On the Preparation of Images

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Abstract

This essay is a plea to activate the aesthetic potential that computer graphics have so far failed to exploit. While teaching and learning using digital methods and tools is beneficial it is also important to think about media references and media comparison as true modernity can only grow from the oldest techniques.

1 The New Is there for the Taking

The myth that everything that is created must commence from point zero with no prior models, provokes people to deceive themselves or refuse to explore the source of new formulations. The new is there for the taking.

Nothing unsettles a creative person more than having to follow formulas as using prescriptive methods generally seems incompatible with the creation of something genuinely new. Derivative processes seem to be in stark conflict with the ability to create something from nothing.

Anxiety over working with formulas can melt away if the formula in question serves to facilitate the individual, the unmistakable, or if it perhaps even becomes the prerequisite for such a creation. In this interpretation, the term formula is a synonym for concept or program. The essential idea is that it should encourage us to expand boundaries, renew forms, and nurture and maintain curiosity.

Vivienne Westwood, the British fashion designer and a teacher at the Berlin Fashion School starts her course by asking her students to copy styles from costume history. Her clear and simple argument is that if somebody intends to become a famous chef, they do not begin their career by inventing new dishes, but rather by learning the trade and copying well-known recipes.

One must have the courage and the opportunity to question and develop experiences without being inhibited by professional intervention. One should be allowed to become a dilettante. The access to advanced media, especially affordable computers, makes it possible to acquire vast amounts of information, but it is important that students evaluate that information. That way they are able to explore what is possible in principle.

Discussing the techniques and media used to produce images will inevitably lead into areas outside the scope of landscape architecture, areas that touch upon the present, but also bring the future and the apparent past into the picture. The preparation of images, meaning the inherent skill and techniques employed, is an important subject matter within the professional study of landscape design. Ultimately, courses in “Landscape Architecture and Communication” are primarily a means of training students to see and to perceive.
2 Painting by Binary Numbers

Today’s visual world based on the binary system creates images, which no longer require reference to reality. Both film and Internet use encourage the worship of technical images for which the public is clamouring. There are some operators, especially those with a sharp sense of detail, a trained eye, and capable of sensing microscopic nuances, who are able to satisfy this craving for images in a particularly creative way. Let us learn from them. The fascinating thing about the work of these inventive people, however, is that their products are beautiful precisely because their creators have given them human defects.

2.1 Finding Nemo, produced by PIXAR Animation Studios, 2003

To create their spectacle, animators working on the film “Finding Nemo” were sent, accompanied by underwater scientists, on diving trips and into large aquariums. Their first-hand experiences gave the film an extraordinary density and richness. They learnt from the solitary little creatures they saw and realised that whole movements can be expressed just with the blink of an eye or twitch of a mouth. They were determined to put so many things into the movie that it could not all be taken in on first viewing, things that, in some cases, only scientists could enjoy and be amazed by. They allowed themselves the luxury of sheer extravagance, and it is these tiny elements that make the movie so great. Yet it has plenty of visual value in other respects. Just think of the timid expression on Nemo's face, the greedy eyes of the shark or the furrows in its top lip. These are the tiny, barely perceptible details with which they were wrestling. “Our goal is always to make things believable not realistic. By stylizing the design of things, adding more geometry and pushing the colors, we were able to create a natural and credible world for our characters” (LASSETER 2003).

2.2 Kaya a 3D CG virtual female by the artist Alceu Baptistao, 2001

The Silicon Generation, which emerged in the US at the end of the twentieth century, uses plastic surgery to optimise their bodies as if they were Formula One racing cars, creating better performance, siphoning off the unnecessary and spraying on a new look, all of which is now considered perfectly normal. They make their skin as smooth as a sleek fender, distancing themselves from the fact that real, original skin is covered in hairs, moles and tiny marks of all kinds. And their beautiful, yet all-too normal bodies are surgically optimised to give them the kind of surface tension that is reminiscent of a surf board.

These Silicon beauties and the trigger-happy Tomb Raider star Lara Croft are roughly cut, especially in contrast to the virtual supermodel Kaya. The fascinating thing about Kaya and other Internet nymphs, however, is that they are beautiful precisely because their creators have given them human defects.

Everything about Lara Croft, the first internationally-known avatar of popular culture, is perfect and symmetrical: her eyes, her pneumatic chest, her artificially smooth hair. In contrast, Kaya has irregular freckles, little wrinkles around her eyes and chapped lips. Kaya and her digital friends are top candidates for the title of “Miss Digital World”.

The advantage these models have over flesh-and-blood colleagues like Isabella Rossellini and Naomi Campbell is that they are easier to manage than extravagant, moody real-life supermodels. They don't get hungry, don't need expensive hotels and will never need to
enter into contract negotiations with their producers. It is interesting to note that Kaya's fashionable beret is actually just a sneaky way of not having to model a full head of hair, which is extraordinarily difficult on a computer.

3 Strokes as Fleeting as the Scent of Perfume

Returning to a different age means returning to a different media. The women whom René Gruau, an Italian-born illustrator created were almost beyond the confines of everyday life. They were dream creatures, fluid goddesses of elegance, who consisted of nothing more than a few lines, patches of red and black and dark, heavy borders: as fleeting as the scent of a perfume, yet capable of leaving the same impression.

Gurau’s clients included couturiers such as Christian Dior. The woman with the concealed eyes ceated by Gurau was on every advertising column in the 1950s. Today the sparing use of line and shape in Gaurau’s work still impresses. It is the incredible ability to depict so much with so little which makes the difference: the contours of a perfectly moulded face with concealed eyes, a full, slightly pouting mouth, a Doris Day-type snub nose, and a curved line that outlined the neck as a movement of the head (KILROY 2010).

Capturing energy, elegance and audacity by bold lines and fluid style – René Gruau’s work indicates what the brush, pen and ink achieved before digital tools and methods took over.

4 The Curiosity of the Matchstick Man

So why draw with only a pencil, drawing ink, brushes and paints today? It is not a question of whether somebody can draw well or whether everyone should be an artist. It’s more to do with learning to see. It doesn't really matter whether or not students are capable of drawing something that could be hung in a gallery at the completion of their courses. What matters is the ability to appreciate and experience. Students can learn to draw if they are motivated and thus responsive to the message inherent in images. Drawing makes sense because it teaches students to look carefully and trains their ability to perceive things that otherwise may only have received a fleeting glance (JONAK 2009).

The students’ attempts to reproduce with their own hand what they have seen with their eyes, changes their relationship to the object. Instead of just looking at it, students acquire a deeper understanding of the object’s components and this enables them to commit it to memory with greater precision. More important than learning techniques is learning to see and foster creative thought processes. Leonardo da Vinci wrote in his notebook that just by pausing from time to time and examining spots on a wall or clouds one can come up with amazing ideas (JUNG 1991).

Drawing has an additional benefit. It helps us to understand why we respond to certain things, regardless of whether we are considering landscapes, gardens or buildings. “Ideas conceptualized in your head need to be translated onto paper so that they can be tested.” (ZELL 2008, 7). By looking and drawing students find a means of explaining their tastes
and can thus develop an “aesthetic sensibility”, the capacity to make judgements, which will help them to make decisions within the design process.

5  Provence Has Taken on Different Colours since Van Gogh

It is important to mention Provence in this discussion, a place that has provided a treasure trove of examples illustrating landscape, climate and colour.

As an artist Van Gogh discovered Provence in 1888, although this unique area of France had already been the subject of paintings for more than a hundred years. According to Van Gogh, however, most of his painter colleagues had not done their subject justice; they had failed to give a realistic rendition of the qualities of the place.

“So what did Van Gogh see that other people had overlooked? For one thing, he noticed the way in which the olive trees moved in the wind. He also saw the colours in a different way to other observers. This is due to the area's specific climate. The mistral wind that blows from the Alps through the Rhone valley regularly clears the sky of clouds and moisture and scrubs it to a pure, deep blue without the slightest trace of white. At the same time, a high water table and good irrigation support plant life that is both unique and abundant for a Mediterranean climate. Since the air contains no moisture, there is no mist to obscure or interfere with the colours of trees and flowers. Due to this interplay of a cloudless sky, dry air, water and abundant vegetation, Provence exhibits a lively, contrasting array of primary colours. Van Gogh's predecessors paid little attention to these contrasts and painted exclusively with complementary colours”…and it was this contempt for the natural Provencal colour palette that angered Van Gogh.“ (DE BOTTON 2002, 212)

By studying Van Gogh students can learn a great deal about shading, colour schemes, proportions, perspective and image composition. And perhaps they might also find something to admire in the Provence sky when it is pointed out, however superficially, that it all comes down to that special shade of blue.

6  Everything Is Design

Tulips, tomatoes, sweet corn: creative manipulation is everywhere, constantly present in our everyday life. It is so matter-of-fact that this type of design has been virtually driven out of our consciousness. This instance also questions what can actually be taught and learnt in creative disciplines.

Genetic engineers decide whether strawberries made in petri culture dishes should look like strawberries and even taste like strawberries but they often end up just looking like strawberries. But apart from genetic manipulation, we should also consider the many extraordinary examples of cross-breeding undertaken by “flower pioneers”, whose designs landscape architects utilize so enthusiastically.

The success of any new invention relies on many criteria. But most of all it has to withstand the comparison with familiar traditional applications.
7 Dreaming the Old Avant-garde Dream

It seems to be easier to create monsters than to work on the illusion of reality. Most computer graphics appear so smooth and flat, as if they were made out of plastic. Research into digital methods and tools in landscape design should not neglect this aspect of the topic.

MANOVICH (2001) explains that the digital image technique was originally developed for military purposes in order to train pilots. The entertainment industry adopted the graphic language of military surfaces, which focuses on flight simulation and not on drape illusion. This might be one of the reasons why no Vermeer of computer graphics has yet emerged. Anyone wishing to speak of a new medium must inevitably allude to an old one. According to the fundamental laws of media theory only media comparison creates media reference.

Digital communication expands the possibilities of depiction. With just a few clicks in Photoshop an enormous variety of visual effects can be applied and revised. Never before has it been so easy to work with a multitude of aesthetics, atmospheres or combinations of stylistic devices (ULLRICH 2002). With the immense resource of images and especially through digital access, the Dadaist, Surrealist and Constructivist dream of art as an assembly process has come true.

But the process of creating something new has been left by the wayside. Entire image cultures lie fallow. Images are easier to remember than words. The Danish architect and author Nils Ole Lund is an expert at collage-making and has been creating artificial realities by experimenting with photomontages. “When I start making collages in most cases I have one or two basic pictures, two contrasting images, the rest is added, ideas, details, accessories” (LUND 1990, 5). Through his collages Lund achieved “discussions in a more direct way than by writing articles, giving lectures or even designing houses” (LUND 1990, 8).

Although the old avant-garde dream of art as an assembly process (the universal language of images) appears to have come true designers are not taking full advantage of the enormous creative potential of digital communication.

8 A Language of Image

Working as designer means to stimulate internal images. “Images are means to creating architecture, and may even be my most primary means. Memory is stored in images. It can, of course, be stored in smells, too, but these smells then immediately turn into an image, memory does not remain abstract.” (WIDDER CONFURIUS 1998). By stimulating these images during the design of spaces people who look at a building or landscape are led to experience the same feeling. “With time we discover that our personal images, conjured by memory, are actually not so special and that we all share them” (WIDDER CONFURIUS 1998) For prospective landscape architects, learning the language of images is not merely a form of communication for their leisure time, but an indispensable vocabulary that can be used throughout their professional careers. What we teach and research could boldly be
redefined as design communication, and even manipulation, through images. The science of images discussed in this paper deserves equivalent status to that of the science of language. Thus, students use the language of images on their courses in order to convince their professors of the quality of their design. Equally, in the everyday world of architectural practice, pictures are used to communicate with a range of participants, from clients to competition judges and local people, and designers obviously hope that their images will fill everyone with enthusiasm for the content and quality of their thoughts.

Just as other specialists seek out effective languages with which to communicate, landscape architects, too, need to create genuine opportunities for communication between their inner senses and the various protagonists in the design process. We expect language to involve a dialogue, and a similar type of dialogue with similar benefits can be conducted between our eyes and our mind.

The media revolutions of the 20th and 21st centuries have established a visual environment in which simple site plans, models and even photographs increasingly appear as hopelessly unspectacular. Even with everything that is known about the psychology of effect, intelligent image production still represents an attack on the recipients' senses. Many people today can draw nice pictures, especially since the introduction of MS paint or Adobe Photoshop, but to work to scale needs professional education. Site plans and site models, digital or not, are still a very important communication method for landscape architects working with three-dimensional illusion and professional assessment.

So instead of offering up a flood of images containing promises that are hard to keep, landscape design representation is most likely to succeed by retaining an original image throughout the whole process in the form of a drawing (the sketch) and the closest correspondence between the desired look (the plans) and the reality (the finished space).

References

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