ yet we, as humans, experience a landscape or building using all our senses. This cultural focus on the visual (using our eyes) neglects the full sensory experience.ⁱⁱ This ocular-centrism disconnects us from our habitat and makes us blind to the full extent of our landscapes, built or un-built. In the book *Experiencing Architecture* (1959) the message is: it is not enough to see architecture; you must experience it.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the 1996 book *The Eyes of the Skin; Architecture and the Senses*, Juhani Pallasmaa (b.1936) discusses how Western culture has historically regarded sight as 'the noblest of the senses, and *thinking* itself thought of in terms of seeing'.^{iv} Yet this singular approach brings with it bias in our understanding of our world^v, past and present, as well as a bias in *how* we communicate, *how* we think and *how* we document our findings, ideas and explorations about the world.

Our archives and libraries are filled with objects like books and artefacts, which we *look at*, predominantly. Perhaps we should also be archiving in equal measure the smells, tastes, sounds and textures of the past and present. If we only look at something without the holistic experience of including all our other senses, we only ever see one part of the whole. Does this mean our reading of our shared history is, by its very nature, biased? How can we better document a landscape for future generations to more fully understand and appreciate it?

Film now captures the aural experience of moving through landscapes and buildings in an incredibly captivating manner. Sounds are realistic, technically balanced between right and left speakers and created by Foley artists to capture an imagined experience. Foley in film-making is the creation of sound effects to be added to films and other media after the shooting of the film footage **VI**. For example, Foley artists often use everyday objects to create sounds, like a shoe and gravel in a tray to make the sound of someone moving across a gravel drive.

When we watch films – good films – they convince us that we are there in the landscape by using both moving image and sound. Visual film-footage is collaged with digital renders and models to create otherworldly places, such as in the film *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003), directed by Peter Jackson. The otherworldly imaginings of J.R.R. Tolkien's (1892–1973) novel are brought to life beyond the author's own rich book illustrations. Another filmic example is Jacques Tati's (1907–1982) *Mon Oncle* (1958) where sounds are added to the visual footage to great atmospheric and comic effect. In that film, there are various scenes in an ultra-modern house, which is represented as hilariously awkward to live in with its various gadgets and un-homely rules making the occupants servants to the 'modern' way of life. The sound effects in this film are equally important as the visuals to understand the story and the points the director makes about modern life. The combination of aural and visual information work effectively in the film to transport the audience to being in the story's landscape.

Equally, film documentaries also capture a landscape well, transporting us into a jungle, desert or the world beneath the ocean; for example, David Attenborough's (b.1926) nature documentaries with the BBC, such as *The Green Planet* (2022), where dynamic film footage is collaged with sounds, collected by expert sound recordists, who capture sounds of a landscape precisely and clearly. Chris Watson (b.1952) is a well-known British sound recordist whose recordings of soundscapes are used in documentaries and even stand as their own as soundscapes documenting landscapes through sound. *Weather Report* (2003) and

El Tren Fantasma (2011) are albums by Watson which provide captivating aural landscapes which transport you there, with the listener almost smelling and tasting the aural environment like rain or a train rushing past.

Our advances in technology for film, virtual gaming, virtual reality, theme park rides and other 'experience' disciplines are crossing into architecture (and vice versa). In so doing, we are all better equipped with tools for documenting the experience of a landscape, built or un-built, with *all* the senses. Equally it is important to remember it is still possible to capture, without high-tech digital tools, the essence of a landscape in a holistic manner by documenting the sounds, tastes, smells, textures and visuals. For example, the medium of writing can describe and capture a landscape in stories such as the atmospheric descriptions of the wilderness of Dartmoor, UK by Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) in his book *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902). In addition, drawing can describe and capture a landscape; examples include John Coletrain's (1926-1967) and Wadada Leo Smith's (b.1941) drawings charting the terrain of a piece of music. Each drawing captures, from the listener's viewpoint, the journey of experience and emotion with colour, markings and texture.

As an educator in architecture, it is important to challenge and re-train our architecture student's ways of looking at and understanding a landscape away from ocular-centrism. To do this, we began the academic year at Oxford Brookes University with a series of 'Transect Walks' cutting a line meandering along the different waterways of Oxford, England, and crossing the city at different points. We asked the students to record and document the 'Transect Walk' in their own way, using a creative method of their own making.

Below is an extract from the 'Transect Walks' exercise which we gave to the students:

The object of the walk is to fire up your skills in observation.

What do you notice? There are no wrong answers. Record things you find interesting, artwork, buildings, bridges, objects, etc. Make collections of things and moments that catch your eye. What do they tell you about the evolving culture of the city and its people? Why is that interesting to you?

Record your thoughts and findings in the form of a transect.

In its most functional form a 'transect' is just a line cut through an environment from which to measure various things. Geographers use them as quantitative research for defining amounts of things, distances between things, etc.

This is not what we want you to do.

You are tasked with cutting a qualitative transect, a map or diagram which records your journey as a series of experiences, found objects, fragments of narrative, photographs, etc. It is up to you what format your transect takes and how it is presented.

vii

Words written by Mike Halliwell

Our students are MArchD (RIBA Part 2) architecture students from Oxford Brookes University, England. They are in their final year of five years of full-time architecture education, with this being their final, year-long design studio. The teaching team in the design studio was Mike Halliwell as Unit Leader, Hannah Durham as Unit Tutor and Scott Sworts as Technology Tutor.

Our students had spent the previous academic year before joining our design studio as research-led designers – developing their own individual research projects with a thorough literature review, developed methodology and comprehensive modes of testing and representing their ideas and designs in a rigorous and thorough manner. Due to this, our students were conceptually advanced and had a well-developed representational skill set.

The 'Transect Walk' exercise was devised to disrupt the standard approach to architecture and to challenge the *traditional* architect's approach to site analysis. The aim was to enable the students to tune into and develop their own way of

experiencing, way of seeing and way of representing the landscape around them. In so doing, we were encouraging a diverse collection of ways to read and understand a landscape, enabling inclusivity in the manner of documentation and expression. This exercise was at the start of our year-long design studio, setting the tone for the work to follow.

We will look at four examples of student work from the 'Transect Walks' exercise.

Charlotte Cubitt saw the landscape through a painter's eye. She dissected the visuals of moving through the waterway landscapes of canals and rivers and turned it into an artist's palette, including an emotional response written through words; texture/movement illustrated with a sketch, noting the balance between order and chaos; colour swatches capturing mood; perceived lightness through tones of grey and sounds captured through strings of letters creating sound words. By placing these elements into a table format, Cubitt dissected the scene into these named elements and then captured them in that moment. This focus on a specific fragment of the scene fine-tuned the 'looking' to capture details unseen in the glances of others. This notation system encapsulated a rich scene which was the lens by which Cubitt viewed the world.

This system became a tool for how she went on to design a final proposal for a community building that housed artist studios with a shared public space. Cubitt approached her building like an artist producing a painting; she considered a story board of scenes or landscapes moving through her building, composing each with materials, colours and lightness/darkness. This approach informed all aspects of the building design, including elevations and sections as well as interior elevations, plans and each slither of the building she documented through drawings and models. The building became a landscape or terrain for which Cubitt designed the experience.

[Insert 15031-5485-012-Figure-001 here]

Figure 12.1 Transect 1–2 (2020) by Charlotte Cubitt, produced from a walk along the waterways in Oxford. Cubitt was a student in the design studio DSR 2020–21, on the MArchD (RIBA Part 2) Architecture course at Oxford Brookes University, England.

Olivia Staff challenged herself to capture the scene in a string of words, through the spoken word of poetry. For each 'Transect Walk', Staff created a poem which is accompanied by a slide show made up of familiar, rectangular photographs capturing fragments of the walk, like postcards of memories where her eyes had once landed. The words reveal hidden phenomena not obvious when looking at the photographs; the words add a messy human touch to the scene with past, present and future interpretations of the visuals. Despite our dictionaries, words can be interpreted in many ways, depending on the receiver's background, life experience and the context to which the word is delivered. Staff played with this in her work using words as a fluid mode to communicate through the context-twist provided by poetry. This mode of working opened up many creative ways of seeing and understanding the landscape which is observed as being like a body in constant flux. The poem can be read on its own without the visual aid, but together they read like a musical score with depths of tone, note and rhythm.

Staff went on to weave poetry into her final design of a super-computer building, using poetry as a design tool to describe in detail the architectural spaces before she began drawing them. She described the smells, sounds, textures and visuals of each space, then began collaging, drawing or modelling them fragment by fragment until a building emerged. Staff extended her fascination with languages to describe a landscape by looking at the relationship between computer-programming languages and the physical weaving-codes of the loom. This merging of various modes of communicating a landscape, whether it be computer programming or the woven landscape of a fabric or poetry, enriched her built architecture as well as how the architectural landscape could be read or understood.

[Insert 15031-5485-012-Figure-002 here]

Figure 12.2 Transect 1–2 (2020) by Olivia Staff, produced from a walk along the waterways in Oxford. Staff was a student in the design studio DSR 2020–21, on the MArchD (RIBA Part 2) Architecture course at Oxford Brookes University, England.

Jian Feng Wong became fascinated by the blurred boundaries of private versus public space along the waterways where canal boats are floating homes moored on public rights-of-way. Equally on the adjacent side of the canal, large period homes with back gardens stretch to the edge of the canals with no physical boundary of a fence or the like, so passers-by can relish the naughty enjoyment of looking into back gardens and rear-home elevations. The normally private realm of the English back-garden is on display to the public to people-watch and compare back-garden designs and usage. Wong documented this through a series of diagrams, dissecting the layers of private and public and looking at infrastructure creating or obscuring views. His approach of understanding this landscape was similar to the Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980) film *Rear Window* (1954), where a story unfolded through watching occupants in nearby high-rise flats, seen through the familiar frame of windows, looking out and looking in. Wong extended these observations to consider: Who is being watched? Who are the watchers? And ultimately, do they watch each other from their respective viewpoints?

This way of reading a landscape became embedded in Wong's final design of a building with shared work environments for start-ups and small businesses that shared facilities, resources and ideas with one another. His building could be read like a story, with a beginning, middle and end in moving through the building, as well as chapters or different types of rooms/spaces to experience. Within the design, there were moments of narrative climax and the building had various possible endings or exits as well as beginnings or entrances. This way of designing equally inspired the format for his set of final architectural drawings which became like a set of illustrations in a children's book with the traditional architectural drawings (plans, section, elevations and technical drawings) as an appendix.

[Insert 15031-5485-012-Figure-003 here]

Figure 12.3 Transect 1 (2020) by Jian Feng Wong, produced from a walk along the waterways in Oxford. Wong was a student in the design studio DSR 2020–21, on the MArchD (RIBA Part 2) Architecture course at Oxford Brookes University, England.

Jasmine-Ann Jeffery chose to see the world through the eyes of a bee. This specific lens on viewing the landscape allowed Jeffery to zoom in to the pixels of colour within the scene. A photo was analysed into colour blocks and then used to produce the colour spectrum of the 'Transect Walk'. The colour swatches acted like the colour DNA of the walk, place and season. Attaching the human categorising colour systems like RAL codes, Jeffery then began to disconnect the numbers and colours away from the reality of the site, taking them into a human categorising system with wider meanings beyond the actual site. Through this specific lens of viewing the world, how colours have an impact on humans as well as insects and bees became a discussion point. With a changing world, where our pollinators, such as the bee, are in decline, what colours of nature have we already lost and what colours will remain? Moving beyond the collection of the 'Transect Walk' colour swatches, Jeffery then went onto collect and document flower specimens along the walk by looking into the history and origin of each plant and which insects the flower supported. These specimens were collected, categorised and set in resin to preserve them.

Jeffery went on to use this way of seeing as a design tool to create a building for bees and humans to co-inhabit in harmony together, re-educating the public on the purpose of a human building that in fact can support other site-specific populations of animals. Jeffery selected construction materials that were human- and bee-friendly and carefully selected colours around the building to attract or deter the bees. Jeffery's architecture was seen as a built landscape embedded in a landscaped garden, with each having equal design attention placed on them.

[Insert 15031-5485-012-Figure-004 here]

Figure 12.4 Transect 1–2 (2020) by Jasmine-Ann Jeffery, produced from a walk along the waterways in Oxford. Jeffery was a student in the design studio DSR 2020–21, on the MArchD (RIBA Part 2) Architecture course at Oxford Brookes University, England.

These are examples of how four students reframed their lens of seeing a landscape, which meant they were actively engaging with the landscape beyond the snap-happy, curated Instagram culture which we now all live within, which dwells on the surface of reading and understanding landscapes.

Another student in our group collected rubbings and plaster casts of the different textures along the ‘Transect Walks’, and then used this approach to design through texture, with material choices at the forefront in her proposal, which involved renovating a heritage building. Another student in the ‘Transect Walks’ exercise turned the water of the waterways into a character, writing the story of the water’s journey through Oxford. He again continued this approach of documenting a landscape, with his final design being a shrine to water in the form of a set of outdoor and indoor bathing buildings in the landscape.

Our students used everyday tools as field researchers, like cameras in iPhones to collect this data. They had a well-defined focus and were able to capture the unfolding landscape, beyond the use of the single sense of *sight*, to also capture the experience with our other senses – sound, touch, taste and smell.

Each student’s individual way of seeing a landscape began with the ‘Transect Walk’ exercise and then became part of their design toolkit as early career architects able to view the world differently from a different viewpoint, refreshing their modes of working and interpreting . . . and in so doing, diversifying our understanding and reading of landscapes, built or un-built. Our students went beyond simply capturing and representing the visual; they included the subtle, multi-sensory experience of being *in* the landscape, rather than being removed from it.

Photography as a mode of representation was examined and re-interpreted in the 'Transect Walk' exercise by adjusting the filter for seeing to a specific aspect. When the eye is tuned to seek out and see a certain small fragment of a landscape, suddenly the vast, complex and detailed collage of a landscape no longer overwhelms the viewer. The viewer no longer attempts to see or capture everything, but instead is able to *really see*, in-depth and in-detail, a part of the jigsaw puzzle of a landscape which is constantly evolving and changing through time.

A landscape is like our solar system; it is a landscape that encapsulates our shared past, our shifting present and our evolving future. The context for viewing it and the methods and tools we use has an impact on how we interpret and understand it. Every method or tool is flawed and yet each is true.

Our students, as future architects and designers, will shape our landscapes going forward and shape the impact our built environment has on us and how we inhabit it. With the help of the 'Transect Walks' exercise, our students not only design architecture visually but also and *importantly* now design with all our human senses in mind. Going forward, let us all consider as we design: what do our landscapes, built or unbuilt, sound like, feel like, taste like and smell like.

Bio

Hannah Durham, *AA Dipl, BA (First Class) Honours, ARB, RIBA, PCTHE, FHEA.*

Hannah is an architect, researcher and senior lecturer in architecture at Oxford Brookes University and a fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Hannah teaches across the undergraduate and postgraduate architecture programmes for design studios and research dissertation supervision. She currently leads a design studio called Building Stories, which explores the relationship between storytelling and architecture. Equally she is the module leader for Cities, Culture & Society, exploring the history of cities as well as how we shape cities and how cities shape us.

She has over eight years of experience working in architecture practice and seven years of experience as an educator. Her research focuses on revealing untold

stories in architecture. For example, she was an oral history researcher and interviewer for the AA XX 100 project, collecting the life stories of women architects. Hannah was named a Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Journal 2021 Rising Star.

Hannah is an external examiner and RIBA Validation panel member. She studied at Oxford Brookes University, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and the Architectural Association, London.

Bibliography

- Blessner, Barry and Salter Linda-Ruth. *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture*. Cambridge, USA: The MIT Press, 2007.
- Rasmussen, Steen Eiler. *Experiencing Architecture*. Cambridge, USA: The MIT Press, 1962.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani. *The Eyes of the Skin; Architecture and the Senses*. Great Britain: Wiley-Academy, 2005.
- Oxford Languages. *Oxford English Dictionary*. USA: Oxford University Press, 2012.

i Barry Blessner and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture*, (Cambridge, USA: The MIT Press, 2007), 1.

ii Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin; Architecture and the Senses*, (Great Britain: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 22.

iii Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, (Cambridge, USA: The MIT Press, 1959).

iv Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin; Architecture and the Senses*, (Great Britain: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 15.

v Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin; Architecture and the Senses*, (Great Britain: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 16.

vi Oxford Languages, *Oxford English Dictionary*, (USA: Oxford University Press, 2012).

vii Mike Halliwell, *DSR Design Studio Brief for the Transect Walk*, *Oxford Brookes University Teaching Material Unpublished*, (Oxford: Oxford Brookes University, 2020).