

# Introduction

## Photography and representation

Photography is the primary form of representation used by landscape architects. We use photography to document site characteristics and existing design precedents. The history of our profession is taught through photographs, showing us places around the world that we may never be able to visit ourselves. Landscape architects amass photographic catalogues of materials, construction details and plant species. We use photography to document our own work and show these photographs to prospective clients as a way to promote our skills.

Yet, photography is not formally or consistently addressed as a means of representation in landscape architecture curriculum. Unlike drawing, painting, modeling and computer aided design, photography is not taught as a primary way of conveying information and ideas, even though we rely heavily on it. Why? Photography is taken for granted as something everyone can do. All you have to do is point and click, right? Wrong.

How many times have you looked through site photographs and wondered “What was I thinking when I took these?” or “why did I take this photo?” Often only a few of countless photographs are actually useful for our design process. Our perceptions at the time of taking the picture do not materialize into readable photographs because we are not aware of the many factors that influence the way we take photographs and the way we read those photographs.

The purpose of this guide book is to acquaint teachers and students of landscape architecture with the techniques and theories that influence the way we take and read photographs. The goal of this guide is to enable a process of active taking and looking. The lessons and examples articulate ways to more deeply and critically engage in the photographic process as a part of the larger design process. Like all other tools of representation, there are qualities inherent to the photographic process that can be mastered and manipulated to yield photographic representations that more closely match perceptions of a place. (These representations can be literal or abstract.) This mastery is a step towards active engagement of the tool: the camera; and the representations it yields: the photograph.

### **the three major goals of this guide**

- 1. Enable a process of active taking and looking.*
- 2. Help designers understand the important role photography plays in the design process.*
- 3. Teach designers how to more fully utilize photography in the design process.*

## Tools

There are multiple tools landscape architects use to represent places, concepts, theories and visions for future intervention: pencils, pens, ruled scales, triangles, watercolors, maylines, markers, clay, cardboard, balsa wood, scissors, exacto knives, paintbrushes, computers, drawing software, mice, electronic drawing pads, printers and paper, paper and more paper. Often students are taught how to manipulate these tools in their first year of design school. They are taught techniques ranging from ways to hold a pencil and draw with it, to ways to print out AutoCadd drawings from a large format plotter. In order to use these tools to their fullest potential students must learn how to interface with their inherent qualities. The pencil does not make the drawing; the ability to use the pencil makes the drawing.

*Popular taste expects an easy, an invisible technology. Manufacturers reassure their customers that taking pictures demands no skill or expert knowledge, that the machine is all-knowing and responds to the slightest pressure of the will. It's as simple as turning the ignition key or pulling the trigger.*  
Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. 1977. p. 14

*Today photography has been reduced to a cycle of three simple operations. 1. Pull the String. 2. Turn the Key. 3. Press the Button. This is the essence of photography and the greatest improvement of them all for where the practice of the art was formerly confined to those who could give it study and time and room, it is now feasible for everybody.*  
From the Kodak instruction manual. 1888.  
From "The Bicycle Kodak." Kenneth Helphand. *Environmental Review*. 1981.

Unlike the preceding forms of representation, we expect the camera to do the work for us. We expect the camera to take a picture of a place that accurately represents the photographer's perception of the place. The camera is often thought of as separate from the self, an automaton that does the work. All you have to do is point and shoot.

This is not the case. Photography is a multi layered *PROCESS*. The term "point and shoot" over simplifies the process of making photographs. We walk around with our point and shoots and falsely think that pointing and shooting will result in a photo that replicates exactly what we see. The return trip to the one hour photo often yields a certain disappointment. "That's not the way it looked!" or "Why did I take so many photos of *that*?" Digital photography exacerbates this issue, enabling us to "take as many photos as I want" and "throw away" images immediately. Photography increasingly becomes disposable. We don't engage in the process because our society puts so much trust in the ability of the machine.

Thinking of the camera as a tool, like any other tool for representation, with technical features that require interaction and mastery by the user is the first step towards engaging in the active process of taking and looking at photographs.

There are certain qualities inherent in any tool for representation. The user must adapt to these qualities in order to master the tool. There is also an element of innovation that the user of the tool can bring to the representation process. The interplay between working within the limits of the tool and pushing and bending these limits produces creative and unique products. The tool itself does not entirely

determine the representational outcome. There is always the element of unique human individual interaction with the tool. Each person interfaces with the tool differently and thus creates an original representation with the tool.

Our tool is the camera. The photographic representations are the products using this tool. This guide encourages teachers and students to learn and work towards mastering the technical and theoretical aspects particular to the camera and create photographs that facilitate a deeper engagement with the design process.

## Looking

Like other forms of representation, photography controls the viewer's perception of that which is depicted. It controls perception through a set of formal and conceptual issues: framing, composition, focus, scale, viewpoint, time, atmosphere, feeling, subjectivity, narrative, reader response and reality. Understanding these issues helps us better represent our perceptions photographically. Teaching these issues to landscape architecture students helps them utilize photography in their design process to a much fuller extent and enhances their awareness of these factors in their design work.

I have already referred to *active taking* and *active looking* as primary skills required to engage more deeply in the photographic process for design. Particular details of each of these concepts will be covered in each of the lessons, but it is important at this point to articulate the basic concepts that formulate this active process of engaging the camera. *Active taking* asks the photographer to think more critically about what she is representing within the frame of the photograph. *Active taking* is the antithesis to pointing and shooting. It asks the photographer to take full control of the process of taking photographs. At its most basic level active taking requires you to ask questions of yourself while photographing:

- Why am I taking this photograph?
- What relationships am I representing?
- What am I leaving out?
- What are my biases in taking this photograph?
- What am I trying to show others with this photograph?
- How might someone else experience and photograph this place?

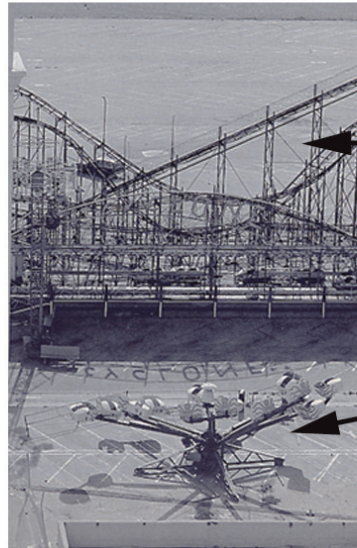
At a more advanced level active taking becomes an internalized process of visually and psychologically searching, processing and criticizing the motives and

### formal and conceptual issues in photography

*framing*  
*composition*  
*focus*  
*scale*  
*viewpoint*  
*time*  
*atmosphere*  
*feeling*  
*subjectivity*  
*narrative*  
*reader response*  
*reality*

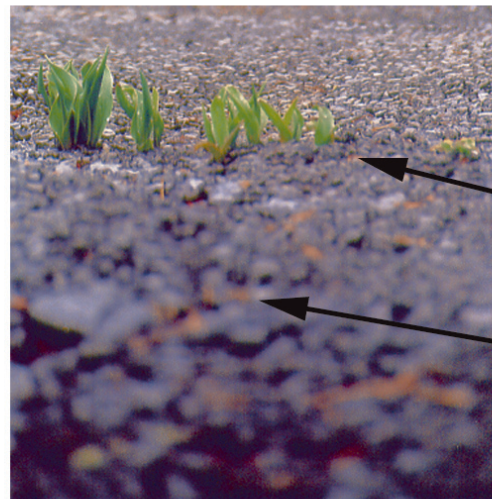
# Passive Photography

t a k i n g                      &                      v i e w i n g



Look, a roller  
coaster.

Must be a fair  
grounds.

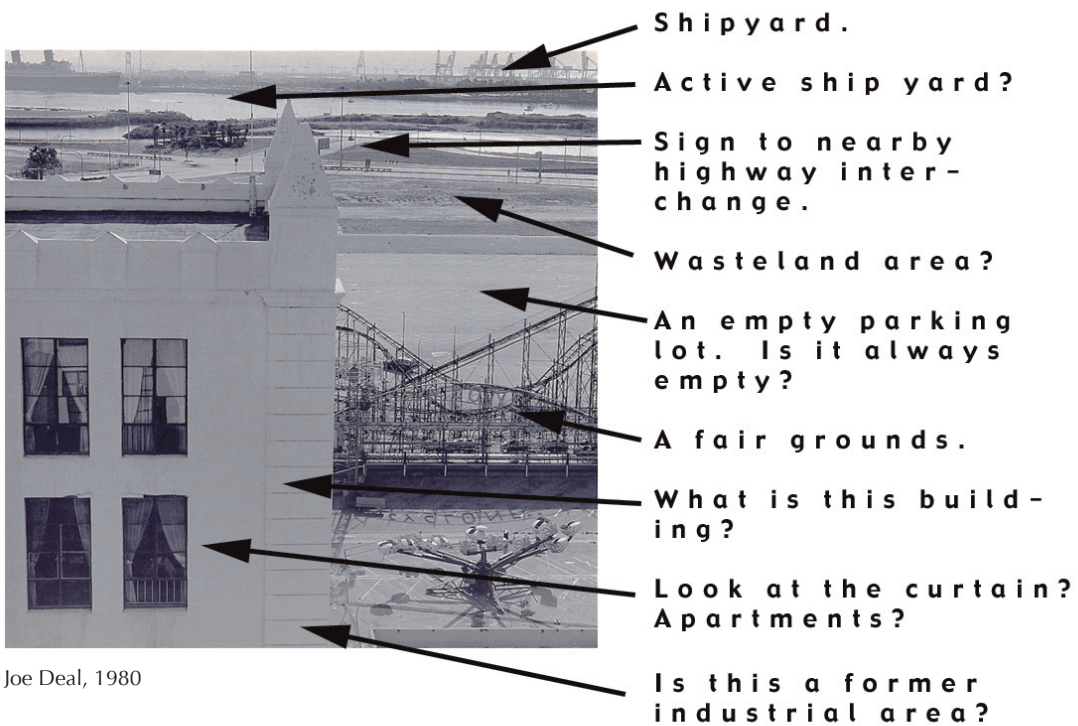


Tulips?

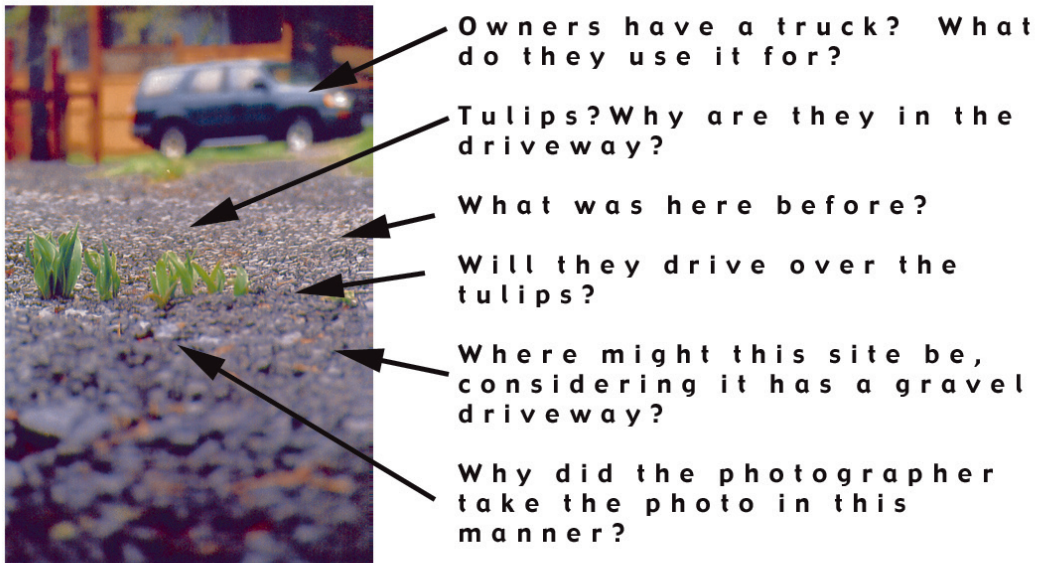
Gravel out of  
focus.

# Active Photography

## t a k i n g   &   v i e w i n g



Joe Deal, 1980



Jackie Robertson, 2003



Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his book *Flow*, discusses why we enter this state of mind, this feeling of flowing. *Flow* is a combination of challenge and skill. As our skills improve and become second nature the challenges we meet with these skills can increase. As we come closer to technically mastering the camera we are able to take on greater challenges of representation. Often with photography we challenge ourselves through our internal thought process. Without a balance between skill and challenge one becomes bored or frustrated and either chooses to increase the skill or challenge or drop the endeavor all together. The learning process is closely related to increasing skill and challenge. The ability to flow (engaging in a balance of skill and challenge) is the psychological and physical reward to this, at times difficult, learning process.

See *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. 1990.

#### **the three major goals of this guide**

1. Enable a process of active taking and looking.
2. Help designers understand the important role photography plays in the design process.
3. Teach designers how to more fully utilize photography in the design process.

intentions of one's personal photographic process. The photographer becomes fully and actively engaged in the process of taking photographs. This can often feel similar to the act of drawing or painting, when the user feels comfortable with the tool and an internal dialogue of conscious and intuitive decision-making takes place at a fairly rapid rate. You flow with the moment. In these situations the process of making is equally and sometimes more meaningful than the product that results. Active taking often results in more descriptive photographs: visually, conceptually, abstractly, emotionally, narratively more descriptive in one or many of these aspects.

*Active Looking* is concerned with the process of viewing photographs, both your own and others. Like active taking, active looking starts with asking questions, instead of passively accepting what is depicted in the photograph. Active looking asks the viewer to explore the contents of the image, think about what those visual contents refer to in a larger physical and psychological context, and be critical of what the combination of these aspects tells the viewer.

A starting point for active looking is understanding that the personal biases of the photographer are always present in the photograph. Similarly active looking asks us to examine our own biases while viewing a photograph. Often in designing landscapes we must rely on photographs taken by someone else. By actively looking at these photographs we can come to a better understanding of what is actually being shown and how that affects the way we design for a place. Each of these concepts will be explored in more depth in the following lessons. The basis for these explorations relies on looking, critical looking.

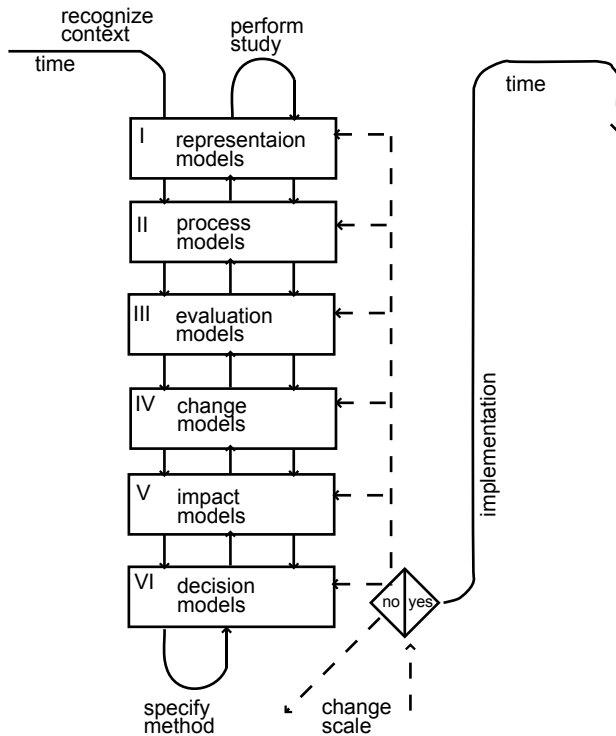
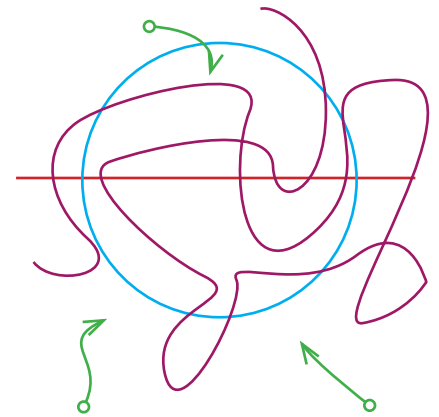
### **Photography and the design process**

The second major goal of this guide is to help designers understand the important role photography plays in the design process. The third goal of this guide book is to show how designers can take a more active role in utilizing photography in the design process.

This guidebook will not give a step by step method for how and where to fit photography into the design process. It is not prescriptive in that way; instead it is prescriptive in how a landscape architecture student can methodically learn about the techniques and theories of photography, particularly landscape photography. This method is flexible and adaptable to multiple teaching and learning situations.

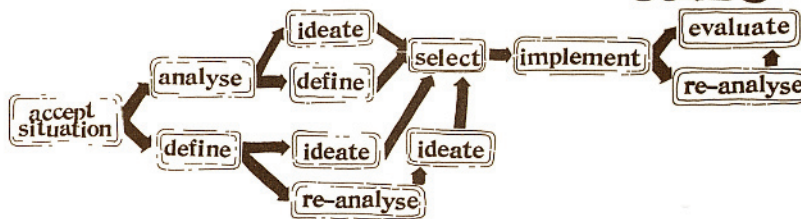
It is similarly adaptable to multiple design processes. The design process in landscape architecture, as well as other design disciplines, is often linear, cyclical and non-linear at the same time. The process relies on both learned knowledge and facts and intuitive reactions to this information. It is not a closed process. New ideas or events are always feeding into the design process. As a result everyone's design process is unique to themselves.

Despite the idiosyncratic nature of the design process, there are events or circumstances during the design process that everyone must engage. Designers such as Carl Steinitz and Don Koberg (*Universal Traveler*) articulate these stages.



The design process as a verb. Redrawn from Carl Steinitz. *Landscape Journal*. 1990

# branching

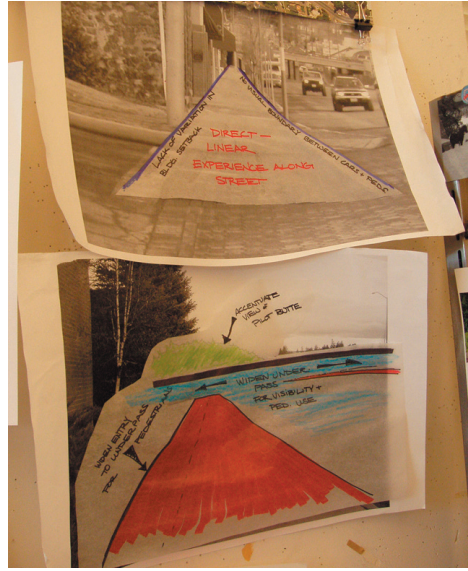


The design process as a problem solving journey. Branching is one of many forms this journey can take. Don Koberg and Jim Bagnall. *The Universal Traveler*. 1972.

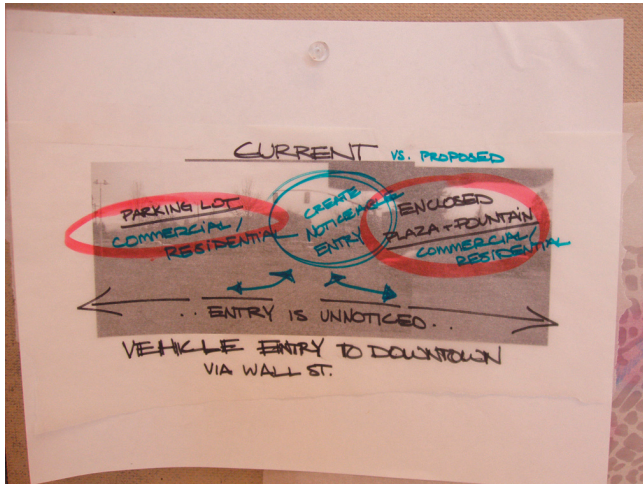
I break down the design process into simpler pieces that directly relate to where photography enters into the picture.



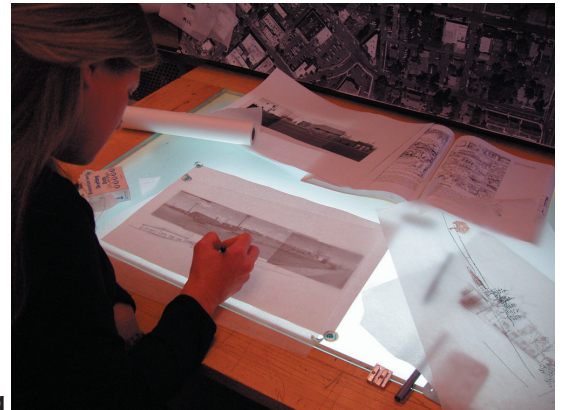
information collection



idea generating



choice making



trying



more inspiration



evaluation



***Information collecting:***

Photography is used to document site characteristics, site contexts, and precedents. We take our own and collect other peoples' photographs during this stage. These photographs can be personal photos, aerial photos, historic archive photos, professional photographs from publications or digital photographs from the internet.

***Idea generating:***

Photographing a place, experimenting with the camera or manipulating photographs manually or digitally are ways to generate ideas about a place. This can often be a playful and experimental process. Also closely examining photographs can generate new ideas.

***Trying:***

Similarly photography can be a way of trying out ideas. Digital photographic simulation of a future design idea is common. Photo collage with various other media is another way of trying out design ideas. Drawing or tracing from photographs and adding design interventions into the drawing is a more traditional approach of trying out ideas with photographs.

***Choice making:***

The products of these photographically based methods of trying lead to a product that helps us make a decision about a particular design idea.

***More Inspiration/Information collecting:***

After engaging in one cycle of idea generating, trying and choosing, many designers seek more inspiration and information by collecting more precedents or revisiting site characteristics and contexts. Photographic images of these things often stimulate further idea generation.

***Evaluating:***

The success of our choice making is often evaluated through photographic documentation. These photographs may be of the built design, digital photo generations of particular aspects of the design, photographs of models for the design, or simply photographs of the final drawings for the design.

All of these uses of photography during the design process are fairly conventional in the field of landscape architecture. Photography is instrumental to our design process. This is why it is so important for us to become familiar with the technical and theoretical issues of photography as a tool for representation. With

See the following authors for a deeper discussion of Landscape.

*JB Jackson*

*John Stilgoe*

*Kenneth Helphand*

*Anne Spirn*

*William Cronon*

*D.W. Meinig*

*The word landscape has a dual origin and multiple meanings. The English word derives from landskip and landshaft. Landskip referred originally to paintings that depicted the domesticated countryside as a scene, with pictorial conventions derived from theater and painting. Landshaft, on the other hand, was a collective term for the whole village, gardens, fields, and woodlot. It was the world of the rural resident. Modern usage emphasizes the landskip meaning, the visual and scenic, but modern times demand a return to other origins, to landscape as a social concept, the bond of people and place.*

Kenneth Helphand. "Introduction: Landscape Thinking." *Colorado: Visions of an American Landscape*. 1991.

this familiarity we can more actively, critically and effectively utilize photography in the design process.

## **What is Landscape?**

For those new to the field of landscape studies, it is important to define what we actually mean when we say landscape. Landscape encompasses every place where humans and other living creatures dwell -- cities, towns, rural agricultural lands, woodlands, seashores, mountain ranges, river ways, backyards, canyonlands, coral reefs, boardwalks.

In pedestrian terms Landscape is often associated with "nature," the antithesis of human culture or urban culture. Indeed these two terms are often thought to be synonymous. This surface assessment of landscape often leads to taking landscapes for granted (much in the same way that I have discussed we take photography for granted.) But, landscape is not just "nature" (and separate from the human built world).

Landscape is the intersection of human intervention in an existing geographic and geomorphic place. Today almost every landscape on earth is influenced by human action, be it the direct action of building and cultivating or the indirect action of air or noise pollution. Landscape is a reflection of human culture. Separating nature from human culture is no longer a legitimate way to think about landscape places.

## **What is photography?**

At this point it is important to really talk about what photography is. Photography is often described as a melding of art and science. The photographer's vision is captured on various chemical concoctions via the controlled conveyance of light. With no vision, there is no photograph, with no chemistry there is no photograph, with no light, there is no photograph.

Photography is, at its essence a mix of human spirit, material substance and light. Anyone who has worked in a darkroom can appreciate Colleen Choquette-Raphel's exclamation to first year photography students that "Photography is Alchemy!"

What does this have to do with teaching photography as a design tool, where we often do not have the pleasure of forays into the darkroom, but instead take forays to the local one hour photo place or our personal computer screen?

As stated previously, this guidebook articulates the basic building blocks of photographic language through a series of lessons. Each of the lessons outlines the basic principles of parts of this language and explores these principles through issues relating to the representation of landscapes. We will look at photography as a *process* of learning and creating, not simply a product. As discussed above the key to using photography for design is to fully engage in the process of making photographs. Through this process we will also learn that photography, like any other media, illustrates and poses universal design questions from which designers can learn.

This process involves an understanding of the language of photography combined with a deeper physical and mental engagement in the act of taking a photograph. A combination of formal aspects of photography and an examination of the basic set of psychological dialogs that occur between the photograph and the viewer make up the language of photography. Learning this language facilitates active taking and viewing of photographs.

### What is the language of photography?

The language of photography functions on a formal and psychological level. Though we can think of these levels separately, they *always* influence one another.

#### **Formal**

The formal aspects of photography involve the visual representation of the subject matter of the photograph. Formal aspects influence the way the viewer sees the subjects. The primary formal issues in photography are:

- Frame
- Composition
- Scale
- Point of View
- Time
- Atmosphere

*[Photographs] are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing.*

Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. 1977.



Anne Godfrey, *Memory 4*, 2001

Each lesson articulates the basic qualities of each of these issues and how they influence the way we respond to an image.

Frame controls what is depicted in the image. Composition creates relationships between subjects. Scale representation determines how the viewer relates to the photograph. Point of View creates the vantage point from which the viewer experiences the scene depicted. Time -- each photograph is a discrete moment in time. Atmosphere is concerned with the quality of light and how that influences the way the subject matters looks. Beyond physical appearance, each of these formal qualities also influences the viewer's psychological experience of the photograph.

### ***Psychological***

When talking about psychological experience, what we are most concerned with is the viewer's reaction to a photograph. These reactions range from base aesthetic judgment: "Isn't that a beautiful/ugly place"; to remembering: "that really reminds me of when I was little and we would go to my uncle's house . . ."; to relation to history and theory: "this photograph represents the legacy of the pastoral in landscape architecture."

Photographer Unkown. Prospect Park. Date Unkown.



We are similarly interested in understanding the psychological motivations of the photographer. Why did this person take a photo of this subject in this manner? Or more directly, why did I take a photo of this place in this way? What am I representing to my self and others, and why? The answers to these questions are not as straight forward as we first expect.

Three main theories form the basis of how this guide will address the psychological processes of taking and interpreting photographs. Each of these theories is taken from the discourse on representation in photographic theory.

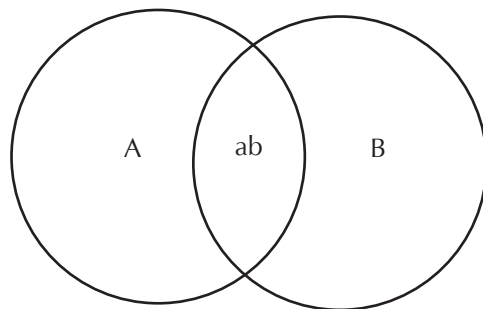
**The Photograph as a subjective representation** -- the photograph is a subjective representation influenced by a multitude of conscious and unconscious choices the photographer makes based on her values and biases. As a result, the photographer controls the reality presented in the photograph. Photography necessarily



manipulates reality, even though people casually assume it portrays a single objective reality.

**The Photograph as a decontextualized object** -- all photographs have a wider often unknown context but are typically presented as independent objects. Without knowledge of this larger context, photographs become isolated representations that can be misread or manipulated for other objectives. Divided from their original contexts photographs often take on narrative lives of their own.

**The Photograph as having an internal and external context** (Barrett 2000) --All viewers bring their own set of experiences, biases and memories to photographic interpretation. Viewers read the internal context of a photograph (that which is depicted) based on a learned set of signs (see side bar). Viewers bring in external context (that which is not depicted but somehow associated with the signs in the photograph) based on their own experiences, memories and cultural biases. This interplay of the depicted and the interpretation of the depicted often leads to multiple readings. Paying close attention to the origins of our photographic interpretations leads to a deeper understanding of our own biases as we view photographs and take photographs. This dialogue between photograph and viewer deeply influences the design process.

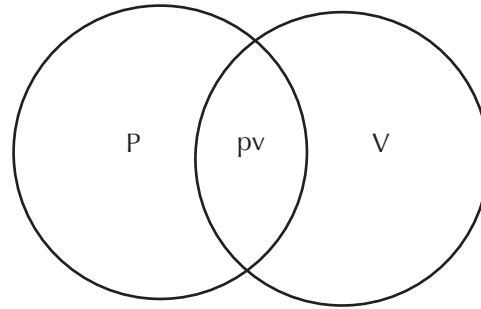


Wilbur Shramm model (1973) where A and B are two individuals in communication. ab is the shared experience which enable them to understand one another. Without this shared experience there can be no clear communication.

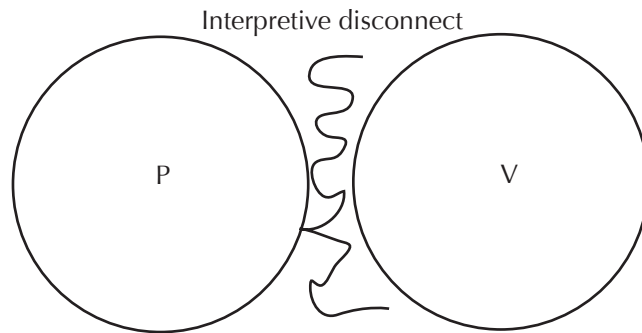
*It has become commonplace to use such phrases as 'the language of painting' or 'the grammar of interior design.' [Or in our case the language of photography and landscape'] This is because we have come to recognize the connection between all of the systems by means of which we communicate; the key to this link is the definition of a sign as any physical entity to which a community attributes meaning. Words, clothes, gestures, possessions, pictures, colors -- we give meaning to all of them in our daily interactions.*

*The group of theories which groups all of these signs was named semiology [semiotics in the US] in the pioneer writing of Ferdinand de Saussure, where it was defined as 'the science which studies the life of signs in our social interaction'.*

John Morgan and Peter Welton. See *What I Mean? an introduction to visual communication*. Second edition. 1992. p.41-42.



Adapted Shramm model (by the author 2003) where P is the photographer, and V is the viewer. pv is the visual, metaphorical and cultural language that P and V share which facilitates communication of the meaning of the image (the photograph). Again, if the viewer(V) and the photographer(P) do not share the same “language” the interpretation of the image can vary widely. This interpretation process is highly influential during design process.



### **Active taking and looking = Critical taking and looking**

Gaining a basic understanding of the formal and psychological issues that form the way we take and view photographs teaches us how to be more critical about the use of this media. Because photography is so casually (and wrongly) associated with depicting the real and objective, we must gain a critical eye for photographic representations that claim to show “what a place is really like.” Critical looking and taking means thinking deeply about what is being shown, and how you, the photographer, are engaging in the photographic process. Critical looking and taking does not mean dismissing the efforts or intentions of a photographer, the images he makes, or the way someone else reads images. Instead it is about trying to understand why individual photographs communicate particular information, ideas, or feelings to a particular viewer. In turn we want to understand how photographs influence the way we design for a place.

## Introduction to Photography

### **Primary:**

- Barrett, Terry. *Criticizing Photographs: an introduction to understanding images*. Mayfield Publishing Company. Mountain View, California. 2000. Third ed.
- Berger, John. "Reading a Photograph." *Classic Essays on Photography*. Trachtenberg, ed. Leete's Island Books. New Haven, Conn. p. 291-294.
- Fox, William. *View Finder: Mark Klett, Photography and the Reinvention of the Landscape*. University of New Mexico Press. Albuquerque, NM. 2001.
- London, Barbara, Upton, John. *Photography*. HarperCollins College Publishers. New York, NY. 1994.
- Shore, Stephen. *The Nature of Photographs*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore. 1998.
- Szarkowski, John. *The Photographer's Eye*. The Museum of Modern Art. New York. 1966.

### **Secondary:**

- Bayer, Johnathan. *Reading Photographs: Understanding the Aesthetics of Photography*. Pantheon Books. New York. 1977.
- Jussim, Estelle, Lindquist-Cock, Elizabeth. *Landscape as Photograph*. Yale University Press. New Haven, Connecticut. 1985.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Picador USA. New York. 1977.
- Szarkowski. *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*. The Museum of Modern Art. New York. 1978.
- Trachtenberg, Alan, ed. *Classic Essays on Photography*. Leete's Island Books. New Haven. 1980.

### **Tertiary:**

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography*. Hill and Wang. New York. 1981.
- Wells, Liz, ed. *Photography: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge. London. 2000.

## Introduction to perception theories

(broadly meaning art, literary, linguistic and communications theory and postmodern philosophies)

### **Primary:**

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books. London. 1972

Morgan, John, Welton, Peter. *See What I Mean? An introduction to visual communication*. Edward Arnold. London. Second Edition. 1992.

### **Secondary:**

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory : an introduction*. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis, MN. 1996 2nd ed.

Sarup, Madan. *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. University of Georgia Press. Athens. Second edition. 1993.

### **Tertiary:**

Barthes, Roland. *The Semiotic Challenge*. Hill and Wang. New York. 1988.

Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press. Bloomington. 1976.

Fucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*. Haverster Press. 1980.