**FREEHAND RENAISSANCE**

Principles for updating hand drawing for a digital world. By James Richards, ASLA

**WHY DRAW?** In an ever more digital world, with all the technology available to us, is hand drawing still relevant? Increasingly, it depends on whom you ask. A generation of new landscape architecture graduates and young professionals is wading into complex projects without the drawing and sketching skills that have sustained designers for millennia. Many young landscape architects say they see no need for them.

At the same time, six-figure executives from Nike, IBM, and Microsoft are lining up to learn freehand drawing skills in seminars with names like “How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci.” It’s the ultimate irony that as design offices rush to become paperless, cutting-edge company leaders are learning to draw in order to become more creative, whole-brain thinkers. What’s going on?

**SIMPLIFY TOOLS.** This saves media decision time and forces you to develop mastery of a particular set of tools and skills. It’s taken me decades to get back to the same basic tools I used in kindergarten. The vast majority of my concept drawings, like the small sketch at right, are done with a 12-inch roll of white tracing paper, a number two pencil or Pilot Fineliner, and a palette of 15 colored pencils that can be used singly or in combination to quickly wash color onto the back side of a drawing. An electric sharpener, spray fixative, and gray marker are always on my desk, and a few pastels are usually nearby. I doodle one-inch boxes of lines and textures for practice, and I use a copier and can then be resized as needed for presentation.

**IMPRINT TECHNIQUE.** A loose “designer” script communicates well, underscores the preliminary nature of the idea, and contributes life and freshness to the image. The 6-by-10-inch sketch above, quickly drawn with pencil on white tracing over a print of a digital site photo, uses informal script notes to highlight the designer’s ideas at a freeway interchange.

**NOTATE EVERYTHING.** The extent and quality of the designer’s ideas are not always apparent in an image, and ideas can be usefully blessed or dismissed on the basis of a reaction to a sketch. Notes help take the focus off the drawing and keep it on the ideas, where it belongs. Keep notes informal to encourage client and team feedback. A loose “designer” script communicates well, underscores the preliminary nature of the idea, and contributes life and freshness to the image. The 6-by-10-inch sketch above, quickly drawn with pencil on white tracing over a print of a digital site photo, uses informal script notes to highlight the designer’s ideas at a freeway interchange.

**WORK SMALL.** The small sketch at right is done with a 12-inch roll of white tracing paper, a number two pencil or Pilot Fineliner, and a palette of 15 colored pencils that can be used singly or in combination to quickly wash color onto the back side of a drawing. An electric sharpener, spray fixative, and gray marker are always on my desk, and a few pastels are usually nearby.

**SITTING BUILDINGS TO FRAME LAKE VIEWS.** The ultimate irony that as design offices rush to become paperless, cutting-edge company leaders are learning to draw in order to become more creative, whole-brain thinkers. What’s going on? Equally ironic is that, as more tech-savvy graduates enter the marketplace and better digital visualization tools become available, my work as a consulting designer—diagramming and sketching on the “front end” of complex projects—has exploded. I’m hand drawing more now than ever in my 30-year career. I’m convinced that this demand isn’t because I’m a particularly gifted designer, but because the ability to capture visual impressions by hand, very quickly, is increasingly rare. And with the loss of these skills, our design firm clients tell us, a measure of spontaneity and creative freshness may have also been lost in the process.

Accordingly, clients are not calling on me for illustration—the tech-savvy grads and professional illustrators handle that very well, thank you—they’re requesting visual thinking and quick freehand drawing skills to help jump-start a flow of ideas early in the creative process. In the past few years, I’ve increasingly been asked to fill a role that’s more common in the film industry than in landscape architecture. A generation of new landscape architecture graduates is wading into complex projects without the sketching skills that have sustained designers for millennia.

**SIMPLIFY TECHNIQUE.** Practice and master a limited and consistent vocabulary of strokes, textures, and line work that become your drawing vocabulary. Employ those consistently in your work. When those techniques become second nature, you don’t have to think about how to draw something. The drawing process becomes automatic, and your focus is on the ideas. Over time, and with practice, drawing can become as fast as handwriting. Really! Like many freehand sketchers, I doodle one-inch boxes of lines and textures for practice, bottom.

**SIMPLIFY MESSAGE.** Focus the drawing’s content on reasons for making design decisions and capture the essence of the point to be communicated in a few strokes. Overly detailed or irrelevant information can distract from the issue at hand. Keep the level of detail in an image appropriate to where you are in the decision-making process. Drawn over a 4-by-6-inch digital photo of existing conditions, this quick sketch, right, is one in a series visualizing unfolding views in a sequence of rehabilitated open spaces for a college campus. These small drawings use composition, color, and a focal point to underscore one big idea—collapsing buildings to frame lake views, middle. The arrows reinforce the key point (and are a nod to my drawing hero, Bill Johnson, FASLA).

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architecture firms—that of the “concept designer,” whose rapid sketches and storyboards initially flesh out the film director’s vision. In fact, when envisioning the future of design firm workflow, Hollywood may not be a bad place to start.

Designers still marvel at Gordon Cullen’s revolutionary serial vision drawings from the 1960s, documenting townscape as a series of unfolding...

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BUILD ON A DIGITAL PHOTO BASE. Digital images from cameras and computers are easily obtained and provide tremendous time savings as bases for rough sketches. With the addition of a quickly sketched horizon line and vanishing point, they provide accurate layout and context for quick eye-level and aerial perspective design studies. With this method, many design decisions can be made in a perspective view that informs the design plan, and refinement becomes a playful back-and-forth between plan and perspective views. In this series, an idea is doodled onto a pocket card in a client meeting (A). A digital photo is taken at the site (B), and a horizon line and vanishing point are located using building edges as clues. Ideas are then tested in successive white trace overlays on a letter-sized printout (C). Two quick overlays later, colored pencil is washed onto the back of a tracing for discussion with the client (D). The sketch becomes the basis for a later watercolor illustration (E) or computer rendering.
sequential views. But the creative demands of film animation had Walt Disney creating similar sequential sketches in the form of storyboards decades earlier, resulting in serial visions for imaginary landscapes. And while the technology of animation has grown exponentially more complex, the hand-drawn storyboard is still the engine of creativity in film studios. At a recent conference on drawing hosted by UC Berkeley, an Academy Award-winning director for Pixar Animation expounded at length on the critical role that hand drawing plays in the creative process.

“Story is king,” said Harley Jessup, “and nailing the story—from the artist’s mind directly to the rest of the creative team—requires the speed and fluidity of hand-drawn sketches and storyboards.” Storyboard artists and concept designers translate visual thought from mind to paper as fast as handwriting, creating believably worlds in a few strokes. Some of these small black-and-white sketches can be scanned and digitally converted to stunning color renderings, further describing mood and character. For Monsters, Inc., Jessup’s team produced more than 43,000 hand-drawn storyboards to guide computer animation. Not 43,000 drawings—43,000 storyboards.

What does this mean? It means that in animated film—one of the most creatively and technologically sophisticated mediums—the balance between concept-level hand drawing and computer rendering, using each for their unique strengths, is what facilitates the magic. But extensive hand drawing is limited to the very early stages of the creative process, where speed is needed, as reflected in the market demand for our services, is the development of quick, fluid hand-drawing skills that serve the earliest conceptual levels of a project to capture a flow of ideas as they occur.
This approach makes both hand drawing and digital media better. Consider that photography didn’t eliminate painting. What it did was free painting from its more mechanical uses for realistic depiction and allow it to evolve into a more creative medium, used to express ideas that couldn’t be better expressed any other way. Likewise, digital drafting and illustration programs don’t replace the need for drawing. What they do is free drawing from cumbersome mechanical processes and laborious illustrative techniques and allow drawing to do what it does best: to be an immediate and direct connection between the mind’s sketched techniques allow rapid visualization and a greater volume of ideas.

As with state-of-the-art filmmaking, freehand drawing can and should play a similarly important role in the design process of landscape architects as a spark plug for rapidly testing ideas. Hand graphics skills for landscape architects, however, are still largely taught as traditional (and sometimes time-intensive) “rendering” techniques for illustrating finished designs. This approach fails to use both drawing and digital media to best advantage. What is needed, as reflected in the market demand for our services, is the development of quick, fluid hand-drawing skills that serve the earliest conceptual levels of a project, to capture a flow of ideas as they occur. These ideas generate critical early feedback and can then be further explored and finally illustrated to great advantage through digital media. As with film production, it’s not a matter of hand drawing versus computer media, it’s using both for their unique strengths. It’s not either/or but both/and.

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eye of the designer and his client/audience, while capturing the exuberance of this exciting part of the creative process. At best, this exuberance is contagious, drawing collaborators and clients into the exploration of still more ideas.

This “both/and” approach requires modifying how design drawing is taught and practiced, with less emphasis on “rendering” and more on visual thinking and rapid visualization.

It’s beyond debate that technology has raised our game as visual communicators. But rather than replace traditional skills of great value, it should free us to rethink how we use those skills to be as creative, efficient, and productive as possible. This in turn suggests we rethink how we train designers in visual thinking and drawing in order to use drawing for what it does best: to reconnect right brain to left, mental to physical—and in the process, slowly perfect ourselves as vehicles for creative expression and design.

Why draw? Not to become great illustrators but, like the high-tech executives taking the da Vinci course, to unlock creative ideas through reconnecting mind, eye, and hand. In a competitive world where technology is the great leveler, nurturing your creativity holds the keys to the kingdom.

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D RAW PE OPLE FIRST. This practice immediately gives the scene depth and scale and helps break the tension of marking on a sheet of pure white paper. I often start a sketch by drawing people in a crowd, then add the setting after exploring options through overlays. The result is always lively. In this example, a horizon line establishes eye level, assumed to be five feet, for this 4-by-6-inch sketch. A quick circle on the horizon line, with a rectangle beneath and “flippers” for arms and legs, creates a convincing figure (1). More figures are added in varying sizes to create a sense of depth but always with eyes hung on the horizon line. The far right foreground figure could be hand drawn from scratch or quickly traced from an Entourage file or the Sunday comics (2). With a lively crowd in place, various building massings are explored with white trace overlays, and one is chosen that shapes a strong space and communicates the desired character (3).

PULL IT TOGETHER WITH DARKS. Strong darks are often the difference between a timid sketch and a compelling image. Dark areas define planes and volumes, frame key objects, and tie the entire composition together. With a strong pattern of darks, color becomes optional and can be quickly added or not depending on the situation. White trace overlays can be used to test one or more patterns of darks over the line drawing. In example (4), opposite, a pattern of darks has been chosen, and a Pilot Fineliner is used to create black areas and middle values using diagonal strokes, resulting in a strong composition. With strong darks in place, subtle color can quickly be washed onto the back of the tracing paper with colored pencils, left.