

Lesson Four

Viewpoint

The Physical and the Psychological

Viewpoint is the physical position from which a photograph is taken. Viewpoint is both the angle and distance of the subject in relation to the camera. For example I can look up into a tree and take a photo of its leaves, which are 15 feet away from me. Or I can take a picture of the same tree from an airplane looking straight down, flying 300 feet away from the tree. The photographic results are quite different. As a result perceptions of this tree are different and dependent on the photographer's viewpoint. For example, from 300 feet away, the tree may seem like an abstract form. While from 15 feet away the tree may become a detailed unique space.



Left: Aerial Photograph, date unknown.
Right: The same tree. Anne Godfrey, 2004.

Adult human viewpoint is usually about 5'4" when standing. It is the viewpoint most often represented by the casual photographer. When we look at site photographs, it is the most common viewpoint. Why? Because it is easy, just put the camera in front of your face and shoot.

Imagine (image) your local urban neighborhood. Think about your experience in that place. Now think about how a four year old child experiences that place, or a person in a wheelchair, a person who is 6'5", or an 85 year old woman. All of these people have different visual experiences of this place, based on their physical viewpoint in this place. Each of them would tell you different stories about this place, and have different attitudes of feelings about this place. Our psychological interaction in the world is closely tied to our physical interaction in the world.

By putting ourselves in other viewpoints we can gain a better understanding of what other humans and animals experience in a particular place. These visual experiences are closely tied to physical and psychological aspects of a place that determine how usable and inhabitable it is.

Lets look at a fairly straight forward example, the vantage point of a small child. Everything changes -- focus on subjects, scale relationships, relationship to objects. The suitcase and the men's shoes take on a much more dominant position from a child's vantage point. Walking adults would take a photo of faces, ties, glasses, while the child sees feet, hands, pants, belt buckles and the sidewalk.

Clockwise from top left:
Joseph Sterling. Teenagers, 1960.
Ray Metzker. City Whispers, Philadelphia, 1980.
Larry Callahan. Heroic Figure, Chicago, 1961.



The child's angle of interaction is completely different as is his psychological interaction. His physical relationship to his surrounding determines his psychological relationship. As we see, a child functions in an adult scaled world.

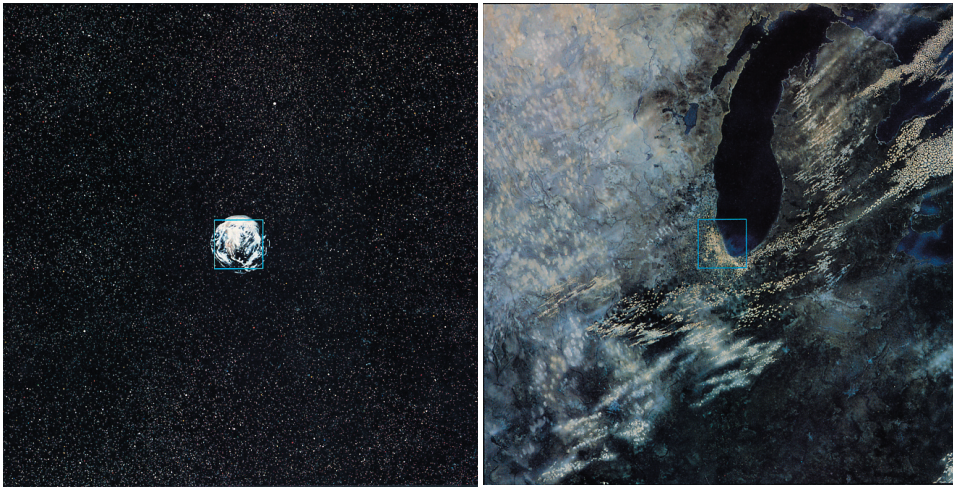
Scale and Viewpoint

What is perceived and experienced is most often controlled by the scale at which something is viewed. In aerial photography, the distance at which the photograph was taken from the ground determines both how much we see in one

frame and how much detail we can read in the frame. Aerial photography is one of the primary ways landscape architects study and gain information about the landscape.

Powers of Ten, by Philip and Phyllis Morrison, is an extreme but revealing example of how scale controls perception of a place. This series of photographs looks at the earth in successive intervals of the power of ten. The book starts with a photo of the universe at 1 billion light years or 10^{25} meters from the earth's surface and ends with subatomic particles at 0.1 fermi or 10^{-16} meters. For our purposes it is helpful to look at the 10^8 meter to 10^{-3} meter range.

In this series there are three major issues to take into consideration: context, recognition, detail. Starting with 10^8 meters we can see the earth, and recognize it as the earth based on previous photographs, such as those from the Apollo flights. The larger context of the galaxy is present, but unless the viewer is an astronomer,

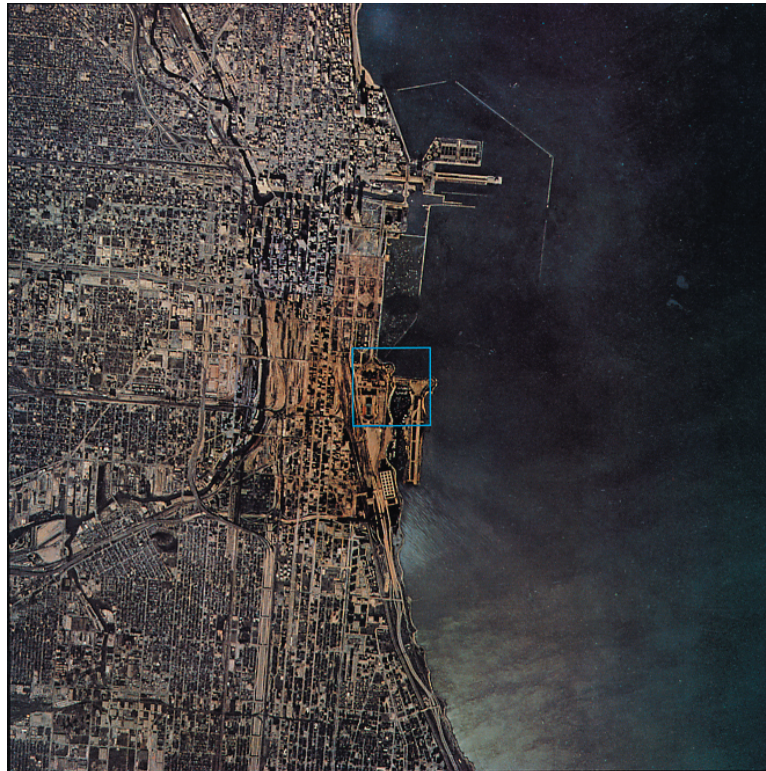


10^8 meters
 10^6 meters
Powers of Ten, 1982

there is not much detail to be read from this photograph. Skipping down to 10^6 meter a much different view appears. The context of the galaxy is gone, and we no longer see earth as a whole, but now the shape of Lake Michigan is recognizable. This recognition contextualizes the greater Chicago Metro Area within the center of the photograph. If the viewer is familiar with the region she also recognizes the detailed shapes of the Door County Peninsula and Lake Winabago in Wisconsin. Details beyond shape and pattern are not discernible at this scale.

At 10^4 meters we now see downtown Chicago and its surrounding neighborhoods. Context is gained and lost. Regional context is lost, and if we

10^5 meters
Powers of Ten, 1982



10^3 meter
 10^1 meter
Powers of Ten, 1982



were not familiar with how Chicago sits on the bank of Lake Michigan, it may not be apparent where or what this city is. Finer grained context is gained, because roads, individual buildings and rivers are discernible. At this scale we begin to see three dimensionally. We can see the shadows cast by the taller buildings. Again, if we are familiar with Chicago, we can recognize the shapes that denote the Sears Tower, the Chicago River, the grounds of the Art Institute, the rail yards, ships docked at marinas and Lake Shore Drive. But at this scale the photo is still, as the Morrisons put it, “a maplike tracery of symbols.”

Ratcheting down more quickly, shapes become recognizable detailed objects; trees and grass become more than just colors and we begin to see human scaled objects such as cars and sidewalks. But as the viewpoint zooms in closer, more and more context of the larger place is lost. Once 10^1 meter is reached, all context is lost. We are looking at a patch of grass with napping picnickers that could be anywhere -- Central Park in New York city, Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, or Marathon Park in Wausau, Wisconsin.

Once we reach 10^0 meter, or human scale, the image shows human sized details -- books, magazines, food, clothing. Individual features and details that make one thing unique from another are recognizable. The context of the



10⁰ meter
Powers of Ten, 1982

photograph is only concerned only with the objects surrounding the central subject, the napping man. Again, this photo could be almost anywhere. And at this point it could be inside or outside for all we know.

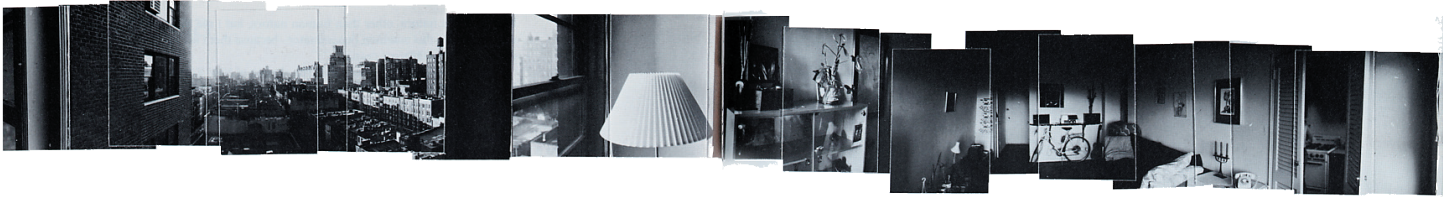
Thinking about and photographically representing multiple scales, be they at intervals of the power of ten, or random intervals from insect scale to city wide scale, helps designers think about multiple and interconnected relationships that cannot always be perceived at one (human) scale.

Expanding viewpoint

Viewpoint is restricted by angle of view. Both human eye sight and camera lenses have a limited angle of view. The frame reflects the limit of the lens's angle of view. Our experience of the landscape is controlled by this angle.

There are techniques that can expand the angle of view. Often expanding the angle of view is a helpful way think about a place in a new way. Expanding angle of view can reveal new relationships, uncover larger pervasive patterns, or simply help the designer think about a place from a fresh perspective.

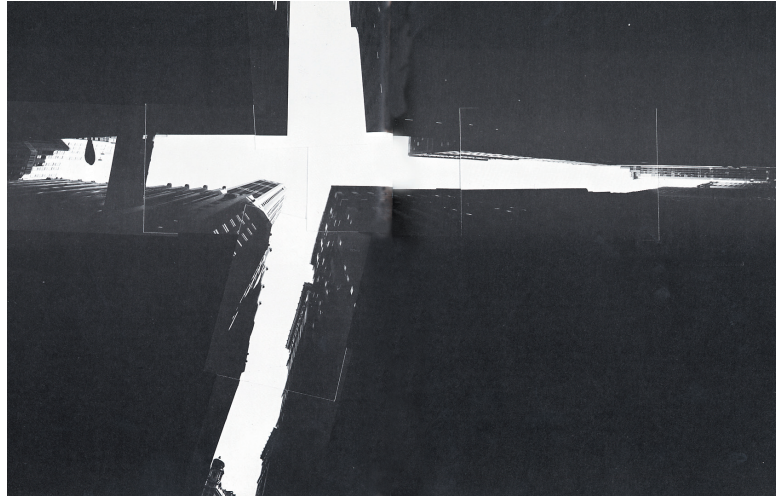
In *Manhattan*, series of photos are assembled to create panoramas. The panoramas created are not conventional horizontal panoramas. Instead the photos trace the criss cross of the buildings against the sky, take a 360 degree spin on



Roberte Mestdagh. Barbara's apartment, window towards west. 1981.

41 Street, simultaneously look in- and outside of a high-rise apartment window. These series of photographs tell far more than a single picture would. There is a greater sense of space, connection and relation between certain elements becomes more evident, and the organization and patterning of the space is

Roberte Mestdagh. Looking at the Sky: Crossroads, Exchange Street and William Street. 1981.



revealed.

David Hockney uses a similar method but with different results. His series of photographs act as a collage of both a place and time. Multiple facial expressions appear in one collage, bending our sense of time. This reinvigorates a sense of action and movement and twists the idea that photographs capture a single moment. Shown as a collage, Hockney's work pushes conventional notions about photography as a single well composed image. It is a collage of both space and time that expands and bends viewpoint.

We see more angles, relationships and interactions in these collages than what is possible in one photograph. The angle of view is explained at Hockney's will, in whatever direction catches his interest. He follows actions and lines in space with his camera, breaking the boundaries of the single photograph. Through these actions and choices Hockney presents a larger context. The viewer has a better



David Hockney. George, Blanche, Celia, Albert and Percey, London. 1983.

sense of space, interaction and the narrative of the event Hockney represents.

Viewpoint for design

Viewpoint controls what is seen in the photograph, much like the frame. The two work together to determine the internal context of the photograph. By altering viewpoint, we alter the visual and psychological experience of the viewer, and ourselves, as photographers. By expanding the viewpoint through the construction of a series of photographs greater spacial and contextual relationships are revealed.

Tapping into these aspects of viewpoint helps the designer experience a place in new ways. Through experiencing a place beyond the normal human viewpoint new relationships, patterns and issues are revealed. Changing viewpoint is a way to literally gain new perspective on a place. As designers, it is important to acknowledge multiple perspectives, both physical and psychological, while designing. Taking photographs from multiple viewpoints often opens up new

possibilities for design.

The following student work shows how each of the students revisited a place by simply changing and expanding their viewpoint.

Aerial view from a ladder

This student brought a ladder out to his site and took a series of panoramic aspects. By doing so the subtle qualities of the topography became more apparent. Also, the way the pieces of the site fit together (buildings, wood lot, entry drive) finally become clear and apparent in this series. This viewpoint reveals spatial relationships a single, human viewpoint photograph could not capture. This new viewpoint also helped the student make the final decision about adding a viewing platform to the design program. Showing these photographs to the client (the Wicks Beal Sculpture Studio) helped them gain a better understanding of their site



Garrick Mishaga, 2003.

and the student's proposals for change and enhancement of this site.

Urban collage

In a Hockney -esque move, this student captures a sense of motion and change that is the epitome of this urban street corner. This collage is taken from multiple viewpoints within the student's standing range of motion. A greater sense of relationship between various objects (cars, buildings, people) is gained than what a single photograph could provide. Also, the passage of time is revealed. We see cars moving through space and a blurring of movement. This multiple viewpoint collage reveals the kinetic liveliness of this place, something very important to



understand as a designer for this place.

Jeb Weinstein. Bagdad Theatre. 2003

Overcoming a visual barrier

This student took a series of single photographs from an elevated viewpoint (atop a car) to overcome a visual barrier. In previous assignments it became quite clear to the class that the photographs this student could take were limited because of the space she was working in, a series of alleys lined by privacy fences. The student could not gain a sense of the larger context (the way backyards relate to the alleys) or connections available to humans and wildlife because her viewpoint was constrained by the fences. Her solution was to sit atop her car while her husband drove down the alleys and take photographs. Finally she could see the multiple

connections and patterns between the backyards and alleyways.

The assignment asks the students to change their viewpoint and discover how that influences their perception of their design site. This can be done as simply an experiment (like the urban collage example), or as a planned exploration that aims to reveal visual information and relationships that cannot be experienced from human viewpoint (like the alley view from on top of car, for example).



Arica Duhrkoop-Galas, 2003.

Primary:

Jackson, J.B. "Joe Deal and the vernacular." *Joe Deal: Southern California Photographs, 1976-86*. University of New Mexico Press. 1992. p.3-7.

Orvell, Miles. "Viewing the Landscape." *American Photography*. Oxford University Press. Oxford. 2003. p. 39-59.

Stephen Shore. "The mental level." and "Mental modeling." *The Nature of Photographs*. Johns Hopkins University Press. 1998. p. 55-79.

Secondary:

Lee, Paula Young. "The Rational Point Of View. Eugene-Emmanuel Viollete-le-Du and the *camera lucida*." *Landscapes of Memory and Experience*. Jan Birksted, ed. Spon Press, New York. 2000. p. 63-76.

Tertiary:

Cosgrove, Denis. "Liminal Geometry and Elemental Landscape: Construction and Representation." *Recovering Landscape: Essays in contemporary landscape architecture*. Corner, James, ed. Princeton Architectural Press. New York. 1999. p. 103-119.

Assignment Four

Viewpoint

This week's assignment is to physically change your point of view for the series. You can, for example, stand on a bucket, kneel, lie on the ground, or lean over for the series. You have to choose one new point of view for the whole series (i.e. stand on a bucket each time you stop to take a photograph). Additionally you must hold the camera to your face (especially the digital people) to get a better understanding of how the camera is an extension of the body.

This exercise asks you to put yourself in another person's (or animal's) shoes. This taps into the psychological implications of viewpoint by forcing you to take photographs differently. Choose a person or animal to emulate while taking your series -- a five year old child, a squirrel, a 6'7" person, a golden retriever, an acorn woodpecker, a house painter, an ant, a moth, a person in a wheel chair, a blue jay, a nutria, a horse, a stilt walker, a mole, a person driving a tractor, a 5'2" grandmother, a canadian goose, a duck, etc. etc. etc.

For next week write a description or narrative relating to your new persona. Include a picture of your new self as well.

Please pin up your whole series, and the picture of your new self. Please hand in the journal at the beginning of class.

Journal Four Viewpoint

Please describe how you changed your Viewpoint (or draw a diagram). What or who are you portraying?

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

How is this experience different than taking photos from your regular viewpoint?

What new thing(s) did you notice? Why?

How will these photos influence your design work?