

# Lesson Two

## Frame

Frame is one of the primary formal components of photography. Formal components deal with visual aspects of photography: light, shadow, form, relationship and how they are compositionally presented in the photograph. The frame is the edge of the photograph. When looking through the viewfinder of a camera, the frame is essentially what you look through.

A frame is similar to a site boundary: it is a line that separates the area designated for our attention from the area that is not. A site boundary tells us the scope of the project. The designer's responsibilities fall within the site boundary. Yet any good designer addresses relationships, histories and events outside of the site boundary that affect what is in the site boundary, and vice versa. To only consider what lies within the site boundary means ignoring whole sets of issues that potentially formed and will change that place. We can think about a photograph and its frame in the same way. A frame divides an image from its surrounding context, yet that surrounding context influences what is seen in the image. As an active participant in the photographic process we must consider both what is seen within the frame and the possible unseen contexts beyond the frame.

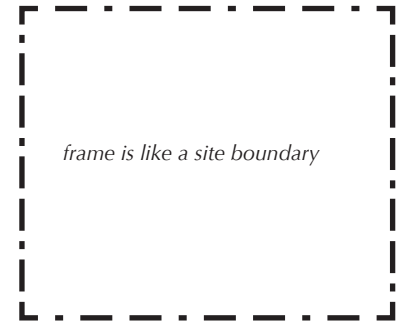
The frame controls the viewer's experience. The frame determines:

- what is shown
- what is not shown
- the space within the photograph
- the potential space beyond the frame
- relationships represented within the photograph
- the potential relationships beyond the frame
- the basic parameters of the composition

Framing is an active choice made by the photographer. Framing can enhance or detract from the representation of the above aspects.

The Frame:

- establishes the setting
- establishes relationships (real or constructed)
- can disorient
- can focus on and amplify a particular moment or relationship



*Among the elements of photographic vision -- the subject, time, vantage point, and frame -- the frame is the most critical because it defines the contents.*

Hildegard Binder Johnson. "The Framed Landscape." *Landscape*. v. 23, no. 2. Spring 1979.

- determines our sense of the surrounding environment
- establishes real or imagined narratives
- establishes focus
- can give larger context to a single event
- can amplify emotional impact.

*The photograph's edge defines content. It isolates unexpected juxtapositions. By surrounding two facts, it creates a relationship. The edge of the photograph dissects familiar forms, and shows their unfamiliar fragment. It creates the shapes that surround the objects.*  
 John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*.  
 1966.

Take, for example, this photograph by Joe Deal. He represents multiple relationships simply by including multiple layers of landscape spaces in one frame. The viewer immediately identifies a white building in the fore-ground and the roller coaster and fair ride in the mid-ground. Deal gives this photograph a larger place context by including the background in the frame. We see that the fairground and building are close to a river and what appears to be an active shipyard. We can determine from the road sign that there is a highway interchange nearby. And if we are familiar with this particular area these adjacent elements may signal the location of this place within the larger out-of-frame context.

What is left out of the frame is equally important, as is the case with all photographs. Deal's photograph does not show what is adjacent to the white building in the fore ground, nor do we get enough information about the white building to accurately determine it's use. We don't know if there are other fair rides next to the roller coaster, but we do get a sense that the parking lot behind it does extend beyond the vision of the frame. The shipyard in the distance, and the size of the ships, may signal that this is a port, close to the ocean, but we can't be sure about that. It might be on the Great Lakes. That information is not in the frame. Only the title "Ocean Center Building and the Pike, Long Beach, California, 1980" gives us information that is left out of the frame.

*A photograph has edges, the world does not. The edges separate what is in the picture from what is not.*  
 Stephen Shore. *The Nature of the Photograph*.  
 1998.

The frame is the primary formal quality that characterizes a photograph as decontextualized object. The frame, by nature, dissects the depicted scene from its larger context. The scene becomes an image, which no longer depends on the landscape context from which it was taken. This image functions on its own according to the internal context it represents. It is the viewer who recontextualizes the photograph (accurately or not) based on the external context she brings to the photograph.

### **Frame and the designer**

For landscape design, the frame controls representation of the scale, space and physical relationships in space. A critical aspect of a landscape can easily be



*I think Deal's contribution is a very simple one, easy to accept: he shows us that there is a much wider and much more stimulating choice of subjects in the everyday urban world than we had ever suspected. He shows us the importance and variety there is in the urban, domestic and landscape spaces surrounding us.*

JB Jackson. "Joe Deal and the Vernacular."  
*Southern California Photographs, 1976-86.*

1992.

Joe Deal. Ocean Center Building and the Pike, Long Beach, California, 1980

edited out by the photographer. Similarly, certain relationships can be exaggerated or altered through framing. Actively identifying and framing significant and meaningful relationships of a site requires a careful, thoughtful, and active process of visual and physical exploration. This active process will enable the designer-photographer to take more useful photographs for landscape designs.

Thinking about the frame enables us to use the whole surface of the photograph. Paying attention to the potential of the whole surface of the photograph starts with looking more closely at the edges of the frame. This is the first step to depicting multiple and meaningful relationships within a photograph. These relationships tell the stories of a landscape and influence the way we think about and design for these landscapes.

*Anne Spirn defines framing in landscape terms, particularly Japanese garden landscape terms.*

*"Framing brackets; it separates from context, focuses attention by screening undesired or irrelevant views, by directing the gaze. Gates, walls, hedges and groves of trees may frame objects, scenes or distant prospects by enclosing with distinctive color, texture, sound or scent."*

Anne Spirn. *The Language of Landscape.*

1998

# Reading

Photographers to look at :

Henri Cartier Bresson

Joe Deal

Ray Metzker

Lee Friedlander

Robert Adams

Jan Staller

Fay Godwin

## **Primary:**

Shore, Stephen. "frame." *The Nature of Photographs*. Johns Hopkins University Press. 1998. p. 28-35.

Szarkowski, John . "The Frame." *The Photographer's Eye*. The Museum of Modern Art. 1966. pp. 70.

Cartier-Bresson, Henri. *Europeans*. Blufinch Press. Boston. 1998.

## **Secondary:**

Bayer, Johnathan. "Organization of the Picture" *Reading Photographs: Understanding the Aesthetics of Photography*. Pantheon Books. New York. 1977. p.28-29.

Pfahl, John. *Picture Windows*. Little, Brown and Co. Boston. 1987.

Staller, Jan. *On Planet Earth*. Aperture. New York. 1997.

Weston, Edward. "Seeing Photographically." 1965. Reprinted in *Classic Essays in Photography*. Trachtenberg, Alan, ed. Leete's Island Books. New Haven. 1980.

## **Tertiary:**

Johnson, Hildegard B. "The Framed Landscape." *Landscape*. v. 23 n. 2. Spring 1979. p. 27-32.

O'Brian, Dean W. "Framing the Pseudoenvironment." *Landscape*. v. 26 n. 1. Spring 1982. p. 26-32.

# Assignment Two

## Frame/Re-frame

Take a series of photos focusing on the issues of frame that we discussed in class. Get in the habit of scanning the edges of your frame before you take a photograph and think about how you might be able to re-frame your shot to create a more meaningful and information filled photograph. Think about using the whole surface of the negative instead of just the center. This means you will be looking through your viewfinder and re-looking at the larger scene while taking photographs.

After printing your series select four photographs and re-frame them again. You can do this by using photo tape, making a paper mask or using photoshop. In class we will look at these re-framed images.

Please pin up the original image and the reframed image. Please pin up the rest of your roll below the four re-framed sets.

## Journal Two

### Frame

What were you thinking and/or feeling as you were taking photos?

What was it like to concentrate on the frame?

Did you notice anything new? What? Why?

How can this assignments assist your design work?

Based on the readings, define the uses of framing in your own words?

Please comment on the process of reframing four of your photographs.



# The Results

## Re-framing

This part of the assignment is often unclear to students when first presented. “Why are you making us do this?” “I don’t get it.” But for many the act of re-framing photographs they have already framed makes clear how framing controls how we read photographs. Comparing and contrasting student’s original photographs and the “re-frames” clearly shows how framing:

- controls the amount of information depicted
- determines the context or lack there of
- sets up a feeling or mood
- focuses attention on detail

and basically controls our experience of a place.

## Framing and Scale

Students approached this assignment in various ways. Where we see the most variation is the scale at which students choose to frame the subject matter. Some stayed at what I call a mid-landscape scale. Where most of the photograph is concerned with subjects in the mid ground. While some zoomed in and started focusing on the foreground, or details, and leaving larger landscape contexts out of the frame.



Mid Landscape

Jackie Robertson



Details

Natira Jones

Discussing the implications of these scale representations is important, because at this point many are not consciously aware of the impact their framing choices have on the viewer.

## Mid-landscape

Mid -landscape site photos usually contain at least a hint of the larger surrounding landscape. A sense of mountains, weather patterns and structures adjacent to a site are easily read in these kinds of photographs. Framing becomes an exercise in depicting topography, vegetation types at all levels (ground, shrub, canopy), and the spatial extent and character of the site. Often the viewer must look more actively at these photographs in order to glean more detailed information. At first glance we simply read the lines of the topography and the vertical structural elements. We must keep looking to find hints about drainage, soil type, circulation patterns, vegetation patterns, use, traces of cultural history, etc. We will revisit this issue in depth in the Lesson Three: Composition.

Even though Mid-landscape photos give a wider angle of view and represent larger areas of land, important aspects of a site can easily be edited out. For instance, a very busy six-lane boulevard is minimized, almost not noticed by the passive viewer, in this photograph. Instead we see a pastoral expanse of lawn, which seems quite and inviting. The adjacent boulevard greatly impacts the way this site feels. Yet we hardly notice it in this photograph.

The beauty of intentionally taking a series of photos, even though our primary concern is framing, is that multiple aspects of a site can be represented. This student could have included a set of photographs of the boulevard. He could have shown the expanse of the traffic lanes and what the site looks like from the boulevard. It is important to remind students to show all aspects of the site, not just what is appealing.

### Details

Detail photos, or foreground photos, look more closely at materials, patterns, and events that occur on a micro, instead of macro scale. Often these types of photos directly relate to the scale of the body, being either smaller than or the



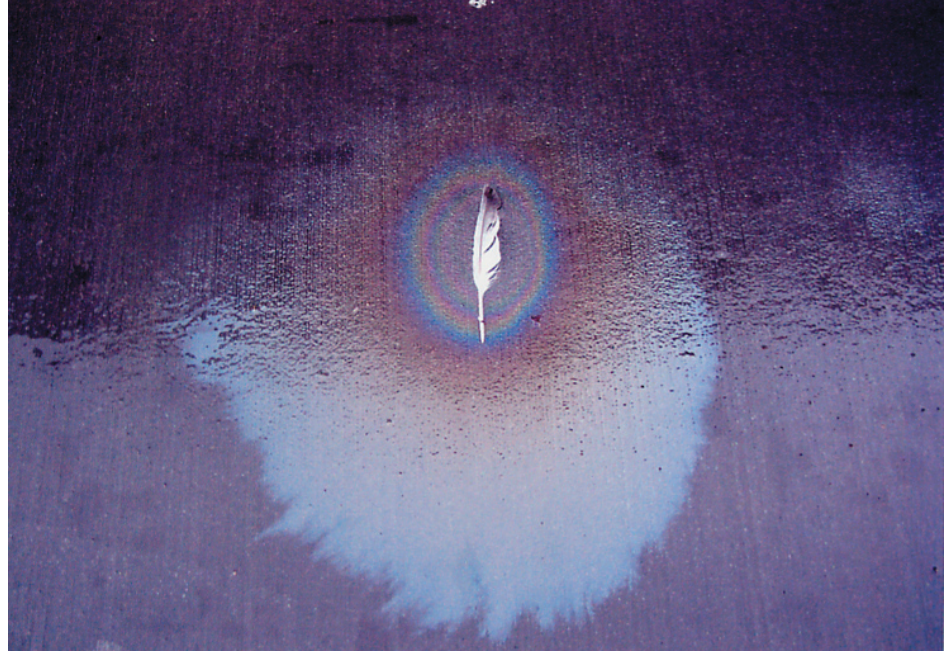
Hani Attia, 2003.



same as size as body. Detail photos framed with no surrounding context become studies of material, structure, texture and light. Though most of the elements are recognizable, such as the tractor, the object becomes abstracted and the viewer



Sharon DeBell, 2003.



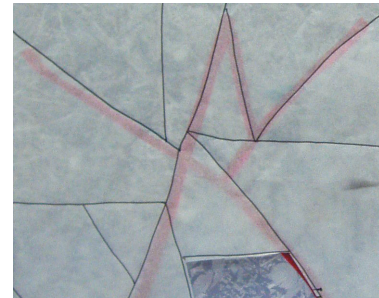
Ryan Wagner, 2003.

focuses on the forms and shadows of the wheel and the fork lift. This photo of a feather on wet concrete in a pool of motor oil really becomes about light, wetness and color.

The frame emphasizes the form of these objects because it determines the space the forms reside in. The tractor wheel is cut by the frame, so we see the form of the tractor tire, but not the whole tractor tire on the grass, attached to a tractor. The frame closes the space and focuses our attention on more abstract qualities of the objects. Students often apply these abstractions at multiple scales to design process, continuing to abstract the forms as they work.



Liz Deck, 2003.





Another type of detail photo includes some landscape context. Our eye is drawn to the detail because of the space it takes up in the frame, but the photographer chooses to include context in the background. In this photo the subject matter is the inscribed stone. The student intentionally framed the photograph to include the park context, the Willamette River and the very distinctive architectural landmark in the background. This way of framing draws our attention to the detail, but does not abstract its form. It includes larger landscape context that places the detail firmly in a larger space.

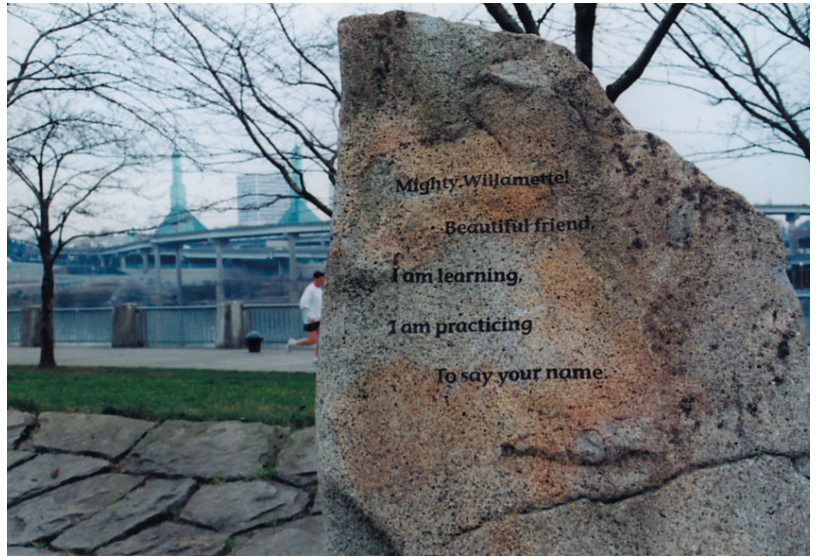
### **Is there as scale of representation that is more helpful than others for design?**

Challenging students to frame photos at multiple scales within their series is the best way to start answering this question. Students will learn which scales of representation are most helpful to certain aspects of the design process. All scales are helpful, as long as all scales are acknowledged. A design on a regional scale may primarily utilize landscape scaled aerial photographs, yet to leave out photographs of micro level details would mean ignoring a whole set of issues in the design. Working at multiple scales is key to good design practices. David Hulse always advises that landscape architects consider at least one scale larger and one scale smaller than the scale of the design site. This holds true for how we photograph a place as well as how we design for it.

### **Style**

Many students' individual styles start to become apparent in the second assignment. Some have very distinct and unique styles, while others are just starting to think about personal preferences. Students start to question whether their personal style is OK or not. Understanding and acknowledging stylistic leanings can lead to a better understanding of personal design style. Questions to ask are:

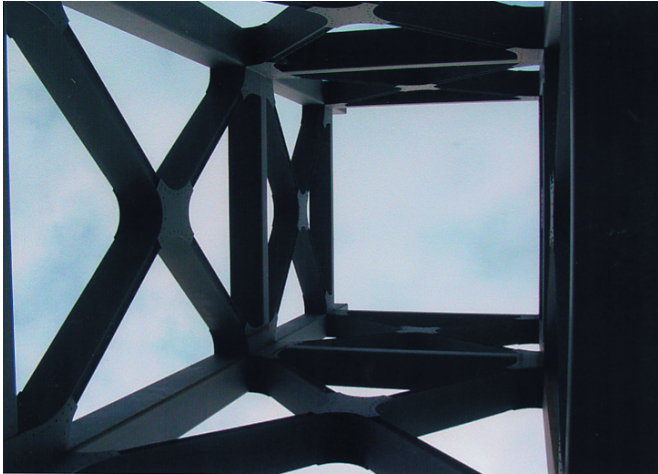
- what types of visual relationships am I drawn too?
- how do I represent these in my photographs?
- how does this influence my design process? (a VERY important question)



Kaori Fukayama, 2003

- how is the way I photograph expressive of the way I design?
- what am I leaving out because of my leanings(biases)?
- how can I become more aware of this and start documenting more aspects of a place? (While still “photographing the way I photograph.”)

We will revisit these questions in Lesson Three.



Clockwise from top left: Matt Gurrad, Wendy Palamara, Ben Holmes