

The Class

Ten Lessons in Landscape Photography was first taught at [redacted] in 2003. The following is a compilation of two versions of the class taught that year and additional information and ideas formed during and after the creation and teaching of the classes.

The concept of the ten lessons was formed after attending a dance performance piece at Bryant Lake Bowl in Minneapolis, Minnesota during the summer of 2002. Collin Rush constructed a ten part dance performance where he both taught and engaged in a particular modern dance theory, New Dance. This theory is centered around increasing awareness of the body in place and space and following and flowing with the emotional reactions to place, space, time and the presence of others. Collin ended each performance/lesson by giving an assignment to the audience to “try at home.” The core of each lesson focused on increasing awareness.

My work with photography pursued the same goals. I saw photography as a way to engage in a deeper dialog with a place, increasing sensitivity and awareness of the place and understanding its impact on my psyche. I increasingly saw photography as a way to teach landscape architecture students how to delve deeper into their understanding of a place. The Class was borne out of these initial ideas and has since evolved into a much more complex exploration of how photographic representation informs the design process.

The following information is presented to help teachers and students of these lessons:

- understand the basic structure and method of the class
- understand the lesson format



Little did I know at the time that I was following in Lawrence Halprin's footsteps, echoing on a micro scale Halprin's collaborations with his dancer wife Ann Halprin.

Collin Rush, 2003. Photo by Michael Godfrey

Landscape architecture has been my sphere of action and service, just as photography is my touchstone and way of knowing. The landscape architect's experience helps me see significance; the photographer's disciplined, feeling way of seeing leads me to deeper insights. Photographs prompt and push my thinking: I let them speak, work on my feelings and mind, and sort them as images first, seeking connections. The Language of Landscape began this way.

Anne Whiston Spirn. *The Language of Landscape*. 1998. p4.

Basic structure of the class

This is an adaptable set of lessons, and instructors should feel free to alter and experiment with the basic structure I present. Also, this class was structured to fit an 11 week, four term, academic calendar, thus the Ten Lessons. But many of the lessons can be divided, lengthened and enhanced to fit a 15 week semester. I have included samples of syllabi and course outlines in the Appendix.

This guide is created to provide instructors and students with a basic understanding of the inherent qualities of photography as a tool for representation. It is also a first step towards engaging in a much deeper discussion and exploration of this medium. The main text outlines and explains the main ideas. The reader may then wish to consult the additional readings. An instructor could prepare to teach the class based on the main text, additional readings and personal research, and hone the curriculum to specific program needs. Likewise, a student could read this guide, consult the primary readings and engage in the assignments and journal as an independent study. Though this independent study option is feasible, I find that students and instructors gain valuable insight from peer comment in the classroom setting.

The content of the lessons progresses from basic technical and formal skill building to more abstract and theoretical explorations. Lessons One through Five address basic visual aspects of photographic representation. A discussion of the psychological interpretation and landscape representation starts in the first five lessons. Lessons Six through Ten concentrate on developing these issues in more detail, and thus become more theoretically abstract in their concepts and content. Yet the students are still developing their photographic skills through the weekly assignments. Simply put, the first five lessons teach students how to photograph physical things and relationships, while the last five lessons teach the students how to photograph perceptions, feelings and ideas.

The class is made up of five major components: Lecturing, photographing, group photo critiques, reading, and journal writing. Each component informs the other components, and ideally students engage in all five throughout the class term.

Lecturing:

Each lecture elucidates the topic for the week (i.e. frame, viewpoint, truth) through both verbal description and discussion of a series of slides (usually about 40 for a one hour lecture). The lectures are both a place for the instructor to give

multiple and varying examples of the topic and for the students to ask questions. The lectures also reflect on the assigned readings.

I always turn the conversation back to how these issues potentially inform the design process for site design. The lecture concludes with handing out and explaining the photo assignment, allowing for questions and clarifications.

The examples used in the lecture are primarily from the wide and diverse landscape genre. I also show some **street photography** that I find particularly helpful in illustrating some of the basic photographic theories. My selection of landscape photographs tends to focus on **straight** photographers, and photographers' work representing the American West. I chose this subset of the landscape genre for two primary reasons: 1) I taught the class in the West, basically at the end of the Oregon Trail, so these landscapes are more familiar and often directly relate to the students' design work. 2) Nineteenth century survey photography of the West had, and still has, an huge impact on landscape photography and how we image the western American landscape. Also, I do not use many examples of "nature photographers," like what one would find in Sierra Club calendars, because I believe they often falsely idealize and abstract the landscape (see Lesson One for a deeper discussion of this).

After much debate I also chose not to use students' previous work as examples in the lecture. My reasoning behind this is that each week we look at students' work during the group critique pin up. Students see most of their peers' work over the term, and learn from these examples during the group crit. Lecture time is better spent exposing students to photographers they may not otherwise encounter. The students gain a greater appreciation for the landscape photography genre and learn about the significant developments in the history of photography.

Photographing:

Each week the students take the equivalent of a roll of film (24-36 images) that documents their design site (or precedent or inspiration for their design -- see the following). Students use the camera they own (digital, film point and shoots, SLRs and Polaroids are all acceptable) and have their photos processed or printed.

Each week's photo assignment asks the student to focus on the formal or theoretical topic for that week's lesson (i.e. composition, narrative). I ask the students to limit the number of photos they take because it helps students become more deliberate during the photographing process. Taking photographs of their

street photography: a genre within the straight photography movement that candidly documents street life. Weegee is one of the best known street photographers.

straight photography: photographic style that accentuates the documentary qualities inherent in the photographic process of image making. Straight photography is a Modernist movement that is a direct reaction against Pictorialism. Well known straight photographers are Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. Much of the photography we view today is straight photography.

Survey Photographers of the American West
(late 1800's):
Timothy O'Sullivan
William Henry Jackson
Carleton E. Watkins
Alexander Gardener
William Bell

site week after week also provides them the benefit of simply spending time at the place they are designing and asking them to really see it. It is important to point this out to students. If students are designing for a site that is not easily visitable I ask them to photograph similar places in a more local setting, seek out precedents, and photograph places that can act as inspiration for the design. This situation is at times problematic. I find the students who can repeatedly visit their design site more quickly grasp the value of the progression and goals of the lessons. Students who visit multiple sites have a very different learning experience from those students who stay with one site. For students who use multiple sites, the progression of the lessons seems more disconnected and the class does not have the same feeling of cohesiveness. With this in mind I suggest that students pick one site and photograph it for the whole term. This means the student may not use a site they are designing for. From my experience this trade off does benefit the students. If the situation does not allow for this the instructor should be aware of how this will change the learning experience for these students. Students still understand the core concepts of the class, but their learning experience is different than students who use one site for the duration of the class.

Group Critique:

The students pin up all or part of their assignment and discuss how they both approached the assignment and how their photographs informed their design work. Some of the primary discussions revolve around the following issues: how much information a photograph includes; relationships depicted in the photograph; exploration of form and color through the image; how site contexts are represented; and how personal design style and biases are reflected in photographs. The goal of the discussion is not to praise those who made “beautiful photographs”, but rather to discuss how each student’s approach does or does not help further his design process and why.

The students hand in all of their photos from the assignment. I review their work and make individual comments about issues we did not cover in class. This two tiered review process allows for broader peer comment on the students’ work and more focused and specific comments from me, as the instructor.

Reading:

Short readings accompany each of the lectures. For the first half I choose readings that many students encounter in introductory photography classes. For

the second half of the class (which becomes more concerned with theoretical and conceptual issues) I chose readings from landscape architecture and landscape theory texts.

Each of the lessons in this guide ends with a suggested list of readings. They are divided into three levels: Primary, secondary and tertiary. The primary readings are (for the most part) the basic readings for the class. These readings discuss the basic ideas and theories of photography and landscape representation. They are the building blocks for more advanced reading. Secondary readings are more advanced and build on the ideas introduced in the Primary readings. Tertiary readings require some basic familiarity with landscape, art and/or literary theory. In some of the lessons, additional readings which pertain to specific topics, are provided. At the end of this section is a list of basic photography texts that I feel are helpful in becoming familiar with photography as a representational medium.

Journal writing:

While looking at, taking and discussing photographs is the primary focus of these lessons, writing about the experience of this process has proved important for students' individual development. I give a set of questions with each assignment that asks the students to reflect on the process of taking photographs. Asking the students to write about this process forces them to think and reflect on what they are doing, thinking and feeling while taking photographs. It adds another layer of personal understanding. The students hand in the journals with their photo assignments. I use the journals as a way to gauge how well a student is understanding the concepts of the lessons. I also directly address questions or thoughts that come up in the journal writing. It is important for the students and instructor to understand that the journal is first and foremost a place for students to explore their own process in their own individual way. Often the journal is an outlet for introverted students to discuss their ideas, or a place to test out ideas the students may not be comfortable sharing in class. Some of the most profound and interesting comments were made in students' journals, not in the group pin up sessions. Writing also taps into the kinetic processes of learning, which is appealing to many students.

Lesson structure

Each of the following lessons contains:

A list of concepts and goals for the lesson

A description and discussion of the lesson topic's concepts

Examples and discussion of these concepts

Discussion of how these concepts inform the design process

A list of primary, secondary and tertiary readings

An example of the assignment and journal, when given.

The lessons are intended for multiple readers with varied levels of understanding about photography. Students of landscape architecture with little or no experience in photography are introduced to the formal and conceptual issues through the main text. Readers with a background in landscape architecture will find the main text directly relates photography to landscape and design process issues. People with a more advanced understanding of photographic issues will gain information about issues of representation in landscape and landscape architecture. The side bar quotes and discussions delve deeper into the basic issues introduced in the main text. The side bars also introduce authors and photographers not discussed in the main text. This structure allows the reader to pick and choose the information from the lessons based on her level of understanding. The listed readings at the end of each lesson are intended to direct readers of all levels to more resources. These readings are on various subjects including photography, landscape architecture, art, literary theory and communication theory.

This guide is a total integration of practice and theory regarding photography as a tool for representation. The success of this class is dependent on the active integration of theory and practice by the instructor and students through multiple ways of learning: photographing, reading, writing, talking, helping and creating.

THEORY:

Thinking and talking about how and why photographs influence viewers' perception of a place.

PRACTICE:

Learning, trying and eventually mastering the representation techniques of photography.

