

281

DISCOVERING SENSE OF PLACE

— *An Introduction through Writing & Photography*

Introduction

“To see what is in front of one's nose requires a constant struggle.” George Orwell.

“The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.” Dorothea Lange.

This course introduces students to 'sense of place' through writing and photography. It is important for architects to be able to understand a place when designing and making architecture. However, just understanding the physical aspects of a site is not enough. Good architects understand and then tap into the unique phenomenon of a place, those intangible qualities that dictate how a place feels as well as looks.

“Architecture is bound to situation. Unlike music, painting, sculpture, film and literature, is intertwined with experience of a place. The site of a building is more than a mere ingredient in its conception. It is its physical and metaphysical foundation.” Steven Holl.

Using a site in Portsmouth as the focus for their work, each week students will be asked to read a paper and in light of this, photograph their site. These photographs will be projected for discussion at the following week's class. The final submission will be a digital format photographic narrative, annotated with a 1200 word essay that expresses the particular qualities of your site with reference to your reading.

Unit 281 - Learning Outcomes

1. Develop an understanding of 'place' and its importance in making architecture.
2. Develop an understanding of photography as a way of seeing.
3. Develop an understanding of site analysis.
4. Knowledge of specific influences relating sense of place to architecture and urban design.
5. Develop a method for recording site analysis that can be used for all projects in the future.



The course includes an introduction to Adobe Photoshop (Week 7) and its potential for adjusting contrast, hue, saturation, and other qualities.



Watch: James Howard Kunstler: The tragedy of suburbia. In James Howard Kunstler's view, public spaces should be inspired centres of civic life and the physical manifestation of the common good. Click on the image to open the video. (20mins)

Whilst most of the papers will be provided and found in the University Library a key text, [The Language of Landscape](#) by Anne Whiston Spirn, is not in the library and should be purchased by students. Amazon has it in stock for £11.95. Students will need a copy of this book by week three.



Look: [Joel Meyerowitz](#) is a “street photographer” in the tradition of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank. His first book,

[Cape Light](#), is considered a classic work of colour photography and has sold more than 100,000 copies.

Overview

This course uses photography as a disciplined way of seeing, of exploring landscapes and expressing ideas. Readings, observations, and photographs will form the basis of discussions on landscape, light, significant detail, place, and how photography can inform design and planning.

Students keep an online journal or blog of words and photography that explores the qualities of a particular place. Each student selects a place in Portsmouth that they would like to explore. It is suggested that the chosen site is close to home to make visits easy. A small selection of images are projected each week for class discussion and posted on their blog.

Each week students are given a paper or papers to read, this along with their photographs and written observations will form the material for discussion at the following week's class.

Student work will be evaluated in three ways: class attendance and contribution to discussions, (20% of final grade); a blog updated weekly (20%); final photo and written essay (60%). There will be four photographic assignments over the term: Week 3 – Light, Week 4 – Significant Details, Week 8 – Landscape, Week 9 – The Sense of Place.

Light

Introduction in week 3 with discussion in week 4.

Photograph your site with respect to qualities of light, especially aspects of light that are particular to your site, as well as to time of day, weather, and season. Take photographs at different times of day on different days.

Post six of your images online by 8AM Tuesday, 28 October 2008 and assign them to a category called 'Light' on your blog. Write around 200 words describing your photographs, particular in light of your readings this week. These six photographs will form the basis for your presentation and discussion in class.

Between Tuesday and class on Wednesday, review all six of the selected photographs of other students in the class. Select one from two other student's set and post a comment and/or constructive critique on the photo.

Your Online Journal

Students keep a [Wordpress](#) blog throughout the course and posts are to be submitted in at least weekly installments. The blog is a place to record observations of individual sites,

Required Reading: Week 2

(for discussion in week 3)

Holl, S – Anchoring

[Download PDF](#)

British Journal of Photography, 2008-09-08. pp. 17-30

[Download PDF](#)

light and other landscape phenomena, and reflections on readings and class discussions. It also serves as a source of ideas and written material for the final essay of words and images.

Required Reading: Week 3

(for discussion in week 4)

Spirn, A - Language of Landscape. pp. 3-81

Students can use [FLICKR](#) or similar to upload all their photos if they wish.

Blog submissions are due by 8AM on the dates set out below. By using software like [Google Reader](#) and subscribing to [RSS](#) everyone in the class can comment on other students work. **NB:** The blog posts represent 20% of the final grade.



Watch: Moshe Safdie: What makes a building unique? Architect [Moshe Safdie](#) delves into four of his design projects and explains how he laboured to make each one truly unique for its site and its users. (20mins)

Significant Details

Introduction in week 4 with discussion in week 5.

Good photographers are close observers; they choose what to frame, how, and what to place in sharpest focus in order to highlight significant detail. Dorothea Lange kept journals where she jotted the telling details she recorded in photographs. Details reveal important truths, physical diagnosis in landscape, is the art of culling the significant from a welter of irrelevant detail.

Photograph significant details of your site, details that are clues to your site's particular character and that embody or refer to larger stories.

Post six of your images online by 8AM Tuesday 4 November 2008 and assign them to a category called 'Detail' on your blog. Write around 200 words describing your photographs, particular in light of your readings this week. These six photographs will form the basis for your presentation and discussion in class.

Between Tuesday and class on Wednesday, review all six of the selected photographs of other students in the class. Select one from two other student's set and post a comment and/or constructive critique on the photo. Try to comment on different students work from the 'Light' session.

Landscape

Introduction in week 5 with discussion in week 8.

Revisit and reflect on your site in light of the readings for the class. Photograph your site from the perspective of those who live in or use the site. Review the photographs you have already taken in light of this topic.

At this stage you should start thinking about your final submission, the essay of images and words you will create to express the particular qualities of your site, to interpret its character, to tell its story(ies). Begin to identify the stories you want to tell and use this assignment to advance your thinking.

Post six of your images online by 8AM Tuesday 26 November 2008 and assign them to a category called 'Landscape' on your blog. Write around 200 words describing your photographs, particular in light of your readings this week. These six photographs will form the basis for your presentation and discussion in class.



Look: [Dorothea Lange](#) was an influential American documentary photographer and photojournalist, best known for her Depression-era work for the

Required Reading: Week 4 (for discussion in week 5)
Relph, E - Place and Placelessness. pp. 29-33, pp. 44-49 & pp. 63-67
[Download PDF](#)

Farm Security Administration. "Landscape is meaningful and expressive; it can be poetic, rhetorical, polemical, as well as pragmatic. Landscape meaning is complex, layered, ambiguous, never simple or linear. A river flows, provides, creates, destroys, simultaneously a path and a boundary, even a gateway. Fire consumes, transforms, and renews. Multiple meanings are the source of metaphor and other tropes, as well. Metaphor and irony juxtapose meanings: harmonious, contrasting, or conflicting." Anne Whiston Spirn.

Required Reading: Week 5 (for discussion in week 6)
von Meiss, P - Elements of Architecture. pp. 143-164
[Download PDF](#)
Libeskind, D - Breaking Ground. pp. 63-88
[Download PDF](#)
Koren, L - Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers. pp. 21-36
[Download PDF](#)

Between Tuesday and class on Wednesday, review all six of the selected photographs of other students in the class. Select one from two other student's set and post a comment and/or constructive critique on the photo.

The Sense of Place

Introduction in week 8 with the discussion in week 9.

This is the final week before we focus on your end of course submission. You should revisit your site and photograph it in a way that attempts to summaries your feelings and understanding about what the place is: to capture its essence.

Post six of your images online by 8AM Tuesday 2 December 2008 and assign them to a category called 'Place' on your blog. Write around 200 words describing your photographs, particular in light of your readings this week. These six photographs will form the basis for your presentation and discussion in class.

Between Tuesday and class on Wednesday, review all six of the selected photographs of other students in the class. Select one from two other student's set and post a comment and/or constructive critique on the photo.

Draft Essay: Your Site in Images & Words

The final class (Week 10) before the Christmas holiday will be an opportunity to discuss a draft of your written and photographic essay.

You should compile and compose your images and writings into a coherent and concise PowerPoint presentation. Each student will make a five minute presentation to the class, followed by five minutes of discussion and feedback. The more you do for this class the easier your final hand in will be.

Submission

The final submission will be a 1200 word essay with photographs that attempts to describe your sites sense of place with reference to your reading. You can use any software you feel will best convey your sites story. You will be shown examples of what the photographic essay could be in Week 2.

Your final written and photographic essay is to be submitted to the office at the School of Architecture on 6 January 2009 by Midday. Submissions should be on a clearly labeled CD in *.pdf, *.html and/or *.ppt format . No other formats please.

Watch: A discussion with Pritzker Prize Winners Jean Nouvel, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid and Renzo Piano. Nouvel talks several times about the importance of place and context. (56mins)



Required Reading: Week 7
(for discussion in week 8)
Pallasmaa, J - The Eyes of the Skin. pp. 39-49
[Download PDF](#)
Spirn, A - Language of Landscape. pp. 133-188

Look: [Hélène Binet](#) studied photography in Rome where she grew up. Since turning towards architectural photography in 1989 she has worked with Zaha Hadid, John



Hejduk, Daniel Libeskind, Peter Zumthor and others.
www.helenebinet.com

Also take a look at the work of Adrian Ensor.
www.adrianensor.com

Required Reading: Week 8
(for discussion in week 9)
Spirn, A - Language of Landscape. pp. 216-239

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