

TIME FOR DRAWING

On coming to our senses: personal view

by Rena Czaplinska-Archer

*"The journey of discovery
lies not in seeking new horizons
but in opening your eyes"*
Marcel Proust



Aalvar Aalto summer house from Angelo Candelpas travel sketchbook 2006

When Alex Tzannes wrote last year in *Architecture Australia* about judging architectural awards he commented that virtual reality images have become very popular in presenting projects, but at the end the judges always go to visit the buildings. And what he said is that so far nothing can replace the experience of sensing body. The buildings feel differently when seen in the virtual reality of the computer screen and come differently to life when sensed with our bodies. What Alex Tzannes was talking about is **kinaesthetic sense**.

But what is it and how do we develop this sense, how do we teach it to future architects?

There could be many ways to develop sensory awareness. I found that learning to draw provides a simple answer.

For years architectural design education has been dominated by conceptual and technical teaching methods focussing on computer technologies while ignoring being in the body and in the phenomenal world. Taking a photo with a digital camera does not take long. We only have time to notice superficial things. Working on the computer screen engages only the sense of sight while ignoring other senses.

Drawing and sketching takes time.

It teaches us to be present, still, receptive, to really listen and to develop understanding and insight. Engaging the body develops our haptic, aural and kinaesthetic senses and grounds us in the present moment experience.

This article looks at how learning to draw can contribute to the Architectural Design Education by awakening the senses. By focussing on developing sensory awareness learning to draw builds the foundation of the body centred creative intuition, thinking and imagination. This gives the students a foundation to develop phenomenological engagement in architectural design.

After years of teaching design to architecture students I became frustrated by absence of sensory awareness training and consistent lack of basic drawing skills exposed by many students preoccupied from day one with abstract intellectual concepts while struggling with the design studio tasks and the new computer technologies. When years ago I was invited to try my hand at teaching drawing and sketching to architectural students I accepted enthusiastically hoping that I can make a difference.

I found teaching to draw easy, having drawn all my life it has become second nature. As a practicing architect I have no problem with teaching perspective or axonometric drawing. It was not about that. It was the question of teaching sensory awareness which challenged and excited me. For sensory awareness expertise and guidance I turned to Anna Halprin, one of the most influential and radical movement artists of the 20th Century. I have been a student of Halprin movement method for more than 20 years and have used it since the early 80's in enhancing my own drawing and designing skills. I have been aware of big changes in my own perceptions. Using movement and sensory awareness made sense to me.

In developing the drawing class program I came from an assumption that we are all creative and initially we can all draw, see and feel but in the process of socialisation and education our natural drawing and sensing abilities become blocked. We don't see, feel, sense what is in front of us any more. This condition is widely acknowledged by psychologists and psychotherapists dealing with rising stress levels in our society.

According to Jon Kabat Zinn a founding director of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the [University of Massachusetts Medical School](#) most people live their lives not present in their bodies. Absent minded we do a lot of looking but it is surprising how little we actually see, hear, smell, taste or feel. For years we can walk down the same street and never quite see it, although our eyes are open. We spend a lot of time "out of touch" with the surrounding reality. Our senses can also fool us. We tend to see only what we want to see or hear, depending on the story we are telling ourselves. Jon Kabat Zinn advocates waking up by coming to our senses. His Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programs have been successfully introduced worldwide into many hospitals, schools, offices and even prisons.

Australian recipient of 2006 Pritzker Prize in Architecture Glen Murcutt claims that sensitivity is the crucial quality of architectural design skills. Murcutt's famous Masterclasses focus on teaching sensitivity to the site and to the environment. Students spend a week exploring, sketching, and listening to the landscape before they design a building there. The instructions sound like typical exercises in a drawing class.

“...look into strength and delicacy of this landscape...look into finesse of the flora...look into transparency of the flora...look into translucency of the light and shade patterns...look at the way wind acts on this landscape...see how nature is working...respond to these factors in the selection of the site”

Murcutt points that we have to spend time, we have to learn to pay attention, we have to “get in touch” and “in tune” with the landscape before we can really see and understand it. Our designs need to grow out of deep respect and sensitivity to the site.

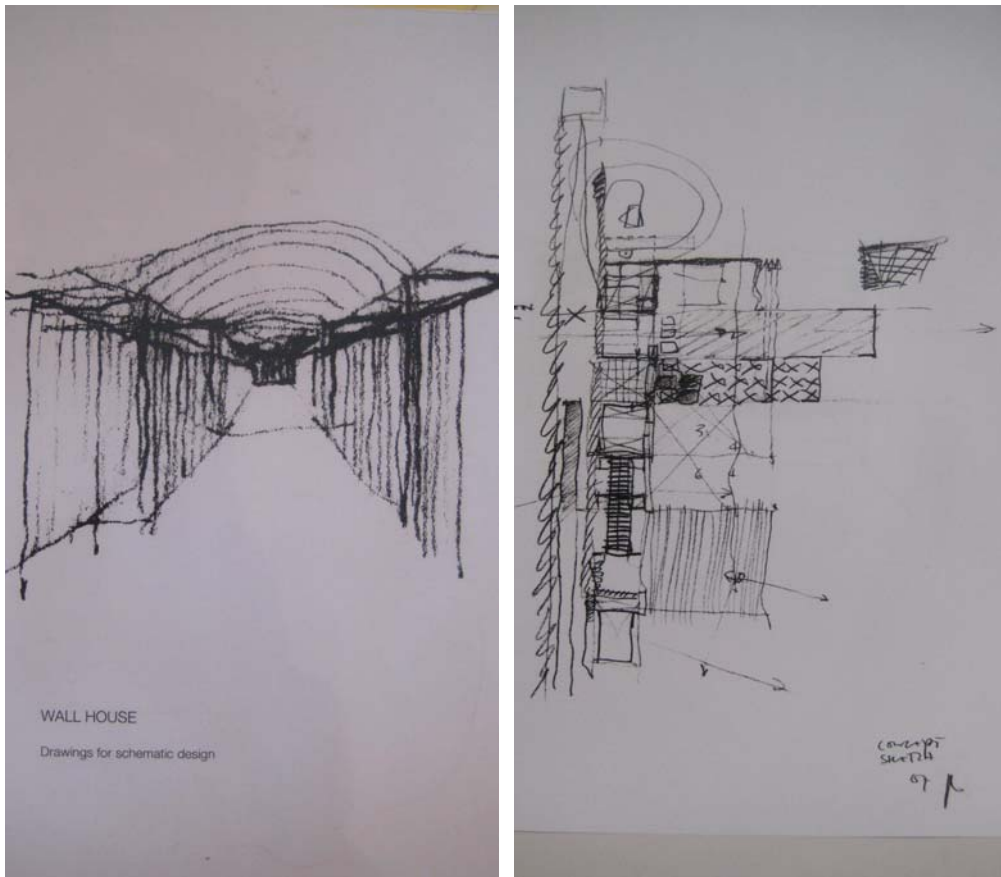
In the process students learn how to design low energy and environmentally sustainable buildings keeping in mind how to adapt the concepts to any topography and climate, how to capitalize practically on natural light, how to safeguard the surrounding landscape and why. Glen Murcutt explains that the key to this process is not complicated. It is simply about paying attention, being aware of what is all around us.

When an average person is asked what architects do, they usually say architects draw. Designing is often considered to be the same as drawing. But why do architects draw? When Edward Robbins, a lecturer in architecture at MIT, researched this subject few years ago he interviewed many architects around the world about the role drawing plays in their practice. The resulting collection of interviews appeared in the 1994 MIT Press book “Why architects draw”. The examples range from the early scribbles valued as a creative design activity enabling the concept to emerge, to the social role of drawing as a communication tool, to a set of working drawings used as a management tool to bring the design to fruition and manage the design and construction process.

Drawing, especially easy and messy, scribbly sketching drawing helps to think, feel, helps to clarify and allow for insight and new understanding to emerge, helps to analyze and helps to synthesize, it allows to tap into body memory and intuition, it allows to play with chaos and ambiguity. Rafael Moneo who has been a Head of Harvard Graduate Architecture School and runs several successful offices in Spain and New York, uses free hand sketching and drawing to explore and understand the project. He sketches for hours until he gets an insight into the project. Something happens at that point, certain clarity of thinking. The drawing itself does not need to be clear and ordered, but the design idea somehow gets born in the messiness of scribbles and notes.

Professor Tom Honeghan, who has been a Head of Architecture School at Sydney University, also claims that sketching is crucial for the design process. Sketching helps to think, to be curious, to enquire, to question to reflect on what we see. Architectural sketchbooks can become creative and often beautiful journeys towards completed buildings. In his recent opening speech to Architecture 09 exhibition of drawings he compared sketching to taking an idea for a walk

“Like the dog, the sketch will often – and this is what we always hope will happen – lead you to a place that takes you by surprise – which you didn’t, in the least, expect. The ideas in one sketch will trigger others, and a chain-reaction leads to a conclusion that often appears to have simply come out of the ether because the thought-process that got you there is too complex, contradictory and tangled for even you to see as a whole, or to explain.”



Wall house concept sketches by Peter Stutchbury

For many years now computers have replaced the hand drawing skills practiced by architects for centuries. Time previously used to learn and practice free hand sketching is hard to find in today's architecture school's curriculum. Some even question the need for it.

However there are also voices of concern out there. Glen Murcutt does not encourage the use of computer in his Masterclass. His students have to do hand drawings. Juhani Pallasmaa, a prominent Finish professor of architecture and an author of a famous 2005 Academy Press book "Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses" is concerned about the visual emphasis of the flat screen virtual reality of computer images.

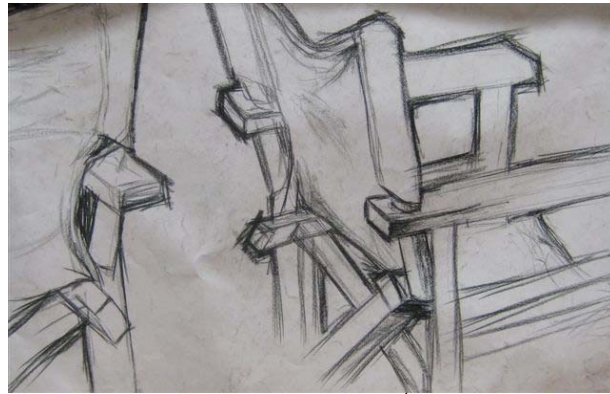
Pallasmaa describes our culture as being dominated by an ocularcentric paradigm since ancient Greek times, where knowledge truth and reality all relate to vision-centred interpretations. Focusing on visual literacy and intellectual understanding is important but current over-emphasis on the intellectual and conceptual dimensions in architecture contributes according to Pallasmaa to the disappearance of its physical, sensual and embodied essence. It undervalues our physical bodily presence and ignores senses.

"Buildings and cities are experienced through our bodies, through multi-sensory channels; the visual aspect is only one part of it. All experience implies the acts of recollecting, remembering and comparing. An embodied memory has an essential role as a basis of remembering space and place".

Seeing through eyes of the skin, using Pallasmaa's expression, may be a good way to teach drawing to architects. It would be a different kind of a drawing class; not about becoming an artist, more about awakening the senses, embodying vision, and experiencing architecture through our bodies.



Persian student by Rena



chairs by 1st year student

If it is so simple, why is it so hard?

The key process of learning to draw is slowing down and learning to feel, see and listen. Listen to sensory responses to what we see. We only notice what we perceive. There has to be a response, a perception record to what we see. Moshe Feldenkrais, who researched and wrote about teaching awareness through movement, claims that we are only aware of things that we know. To learn to draw we have to learn to see things we normally don't notice, things stuck in our blind spot. To start to see them and therefore be able to draw them we have to become aware of them first, we have to perceive them, feel them in our body, there has to be a body response.

The worrying thing is discovering how many people don't record awareness of any feelings in their body. Our lifestyle seems to blind our senses, constant music in shopping centres blinds our hearing, the visual violence of TV films makes us insensitive, constant tension held in our muscles shuts down the feelings, sitting for hours in front of computer screen does not help this tension either. We seem to be running through life in a robotic way.

How do we wake up? How do we become more "tuned in"?

I believe it boils down to connecting with our senses, coming back "home" to our bodies, paying attention and living in present moment. As we slow down and start to focus we discover that drawing is really about learning to see and listen. Learning to draw with such focus on body awareness as described above helps to tune the body. This tuning broadens our repertoire of feelings and perceptions, it opens our eyes. As we perceive and see more, our understanding of the world changes. Like musicians who through practice learn to hear more sounds, or painters who learn to see more colours, through learning to draw architects learn to perceive space, texture, volume, light and shade, proportions, size and distance, learn to feel and experience architecture with our bodies.

Drawing time is an investment in tuning our bodies and coming to our senses. Perhaps it may allow for the architectural designs coming from our breathing pulsing feeling body to hold some of the sensory qualities that originally sensed and imagined it?

I do not think that drafting or technical drawing describes best what architects do. Architects design but designing does not need to happen on paper or on the computer screen. The crucial ingredients of the design process are imagination, space perception and sensory awareness. Hand sketching offers the connecting link.

Learning to draw while awakening our senses is a different kind of a drawing class. It evolved into, what I called Embodying Vision program, which combines drawing practice with mindfulness of the body, while movement and body-mind centring

exercises help with releasing tension, dissolving the inner critic and bringing us into the present moment. Once present our eyes open. We can see, we can feel, we can listen, we can learn. We are awake. We are switched on. Once we can see and feel our drawings change. The drawings we make tell the story of our shift.

There is, of course, no royal road to immediate understanding of good drawing. It has to be sensed and felt... Lloyd Rees



Rena is a practicing architect who teaches design and drawing at the Architecture Faculty of Sydney University and conducts popular weekend workshops. Next weekend workshop will be held on 24-26th July at the Arthur Boyd Centre in Riversdale.