Ten Lessons in Landscape Photography:
Photography and the Design Process

Abstract

"If so much of the body of work of contemporary landscape architecture is know through images, to what degree are the photographs faithful renditions of these landscapes? We take for granted the truthfulness of photography. However, photography has powerful abstracting tendencies that fundamentally transform the world."
Alan Ward. "On the Making of Icons." Landforum. v 12. 2002.

Photography is a primary form of representation used by landscape architects. We use photography to document site characteristics and design precedents. The history of our profession is taught through photographs. Landscape architects amass photographic catalogues of materials and construction details. We use photography to document our work and display these photographs to promote our skills. In fact, most projects are only seen as photographs.

Yet, photography is not formally or consistently addressed as a means of representation in landscape architecture curriculum. Unlike drawing, painting, modeling or computer aided design, photography is not taught as a primary way of conveying information and ideas.

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

In response to these issues I developed a class at titled Ten Lessons in Landscape Photography that both systematically teaches the formal qualities of photography and encourages students to explore and expand their own design process through photography. Students were also taught how to more critically view and interpret photographs. The goal of the class was not on making beautiful images, but rather on creating photographs that furthered the design process.

The class taught students how to 1) create a more useful set of photographs for design, 2) engage more deeply in the photographic process, 3) apply the formal and conceptual issues of photography to site photographs and 4) be more critical of others' photographs. This work further discusses photographic theory, course methodology and a comparison of students' approaches and results; all within the frame of the design process and the practice of landscape architecture.